

**Monday**  
**23 February 2026**

**Volume 781**  
**No. 250**



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

**PARLIAMENTARY**  
**DEBATES**  
**(HANSARD)**

**Monday 23 February 2026**

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The following abbreviations are used to show a Member's party affiliation:

| Abbreviation | Affiliation                        |
|--------------|------------------------------------|
| Alliance     | Alliance Party of Northern Ireland |
| Con          | Conservative Party                 |
| DUP          | Democratic Unionist Party          |
| Green        | Green Party of England and Wales   |
| Ind          | Independent*                       |
| Lab          | Labour Party                       |
| Lab/Co-op    | Labour and Co-operative Party      |
| LD           | Liberal Democrat                   |
| PC           | Plaid Cymru                        |
| Reform       | Reform UK                          |
| SDLP         | Social Democratic and Labour Party |
| SNP          | Scottish National Party            |
| TUV          | Traditional Unionist Voice         |
| UUP          | Ulster Unionist Party              |

\*The term “Independent” may denote—

Members who have been elected as Independent candidates without affiliation to a political party; or

Members who have been elected after standing for a political party but no longer have the party Whip in the House of Commons.

# HIS MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

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(FORMED BY THE RT HON. SIR KEIR STARMER KCB, KC, MP, JULY 2024)

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SECRETARY OF STATE FOR EDUCATION, AND MINISTER FOR WOMEN AND EQUALITIES—The Rt Hon. Bridget Phillipson, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO—The Rt Hon. Ed Miliband, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT—The Rt Hon. Steve Reed OBE, MP

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SECRETARY OF STATE FOR SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY—The Rt Hon. Liz Kendall, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRANSPORT—The Rt Hon. Heidi Alexander, MP

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SECRETARY OF STATE FOR SCOTLAND—The Rt Hon. Douglas Alexander, MP

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MINISTER WITHOUT PORTFOLIO—The Rt Hon. Anna Turley, MP

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Kate Dearden, MP  
Baroness Lloyd of Effra CBE §  
Chris McDonald, MP §

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The Rt Hon. Baroness Smith of Malvern (Minister for Skills, and Minister for Women and Equalities) §

The Rt Hon. Sir Stephen Timms, MP (Minister for Social Security and Disability) §

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Josh MacAlister OBE, MP

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Lord Wilson of Sedgfield  
Lord Katz MBE  
Lord Leong CBE  
BARONESSSES IN WAITING—  
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Baroness Taylor of Stevenage §  
Baroness Anderson of Stoke-on-Trent  
Baroness Twycross §  
Baroness Blake of Leeds

§ *Members of the Government listed under more than one Department*

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REPRESENTING THE SPEAKER'S COMMITTEE ON THE ELECTORAL COMMISSION—Stephen Gethins, MP  
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# THE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

## OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE FIRST SESSION OF THE FIFTY-NINTH PARLIAMENT OF THE  
UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND  
[WHICH OPENED 9 JULY 2024]

FOURTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF  
HIS MAJESTY KING CHARLES III

SIXTH SERIES

VOLUME 781

THIRTIETH VOLUME OF SESSION 2024-2026

### House of Commons

*Monday 23 February 2026*

*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—*

##### Leasehold Reform

1. **Mohammad Yasin** (Bedford) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to reform the leasehold sector. [907899]
2. **Mary Glendon** (Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend) (Lab): What steps he is taking to reform service charges for leaseholders. [907900]
13. **Sadik Al-Hassan** (North Somerset) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to reform the leasehold sector. [907913]
19. **Apsana Begum** (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): What steps he plans to take to reform the leasehold system. [907920]
20. **Paul Waugh** (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): What steps his Department is taking to reform the leasehold sector. [907921]
22. **Mr Lee Dillon** (Newbury) (LD): What steps he is taking to support leaseholders. [907923]

**The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Steve Reed):** On 27 January, we published the draft Commonhold and Leasehold Reform Bill, marking the beginning of the end for the feudal leasehold system and supporting millions of families with the cost of living. We are reinvigorating commonhold and capping ground rent. We are analysing the responses to our wide-ranging consultation to drive up transparency of service charges and make it easier for leaseholders to challenge unreasonable costs. We will implement these measures as soon as possible.

**Mohammad Yasin:** With service charge inflation rising by 50% and leaseholders, freeholders and tenants even facing 80% increases, this is a growing scandal. Too many of my constituents are trapped under charges they cannot afford, paying for defects caused by poor construction and stuck with properties they cannot sell. Will the Secretary of State strengthen the draft Commonhold and Leasehold Reform Bill to require fully itemised transparency, to penalise landlords who refuse disclosure and to create a faster, cheaper way to challenge excessive charges without a tribunal?

**Steve Reed:** The Government recognise the considerable financial strain that rising service charges place on leaseholders and tenants. On 4 July last year, the Government published a consultation on strengthening leaseholder protections over charges and services, which included proposals to increase transparency of service charges and to scrap the presumption that leaseholders pay their landlord's legal costs, thereby removing a significant barrier to challenging poor practice. The consultation closed on 26 September; we are analysing the responses and will publish our response shortly.

**Mary Glendon:** Leaseholders in Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend contact me regularly about extortionate service charges, saying that tribunals are slow and stressful and that, ultimately, they feel powerless. The Minister for Housing and Planning has previously set out that retaining variable charges is important, so that necessary funds can be raised for legitimate purposes. Is the Secretary of State confident that, without directly limiting

their rate of increase, the Government's reforms will address the issue of unreasonable charges making properties unsellable?

**Steve Reed:** We are determined to take action to address unfair and unjustified charges, and we are committed to implementing the measures in the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act 2024 as quickly as possible.

**Sadik Al-Hassan:** I commend the Government and my right hon. Friend's reforms to the leasehold sector, particularly capping ground rents, which will make a real difference to leaseholders across North Somerset. I have been contacted by numerous constituents in Portishead and across my constituency living in leasehold properties managed by FirstPort. They report persistent failures, poor communication, and opaque and unjustified service charges. Will the Secretary of State confirm that the Government's leasehold reforms will go further by introducing robust, enforceable regulation of service charges and professionalising property management companies such as FirstPort so that they can genuinely be held accountable for poor management practices?

**Steve Reed:** I recognise, of course, the situation my hon. Friend is describing and how unacceptable it is. The Government are committed to ensuring that those living in leasehold properties are protected from abuse and poor service at the hands of unscrupulous managing agents. On 4 July last year, we consulted on the introduction of mandatory qualifications for managing agents, and we are analysing responses right now. We are clear that this consultation is not the final step in the regulation of agents, and we will set out our full position shortly.

**Apsana Begum:** I have been working with leasehold groups in my constituency such as the aptly named Friends in High Places group. They inform me that the combined costs of the Building Safety Regulator's fees, the purchasing of reports and various surveys, and the remediation works needed are giving rise to potentially enormous bills, which could lead to leaseholders becoming bankrupt and homeless, as the bills are not picked up by developers or freeholders for older buildings, or resident management companies. Will the Minister outline how upcoming legislation will clarify what counts as proportionate and/or reasonable costs that fall on to leaseholders in relation to the BSR's work?

**Steve Reed:** I commend the work of the Friends in High Places group, which my hon. Friend has been working with. We are now seeing improvements in the performance of the Building Safety Regulator, but she is right that unfair costs should not fall on leaseholders. If it would be helpful, I will happily arrange a meeting between her and the relevant Minister.

**Paul Waugh:** Far too many homeowners in Rochdale are subject to fleecing, whereby they are fleeced for estate management company fees in return for little or no service or accountability. The Government are taking action to prevent future homeowners from falling into that trap, but will the Secretary of State set out how he plans to help current homeowners to avoid this rip-off charge?

**Steve Reed:** I know the Housing Minister is looking forward to meeting my hon. Friend and his constituents next week. HorNets have been strong and vocal campaigners

for homeowners' rights, and I welcome their engagement. The Government are committed to ending the injustice of fleecing. Leaseholders should not be subject to the kind of legalised extortion that they have experienced in recent years, and the Government remain committed to bringing these practices to an end.

**Mr Dillon:** I thank the Secretary of State for his response and welcome the support being given to leaseholders; however, many of the problems they face could be addressed through stronger regulation of managing agents. Persistent failings by companies such as FirstPort continue to fill my inbox. In Newbury, we have a block of flats where a lift has been out of order for two years, and one constituent told me that, because it was broken, her son had to carry her husband down the stairs when he moved into a care home. No family should ever have to face that. Will the Secretary of State outline what steps the Government have taken to strengthen the regulation of managing agents and ensure that they are properly accountable to residents, who pay for their services?

**Steve Reed:** I recognise what the hon. Member says about FirstPort because Members across the whole House have been raising similar concerns for a very long time. He will be aware that we launched a consultation last summer that will include looking at how we can better and more tightly regulate managing agents so that leaseholders are not subject to the kind of abuses that he describes.

**Manuela Perteghella (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD):** Many of my constituents live on new build estates where the roads and open spaces have never been adopted. Years after moving in, they are still paying private management charges on top of their council tax for basic infrastructure that homeowners should expect the council to maintain. Does the Secretary of State recognise that this gap between planning approval and adoption is fuelling the fleecing scandal, and will the Government act to ensure that developers complete roads to adoptable standards and local authorities are supported to adopt them promptly?

**Steve Reed:** The hon. Member is right to point out the abuses of fleecing and how disturbing and worrying this can be for the people living on these estates. The Government launched two consultations in December precisely so that we can properly understand and take action to prevent the kind of abuses that she describes.

**Alex Easton (North Down) (Ind):** Have the Government made an assessment of the potential merits of introducing a mandatory standard service charge statement for leaseholders to ensure a clearer breakdown of costs and improve transparency in the administration of service charges?

**Steve Reed:** I recognise the situation that the hon. Member describes. We have launched the consultations to cover the circumstances he describes, precisely so that we can end that kind of practice.

**Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD):** These sharp practices are not down to just one management company—a lot of companies are at it. A leaseholder constituent wrote to me to say he feels "abandoned and angry". His property is leaking, but the freeholder is not interested

in helping, and his ground rent will double in 2030. Can the Secretary of State reassure me that my leaseholder constituent will be protected from these unreasonable charges in the future?

**Steve Reed:** I hope the hon. Lady's constituent will be pleased to learn that the reforms we have announced as part of the draft Commonhold and Leasehold Reform Bill, launched recently by the Minister for Housing and Planning, will include capping ground rents so that that kind of abuse cannot happen in future.

**Shockat Adam** (Leicester South) (Ind): I refer Members to my entry on the Register of Members' Financial Interests. An acute increase in service charges of 78% has knocked the residents of Phoenix House in my constituency. The council is the freeholder, and it has overseen a complex arrangement with a private head leaseholder and various commercial managing agents below it. Due to the complexities of these arrangements, the residents have no idea where this 78% increase has come from. Will the Minister commit to introducing a duty of candour so that leaseholders know exactly what they are paying for, and will he further consider a threshold for acute service charge increases?

**Steve Reed:** The hon. Gentleman will have been able to make those points through the consultation, which we launched in order to get to a position where we can simplify the system so that leaseholders know what charges they are being asked to pay and what services they are receiving for them, and to give them greater powers to challenge unfair practices of the kind he has just described.

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

**David Simmonds** (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): According to the Government's own statistics, 84% of respondents to their consultation said they felt that the system for challenging unfair charges for managing agents and other lease arrangements was not fit for purpose. The Conservatives agree—that is why we legislated to address this in the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act 2024. I appreciate that the Secretary of State has had a few distractions recently, but he has told the House that he is committed to addressing this matter. Can he tell all our leaseholder constituents by when the Government will enact that legislation, which we passed with his party's support?

**Steve Reed:** Of course, nothing is going to distract me from focusing on the needs of leaseholders, and we remain fully committed to ensuring that the provisions and powers outlined in the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act are brought into force as soon as possible. It is important for us to go through the technical detail that is covered by the consultation, but we will bring forward those proposals in due course and as quickly as possible.

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

**Gideon Amos** (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): Many of the 5 million leaseholders were looking forward to being freed from the feudal leasehold system until they read the draft Bill, which left many disappointed. There is no restriction on the development value that leaseholders are going to be charged and no broadening of the mixed-use

blocks that will be eligible for enfranchisement, while leaseholders will continue to pay the legal fees of landlords, and service charges are still not being capped. Given the commitments in the Labour manifesto and the King's Speech to enact these recommendations from the Law Commission, should the Government not be more courageous, take on the landlords and give leaseholders proper rights to enfranchise, as they promised?

**Steve Reed:** I agree with the sentiment of the hon. Gentleman's question, but unfortunately he has a number of his facts wrong; if he would like to put those details in a letter, I would be happy to respond and bring him up to speed. We are, for instance, seeking to end the practice of leaseholders being required to pay their landlords' legal fees. This is the biggest reform of leasehold in a thousand years. I hope that the hon. Gentleman writes to me and, after I respond, that he will be able to give the reforms his full support.

**Gideon Amos:** The Law Commission reforms are being enacted and there is no date yet for a Bill to be brought forward. I hope that the Secretary of State will provide one.

Moving on to leaseholders who are still living with unsafe cladding and building defects, hundreds of thousands of people in buildings under 11 metres tall are living with cladding that is recognised as highly flammable, but are not eligible for the building safety fund. Is it not time that they were given the peace of mind and the safety they thought their home was providing them?

**Steve Reed:** We are supporting these situations on a case-by-case basis, but I would be more than happy to arrange a meeting for the hon. Gentleman with the Minister for Building Safety, if that would be helpful to him.

### Antisemitism

3. **Joani Reid** (East Kilbride and Strathaven) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential implications for his policies of recent trends in levels of antisemitism. [907902]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Miatta Fahnbulleh):** We are continuously assessing trends in antisemitism, working with the police, the Jewish community and our antisemitism working group. What is absolutely clear is that antisemitic incidents are on the rise. This is an unacceptable and heartbreaking reality, and we are determined as a Government to get a grip of and turn the tide on it. That is why we are taking co-ordinated action to tackle antisemitism, including across education, health and other key institutions.

**Joani Reid:** I thank the Minister for her response. As she rightly outlines, antisemitism is on the rise. During the ongoing by-election campaign in Gorton and Denton, senior Green party figures engaged with 5Pillars—an outlet that has previously been disciplined for anti-Jewish hatred and that is well known for amplifying extremist voices. Those in public office have a duty to act responsibly, and there are serious questions to ask here about judgment. Does she agree that parties seeking office should not legitimise platforms linked to hatred, and will she outline what further steps the Department is taking to combat extremism, antisemitism and other forms of hatred?

**Miatta Fahnbulleh:** We are seeing the rise of hate and division in our society. This is an absolutely shameful reality. Parts of our Jewish, Muslim, Sikh and Hindu communities are feeling scared and unsafe in their own country. All of us in politics and public life have a huge responsibility to play our part to stamp out this hate and division. That includes calling it out wherever we see it, holding our communities together and standing with the majority of people in this country, who are tolerant and accepting of their neighbours irrespective of their faith, colour or background.

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

**Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con):** Antisemitism is horrible, but will the Minister agree that there is nothing antisemitic in supporting the rights of the suffering Palestinian people and there is nothing antisemitic in opposing the actions of the present right-wing Israeli Government in making a two-state solution impossible? There is nothing antisemitic in that, because probably the majority of Jewish people throughout the world agree with me—and, actually, the actions of the Israeli Government in forcing Palestinians off their ground is fuelling antisemitism.

**Miatta Fahnbulleh:** It is very important for us to make a distinction between the antisemitism that we are seeing, which is rife and unacceptable and which we all have a duty to stamp out, and the plight of the Palestinian community, for which a lot of us will have great sympathy. As a Government, we are committed to delivering the two-state solution. We are committed to working towards peace—peace for the Palestinian people, and peace for the Israeli people and Jewish.

**Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab):** Interfaith activity has faced significant reduction and in some cases almost collapsed following heightened tensions from the Gaza conflict. Does the Minister agree that measures to support and fund interfaith understanding have a crucial role in restoring community cohesion?

**Miatta Fahnbulleh:** My hon. Friend is completely right, and he talks with great passion, commitment and knowledge about these issues. Interfaith work is key; we are seeing that within our communities. The Department is committed to supporting interfaith work and working with all our faith communities. We will continue to do that, because, ultimately, it is people of faith in our communities who will come together and do the hard work of bridging and bonding our communities at a time when there is huge pressure on all sides.

**Rishi Sunak (Richmond and Northallerton) (Con):** I recently had the privilege of spending some time with the Jewish community of Stamford Hill. Those conversations reinforced that we must, as the Minister rightly said, do more to combat antisemitism. She cited the recent figures showing that antisemitism is at near record levels. When in government, we put in place the first multi-year funding for the Community Security Trust, and I thank the Government for recently extending and increasing that funding. Will the Minister join me in thanking CST volunteers and agree that anti-religious hatred has no place in our society?

**Miatta Fahnbulleh:** The right hon. Member is completely right. Religious hatred has no place in our society. The tragedy at the moment is that it is on the rise; we are seeing it in our Jewish community, in our Muslim community, and in our Hindu and Sikh communities. It is beholden on us to make sure that we are doing our part to stand with these communities and stamp out religious hatred. I am proud that this Government are putting funding towards security. The work of the CST has been vital for the Jewish community and for supporting the community. The travesty is that we need security in our synagogues and places of worship. That cannot be a reality that any of us tolerate, and it is one that we must work together to stamp out.

#### Northern Ireland: Local Growth Fund

4. **Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP):** What plans he has for the delivery of the local growth fund in Northern Ireland. [907903]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Miatta Fahnbulleh):** With funding from the UK shared prosperity fund ending, we are committed to continuing local growth funding in Northern Ireland to boost productivity and growth. We are working closely with the Northern Ireland Executive and the Northern Ireland Office to design and deliver an investment plan that will support infrastructure, business growth, and skills and employment.

**Robin Swann:** I thank the Minister for meeting me to discuss the concerns raised by the voluntary community sector in Northern Ireland about how the fund will be split between capital and revenue. We are now looking at a fund that is more capital-heavy than revenue-heavy, and the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People has said that the shift towards capital-heavy investment fails to recognise the reality that youth and community work is relational, intensive and people-driven, not infrastructure-driven. Will the Minister continue to work to shift the balance between capital and revenue, so that the funding supports the people who use it?

**Miatta Fahnbulleh:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for meeting me with people from parts of the voluntary sector. As he said, local growth funding will direct capital funding into the enabling infrastructure that is required for boosting the Northern Ireland economy. That sits alongside a £19.3 billion spending review settlement and £370 million in Budget funding to the Executive, which has the flexibility to support programmes delivered by the voluntary and community sector. But as we have heard, the voluntary and community sector is under huge pressure, and we are committed to working with the Northern Ireland Office and the Executive to find ways to support the sector through the transition.

#### Oxford-Cambridge Growth Corridor

5. **Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab):** What recent assessment he has made with Cabinet colleagues of the adequacy of progress on the delivery of the Oxford-Cambridge growth corridor. [907904]

**The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook):** In the 13 months since we announced plans to supercharge growth in Oxford-Cambridge corridor, significant progress has been made, including through updated proposals on East West Rail, the establishment of an Oxford growth commission and tangible steps towards realising the full potential of Greater Cambridge.

**Daniel Zeichner:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the work he has been doing on this issue, and I was pleased to see the announcement of the consultation on the development corporation a few weeks ago. What further steps can we expect to be taken along the corridor in the coming months?

**Matthew Pennycook:** I thank my hon. Friend not only for his question, but for his unwavering support for ambitious, high-quality sustainable growth in his city and the surrounding areas. We are determined to unleash nationally significant growth in Greater Cambridge, to the benefit of existing and new communities and the nation as a whole. Following the consultation on a Greater Cambridge urban development corporation, which ends on 1 April, we will publish the summary responses and a formal response setting out the Government's next steps. As ever, I will strive to ensure that my hon. Friend and other hon. Members from Cambridgeshire are fully apprised of the Government's thinking.

**Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con):** Defence will be a key pillar of the Oxford-Cambridge growth corridor. In my Huntingdon constituency, we are lucky to have RAF Wyton. It is in the middle of a very ambitious project, Project Fairfax, which will use surplus Ministry of Defence land. The MOD signed a memorandum of understanding with Huntingdonshire district council last year, and Homes England is a key part of that. Will the Minister meet me and the chief executive of Huntingdonshire district council to discuss how we can best supercharge these growth plans and make good progress on them?

**Matthew Pennycook:** I am more than happy to meet the hon. Gentleman.

#### **Pride in Place Funding: Glasgow South**

**6. Gordon McKee (Glasgow South) (Lab):** What assessment he has made of the potential impact of Pride in Place funding on neighbourhoods in Glasgow South constituency. [907905]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Miatta Fahnbulleh):** Castlemilk in Glasgow South will be given up to £20 million in Pride in Place programme funding over the next 10 years. Glasgow city council will also be allocated £1.5 million through the Pride in Place impact fund over the next two years. That funding, alongside increased powers in our Pride in Place strategy, will put my hon. Friend's community in the driving seat, so that it can deliver the priorities that it wants to see in the area.

**Gordon McKee:** I thank the Minister for her answer. Castlemilk in my constituency is full of brilliant people, but it has often been let down by government, whether

that is the SNP Government closing the local police station, or the council cutting the opening hours of the local swimming pool, so I am delighted that the UK Labour Government are awarding £20 million of Pride in Place funding to Castlemilk. Local people are full of ideas about how that money can be spent, and top of the list for many is bringing a supermarket to the area. Will the Minister join me in celebrating that funding, and will she commit to working closely with me and the local community to make this a success?

**Miatta Fahnbulleh:** I thank my hon. Friend for being such a powerful champion for his community. I am excited by the engagement and the ideas coming from people in Castlemilk. I thank him for all the work he is doing to make Pride in Place a success in his area. My colleagues in the Scotland Office and I look forward to working with him and the community to deliver for the area.

#### **Grey-belt Land**

**7. Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con):** What definition his Department uses for grey-belt land for housing developments. [907906]

**The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook):** The definition of grey belt for the purposes of both plan making and decision making is set out in the glossary of the national planning policy framework. The Government also updated green-belt planning practice guidance in February last year, to assist local planning authorities with identifying and considering proposals for potential grey-belt land, and to provide for a consistent approach across England.

**Bradley Thomas:** Bromsgrove golf course is in open countryside. It is a beautiful, green open space and one of the most popular golf courses anywhere in the country, and it contains more than 20,000 trees. Does the Minister really think that it is suitable for development, particularly at scale? Will he rule out development on such golf courses? If not, will he meet me and members of the golf club to discuss their concerns?

**Matthew Pennycook:** I certainly will not rule in or rule out development on any particular site. The hon. Member knows why I cannot speak to particular planning applications, but he knows from our recent meeting on the subject that it is for local planning authorities to determine whether exceptional circumstances exist to justify the release of green belt, and it is for individual local planning authorities to undertake the necessary assessments to identify if land is grey belt, either through plan making or through specific applications that come forward.

**Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op):** The Office for Budget Responsibility has concluded that this Government's overhaul of the planning system will mean more house building in this country than at any time in the past 40 years. That is good news for residents in my constituency, who are desperate to get a home for themselves and their families. What more can this Government do to provide the uplift in social and affordable housing that residents in Harlow desperately need?

**Matthew Pennycook:** My hon. Friend is right; our changes to the national planning policy framework in December 2024 alone have been judged by the Office for Budget Responsibility to have led to the biggest increase in house building in the past 40 years. The Conservative party will not recognise that, as important as it is to preserve green belts, there are simply not enough sites on brownfield land across the country to deliver the volume of homes that we need. That is why we need a more strategic approach to green-belt land release and development.

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

**David Simmonds** (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): The Minister has set out clearly for the House the key plank of development strategy under the previous Secretary of State: re-designating large parts of our green belt as grey belt. Housing delivery is collapsing, but a recent report identified that London already has capacity for 460,000 additional homes on brownfield sites. At the mayor's rate of delivery, that is an 83-year supply of housing development plots. Rather than focusing on releasing green belt for development, why do the Government not instead focus on building those homes that already have planning permission, and could be built on brownfield sites tomorrow?

**Matthew Pennycook:** The Government are focusing on precisely that. That is why we have further strengthened national planning policy in respect of previously developed land—that is out to consultation at the moment, as the hon. Gentleman knows—and why our new homes accelerator is doing what is needed to unblock permission sites across the country. I refute the idea that house building is collapsing. We are dealing with the legacy of the previous Government's decisions, including the abolition of mandatory housing targets, but starts are up, and applications are coming through the system.

#### Private Rented Sector

8. **Chris Bloore** (Redditch) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help improve the private rented sector for tenants. [907907]

**The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook):** The Renters' Rights Act 2025 received Royal Assent on 27 October last year. As per the road map we published in November, we intend to implement the new tenancy system it provides for on 1 May, at which point, among other things, section 21 no-fault evictions will be abolished, rental bidding wars will be prohibited, and the practice of landlords demanding large amounts of rent in advance from tenants will be banned.

**Chris Bloore:** The Minister knows that the Renters' Rights Act will be transformative, especially for my constituents, but will he reassure me that the Government recognise the urgent need to improve safety and standards in the private rented sector, and will he act to drive down rates of non-decency?

**Matthew Pennycook:** I can provide my hon. Friend with the assurance that he seeks. Whether in the PRS or in the social rented sector, landlords should address

non-decency wherever it exists. We are giving landlords until 2035 to implement our new decent homes standard, but we have made it clear that they should not wait until then to improve their properties. We are acting in other ways to ensure that private tenants have safe, warm and decent homes, including by introducing new minimum energy efficiency standards for the sector, strengthening local authority enforcement in respect of unremediated hazards, and applying Awaab's law to the PRS through the relevant provisions in the Act.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): The private rental sector in Northern Ireland has a slightly different system, as the Minister knows, but the problems are the same across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. He is always incredibly helpful when it comes to assuring me and others in this House of the importance of Northern Ireland's input into the process. Has he had the opportunity to speak to the relevant Minister in the Northern Ireland Assembly, to ensure that we in Northern Ireland have the same protections that he is proposing for here?

**Matthew Pennycook:** I can provide the hon. Member with that assurance. I met my counterpart in Northern Ireland some time ago, and this prompts me to check with my private office and ensure that another meeting is scheduled for the near future.

#### High Streets

9. **Alison Bennett** (Mid Sussex) (LD): What steps he is taking to support high streets. [907908]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Miatta Fahnbulleh):** The Government are taking action to revive our high streets after a decade and a half of neglect under the last Government. We are tackling vacant premises through high street rental auctions, driving local regeneration through £5.8 billion of Pride in Place funding, and bringing forward a high street strategy backed by at least £150 million of support for the areas that need it the most.

**Alison Bennett:** Burgess Hill in my Mid Sussex constituency has done everything asked of it by successive Governments. It is taking thousands of new houses, yet it has a high street and shopping centre that need redevelopment. Under the previous Conservative Government, a levelling-up fund bid was unsuccessful, and Labour has not supported it through the Pride in Place scheme. The Liberal Democrats want to give Burgess Hill the town centre that it so badly deserves. What support can the Minister offer for the regeneration of high streets and town centres, such as that in Burgess Hill, that are unlikely to qualify for Pride in Place funding?

**Miatta Fahnbulleh:** The hon. Member is right to talk about the importance of high streets. They are a barometer of how people feel that their communities and the nation is doing. We are committed to reviving high streets, and that means reimagining high streets, and working with communities through our high-street strategy to empower them to do that. We have the high-street rental auction, which is a way that we can get vacant premises

up and running, alongside £150 million that we have announced with the strategy, so that places are able to reshape their high streets and ensure that they work for their communities.

**Baggy Shanker** (Derby South) (Lab/Co-op): In Derby, we have heard concerns about the impact of food delivery drivers on our high streets and the city centre, particularly on St Peter's Street. Will the Minister work across Departments to ensure that food delivery companies are operating safely on our high streets and in our city centres?

**Miatta Fahnbulleh:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue. I am committed to working across Departments, and I am happy to meet him to hear the specifics of the issues on his high street, and to work with colleagues across Government to see how we respond to them.

### Building Safety Regulator

10. **Sarah Olney** (Richmond Park) (LD): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the Building Safety Regulator. [907910]

18. **Darren Paffey** (Southampton Itchen) (Lab): What progress his Department has made on reforming the Building Safety Regulator. [907918]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Samantha Dixon):** On 27 January, the Building Safety Regulator became an arm's length body under the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. This was a major step towards creating a single construction regulator. The BSR continues to make strong progress on overhauling its operating model. Only the most complex legacy new build cases remain, and new applications are being approved near the 12-week target, through the innovation unit. The BSR is building on this progress, and is focusing on delivering improvements in respect of remediation and the occupation regime.

**Sarah Olney:** The Mayor of London has set a target of building 88,000 new homes in London a year over the next decade. However, recent figures show that construction began last year on only 5,891. Over the past two years, construction of new builds has fallen by 85% for affordable homes and 94% for council housing, and delays in the Building Safety Regulator's approval processes are stalling development projects, curtailing investment and losing people their jobs. Does the Minister agree that ensuring that the regulator operates efficiently is paramount if we are to deliver on housing targets and support the UK housing sector?

**Samantha Dixon:** The Government recognised last summer that the Building Safety Regulator needed to be reformed and brought in new leadership, and there has been a marked improvement in performance. Performance data is published monthly, so there is transparency on how the Building Safety Regulator is performing. In the final quarter of 2025, we saw the highest number of decisions—673—since the BSR commenced operations, and we are still pushing hard for further improvements.

**Darren Paffey:** Tomorrow marks one year since the residents of Sundowner Court in Southampton were forced to leave their home because of serious fire safety defects. Two neighbouring blocks followed suit soon after, and no one expects to be back in their home for at least another year. The Government rightly prioritised speeding up remediation, and it is important that our regulator shares that sense of urgency, but the Building Safety Regulator is taking up to 40 weeks to approve some of the remediation plans. What improvements can the Minister promise that this Government will make to speed up those approvals and end the misery for my residents?

**Samantha Dixon:** MHCLG and the Building Safety Regulator accept that many applicants have experienced delays, and we recognise that having to wait 40 weeks for decisions is unacceptable. That is why the BSR has established a dedicated external remediation team, and is engaging with stakeholders to work through the detail of applications. A new batching model is being trialled to reduce the length of time taken to assess building control applications, while maintaining building and resident safety.

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

**Gareth Bacon** (Orpington) (Con): When announcing reforms to the Building Safety Regulator last June, the Secretary of State's Department promised to "enhance the review of newbuild applications, unblock delays and boost sector confidence",

but in London, where demand is highest, house building has fallen to its lowest level since 2009, which was under the last Labour Government. At gateway 2, towards the end of quarter 4 of 2025, there were still 740 live cases. On top of that, where decisions were made on applications, the vast majority were invalid, withdrawn or rejected; 67% were not classed as approved for one reason or another. That is not success, is it?

**Samantha Dixon:** In the last 12 weeks, 11,962 new-build homes have been approved, allowing construction to start. The BSR is moving forward. We will continue to press it to do better.

**Gareth Bacon:** With all due respect, the Government need to do an awful lot better than that. They hide behind the claim that there is a clear downward trend in live gateway 2 applications, but the reality, according to the Government's own statistics across all categories, is that the number of live applications in London has fallen by a mere 6% in the last 12 weeks. That is hardly a reason to celebrate, is it? Will the Government admit that they, Sadiq Khan and their under-delivering reforms are hindering building, rather than helping to get London building?

**Samantha Dixon:** Performance continues to improve steadily across gateway 2, and decisions are being made increasingly quickly and at higher volumes. We will continue to press the BSR to do better, faster.

### Social and Affordable Housing: Bradford

11. **Imran Hussain** (Bradford East) (Lab): What assessment his Department has made of the level of need for additional social and affordable housing in Bradford. [907911]

**The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook):** There are 1.3 million people on local authority housing registers across the country. It is not in dispute that there is acute need across England as a whole. National policy makes clear that it is for local authorities, informed by local assessments of need, to set out requirements for the proportion and type of affordable housing that should be delivered through new development, including the minimum proportion of social rented housing required, and planned, to meet that need.

**Imran Hussain:** The Minister will know that Bradford is one of the youngest and fastest-growing cities, yet we are urgently and desperately in need of social and affordable housing. The reality is that homelessness is on the rise, and we have record numbers of people on waiting lists. Families simply cannot get decent houses. While I welcome the Government's ambitious home building programme, will the Minister assure me that adequate measures are in the programme to address the need for social and affordable housing? While local government will have some say, we must give clear directions.

**Matthew Pennycook:** Given the acute need for affordable housing in Bradford, I understand entirely why my hon. Friend continues to press so vigorously for an uplift in the supply of affordable, and particularly social rented, housing in his constituency. I know that he will welcome the fact that, in the coming days, bidding will open for grant funding from our new £39 billion social and affordable homes programme, 60% of which is targeted at social rent. He will also note that the Government are currently consulting on a new national planning policy framework, including on proposals designed to further support the delivery of social and affordable housing, such as setting a national expectation of at least 10% social rent on all new developments.

#### **Pride in Place Funding: Derby North**

**12. Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab):** What mechanisms his Department has put in place to ensure that communities are consulted on the use of Pride in Place funding in Derby North constituency. [907912]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Miatta Fahnbulleh):** We are very clear that communities should be in the driving seat, which could happen through local people coming together in a neighbourhood board led by an independent chair from the community to develop a plan to invest £20 million in Pride in Place funding over the next decade. However, there is also an expectation on such a board to kick off a much wider conversation with the community and to reach parts of the community that are not normally around the table and are locked out of decisions. That community engagement will be supported by £150,000 for every place to make sure that we are reaching people, speaking to them and making sure that they are at the very heart of this plan.

**Catherine Atkinson:** For me, the most exciting thing about the £20 million of Pride in Place funding for Chaddesden West in my constituency is that local people decide how it is spent. People in Chadd know their community better than anyone. I have already had some

great suggestions, including creating opportunities for young people, tackling loneliness for older people and addressing antisocial behaviour in the area. How are the Government ensuring that local voices are heard and acted on?

**Miatta Fahnbulleh:** My hon. Friend is completely right. Local people in Chaddesden West know what their priorities are and should therefore be in the driving seat. I thank her both for championing Pride in Place and for the work she is doing to make it a success. We have been very clear in the guidance that neighbourhood boards, which are led by the community and are of the community, will be in the driving seat and must be the key decision makers. We are developing toolkits to support community engagement backed by £150,000 of funding so that we can reach out, go on to the estates and go into the neighbourhoods in order to have a conversation with the community to drive the change that they want to see.

#### **New Social and Affordable Housing**

**14. Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op):** What steps he is taking to help increase the proportion of social and affordable housing in new developments. [907914]

**The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook):** To honour our commitment to deliver the biggest increase in social and affordable house building in a generation, we have backed registered providers with the biggest social and affordable housing investment in recent memory. Although there is more to do, we have already taken steps to strengthen the existing developer contribution system to ensure that new developments provide necessary affordable homes and infrastructure.

**Rachael Maskell:** York Central will create 12,500 new jobs and 3,000 new homes in phase 1, which will be before the planning committee in May. Just 20% is allocated to affordable housing, but there must be an ambition for 40% because York has one of the worst housing affordability disparities in the country. We must reach that target, or our housing crisis will worsen. Will the Minister meet me to discuss York Central and set out what steps he will take with Homes England to ensure that we do not just achieve housing numbers, but meet local need?

**Matthew Pennycook:** We need to build many more homes of all tenures, but it is absolutely right to stress the importance of delivering a significant uplift in the number of social and affordable homes. I am aware that discussions are ongoing about increasing the proportion of affordable housing within the York Central scheme. I encourage the developer to work with Homes England and relevant registered providers to maximise the potential for social and affordable housing in its first phase. I am more than happy to ensure that my hon. Friend gets an appointment at one of my forthcoming Tea Room surgeries.

**Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con):** As the House will know, local plans are the method by which we can identify affordable homes and make sure that they are built in the right place at the right time.

Since I was elected back in December 2019, I have consistently asked the Liberal Democrat Three Rivers district council to get on with the local plan. However, as the Housing Minister will know, the latest version of that plan did not have sufficient evidence. He has therefore rightly called it in. Does he agree that the Lib Dems need to get on with delivering the local plan and that they should not continue to fail my residents in South West Hertfordshire?

**Matthew Pennycook:** The hon. Gentleman will understand that I cannot discuss any specific local plan. However, in general terms I would say that any party that controls any local planning authority across the country must take active and firm steps to get up-to-date local plans in place. They are the best way for local communities to shape development. Without them, communities are open to speculative development that does not have resident input. That is why we are pushing for universal coverage across the country.

### Housing Developments: Access to Infrastructure

15. **Sarah Green** (Chesham and Amersham) (LD): What steps he plans to take to ensure that new housing developments have adequate access to infrastructure. [907915]

**The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook):** As I have said, local development plans should address needs and opportunities in relation not only to housing numbers but to infrastructure, and identify what infrastructure is required and how it can be funded and brought forward. Through changes to national planning policy, and financial support for essential infrastructure through land and infrastructure funding programmes, the Government are supporting infrastructure provision, but we recognise that there is more to do to ensure that the right infrastructure is built at the right time.

**Sarah Green:** I am keen to hear what work the Department has under way to ensure that necessary infrastructure is in place. The cumulative effect of lots of smaller developments on the sewerage system and GP provision is the same as the effect of one large development. That is a live issue in Buckinghamshire, where we do not yet have a local plan. Will the Minister meet me to hear about the struggles that communities face in getting the relevant agencies to engage?

**Matthew Pennycook:** This is not the whole answer, but having up-to-date local plans and infrastructure funding statements in place can make a huge difference in ensuring that the right infrastructure comes forward at the appropriate time. I am more than happy to meet the hon. Lady to discuss what more we can do not only to get her local authority to put a plan in place as quickly as possible, but to bring development and infrastructure forward in the right way on individual developments in her constituency.

**Alex Mayer** (Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard) (Lab): Until local roads are adopted, communities miss out on so much—from having their roads gritted to getting a post box, as I have found out. How can we speed up Central Bedfordshire council and others?

**Matthew Pennycook:** It is probably easier if my hon. Friend writes to me on those particular concerns in her area, and I will set out the Government's full position. I am happy to discuss the matter that she raises in further detail.

### Topical Questions

T1. [907949] **Anna Dixon** (Shipley) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

**The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Steve Reed):** Earlier this month, the Prime Minister confirmed that 40 more places will join the Pride in Place programme. That means that nearly 300 communities—those most held back by the previous Government—will benefit from that transformational programme. They will receive up to £20 million each over 10 years—a transformational level of funding—and, importantly, local people will decide how that money is spent. This Government recognise that local people know best what needs to change to bring pride back to the heart of the place they call home.

**Anna Dixon:** Our politics are increasingly fragmented. There is a real threat that an extreme minority party could win a majority of seats with just a fraction of the popular vote at the next general election—the situation is urgent. Some 60% of the public now support proportional representation. Will the Minister meet me and other members of the all-party parliamentary group for fair elections to discuss the case for a national commission on electoral reform?

**Steve Reed:** My hon. Friend will be disappointed to hear that the Government have no plans to change the electoral system for UK parliamentary or council elections in England. Indeed, the last time a Government called a referendum on proportional representation, the public rejected it. The Government believe that although first past the post is not always perfect, it provides an important direct relationship between Members of this Chamber and their local constituents. I will of course ensure that she gets an appropriate meeting.

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

**Sir James Cleverly** (Braintree) (Con): An estimated 48,000 new entrants to the construction sector are needed every year to meet the Government's target of 1.5 million new homes. Apprenticeship starts come to about half that figure, and apprenticeship completions come to less than a quarter. Does the Secretary of State now accept that his target will not be met, that there is a growing crisis in construction skills under Labour, and that the Government have no credible plan to deliver the workforce needed to build those homes?

**Steve Reed:** The Government remain fully committed to meeting the target of 1.5 million new homes, and we are working with the sector to ensure that that happens. Local authorities now have housing targets again—they were sadly scrapped under the right hon. Gentleman's Government—and we are investing £600 million to increase vocational skills and training to ensure that we have the supply of workers that the sector needs. We are

working closely with developers, which are themselves helping to fund the pipeline of talent to build the homes that the country needs.

**Sir James Cleverly:** As my hon. Friends have highlighted, under a Labour mayor and a Labour Government, house building in London has collapsed to less than 60% of the target. In October, the Secretary of State said:

“My job should be on the line if I fail to meet my target”.

As the 1.5 million homes will not be built, will he keep his promise and resign, or will he wait to be fired by whoever replaces the Prime Minister after the May elections?

**Steve Reed:** The right hon. Gentleman will be aware, since he was a member of the previous Government, that house building across the country collapsed in 2023-24, and they chose to do nothing. This month the social and affordable homes programme opens for bids. London will get 30% of that, worth more than £11 billion, and that will help to provide the biggest increase in social and affordable homes in London and across the country that this country has seen.

T5. [907955] **David Williams** (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): I support the Government's plans to build 1.5 million homes, and families and first-time buyers in Stoke-on-Trent and Kidsgrove really need them. Residents from Packmoor, Ball Green, Norton Green and Talke understand that too, but does the Minister agree that development should be brownfield first, protecting green space wherever possible, and backed by the investment in infrastructure that our communities need and deserve?

**The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook):** I can give my hon. Friend the assurances he seeks, and I encourage him and his constituents to engage with proposals in the consultation on a revised national planning policy framework that seek further to strengthen support for brownfield development and ensure that appropriate infrastructure provision comes forward alongside that development.

T2. [907952] **Andrew George** (St Ives) (LD): Ministers know full well that a planning application submitted today for affordable homes will not contribute to the Government's welcome intention to meet affordable housing need by the end of this Parliament—

**Matthew Pennycook** indicated dissent.

**Andrew George:** The Minister is shaking his head, but it simply is not possible through the pre-development process. Although I have met the Secretary of State to discuss how we can move forward shovel-ready projects that are held back at the moment, will Ministers meet Members of Parliament who are concerned about the thousands of homes that could be delivered and start on site right now, so that we can get Britain building and meet the desperate need for affordable homes?

**Matthew Pennycook:** I do not accept the hon. Gentleman's characterisation of development that can come forward and be funded through our new social and affordable homes programme. We are ensuring that that programme has the necessary flexibility to fund provision across the country, whether it is community-led housing or rural housing. Our new homes accelerator is

doing precisely what the hon. Gentleman says, by going in and unblocking problems site by site to get stalled development going.

T8. [907958] **Andrew Cooper** (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): The Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee has just published a report on social housing conditions, warning that just under 430,000 social homes are non-decent. Additional research shows that in the north, more than 100,000 social homes will reach end of life over the next 10 years. I am chairing the Westminster group of the Renew inquiry, which is looking at how housing-led regeneration in the north can improve housing conditions and support the delivery of new homes and growth. Will the Minister meet me and representatives of the Northern Housing Consortium to discuss this important issue?

**Matthew Pennycook:** I have met Northern Housing Consortium on a number of occasions. My hon. Friend will know that funding from the social and affordable homes programme can be used to support the regeneration of existing social housing estates. If he wants to write to me with further details about some of the recommendations he has suggested, I would be more than happy to respond.

T3. [907953] **Stuart Anderson** (South Shropshire) (Con): Many park home residents in South Shropshire are concerned about the 10% sales commission and think it is unfair. I know that the Government have committed to a consultation, but will they speed that up and just scrap the unfair commission?

**Matthew Pennycook:** We need to understand this issue better, because answers were not forthcoming in the consultation carried out under the previous Government regarding the rationale for the commission. I assure the hon. Gentleman that in the very near future we will go out to consult and to find more evidence, so that we can take the action that is so desperately needed in this area.

**Michael Wheeler** (Worsley and Eccles) (Lab): In my constituency of Worsley and Eccles, residents of Peel Green and the surrounding area, including the enthusiastic pupils of Salford City academy, are looking to get their hands on the Pride in Place money. What steps are the Government taking to ensure that they are at the forefront, they take the lead, and they decide?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Miatta Fahnbulleh):** I thank my hon. Friend for all the work that he is doing with his community on Pride in Place. We are very clear that communities should be in the driving seat, and we are setting a clear expectation that all places will have forms of community-led delivery by the third year. That creates the opportunity for community interest companies, co-operatives and other models, because at the heart of this is the principle that the people who know their patch the best should be in the driving seat of changing their place.

T4. [907954] **Graham Leadbitter** (Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey) (SNP): With local growth funding from Moray council, in my constituency, stopping, associated progress in digital connectivity will stop, business advice

and growth services will reduce, and there will a much-reduced skills development programme. A total of 14 staff will be made redundant, with further scope for redeployment. Why is the Minister content to preside over these funding cuts and redundancies?

**Miatta Fahnbulleh:** We have committed to local growth funding to boost growth in Scotland. We have also delivered record investment to the Scottish Government, who have in their gift the ability to invest in communities and in programmes that will drive the prosperity of local areas. The hon. Gentleman should not be looking to national Government; we have done our part—now it is over to the Scottish National party.

**Leigh Ingham** (Stafford) (Lab): While I welcome the fact that the Red Lion in Sutton has had its asset of community value status extended by a year, that does not completely protect it from future planning applications. Will the Minister meet me to discuss this case, and that of the Railway Inn in Norton Bridge, to understand how the Government can best support these sites and save them for future community use?

**Miatta Fahnbulleh:** Yes, I will meet my hon. Friend.

T6. [907956] **Charlie Dewhirst** (Bridlington and The Wolds) (Con): From his time at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Secretary of State will be well aware of issues with agricultural planning, so will he guarantee to the House that he will take urgent action to unblock the system and unlock tens of millions of pounds back into the rural economy?

**Matthew Pennycook:** From that question, it is difficult to understand precisely what the hon. Gentleman is getting at. If he writes to me, I will happily respond.

**Sam Rushworth** (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I know that the people who elect us to this place believe that it is important for politicians to uphold standards, whether at a national or local level. There is growing concern about the public behaviour of the leader and deputy leader of the Reform-led council in Durham, but they have changed the regime for standards, so that a committee of only three, with two Reform members, looks at those issues. Will the Minister consider an independent commissioner for standards for local government to ensure that we can hold our representatives to account?

**The Minister for Local Government and Homelessness (Alison McGovern):** I thought I was going to get away without answering any questions, Mr Speaker. My hon. Friend raises an important issue. On 11 November last year, we published a Government response to a consultation and I am anxious to get on with taking more steps to address the kind of thing that he raises as quickly as we can.

T7. [907957] **Sir Julian Smith** (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): Small businesses across North Yorkshire are under massive pressure from national insurance, the workers' rights Bill, rates, energy costs—the list goes on. Now that the consultation on the tourist tax has closed, will the Minister put that tax on pause in the interests of job creation for young people? The stats today are truly appalling.

**Miatta Fahnbulleh:** The tourism levy has been campaigned for by mayors and local areas. We are consulting on the levy at the moment, but we are clear that there will be a balance between the ability of areas to generate that tax and ensuring that local businesses and small and medium-sized enterprises are thriving in the area, which is the remit and the priority of both mayors and the Government.

**Liam Conlon** (Beckenham and Penge) (Lab): An application was made recently for a 24-hour gambling casino in Crystal Palace. I, along with Labour councillors, my right hon. Friend the Member for Streatham and Croydon North (Steve Reed) and over 1,000 local residents, oppose this predatory operator opening. Will the Minister join me in calling on the Conservative-run council to listen to residents and block the application?

**Miatta Fahnbulleh:** I thank my hon. Friend for his effective and committed campaign. We are clear that local areas should be given the power to shape their high streets. When businesses such as gambling shops and casinos are working against what communities want, it is right that the council takes action. The Secretary of State and I are committed to working with my hon. Friend on this issue.

**Lincoln Jopp** (Spelthorne) (Con): Last year, 88,000 new homes were meant to be started in London, but instead, 5,891 were started. That shortfall has a direct impact on rents in my Spelthorne constituency. Will the Secretary of State say why he is allowing Sadiq Khan to run circles around him?

**Matthew Pennycook:** The Government have recognised openly that there is a perfect storm when it comes to house building in London. That is precisely why we are consulting on an emergency package. As the hon. Gentleman will know, the consultation closed just weeks ago and he does not have long to wait before we come forward with next steps.

**Dan Carden** (Liverpool Walton) (Lab): Private market rents are most extortionate in working-class communities such as mine, where people can still buy a terraced house for around £70,000. So far, the Government have kept regulation linked to market rents, but we could do something different. We could do something that the Tories and Reform cannot do and that previous Labour Governments did do: as with Harold Wilson's fair rents, we could have rent controls in deprived areas with poor housing stock. Will Ministers at least consider a pilot? Why not do it in Liverpool?

**Matthew Pennycook:** I am sorry to disappoint my hon. Friend, but the Government have been very clear that we do not support rent controls. The provisions of our Renters' Rights Act 2025 will ensure that landlords can increase rent only once a year and that tenants are empowered to challenge unreasonable rent increases.

**Alex Brewer** (North East Hampshire) (LD): What measures is the Minister taking to protect communities from inappropriate, speculative development when effective and expensive local plans that were working have been rendered effectively useless by new housing targets?

**Matthew Pennycook:** If a local planning authority has an up-to-date local plan in place, it will be up to date and in place until it needs to be replaced. At that point, we expect the targets that flow from the new standard method to be adhered to.

**Valerie Vaz** (Walsall and Bloxwich) (Lab): Will the Minister meet me to discuss the decisions of Walsall council, including the closure of the Walsall Leather Museum against the wishes of local people?

**Alison McGovern:** I will.

**Wendy Morton** (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I have another request from Walsall borough residents. Earlier today, the Secretary of State said that local people know best. I have sent him an invitation to a peaceful protest in Aldridge on Saturday; residents from right across the constituency are coming together to protect their precious green belt. Will he come and meet with them?

**Steve Reed:** I apologise, but my diary is already full up—I will be in another part of the country on Saturday. I am sure that the right hon. Lady's constituents will also want to see the homes built that they and their children will need now and in the future.

**Amanda Hack** (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): We need to improve the infrastructure surrounding new developments and existing developments while ensuring that highways in local government, which felt the full impact of austerity, have the resources to deliver. What conversations has the Minister had about expanding capacity in local government to ensure that highways have the appropriate resources to deliver the infrastructure that we need?

**Matthew Pennycook:** We have provided significant support for local planning authorities to help them with capacity and capability pressures. My hon. Friend will know that through the provisions in the Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025, we are allowing local authorities to set their own fees at a local level to ensure that their costs can be covered.

**Aphra Brandreth** (Chester South and Eddisbury) (Con): There are a number of new build housing developments in my constituency where developers have sold the properties and moved on without completing work on vital infrastructure such as roads and sewers. What consideration has the Minister given to allowing councils to refuse future planning permission to developers with a record of leaving developments incomplete?

**Matthew Pennycook:** As part of the proposals we set out in a build out working paper last year, we are looking at some of the powers in the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023 that allow local planning authorities to refuse planning permissions to developers who consistently do not build out. On the issue of highways, I will happily respond to the hon. Lady if she writes to me with some more detail.

**Laurence Turner** (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that Birmingham's exit from section 114 status is an important moment for the city? Does she further agree that it is time to start scaling back the central Government intervention?

**Alison McGovern:** Birmingham city council has strengthened its financial position, and its balanced budget proposal for '26-27 is a significant milestone. That has been made possible by the Government's funding reforms, which increase Birmingham's core spending power by 45% from '24-25 to '28-29, because we recognise that councils should be funded in line with poverty and deprivation.

**Dr Al Pinkerton** (Surrey Heath) (LD): The Minister has talked about the protections afforded by local plans, but in areas such as Surrey Heath and Guildford, which have experienced a near-doubling of housing targets, those protections have been stripped away according to the tilted balance approach. What protections will the Minister put in place as at least a temporary measure to protect our communities from speculative development?

**Matthew Pennycook:** Local plans that are up to date provide protection from speculative development. Local authorities have to ensure that they are meeting housing delivery targets; that is an essential part of the system. Again, I will happily respond if the hon. Gentleman writes to me with further detail.

**Luke Myer** (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): This Government have announced that they are awarding over £18 million to Redcar and Cleveland borough council to help it tackle the broken children's social care market. While that is very welcome, it is a shame that it is necessary, so will Ministers meet my council leader to discuss what further support can be put in place to make sure this is not needed in future?

**Alison McGovern:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising this incredibly important issue; I am working closely with Department for Education Ministers on it. I had the pleasure of speaking to a representative of Redcar and Cleveland earlier today, but I will keep working closely with my hon. Friend as well.

**Alicia Kearns** (Rutland and Stamford) (Con): I am afraid that this question may feel like groundhog day. This time last month, I asked for a meeting about local government reform, because my residents are so concerned. I was promised a meeting, yet despite having chased at least twice a week every single week for the past month, we have had zero response from the Department. When are we going to get the meetings on really important matters that we are promised in this Chamber?

**Alison McGovern:** I thank the hon. Lady for chasing that. I am sure we will meet before too long. [*Laughter.*]

**Alicia Kearns:** It is not funny.

**Alison McGovern:** I do not think it is funny either. We will meet before too long and get on with it, because local government reorganisation is very important.

**Euan Stainbank** (Falkirk) (Lab): In Falkirk, an allocation from Labour's impact fund has addressed the funding gap that would otherwise have risked the delivery of Scottish Canals' national centre of excellence for canals and traditional skills. Will the Minister visit this regeneration project once it is completed to celebrate this Labour Government's investment in supporting Falkirk?

**Miatta Fahnbulleh:** Yes, I or one of my colleagues will happily visit that fantastic scheme.

**Josh Babarinde** (Eastbourne) (LD): Sovereign Harbour in Eastbourne is unique, in that it is the only harbour in the country where freeholders and leaseholders have to pay through their rent charge for not only the maintenance of the area, but sea defences, which elsewhere are paid for by the Government. Will the Secretary of State commit to meet me to review the fairness of that arrangement and help stem the tide of 16% increases in that rent charge, as has happened this year?

**Matthew Pennycook:** Not just because I have accepted a large number of meetings, I think a far better way for the hon. Gentleman to submit his views would be through the appropriate consultation on freehold estates, where he can bring that case and the issues it raises to life for us.

**Jim Allister** (North Antrim) (TUV): With recent weeks having seen the closure of the two largest retailers on the main shopping street in Ballymena in my constituency, does the Minister think that the ideology of Pride in Place is capable of rescuing the situation? As part of that, would it be possible to have a special programme whereby large retail spaces whose overheads are unbearable could be subdivided into small retail units for new businesses, so that those overheads might become bearable?

**Miatta Fahnbulleh:** The plight of our high streets is something that this Government are very alive to, and we are trying to work with national and local governments to make sure we respond. Our job is to make sure we are providing the powers and the ability for places to shape their high streets so that they respond to what their communities want. We are open to ideas in that space, including ideas coming from local areas.

## Labour Together and APCO Worldwide: Cabinet Office Review

3.43 pm

**Alex Burghart** (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster if he will make a statement on the Cabinet Office review into Labour Together and APCO Worldwide.

### **The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Darren Jones):**

Freedom of the press is a cornerstone of our democracy, and the Government are committed to upholding and protecting that freedom. Journalists must be able to do their job without fear or favour, including holding politicians of all political parties to account on behalf of the public that we all serve.

In the past week, there have been a number of media reports about the actions of the think-tank Labour Together in 2023 and 2024. Some of those media reports have included allegations about the conduct of the joint Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Cabinet Office and the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, my hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield (Josh Simons), who was previously the director of Labour Together.

As the Prime Minister confirmed last week, he asked civil servants in the Cabinet Office propriety and ethics team to establish the facts. As Members across the House will know, all civil servants are bound by the civil service code, which dictates that they act with integrity, honesty, objectivity and impartiality. The exercise to establish the facts around the allegations was bound by those principles.

That work has now concluded and the facts have been reported to the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister has been advised that the matter should now be referred to the independent adviser on ministerial standards, and the Prime Minister has done so today. This is not a new process, but a continuation of the process that the Prime Minister has started. The Prime Minister will make a judgment when he has received the advice from the independent adviser. That will happen very soon, and the independent adviser's advice to the Prime Minister will be made public in the normal way.

The independent adviser is appointed to provide impartial, independent advice to the Prime Minister, in line with his published terms of reference. The current independent adviser was appointed under the last Administration by the Prime Minister's predecessor and is independent of the Government. He will provide his independent advice directly to the Prime Minister.

I reiterate that a free and independent press is an absolutely essential part of a free, open and democratic society and is one of the things that makes our country great. Representing the public as a Minister is a privilege and a duty, and public scrutiny is rightly part of that. The Government are committed to protecting freedom of the press, and no journalist should ever be intimidated for trying to hold those in power to account.

**Alex Burghart:** Thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker. The details of this story are quite extraordinary, even by the standards of this Government. While he was the director of the think-tank Labour Together, the now Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, the hon. Member for Makerfield (Josh Simons), paid a

PR agency to investigate the "backgrounds and motivations" of British journalists who had written about Labour Together's breaches of electoral law, of which there were many—more than 20, the most famous being a failure to declare £730,000-worth of donations. The agency produced a report that included an allegation that the journalists in question had relied on Russian hacking. Needless to say, those reports were entirely spurious.

The Minister has claimed that the agency acted beyond its brief, but in the past few days an email from the agency to the Minister has been published, showing that he was shown that a "human intelligence investigation" into the journalists would take place. That investigation included details of one journalist's Jewish faith and made claims about his ideological upbringing and personal relationships. The report was then circulated to key members of the Labour party and to GCHQ, who swiftly said that there was no case to answer.

This looks to all intents and purposes like a deliberate attempt to smear and intimidate journalists whose only "crime" had been to report that Labour Together had broken electoral law. As of today, it is very difficult to see how the Minister's position is tenable.

The referral to the independent adviser, which the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister has just announced, is the right thing to do, but it should have been done immediately. This should not have been dealt with internally in the Cabinet Office, where the Minister in question is the Minister with responsibility for inquiries and whistleblowing—you couldn't make this stuff up! I must ask the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister why the Minister has not been suspended while the investigation is going on.

The Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister refers to the work of the propriety and ethics team. We must also ask about the current membership of that team, because it is known that a political appointment was made to a civil service role of a woman who was previously an employee of Labour Together. Does the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister now accept that that appointment was wrong?

It must also be the case that very many people took money from Labour Together: the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister, the Chancellor, the Foreign Secretary, the Home Secretary, the Deputy Prime Minister—the list goes on. An organisation set up to conceal the source of its donations from the public and from the Labour party—is it not time for an investigation into Labour Together?

**Darren Jones:** I will take those questions in reverse order. The shadow Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster accused me of taking money from Labour Together. That is not true. I had a number of staff seconded to my office when I was a member of the shadow Cabinet. As I am sure Opposition Members know, that is an important contribution that is made to political parties, as the Opposition do not have access to the civil service, but no money was taken—not one pound, not one penny—and seconded staff were reported in the proper way. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will revoke those comments when he gets the opportunity.

The hon. Gentleman's second question was about the investigation led by the propriety and ethics team. I can confirm that that was led by a senior member of

staff—not the member of staff to whom the hon. Gentleman referred—who reported directly to the Prime Minister.

The hon. Gentleman's first question was about why the Minister in question has not been suspended while the investigation is taking place. That is because the independent adviser on ethics can investigate Ministers only while they are in office. If the Minister had been suspended or removed from office, the independent adviser would not be able to undertake his work, and the Prime Minister thinks it is important that the independent adviser is given the opportunity to do just that.

**Jon Trickett** (Normanton and Hemsworth) (Lab): May I put it to the Minister that a significant number of Ministers in this Government, including him, received large sums of money from Labour Together? I think he received almost £60,000.

**Darren Jones** *indicated dissent.*

**Jon Trickett:** The Minister is shaking his head. If what I have said is untrue, I withdraw it, but a number of Ministers did receive money. Did it not leave a bad taste in many people's minds—if you can have a bad taste in your mind—that so many Ministers were standing in judgment on another Minister who had been the director of Labour Together? Clearly, the right thing to do is to hand over the investigation to an independent third party. Narrowing the investigation down to simply one man is a mistake, given that Labour Together has made a number of serious blunders.

**Darren Jones:** To repeat myself, just for the record, I did not receive a pound from Labour Together. I would appreciate it if Members did not keep repeating that falsehood.

The answer to my hon. Friend's question about the independent adviser is in the title: the independent adviser is independent of Government and is looking at this matter in the proper way, as my hon. Friend would expect. We will wait for that advice to come to the Prime Minister, which I expect to happen very shortly.

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

**Sarah Olney** (Richmond Park) (LD): The Liberal Democrats are appalled by reports of smear tactics being used by the party that came into government with a promise to clean up politics following a decade of sleaze under the Conservatives. Investigative journalists have a vital role to play in holding Governments and commercial entities to account. A free and fair press is the cornerstone of a thriving democracy, and this revelation is an outrageous attack on our free press. Can the Government clarify what steps they are taking to uphold the independence of journalism in this country?

Successive Governments have eroded the public's trust in politics, so will this Government now implement the Liberal Democrats' suggestion of putting the ministerial code on a statutory footing? I have heard what the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister has said about keeping the Parliamentary Secretary for the Cabinet Office in his job while the investigation takes place, but does he not agree that this is one more example of the Government insisting that process has to take precedence over political judgment? Can a way not be found for the Minister to step aside while a full investigation is undertaken?

**Darren Jones:** The best route for independent investigations of these types is the independent ethics adviser. As I have informed the House, he can only investigate sitting Ministers. The process is important, and although it is not for me to make the case one way or the other for the Minister in question, he refutes the allegations and needs to be given the chance to go through that process. The independent adviser will then independently give a view to the Prime Minister in relation to the ministerial code and other issues. Ultimately, it is a question for the Prime Minister as to what should happen next.

I will slightly correct the hon. Lady, if I may. The accusations being made are not against the Labour party or the Government, but against the think-tank Labour Together.

**John McDonnell** (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I am the secretary of the National Union of Journalists parliamentary group, and we play a specific role in trying to protect the ability of journalists to report honestly and fairly across the world. We believe that what we saw was an attempt to smear journalists to prevent them from reporting the truth. That is why I wrote on five occasions to the general secretary of the Labour party, and to the Prime Minister, to ask for an independent inquiry. In the end, I was told that an inquiry was being undertaken by the Public Relations and Communications Association, which is not a regulatory body. I was told that the Cabinet Office was not carrying out an investigation, but assembling the facts. We now know that ex-Labour Together staff are in that team, and we know that Ministers have received donations, often to their office or their campaign. The scale of the donations from Labour Together is shocking, to be frank. It is almost as though an organisation has bought a political party—that is one of our worries.

Now we are told that this matter will be referred to the independent adviser. Is it true that the independent adviser will investigate the whole sequence of events with regard to Labour Together, and not just the role of this individual MP, who is now a junior Minister, during the period when he was an MP or a Minister? We need to get the full truth of what went on. At the moment, this does not pass the smell test, as far as I am concerned.

**Darren Jones:** As the House will know, the independent adviser on ethics has the remit to investigate Ministers on behalf of the Prime Minister in relation to concerns on which the Government have standing to ask such questions. Any questions about what happened or did not happen within Labour Together as a private organisation are a matter for the board of Labour Together.

**John McDonnell:** It is a whitewash—it is another whitewash!

**Mr Speaker:** Order.

**Sir Alec Shelbrooke** (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): To paraphrase Churchill, the cornerstone of a free society is a free press. Whatever the investigation may be looking into, I am afraid that the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office has admitted that he set the investigation going because he did not like the report

[Sir Alec Shelbrooke]

that had been issued about donations. That should not need an independent inquiry; the Prime Minister should sack this Minister now. The Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister is here in effect to represent the Prime Minister, so I ask: will the Prime Minister U-turn before or after Prime Minister's questions this week?

**Darren Jones:** As I have said repeatedly, the process is now for the independent adviser to follow, for advice to be presented to the Prime Minister, and at that point the Prime Minister will make a decision.

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): We expect integrity from our journalists and we expect integrity from our Ministers. In the light of the fact that 109 MPs received funding from Labour Together, can the Minister say what involvement the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards has had, and what advice was given to those 109 MPs regarding reporting the funding they received from Labour Together?

**Darren Jones:** As my hon. Friend knows, any donations that individuals receive—from Labour Together or from a trade union, Momentum or any other organisation—are for them to declare in line with the rules, and I do not think there has been any accusation that Members have been in breach of those rules.

**Esther McVey** (Tatton) (Con): The steps taken by the former head of Labour Together to smear journalists when they dared to look into the murky finances of this Labour think-tank are nothing short of chilling. No longer head of Labour Together, he is now serving as a Minister in the Cabinet Office, which is the Department currently looking into his actions, so he will be marking his own homework. When is the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office going to be sacked, if he will not do the decent thing and resign?

**Darren Jones:** I know my voice is going, but maybe the right hon. Lady did not hear my response to the urgent question. The process is being led by the independent adviser for ethics, which is not the Cabinet Office. As I have said, the independent adviser will report to the Prime Minister, and the Prime Minister will then make a decision.

**Rebecca Long Bailey** (Salford) (Lab): I am the chair of the NUJ parliamentary group, which has long campaigned for press freedom, usually in relation to authoritarian regimes, but it seems that the surveillance and political intimidation of journalists is a threat much closer to home. As we have heard, that threat is not being adequately investigated, so will the Minister agree with the NUJ, me and other colleagues that we need an urgent, independent and transparent inquiry into the activities of Labour Together and APCO, and that we need stronger legislation to prevent the corporate surveillance of journalists?

**Darren Jones:** As I have said, the independent adviser will be looking at the testimony and evidence in relation to the Minister in question and advising the Prime Minister in relation to actions where the Government have standing. Questions for other agencies and organisations are either subjects for their relevant trade bodies or decisions for their private board.

**Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): I am a former journalist and member of the NUJ, and I cannot sufficiently express my anger at hearing that a member of my former profession was investigated in this way in an attempt to intimidate them. The Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister has made great play of the fact that it was not the Government but Labour Together that investigated them, but in the mind of the public the two are now linked. Do the Government not need to take urgent action to distance themselves from this organisation, cut off links and make sure that there is some transparency about what exactly went on?

**Darren Jones:** As I have said, in relation to anything that the Government are responsible for, we of course uphold the principles that the hon. Member speaks passionately about, and which we in the Government agree with wholeheartedly. If there are changes that need to be made in Government, we stand ready to do so. As I say, the Government are unable to take steps to investigate private organisations directly, unless there is a legal basis to do so. Therefore, it is for the independent organisation to conduct its own investigations.

**Ian Lavery** (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): I am curious—I am not sure who Labour Together are, what it is, or what its purpose is. I have no idea whatsoever; however, if we believe—and I do not—everything that we read in the newspapers, there have been very serious allegations. It has been suggested that more than 100 Labour MPs have received between hundreds of pounds and hundreds of thousands of pounds in donations. Those are the allegations in the press. With that in mind, can we clear this up? Instead of an investigation into one single individual, can there be an investigation into the entire operations of Labour Together? Nobody knows who they are, and we need to find out.

**Darren Jones:** As my hon. Friend knows, Labour Together is a private organisation. It is a question for its board what it does in relation to its conduct. As I have said already to the House, any donations that have been received by individual Members, whether from Labour Together or other organisations, have, as far as I am aware, all been declared in line with the rules, and there have been no accusations to the contrary.

**Steve Barclay** (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con): Can the Minister confirm that the new head of propriety and ethics was appointed without a fully open, competitive recruitment process, and that the outgoing head of propriety and ethics was promoted to permanent secretary also without a fully open recruitment process? If so, he will know that both those appointments were in breach of rules put in place by the last Government—by myself as Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster—unless an individual Minister signed off a waiver from the process. Can he say which Minister signed off such an exemption, and why patronage is preferred to open recruitment for such sensitive roles?

**Darren Jones:** I was not privy to those appointments, so I cannot confirm the exact details that the right hon. Member asks of me. What I can say is that the senior civil servant who is currently acting as the director of propriety and ethics is a temporary appointment subject to a full recruitment in due course, which is in line with the rules that the right hon. Member refers to.<sup>1</sup>

1.[Official Report, 13 April 2026; Vol. 783, c. 9WC.] (Correction)

**Apsana Begum** (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): The severity of the allegations against Labour Together cannot go unaddressed. The Minister says of the referral to the independent adviser that it would then be for the Prime Minister to decide, but given that the Prime Minister's own Labour leadership campaign in 2020 was supported by Labour Together, does the Minister feel that that would be appropriate? And what of the allegations against Labour Together beyond the role of the one Cabinet Office Minister? Who will investigate those allegations? As the Minister referred some weeks ago to a spirit of transparency and accountability following what we have heard of the role of Peter Mandelson, does he not want to see transparency and accountability more widely on the allegations around Labour Together?

**Darren Jones:** My hon. Friend's question on transparency is answered by the fact that the independent adviser's conclusions and advice to the Prime Minister will be published in the normal way, and they will be available for the public and this House to see. On whether the Prime Minister is the appropriate person to decide, as he is the only person, constitutionally, who advises His Majesty the King on which Ministers to appoint or dismiss in the circumstances set out, it is right for the Prime Minister to come to that judgment.

**Pete Wishart** (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): What is of no doubt whatsoever is that countless Labour MPs took money from Labour Together. Anas Sarwar and his now estranged Scottish Labour MPs must come clean about their close financial and personal relationships with this sullied organisation, but for some reason they have all developed collective amnesia. They have forgotten about their links with this rotten organisation, their only defence being that they are utterly clueless. Will the Minister now insist that Scottish Labour hand back the £100,000 that it took from this dodgy and disgraced organisation?

**Darren Jones:** As I have said to the House, individual donations will be declared in line with the rules in the normal way. It is for those individuals to decide what they do with those donations.

**Andy McDonald** (Middlesbrough and Thornaby East) (Lab): This is truly a sordid affair. The Minister speaks of receiving funds from Labour Together to work on policy; I will just remind him that when we sat on the Opposition Benches, many of us were quite content with the support we received from the trade union movement and were proud to declare it as socialists.

On Labour Together and its funding basis, it seems clear that the former chief of staff in Downing Street was content with not declaring, safe in the knowledge that the Electoral Commission's powers were very limited and that a fine of £16,000—in the context of £730,000 of moneys coming into the system—was simply the cost of doing business. Can the Minister assure me that Sir Laurie Magnus will look at the funding structure and consider whether we need to revisit the ways in which people can be penalised for such egregious transgressions and flagrant disregard for doing business properly? To my mind, these individuals should, just as we ask directors to be individually responsible, bear personal responsibility in these circumstances.

**Darren Jones:** I thank my hon. Friend for his question. The independent adviser on ethics will be looking at the ministerial code and its application to the Parliamentary Secretary in relation to the statements that have been made and the facts that have been made available through the propriety and ethics team's fact-finding process. My hon. Friend asks a wider question around the regulation of think-tanks, donations and so on, which I am sure will be debated as part of the forthcoming elections Bill. I agree that those things should, of course, be done in the proper and ethical way.

**Sir Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): Is it not likely that, with the awards ceremony last night, the Government would have won the BAFTA for "One Scandal After Another" had they entered? The facts in this matter are not in dispute: the organisation Labour Together did not declare massive donations and was fined as a result; and in response, its head, now a Labour Minister, sought to gain dirt on the journalists who had truthfully reported the matter. Why does this need to be investigated? The facts are clear and the position is indefensible. I regard the three Ministers present as decent people and as gentlemen. Are they not sick of being put forward to defend the indefensible?

**Darren Jones:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his concern for our wellbeing. As I have said, the independent ethics adviser will conduct his investigation and report to the Prime Minister in the normal way, at which point the Prime Minister will make a decision. It is not for me at the Dispatch Box to make the case one way or the other for the parties involved. However, I can inform the right hon. Gentleman that the allegations he has alluded to are disputed, which is why it is important that the independent adviser is given the opportunity to undertake that process and advise the Prime Minister in the proper way.

**Ian Byrne** (Liverpool West Derby) (Lab): Yesterday, party colleagues and I wrote to the Prime Minister and the general secretary of the Labour party to raise serious concerns over the allegations facing Labour Together. It is absolutely essential that any investigation into these matters is demonstrably independent, thorough, transparent and, now, wide-ranging, listening to the many voices in this place. For that reason, I ask the Minister to confirm that published terms of reference for that investigation will be brought before Parliament and suggest that the Government should introduce the duty of candour of the proposed Hillsborough law in any investigation.

**Darren Jones:** The terms of reference for the independent ethics adviser are already published, as is the ministerial code; as I have been able to confirm today, the advice that the adviser provides to the Prime Minister will also be published. All those documents will therefore be available to the House. As my hon. Friend knows, the Government support the proposals of the Hillsborough law and are working at pace to be able to complete the legislation to ensure that a duty of candour is on the statute books.

**Danny Kruger** (East Wiltshire) (Reform): The Government are hiding behind process as usual, even when the process is so clearly compromised, as in this case. First, we hear that the propriety and ethics team are looking

[Danny Kruger]

at this matter even though we know that the leader of that team is a former Labour Together staffer who was appointed according to inappropriate process. I would be grateful if the Minister repeated and perhaps explained the extraordinary claim he made earlier from the Dispatch Box that it is necessary for the Minister in question to stay in his role so that the independent inquiry can be carried out. It is an absolutely extraordinary suggestion—could he explain it? Secondly, could he simply confirm to the House that it is for the Prime Minister to appoint and dismiss Ministers without reference to independent inquiries, and that he is perfectly capable of making the right decision now?

**Darren Jones:** The Prime Minister made the ethics adviser independent on coming into government because of the misuse of that process by former Prime Ministers who were trying to cover up for their friends. The independent ethics adviser has not only illustrated his independence but proven that the independent process works, because where Ministers have been in breach of the code, the Prime Minister has sacked them as a consequence.

The hon. Member made a statement that the leader of the propriety and ethics team was a former Labour Together staffer. That is not true, and that should be acknowledged. He asked why Ministers have to remain in post while they are being investigated by the independent ethics adviser. Those are the rules for the system that we inherited. He raises an interesting question, and we should consider that for the future, but for the time being the rules are as established, and they require a Minister to stay in post while they are being investigated.

**Matt Bishop** (Forest of Dean) (Lab): I hope the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister agrees that any investigation into any matter should be done in an appropriate and timely way. I know that it is an independent investigation, but can he advise the House on what the timescale for the investigation may be and, if it is not very quick, whether it can be brought forward?

**Darren Jones:** The independent ethics adviser is able to conduct inquiries in the time that he considers necessary in relation to the facts, the number of documents and the conversations that need to be had, but I agree that the advice ought to be made available to the Prime Minister as quickly as possible. I would certainly hope for that to be the case in the coming days.

**Sir John Whittingdale** (Maldon) (Con): The Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister may be aware that at the end of this week the UK takes on the chair of the global Media Freedom Coalition—a partnership of 51 countries pledged to protect journalists and the freedom of the press. How could the UK have any credibility in that role, given the revelations of the behaviour of a member of this Government, which are more akin to that of the worst authoritarian states?

**Darren Jones:** I think that the right hon. Member talks down the country. The UK is rightly proud of the freedom of the press and its role in our democracy, and I know that both his party and mine support those principles. He has referred to allegations being made,

and that is why an independent process is looking at the veracity of those allegations and any denial that is put. As soon as its advice has been made available, it will be put to the Prime Minister to make a call on it.

**Imran Hussain** (Bradford East) (Lab): The vicious actions of Labour Together are despicable. Any attack on the freedom of our press and individuals is unforgivable. The Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister keeps referring to an independent ethics adviser while at the same time admitting that his only remit is the ministerial code of conduct. He needs to be reminded that the actions that have been referred to took place before the Minister concerned was in office. These actions are such that they will cause irreparable and tremendous harm to the Government and our party. Only an independent investigation into all the actions of Labour Together will suffice. Why will he not understand that?

**Darren Jones:** The investigation that the Government are conducting in relation to the Minister is independent. The ethics adviser is independent, as I have alluded to a number of times. The independent ethics adviser is able to look at the ministerial code as well as the circumstances in relation to the questions put to him, and his advice will make reference to that when he comes to advise the Prime Minister. I know that the hon. Member will be disappointed by this, but the Government cannot instigate an investigation into a private organisation unless there is a legal basis to do so. It is a question for the board of Labour Together whether they wish to undertake any work on the allegations that have been made in the media.

**Liz Saville Roberts** (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): There are real concerns that non-state actors, such as the commercial public relations organisation APCO and possibly Palantir Technologies, are selling services to carry out surveillance with the purpose of smearing journalists in the United Kingdom. If the Government are not just uttering polite, meaningless words about protecting journalists, surely we now need an independent investigation so that we can move beyond process and look at how to regulate such non-state actors?

**Darren Jones:** I am afraid that I do not know the veracity of the right hon. Lady's allegations, but I share her concern. If that were to be true, it would clearly be unwelcome in the United Kingdom. If laws and regulations need to be updated to prevent that from happening, then of course this House should consider them.

**Sean Woodcock** (Banbury) (Lab): I am grateful to the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister for his statement. I wonder if he could clarify the actions that the Government will take should the investigation show that further questions need answering.

**Darren Jones:** The independent adviser will write a letter to the Prime Minister following his investigation, which will detail the facts as he understands them and the case that has been made by the parties in question. He will then draw some form of conclusion, on which the Prime Minister will need to decide how to act. As I have said this afternoon, those options can include an agreement for the Minister to continue in post or not.

**Harriet Cross** (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): The Prime Minister has today said that the independent ethics adviser will now investigate. Is this not another example

of how poor his judgment is? Initially saying that the Cabinet Office could investigate someone who is now a Cabinet Office Minister was ludicrous; that was never going to be independent or comprehensive. The U-turn today is just so that his Chief Secretary had something to talk about in response to today's urgent question, which my hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) dragged him to the House for. Why is the Prime Minister's judgment constantly so bad?

**Darren Jones:** I think the hon. Lady might be slightly confused.

**Lincoln Jopp** (Spelthorne) (Con): Why don't you mansplain it to her?

**Darren Jones:** I will happily mansplain it to the hon. Gentleman, if I may say so!

The independent adviser is independent, and the proper process will be followed. I remind the House that the reason that the process exists and that the ethics adviser is independent is that the previous Administration repeatedly failed to deal with ethics issues properly. The referral to the independent adviser has been done promptly, following fact finding, and he will report in due course.

**Brian Leishman** (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): When the Prime Minister came to power, promising to clean up politics, he declared:

"Journalism is the lifeblood of democracy."

We all know that Labour Together helped to mastermind the Prime Minister's rise to the highest office in the land, and that it stands accused of running an orchestrated campaign to smear and discredit journalists. I think the Prime Minister should be here in this House answering questions, but my prediction is that that day will come. In the meantime, does the Minister agree with me and an ex-founder of Labour Together that this is some "dark shit"?

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Mr Leishman, you will withdraw that, won't you?

**Brian Leishman:** I withdraw.

**Mr Speaker:** Stand up. I think I want a bit better—a bit more respect, please.

**Brian Leishman:** Please accept my apology, Mr Speaker. I withdraw the bad language.

**Darren Jones:** I think the question has been withdrawn, Mr Speaker.

**Jeremy Corbyn** (Islington North) (Ind): Can I take the Minister back to the strange answer that he gave to the hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain), who asked for a full inquiry into all the actions and activities of Labour Together, including the behaviour of Morgan McSweeney and the hon. Member for Makerfield (Josh Simons)? I want the inquiry to extend to their undermining of the Labour party leadership between 2015 and 2020—the systemic briefing and attacks, and the general undermining of the interests of the Labour party while Labour Together claimed to support it. A single inquiry by a single person does not cut it.

There needs to be an open, much more public investigation into not just Labour Together's behaviour but the sources of its funding, expenditure and donations. Will the Minister confirm that political donations are not just cash payments but include the secondment of staff and the use of facilities, all of which ought to be publicly and openly declared, and clearly have not been?

**Darren Jones:** The Electoral Commission has looked at some of these issues and fined Labour Together for previous errors, but other than that investigation, I am not aware of any accusations of illegal or improper donations to Labour Together or other organisations. As I said, it is important that the Government investigate matters that relate to the Government and ministerial appointments, but questions for Labour Together as a private organisation are questions for its board.

**Lincoln Jopp:** As of today, what services—if any—is Labour Together providing either to the Labour party or to the Government?

**Darren Jones:** I can only speak on behalf of the Government; as far as I am aware, it is not providing any services.

**Jim Allister** (North Antrim) (TUV): If I understand this correctly, out of all this unsavoury saga there is a single investigation about a single Minister. But if that investigation is under the ministerial code, it will deal only with his time as a Minister, and his previous involvement with Labour Together is beyond that remit, is it not? In Labour Together, we have a party within a party. Surely, how it was funded and how it used those funds are things that the Labour party executive could conduct an investigation into. Is that not correct?

**Darren Jones:** Labour Together is a separate organisation to the Labour party. It is not for the Labour party or the Government to investigate third-party organisations. It would be like asking the Government to investigate Tesco—that is not something the Government can do unless there is a legal basis on which to do so. On the hon. and learned Gentleman's first question, the ministerial code incorporates the Nolan principles that apply to all Ministers and their appointment to Government. I am sure that the independent adviser will consider those when he considers the facts.

**Ben Obese-Jecty** (Huntingdon) (Con): Far be it for me to insert myself into the internecine warfare fast breaking out on the Government Benches, but the Minister pushed back when it was suggested that he had received donations from Labour Together. His entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests shows £63,000-plus of donations in kind with regards to both his time in opposition and his time in government. With that in mind, if the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee launches an inquiry into Labour Together, will the Minister and his Department co-operate with it?

**Darren Jones:** Investigations by Select Committees of this House are a matter for those Select Committees. The Government will always comply with requests from Committees.

**Shockat Adam** (Leicester South) (Ind): When in opposition, the Prime Minister said that Boris Johnson “always looked the other way”

over standards in government, and that he was “corrupt”. Yet Labour Together has been led by key advisers to the Prime Minister, including my constituency predecessor, and some remain in his Cabinet to this day. Given the £730,000 in undeclared donations from millionaire venture capitalists, and a payment of almost £36,000 to a public relations firm to smear investigative journalists, does the Minister agree that the public were promised real change but all they are getting is much of the same, and that the great British people expect a lot better?

**Darren Jones:** When coming into office, the Prime Minister was committed to improving the systems that we inherited. That was established with the ethics adviser being made independent—being able to conduct his investigations independently and to advise the Prime Minister, irrespective of whether the Prime Minister asks him to do so. It was done by our establishment of the Ethics and Integrity Commission. It was done by our introduction of the Hillsborough law to bring a duty of candour into statute, to ensure that officials and politicians tell the truth, where in the past they have been shown not to do so. Those are a number of examples of how the Government are bolstering ethics and standards in public life—the hon. Gentleman is right that the public expect that from us. On this particular matter, as I have said, the independent adviser will consider the issues as they relate to the Minister in question, and advise the Prime Minister in the normal way.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): The Minister is an honourable man, but my goodness he has drawn the short straw today. These incredibly difficult allegations deserve and need honest answers. It is clear that this is yet another example of bodies overstressing their remit, and indeed their rights. The general public will view this as Big Brother watching over us all. How will the Minister, once again, rebuild trust in a Government who respect individual rights and independence, not some despotic Government to whom espionage on their own citizens is a normal occurrence?

**Darren Jones:** It is important to clarify that the allegations are not against the Labour party or the Government, but against the think-tank Labour Together. There is no suggestion that the Government are conducting business in the way the hon. Gentleman suggests. He and I—and the House, I am sure—will agree that freedom of the press is a cornerstone of our democracy and something that we in this Parliament will always seek to protect.

**Jon Trickett:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The House will have heard me suggest that the Minister had received a donation of almost £60,000. I withdrew that suggestion following an indication by the Minister that it was not correct. I have now had an opportunity to look at his declaration of interests for the early months of 2024. He received two donations amounting to £60,000. I accept that this was not in cash, so I want to clarify what I said, but on the other hand, the Minister has received a significant amount of money. I seek your guidance on whether Ministers who have received money need to declare their interest before responding on matters that relate to Labour Together. Maybe you have not considered that and can give us guidance later.

**Mr Speaker:** Maybe the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister wants to answer that rather than me.

**Darren Jones:** Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I am happy to answer that point. As the hon. Member for Normanton and Hemsworth (Jon Trickett) pointed out, I have not received one pound in cash from Labour Together, which was the suggestion from some Members in the House. Instead, I received while in opposition some hours of seconded time from staff, who were provided policy research to my role when I was in the shadow Cabinet. That was normal at that time, whether in relation to Labour Together, trade unions or other organisations. I am happy to confirm that those were declared in the proper way. There has been no breach of the rules and I am happy to make those declarations to the House today.

**Mr Speaker:** If the hon. Member for Normanton and Hemsworth (Jon Trickett) believes there is something wrong, my advice would be to go to Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards. That would be the way forward, rather than to debate this matter on the Floor of the House.

**John McDonnell:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I do not want to delay matters, but it is now being reported in the media that the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, the hon. Member for Makerfield (Josh Simons), has accidentally messaged details of his case to a mass WhatsApp group of the 2024 intake of Labour MPs, in which he said:

“Jonny rang, PM will ask Laurie to look in to it. Aim is to move fast. But PET did find I had not broken the code.”

I take it that Jonny is the Chief Whip and Laurie is the independent adviser. PET is the propriety and ethics team. However, the PET cannot determine whether or not a Minister has broken the code. A Government spokesperson has said:

“This was an accidental post and clearly meant for a more private conversation. It’s right that the independent adviser takes this away now.”

Could I have your assurance, Mr Speaker, that whatever has been provided to this Member from the propriety and ethics team will be published immediately, and that there will be openness and transparency on this matter?

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister to respond.

**Darren Jones:** Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I understand that the Chief Whip spoke to the Minister in question this morning to inform him that the Prime Minister had decided to refer the matter to the independent adviser, but I can confirm that the propriety and ethics team will not have made a judgment one way or another about whether the Minister has been cleared or not in relation to the ministerial code. The propriety and ethics team advised the Prime Minister to refer it to the independent adviser, and it is for the independent adviser to come to a judgment on that and then to report to the Prime Minister.

**Mr Speaker:** I am going to leave it at that. I will just say that the PET will not be making the decision.

## Lord Mandelson: Government Response to Humble Address

**Mr Speaker:** Before we come to the statement updating the House on the Government's response to the Humble Address motion, I would like to remind the House that Lord Peter Mandelson is the subject of an ongoing live police investigation. I understand that there is interest from the public on this matter and that there has been much coverage in the media. While the matter is not currently sub judice, I would gently say to Members that it would be helpful to exercise a degree of restraint in referencing specific matters under investigation. I know the House would not wish to do anything that risked prejudicing the investigation.

4.29 pm

**The Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister (Darren Jones):** With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement regarding the Government's response to the Humble Address laid before the House on 4 February. I committed to keeping the House updated. This is now my third statement on this issue, and I will continue to update the House throughout the process.

I will first update the House on the work already being undertaken by the Government. I can confirm that work is ongoing across Departments to search for and identify the material relevant to the Humble Address, and Departments have been instructed to retain material that may be relevant to the motion. Given the breadth of the motion, this process will clearly take some time. However, I want to reassure colleagues that officials have been working throughout the recess, and expect to compile information relating to the House's request very shortly.

As the motion envisages, we are carefully assessing the material for whether any of it may be prejudicial to national security or international relations. The House will appreciate that this remains a sensitive matter, and the Government are committed to referring this material to the Intelligence and Security Committee. The Cabinet Office is leading this work, in close co-operation with the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, in a process agreed by the permanent secretary to the Cabinet Office. This was delegated by the new Cabinet Secretary, following her appointment by the Prime Minister last Thursday.

The Government intend to publish documents in tranches, instead of having one publication date at the end of the process, given that we are unable to confirm how long the process will take. The Government expect to be able to publish the first tranche of documents very shortly, in early March. I should, however, inform the House that it remains the case that a subset of this first tranche of documents is subject to an ongoing Metropolitan police investigation. That includes correspondence between No. 10 and Lord Peter Mandelson, in which a number of follow-up questions were asked. Because of the Metropolitan police's interest in this document, we are unable to publish it in early March in the first tranche, but we will release it as soon as we are able to, upon consultation with the Metropolitan police.

There is also a small portion of the material that engages matters of national security or international relations, and thus the role that this House has envisaged for the Intelligence and Security Committee. We are

working with the committee to establish processes for making this material available to it, and we are grateful to the committee in advance for its important contribution to reviewing these documents.

I recognise that the House will want to know about the next steps around the publication of the remainder of the information relevant to the motion—the information that is not included in the first tranche. I would like to make it clear that for anything we publish, we will take our normal approach to publishing material in the House, such as regarding the redaction of junior officials' names and, where relevant, legal professional privilege.

Further work is needed to compile the information in scope, and to conduct the necessary assessments. However, I can commit to the House that we will release this further material, subject to the ongoing process with the Met police and the Intelligence and Security Committee, and we will continue to keep Members updated as we make progress. I welcome the House's patience as the Government work swiftly to comply with the Humble Address.

With your permission, Mr Speaker, I should like to mention a separate matter before I conclude. I understand that there has been a high level of public interest in the news of Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor's arrest last Thursday, and in what may follow. The Government are clear that we are not ruling out action in respect of the line of succession at this stage, and we will consider whether any further steps are required in due course. It is vital, however, that we first allow the police to carry out their investigations. I know they will have the full support of the Government and, I am sure, this House as they do so.

I will return to the House with further updates, as I have committed to do, in due course—not just on this issue, but on wider reforms to standards, lobbying, transparency and the removal of peerages. I commend this statement to the House.

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

4.32 pm

**Mike Wood** (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): I thank the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister for the statement, which we received at 3.38 pm. I gently suggest to him that the 45 minutes referred to in the ministerial code is a minimum, rather than a target.

On 4 February, this House voted, cross party, for a Humble Address to be presented. That is not a polite suggestion; it is a formal command from Parliament to the Executive, but three weeks later, the Government have moved with the urgency of a tired sloth on a bank holiday Monday. Before the recess, my hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) sent a comprehensive list of questions to the Cabinet Office. He received nothing back—not a letter, not a postcard, not even an out-of-office reply, so let us try for some verbal clarity today.

The Prime Minister previously staked the integrity of this process on the personal oversight of the Cabinet Secretary—and then he sacked him. Has the change in Cabinet Secretary caused a scoping delay, or are the Government simply using the handover as convenient long grass to kick this into? Reports suggest that a secret investigation into Lord Mandelson's conduct took place last September. My hon. Friend the Member for

[Mike Wood]

Brentwood and Ongar asked about this on the Floor of the House, and again in writing, but there has been silence. Can the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister tell us if that report exists? If so, who wrote it, and will the Government stop playing hide-and-seek and publish it?

The Government call this an urgent review, yet the terms of reference remain as elusive as a coherent Treasury forecast. The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, the hon. Member for Brighton Kemptown and Peacehaven (Chris Ward) promised my hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar in the debate on 4 February that he would write with answers, yet there is still nothing. Can the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister tell us whether the scope includes the £241 million Ministry of Defence contract awarded to Palantir following Lord Mandelson's off-diary meetings? Does it cover Global Counsel? Or are we looking only at bits of the noble Lord's Rolodex that are not politically explosive?

The Intelligence and Security Committee is being asked to help, yet its secretariat consists of Cabinet Office civil servants. As the ISC itself warned last May, an oversight body should not be beholden to the very organisation it is supposed to be overseeing. If this is a genuine audit, what steps are being taken to ensure that the committee can operate without conflicts of interest, when Cabinet Office staff are considering material that relates directly to decisions taken by the Cabinet Office itself?

Mr Speaker, you could not have been clearer:

"the police cannot dictate to this House."—[*Official Report*, 4 February 2026; Vol. 780, c. 375.]

Yet the Government remain coy about the legal basis for withholding documents. We need an unequivocal commitment today that once the police are finished, every withheld page will be published—no excuses, and no redactions by stealth—and that in the meantime, any documents that are withheld from publication at the request of the police are handed to the ISC immediately, as you indicated after the debate, Mr Speaker.

Finally, will the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister commit to a Keeling-style register of all withheld documents? If the Government have nothing to hide, they should have no problem listing exactly what they are keeping from us, and why.

The Opposition have acted in good faith. We have been patient, but careful work must not become a euphemism for managed delay. This House gave a constitutional instruction on 4 February. It is time the Government stopped treating Parliament like an inconvenient interruption to their schedule, stopped giving every impression that their priority is working out whose back to cover, and started providing some actual answers, so that we can start to get to the bottom of this murky matter.

**Darren Jones:** The shadow Minister asked a number of questions, which I will take in turn. He asked if the appointment of the new Cabinet Secretary had resulted in any delay or change to the process. The answer is no; the process is being led by the permanent secretary in the Cabinet Office. It was delegated to her by the former and new Cabinet Secretaries.

The shadow Minister referred to a secret report. As far as I am aware, there is no secret report, and all the documents will be published in the proper way, but he must recognise that we are trying to manage a criminal investigation by the Metropolitan police. I am sure that the House would not want us to inadvertently interfere with that process, which needs to be allowed to happen in the proper way. We are working closely with the Intelligence and Security Committee to make sure that it is able to fulfil the requirements of the Humble Address, and we will support it to do so.

The shadow Minister questioned the Intelligence and Security Committee's independence. While it is not for me to speak for the committee, I am sure that every member of it will strongly refute his suggestion, given that they honour their independence very strongly, and the Government respect that entirely.

**Andy McDonald** (Middlesbrough and Thornaby East) (Lab): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his statement. I agree that the Prime Minister was quite right to put the "Lord of the files" outside the tent; we got there eventually. However, can my right hon. Friend assure me that the answer to the \$64,000 question—what was known at the time when Peter Mandelson was appointed US ambassador—will be put in the public domain? Many people in this place and across the country would not have touched Peter Mandelson with a bargepole. They are trying to get their head round why on earth this Government were not of the same view.

**Darren Jones:** I can confirm that those documents will be made available, subject, I am afraid, to the exclusion of one particular item, in which No. 10 asked Peter Mandelson a number of questions. The Met police have asked that to be held back, subject to their investigations, as I have said. That item will therefore have to be published at a later date, but the documents that are not subject to the Met police investigation will be published very shortly.

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

**Mr Tom Morrison** (Cheadle) (LD): The victims of Jeffrey Epstein have always been, and must remain, at the forefront of our minds. The decades of abuse and suffering that they endured can never be undone. Although nothing can erase that pain, we believe that recent decisions taken by the police and the Government represent a step in the right direction.

We welcome the Government's work to begin releasing the files relating to the role of Peter Mandelson. Parliament asked for transparency, and the public deserves it. Earlier this month, my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey) called for a full statutory public inquiry into Jeffrey Epstein and his influence on the British political establishment. Only through an independent inquiry can we uncover the truth and deliver justice for the victims, so will the Government support that call? Once again, allegations of sleaze and scandal cast a shadow over our politics.

After a decade of misconduct and rule-breaking under successive Governments, it is clear that the current system is not fit for purpose, so will the Government finally commit to putting the ministerial code on a statutory footing, to ensure that breaches carry real consequences? Will the Minister commit to protecting

those who speak out, by establishing a new office of the whistleblower, which strengthens legal protections and increases public awareness of whistleblowers' rights? Transparency, accountability and integrity in public life are not optional; they are essential.

**Darren Jones:** In relation to investigations and inquiries, the House will know that the criminal investigation being led by the Metropolitan police takes primacy. Neither the House nor the Government would want to interfere inadvertently with that process. The Government agree with the hon. Member that it is important that people are held to account for their actions, and that the victims receive justice.

The hon. Member invites me to comment on some suggested reforms. As I have said to the House before, I am very happy to consider them—particularly the Liberal Democrat proposals on whistleblowing, which either he or his colleagues are to write to me about in due course. As far as I can tell, the ministerial code is working. A very effective independent adviser advises the Prime Minister, and when there is a breach, Ministers are removed from office. I am not entirely sure what value a statutory footing would add, as we have given independence to the ethics adviser, and the code seems to be applied effectively.

**Janet Daby** (Lewisham East) (Lab): I share the sentiments expressed by many Members, and my thoughts are with the hundreds of survivors—most of them children—of that horrific sexual abuse. The public rightly expect holders of high office to maintain a high standard of conduct, and the Prime Minister rightly called for the removal of peerages from disgraced peers. Will the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister confirm that the Government are providing the police with the support that they need to progress the criminal investigation?

**Darren Jones:** I can confirm that the Government are complying, and will continue to comply, fully with the requests from the Metropolitan police, as well as from Parliament in relation to the Humble Address. My hon. Friend is right to say that it is important that we do so to bring transparency and accountability to these most egregious actions.

**Sir Roger Gale** (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): Could the Minister clarify whether or not the Cabinet Secretary's review into Lord Mandelson will be advised by the Cabinet Office propriety and ethics team? I ask for two reasons. First, I think I am right in saying that it was the PET that undertook the original so-called due diligence on Lord Mandelson. Secondly, in the light of the question asked by the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) a few moments ago about the involvement of the PET in an earlier unsavoury matter, I am not sure that the House will have much confidence in that team.

**Darren Jones:** My experience of the civil servants in the propriety and ethics team is unquestionably that they work extremely hard, comply with the civil service code and seek to ensure that the Government uphold all the ethics and integrity rules that we are subject to. I have not seen one instance or any suggestion of poor performance or conflict of interest in that team, and I wholeheartedly endorse their work.

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Palantir is a client of Global Counsel, which was Peter Mandelson's PR agency, and clearly Palantir has benefited from lucrative contracts from the Government. Will the Minister ensure that all papers associated with Palantir are published as part of this inquiry?

**Darren Jones:** Documents that are published as part of the Humble Address will of course comply with the terms of the Humble Address. As I have said to hon. Members before, if there are particular suggestions or concerns about specific Palantir contracts, those representations—with our assistance, if helpful—should be made to the Departments concerned, but I have not seen any suggestion that there has been a breach of procurement rules in relation to the issues raised.

**Sir Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): In response to an earlier question about the role of the Intelligence and Security Committee in relation to the Cabinet Office, the Minister rightly said that the ISC is concerned about its independence. As its former chairman, I can vouch for the fact that it was particularly concerned about the dominant role that the Cabinet Office had in its affairs. In his annual report covering 2023 to 2025, which was published on 15 December last year, my successor as chairman states:

"The Committee in the last Parliament became very seriously concerned that the vital scrutiny that the ISC provides was being undermined by continued interference by the Cabinet Office in the Committee's Office... The root of the problem lies in the control exerted over the Committee's staff and resourcing by the Cabinet Office."

This is an opportunity to let the ISC have what it has asked for and wanted for years, which is independence from the Cabinet Office. Will the Minister please take that message back?

**Darren Jones:** I think the right hon. Member is referring to 2023, which is of course before this Government were in office. I confirm that we are in the middle of negotiations with the committee on a number of issues, partly in relation to its headcount. We have increased the budget available to the committee for staffing. We are considering the question of whether those staff should be independently employed separately from the Cabinet Office at the moment. It is not for me to speak on behalf of the committee, but I remind the House—and I am sure the right hon. Member would agree—that even though those staff are currently employed by the Cabinet Office, the work they do for the committee is exemplary, and the committee itself is strongly independent of Government.

**Matt Bishop** (Forest of Dean) (Lab): I thank the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister for his statement. I welcome comments from the Prime Minister calling for legislation to remove peerages from disgraced peers such as Mandelson, and I hope he will go even further and look at the line of succession in the royal family—I welcome those updates. My constituents, victims groups and everyone I speak to say that it is great to hear the messages, but they want to know when. Do we have any timescales for when this legislation will be brought to the House?

**Darren Jones:** We are working with relevant advisers and Departments to scope the Bill, and the measures that need to be brought forward for that to be effective.

[Darren Jones]

The legislation raises a number of constitutional questions, which have taken some time for the Government to consider. The last time peerages were removed, I think, was in the 1600s, so it is not something that has been done recently.<sup>1</sup> We must ensure that the scope and drafting of the Bill is done in a way that means it will be effective when it is brought forward to the House.

**Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): This is the second statement or urgent question in a row that we have had about ethics, and where the tentacles of various organisations or individuals go within Government. Does the Minister accept that we need a statutory inquiry that looks closely at the links and interference of outside bodies in Government, and in the operation of government?

**Darren Jones:** I have already committed on behalf of the Government that we will review the current regime and rules in relation to transparency on lobbying, and changes have been made recently in relation to the register and people's declared interests. My sense is that we could go further, and as I said in my statement, I will come back to the House in due course to update Members on how we will be able to take those reforms forward together.

**Chris Vince** (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister for his statement and for coming again to the House to talk about this important matter. I also thank the Intelligence and Security Committee for the work it has done on this issue. Does the Chief Secretary agree that ensuring we get this process right is what our constituents deserve, and what the victims of these vile crimes deserve?

**Darren Jones:** I agree with my hon. Friend. In relation to the criminal investigation being conducted by the Metropolitan police, the Government of course want to support the Metropolitan police and to collaborate with them to ensure that where justice can be found, it must be found. In respect of the Intelligence and Security Committee, which has an important function in the House to support the work of Parliament, we are currently working together to ensure that the processes and the capacity are in place to honour the commitments in the Humble Address, in a way that means that the House is served with these documents as quickly and as effectively as possible.

**Dr Andrew Murrison** (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Regular updates are all well and good, and they are appreciated, but they are a classic Whitehall strategy for disguising managed delay. When we get the first tranche of documents, will the Minister ensure that it is substantial and deals with the two key issues: first, what the Prime Minister knew at the point when he appointed Mandelson, what the agencies knew and what the propriety and ethics team advised the Prime Minister in relation to Mandelson's connection with the convicted paedophile, Jeffrey Epstein, at the point of appointment; and secondly, the details of the dodgy, shady-looking Palantir deal involving Alex Karp, the Prime Minister and Peter Mandelson?

**Darren Jones:** I can confirm that the first tranche of documents that will be released are the documents that the Government currently hold, subject to the exclusion of one document at the request of the Metropolitan police, where subsequent questions were asked by No. 10 of Peter Mandelson—that can be released only when the Metropolitan police tell us that it can be released—and subject to a review with the Intelligence and Security Committee of some individual line items that might be considered to be related to national security or international relations, as set out in the terms of the Humble Address. The subsequent tranches of information will come in due course, because commissions have gone out across Government for Departments to search their archives and databases to bring forward any documents that relate to the terms of the Humble Address. Given the depth of the issues raised in the Humble Address, that will take some time to process.

**Brendan O'Hara** (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): Right now, trust in this chaotic Government has all but evaporated and the Prime Minister's personal judgment is now on trial. We know that millions of documents are still to come out, so the Government really only have one chance to come clean, and any attempt to sanitise what is made public could have disastrous consequences for our democracy. Can the Government guarantee that the criteria for releasing the information will be exactly what this House demanded, and that the appointment of a new head of the civil service will not alter that one iota?

**Darren Jones:** The appointment of the new Cabinet Secretary has no bearing whatsoever on this process or on the Government's compliance with the Humble Address. As the hon. Member would expect, the Government will comply with the terms of the Humble Address.

**Dr Ben Spencer** (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): An additional concern that I have with the appointment of Peter Mandelson is that the American Government had compromising information in the form of the Epstein files. I wonder what consideration was given to the appointment of an ambassador who would be going into sensitive negotiations with a foreign Government knowing that that Government had compromising information. Will the Minister confirm that those considerations and that information is in scope of the disclosures?

**Darren Jones:** I am not sure which documents specifically the hon. Gentleman refers to. I note that the documents that were released by the US Department of Justice, and previously via Bloomberg in September 2025, were documents that the Prime Minister and the Government were not privy to until those disclosures had taken place.

**Tessa Munt** (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests in connection to WhistleblowersUK, a not-for-profit organisation. I am concerned that we still have no conclusion to the Public Office (Accountability) Bill. It seems to be stuck on amendment 23, which still is being discussed. I am not sure how the Government will ensure that there are credible sanctions, maybe against Ministers who fail to whistleblow. Will the

1. [Official Report, 13 April 2026; Vol. 783, c. 10WC.] (Correction)

Minister commit to protecting whistleblowers by establishing a new independent office of the whistleblower, so that members of the public understand that they can have legal protections and so that they have much greater awareness of their rights about whistleblowing?

**Darren Jones:** I hear the strong interest of Liberal Democrat Members in the office for the whistleblower proposal. As I said to the hon. Member for Cheadle (Mr Morrison), I am happy to look at those details when her colleagues write to me with them. The Government have committed to bring the duty of candour Bill back to the House as quickly as possible and for it to be completed in this Session. We are in the process of negotiations with the families, the intelligence agencies and the Intelligence and Security Committee on one final issue. As soon as we are able to resolve that, we hope to progress the Bill at pace.

**Katie Lam** (Weald of Kent) (Con): We must see the documents that pertain to the appointment of Peter Mandelson. Given that any member of the public could have told the Government that Mandelson was dodgy, it seems amazing that the Prime Minister requested that this vetting happen in the first place. This is not a question of process; it is a matter of judgment. Does the Chief Secretary believe that these documents will reveal why the Prime Minister's judgment is consistently so poor?

**Darren Jones:** I believe the documents will show that the Prime Minister was lied to by Peter Mandelson.

**Jeremy Corbyn** (Islington North) (Ind): It is very clear that the issue has been referred to the Intelligence and Security Committee and that it will look at issues of national security and international relations. I intervened in the debate on this matter; it is possible that the Chief Secretary heard that intervention. I want him to be very clear that in the event of the committee discovering commercial links from Mandelson to any company, including Palantir but not excluding others, they will be pursued and will not be ignored because they do not necessarily impact immediately on the very narrow definition of national security and international relations.

**Darren Jones:** The commission for information from Departments that is taking place has not yet resulted in those documents being shared with the Cabinet Office. If issues need to be pursued further once the documents are shared, we reserve the right to do so.

**Danny Kruger** (East Wiltshire) (Reform): I wish I had started counting at the beginning of this statement how often the Chief Secretary used the word "process". The word that I have been listening out for and have not heard him say is "responsibility". Does he accept that it is the job of the Prime Minister to make all these appointments without reference to backroom bureaucrats and lawyers? Should he not accept that he made a terrible mistake in respect of Peter Mandelson, do the right thing and reveal all the papers immediately?

**Darren Jones:** It is interesting to hear from a Member on the Reform Benches that they do not agree with process or vetting. The Government are committed to both

those things, because that is the way in which Government should conduct itself. As the Prime Minister has said at the Dispatch Box, had he had the information that we all have now available to him at the point of appointment, he would not have appointed Peter Mandelson. On that basis, he has apologised for any distress that that has caused for the victims of Jeffrey Epstein.

**Jim Allister** (North Antrim) (TUV): If I understand the Chief Secretary correctly, he is saying that when it comes to the disclosure of documents, the Metropolitan police will have an unquestioned discretion as to whether to disclose. Moving forward, if there is no prosecution, presumably all those documents will be disclosed at that point. If there is a prosecution, one presumes that those documents that are relied on for that prosecution will not be disclosed until after the prosecution. There will be a cadre of documents that are not being relied on for the prosecution but, because they have been in the possession of the Metropolitan police, will be subject to disclosure to the defence. At the point when the Crown Prosecution Service decides that it is not relying on them, will those disclosable documents be published?

**Darren Jones:** We do not disclose any documents that the Met police tells the Government are related to its criminal investigations until it tells us that they are available to be disclosed. That will be on the basis that they are not relevant to the prosecution or because the prosecution is being taken forward or otherwise. The last thing that anyone in the House would want is for us to undertake a process that ultimately undermines a case, should the CPS decide to bring it to the courts, when we want proper justice to be delivered in the court. That is why we are honouring the requests of the Metropolitan police in the pursuit of justice.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): The question on the lips of all of us in this House and this nation is: when will this ever end? That is an eternal question. It is understandable that the Government will stagger the documentation, but staggering must not be staging. Will the Chief Secretary once again reassure Members of this House and the people of this nation that the time for covering has long passed? Openness and allowing the information to be understood are essential components if trust is ever to be rebuilt.

**Darren Jones:** The hon. Member is right. The Government should publish these documents as quickly as possible, not just to comply with the Humble Address from this House, but to ensure that they are made transparent. Given that I am unable to confirm to the House today how much information we will receive from Government Departments in relation to the commission for information—and, as a consequence, how long it will take for that process to conclude, for the Metropolitan police to release any documents and for the Intelligence and Security Committee to conduct its work—I thought it was better that the Government publish the documents that are available as quickly as possible, instead of waiting until the end of an undetermined period. I hope that that suits the spirit as well as the letter of the Humble Address.

## Schools White Paper: Every Child Achieving and Thriving

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** Before we come to the statement from the Secretary of State for Education, I must once again note Mr Speaker's disappointment about briefing to the media before important announcements are brought to this House, given the Government's own rules in their ministerial code. As the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee recently stated,

"making the most important statements in the first instance to Parliament means doing so before they are made to the media and not at the first available opportunity thereafter."

The Government need to either adhere to their own rules or change them.

5 pm

**The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson):** Madam Deputy Speaker, please allow me to begin by saying that the unauthorised leaking of elements of today's announcement is deeply regrettable. I have already asked officials to launch a full investigation into the source to ensure that such breaches do not happen again.

With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will now make a statement to update the House on this Government's work to transform education in this country, because childhood is changing. Our children are growing up in a world of ever-increasing connectivity and communication, but uncertainty and mistrust are on the rise, too. Our children have the curiosity, resilience and enterprise to succeed, but a vision for education that stops at the school gates has failed to deliver the opportunities they need.

Under the last Government, absence was at historic highs. Despite the heroic efforts of staff, the disadvantage gap is still stubbornly wide, children with special educational needs and disabilities are still sidelined, and bright pupils are still left to drift along. A system of high standards for some, but not for others, is not good enough; high standards and inclusion must go hand in hand.

The last Government's vision for education was too narrow. No school is an island, and for children to do well, we need to look outside the classroom as well as inside it. We need to rebuild the services on which families rely. That is why we have acted fast, beginning to remove the stain of child poverty, rolling out free breakfast clubs, expanding free school meals and removing the two-child limit. I am deeply proud that this Labour Government will have lifted more than half a million children out of poverty by 2030. We have also delivered the expansion of 30 hours of Government-funded childcare; we are rolling out Best Start family hubs, and we will fund a SEND practitioner in every hub.

Today, we go further. We are publishing our schools White Paper, a vision for schools that do not stand alone, but are at the heart of happy and healthy childhoods. For every child, a great local school—a school of ambition and achievement; a school filled with sport, music and drama; a school of high standards and inclusion. Let there be no doubt: standards will rise for all children. Those born under this Labour Government will on average leave school with a grade 5 or higher across their GCSEs, and I will not have higher standards for some while others are left behind. The disadvantage gap

was as stark in 2024 as it was a decade before, but now we will cut it in half. We will boost the impact of the pupil premium and the national funding formula, consulting on better targeting, and we will deliver three big shifts in our schools.

The first big shift will be from narrow to broad, capturing the true breadth of opportunity, starting before children even reach the classroom with our Best Start family hubs. To improve the transition into reception, we will establish partnerships between early years and schools, and staff will work together to help children settle. School days will be energised by a broad and rich curriculum that contains the knowledge and skills for all our young people to succeed, and we will consult on measuring attainment and progress, improving the Progress 8 measure to strengthen the academic core and support students to pursue subjects that strengthen our economy and our society, such as drama, art and design, if that is the route they want to take.

We will set high expectations and standards for all, and nowhere more so than in reading. The ability to read opens up a world of opportunity, and falling behind locks children out of learning, so our new year 8 reading test will help them to stay on track. Currently, too many children are sidelined and held back, with their needs not met. We know that the biggest challenges are concentrated in some communities: that is why we will launch and fund two place-focused education missions, Mission North East and Mission Coastal. We will transform the life chances of local young people and draw a blueprint for national change.

We need an education system that works for every child: that is why our second shift is from sidelined to included, to inject excellence and rigour into the learning of every child. But, as a society, we have let those expectations slip for children with special educational needs and disabilities. Members across the House all know that our SEND system is not working. They have heard it from their constituents: parents who are tired of fighting, who are fed up with sending their children out of their communities to have their needs met, and who are angry that their child's future is being written off.

Parents and children have been failed, and they have been failed for too long. That is the reality that this Government inherited from the Conservatives: a system that was designed with the best of intentions, but which became "lose, lose, lose", in the words of my predecessor, because of the choices and then the inaction of the Conservative party. It was a system that drove local councils, again and again, to put process above people. Support was stripped away, forcing parents to run a legal gauntlet for what should have been their child's by right: support that all too often just did not materialise.

Today, that changes. We will fix the SEND system once and for all. Today is a realisation of those children's rights, the right to high expectations and outcomes and the support to fulfil them. Far more local children will be going to school with their friends in their local communities, close to home. It will be better for them and, evidence suggests, better for the whole class.

Over the next three years, we will invest more than £1.6 billion to strengthen the mainstream inclusion offer. For those children whose needs cannot be met through universal support, there will now be three further layers of support—targeted, targeted-plus and

specialist—available from day one when a child needs them. Schools will now have a statutory duty to record and monitor each child's special needs and provision in an individual support plan.

We will fortify mainstream provision with our new national Experts at Hand initiative, backed by £1.8 billion of new investment. Educational psychologists and occupational and speech and language therapists in our schools will support our teachers, benefiting our children. Earlier this month, we announced huge investment in school buildings. Every secondary school will have an inclusion base, a dedicated space to bridge the gap between mainstream and specialist provision.

This is about improving support, not removing support. Children with the most complex needs will still have access to education, health and care plans derived from a specialist provision package of support designed by experts. We know that insightful, holistic inclusion happens when schools share their expertise and their resources, so we will strengthen schools' strategic SEND partnerships, with every school becoming part of a local SEND group. Our new national inclusion standards will set out clear evidence-based guidance for support. To restore parents' trust in the system, we will improve the mediation and school complaints process, making the SEND tribunal the genuine mechanism of last resort, and we will give the Children's Commissioner a new remit to oversee our SEND reforms.

I thank every parent, every organisation and every group who has taken part in our national conversation on SEND. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friends the Members for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) and for Queen's Park and Maida Vale (Georgia Gould) for driving forward that work.

This is not the end of the conversation. I urge everyone to get involved, as today we launch our national SEND consultation. I ask parents, carers, support staff, teachers, experts and leaders to work with us. We are building a system for children with SEND that will be unrecognisable from what came before. We are putting in the investment, care and time to get this right, with a smooth transition from 2030.

Schools need engagement from without as well as within, with communities coming together to support every child, so our final shift will be from withdrawn to engaged. We need to mend the broken social contract by helping children to feel that they belong in school and providing calm, inclusive classrooms that welcome children with different needs, guarded by high standards for behaviour and attendance. Schools will build deep and meaningful partnerships with parents by inviting them in to see how their child can achieve and thrive. We will establish minimum expectations for home-to-school partnerships, making it clear what families can expect from schools and what schools can expect of families.

Excellent support staff, teachers and school leaders can transform children's lives, but too many incredible young women are still leaving the profession, so I am putting an end to a quarter-century of standstill and boosting maternity pay. I want to spread the excellence of our wonderful staff, so we will put purposeful collaboration at the heart of our education system. Strong school trusts are vital in sharing what works and driving improvement, so all schools will move towards forming or joining a high-quality trust, and we will empower local authorities and partnerships to establish trusts too.

We will work with the sector through this significant change, set high expectations through new trust standards, and introduce trust inspection by Ofsted.

We in this House have a responsibility to look beyond the here and now—a duty not just to run the country of today, but to shape the society of tomorrow. Members will agree that, in Britain, background should be no barrier, success should be open to all, and talent, invention and hard work should matter more than class and connections. A stronger, fairer Britain is possible, but to make it true in our country we first have to make it true in our schools and for the little boys and girls now sitting in our classrooms, who can become the thoughtful and engaged citizens to take us towards the 22nd century. For them, we must come together today and build a Britain of opportunity for all. I commend this statement to the House.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** I call the shadow Secretary of State.

5.11 pm

**Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con):** I thank the right hon. Lady for advance sight of her statement, and her officials and advisers for briefing me over the weekend. I pay tribute to those who have pulled together a 300-page document, which I will now attempt to scrutinise in the five minutes that I have available to me today.

I turn first to SEND. The principles of more support in schools, evidence-led packages, early intervention, and more speech and language therapists are welcome, but despite the 300 pages there is still much that we do not know. We do not know exactly how children will qualify for an EHCP in the future, and no clear eligibility criteria for the so-called specialist provision are set out. There will be around seven packages of support when someone gets an EHCP, but we are not told what these packages of support are, how people qualify for them or how much money will be associated with each. That makes it quite difficult to judge how effective the new system will be, let alone legislate for it.

Many questions also spring from the individual support plans, or ISPs, which will take place in schools. It is not clear from the document what will trigger an ISP, nor the funding that will be associated with it. At the moment, schools generally have to cover the first £6,000 of support before an EHCP is triggered. What will be the new threshold for schools to cover?

On funding, I note the £1.6 billion pot for inclusive mainstream provision over three years, which equates to £24,000 per year per school if divided evenly across every school in England. That is nowhere near enough for the extra work that schools will have to cover to write individually tailored ISPs for every SEND child. This is a mammoth burden to place on schools—one that I do not necessarily think is misplaced, but £24,000 a year is not enough to help them manage it. It is not a recipe for inclusion, but a recipe for disaster. Can the Education Secretary tell schools what additional funding will be available to help them hire extra SENCO support to help them deal with these pressures? Unbelievably, the workforce plan for 6,500 teachers—incidentally, it will not deliver 6,500 more teachers—says nothing about special educational needs provision within the workforce, perhaps because it tries to ignore primary schools altogether.

[Laura Trott]

On wider funding, the Government have still not said how the £6 billion black hole in SEND funding, identified by the Office for Budget Responsibility, will be filled. The latest I read today in the *Financial Times* is that the money will come from councils. Would the right hon. Lady care to confirm that? Are the funding pots announced today new money, or will they be coming from the Department's existing overall budget? Has the DFE's budget expanded beyond what was set out at the spending review at the Budget, and if so, by how much? Will these reforms save money, and if so, over what time period? Lastly on SEND, Ministers repeatedly failed over the weekend to give clarity on reassessments, so I will give the right hon. Lady one more opportunity. Will she rule out any child who currently has an EHCP having it removed—yes or no?

Turning to the wider schools issue, we have the absurdity of a White Paper saying that trusts will be the main driver of system-led improvement, but the Department proposing, in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, to remove the academy order by which underperforming schools are taken over by trusts. Either trusts are a driver for improvement of schools or they are not. I think they very much are a driver, and it seems the Education Secretary now agrees, so will she, with the zeal of a convert, disavow her earlier sins and reinstate the academy order?

On that theme, the White Paper says:

"Our best school trusts...innovate and drive excellence in standards".

Well, they used to be able to do that, but the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill takes away their ability to innovate in the curriculum, on who they employ, on the terms and conditions of employment, and even on uniforms. Again, I am delighted by the turnaround from the Education Secretary, but I ask that that is reflected in the legislation she is putting through the House.

I fundamentally disagree with the proposal in the White Paper to emphasise inclusion when it comes to suspensions and exclusions. That is the wrong approach. If a pupil is behaving in a way that makes fellow pupils or a teacher unsafe, it is utterly wrong to hesitate to exclude because of inclusion. When pressure is put on schools not to exclude, we have seen tragic cases of how wrong it can go, such as that of Harvey Willgoose, and we must not make the same mistake again.

There is much more to cover—funding reform, admission codes and work I would actually praise such as on maternity pay—but I dare not risk your wrath, Madam Deputy Speaker, so I close by saying that we support the principle of reform, but there is precious little clarity for SEND parents today.

**Bridget Phillipson:** I will seek to respond to the right hon. Lady's questions. I welcome the broadly constructive approach she has taken, but it would be remiss of me not to point out that so many of the problems we are dealing with were left behind by the Conservative party, and an ounce of humility, contrition or understanding as to how we got here would really enlighten our understanding of what we need to do to make change happen.

As I said in my statement, I recognise that the intentions behind the 2014 reforms were good intentions, but it became very clear, very quickly that problems were developing within that system. The right hon. Lady asks about council deficits and about the challenge. That became pretty clear, pretty quickly, and in 2019 the Conservatives brought in the statutory override, because it was clear that councils were struggling with the increasing demands they were facing.<sup>1</sup> That, however, did not happen in isolation. It happened because, between 2010 and 2019, family support services were stripped away—Sure Start centres closed, early help went, children were left to struggle—and we stored up problems for the future. The failure to identify and support children sooner is part of the reason we continue to see escalating need in our school system.

Today, we are putting that right. We will address the challenges that children and families face at the earliest possible point, not wait until years down the line when things have reached crisis point. That is as true in our schools as it is in children's social care. It is also why we will take action to clamp down on the massive expansion in private equity-backed, independent specialist provision that is sucking money out of our education system into profit when it should be focused on outcomes for children.

The right hon. Lady asks about specialist provision packages. We have published a document setting out the shape and nature of those packages. I intend to appoint an expert panel with clinical and education expertise to shape them, to make sure that we have clear national standards—not a postcode lottery, as we have seen in the past.

On individual support plans, our intention is that they will be easy to use, digital, and able to move between different settings. In many settings that will happen already, but we want the consistency that comes with having one system. Ofsted will also look carefully at how settings are using ISPs in order to judge effective inclusion.

The right hon. Lady asks whether this is about saving money, what the time period is, and about the OBR's projections. The figure quoted by the OBR was a projection based on an unreformed system. We are reforming the system and investing up front to deliver reform. This is not about cutting costs, saving money, arbitrary targets or reducing numbers; this is about better support and better outcomes for children.

The way in which the right hon. Lady framed her point about inclusion was fundamentally wrong and misjudged. Of course schools should take action when violent incidents take place, but that is not the same thing as making sure that schools are catering to children with special educational needs and disabilities. There is a need for caution in how we approach this point.

The transition to the new system will be a careful, phased transition over the course of the decade. It will not be until 2030 at the earliest that the new system will be fully operational. We are taking the time to manage this and get it right, as children move from one system to the next.

Finally, the right hon. Lady asked about the role for trusts and the Government's approach. It was the last Labour Government who introduced academies to drive up standards in our most disadvantaged communities, but I see no conflict at all between the approach that we are taking and insisting that children should be taught

1.[Official Report, 2 March 2026; Vol. 781, c. 6WC.](Correction)

by qualified teachers and that their parents should be confident that the national curriculum is being followed. It was the Conservatives who first introduced the national curriculum. They were right to do so then, and we still back that now, but it is right that parents should expect a qualified teacher and should not expect to pay the earth for a school uniform.

This is a conversation that I have no doubt will continue in the weeks and months ahead. I relish the opportunity to set out the Government's ambition for every child in our country. This is a golden opportunity to shape our school system to deliver better, earlier, and more timely support for children who have been let down for too long. This Labour Government will turn it around.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** I call the Mother of the House.

**Ms Diane Abbott** (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Ind): The Secretary of State will be aware how traumatic it is for a child to grow up with special educational needs and to support such a child. She will also be aware that disproportionate numbers of those children come from marginalised communities, and of those parents' anxiety that these reforms will mean, in the long run, that children will lose access to support that they are legally entitled to now.

The Secretary of State has said that she wants to reform the SEN system once and for all, but we cannot reform it without the work and the support staff. Just recently, a London borough has seen a third of its staff resign. Will the Secretary of State tell the House how, in order to deliver on her aspirations, which we all share, she will make sure that the staff are there, are paid, and do not face the pressures that they face currently?

**Bridget Phillipson:** My right hon. Friend is right to identify that far too many groups within our country—marginalised communities—are let down by a system that forces parents to fight. The intention behind what we are setting out today is to make it easier for parents and children to get early and better support without having to go through a legal, bureaucratic process in which, sadly, parents who do not have resource are sometimes unable to take part. The Children's Commissioner will also consider those questions of disproportionality, and will continue to give us oversight of the system as we make that transition.

I recognise the point that my right hon. Friend raises around the need to support staff, both in recruiting and retaining them, but what we are setting out today on the schools White Paper and SEND is part of our wider approach on children's social care, on investing in early help and family prevention, and of course with our action on child poverty, which will make a huge material difference to the life chances of children.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** I call the leader of the Liberal Democrats.

**Ed Davey** (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of her statement. I declare an interest as my son, John, has an EHCP, which is critical to his education and to our whole family's wellbeing. That is why we, like so many families,

have been dreading today. We all know that the crisis in SEND must end—the fights, the exhaustion, the underfunding and the private profiteering all must change. It is why the Conservatives' failure to apologise for the crisis really angered me and will have infuriated families across the country. However, as we fix the crisis, children's rights must not be stripped away. As we consider the Secretary of State's proposals seriously, we will continue to listen to and champion all the families whose lives could be impacted profoundly.

I have three questions for the Secretary of State. First, early intervention is critical to improving children's lives and making the whole system affordable, and I worry that these modest changes will not shift the dial. Will the Secretary of State consider investing in universal screening and then active support for the child and their family earlier on?

My second question concerns the plans for EHCPs. Speaking for my family and for many others like mine, it is hard to believe that the range and complexity of needs and disability can be captured in a small number of predefined EHCP packages. Can the Secretary of State guarantee that her changes will mean that the voices of parents—the real experts on their children—will at long last be heard when decisions are made?

Finally, on changes to the pupil premium, which was devised, championed and introduced by our party, will the Secretary of State give a clear commitment that no individual child, wherever they live, will see their pupil premium funding reduced? Will she instead boost the pupil premium to put right the cuts and betrayals of the Conservative party?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman, who cares deeply about this matter as both a parent and a politician, for the approach he has taken, and I look forward to working with him and his party in the weeks and months to come. We share a commitment to ensuring that the move from one system—one that we can all agree is not working—to a better one is phased and done carefully. I agree that the voices of parents must be heard right throughout that process.

The right hon. Gentleman asks about early support. I completely agree with what he says, which is why we are investing £1 billion in rolling out Best Start family hubs, expanding early years education and school-based nurseries and investing in local authorities' ability to develop early help.<sup>1</sup> Colleagues will note in the material we have published that we will continue to see an increase in EHCPs in the years to come before we see a plateauing and then a reduction. The reason for that is that we want to do this in a managed way. I hope that we can reduce those numbers more quickly—not for any arbitrary reason or because we are chasing a number, but because we should be supporting children much earlier. The evidence from Sure Start was clear: if we step in earlier and support families, we reduce the need for SEND support later on in school, especially in areas such as speech and language support, because we have met that need more quickly.

I understand the right hon. Gentleman's point around transition and education, health and care plans. We have already set out some detail on specialist provision packages, which will be shaped by an expert panel independent of Government—we will put that on the statute book. There will also be clear national accountability and national standards to move away from the postcode

1. [Official Report, 2 March 2026; Vol. 781, c. 6WC.] (Correction)

[Bridget Phillipson]

lottery that we have seen recently. I know that the right hon. Gentleman is also interested in how we can ensure that cases of high need and low incidence are addressed through regional models, which we have committed to considering through the consultation.

The voices of parents will be heard as we move forward. We have launched our consultation, which will run for 12 weeks. There will be events the length and breadth of the country to enable parents to take part in that conversation, and I urge parents, health staff, education staff and others to share their views on what we have published to make sure that we are getting this right.

On the pupil premium and the targeting of disadvantage funding, I am keen to address the fact that free schools meals are quite a blunt way to assess disadvantage in a family. We know that children who are on free school meals or who face persistent disadvantage and poverty right throughout their school career are far more likely to have bad outcomes than children who spend a period of time in poverty. We need a more nuanced approach to how we can better target resource to better improve outcomes for children. We will be consulting on that, and I look forward to discussing it with the right hon. Gentleman further.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** I call the Chair of the Education Committee.

**Helen Hayes** (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I welcome the publication of the schools White Paper, the clear statement of intent from the Government on narrowing the attainment gap and the consultation on SEND reform. I appreciate the time that the Government have taken, in preparing these reforms, to listen to parents, carers and children and young people across the country who are being failed by the current SEND system. I am encouraged to see many of the priorities identified by the Education Committee in our report "Solving the SEND Crisis" in the consultation paper, including early identification of need, reform of mainstream provision and strengthened accountability.

The Secretary of State knows that it is impossible to overstate the anxiety of parents and carers who have been failed by the current system about what reform will mean for them, and rebuilding their trust must be central to the Government's approach. Parents and carers are particularly anxious about the requirement in the proposals for a child with an education, health and care plan to be reassessed at the end of their current stage of education. What assurance can the Secretary of State give parents who are worried about this change that reassessment will not mean loss of support, that their views will be listened to during the 12-week consultation period, and that the Government remain flexible to respond to the feedback that is received?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I am grateful to the Chair of the Education Committee and all members of the Committee for their very serious work and report. She will see reflected in what we are setting out today that the Committee's work has shaped our approach. I am grateful to the Committee and all its members for their support in this.

I completely recognise what she says about the anxieties and worries of parents. I have spoken to parents the length and breadth of the country about the fights they have had to go through and how tough it has been to secure the support that their children need. I want to thank and pay tribute to our SEND development group, which has worked so closely with us to ensure that the voices of parents, carers, children and those who are delivering services have been heard as we shape our reforms.

We do want to do this carefully. This is a decade-long process and transition that we are embarking on. From now until the commencement of legislation in 2029, the current system, with all its existing duties and rights, will continue. Only after that will we begin to move children through our new system of support. My hon. Friend will recognise that children should be assessed annually through the EHCP process. Frequently that does not happen or it does not happen well. Our intention is to deliver better, expanded support more quickly for a wider group of children and to manage that carefully. We have made a commitment that all children in specialist provision with an EHCP will be able to remain within specialist provision unless their parents take the decision to move.

I do recognise the wider point about transition, especially in post-16 education. We want to continue to work with colleges and providers to ensure the smoothest move for children. I know that that is an area that my hon. Friend has taken great interest in, and it has been flagged to us as a real concern.

**Sir Iain Duncan Smith** (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I welcome the right hon. Lady's ambition, but where in all this will she retain the power to do something about councils that simply fail completely? An Ofsted report of my local council referred to it as disjointed and having weak co-ordination and limited accountability. It also talks of services falling short, parents being ignored and EHCPs never being granted when they should be. This is the reality for many of the parents that I meet. They are petrified. Will the Secretary of State explain what can be done about local councils' failure? She speaks about EHCPs, but I have talked to parents recently and they are very worried. They struggled to try to get an EHCP, and now they are worried that somehow they will lose it. Could she reassure those parents that that will not happen?

**Bridget Phillipson:** On EHCPs, the transition, in terms of the phased review, will take place in 2029-30 for commencement in the academic year starting in 2030. The children to whom that would apply are currently in year 2. In the time we have available to us now, we will build up the system. It will be transformed from where we are now with the new investment that I have set out. It is genuinely new money and new investment that will make a huge difference.

There will be more support like an EHCP available without the fight for an EHCP. We used to have a system that delivered more of that; it was pulled away and we need to make it much more central to the work of schools. The right hon. Member is right to raise the responsibilities of local authorities. Although we have, together with colleagues across Government, acted to address the long-standing deficits built up by councils over many years, and we have committed to write down

90% of that, it will only happen, and the write-down will only follow, if local authorities produce SEND plans that will deliver accountability and the places and support for children. We will not tolerate failure. I will not tolerate failure.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** Order. Can we have much shorter questions, please?

**Peter Swallow** (Bracknell) (Lab): Countless parents in my constituency have described the constant fight to get support for their SEND children. They have to battle to get a piece of paper that sets out rights that they then cannot access because the support is not there. Will the Secretary of State set out what the new system will mean for the day-to-day lives of children and their parents, and how we can rebuild trust after so many have been let down for so long?

**Bridget Phillipson:** My hon. Friend has championed this cause locally and is doing a huge amount to ensure his constituents get the best possible education and care for their children. The principal difference is that support will come earlier and more quickly, and families will not have to fight so hard to get what they need. Children will not need a statutory plan or an EHCP to receive targeted support. The support will be designed with parents through individual support plans, with extra investment—the investment that I have announced today alone is an extra £4 billion. That will make a huge difference to families across the country.

**Sir Oliver Dowden** (Hertsmere) (Con): For parents of children with special educational needs in Hertsmere and across the country, one of the greatest frustrations they feel is understanding what is going on in relation to their children. What reassurance can the Secretary of State give parents that councils will be required to keep them up to date about what is happening with their children and what provision they will have prior to the final outcome, whether it is an EHCP or a specialist school?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I have heard that in relation to lots of councils in lots of parts of the country. It is clear that a wider problem arose out of what the 2014 reforms asked of councils, but it is also clear that there is huge variation between councils. Some are doing this incredibly well: they have invested and created the places that are needed, they make assessments happen quickly and they work well with parents. It is also very clear to me that there are councils doing this badly and poorly. I say to them that there will be no excuses for failure with the extra investment that is coming.

**Mark Sewards** (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): As a teacher and now an MP, I know how broken our current SEND system is. Many parents are deeply scarred by their fights with it, and will understandably treat any reforms with scepticism, no matter our intention. I absolutely welcome the introduction of individual support plans alongside EHCPs to ensure that students get the support they deserve. What assurances can the Secretary of State give parents that we will genuinely enforce the legal right to an education with these new plans?

**Bridget Phillipson:** Through the plans that we are setting out today, we will be expanding legal rights for children. More children will be able to benefit from targeted support than is the case at the moment. Every child should have

the right to go to a great local mainstream school. We cannot allow the situation to continue where many children are sent far from home, away from their friends and not fully established within their communities. We know the damage that that causes later in life. Although I recognise parents' real worry and anxiety that the system is not working, change is difficult and it needs to be managed properly. I encourage parents to review the consultation to see what we have set out, and to continue to work with us and respond to the consultation to ensure that their voices are heard.

**Sir Julian Smith** (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): I welcome the section on training in the SEND consultation, but much of it is not statutory. Will the Secretary of State confirm her thinking on that? Will she also confirm that autism and profiles of it such as pathological demand avoidance will be at the centre of that training?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I know the right hon. Gentleman takes a real interest in this area and has long campaigned for further training and support for staff. We have seen some of the greatest expansion in need around autism, and it is right that we better equip our teachers and staff with what they need to support children. A new requirement will be set out in the SEND code of practice for all settings to ensure that staff receive training on SEND and inclusion. We will embed that expectation across early years, schools and colleges, and we are investing the money to ensure that happens.

**Tahir Ali** (Birmingham Hall Green and Moseley) (Lab): I welcome the statement. Many parents in my constituency are frustrated with the current system, which is broken, not fit for purpose and does not meet the needs of children. Will the Secretary of State let us know the details about the complex cases, because we do not want this to be at the cost of caring for those children's needs? Secondly, for those who do end up at tribunal, tribunals must be properly funded to stop the current lengthy delays of over 12 months.

**Bridget Phillipson:** I have heard from parents, campaigners and others the importance of ensuring strong accountability and redress so that when things go wrong, parents can have them put right. That is why we will retain a role for the tribunal in the new system. It is also why we are setting out our intention to ensure that more children with complex needs can be assessed more quickly. Often, when children are born with life-limiting conditions or very complex needs, their parents spend months and years getting an assessment, even when their child may not have long to live. We have to bring that to an end. We must ensure that children with complex needs get the support made available to them much more quickly. Through the consultation, we intend to do that.

**Manuela Perteghella** (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD): Prioritising early years intervention is fundamental to stopping needs from escalating and affecting the entire educational journey of children. What concrete steps will the Government take to invest, for example, in universal screening programmes, high-quality specialist training for all staff, or even for each school to have access to a speech and language therapist, so that support is given at the point of need?

**Bridget Phillipson:** We are massively expanding investment in the early years, and early years staff will be part of that training requirement. We will make sure that they have the resources to do that. I agree that access to speech and language provision is one of the greatest issues that has been identified. The £1.8 billion of extra investment that we are putting in will allow schools to work with local authorities and integrated care boards to deliver more speech and language support directly into schools, without parents having to go through that fight for an EHCP to secure provision.

**Sureena Brackenridge** (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): Those who work in education, as I did, will know of the creaking bureaucratic SEND system that, too often, puts specialists behind paperwork rather than directly benefiting children. Will the Secretary of State explain how her SEND reforms will put children's needs first and give schools access to specialists such as speech and language specialists and education psychologists when needed, and not after some awful adversarial process?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I could not agree more. I have heard time and again from educational psychologists, SENCOs and speech and language therapists that they spend all that time training to work with children to deliver better support and to drive up standards across a setting, but they find themselves sat at a desk sending emails and filling out forms. I want those amazing and talented professionals to work with children, delivering change. The move to a more flexible system away from that bureaucracy and fight will free up a lot of time for those amazing people to do that work.

**Lewis Cocking** (Broxbourne) (Con): The SEND system needs urgent and serious reform. Families I speak to in Broxbourne have been battling against an unfair funding formula that sees pupils get thousands of pounds less than elsewhere in the country. Will the Secretary of State reassure me and my constituents that historical demand will no longer be a factor in allocating funding, so that the system is truly fair for every child?

**Bridget Phillipson:** We will consult on whether to make changes to the national funding formula. But this change is urgent and much needed, and it falls to this Labour Government to deliver.

**Ian Lavery** (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): Every MP in the House will have had parents explain the difficulties they face accessing support for their children. They are on their knees; they are desperate; they are distraught. The system is adversarial and quite often has a negative end result. Will my right hon. Friend advise me and reassure this House that any new system set up will be quick, easy, accessible and less adversarial?

**Bridget Phillipson:** Yes, that is exactly our intention. I know that parents have fought really hard, and will continue to fight really hard, to get the support that their children need, but there are lots of families in our country who do not have the fight in them, because of poverty or disadvantage, or because they are marginalised. Those families need early and timely support that does not require them to hire a lawyer or go to a tribunal, and that is exactly what we will deliver.

**Caroline Voaden** (South Devon) (LD): I applaud the Government's attempt to increase mainstream inclusion for children with SEND, and welcome the £1.8 billion set aside to ensure that children have access to experts, but as far as I can see, there is absolutely no mention in the White Paper of any new funding for increasing the number of teaching assistants, who will be vital in delivering this expansion of mainstream provision. Can the Secretary of State explain how the Government will achieve their aim of making mainstream schools more inclusive for students with SEND without a serious uplift in the number of assistants supporting classroom teachers?

**Bridget Phillipson:** We are already investing much more in our schools. Today, we are setting out additional, new investment, including £1.6 billion that will allow schools to consider how best they can meet need, and they will of course consider how best to deploy teaching assistant support, one-to-one interventions, small group interventions and teaching support. Through the consultation, we are considering how we can better support special educational needs co-ordinators in our system, to drive expertise and change across a setting, because some of our best and most talented SEND staff spend too much time sat in offices, when they should be working directly with teaching assistants and others to make improvements for all children in their school.

**Darren Paffey** (Southampton Itchen) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for a statement that not only tries to fix the deep cracks that have formed in this broken system in recent years, but sets out a wholesale vision for transforming it. This is long overdue and much needed by parents, students and teachers. She will know that although the system is on its knees, there is a lot of good practice already out there. How will she harness the best that we have in our schools, including in Southampton, to ensure the earliest and fullest support for our children?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I agree strongly with my hon. Friend and, like him, I have seen fantastic practice that works incredibly well. It can be variable, and we will make sure that there are clear quality standards for more specialist provision in the mainstream, and Ofsted will inspect against those. Also, the amount of provision available can vary hugely across an area. That is why I have set out our expectation that every secondary school will have an inclusion base, and we will have a similar number of inclusion bases in local primary schools, so that everyone comes together and does what is necessary to deliver a fully inclusive mainstream system that better caters for children with complex needs and special needs, but also works with the specialist sector to deliver that.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** We are under huge time pressure—there is another statement to come, and then two items of protected business—so not everybody will get in. Please keep questions short—and keep answers just as short, Secretary of State.

**Charlie Dewhirst** (Bridlington and The Wolds) (Con): I welcome the ambition to look again at the funding formula that so disadvantaged children in my constituency. I also welcome the additional provision for children with SEND in mainstream settings, but for many children,

that is not appropriate; they need a specialist setting. One of the biggest problems I have locally is a lack of places in our special schools. In Bridlington, a plan for a new 120-place school was approved in May 2024. Can we ensure that officials in the Department work with my local authority to get that school built at the earliest possible opportunity?

**Bridget Phillipson:** We are investing more in specialist provision, including specialist provision in mainstream, and we have set out £3.7 billion of capital investment to make that happen, but I would be more than happy to make sure that the hon. Gentleman has a meeting with officials, or with a Minister, to discuss that case further.

**Jon Trickett** (Normanton and Hemsworth) (Lab): I heard today from one of my constituents who is struggling—in agony, almost—to get proper recognition of his children's needs. When can he and everybody else expect to see results from the Secretary of State's announcement? On the attainment gap, will she look particularly at the coalfield communities? For example, in my constituency, the least deprived 50% or more are achieving the targets for GCSEs, but the figure for the most deprived is less than a quarter, which is totally unacceptable.

**Bridget Phillipson:** As a fellow coalfields MP, I would be more than happy to do that. I recognise what my hon. Friend says about the challenges that families face. My message to parents is that while we want to ensure a phased and careful transition from the system we have to the better system that I believe is possible, we will, alongside our work on that bigger change, be investing from this year in capital, people and training to make the system that we have work better and far more quickly.

**Rebecca Paul** (Reigate) (Con): I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. The key concern I hear from parents and carers in Reigate, Redhill, Banstead and our villages is that they fought for years, or are still fighting, to get support. Can the Education Secretary reassure my constituents that they will not lose the hard-fought-for support that they are entitled to?

**Bridget Phillipson:** We will expand and improve support for more children in our system. There will be greater legal rights for a greater number of children, and we will ensure that if parents need support when children are struggling, we do not wait for arbitrary, lengthy bureaucratic processes; we get on and deliver it.

**Samantha Niblett** (South Derbyshire) (Lab): I was grateful to the Secretary of State for coming to my constituency and meeting some SEND parents in Swadlincote. They felt heard. I thank her for the way she is delivering this White Paper; it is not a case of, "Here you go—this is what we will do to you," which is what these people have been used to for so long. It is, "We want to hear from you." I will have a consultation meeting with my constituents, and I will be very interested to hear what they have to say.

**Bridget Phillipson:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend, and to every Member on both sides of the House, for their contributions about their families and constituents' experiences. Their voices have been heard loud and

clear in this process. We have taken time to ensure that the reforms that we are setting out are the right ones, and reflect parents' views, but we are of course continuing that consultation. I look forward to my hon. Friend sharing further thoughts from her constituents.

**Josh Babarinde** (Eastbourne) (LD): Hundreds of schools across the country have received cash under the school rebuilding programme, including my old school, Cavendish school in Eastbourne. Some of them received that cash and put their plans in place some time ago, but now their obligations and responsibilities will change and increase. What steps will the Secretary of State take to support those schools in adjusting their plans, if needed, and what permissions will she allow them to do just that?

**Bridget Phillipson:** We have set out our education estates strategy, which is about ensuring that all schools are inclusive by design; that when we build new schools or significantly refurbish schools, inclusion is right at their heart; and that we are building schools to last. If the hon. Gentleman would like to share further information, I would be happy to look into it.

**Chris Vince** (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): As a former teacher—something I obviously rarely mention—I cannot emphasise enough how much hope this White Paper gives me. Residents in my constituency of Harlow found that the EHCPs they got were not worth the paper they were written on; schools were unable to meet their so-called legal requirements. How will the reforms benefit parents and children in my constituency who have battled a broken system for too long?

**Bridget Phillipson:** Our intention is that parents in Harlow and across the country will not have the fight that they have had for far too long, and that when a need is identified, a child is struggling, or extra support is required, our schools will have the resources and expertise to put that support in place straight away, without the need for parents to go anywhere near a tribunal.

**Alison Griffiths** (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton) (Con): In my constituency and across West Sussex, the number of EHCPs has risen by 75% since 2019, but the funding to support them has risen by only 37%. Can the Secretary of State reassure parents that the correct funding—not just £24,000 per school—will be in place for support?

**Bridget Phillipson:** We are investing more in support for children; there is the extra £4 billion I have announced today, alongside funding that has already gone into the high-needs block and into schools. Yes, the big increase in the number of EHCPs is, of course, partly down to need—we face growing need, and we see the same internationally—but EHCPs have become the only vehicle for lots of parents to get the support that their children need. That is part of the reason why we have seen such a sharp increase. We need to rebalance the system, so that we identify and address need, and put in place support, quickly before needs escalate.

**Leigh Ingham** (Stafford) (Lab): Many constituents have spoken to me of their absolute despair about the SEND system. It was their feedback, along with

[Leigh Ingham]

that of schools, SENCOs and professional organisations, that helped me produce my report, “Better SEND support for Stafford, Eccleshall and the villages”, which the Minister kindly took a copy of, and which I know has fed into this. I particularly welcome the increase in early intervention. Could the Minister say more about how the Government intend to implement it in towns like Stafford?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for sharing the views of her constituents, and of professionals across her constituency, as we brought forward this work. Through our Best Start family hubs, which we are rolling out across the country, we will ensure that there is a SEND-trained professional in every setting. We are doing that because the evidence is clear that if we identify needs sooner, we prevent problems from escalating. The evidence was clear when the Sure Start programme was in operation. It demonstrated that if we meet needs when children are young, and if we back families and put in place support, we reduce need, including the need for crisis-level intervention that we sadly saw further down the line.

**Mike Martin** (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): I congratulate the Secretary of State on the White Paper. She clearly cares about this, which bodes well for the outcome. For too long, the cost of SEND support has fallen on local authorities, and that has had a knock-on effect on the other services they provide, such as libraries and roads. It now seems—if I am reading this right—that much SEND cost will come back to the DFE. What does that mean for local authority budgets? Will they be raided, and will that money be brought across to the DFE, or will those budgets be kept the same?

**Bridget Phillipson:** Through what we have set out on local government funding, we are putting in place support for councils to deal with the long-standing deficits that have accrued, but I want to be absolutely clear that the support is conditional on local authorities working with us to provide places, and to deliver the clear systems of support that families all too often find are not there. But the wider pressures will be met by Government. We will do what we need to do, but we need health authorities and local authorities to play their part as well.

**Mohammad Yasin** (Bedford) (Lab): Parents, teachers and children recognise the need for SEND reform and stronger inclusion, but can the Secretary of State confirm that inclusion will not mean conformity, that children who do not meet the EHCP threshold will still receive full specialist support without a fight, that the fully funded workforce plan is in place to provide the expertise needed for every child to thrive, and that there will be a mechanism for appealing against the decision, if parents want to do that?

**Bridget Phillipson:** Yes, we will ensure that children get support without needing to escalate things. It was a pleasure to join my hon. Friend at a family hub in his constituency and to see at first hand what can be achieved if we support children when they are young, and if we back families and invest in children’s future.

**Rebecca Smith** (South West Devon) (Con): Schools right across my constituency already have inclusion bases, but often there is already tension between the schools and the parents, who want better support through EHCPs, which they are having to wait for. What is the Secretary of State’s thinking on ensuring that the relationship between schools and parents remains strong, and that we do not inadvertently pit parents against teachers, given the new role that schools will play?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I agree that it will be essential for schools and parents—and Government, too—to work together. The White Paper’s vision is of a system in which Government, schools and parents honour our responsibilities, and work together to deliver better outcomes for children. We set out clear expectations in the White Paper about the engagement that schools should be undertaking with parents, but also about parents’ responsibilities to support their child’s school, for example by doing everything they can around attendance. We will continue to do that.

**Jen Craft** (Thurrock) (Lab): I would like to declare an interest: I have the honour of being a parent of a disabled child who has an EHCP. I very much welcome the Secretary of State’s statement. It is a true reflection of the amount of engagement that she and her Department have had with parents and families of children with SEND, and with the sector. I would welcome clarity on a couple of points. I welcome the move to make the system much less adversarial for parents, and to allow parents to get on with the job of being mum and dad, but I would welcome clarity on where accountability is built into the system, particularly as regards individual support plans. I would welcome clarity on whether health authorities will have more accountability; they often have about 50% of the onus to deliver certain services, but at the moment there is no statutory duty on them to do so. I would also welcome clarity on whether guidance on the reasonable adjustment framework in schools might be strengthened, and how parents can hold schools and settings accountable if they do not meet their duties under the Equality Act 2010 framework.

**Bridget Phillipson:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for all the time she has taken to speak with me and colleagues in the Department to share her experiences as a parent and help us understand the wider shift that we need to see. She asked a number of detailed questions. I will respond briefly, but I am happy to discuss them further. We need to ensure that there is accountability around individual support plans. An independent SEND professional will sit on complaints panels as a part of that. Health authorities must play their full role alongside local authorities in delivering better support. My hon. Friend is right to identify the need for clarity around reasonable adjustments and what that means for schools. We will be setting out further detail on that.

**Suella Braverman** (Fareham and Waterlooville) (Reform): Currently, too many parents are battling a system that is costly, bureaucratic and slow. Will the Secretary of State confirm that none of her changes announced today will help the parents currently in the system this year, next year or even the year after that, and that what her changes do is create a decade of uncertainty?

**Bridget Phillipson:** No; the right hon. and learned Lady is wrong. If she had listened, she would know that she is wrong, but I am sure she would not like to break the habit of a lifetime. Before asking any questions about what this Government are doing, she should consider the actions that she was responsible for as part of the previous Government.

**Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Bromborough) (Lab): First, I declare an interest: my wife is a teacher. In her statement, the Secretary of State spoke about her desire for schools to be welcoming environments for children. That really matters because when a school implies that it might not be the right setting for a child, it can often be the start of multiple battles with the council, other schools and the NHS, and every stage of that is a rejection for the child. How can we ensure that when we fix the system, we fix the culture as well?

**Bridget Phillipson:** My hon. Friend is right: this is about collaboration not just between the Government and schools, but between schools and parents. Some of the best examples that I have seen, including through our partnerships for inclusion of neurodiversity in schools programme, or PINS, show what can be achieved when parents work with schools to understand where children are struggling and put in place often quite small, practical changes at the start of or during the school day that make a huge difference to a child's attendance, sense of belonging and outcomes in school. I look forward to working further with my hon. Friend on this.

**Ben Obese-Jecty** (Huntingdon) (Con): It was not lost on me this morning that the Secretary of State announced the SEND White Paper in Peterborough, just down the road from my constituency of Huntingdon. It comes under Cambridgeshire county council, which has a terrible record of delivering EHCPs. I have spoken to dozens of schools and hundreds of parents in my constituency who are beside themselves at the length of time it is taking Cambridgeshire county council to deliver EHCPs. Not only is it not within the 20-week statutory timeframe; it sometimes takes 20 months-plus. Can the Secretary of State reassure my constituents that these plans will immediately address those concerns about the delivery of EHCPs and make a real difference to the children who are waiting for those much-needed plans?

**Bridget Phillipson:** The transition will be careful and phased, but we will be putting more support in place from this year to allow children to access support more quickly than they can right now. We will absolutely hold local authorities accountable for delivery.

**Mr Toby Perkins** (Chesterfield) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing the extra funding, but even with that there will never be enough money to go round. Does she agree that getting decisions made by experts closer to our children in their communities will not only improve services, but ensure that we use those precious resources more wisely?

**Bridget Phillipson:** Yes, absolutely; I agree with my hon. Friend. I have heard time and again from parents that professionals often make decisions about children they have not seen recently. That is why bringing more support closer to the child within school and much

closer to home will make a huge difference to the quality of the provision and ensure that it happens far more quickly.

**Jess Brown-Fuller** (Chichester) (LD): The Government's White Paper talks about having an "expert teacher" in every room. That is certainly a problem in the profession, with one in three teachers leaving after five years of service. Chichester University has created a teacher training programme that embeds inclusivity at the root of every module rather than teaching it as a separate module. Will the Secretary of State join me in Chichester to talk to the faculty leading that programme so that every child in this country can benefit from that sort of teaching?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I am certainly interested in hearing more about that approach. We have made big strides forward in initial teacher training. The extra investment we are putting in will support existing teachers and staff working in the profession. However, there is more to do. We are committed to continuing to review standards in initial teacher training. I would be very happy if the hon. Lady shared more details with me.

**Janet Daby** (Lewisham East) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement, for the White Paper and for all the hard work she and her team have put into it. In my previous profession as a children and families fostering social worker, I saw that one of the difficulties that foster carers had was the assessment of children with special educational needs. It often made the placement and their home very vulnerable, and sometimes caused a placement to break down. It would be really helpful if the Secretary of State said how she will measure success in this area for SEND children.

**Bridget Phillipson:** Not only did my hon. Friend have that role in a former life; she helped to shape what we are setting out today through the work she did in the Department. I am grateful to her for her passion, commitment and dedication to all children, especially those who have been through the children's social care system, whose outcomes are often even worse than children with SEND. There is a clear overlap between those groups. In my view, what constitutes success is more children getting support put in place more quickly and, fundamentally, better outcomes for those children. That means better academic outcomes, better outcomes as they move out of education into adult life and, as far as possible, that they are able to live independent, fulfilling lives. At the moment, sadly, too many young people are denied that opportunity.

**Dr Ben Spencer** (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): Clearly, the system needs reform, but many families that have managed to get through the system and get an EHCP will be concerned by the announcements and the uncertainty today. I note that the Government anticipate that by the end of this decade there will be a reduction in children with the highest need. Does the Secretary of State believe that that will be due to a reduction in their need or in provision?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I take my responsibilities to ensure that we do not unduly alarm parents and that we set out the facts and the details incredibly seriously. As things stand, we anticipate that the number of EHCPs will

[Bridget Phillipson]

increase between now and 2030. It will then start to plateau and then start to reduce. We are not chasing an arbitrary reduction, an arbitrary number or a target, but I hope that we can bring that number down more quickly through early support—not by shifting the system to get an outcome, but because we are meeting need more quickly. That is what parents want to see and what I believe in.

**Rachel Blake** (Cities of London and Westminster) (Lab/Co-op): Constituents of mine have told me that they want mainstream schools to be ready to support their children. They have also asked me to ask the Secretary of State who will define complexity, how it will be defined and how local schools will be held to account to ensure that they are providing exactly the right support for children who fit that description of complexity.

**Bridget Phillipson:** I understand my hon. Friend's point and I am grateful to her. We will create and put in statute a set of nationally consistent specialist provision packages underpinned by clear national standards and shaped and defined by experts to bring an end to the postcode lottery and ensure consistency wherever someone happens to be.

**Adrian Ramsay** (Waveney Valley) (Green): I welcome the ambition in the White Paper, particularly to ensure that young people are supported earlier. It has to be the right aim that more young people can be supported within mainstream settings. Is the Secretary of State committed to understanding the reasons for the big increase in the number of young people who cannot be supported in mainstream school and to providing the necessary funding and support to schools? Does she accept that, at the same time, there is not currently enough capacity in alternative provision for young people for whom mainstream school is not working?

**Bridget Phillipson:** There is complexity around this. We need to continue to understand the needs that are developing and the failure to meet them sooner. That is a big part of the challenge. As a country, we have not been meeting need as quickly as we should. I would add that, for too long, we have treated the SEND system as an entirely separate part of the education system and not as central to our schools. That is the shift we will bring and that is how we will ensure that all our schools better cater for a wider range of need.

**Clive Efford** (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): I commend my right hon. Friend for grasping this nettle—it is long overdue. However, she will know, as we all know through our casework, that diagnosis leads to a delay in getting an EHCP and a delay in parents being able to advocate on behalf of their children. If fewer children will get EHCPs in the future, how will we ensure that parents can act as advocates for their children right the way through their pathway?

**Bridget Phillipson:** EHCPs will retain an important role within the system, and diagnosis will remain important, but I know from many of the parents I have spoken with—as, I am sure, does my hon. Friend—that diagnosis sometimes only confirms what is already known about

a child's needs and the support required. Through the investment that we are setting out, and the changes that we are bringing, we will ensure that diagnosis is not required for access to the support that a child needs. In many cases, if we put support in place more quickly, we will prevent problems from escalating and help children to thrive.

**Dr Andrew Murrison** (South West Wiltshire) (Con): In April 2024, a much-needed SEND school at Bitham Park in Westbury in my constituency was given the green light by Wiltshire council and the Department for Education, with a planned in-service date for later this year. The Labour Government put that plan on pause. Is it the Secretary of State's intention for that school to go ahead? If so, will she provide a timeline?

**Bridget Phillipson:** We are putting in place significant extra investment—£3.7 billion of capital—to deliver what is needed in specialist provision and to ensure that local areas can deliver what is required. I would be happy to look into the individual case that the right hon. Gentleman raises and ensure that he gets a response.

**Tom Hayes** (Bournemouth East) (Lab): I thank Bournemouth's parents and teachers for shaping this plan—I can see their views in it. I thank in particular Andrew, Claire, their lovely son and his lovely grandparents. Teachers in Bournemouth have been calling out for national support, and now they have it. Some £165 million of Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole council's debt is being paid off, there is the return of Sure Start, £1.6 billion has been promised for mainstream education, and now there is £1.8 billion for educational psychologists. Will the Secretary of State set out how quickly we will recruit and train those educational psychologists and get them into the system? If we support our school system, we help to fix our SEND system.

**Bridget Phillipson:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for ensuring that his constituents' views have been right at the heart of our reforms. We will move rapidly to invest in recruiting more speech and language therapists and educational psychologists, but we also need to retain more of the brilliant people who have worked so hard to train so that they can support children. Freeing up their time to focus less on bureaucracy and more on working with children will lead to much more fulfilling careers for those amazing people.

**Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): Children with special educational needs, particularly neurodiverse learners, thrive in creative subjects, but over the past decade, music, drama and art have been severely cut from the curriculum. How will the White Paper ensure that we broaden our curriculum to bring back the power of creative subjects?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I strongly agree that we need a rich and broad curriculum—one focused on both academic rigour and a wide range of opportunities, including music, sport, art and drama. In our response to the curriculum assessment review, we set our intention to make that a reality for every child. Our changes to Progress 8 will allow all children greater choice—alongside that academic rigour—to find what is right for them.

**Sojan Joseph** (Ashford) (Lab): In the consultation events that I held with parents, carers and teachers, the message was clear: it is crucial that SEND support starts early. I welcome what my right hon. Friend has said about that. As the proposals move forward, will she ensure that those with lived experience of the system remain central to the Government's reforms, so that SEND support is more personalised to every child's needs?

**Bridget Phillipson:** My hon. Friend is right about the importance of early years, which sit right at the heart of our reforms, in the early identification of need and work with families. Although we have had a big national conversation on SEND, it is only the start of the dialogue that we want to continue with parents to ensure that the changes we implement work for them, and that their voices, and those of children and young people, continue to be heard.

**Sir Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): May I invite the Secretary of State to expand a bit on her vision of what happens at the end of a SEND child's education? She mentioned the idea of independence—and, presumably, socialisation—to advance in society. In what way will her Department try to shape the course to enable children born with a disadvantage to function productively in the real world at the end of the process?

**Bridget Phillipson:** The right hon. Gentleman is right about the transition to adulthood and ensuring that our children are well prepared for what comes next as they move through the school system and into adult life. Many further education colleges and specialist settings already do that incredibly well, but it is variable. We want to deliver higher standards and greater opportunities for young people—particularly those with SEND—through supported internships and options for work placements, and ensure that they can live independent lives as much as possible.

**Olivia Blake** (Sheffield Hallam) (Lab): I declare an interest: I chair the all-party parliamentary group on SEND, and my partner is training to be a teacher. I thank the Front Benchers for the way in which they have conducted this review. I have been pleasantly surprised to see in policy many of the things that constituents have raised with me. How will we ensure that the packages set nationally include the voices of those with lived experience, especially young people, as the process is developed?

**Bridget Phillipson:** It has been a pleasure to work with my hon. Friend as we have brought forward these reforms. The specialist provision packages will be set nationally and led by experts in health and education, independent of Government, but we will ensure that the voices of children, young people, parents and campaigners are heard and understood as we develop those packages.

**Vikki Slade** (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): I welcome the language of “belonging”, particularly as the parent of a SEND child who once said to me, “They don't want me here, do they, mum?” before he was put in specialist provision. We cannot have a broader and more inclusive curriculum if schools are facing cuts, and two of my local schools—Queen Elizabeth and Corfe Hills schools—are facing cuts of £700,000 or

£800,000 next year. One is cutting subjects, and the other is slashing teaching assistants and support staff while the trust charges it £750,000 for central support. What can the Secretary of State do to ensure that more money reaches teachers and children, and is not eaten up by executives in trusts?

**Bridget Phillipson:** We have set out our intention to introduce inspections at trust level. Alongside that, we will renew trust standards to ensure that all trusts are doing the best for children in their care. I am sure that the Minister for School Standards would be happy to discuss further the issues that the hon. Lady raises.

**Claire Hazelgrove** (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Lab): I declare an interest: I am a member of the APPG on SEND and have close family members with special educational needs. I welcome the focus on expanding and improving SEND support. Many of the themes in the proposals, from inclusion to tailored support, were raised by fellow residents of Filton and Bradley Stoke at my “Coffee with Claire” event, from which I shared feedback with Ministers—that is great to see. Will the Secretary of State set out how the views of carers and others have shaped and will continue to shape the proposals?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for ensuring that the views of parents and others in Filton and Bradley Stoke have been heard and are reflected in our proposals. This is only the start of the engagement and consultation. I encourage parents in her constituency and across the country to look at what we have set out, understand our ambition for children with SEND, and take part in the consultation.

**Richard Tice** (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): There is much in these SEND reforms that will reassure parents, particularly the reduction in the adversarial approach. I have spoken before of my concerns about excessive fees and profits of private equity-owned specialist schools. Will the Secretary of State confirm whether the legislation can be accelerated to reduce the pressure on council budgets?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I am slightly taken aback by that question, but I welcome it. We will move fast to ensure that money intended for education is spent on education. That means that we will have to be much firmer and clearer, including with private equity, about the money going out of the system and into profit, rather than going into education. There is a bit of a mix of views in the hon. Gentleman's party about the right approach to SEND—I have heard colleagues of his suggest that children with SEND are naughty or the result of bad parenting—so I suggest that Reform colleagues go away, have a little conflagration and then come back.

**Debbie Abrahams** (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. Young people with special educational needs or disabilities, and with multiple disadvantage, are three times more likely to be not in education, employment or training. I appreciate what my right hon. Friend is saying about reducing the attainment gap, but will she expand a little more on that? Will she also pick up on the point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Hallam

[Debbie Abrahams]

(Olivia Blake) about co-production, and ensuring that people with lived experience and parents are engaged in this?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I agree with my hon. Friend. Through the national conversation that we have had on SEND, our SEND development group has worked closely with Ministers and with my hon. Friend, to ensure that the voices of children, families and experts, including disability rights groups and children's groups, were heard as we developed our reforms. We will continue in that spirit as we take forward the consultation.

My hon. Friend is right to say that there are huge differences in outcomes for children with SEND; the gap between the GCSE results of children with SEND and their peers without SEND has not meaningfully narrowed in recent years, and neither has the likelihood of sustaining education, employment or training after 16. A big part of that has to be about ensuring that outcomes for children are better going through our mainstream system, where we know that with the right support academic outcomes are stronger for children with SEND.

**Adam Dance** (Yeovil) (LD): It is good that the White Paper recognises the need to develop systems to help with early identification, including Best Start hubs, the phonics screener, and schools sharing best practice. However, that will not be enough, so what steps will the Secretary of State take to research, develop and fund a universal screening programme that can start in year 1, so that school is inclusive for all, once and for all?

**Bridget Phillipson:** The hon. Gentleman is right: we are expanding Best Start family hubs, ensuring a real focus on early years, and investing more than £9 billion in expanding early years entitlements. We have also set an incredibly ambitious target to have a record number of children reaching a good level of development at the early years foundation stage; we know that if we secure that, more children will go on to do well later on in life.

**Mr Clive Betts** (Sheffield South East) (Lab): The Public Accounts Committee has looked at the cost of home-to-school transport. Clearly, one of the drivers is the cost of sending kids with special needs miles away from their home to very expensive private schools. The Government have announced help on the statutory overrides that have been incurred by local authorities with regard to those costs, both recently and currently. Given that the reforms the Secretary of State has announced, which I very much welcome, will take some time to come into effect, will she guarantee that local authorities will not have to rely on statutory overrides to continue to provide their statutory duties in future?

**Bridget Phillipson:** Beyond the period that my hon. Friend identifies, this will become the responsibility of central Government. That is the commitment we have given, and we have made a big undertaking with colleagues across Government to take action on the long-standing deficits that local authorities have accrued over time.

My hon. Friend is right to say that the way we can respond to the challenges that local authorities are facing with home-to-school transport is by improving provision closer to home. Councils do not want to be

sending children far from home, and parents do not want their children spending hours in taxis to access provision. That is why the extra capital investment and the 60,000 new places that we will create will, over time, bring down some of the costs that councils are facing.

**Alison Bennett** (Mid Sussex) (LD): I am pleased that the White Paper makes one mention of young carers. It rightly notes that young carers pay a huge price for caring for their siblings and family members. I am sure the Secretary of State agrees that it is vital that we identify and support young carers, so will she support my call to make young carers eligible for the pupil premium?

**Bridget Phillipson:** We will be consulting on disadvantage funding, including the pupil premium and the national funding formula, and on how we ensure that we are halving that disadvantage gap and getting the biggest impact from the £8 billion of funding that we are spending. I will look at the issue the hon. Member has identified; if she wants to share that further, I will be happy to consider it.

**Daniel Francis** (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Lab): I declare an interest, as my wife is special educational needs co-ordinator and one of our children has an EHCP. As the parent of twins, I have had to fight for virtually none of the education of one of my children, but for every single aspect of my other child's education because she is disabled. What I say, and what I have heard clearly from my constituents, is that we must get right aspects such as holding ICBs to account—we heard about that from my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft)—and the transition stages at both primary and secondary school, and the end of secondary. I welcome the proposals, but will the Secretary of State assure the House that during the consultation we will hear those voices and get this right for the families I represent?

**Bridget Phillipson:** My hon. Friend speaks with real passion and expertise, and I could not agree more with him. As well as everything the Government are doing, we will need local authorities and ICBs to work together with us to deliver the change that is needed. There is huge variation across the country, with unacceptable outcomes, too many delays, and children waiting far too long for the support they need. He will also see that through the consultation we are committed to ensuring that children with the most complex needs have that support in place much more quickly than is the situation right now.

**Claire Young** (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): I, too, am a member of the all-party group for special educational needs and disabilities. Historic unfair underfunding in south Gloucestershire has made it harder for schools to support children with SEND, and parents tell me that they are concerned that these changes could make the situation worse. If those fears fuel a surge in EHCP applications in the short term, what steps will the Government take to ensure that councils are properly funded to deal with that, so that during the change children do not miss out on vital support?

**Bridget Phillipson:** That underlines the importance of the investment getting to the front line and delivering quickly. We know the pressures faced by children and families, but the huge variation in the approach that

some councils have taken cannot be adequately justified by funding settlements alone. We have seen some affluent councils in affluent areas delivering incredibly poor quality provision, and I say to those authorities that we will hold them to account for delivering better outcomes for their families.

**Sarah Russell** (Congleton) (Lab): In terms of the points raised about funding, Cheshire is struggling significantly with underfunding per pupil. Will how we roll out funding for these changes follow the existing formula, or will that be revised?

**Bridget Phillipson:** Through what I have set out, we are consulting further on many aspects of funding, including the national funding formula, and we will continue to look closely at how we ensure that all children, wherever they are in the country, get the support they need. My hon. Friend's constituents will benefit from Best Start family hubs, the expansion of childcare and the expansion of the Experts at Hand service—a new initiative we are putting in place to ensure that children get support within school more quickly.

## Local Government Reorganisation

6.27 pm

**The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Steve Reed):** With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will make a statement on local government reorganisation.

This Government are taking action to repair local government, through a new fairer funding settlement based on need, through more powers being taken out of Whitehall and put in the hands of local leaders, and through our plans to reorganise councils to provide better services by eliminating wasteful duplication. Last month, as part of that process, I told the House that we would postpone local elections in councils undergoing reorganisation, where local leaders sought it and where they provided compelling, evidence-based justification. I was guided by two principles: first, that postponement should only ever happen in exceptional circumstances, and secondly, as a firm believer in local decision making, that we should be guided by local leaders themselves.

Following extensive consultation with the affected councils, many of whom shared their anxiety that a lack of capacity could lead to elections for councils that are due to be abolished delaying the reorganisation process, I concluded that those tests had been met in 30 cases. Councils across the political divide were engaged in the original assessment, and across party lines many called for postponement. Delay was granted in those cases, using a statutory power granted by Parliament—the same power that has been exercised by previous Governments. We were satisfied that the use of this statutory power in such circumstances was lawful and justified.

As is normal practice, lawyers kept the legal position under review and I received further legal advice. After considering that further advice, I took the decision to withdraw the proposal. We then rapidly reviewed the matter, recognising the urgency created by the electoral timetable. To confirm to the House, the decision made is that the elections in the affected areas will now go ahead in May 2026 in full, and we have laid a further order to bring this into effect.

We have already written to the relevant councils and we will continue working closely with returning officers, suppliers, the Electoral Commission and other sector bodies to ensure they are fully supported. I recognise that this is a significant change for affected councils. That is why, when further legal advice was received, we acted as quickly as possible to provide clarity for councils. We know that this change will mean additional pressure for councils and councillors across the country. That is why I announced last week up to £63 million in new capacity funding, on top of the £7.6 million provided last year for developing reorganisation proposals.

Our priority is now ensuring that local councils have the support they need for reorganisation. This extra money will help councils to complete reorganisation effectively and sustainably. We will continue working with councils across the 21 reorganisation areas to move to single-tier unitary councils. The people of Surrey specifically will just have elections to the new unitary councils.

Given the views expressed by Members from across the House following my decision, I recognise the importance Members attach to the framework governing ministerial powers over the timing of local elections. The English

[Steve Reed]

Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill provides an opportunity to look again at that framework, and the Government are reflecting carefully on the amendments that have been tabled and the concerns raised.

Reforming local government is not optional. Councils are the front line of the state, responsible for the visible signs of whether a place is succeeding or failing. The public expect better local services and they are right to do so. It was important that we acted swiftly on these elections where further advice was received. I recognise that has been difficult for affected councils and I want to assure colleagues that we did not take this difficult decision lightly. I have spoken to many councillors and Members of Parliament in recent days and understand the scale of disappointment acutely, but ultimately the Government must act when legal advice says that we need to do so. We will continue to rebuild local government after a decade of neglect, so residents get the services that they deserve. I commend this statement to the House.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins):** I call the shadow Secretary of State.

6.32 pm

**Sir James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con):** I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement.

The Secretary of State has caused chaos, confusion and a significant cost to the taxpayer by cancelling local elections, only to reinstate them weeks later and then seek to avoid responsibility for the fallout. This is not an isolated incident: it is yet another Government U-turn. The unavoidable conclusion is that this Labour Government are running scared of voters.

The original decision to cancel elections was taken by the Secretary of State. He repeatedly defended that position at the Dispatch Box. He said in *The Times* that these elections were “pointless”, yet when his decision fell apart, he recused himself from the process and left a junior Minister to pick up the pieces. My first question is simple: why was the retaking of this decision delegated? Was the Secretary of State so compromised by his own actions that he could not lawfully retake the decision himself? Will the Secretary of State now place in the House of Commons Library the full correspondence that he would have disclosed had this gone to court? And if not, why not? What new factors were considered that led to a completely different conclusion ultimately being drawn?

There are also questions of motive. Is it really a coincidence that the elections first marked for cancellation were overwhelmingly in Labour-run areas? I have been in contact with council leaders who describe being placed under intense pressure, repeatedly asked to restate capacity concerns, warned through multiple channels not to criticise the Secretary of State’s decision, and being left with the clear impression that future devolution, future reorganisation and future funding decisions depended on their compliance—a shocking state of affairs under his leadership. I believe that he acted inappropriately. If the Secretary of State is so confident that decisions were taken without political self-interest and without undue pressure being exerted behind the scenes, he should place all correspondence between his Department and

local authorities in the public domain. If he does so, I will be more than happy to withdraw my accusation of inappropriate behaviour.

Does the Secretary of State now accept that there are strict limits on the power to delegate or delay elections outside exceptional circumstances, such as war or public emergency? If so, will he ask his colleagues to accept the amendment tabled by Conservatives in the other place to limit the Secretary of State’s power to cancel elections using secondary legislation, given that Labour MPs voted down the same safeguards on Report in the Commons?

The Secretary of State must tell the House what this shambolic episode has cost the taxpayer in legal fees, wasted preparation and the emergency expenditure now required to organise these elections at short notice. There is also a question about election pilots. What is their current status and why have the Government still not published the prospectus or provided it for parliamentary scrutiny? Specifically, how many councils that originally said that they had the capacity to bid to take part in these pilots later told his Department that they lacked the capacity to hold local elections? How many of the councils with restored elections are now expected to proceed with the pilots?

Ultimately, where does this leave the Government’s flagship reorganisation process? Elections are the foundation stone of democracy. They are not a convenience to be switched on and off at the whim of the Secretary of State, which is why the Conservatives opposed these cancellations. The Secretary of State’s judgment has once again been shown to be fundamentally flawed. If he cannot or refuses to answer these questions, and to be open and honest about his behaviour, he should resign.

**Steve Reed:** I have received a letter from the shadow Secretary of State, and he will receive a response to that in due course.

The decision was updated following legal advice. We acted as promptly as possible after receiving that further legal advice, and that was the right thing to do. When decisions are revisited following legal advice, fresh ministerial consideration is perfectly normal and has happened before, and that was why that was done in that way. The right hon. Gentleman will know that there is a long-standing principle that Government do not publish or comment on legal advice. I know he knows that, because his words—spoken in November 2023—in this Chamber, were as follows:

“In accordance with a long-standing convention in this House, we do not discuss the content or nature of legal advice to Government.” —[*Official Report*, 9 June 2022; Vol. 715, c. 947.]

He was right about that.

The motivation of council leaders, who wrote to me to share their views, and indeed my motivation, was based on concerns raised across the political spectrum about the capacity to complete local government reorganisation on time, because of the benefits that that represents to voters in eliminating wasteful duplication and ensuring that the savings can be ploughed back into the frontline services that matter the most to local people.

On the right hon. Gentleman’s point about amendments tabled in the other place, the Government will consider amendments to these powers in the usual parliamentary way.

**Mr Toby Perkins** (Chesterfield) (Lab): If the shadow Secretary of State is going to call for the Secretary of State to resign, he should make sure that he has more than four people sat behind him; that would make him seem more credible.

I appreciate what the Secretary of State is saying about the importance of elections and how rarely these things should be cancelled. We in Derbyshire have a proposal and expectation to move to unitary authorities in 2027. Does he agree that it is not illogical not to have elections to authorities that very soon will not exist? Can he tell us what lessons have been learned and what this will mean for authorities that are likely to be moving down this path in 2027?

**Steve Reed:** My hon. Friend is right to raise the importance of reorganisation and eliminating duplication so that we can spend the savings instead on the frontline services that I know matter the most to his residents and all our residents. Election delays have happened before—there is precedent for them—but it is important to show full respect to legal advice when it is received. The decision was therefore revisited in the way that he is aware of.

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

**Gideon Amos** (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): Liberal Democrats believe that all authorities in England should be enabled to have the devolution deal and local government arrangement that is right for them.

The shadow Secretary of State asked whether this was an isolated incident; in the context of top-down reorganisation, this definitely is not an isolated incident. Under the last Conservative Government, top-down reorganisation was forced on to areas such as Cumbria and Somerset; it was bitterly opposed by local areas, yet it was forced on to those local communities against local opposition. Cumbria county council took the Conservative Government to court, and Somerset councils opposed the forced reorganisation. When opinion polls were taken across Somerset and the wide conclusion was that two authorities would be better than one, the Government forced those decisions on to Somerset. My first question is therefore this: if polls are taken in areas subject to top-down reorganisation, will the results from the public be supported by the Government?

Secondly, the Liberal Democrats opposed the postponement of these elections. We put down a fatal motion in the House of Lords that could have stopped the postponement in the first place, which the Conservatives failed to support. Given that nine authorities had their elections postponed in 2025, does the advice and rationale that apply in 2026 apply to the postponement that happened in 2025? If not, why not?

**Steve Reed:** The hon. Gentleman will be aware that I am unable to discuss the detail of the legal advice, although he will know the decision that we took after considering that legal advice. His earlier point is absolutely right; we should all be motivated by the interests of local people. It is in the interests of local people that we should get rid of the confusion of having two councils in the same area, so that people know which council to contact, and that we should eliminate the wasteful duplication of jobs such as chief executives, finance

directors and so on, so that we can spend the savings on improving the local services that make a difference to local people and the communities that they care about so much.

**Steve Race** (Exeter) (Lab): The reorganisation of local government is very welcome in Exeter, as we are being held back by our county council on numerous fronts. Can the Secretary of State confirm that reorganisation and devolution will enable cities such as Exeter to pull away with our economic development, housing and strategic planning, and will benefit local residents across the city?

**Steve Reed:** I completely agree with what my hon. Friend says. It is very important that we move ahead with local government reorganisation, not just because of the savings it generates, which can be ploughed into frontline services, but because of the boost it can give to local economies. That puts more money into people's pockets, provides more jobs in the locality and helps those communities to thrive.

**Lewis Cocking** (Bromsbourne) (Con): Having decided that elections should go ahead after all, will the Secretary of State join me in congratulating Conservative-run Bromsbourne council on defending democracy from day one and never once considering delaying its elections? Will he confirm that this Labour Government will not use the same tactics to delay the next general election?

**Steve Reed:** I think that last point is a step beyond where anybody has gone previously. I am sure that there are many reasons to congratulate Bromsbourne council.

**Jonathan Davies** (Mid Derbyshire) (Lab): Local government reorganisation in Derbyshire might see Amber Valley borough council split in half, along with the cost and difficulty of working out how to disaggregate the authority and the services and private finance initiative contracts it still manages, but an outcome is needed that will work for the next 100 years and that is based on the time it takes people to travel to work and the services they access. May I ask the Secretary of State to take a special interest in the circumstances of Amber Valley borough council and ensure that it gets the support that it needs so that it can be part of a new authority that can serve people's needs effectively in the county?

**Steve Reed:** My hon. Friend always ensures that I take a special interest in Amber Valley and the impact of decisions on the people who live in that beautiful part of the world. We have announced additional capacity funding to help councils to deal with the kind of challenges that he just described, recognising that reorganisation has a capacity impact on local authorities.

**Sir Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): I realise now that it was simply fresh legal advice that led to this change of policy, rather than anything to do with the court case brought by the Secretary of State's least favourite political party. Does he agree that the Government, in handling local government reform, should give at least an appearance of being impartial? Despite the Government's consistent advice that the existing district and borough council areas should be seen as the building blocks for the new unitary authorities, Labour-controlled

[Sir Julian Lewis]

Southampton city council is still insisting on trying to dismember the New Forest East constituency by going for boundary changes that would strip off the Waterside, near Southampton, from the New Forest, to which it has always looked. Will the Secretary of State assure me that when he and his colleagues take decisions on this and similar issues, the fact that it is a Labour-led council asking for the guidelines not to be followed will not weigh on them in an appropriate way?

**Steve Reed:** I reassure the right hon. Gentleman on his latter point. I also reassure him that concerns have been raised across the political spectrum, including by council leaders from his own party, about the capacity to complete local government reorganisation. That is why we have announced additional capacity funding to support those councils to be able to complete this important reform. The consultations are still under way on the exact form of the reorganisation that will take place, and it would be wrong for me to comment on that today.

**Peter Lamb (Crawley) (Lab):** I have great respect for the Secretary of State; I believe that he is one of the finest Ministers on this Government's Front Bench, and I have great sympathy for him. The reality is that at times, we have all been presented with advice that has proven to be poor. Frankly, the reality that a lot of us are aware of is that he inherited a mess when he moved away from the very fine job he was doing in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to his current Department.

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government will not publish figures to indicate the savings that this work will allegedly generate. The only figures we have available are those produced by PricewaterhouseCoopers, which have been quoted by Ministers previously. When we look through the figures at the geographical sites that we are talking about, we see that there are no savings through local government reorganisation, particularly when the wider public sector reform agenda is being taken apart by larger police areas and changes to the size of integrated care boards. On that basis, we are undertaking a situation in which there will be significant financial costs to the local authorities but none of the savings that are currently projected. If the Government have contrary figures, I welcome the publication of them and of the advice. The sizes that we are talking about are 14 times larger than the next largest authorities in Europe, with a greater diameter than Greater London and without any community of interest, so given that this will leave Labour communities at the mercy of right-wing councils—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins):** Order. I am sure the hon. Gentleman will be putting his question now.

**Peter Lamb:** Immediately, yes. Given that poor advice has previously been given by the Department to the Secretary of State, is it not time to pause and reconsider the evidence base for local government reform?

**Steve Reed:** I thank my hon. Friend for his question, and of course recognise that he is one of the finest constituency MPs in the House—it was a delight to campaign for him,

and it is a pleasure to see him in his seat now. We have had this conversation before, and it is quite right that we continue to have it, but I do not agree with his analysis; there are savings that will derive from local government reorganisation, and it will also make the system simpler for local people to understand. However, I know that the debate will continue.

**Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD):** Building on the point made by the hon. Member for Crawley (Peter Lamb), the £63 million of new capacity funding is a drop in the ocean compared with the real cost of LGR across the country. We are talking about councils having to merge workforces, IT contracts and outsourced contracts, none of which has been properly funded by central Government. These are authorities that are highly leveraged and do not have the reserves to pay for it. What is the Secretary of State's assessment of the true cost of local government reorganisation?

**Steve Reed:** I have announced additional funding. It is very unfair to describe it as a drop in the ocean, because it goes a long way towards supporting councils that need to go through local government reorganisation to remove anomalies, such as that people in two-tier areas have one council that is responsible for leaves above a drain and another that is responsible for leaves below a drain. If residents do not know which council to contact, it is very difficult for them to seek improvements in the services they are using, which is why it is so important that we continue with this process.

**Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con):** I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. He mentioned Surrey, and he will know that my constituency is going to be in a unitary authority called West Surrey. I have received a huge number of representations from constituents who would like the Secretary of State to consider calling that unitary authority West Surrey and South Middlesex, to take account of the fact that Spelthorne has been in Middlesex for 1,000 years and has never really thought of itself as being in Surrey. Will the Secretary of State meet me, so that I can make further representations on my constituents' behalf?

**Steve Reed:** I am always happy to consider proposals made by the hon. Gentleman, and I will ensure that he gets an appropriate meeting on the point that he has raised, either with me or one of my fellow Ministers.

**Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD):** I welcome the news that the people of East Sussex and Eastbourne will at last have the chance to vote to boot out a Conservative-run county council that has attempted to close a learning disability centre for local people, Linden Court; that has attempted to strip back services at Milton Grange for people with dementia; and that has the worst pothole compensation rate of any Conservative-run council in the country. However, will the Secretary of State pledge to not just me or the people of Eastbourne, but the people of East Sussex, that he will not disrespect their right to democracy next year when they are meant to have the right to vote for unitary councillors in our patch?

**Steve Reed:** I am happy to give the hon. Gentleman the reassurance that he seeks. During recess, I had the pleasure of visiting East Sussex, and from my own experience, I agree with what he has said about the potholes in many parts of that beautiful county.

**Richard Tice** (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): The Secretary of State conveniently forgot to mention that he has been caught red-handed trying to cancel elections, and that he has restored them only because of the legal action of Reform UK. I do not expect him to thank us, but could he at least do the decent and honourable thing and apologise for the confusion and chaos caused to hundreds of council officers across the country, apologise to some 5 million voters, and then resign?

**Steve Reed:** I will not make any apologies for listening to local leaders or for respecting legal advice. If the hon. Gentleman is looking for things that people should resign over, how about the decision to appoint as the leader of Reform UK in Wales a man who was a traitor to his country, and who is now serving 10 years in jail?

**Dr Ben Spencer** (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): What about the cancelled mayoral elections, such as those in Sussex and Hampshire? Do not the same arguments that the Secretary of State has made apply to those elections, or is he just afraid of our candidates, Katy Bourne and Donna Jones?

**Steve Reed:** That decision was taken under different legislation and in different circumstances. It is very important that local government reorganisation is completed before going ahead with the mayoral elections, to which we remain committed, so that this happens in an ordered way.

**Jess Brown-Fuller** (Chichester) (LD): West Sussex county council should never have been offered the opportunity to postpone for a second year running, effectively gifting the Conservative-controlled administration a seven-year term. Now, with democracy restored, there are just 74 days until the polls, so will West Sussex still be expected to work to the original timescale for the creation of unitary authorities and a combined authority that will sit with the mayoralty, or will that also be delayed? How much additional support will be provided to the council, and specifically to the staff at West Sussex, who are now working to a very tight schedule to deliver elections for their residents?

**Steve Reed:** We are proceeding to local government reorganisation on the agreed timetable, with no changes envisaged. We have made additional funding available to support capacity needs, to ensure that reorganisation can go ahead as expected, and I am not aware of any concerns from councils about their ability to deliver these elections. Indeed, councils have delivered snap general elections across the whole country in less time than remains between now and the date of the local elections in May.

**Mike Martin** (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): This has been a shamefully incompetent episode, and perhaps the most shameful part of it is that the Government have been forced to use taxpayers' money to pay the claimant's costs. Could the Secretary of State tell us exactly how much taxpayers' money has been given to the claimant? Perhaps if he cannot do so, the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Richard Tice) could let us know.

**Steve Reed:** That is certainly not an unusual circumstance in cases that end up in the courts in this way. The costs are still being assessed, so I am afraid that I cannot give the hon. Gentleman an answer to that question at the moment.

**Ben Maguire** (North Cornwall) (LD): As recently as 22 January, this Government formally committed to delaying local elections again, but facing defeat in the judicial review, they suddenly realised that the delay was unlawful. This U-turn has cost £63 million at a time when my own local authority in Cornwall faces a massive funding shortfall. Legal advice does not usually suddenly change without a material change in facts, so did the Secretary of State ignore the Attorney General's legal advice on this matter until it became obvious that the Government would lose, or did the Attorney General provide incorrect legal advice to the Secretary of State? Which is it?

**Steve Reed:** The hon. Gentleman will be aware that I am unable to discuss the detail of legal advice that was given to the Government, but there is nothing unusual at all about giving fresh ministerial consideration when decisions are revisited after legal advice is received. That is what happened.

**Mr Will Forster** (Woking) (LD): Given that the Government have now reversed their decision to postpone the 2026 local elections following legal advice, can the Secretary of State confirm whether the same legal considerations also applied to the elections to Surrey county council—which covers my constituency—that were postponed last year? If he states that the Government do not comment on legal advice, do you not agree, Madam Deputy Speaker, that my Woking constituents have been unlawfully robbed of voting out an incompetent Surrey county council last year?

**Steve Reed:** As I said in my statement, the unitary council elections will be going ahead in Surrey this year.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his endeavours. I note that this reorganisation is set to streamline services and save an estimated £2.9 billion over five years. However, from my experience—I am not better than anybody else, but I always try to be helpful—I issue a note of caution. With Northern Ireland 10 years on from our reform of councils, a 2024 Department for Communities report concluded that it is too early to determine whether those reforms have been cost-effective, with the new, larger councils actually spending more than their 26 predecessors. Has the Secretary of State taken into account that report and that uncertainty, and has he ensured that the Government are not promising billions of pounds in savings while actually taking more from taxpayers and ratepayers?

**Steve Reed:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question and his observations, but I remain confident that eliminating duplication where residents are paying for two sets of councillors, two sets of chief executives and two sets of finance directors will save residents money, which can then be invested in the frontline services that matter most to people; for example, it can be used to fix the potholes that we heard about earlier.

## Point of Order

7 pm

**Dave Doogan** (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. On 10 February, the Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry was called to the House to answer an urgent question about a meeting between Palantir, Peter Mandelson and the Prime Minister in February 2025, after which there was an uncompleted award of £245 million from the Ministry of Defence to Palantir. No fewer than four times, the Minister said that he did not know whether there were minutes for that meeting in existence, yet following my inquiries, the Cabinet Office had confirmed back in October 2025 that no such minutes existed. Can you advise us on whether MPs should continue to endure this disgraceful level of briefing of Ministers, who tell us in the House that they do not know something that another element of Government plainly knows very well?

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins)**: I am grateful to the hon. Member for giving me notice of his point of order. The House expects Ministers to always give full and frank answers to questions put to them in the House. If a mistake has been made, it is open to a Minister to publish a written correction in *Hansard*.

## Industry and Exports (Financial Assistance) Bill

*Considered in Committee*

[JUDITH CUMMINS *in the Chair*]

**The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Judith Cummins)**: I remind Members that in Committee they should not address the Chair as “Deputy Speaker”. Please use our names when addressing the Chair. “Madam Chair”, “Chair” and “Madam Chairman” are also acceptable.

### Clause 1

LIMIT ON SELECTIVE FINANCIAL  
ASSISTANCE FOR INDUSTRY

*Question proposed*, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

**The First Deputy Chairman**: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Amendment 3, in clause 2, page 1, line 8, at end insert—

“(a) In subsection (1), at the beginning insert ‘Except in respect of exports to which subsections (4B) and (4C) apply.’”.

Amendment 1, page 1, line 8, at end insert—

“(ab) In subsection (1), at the end insert ‘except in respect of exports to which the condition in subsection (4B) is met, where the amount shall not exceed £0’”.

*This amendment is linked to Amendment 2. Together they provide that where the Secretary of State had reason to believe that modern slavery or human trafficking were likely to be present in the supply chain of the business recipient of the goods exported from the United Kingdom, the limit of commitments which could be made under arrangements relating to exports and insurance could not exceed zero.*

Amendment 2, page 1, line 14, at end insert—

“(ca) After subsection (4A) insert—

“(4B) The condition in this subsection is that the Secretary of State has reason to believe that modern slavery or human trafficking are likely to be present in the supply chain of the business recipient of the goods exported from the United Kingdom.”

*See explanatory statement for Amendment 1.*

Amendment 4, page 1, line 14, at end insert—

“(ca) After subsection (4A) insert—

“(4B) This subsection applies to exports of goods in respect of which the Secretary of State has reason to believe that the goods exported from the United Kingdom are likely to be re-exported in a way that would, had the goods been exported directly from the United Kingdom, be contrary to any provision of the any Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018, or of any sanctions regulations made under that Act.

(4C) In respect of exports to which subsection (4B) applies, the aggregate amount of the Secretary of State’s commitments at any time under arrangements relating to exports and insurance shall not exceed £0.”

Clauses 2 and 3 stand part.

New clause 1—*Impact of financial assistance limits*—

“Within one year beginning on the date on which this Act is passed, and once every year thereafter, the Secretary of State must publish and lay before Parliament a report assessing the impact of the limits set by this Act on—

- (a) England,
- (b) Northern Ireland,
- (c) Scotland, and
- (d) Wales.”

*This new clause would require the Secretary of State to publish an annual report on the impact of the limits set by this Act on each of the UK’s devolved nations.*

**New clause 2—Impact of financial assistance limits on the steel industry—**

“(1) No later than one year after this Act is passed, and annually thereafter, the Secretary of State must publish and lay before Parliament a report assessing the impact on the UK steel industry of the increases in the limit on selective financial assistance for industry and the commitment limits on financial assistance for exports and overseas investment for which this Act provides.

(2) A report under this section must include a statement of—

- (a) the level of financial assistance provided in each month to UK steel undertakings under section 8 of the Industrial Development Act 1982 (as amended by this Act); and
- (b) the number of UK-based full time equivalent jobs in the steel industry which, in the opinion of the Secretary of State, would have been lost had it not been for the increases in the limit on selective financial assistance for industry and the commitment limits on financial assistance for exports and overseas investment for which this Act provides.”

**New clause 3—Impact of financial assistance limits (No. 2)—**

“Within one year beginning on the date on which this Act is passed, and once every year thereafter, the Secretary of State must publish and lay before Parliament a report assessing the impact of the limits set by this Act on—

- (a) gross domestic product (GDP),
- (b) export capacity of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and
- (c) volume of trade between the United Kingdom and the European Union.”

*This new clause would require the Secretary of State to publish an annual report on the impact of the limits set by this Act on GDP, SMEs, and trade between the United Kingdom and the European Union.*

7.2 pm

**The Minister for Trade (Chris Bryant):** It is good to see you in the Chair, Mrs Cummins. I welcome all Members to this slightly unusual Committee. Normally, a Committee of the whole House is awfully contentious, with everybody shouting at one another, but it will not be so contentious this afternoon—certainly not as regards the main body of the Bill. I will introduce the Bill now, and at the end I will respond to the debate, and on the amendments that several hon. Members have tabled.

Clause 1(a) will increase from £12 billion to £20 billion the aggregate limit of financial assistance that can be provided under section 8(1) of the Industrial Development Act 1982; this is to reflect inflation adjustments since the limit was last raised in 2009. Clause 1(b) will raise from £1 billion to £1.5 billion the level of incremental increases that can be made in an order by the Secretary of State; again, this reflects inflation adjustments since the limit was last raised in 2009. The parliamentary scrutiny arrangements for these incremental increases will remain precisely as they were, namely that they will be subject to the affirmative legislative procedure.

Clause 2 will amend the financial assistance for exports and overseas investment under the Export and Investment Guarantees Act 1991. It will make four changes to the Act: it will raise the commitment limit from £84 billion to £160 billion; it will simplify the legislation by expressing the limit in sterling, rather than in special drawing rights; it makes provision for the limit to be increased by increments of up to £15 billion through secondary legislation, as the need arises; and it will remove the limit on the number of occasions on which the commitment limit can be raised.

Clause 3 outlines the territorial extent of the Bill. I can confirm that the Bill does not engage the legislative consent motion process. My Department had discussions, prior to the introduction of the Bill, with all the devolved Governments; they confirm that the legislative consent motion process is not engaged.

I hope all hon. Members will agree that all three clauses should stand part of the Bill. I look forward to hearing the debate on the amendments.

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** Will the Minister give way?

**Chris Bryant:** I was about to sit down, I am afraid. I had finished.

**Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con):** This is a short Bill, but it involves potentially raising and spending a huge amount of public money, so in the interests of thorough scrutiny, I will speak to Opposition amendments 3 and 4 to clause 2, concerning the use of public finance for exports that may ultimately be re-exported to sanctioned destinations. Our amendments would prevent the Government from providing export finance or insurance where there is reason to believe that goods may be re-exported to Russia, or to any other country subject to UK sanctions. In such cases, the Secretary of State’s financial commitments would be capped at zero.

These amendments are not abstract. They respond to a very real problem in our world today that has been highlighted by independent analysis. For example, Sky’s Ed Conway has done extensive reporting showing that although direct exports to Russia have collapsed since sanctions were imposed, goods of UK origin are still reaching Russia through third countries. Exports to states such as Kyrgyzstan, Armenia and Uzbekistan have surged by extraordinary amounts—sometimes more than 1,000%. Obviously, these are not normal market movements; they are clear indications of diversion routes being used to circumvent sanctions.

These are not just trade flows on a spreadsheet. Sky News has shown that components of UK origin have been found inside Russian military equipment used on the battlefield in Ukraine. Among the items that have been identified in Russian systems are British-made microchips found in Russian drones, UK-origin electronic components inside Russian missiles and dual-use technology that should never have been able to reach Russia under the sanctions regime. Those components were not exported directly from the UK to Russia; they were routed through intermediary countries, often the same countries to which UK exports have suddenly spiked. President Zelensky has publicly raised concerns that UK goods are still making their way into Russia, despite sanctions.

[*Dame Harriett Baldwin*]

That is why we believe that amendments 3 and 4 are necessary. They represent a simple but important safeguard. The UK must ensure that its export finance system does not inadvertently support supply chains that undermine our sanctions regime. In the case of Russia, we must be absolutely certain that no UK-backed goods are being diverted in ways that could support its illegal war against Ukraine.

The Minister has spoken about the need to expand UK Export Finance's capacity and to support small and medium-sized enterprises in particular. We agree that export finance has an important role to play, but it must be deployed responsibly. I am sure that the whole Committee agrees that public money should never be used in ways that conflict with our foreign policy or national security objectives. Our amendments would ensure that the Government exercise due diligence, and that UK Export Finance support is aligned with the UK's sanctions framework. I am sure that the Minister will agree that that is a constructive and proportionate proposal, and will want to support it tonight.

New clause 2, in the name of His Majesty's Opposition, is about the steel industry. We can all agree that steel made in the UK is a strategic foundation sector for the United Kingdom. It supports thousands of skilled jobs and underpins supply chains across manufacturing, construction and defence. We did not oppose the Government's emergency legislation last April, although we warned that it was rushed, and that the Government did not have a proper plan. Nearly a year on from that emergency legislation, and nearly two years into this Government, we are still waiting for the long-promised steel strategy.

The Government have still not been able to agree a deal with the Chinese, despite the Prime Minister's visit to China. There has been secret meeting after secret meeting between Ministers and Jingye—meetings on which the Government have refused to update Parliament. New clause 2 would simply require the Secretary of State to publish an annual report on the impact of the increased financial assistance limits on the UK steel industry. That report would set out, first, the amount of financial assistance provided each month to UK steel undertakings under section 8 of the Industrial Development Act 1982, and secondly, the number of full-time equivalent steel jobs that, in the Secretary of State's view, would have been lost without the increased limit. It is a straightforward accountability measure. If public money is being used to support the steel sector, Parliament and the public deserve to know how much is being spent, why it is necessary and what outcomes it is delivering.

The Government have repeatedly spoken about the importance of steel, and we agree that steel is very important, but without a clear strategy or transparent reporting, it is impossible to judge whether interventions are effective, and whether they represent value for money. How do we know that we are not providing a limitless amount of funding that will crowd out support for other industries, and how can we assess whether it is good value for the taxpayer? New clause 2 would not constrain the Government's ability to act; it would simply ensure that support is justified, targeted and effective. I hope that the Minister will recognise the value of this additional transparency and accept the new clause.

I turn to amendments 1 and 2, tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith). We believe that they are sensible and straightforward. If the Secretary of State has reason to believe that modern slavery or human trafficking is likely to be present in the supply chain of a business receiving export-supported goods, obviously the amount of public financial support should be zero. That is surely the only responsible position that this House can take. We are inherently supportive of the need for transparency in supply chains, and will support the amendments.

I turn to new clause 1, tabled by the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister). Providing transparency on the amounts that are allocated across the whole United Kingdom would seem to be helpful assistance to this House.

**Jim Shannon:** May I commend the shadow Minister for what she has said? The Minister referred to discussions with the regional Administrations. UK Export Finance's industrial support has helped a number of companies in Northern Ireland, including Wrightbus, with guarantees for international sales, to the tune of hundreds of millions of pounds. We in Northern Ireland are of the opinion that we still adhere to EU rules. Does the shadow Minister agree that this needs to be clarified, and that we need the transparency to which she has referred, so that the EU cannot continue to dictate terms to this nation through the back door of Northern Ireland? Does she agree that that is very important, and that the Minister and Government must respond to that?

**Dame Harriett Baldwin:** The hon. Member makes a very important point, and I know that the House will be eager to hear how enthusiastic the Minister is about all the amendments that have been tabled. I am sure we will shortly hear whether he supports them, or why he does not and why he will urge his colleagues to vote against them this evening.

**Alex Ballinger (Halesowen) (Lab):** It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Madam Chair. I welcome the Bill and, more broadly, the Labour Government's focus on our modern industrial strategy. In the Black Country, where manufacturing is our tradition, businesses are following this agenda very closely. I am pleased to see that the Bill will result in increased headroom for both industrial financial assistance and UK Export Finance.

However, I have three questions for the Minister on practical points on SMEs' access to finance in this Bill. First, on access to trade finance for SMEs, I speak to firms in Halesowen and Cradley Heath that can win export work on quality and reputation, but that lose contracts because they cannot bridge the working capital gap between buying inputs and getting paid. A forge may secure a promising overseas order, only to be asked by its bank for levels of security that are simply unrealistic for a business of that size. By the time finance is arranged, the customer may have gone elsewhere. Although I welcome the increased capacity in clause 2, I would like a reassurance from the Minister that UK Export Finance will translate the headroom into products that genuinely work for SMEs in a way that is faster, simpler and more proportionate to their requirements.

7.15 pm

Secondly, I want to speak up for downstream steel SMEs. We have several steel processing firms in my constituency, including Davro Steel, which takes steel and adds value through processing and distribution, supplying manufacturers that depend on reliable specifications and timings and price stability. However, those businesses are anxious about the direction of travel on steel tariff safeguards and quotas, because measures that protect larger players in the sector can, if designed poorly, raise input costs or restrict supply for downstream SMEs. I hope the Minister can reassure the House that he will look at the whole value chain, not just the headline producers, when the Government deploy the increased assistance enabled by clause 1.

Thirdly, on the defence supply chain, the Black Country has deep links to defence manufacturing, and two issues may impact on the positive changes in the Bill. The first is export licensing timelines, because excessive delays can kill a contract, and the second is the growing concern about environmental, social and governance-related access to finance. These are practical problems when a legitimate UK defence supplier struggles to access competitively priced finance, because lenders' policies treat defence as reputationally high risk. I ask the Government to ensure that our regulatory architecture does not accidentally penalise lawful, strategically important businesses and industries in the defence sector.

I support the Bill. I support the intent behind clauses 1 and 2 to create headroom so that the Government can act to support manufacturers and exporters, but I ask the Minister for reassurance on three points: that SMEs will be able to access trade finance in practice; that downstream steel processors and manufacturers will not be overlooked in favour of larger players; and that defence exporters will see improvements in licensing speed and fair access to finance.

**The First Deputy Chairman:** I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

**Mr Joshua Reynolds (Maidenhead) (LD):** The Liberal Democrats support this Bill, and we support the amendments that are before the Committee today. The Bill does something that is straightforward and necessary: it raises the Industrial Development Act cap from £12 billion to £20 billion, reflecting inflation since the alignment was last set in 2009, and it nearly doubles UK Export Finance's commitment limit from £84 billion to around £160 billion. Both the industrial assistance and export finance frameworks would hit their ceilings if we did not make these changes, so it is really important to make them. We support the Bill because British businesses need the Government's backing to compete globally, and these limits need to keep pace with our ambition.

The amendments before us would strengthen the Bill in a few distinct ways. Amendments 1 and 2 would ensure that Government-backed export finance cannot be used to support businesses whose supply chains involve modern slavery or human trafficking. That is a straightforward ethical line. British taxpayers should not be underwriting exploitation, and we Liberal Democrats are glad to support the amendments. I ask the Minister to confirm what existing safeguards are in place, and whether implementation guidance will be issued so that businesses know where they stand.

Amendments 3 and 4 would address the risk that UK Export Finance could facilitate sanctions evasion through re-exporting. As we raise the statutory limit to £160 billion, Parliament must be satisfied that none of this expanded headroom can be used in a way that undermines our sanctions regime, so we support the amendments.

New clause 1 would require annual reports on the impact of the limit changes on each of the four UK nations. Although export finance is a reserved matter, outcomes are not necessarily evenly distributed. A report would allow Parliament to scrutinise whether the expanded capacity is reaching every single part of the United Kingdom, so we support the new clause. New clause 2 would require annual reports on the steel industry. Steel is of profound strategic importance to the UK and deserves the dedicated parliamentary scrutiny that the new clause suggests, so we support it.

New clause 3, which appears in my name, would require the Secretary of State to report on the annual impact of the Bill on GDP, on the export capacity of small and medium-sized enterprises, and on the volume of trade between the United Kingdom and the European Union. UKEF's 2024 to 2025 activity contributed £5.4 billion to the UK economy, and Parliament should be able to verify such a claim on an annual basis. According to the Office for National Statistics, there are 5.7 million SMEs in the UK, yet UKEF's annual report shows that it supported just 667 businesses. Annual reporting would hold the Government to their own target of supporting an additional 1,000 SMEs to export. It would make visible whether the current eligibility criteria, which require at least 20% of a business's annual turnover to be from exports in any one of the previous three years, continue to lock out businesses trying to break into export markets for the first time.

On the UK-EU trade part of new clause 3, the Chartered Institute of Export & International Trade has documented a 30% fall in EU export value among the smallest firms since the trade and co-operation agreement came into force. A recent Institute of Directors policy voice survey found that 54% of businesses that stopped exporting to the EU cited the trading relationship with the EU as one of the reasons why. These are not businesses that failed to break into new markets, but established exporters that have walked away from our largest and nearest trading partner because the barriers in their way are too great to bear. Every customs declaration and every check that did not exist before 2021 is another reason why businesses are not exporting to the EU, because it simply is not worth it for them. Those are the realities behind the statistics that simply increasing UKEF capacity alone cannot fix. Parliament should be able to see whether expanded UKEF capacity is making a measurable difference to those figures, so we hope the Minister will support new clause 3.

The most effective long-term support for British exporters would be a new bespoke UK-EU customs union. Analysis by Frontier Economics, commissioned by Best for Britain, in February 2025 suggested that a customs union could boost British GDP by 2.2%. The House of Commons Library estimates that this could generate £25 billion in additional annual tax revenue for His Majesty's Revenue and Customs, which I know the Chancellor would be grateful for. New clause 3 is the link or accountability mechanism that would allow Parliament to see whether what has been proposed is working.

[Mr Joshua Reynolds]

We will support the Bill and the amendments to it, because capacity without accessibility is meaningless, and capacity without accountability is unacceptable. The Government need to accept the new clauses that match the expanded headroom with the practical reforms to ensure that they reach the 5.7 million SMEs, which are the backbone of British business, currently not being supported by UK Export Finance.

**Ms Marie Rimmer** (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): I rise to speak in support of amendment 1, which appears in the name of the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith). The Bill is narrow, but it gives us an opportunity to raise this matter.

Thanks to the work of this House, public bodies such as the Department of Health and Social Care are legally required to eradicate slavery in their supply chains under the Health and Care Act 2022 and the National Health Service (Procurement, Slavery and Human Trafficking) Regulations 2025. We also strengthened the safeguards to ensure that public money is free from forced labour in last year's Great British Energy Act 2025. There was a little bit of fuss about that at the time, but no slavery or human trafficking is present in any part of Great British Energy's supply chain.

UK Export Finance still lacks those protections, but amendment 1 would fix that inconsistency. If we are increasing the financial limits available to UK Export Finance, we should ensure that British support for business abroad is never tied to exploitation. It would make the protection much bigger by covering everything across Government. We tried something like that with the Great British Energy Bill, and I was told I was right that this would not have been covered, but the Bill then went to the Lords and came back pretty quick. I thank the right hon. Member for tabling his amendment.

**Sir Iain Duncan Smith** (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): Madam Chair, it is a great honour to speak to this packed Chamber on my amendments, and it was good of you to call me so soon—there are so many people ready to speak.

I rise to speak in support of amendments 1 and 2 that appear in my name and those of my colleagues and friends, and it is my intention to press them when the time comes. Why is this necessary? In this particular area, I refer to the hon. Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer) as my hon. Friend, because she has been stalwart in campaigning against slave labour and forced labour. I bow to her because of her stalwart support. As she said of the amendments, it is vital to safeguard UK export finance and ensure it is legally protected from any exposure to forced labour and human trafficking.

We have been through this issue again and again, and I just hope the Minister, who has been a stalwart supporter of this drive, can give me a very clear sign when he responds to the debate that the Government want to adopt the amendments, which are critical to cleaning up what has essentially become a supply chain too often full of the products of slave labour.

I am in favour of the Bill, not against it. In principle, I think it is right basically to raise the limit to £20 billion and the aggregate limit to £160 billion to account for inflation. However, it is also absolutely right to ensure that this increased financial firepower is not used inadvertently to fund modern slavery. Together, the amendments would ensure that, if the Secretary of State has reason to believe that modern slavery is present in a recipient's supply chain, the permitted financial assistance for that export drops to zero—in other words, no finance.

For those who may not have followed what has been going on, we had to amend the original Health and Care Bill to stop slavery being used in relation to the NHS. Last year, as the hon. Member for St Helens South and Whiston said, we had to amend the Great British Energy Bill. The Government decided to vote down that amendment, but the Bill was amended in the Lords. Many Labour Members suddenly realised that they were going to be asked to vote in favour of slave labour in the supply chains of Great British Energy, and they said no. The Government then decided not to oppose the amendment, which was absolutely the right thing to do in the end.

However, I wish we had not had to go through all of that. Surely there is a moral purpose in all this, which is that if we have any suspicion that a product or a supply chain has elements of forced labour—we know China does it endlessly, and Russia and other countries use it—we should not allow that. When we compare ourselves with the United States, the reality is that its Governments, no matter who is in power, have a very simple rule: it is the responsibility of companies importing to check their supply chains, and the excuse that they did not know or could not find out is simply not good enough, so they are prosecuted if there is slave labour in the supply chain.

The amendments are all about trying to shut down another possible loophole, in this case on finance. We believe that UK Export Finance is currently exposed to forced labour. For instance, in 2022-23, it supported businesses involving a subsidiary of AVIC—Aviation Industry Corporation of China—a company sanctioned by the US as a People's Liberation Army entity. This is something that nobody, if they really ask themselves, on either side of the House wants, and I am sure that the Government do not want it, so the question is: how do we shut this down?

I want to quote a couple of really quite senior people in the Government who have spoken about this in the past. The Prime Minister has said:

"We're not going to raise human rights standards if we ignore it in trade."

He said:

"It shouldn't be up to the consumer...to research every product and work out every ethical aspect of it."

I say yes, because of course it is impossible to do so as an individual. When I had a row with Amazon and other companies, I said, "Why don't you make it easy to find out what the route in your supply chain is? People don't know where something was made until they actually have the product land on their desk. Why can't they see that on their computers and be able to identify that?" However, those companies do not want to do that, because they think people may not buy the products.

In May 2025, when he was the Trade Secretary, the right hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) said:

“We are very clear on our position regarding the abhorrent practice of modern slavery. It is a terrible crime which we are determined to eradicate. I assure you that this Government takes this issue seriously and is continuing to assess and monitor the policy tools available to ensure we can best tackle forced labour in supply chains.”

The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Ed Miliband), has also said that

“our clean power mission should not come at the expense of human rights...This involves confronting human rights abuses, including modern slavery, in energy supply chains”.

That is absolutely right, although I do not understand why it took so much for us to get those on his side of the fence to agree, finally, to take such abuses out of the supply chains for Great British Energy, given his stated views.

7.30 pm

UKEF has also supported China Southern Airlines, an organisation affiliated with involuntary labour transfers and “poverty alleviation”—which, of course, is a complete sham—campaigns in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Successive Governments have acknowledged that “poverty alleviation” is a euphemism for involuntary state-imposed labour. We know that. There is no question about what is going on behind these ridiculous euphemisms. We should therefore be ensuring that such things do not happen, but they have happened.

We currently have an uneven human rights standard across Government. While the Department of Health and Social Care is, as I said earlier, now required by law to eradicate slavery from its purchasing, other Departments that are currently exposed to complicity in human rights abuses are not required to satisfy those standards. UKEF is a case in point. I beg the Government to amend the Modern Slavery Act 2015 at some stage to make it an outright criminal offence for anybody to import, or support, any product made by any company that uses slave labour. That would kill this off once and for all, and would cover all elements of Government activity. I know the Minister responding to the debate believes in doing that. I simply say to him, why do the Government not just say, “Enough’s enough—we’re going to get after it”? We will come back to that, I am sure, when he sums up.

The amendment mirrors the high standards set in the Great British Energy Act—an amendment to which we, as the hon. Member for St Helens South and Whiston pointed out, finally got agreement. It mandates very clearly that no slavery or human trafficking be present in any part of the organisation’s supply chain. By allowing public money to flow to entities sanctioned by our allies, we risk disrupting multilateral relations and creating significant operational risks for British businesses.

We also do down our own competitiveness. It should be no surprise to us that Chinese companies such as Huawei are able to outbid British and other western companies, when we later discover that they use a significant amount of slave-made product for which they do not pay any salaries. They are therefore able to keep their costs much lower than western companies—

British, European, and even American companies—because those companies are obligated, quite rightly, to pay proper wages to those who make their products. This is also, therefore, a terrible offence in trade terms, not just in human rights terms.

While UKEF maintains its own internal environmental and human rights policies, those have already been proven inadequate for the task of preventing investment in companies seriously exposed to human rights abuses, of which this is the worst of all. The Bill presents a rare and necessary opportunity to use primary legislation to bind UK outward investment to a zero-tolerance approach to modern slavery. The Government will say, I am sure—though I hope they do not—that the Bill is narrow, and that this is not the right Bill or the right time. I am afraid we have always heard that. When I was a Government Member, I used to say to Ministers, “There never is the right time, and there never is the right Bill. There’s just the wrong one that is sitting here for you to amend.”

We heard repeatedly that all reforms to the Modern Slavery Act would be brought forward “when parliamentary time allowed”. That is what the Government said. As I said earlier, when parliamentary time allows, we should update the Modern Slavery Act so that it is an offence to have any involvement whatever in the importing, exporting or financing of any goods whose production involved slave labour.

None of that has been brought forward, but we have an opportunity with this Bill, so I do not apologise for tabling the amendments. The Bill may be narrowly focused on an institution that has made mistakes in the past, which we have evidence of—funnelling UK tax moneys into pockets of human-rights-abusing companies in China. That surely must stop. If we are to bring this element of financing up to date and provide for the powers and capacity needed to support those who are exporting and importing, we must make sure that it is done in a fair and clean way.

Given that ours was the first country in the history of the world to abolish slavery, the record of this House should remain that wherever we see slavery we will stamp it out. This is yet another way of doing that, so I urge the Minister to go off script and say that he will do this. It is morally right, it is economically right, and it is right for this House, and the people elected to it, to get this done.

**Jim Allister** (North Antrim) (TUV): Given that the Bill applies across this United Kingdom, one would naturally assume that it will bring a level playing field to this United Kingdom, and deliver parity and equality of opportunity for companies across the United Kingdom. These companies are all taxed on the same basis and pay into the same Treasury, so the reasonable expectation would be that if financial assistance is available and they qualify for it, they should be equally able to obtain it.

Sadly—although one would not know it from reading the Bill—that is not so, because the Bill is subject to a higher authority in respect of my constituency and the whole of Northern Ireland: sadly, we remain subject to EU state aid rules, which cap the delivery of that parity and equal opportunity for companies operating in my part of the United Kingdom.

[*Jim Allister*]

The imposition of the EU's state aid rules arises from article 10 of the protocol now called the Windsor framework, which the EU has accurately described in these terms:

"This means that EU State aid rules will continue to apply to the EU Member States, as well as to the United Kingdom in respect of aid that has an effect on the trade between Northern Ireland and the European Union that is subject to the Windsor Framework. It follows from other provisions of the Windsor Framework, and in particular its Articles 5 and 9, that trade in goods and wholesale electricity is subject to the Windsor Framework". Being subject to the Windsor framework means that, under article 10, we are subject not to the rules of this House on state aid but to the rules of a foreign jurisdiction, which makes rules and laws that we can neither unmake nor change. Therein lies the fundamental objection: though we are passing a Bill that rightly raises the thresholds of available assistance in Northern Ireland, this House is not sovereign in that regard. The Government can only grant that state aid to the level that the EU permits under its state aid rules.

**Sammy Wilson** (East Antrim) (DUP): Does the hon. and learned Member accept that the situation is even worse than that? If goods that are subsidised or get state aid in GB have a tenuous connection with markets in Northern Ireland, the EU can again limit the amount of state aid given, disadvantaging some producers even here in GB.

**Jim Allister**: Yes, that is absolutely right. The Windsor framework is premised on an assumption of risk that goods from Northern Ireland will permeate the EU market, and therefore goods supplied from GB companies into Northern Ireland are also subject to that risk. If that risk is manifested, it would appear that those companies are also subject—or could be subject—to the same state aid restrictions.

We are supposed to be one sovereign United Kingdom, but the EU requires that businesses in Northern Ireland do not benefit from the same state aid to the extent that the goods in question might be sold into the EU. That inevitably puts businesses in my constituency, which pay the same taxes as businesses across the United Kingdom, at a distinct disadvantage compared with what in some cases might be competitors across GB in the production of goods.

In fact, it is even worse for Northern Ireland companies, particularly manufacturing companies. As part of the integrated United Kingdom market, those companies depend more often than not on their supplies and raw materials coming from GB, but that supply is now fettered by the Irish sea border. Those raw materials now have to pass through an international customs border with paperwork, declarations and, in some cases, tariffs, all of which add to the cost of business. Not only are businesses subject to the extra cost insisted upon through the Irish sea border, but they are now put in a position where they cannot have equal access to the state aid that might be available elsewhere. That is a fundamental inequity as it applies across this United Kingdom.

The situation is further compounded by the fact that if there is a dispute about whether something amounts to state aid or whether it infringes EU state aid rules,

that is not decided by our courts, but by the European Court of Justice. Not only are we deprived within the supposedly sovereign United Kingdom of the right to grant equal state aid across this United Kingdom, but, if there is a question as to its validity, it is a foreign court that adjudicates upon that because of our subjection to EU law. It really is a double whammy in that regard.

Of course, the inevitable consequence is a chilling effect when it comes to Government considering whether to give state aid to Northern Ireland: they know that there could be a challenge from the EU and that that challenge could go to the European Court of Justice, with all the bother that entails. That chilling effect will therefore cause the Government to hold back from giving that aid. The loser, again, is businesses in Northern Ireland.

**Sammy Wilson**: Would the hon. and learned Gentleman accept that there is a further chilling effect? Namely, companies that might decide to invest in GB or in Northern Ireland may well feel that since they would be able to achieve less support in Northern Ireland than in GB, they will simply choose to invest outside Northern Ireland in GB, and jobs and investment opportunities will therefore be lost as a result of the picture he has painted.

**Jim Allister**: Of course. That is further compounded by the fact that if those companies did set up in Northern Ireland and were manufacturing businesses dependent on raw materials coming from GB, as most are, they would have to pass through an international customs border with extra costs as well. In Northern Ireland, they are being invited not only to set up in a place where state aid may be capped by a foreign jurisdiction, but to set up in a jurisdiction where the raw materials will, by virtue of the Irish sea border, cost them more.

The Minister will say, as he has said to me before, "Ah, but you have the advantage of dual market access." No, we do not. We have the worst of all worlds in Northern Ireland. We have the worst of all worlds in the sense that our raw materials are hiked in price because of the Irish sea border, and we now have the reduction in available state aid—

**The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Judith Cummins)**: Order. I am sure that the hon. and learned Gentleman is minded of the Bill that we are discussing and will soon get back to it.

7.45 pm

**Jim Allister**: Indeed I will, but it was in fact during a debate on this Bill on a previous occasion that the Minister made the very point that I was seeking to answer.

It is those circumstances that caused me to move new clause 1, supported by right hon. and hon. colleagues. Going forward, it is right not just in the interests of transparency but in order to see just how level or unlevel our playing field is under this Bill for the whole United Kingdom that the Government should publish annually the levels of support given to each part. We are all here as constituency Members to jealously represent the interests of our constituents, and I want to know from this Government if my constituents and the businesses in my constituency are getting a fair crack of the whip.

That is why, as set out in new clause 1, we should have a reporting mechanism to indicate that to us. I commend new clause 1 to the Committee. I also support the other amendments before the Committee.

**Carla Lockhart** (Upper Bann) (DUP): It is an honour to follow the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister). I stand to speak in support of new clause 1 in his name, which is supported by numerous people across the Opposition Benches.

New clause 1 is not radical or wrecking; it is actually very reasonable in what it asks, and should therefore be accepted. It seeks to ensure that when the House votes to increase financial assistance for industry and exports, the Government return within a year, and every year thereafter, and tell Parliament plainly how each part of the United Kingdom has benefited. That should not be controversial in any way, but it is sadly necessary, because Northern Ireland does not stand on equal ground.

The Bill lifts the cap on financial assistance under the Industrial Development Act 1982 and increases UK Export Finance's statutory commitment limit. That is a good thing and it should, in theory, benefit every business across our country. However, under article 10 of the Windsor framework, EU state aid rules continue to apply in Northern Ireland, where support may affect trade in goods within the European Union. While the rest of the United Kingdom moves forward under one subsidy regime, Northern Ireland therefore operates under a different legal shadow.

The practical effect is hesitation—hesitation in Departments, hesitation in advice and hesitation in investment—because the final interpretation does not rest with the UK courts alone. That is not equality within the Union. We cannot view this in isolation from the wider damage that has already been inflicted on Northern Ireland by the protocol and the Windsor framework.

As I have said before in the House, the protocol and the Windsor framework are not a minor technical adjustment to trade, but a bureaucratic burden, a constitutional compromise and an economic noose around the businesses simply trading within our own internal market. We see that evidenced here in the Bill where it does not apply to Northern Ireland. The failure is not anecdotal; it is measurable, documented and deeply felt. The Federation of Small Businesses has reported that 58% of businesses in Northern Ireland face moderate to significant challenges because of those arrangements and that more than one third have stopped trading with Great Britain altogether to avoid the cost and complexity. Let the reality of that sink in. That is not frictionless trade or the best of both worlds; that is economic distortion inside our own country.

I have spoken about the businesses that have had essential goods delivered from Scotland, costing time and money. I have raised the case of used agricultural machinery being refused entry unless it meets EU standards, despite being road driven and clean. I have heard from retailers struggling to source ordinary goods from their main market in Great Britain because of paperwork and regulatory barriers that simply do not exist anywhere else in the United Kingdom. This is the lived reality of the Irish sea border.

We are told that all of this is necessary to protect the Belfast agreement, but it is not. The agreement is built on consent—the principle that Northern Ireland's place

within the United Kingdom cannot change without consent of its people—yet our economic and legal position has been fundamentally altered without that consent. The agreement does not require an internal border within our sovereign state. It does not require that one part of the United Kingdom be subject to a distinct regulatory and subsidy regime, overseen in part by a foreign court, the European Court of Justice.

This Bill increases state support for British industry, but unless we confront the consequences of the Windsor framework honestly, Northern Ireland will potentially not benefit in step with England, Scotland and Wales. New clause 1 simply asks for transparency. If Northern Ireland is genuinely benefiting equally, let the Government publish the evidence annually. But if, once again, Northern Ireland is constrained while the rest of the United Kingdom moves freely, this House deserves to know just that.

Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom. Our businesses pay the same taxes, and they deserve the same support without qualification, hesitation or constraint. That is why I support new clause 1, along with my colleagues on these Benches, and I commend the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim for bringing it forward.

**Chris Bryant:** I note that the creative industries have now achieved 5% growth in the last year, faster than any other part of the economy—and I think we have seen quite a creative industry this evening, with Members managing to get amendments into this very tightly constricted Bill. I am happy to address some of the issues that were mentioned, but I think some of them strayed somewhat wide of the mark of the Bill itself.

Let me turn first to the amendment from the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith). He and I have participated in many campaigns on forced labour and other issues, and I am entirely with him on the aim of preventing all modern slavery. I will just correct him on one factual mistake that he made. He said that the UK was the first country to ban slavery, but it was Haiti in 1804. It could be argued that Napoleon abolished it, but then they returned to slavery afterwards. It was Haiti that abolished it first.

The right hon. Member makes the very good point that modern slavery is an abomination. It is morally wrong. Forced labour is morally wrong. It is also a taint on any kind of international trade, and it undermines fair practice from other countries that do not engage in forced labour. I am determined to do everything I possibly can, both in this role and in the future if I am not in this role, to make sure that we tackle forced labour in every single part of the way we run our economy. As a Labour Member, it would be shocking if I were not to say precisely that.

The right hon. Member knows that I am not going to accept his amendment—

**Sir Iain Duncan Smith:** What!

**Chris Bryant:** Fake shock does not suit him as a look. It would be wrong for us in this country to feed ourselves, clothe ourselves, and house ourselves on the back of forced labour. At the moment we are engaged in a review of responsible business conduct, and I very much hope

[Chris Bryant]

that that will move us in the direction of being able to tackle this issue comprehensively, rather than just in this particular area.

I reassure the right hon. Member that UK Export Finance takes these issues extremely seriously. It is very diligent in the way that it analyses and looks at any of the investments it makes to ensure that environmental and human rights issues are fully addressed before making any financial commitment. We intend to produce our response to the responsible business conduct review very soon. I cannot give a precise date, as Ministers rarely manage to produce dates, which the right hon. Member knows.

UKEF uses OECD standards and the Equator Principles. It also reports extensively on this area, as it is required to do under the two Acts that apply to it. It works with the Office for Responsible Business Conduct's dispute resolution unit, which provides a non-judicial grievance mechanism for looking at precisely all these issues. I am not saying a long-term no to the right hon. Member's request. I completely agree with the aim of what he is seeking to achieve, but I think we already do that under UKEF. If particular issues arise in the future, I hope the right hon. Member will write to me. I would be very happy to respond to him.

**Sir Iain Duncan Smith:** I understand what the Minister is saying very clearly, but a couple of the examples I gave where things had slipped through the net show that the system is not perfect. Does he think that the Government are likely therefore to deliver, as that said they would, on taking the Modern Slavery Act and beefing it up to such an extent that companies importing and exporting have a responsibility to check their supply chains, and if they do not it would be a criminal offence?

**Chris Bryant:** I cannot say anything more clearly than that I want to make sure that we in the UK are not reliant for our economic prosperity on the forced labour of others. We need to make that as comprehensive and effective as we possibly can. I know the two cases that the right hon. Member referred to, and I am happy to write to him, if he wants, in precise detail about those rather than to delay the House tonight. Funnily enough, the precise processes that we went through in the UK with UKEF in relation to those cases would have been met by the US legislation as well, which is arguably not as effective as it would like to be. I am as interested as he is in being effective in this space.

The hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister) gave an exceptionally good speech, I thought, on why we should not have left the European Union and why we should never have accepted the deal that was put on the table. I note that the people of Northern Ireland agreed with me and not with him on whether the UK should leave the European Union. I am afraid that—

**Jim Allister:** Will the Minister give way?

**Chris Bryant:** If the hon. and learned Member will allow me, I will respond to the points that were made by him and the hon. Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart).

First of all, the requirements under new clause 1 are completely unnecessary because UKEF already reports annually, as required by legislation. All of that is cleared through the National Audit Office. It is all there, perfectly available for anybody to see. I got a sense that there was a suggestion that Northern Ireland was losing out because of the money from UKEF. It is quite the reverse. If either Member wants to go through what is already published in this sphere, they will see for themselves precisely how well Northern Ireland does—and, of course, it should do.

The whole point of the two Acts that we are referring to today is that they should be able to enable—*[Interruption.]* I will give way to the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson), if he could just hold his horses for a very brief moment.

I have two further points. First, UKEF has officers across the whole of the United Kingdom, including in Northern Ireland. I think there is a misunderstanding here. Some people seem to suggest that what happens is that the Government say, "Give money to that business over there." That is not what happens. This is a demand-led process, where UKEF is able to respond to the demand that arises. We need to make sure that that is spread across the whole of the United Kingdom, and that is what we intend to do.

**Sammy Wilson:** Northern Ireland would expect to do well out of this process, because proportionally we export much more of our industrial production than other parts of the United Kingdom. The Minister rails against the decision on Brexit and so on, but does he accept that since the United Kingdom as a whole voted to leave the EU, the Government's responsibility was to make sure that the whole of the United Kingdom left on the same terms?

**Chris Bryant:** I was not a member of that Government, and I did not support the deal that the right hon. Member supported in the first place, which gave us some of the problems we have today.

I want to make sure that all the businesses across the whole of the United Kingdom are able to export. I have made the point before that just over one in 10 businesses in the UK export around the world. If we could manage to double that, it would be very good. I think something like 16,000 UK businesses that used to export to the European Union no longer do so, and I think that is an own goal. We are trying to reset our relationship with the European Union so that we can do better on exports.

I turn now to the comments from the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Dame Harriett Baldwin), which were primarily aimed at money laundering and some of the issues in relation to Russia. I want to make absolutely clear that we are determined to do everything we possibly can to debilitate the Russian military complex: first, by making sure that it does not have the finances available to it, because it is unable to trade in the rest of the world; and secondly, by making sure that it does not have the materiel—the kit that it needs to be able to conduct its war. That is why the UK has implemented a comprehensive set of sanctions worth over £20 billion of UK-Russia trade.

In the UK's next package of sanctions, we will introduce new sanctions on the direct and indirect export of goods from the UK to Russia, further tackling the issues in

chemicals, minerals and metals that have been identified to have potential uses in Russia's military industrial complex. We will target actors in Russia and third countries that support trade in Russian energy, including the shadow fleet vessels, refineries, terminals, and their facilitators.

8 pm

Since January 2025, the Government have provided regularly updated detailed guidance for exporters of at-risk goods, including such things as the hon. Lady referred to, which I think she took from an article in *The Times* that was repeated in *The Telegraph*—or the other way round—detailing specific products and third countries where Russia is focusing efforts to circumvent sanctions. They attempt to be wily, but we are determined to outfox them.

Our guidance goes further than any partner countries', providing a unique resource for UK exporters. The hon. Lady is right that we want to tackle any attempts at money laundering, but her amendment confuses the role of UKEF with the issues in the article in *The Times*. It would also duplicate measures already adopted by UKEF on the back of the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002, the Terrorism Act 2000 and the 2017 Treasury regulations.

I turn to new clause 2, which relates to steel. The reporting requirements for UKEF under existing legislation are clear. We are intent on making sure that we have a proper steel strategy to protect the sector for our security interests and its jobs across the whole of the UK; that is all very important. But I think there is a fundamental misunderstanding in the new clause about the functioning of UKEF, which is essentially demand-led and not determined by Government centrally, except in very exceptional circumstances. There is one other flaw in the new clause: most of the major steel plants in the UK are in assisted areas, so financial assistance usually comes from section 7 of the Industrial Development Act 1982 rather than section 8, which is what the new clause refers to.

My hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen (Alex Ballinger) asked me several questions, and about support for SMEs in particular. UKEF supported 496 SMEs in 2024-25 thanks in part to changes that have made it easier for smaller businesses to access UKEF funding and financing. I am determined to ensure that that continues.

In relation to new clause 3 and reporting on GDP and SMEs, I have already made the point that although Oxford Economics research shows that 115,000 businesses were effectively supported by UKEF, none the less, all the reporting requirements in the new clause are already met in law. Consequently, I hope that hon. Members will not support any of the amendments before us.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Clause 1 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

## Clause 2

FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE FOR EXPORTS AND OVERSEAS  
INVESTMENT: COMMITMENT LIMITS

*Amendment proposed:* 1, page 1, line 8, at end insert—

“(ab) In subsection (1), at the end insert “except in respect of exports to which the condition in subsection (4B) is met, where the amount shall not exceed £0”.”—  
(Sir Iain Duncan Smith.)

*This amendment is linked to Amendment 2. Together they provide that where the Secretary of State had reason to believe that modern slavery or human trafficking were likely to be present in the supply chain of the business recipient of the goods exported from the United Kingdom, the limit of commitments which could be made under arrangements relating to exports and insurance could not exceed zero.*

*Question put, That the amendment be made.*

*The Committee divided: Ayes 161, Noes 272.*

## Division No. 429]

[8.3 pm

### AYES

|                                                         |                                                          |
|---------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|
| Adam, Shockat                                           | Garnier, Mark                                            |
| Allister, Jim                                           | George, Andrew                                           |
| Amos, Gideon                                            | Gethins, Stephen                                         |
| Anderson, Lee                                           | Gibson, Sarah                                            |
| Anderson, Stuart                                        | Glover, Olly                                             |
| Andrew, rh Stuart                                       | Goldman, Marie                                           |
| Aquarone, Steff                                         | Grant, Helen                                             |
| Argar, rh Edward                                        | Green, Sarah                                             |
| Atkins, rh Victoria                                     | Griffiths, Alison                                        |
| Babarinde, Josh                                         | Harding, Monica                                          |
| Bacon, Gareth                                           | Harris, Rebecca                                          |
| Baldwin, Dame Harriett                                  | Hayes, rh Sir John                                       |
| Bennett, Alison                                         | Heylings, Pippa                                          |
| Berry, Siân                                             | Hobhouse, Wera                                           |
| Bhatti, Saqib ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra</i> ) | Holmes, Paul                                             |
| Blackman, Bob                                           | Huddleston, Nigel                                        |
| Blackman, Kirsty                                        | Hudson, Dr Neil                                          |
| Bool, Sarah                                             | Hunt, rh Sir Jeremy                                      |
| Bowie, Andrew                                           | Jardine, Christine                                       |
| Bradley, rh Dame Karen                                  | Jarvis, Liz                                              |
| Brandreth, Aphra                                        | Jenrick, rh Robert                                       |
| Brewer, Alex                                            | Johnson, Dr Caroline                                     |
| Brown-Fuller, Jess                                      | Jones, Clive                                             |
| Campbell, Mr Gregory                                    | Jopp, Lincoln                                            |
| Cane, Charlotte                                         | Kearns, Alicia                                           |
| Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair                              | Kruger, Danny                                            |
| Cartlidge, James                                        | Lake, Ben                                                |
| Chadwick, David                                         | Lam, Katie                                               |
| Chambers, Dr Danny                                      | Lamont, John                                             |
| Chope, Sir Christopher                                  | Leadbitter, Graham                                       |
| Chowns, Dr Ellie                                        | Leigh, rh Sir Edward                                     |
| Cleverly, rh Sir James                                  | Lewis, rh Sir Julian                                     |
| Cocking, Lewis                                          | Lockhart, Carla                                          |
| Coghlan, Chris                                          | Lopez, Julia                                             |
| Collins, Victoria                                       | Maguire, Ben                                             |
| Cooper, John                                            | Maguire, Helen                                           |
| Corbyn, rh Jeremy                                       | Mak, Alan                                                |
| Costa, Alberto                                          | Malthouse, rh Kit                                        |
| Cross, Harriet                                          | Martin, Mike                                             |
| Dance, Adam                                             | Mathew, Brian                                            |
| Davies, Ann                                             | Mayhew, Jerome                                           |
| Davies, Gareth                                          | Maynard, Charlie                                         |
| Davies, Mims                                            | McMurdock, James                                         |
| Davis, rh David                                         | Medi, Llinos                                             |
| Denyer, Carla                                           | Milne, John                                              |
| Dewhurst, Charlie                                       | Mohindra, Mr Gagan                                       |
| Dillon, Mr Lee                                          | Moran, Layla                                             |
| Doogan, Dave                                            | Morello, Edward                                          |
| Dowden, rh Sir Oliver                                   | Morrison, Mr Tom                                         |
| Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain                               | Morrissey, Joy ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra</i> ) |
| Dyke, Sarah                                             | Morton, rh Wendy                                         |
| Easton, Alex                                            | Munt, Tessa                                              |
| Forster, Mr Will                                        | Murray, Susan                                            |
| Fortune, Peter                                          | Murrison, rh Dr Andrew                                   |
| Fox, Sir Ashley                                         | Norman, rh Jesse                                         |
| French, Mr Louie                                        | Obese-Jecty, Ben                                         |
| Fuller, Richard                                         | O'Hara, Brendan                                          |

|                         |                                                            |
|-------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|
| Olney, Sarah            | Spencer, Patrick ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra</i> ) |
| Perteghella, Manuela    | Stephenson, Blake                                          |
| Philp, rh Chris         | Stone, Jamie                                               |
| Pinkerton, Dr Al        | Stride, rh Sir Mel                                         |
| Pochin, Sarah           | Sultana, Zarah                                             |
| Ramsay, Adrian          | Swann, Robin                                               |
| Reed, David             | Swayne, rh Sir Desmond                                     |
| Reynolds, Mr Joshua     | Taylor, Luke                                               |
| Rimmer, Ms Marie        | Thomas, Bradley                                            |
| Robertson, Joe          | Tice, Richard                                              |
| Robinson, rh Gavin      | Timothy, Nick                                              |
| Roome, Ian              | Vickers, Matt                                              |
| Sabine, Anna            | Voaden, Caroline                                           |
| Savage, Dr Roz          | Whately, Helen                                             |
| Saville Roberts, rh Liz | Wild, James                                                |
| Shannon, Jim            | Williamson, rh Sir Gavin                                   |
| Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec | Wilson, rh Sammy                                           |
| Simmonds, David         | Wishart, Pete                                              |
| Slade, Vikki            | Wood, Mike                                                 |
| Smith, Greg             | Wright, rh Sir Jeremy                                      |
| Smith, rh Sir Julian    | Wrigley, Martin                                            |
| Smith, Rebecca          | Young, Claire                                              |
| Snowden, Mr Andrew      | <b>Tellers for the Ayes:</b>                               |
| Sollom, Ian             | Gregory Stafford and                                       |
| Spencer, Dr Ben         | Rebecca Paul                                               |

## NOES

|                                                                     |                            |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Abbott, rh Ms Diane ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy</i> ) | Byrne, rh Liam             |
| Abbott, Jack                                                        | Cadbury, Ruth              |
| Abrahams, Debbie                                                    | Caliskan, Nesil            |
| Akehurst, Luke                                                      | Campbell, rh Sir Alan      |
| Alaba, Mr Bayo                                                      | Campbell, Juliet           |
| Alexander, rh Mr Douglas                                            | Campbell-Savours, Markus   |
| Alexander, rh Heidi                                                 | Carden, Dan                |
| Al-Hassan, Sadik                                                    | Carling, Sam               |
| Ali, Rushanara                                                      | Carns, Al                  |
| Ali, Tahir                                                          | Charalambous, Bambos       |
| Anderson, Callum                                                    | Charters, Mr Luke          |
| Anderson, Fleur                                                     | Clark, Feryal              |
| Arthur, Dr Scott                                                    | Coleman, Ben               |
| Asato, Jess                                                         | Collinge, Lizzi            |
| Asser, James                                                        | Collins, Tom               |
| Athwal, Jas                                                         | Conlon, Liam               |
| Atkinson, Catherine                                                 | Coombes, Sarah             |
| Atkinson, Lewis                                                     | Cooper, Andrew             |
| Bailey, Olivia                                                      | Cooper, Dr Beccy           |
| Baines, David                                                       | Cox, Pam                   |
| Baker, Richard                                                      | Craft, Jen                 |
| Ballinger, Alex                                                     | Crichton, Torcuil          |
| Barker, Paula                                                       | Curtis, Chris              |
| Barron, Lee                                                         | Daby, Janet                |
| Beavers, Lorraine                                                   | Dalton, Ashley             |
| Begum, Apsana                                                       | Darlington, Emily          |
| Bell, Torsten                                                       | Davies, Jonathan           |
| Benn, rh Hilary                                                     | Davies, Paul               |
| Betts, Mr Clive                                                     | Dean, Josh                 |
| Bishop, Matt                                                        | Dearden, Kate              |
| Blake, Olivia                                                       | Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh |
| Blake, Rachel                                                       | Dickson, Jim               |
| Bloore, Chris                                                       | Dixon, Anna                |
| Brackenridge, Sureena                                               | Dixon, Samantha            |
| Brash, Mr Jonathan                                                  | Dodds, rh Anneliese        |
| Bryant, Chris                                                       | Dowd, Peter                |
| Buckley, Julia                                                      | Eagle, Dame Angela         |
| Burton, Richard                                                     | Eagle, rh Maria            |
| Butler, Dawn                                                        | Efford, Clive              |
| Byrne, Ian                                                          | Egan, Damien               |
|                                                                     | Elmore, Chris              |
|                                                                     | Esterson, Bill             |

|                                                              |                                                         |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|
| Evans, Chris                                                 | Mahmood, rh Shabana                                     |
| Fahnbulleh, Miatta                                           | Martin, Amanda                                          |
| Farnsworth, Linsey                                           | Maskell, Rachael                                        |
| Fenton-Glynn, Josh                                           | Mayer, Alex                                             |
| Fleet, Natalie                                               | McAllister, Douglas                                     |
| Foody, Emma                                                  | McCarthy, Kerry                                         |
| Foxcroft, Vicky                                              | McCluskey, Martin                                       |
| Foy, Mary Kelly                                              | McDonagh, Dame Siobhain                                 |
| Francis, Daniel                                              | McDonald, Andy                                          |
| Frith, Mr James                                              | McDonald, Chris                                         |
| Furniss, Gill                                                | McDonnell, rh John                                      |
| Gardiner, Barry                                              | McDougall, Blair                                        |
| Gemmell, Alan                                                | McEvoy, Lola                                            |
| Gill, Preet Kaur                                             | McFadden, rh Pat                                        |
| Gittins, Becky ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami</i> )   | McIntyre, Alex                                          |
| Glendon, Mary                                                | McKee, Gordon                                           |
| Goldsborough, Ben                                            | McKenna, Kevin                                          |
| Gosling, Jodie                                               | McKinnell, Catherine                                    |
| Gould, Georgia                                               | McNally, Frank                                          |
| Grady, John                                                  | Minns, Ms Julie                                         |
| Greenwood, Lilian                                            | Mohamed, Abtisam                                        |
| Hack, Amanda                                                 | Moon, Perran                                            |
| Haigh, rh Louise                                             | Morris, Grahame                                         |
| Hamilton, Paulette                                           | Morris, Joe                                             |
| Hardy, Emma                                                  | Mullane, Margaret                                       |
| Hayes, Tom                                                   | Murphy, Luke                                            |
| Hazelgrove, Claire                                           | Murray, Chris                                           |
| Healey, rh John                                              | Murray, rh Ian                                          |
| Hendrick, Sir Mark                                           | Murray, rh James                                        |
| Hinchliff, Chris                                             | Murray, Katrina                                         |
| Hinder, Jonathan                                             | Myer, Luke                                              |
| Hopkins, Rachel                                              | Nandy, rh Lisa                                          |
| Hughes, Claire ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami</i> )   | Nash, Pamela                                            |
| Hume, Alison ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami</i> )     | Newbury, Josh                                           |
| Huq, Dr Rupa                                                 | Niblett, Samantha                                       |
| Hussain, Imran                                               | Nichols, Charlotte                                      |
| Ingham, Leigh                                                | Norris, Alex                                            |
| Irons, Natasha                                               | Norris, Dan ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami</i> ) |
| Jameson, Sally                                               | Onn, Melanie                                            |
| Jarvis, Dan                                                  | Opher, Dr Simon                                         |
| Jogee, Adam                                                  | Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena                                  |
| Johnson, rh Dame Diana                                       | Osamor, Kate                                            |
| Jones, rh Darren                                             | Osborne, Kate                                           |
| Jones, Sarah                                                 | Osborne, Tristan                                        |
| Josan, Gurinder Singh                                        | Paffey, Darren                                          |
| Joseph, Sojan                                                | Pakes, Andrew                                           |
| Juss, Warinder                                               | Patrick, Matthew                                        |
| Kane, Mike                                                   | Peacock, Stephanie                                      |
| Kaur, Satvir ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami</i> )     | Pearce, Jon                                             |
| Khan, Naushabah                                              | Pennycook, Matthew                                      |
| Kirkham, Jayne                                               | Perkins, Mr Toby                                        |
| Kitchen, Gen                                                 | Phillips, Jess                                          |
| Kumaran, Uma                                                 | Pinto-Duschinsky, David                                 |
| Kyle, rh Peter                                               | Pitcher, Lee                                            |
| Lamb, Peter                                                  | Pollard, Luke                                           |
| Lammy, rh Mr David                                           | Powell, Joe                                             |
| Lavery, Ian                                                  | Poynton, Gregor                                         |
| Law, Noah                                                    | Prinsley, Peter                                         |
| Leadbeater, Kim                                              | Race, Steve                                             |
| Leishman, Brian                                              | Rand, Mr Connor                                         |
| Lewell, Emma                                                 | Reed, rh Steve                                          |
| Lewis, Clive                                                 | Reeves, rh Ellie                                        |
| Lightwood, Simon                                             | Reeves, rh Rachel                                       |
| Long Bailey, Rebecca                                         | Reid, Joani                                             |
| MacAlister, Josh                                             | Reynolds, rh Emma                                       |
| Macdonald, Alice ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami</i> ) | Reynolds, rh Jonathan                                   |
| Madders, Justin                                              | Rhodes, Martin                                          |
|                                                              | Ribeiro-Addy, Bell                                      |
|                                                              | Rigby, Lucy                                             |

Robertson, Dave  
Rushworth, Sam  
Russell, Sarah  
Rutland, Tom  
Ryan, Oliver  
Sackman, Sarah  
Sandher, Dr Jeevun  
Sandher-Jones, Louise  
Sewards, Mark  
Shah, Naz  
Shanker, Baggy  
Shanks, Michael  
Siddiq, Tulip  
Slaughter, Andy  
Slinger, John  
Smith, Jeff  
Smith, Sarah  
Smyth, Karin  
Stainbank, Euan  
Stevenson, Kenneth  
Stone, Will  
Strickland, Alan  
Swallow, Peter  
Tami, rh Sir Mark  
Taylor, Rachel  
Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick  
Thompson, Adam  
Tidball, Dr Marie  
Timms, rh Sir Stephen

Toale, Jessica  
Tomlinson, Dan  
Trickett, Jon  
Tufnell, Henry  
Turmaine, Matt  
Turner, Laurence  
Uppal, Harpreet  
Vaughan, Tony  
Vaz, rh Valerie  
Vince, Chris  
Wakeford, Christian  
Ward, Chris  
Waugh, Paul  
Webb, Chris  
Welsh, Michelle  
West, Catherine  
Western, Matt  
Wheeler, Michael  
Whitby, John  
White, Jo  
White, Katie  
Williams, David  
Woodcock, Sean  
Yang, Yuan  
Yasin, Mohammad  
Yemm, Steve

**Tellers for the Noes:**  
**Mark Ferguson and**  
**Imogen Walker**

*Question accordingly negated.*

*Clause 2 ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

*Clause 3 ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

### New Clause 2

#### IMPACT OF FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE LIMITS ON THE STEEL INDUSTRY

“(1) No later than one year after this Act is passed, and annually thereafter, the Secretary of State must publish and lay before Parliament a report assessing the impact on the UK steel industry of the increases in the limit on selective financial assistance for industry and the commitment limits on financial assistance for exports and overseas investment for which this Act provides.

(2) A report under this section must include a statement of—

- (a) the level of financial assistance provided in each month to UK steel undertakings under section 8 of the Industrial Development Act 1982 (as amended by this Act); and
- (b) the number of UK-based full time equivalent jobs in the steel industry which, in the opinion of the Secretary of State, would have been lost had it not been for the increases in the limit on selective financial assistance for industry and the commitment limits on financial assistance for exports and overseas investment for which this Act provides.”—(*Dame Harriett Baldwin.*)

*Brought up, and read the First time.*

*Question put, That the clause be read a Second time.*

*The Committee divided: Ayes 156, Noes 273.*

**Division No. 430]**

**[8.17 pm**

#### AYES

|                  |                     |
|------------------|---------------------|
| Adam, Shockat    | Andrew, rh Stuart   |
| Allister, Jim    | Aquarone, Steff     |
| Amos, Gideon     | Argar, rh Edward    |
| Anderson, Lee    | Atkins, rh Victoria |
| Anderson, Stuart | Babarinde, Josh     |

Bacon, Gareth  
Baldwin, Dame Harriett  
Bennett, Alison  
Bhatti, Saqib (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)  
Blackman, Bob  
Blackman, Kirsty  
Bool, Sarah  
Bowie, Andrew  
Bradley, rh Dame Karen  
Brandreth, Aphra  
Brewer, Alex  
Brown-Fuller, Jess  
Campbell, Mr Gregory  
Cane, Charlotte  
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair  
Cartlidge, James  
Chadwick, David  
Chambers, Dr Danny  
Chope, Sir Christopher  
Cleverly, rh Sir James  
Cocking, Lewis  
Coghlan, Chris  
Collins, Victoria  
Cooper, John  
Costa, Alberto  
Cross, Harriet  
Dance, Adam  
Davies, Ann  
Davies, Gareth  
Davies, Mims  
Davis, rh David  
Dewhurst, Charlie  
Dillon, Mr Lee  
Doogan, Dave  
Dowden, rh Sir Oliver  
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain  
Dyke, Sarah  
Easton, Alex  
Forster, Mr Will  
Fortune, Peter  
Fox, Sir Ashley  
French, Mr Louie  
Fuller, Richard  
Garnier, Mark  
George, Andrew  
Gethins, Stephen  
Gibson, Sarah  
Glover, Olly  
Goldman, Marie  
Grant, Helen  
Green, Sarah  
Griffiths, Alison  
Harding, Monica  
Harris, Rebecca  
Hayes, rh Sir John  
Heylings, Pippa  
Hobhouse, Wera  
Holmes, Paul  
Huddleston, Nigel  
Hudson, Dr Neil  
Hunt, rh Sir Jeremy  
Jardine, Christine  
Jarvis, Liz  
Jenrick, rh Robert  
Johnson, Dr Caroline  
Jones, Clive  
Jopp, Lincoln  
Kearns, Alicia  
Kruger, Danny  
Lake, Ben  
Lam, Katie

Lamont, John  
Leadbitter, Graham  
Leigh, rh Sir Edward  
Lewis, rh Sir Julian  
Lockhart, Carla  
Lopez, Julia  
Maguire, Ben  
Maguire, Helen  
Mak, Alan  
Malthouse, rh Kit  
Martin, Mike  
Mathew, Brian  
Mayhew, Jerome  
Maynard, Charlie  
McMurdock, James  
Medi, Llinos  
Milne, John  
Mohindra, Mr Gagan  
Moran, Layla  
Morello, Edward  
Morrison, Mr Tom  
Morrisey, Joy (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)  
Morton, rh Wendy  
Munt, Tessa  
Murray, Susan  
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew  
Norman, rh Jesse  
Obese-Jecty, Ben  
O'Hara, Brendan  
Olney, Sarah  
Perteghella, Manuela  
Philp, rh Chris  
Pinkerton, Dr Al  
Pochin, Sarah  
Reed, David  
Reynolds, Mr Joshua  
Rimmer, Ms Marie  
Robertson, Joe  
Robinson, rh Gavin  
Roome, Ian  
Sabine, Anna  
Savage, Dr Roz  
Saville Roberts, rh Liz  
Shannon, Jim  
Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec  
Simmonds, David  
Slade, Vikki  
Smith, Greg  
Smith, rh Sir Julian  
Smith, Rebecca  
Snowden, Mr Andrew  
Sollom, Ian  
Spencer, Dr Ben  
Spencer, Patrick (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)  
Stephenson, Blake  
Stone, Jamie  
Stride, rh Sir Mel  
Sultana, Zarah  
Swann, Robin  
Wayne, rh Sir Desmond  
Taylor, Luke  
Thomas, Bradley  
Tice, Richard  
Timothy, Nick  
Vickers, Matt  
Voaden, Caroline  
Whately, Helen  
Wild, James  
Williamson, rh Sir Gavin  
Wilson, rh Sammy

Wishart, Pete  
Wood, Mike  
Wright, rh Sir Jeremy  
Wrigley, Martin

Young, Claire  
**Tellers for the Ayes:**  
**Gregory Stafford and**  
**Rebecca Paul**

**NOES**

Abbott, rh Ms Diane  
(Proxy vote cast by Bell  
Ribeiro-Addy)  
Abbott, Jack  
Abrahams, Debbie  
Akehurst, Luke  
Alaba, Mr Bayo  
Alexander, rh Mr Douglas  
Alexander, rh Heidi  
Al-Hassan, Sadik  
Ali, Rushanara  
Ali, Tahir  
Anderson, Callum  
Anderson, Fleur  
Arthur, Dr Scott  
Asato, Jess  
Asser, James  
Athwal, Jas  
Atkinson, Catherine  
Atkinson, Lewis  
Bailey, Mr Calvin  
Bailey, Olivia  
Baines, David  
Baker, Richard  
Ballinger, Alex  
Barker, Paula  
Barron, Lee  
Beavers, Lorraine  
Begum, Apsana  
Bell, Torsten  
Benn, rh Hilary  
Betts, Mr Clive  
Bishop, Matt  
Blake, Olivia  
Blake, Rachel  
Bloore, Chris  
Brackenridge, Sureena  
Brash, Mr Jonathan  
Bryant, Chris  
Buckley, Julia  
Burgon, Richard  
Butler, Dawn  
Byrne, Ian  
Byrne, rh Liam  
Cadbury, Ruth  
Caliskan, Nesil  
Campbell, rh Sir Alan  
Campbell, Juliet  
Campbell-Savours, Markus  
Carden, Dan  
Carling, Sam  
Carns, Al  
Charalambous, Bambos  
Charters, Mr Luke  
Clark, Feryal  
Coleman, Ben  
Collinge, Lizzi  
Collins, Tom  
Conlon, Liam  
Coombes, Sarah  
Cooper, Andrew  
Cooper, Dr Beccy  
Cox, Pam  
Craft, Jen  
Crichton, Torcuil

Curtis, Chris  
Daby, Janet  
Dalton, Ashley  
Darlington, Emily  
Davies, Jonathan  
Davies, Paul  
Dean, Josh  
Dearden, Kate  
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh  
Dickson, Jim  
Dixon, Anna  
Dixon, Samantha  
Dodds, rh Anneliese  
Dowd, Peter  
Eagle, Dame Angela  
Eagle, rh Maria  
Efford, Clive  
Egan, Damien  
Elmore, Chris  
Esterson, Bill  
Evans, Chris  
Fahnbulleh, Miatta  
Farnsworth, Linsey  
Fenton-Glynn, Josh  
Fleet, Natalie  
Foody, Emma  
Foxcroft, Vicky  
Foy, Mary Kelly  
Francis, Daniel  
Frith, Mr James  
Furniss, Gill  
Gardiner, Barry  
Gemmell, Alan  
Gill, Preet Kaur  
Gittins, Becky (Proxy vote cast  
by Sir Mark Tami)  
Glindon, Mary  
Goldsborough, Ben  
Gosling, Jodie  
Gould, Georgia  
Grady, John  
Greenwood, Lilian  
Hack, Amanda  
Haigh, rh Louise  
Hamilton, Fabian  
Hamilton, Paulette  
Hardy, Emma  
Hayes, Tom  
Hazelgrove, Claire  
Healey, rh John  
Hendrick, Sir Mark  
Hinchliff, Chris  
Hinder, Jonathan  
Hopkins, Rachel  
Hughes, Claire (Proxy vote  
cast by Sir Mark Tami)  
Hume, Alison (Proxy vote cast  
by Sir Mark Tami)  
Huq, Dr Rupa  
Hussain, Imran  
Ingham, Leigh  
Irons, Natasha  
Jameson, Sally  
Jarvis, Dan  
Jogee, Adam

Johnson, rh Dame Diana  
Jones, rh Darren  
Jones, Sarah  
Josan, Gurinder Singh  
Joseph, Sojan  
Juss, Warinder  
Kane, Mike  
Kaur, Satvir (Proxy vote cast  
by Sir Mark Tami)  
Khan, Naushabah  
Kirkham, Jayne  
Kitchen, Gen  
Kumaran, Uma  
Kyle, rh Peter  
Lamb, Peter  
Lammy, rh Mr David  
Lavery, Ian  
Law, Noah  
Leadbeater, Kim  
Leishman, Brian  
Lewell, Emma  
Lewis, Clive  
Lightwood, Simon  
Long Bailey, Rebecca  
MacAlister, Josh  
Macdonald, Alice (Proxy vote  
cast by Sir Mark Tami)  
Madders, Justin  
Mahmood, rh Shabana  
Martin, Amanda  
Maskell, Rachael  
Mayer, Alex  
McAllister, Douglas  
McCarthy, Kerry  
McCluskey, Martin  
McDonagh, Dame Siobhain  
McDonald, Andy  
McDonald, Chris  
McDonnell, rh John  
McDougall, Blair  
McEvoy, Lola  
McFadden, rh Pat  
McIntyre, Alex  
McKee, Gordon  
McKenna, Kevin  
McKinnell, Catherine  
McNally, Frank  
Minns, Ms Julie  
Mohamed, Abtisam  
Moon, Perran  
Morris, Grahame  
Morris, Joe  
Mullane, Margaret  
Murphy, Luke  
Murray, Chris  
Murray, rh Ian  
Murray, rh James  
Murray, Katrina  
Myer, Luke  
Nandy, rh Lisa  
Nash, Pamela  
Newbury, Josh  
Niblett, Samantha  
Nichols, Charlotte  
Norris, Alex  
Norris, Dan (Proxy vote cast  
by Sir Mark Tami)  
Onn, Melanie  
Opher, Dr Simon  
Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena  
Osamor, Kate  
Osborne, Kate

Osborne, Tristan  
Paffey, Darren  
Pakes, Andrew  
Patrick, Matthew  
Peacock, Stephanie  
Pearce, Jon  
Pennycook, Matthew  
Perkins, Mr Toby  
Phillips, Jess  
Pinto-Duschinsky, David  
Pitcher, Lee  
Pollard, Luke  
Powell, Joe  
Poynton, Gregor  
Prinsley, Peter  
Race, Steve  
Rand, Mr Connor  
Reed, rh Steve  
Reeves, rh Ellie  
Reeves, rh Rachel  
Reid, Joani  
Reynolds, rh Emma  
Reynolds, rh Jonathan  
Rhodes, Martin  
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell  
Rigby, Lucy  
Rimmer, Ms Marie  
Robertson, Dave  
Rushworth, Sam  
Russell, Sarah  
Rutland, Tom  
Ryan, Oliver  
Sackman, Sarah  
Sandher, Dr Jeevun  
Sandher-Jones, Louise  
Sewards, Mark  
Shah, Naz  
Shanker, Baggy  
Shanks, Michael  
Siddiq, Tulip  
Slaughter, Andy  
Slinger, John  
Smith, Jeff  
Smith, Sarah  
Smyth, Karin  
Stainbank, Euan  
Stone, Will  
Strickland, Alan  
Swallow, Peter  
Tami, rh Sir Mark  
Taylor, Rachel  
Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick  
Thompson, Adam  
Tidball, Dr Marie  
Timms, rh Sir Stephen  
Toale, Jessica  
Tomlinson, Dan  
Trickett, Jon  
Tufnell, Henry  
Turmaine, Matt  
Turner, Laurence  
Uppal, Harpreet  
Vaughan, Tony  
Vaz, rh Valerie  
Vince, Chris  
Wakeford, Christian  
Ward, Chris  
Waugh, Paul  
Webb, Chris  
Welsh, Michelle  
West, Catherine  
Western, Matt

Wheeler, Michael  
Whitby, John  
White, Jo  
White, Katie  
Williams, David  
Woodcock, Sean

Yang, Yuan  
Yasin, Mohammad  
Yemm, Steve

**Tellers for the Noes:**  
**Mark Ferguson and**  
**Imogen Walker**

*Question accordingly negatived.*

### New Clause 3

#### IMPACT OF FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE LIMITS (No. 2)

“Within one year beginning on the date on which this Act is passed, and once every year thereafter, the Secretary of State must publish and lay before Parliament a report assessing the impact of the limits set by this Act on—

- (a) gross domestic product (GDP),
- (b) export capacity of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and
- (c) volume of trade between the United Kingdom and the European Union.”—(*Mr Joshua Reynolds.*)

*This new clause would require the Secretary of State to publish an annual report on the impact of the limits set by this Act on GDP, SMEs, and trade between the United Kingdom and the European Union.*

*Brought up, and read the First time.*

*Question put, That the clause be read a Second time.*

*The Committee divided: Ayes 77, Noes 280.*

### Division No. 431]

**[8.32 pm**

#### AYES

Adam, Shockat  
Allister, Jim  
Amos, Gideon  
Anderson, Lee  
Aquarone, Steff  
Babarinde, Josh  
Bennett, Alison  
Berry, Siân  
Blackman, Kirsty  
Brewer, Alex  
Brown-Fuller, Jess  
Campbell, Mr Gregory  
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair  
Chadwick, David  
Chambers, Dr Danny  
Chowns, Dr Ellie  
Coghlan, Chris  
Collins, Victoria  
Dance, Adam  
Davies, Ann  
Denyer, Carla  
Dillon, Mr Lee  
Doogan, Dave  
Dyke, Sarah  
Easton, Alex  
Forster, Mr Will  
George, Andrew  
Gethins, Stephen  
Gibson, Sarah  
Glover, Olly  
Goldman, Marie  
Green, Sarah  
Harding, Monica  
Heylings, Pippa  
Hobhouse, Wera  
Jardine, Christine  
Jarvis, Liz  
Jones, Clive  
Lake, Ben  
Leadbitter, Graham

Lockhart, Carla  
MacCleary, James  
Maguire, Ben  
Maguire, Helen  
Martin, Mike  
Mathew, Brian  
Maynard, Charlie  
Medi, Llinos  
Milne, John  
Moran, Layla  
Morello, Edward  
Morrison, Mr Tom  
Murray, Susan  
O'Hara, Brendan  
Olney, Sarah  
Perteghella, Manuela  
Pinkerton, Dr Al  
Pochin, Sarah  
Ramsay, Adrian  
Reynolds, Mr Joshua  
Robinson, rh Gavin  
Roome, Ian  
Sabine, Anna  
Savage, Dr Roz  
Saville Roberts, rh Liz  
Shannon, Jim  
Slade, Vikki  
Sollom, Ian  
Stone, Jamie  
Sultana, Zarah  
Swann, Robin  
Taylor, Luke  
Voaden, Caroline  
Wilson, rh Sammy  
Wishart, Pete  
Wrigley, Martin  
Young, Claire

**Tellers for the Ayes:**  
**Charlotte Cane and**  
**Tessa Munt**

#### NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)  
Abbott, Jack  
Abrahams, Debbie  
Ahmed, Dr Zubir  
Akehurst, Luke  
Alaba, Mr Bayo  
Alexander, rh Mr Douglas  
Alexander, rh Heidi  
Al-Hassan, Sadik  
Ali, Rushanara  
Ali, Tahir  
Anderson, Callum  
Anderson, Fleur  
Arthur, Dr Scott  
Asato, Jess  
Asser, James  
Athwal, Jas  
Atkinson, Catherine  
Atkinson, Lewis  
Bailey, Mr Calvin  
Bailey, Olivia  
Baines, David  
Baker, Richard  
Ballinger, Alex  
Barker, Paula  
Barron, Lee  
Beavers, Lorraine  
Begum, Apsana  
Bell, Torsten  
Benn, rh Hilary  
Betts, Mr Clive  
Bishop, Matt  
Blake, Olivia  
Blake, Rachel  
Bloore, Chris  
Brackenridge, Sureena  
Brash, Mr Jonathan  
Bryant, Chris  
Buckley, Julia  
Burgon, Richard  
Butler, Dawn  
Byrne, Ian  
Byrne, rh Liam  
Cadbury, Ruth  
Caliskan, Nesil  
Campbell, rh Sir Alan  
Campbell, Juliet  
Campbell-Savours, Markus  
Carden, Dan  
Carling, Sam  
Carns, Al  
Charalambous, Bambos  
Charters, Mr Luke  
Chope, Sir Christopher  
Clark, Feryal  
Coleman, Ben  
Collinge, Lizzi  
Collins, Tom  
Conlon, Liam  
Coombes, Sarah  
Cooper, Andrew  
Cooper, Dr Beccy  
Cox, Pam  
Craft, Jen  
Crichton, Torcuil  
Curtis, Chris  
Daby, Janet  
Dalton, Ashley  
Darlington, Emily

Davies, Jonathan  
Davies, Paul  
Dean, Josh  
Dearden, Kate  
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh  
Dickson, Jim  
Dixon, Anna  
Dixon, Samantha  
Dodds, rh Anneliese  
Dowd, Peter  
Eagle, Dame Angela  
Eagle, rh Maria  
Efford, Clive  
Egan, Damien  
Elmore, Chris  
Esterson, Bill  
Evans, Chris  
Fahnbulleh, Miatta  
Falconer, Mr Hamish  
Farnsworth, Linsey  
Fenton-Glynn, Josh  
Fleet, Natalie  
Foody, Emma  
Fookes, Catherine  
Foxcroft, Vicky  
Foy, Mary Kelly  
Francis, Daniel  
Frith, Mr James  
Furniss, Gill  
Gardiner, Barry  
Gemmell, Alan  
Gill, Preet Kaur  
Gittins, Becky (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami*)  
Glindon, Mary  
Goldsborough, Ben  
Gosling, Jodie  
Gould, Georgia  
Grady, John  
Greenwood, Lilian  
Hack, Amanda  
Haigh, rh Louise  
Hamilton, Fabian  
Hamilton, Paulette  
Hardy, Emma  
Hayes, Tom  
Hazelgrove, Claire  
Healey, rh John  
Hendrick, Sir Mark  
Hinchliff, Chris  
Hinder, Jonathan  
Hopkins, Rachel  
Hughes, Claire (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami*)  
Hume, Alison (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami*)  
Huq, Dr Rupa  
Hussain, Imran  
Ingham, Leigh  
Irons, Natasha  
Jameson, Sally  
Jarvis, Dan  
Jogee, Adam  
Johnson, rh Dame Diana  
Jones, rh Darren  
Jones, Ruth  
Jones, Sarah  
Josan, Gurinder Singh  
Joseph, Sojan  
Juss, Warinder  
Kane, Mike

Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami*)  
 Khan, Naushabah  
 Kinnock, Stephen  
 Kirkham, Jayne  
 Kitchen, Gen  
 Kumaran, Uma  
 Kyle, rh Peter  
 Lamb, Peter  
 Lammy, rh Mr David  
 Lavery, Ian  
 Law, Noah  
 Leadbeater, Kim  
 Leishman, Brian  
 Lewell, Emma  
 Lewis, Clive  
 Lightwood, Simon  
 Long Bailey, Rebecca  
 MacAlister, Josh  
 Macdonald, Alice (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami*)  
 Madders, Justin  
 Mahmood, rh Shabana  
 Martin, Amanda  
 Maskell, Rachael  
 Mayer, Alex  
 McAllister, Douglas  
 McCarthy, Kerry  
 McCluskey, Martin  
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain  
 McDonald, Andy  
 McDonald, Chris  
 McDonnell, rh John  
 McDougall, Blair  
 McEvoy, Lola  
 McFadden, rh Pat  
 McIntyre, Alex  
 McKee, Gordon  
 McKenna, Kevin  
 McKinnell, Catherine  
 McNally, Frank  
 Minns, Ms Julie  
 Mohamed, Abtisam  
 Moon, Perran  
 Morden, Jessica  
 Morris, Grahame  
 Morris, Joe  
 Mullane, Margaret  
 Murphy, Luke  
 Murray, Chris  
 Murray, rh Ian  
 Murray, rh James  
 Murray, Katrina  
 Myer, Luke  
 Nandy, rh Lisa  
 Nash, Pamela  
 Newbury, Josh  
 Niblett, Samantha  
 Nichols, Charlotte  
 Norris, Alex  
 Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami*)  
 Onn, Melanie  
 Opher, Dr Simon  
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena  
 Osamor, Kate  
 Osborne, Kate  
 Osborne, Tristan  
 Paffey, Darren  
 Pakes, Andrew  
 Patrick, Matthew  
 Peacock, Stephanie

Pearce, Jon  
 Pennycook, Matthew  
 Perkins, Mr Toby  
 Phillips, Jess  
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David  
 Pitcher, Lee  
 Pollard, Luke  
 Powell, Joe  
 Poynton, Gregor  
 Prinsley, Peter  
 Race, Steve  
 Rand, Mr Connor  
 Reed, rh Steve  
 Reeves, rh Ellie  
 Reeves, rh Rachel  
 Reid, Joani  
 Reynolds, rh Emma  
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan  
 Rhodes, Martin  
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell  
 Rigby, Lucy  
 Rimmer, Ms Marie  
 Robertson, Dave  
 Rushworth, Sam  
 Russell, Sarah  
 Rutland, Tom  
 Ryan, Oliver  
 Sackman, Sarah  
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun  
 Sandher-Jones, Louise  
 Sowards, Mark  
 Shah, Naz  
 Shanker, Baggy  
 Shanks, Michael  
 Siddiq, Tulip  
 Slaughter, Andy  
 Slinger, John  
 Smith, Jeff  
 Smith, Sarah  
 Smyth, Karin  
 Stainbank, Euan  
 Stone, Will  
 Strickland, Alan  
 Swallow, Peter  
 Tami, rh Sir Mark  
 Taylor, Rachel  
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick  
 Thompson, Adam  
 Tidball, Dr Marie  
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen  
 Toale, Jessica  
 Tomlinson, Dan  
 Trickett, Jon  
 Tufnell, Henry  
 Turmaine, Matt  
 Turner, Laurence  
 Uppal, Harpreet  
 Vaughan, Tony  
 Vaz, rh Valerie  
 Vince, Chris  
 Wakeford, Christian  
 Ward, Chris  
 Waugh, Paul  
 Webb, Chris  
 Welsh, Michelle  
 West, Catherine  
 Western, Matt  
 Wheeler, Michael  
 Whitby, John  
 White, Jo  
 White, Katie  
 Williams, David

Woodcock, Sean  
 Yang, Yuan  
 Yasin, Mohammad  
 Yemm, Steve

**Tellers for the Noes:**  
 Mark Ferguson and  
 Imogen Walker

*Question accordingly negated.*

*The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair.*

*Bill reported, without amendment.*

*Third Reading*

8.43 pm

**Chris Bryant:** I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

I thank all colleagues for their engagement on the Bill. As you will know, Madam Deputy Speaker, Voltaire said, “A small book is a great evil”, but this small Bill will do a great deal of good. It will ensure that the Government can continue to support British industry and British exporters.

Some £14.5 billion of UK Export Finance support last year is supporting up to 70,000 jobs, including across key industrial sectors such as clean energy, advanced manufacturing, life sciences and automotives. Through existing provisions in the Industrial Development Act 1982, the British Business Bank’s northern powerhouse investment fund II has directly invested £115 million into over 300 small businesses. Similarly in the midlands, the midlands engine investment fund II has launched a £400 million fund to drive sustainable economic growth by supporting innovation and creating local opportunity for new and growing businesses.

The Bill ensures that the Government can continue their investment into the British businesses that are the backbone of this economy, and I would like to thank the officials in my Department, in particular James Copeland, Cal Stewart, Ellie Buck and Andrew Fernandes, and of course the whole of my private office, who have helped me take it to this point. In tandem with our new trade strategy, it will ensure that more businesses than ever before will be empowered to export, with the financial firepower of Government behind them. In combination with the modern industrial strategy, this Government have ensured that the UK remains one of the strongest, most attractive and innovative economies in the world, both now and in the future, so it is with great pleasure that I commend the Bill to the House.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes):** I call the shadow Minister.

8.45 pm

**Dame Harriett Baldwin:** I sense that this is an occasion when the House would appreciate it if I were quite brief, but I am grateful to set out our support for the principles of the Bill, and we will not oppose it on Third Reading. The Bill raises the statutory limits in a way that will enable the Government to provide UK industry with additional support, and as His Majesty’s official Opposition we of course want exports to grow, investment to increase and UK firms to thrive. We also believe that public money must be used responsibly, transparently and only where it is genuinely needed, which is why we regret that the Government opposed our amendments this evening.

The Government did not accept our amendments, but we will continue to press for greater transparency around these large sums and expenditure of public money. We will press for stronger safeguards and a more coherent industrial strategy, particularly in the steel sector. We want British businesses to succeed, and exporters to have the support they need. We want public money to be used wisely and in the national interest, so while we will not oppose the Bill today, we will continue to scrutinise closely the work of the Department.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

8.46 pm

**Mr Joshua Reynolds:** Britain is a trading nation. When our businesses win contracts abroad, they create jobs, raise wages and generate the tax revenues that are needed to fund our public services. Expanding UK Export Finance's capacity to £160 billion, and raising the limit for industry development to £20 billion, sends a clear signal that we are open for growth and want our exporters to compete globally. That matters for advanced manufacturing, life sciences, clean technology, and the thousands of smaller firms across every constituency that have the ambition to sell to the world. We support the Bill because that ambition deserves to be backed.

I am disappointed that the Government could not support our amendments. Today we were asked to approve a near doubling of UKEF's statutory commitment limit without the mechanisms that we feel are required to verify whether that is working properly. UK Export Finance supported 667 businesses last year, and we are concerned that its eligibility criteria lock out firms that are trying to break into exporting for the first time. That remains unchanged. We are also concerned, of course, that the structural barriers that drive former exporters away from our largest export market, the European Union, remain unaddressed. We support the Bill because it is important that we move forward in supporting businesses that are exporting, but we are concerned that we have missed an opportunity to help support British SMEs that want to start exporting, or that used to export to the European Union but cannot now. We will monitor the Bill closely to ensure that it works in practice for all those local SMEs.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.*

## Universal Credit (Removal of Two Child Limit) Bill

*Considered in Committee*

[CAROLINE NOKES *in the Chair*]

### Clause 1

REMOVAL OF TWO CHILD LIMIT: GB

*Question proposed,* That the clause stand part of the Bill.

**The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Caroline Nokes):** With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Clauses 2 and 3 stand part.

New clause 1—*Removal of two child limit: report on effects on children in households subject to the benefit cap—*

“(1) The Secretary of State must, within six months of the passing of this Act, lay before Parliament an impact assessment of the effects of this Act on households and children.

(2) The assessment under subsection (1) must include an estimate of the total number of households, and the number of households in poverty, which will not receive—

(a) an overall increase in benefit support from the abolition of the two child limit from April 2026 due to being subject to the overall benefit cap, and

(b) the full potential increase in benefit support they would have been entitled to from the abolition of the two child limit from April 2026, but for the fact that they became subject to the overall benefit cap following any increase provided through the abolition of the two child limit, and the assessment must include the total number of children in such households, and the impact on the number of such households in poverty.

(3) The estimates made under subsection (2) must include analysis at the following levels—

- (a) country,
- (b) county,
- (c) local authority, and
- (d) parliamentary constituency.”

*This new clause would require the Secretary of State to undertake an assessment of the effects of the Act on households and children, including the number who will either not receive an increase in benefit support, or the full potential increase, because they are subject to the benefit cap.*

New clause 2—*Report on the effects on households with a disabled family member—*

“(1) The Secretary of State must, within 12 months of the passing of this Act, lay before Parliament an impact assessment of the effects of this Act on the number of households in poverty with more than two children that have at least one disabled family member.

(2) The assessment under subsection (1) must also consider—

(a) the cumulative impact of changes to universal credit since July 2024 on households in poverty that have at least one disabled family member, and who are affected by this Act, and

(b) any changes in the standard of living for households with—

(i) three or more children, and

(ii) at least one person in receipt of the Universal Credit health element, arising from implementation of this Act.”

*This new clause would require the Secretary of State to publish an impact assessment of the effects of the Act on households in poverty that have at least one disabled family member.*

New clause 3—*Review of the impact of the Act on child poverty, destitution, and wider social and economic outcomes—*

“(1) The Secretary of State must, within 12 months of this Act coming into force, review the effect of this Act on—

- (a) overall levels of child poverty in the UK;
- (b) levels of destitution and deep poverty among households with children;
- (c) households in receipt of Universal Credit which include children;
- (d) educational outcomes for children in households affected by poverty;
- (e) physical and mental health outcomes for children in households affected by poverty; and
- (f) longer-term impacts on economic participation, workforce skills, and demand on health and welfare services arising from child poverty and destitution.

(2) The Secretary of State must lay before Parliament a report setting out the conclusions of the review.”

*This new clause would require the Secretary of State to undertake a review of the effects of the Act on child poverty, destitution, and wider social and economic outcomes.*

**New clause 4—Assessment of the impact of the Act on child poverty—**

“(1) The Secretary of State must, within 6 months of the passing of this Act, undertake an assessment of the effects of this Act on children and child poverty.

(2) The assessment under subsection (1) must consider households with three or more children which are subject to, or as a result of this Act become subject to, the benefit cap.

(3) The assessment must estimate the annual cost to the Exchequer of—

- (a) implementation of this Act, and
- (b) implementation of this Act if households were not subject to the benefits cap.

(4) The Secretary of State must consult the following organisations in undertaking the assessment—

- (a) Child Poverty Action Group,
- (b) End Child Poverty Coalition,
- (c) Save the Children UK,
- (d) The Children’s Society,
- (e) Barnado’s UK,
- (f) Action for Children,
- (g) Joseph Rowntree Foundation, and
- (h) any other organisation that he deems appropriate.

(5) The Secretary of State must lay before both Houses of Parliament a copy of the assessment.”

*This new clause would require the Secretary of State to undertake an assessment of the effects of this Act on children and child poverty in consultation with a number of relevant specialist organisations and also assess the cost of removing the cap.*

8.49 pm

**The Minister for Social Security and Disability (Sir Stephen Timms):** It is a privilege to bring this Bill back before the House. This Government believe that everybody should have opportunity in life: opportunity to achieve their potential and their ambitions, whatever their background. However, at the moment too many children are held back by the scourge of poverty, which affects their wellbeing, how well they do at school and their prospects in their adult working lives as well. No child should have to face lifelong consequences like those, and neither should the country have to bear the huge cost of so much wasted talent and potential.

Lifting the two-child limit in universal credit is the single most cost effective lever that we can pull to reduce substantially the number of children growing up in poverty. In doing so, we are helping hundreds of thousands of children to live better lives, supporting

their families and investing in their future success. It is this Government’s mission to break down barriers to opportunity, to change the course of children’s lives for the better and to build a more hopeful future. The Bill makes a big contribution, delivering more security, more opportunity and more respect for families and communities across the UK.

Clause 1 removes the universal credit two-child limit in Great Britain from April this year. By doing so, we will lift 450,000 children out of poverty. That means that for assessment periods starting on or after 6 April, the universal credit child element will be included for all children in the household, increasing the amount of social security support available to families on universal credit with three or more children. All the associated exceptions will be removed at the same time, including the notorious rape clause.

**Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP):** Specifically on that point, does the Department have good enough data on subsequent children? Have people provided the information that the Department needs to ensure that the extra payments can be made timeously?

**Sir Stephen Timms:** We are confident that we can do that from April onwards. Reinstating support for all children in universal credit is a key step to tackling the structural drivers of child poverty. This Bill, combined with other measures in our child poverty strategy, will lift over half a million children out of poverty.

Clause 2 removes the two-child limit from universal credit in Northern Ireland from April. We are including Northern Ireland in the Bill at the request of the Northern Ireland Executive, who are bringing forward a legislative consent motion in the usual way. I am delighted to see the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) in his place. On Second Reading, he made the point that 50,000 children in Northern Ireland will be lifted out of child poverty. He rightly said:

“If anyone is against that, there is something wrong with them.”—[*Official Report*, 3 February 2026; Vol. 780, c. 168.]

I agree with him on that point and I am grateful to him for making it.

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** I very much welcome what the Government are bringing forward. It is good news and, as the Minister says, if anyone is against that, there is certainly something wrong with them. I cannot see how the measure will not be welcomed. The fertility rate in Northern Ireland is 1.71 children per woman, but for the population level to be stable it needs to be 2.1 children per woman. Does the right hon. Gentleman think that the measures in the Bill will encourage more people to have children? If they do, then that is good news as well.

**Sir Stephen Timms:** I am not sure what the effect will be. It is often said that a Labour Government has the effect of increasing the birth rate, but whether that will prove to be the case this time, I do not know.

Child poverty is a big challenge. Reducing it over the next 10 years will require commitment and collaboration across all four nations. The strategy, including removing the two-child limit, builds on plans under way across Government and devolved Governments. We will continue

to collaborate with devolved Governments on the issue, particularly through the implementation phase that will now follow.

Clause 3 sets out the territorial extent of the Bill, the commencement dates for each of the sections, delegated powers and the short title of the Act.

The Government recognise the consequences of child poverty and the damage that it does to a child's life chances. In the poorest 10% of areas, babies are twice as likely to die before they turn one as those in the wealthiest 10% of areas. Poorer children are more likely to have mental health difficulties by the age of 11, to be unemployed later and to earn less as adults. We estimate that the Bill will increase the universal credit award for 560,000 families, who will gain on average £5,310 per year. That is a much-needed change from the choices of the previous Government—they chose austerity, and children paid the price. Tackling child poverty is an investment in our economy and a downpayment on Britain's future.

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Before the House are four new clauses to the legislation. They set out a pathway through which we can generate data, particularly around the welfare cap, which we know holds back 141,000 children. In the assessments that the Government make, will the Minister draw out particularly the impact of the welfare cap on those children? Will he look to remove it to ensure that those children are not held back in poverty?

**Sir Stephen Timms**: I am sure that we will turn to the points that my hon. Friend makes in a few moments, but I reassure her that we will undertake a thorough evaluation of the impacts of the strategy. We will publish regular updates, and I think she will find there the information that she is interested in.

We cannot leave millions of children to succumb to the damaging impacts of poverty. The Government want instead to invest in children and in Britain's future.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes)**: I call the shadow Minister.

**Rebecca Smith** (South West Devon) (Con): I will speak in part to amendments 1 and 2, although we will not vote on them this evening. Essentially, I am speaking because we do not believe that scrapping the two-child limit and lifting it in this way is the way to tackle child poverty.

When the Conservatives introduced the two-child limit in 2017, we did so for one simple reason: fairness. We believed then, as we do now, that people on benefits should face the same financial choices about having children as those supporting themselves solely through work. Nine years later, we stand by that principle.

The welfare state should be a safety net for people in genuine need, yet too many people feel that the welfare system has drifted from its original purpose. They see a system that rewards dependency while working families and individuals shoulder the tax burden. The two-child limit is a way of saying that work should pay, that taking responsibility should matter and that the system should stand with those who pull their weight.

**Josh Fenton-Glynn** (Calder Valley) (Lab): I am excited to hear that the hon. Member thinks work should pay. Can she tell us why, under the last Government, we went

from one in three children in poverty having a parent in work to two in three children in poverty having a parent in work?

**Rebecca Smith**: We know that poverty decreased under the last Government; I will make some progress.

True compassion for families in poverty means offering sustainable solutions, not just sticking plasters. We need to tackle the root causes of poverty, rather than masking the symptoms. That means dealing with structural issues that damage children's life chances, rather than simply handing out more cash to families.

It is worth noting that the two-child limit has had no significant negative effects on school readiness for third and subsequent children in England. School readiness is the cornerstone metric of the Government's opportunity mission. Labour and other opponents may criticise the cap for all sorts of reasons, but scrapping it will not be a cost-effective way of improving children's educational development.

In terms of holistic solutions, we know that work is the single most transformative route out of poverty. Work provides stability, self-respect and the crucial stepping stones to a better future. We should be doing everything we can to ensure that families on universal credit can access meaningful employment. As I have said before, children in long-term workless households are four times more likely to be materially deprived, and they are 10% more likely to end up workless themselves.

When we were in government, Conservatives oversaw a consistent reduction in the number of children in workless households, yet under Labour that number has reached a nine-year high: there are now 1.2 million children living in homes where no parent has worked for over a year. Without a working parent at home, children miss out on seeing the rhythms and rewards of working life—the morning alarm, the daily routine, the pride of earning a wage and the discipline of saving up for things that matter. This Government seem bent on disincentivising work and destroying jobs.

9 pm

Many of the jobs disappearing under Labour's disastrous Employment Rights Act 2025 are the very jobs most accessible to people on universal credit. In the hospitality sector alone, 111,000 jobs were lost between the 2024 and 2025 Budgets, and construction trades have also been badly hit. Last week, I was contacted by one of my constituents, a mother with an autistic 16-year-old son. He is desperate to find a carpentry apprenticeship, and has rung as many employers in Plymouth as he can, but not a single company can afford to take him on. In fact, according to his mum, whereas 20 suitable apprenticeships were available last year, only three have been on offer this year.

Time and time again, small businesses tell me that they are struggling with Labour's increased employment costs—they simply cannot afford the financial burden and the time commitment required to train younger apprentices. Britain's youth unemployment rate is now higher than Europe's for the first time since records began. Some 150,000 more young people are out of work now than when Labour took office, and in total, 729,000 16 to 24-year-olds are unemployed.

True compassion means creating a system that is fair to working families, especially those whose incomes are only just above the threshold for universal credit. Three weeks ago in this place, I mentioned a self-employed mother who encapsulates this issue of fairness. She confided in me that she and her husband are seriously considering whether they can afford to get pregnant again. She is one of many working mums who face a heart-wrenching dilemma: fulfil her longing to have another baby and lose her earnings as a result, or do what is affordable and risk a lifetime of regret for the child she never had.

To working parents across the country, particularly the self-employed, scrapping the cap sends entirely the wrong message. They are making difficult choices about family size because the state is not going to swoop in and cover the cost. Can we really look working parents in the eye and say that we voted for a system that requires them to make tough decisions while absolving families on benefits from the same dilemmas?

**Kirsty Blackman:** Is the hon. Lady aware of what percentage of people currently subject to the two-child cap are in work? Is she aware that 22% of people on universal credit earn more money than the personal allowance and therefore pay income tax?

**Rebecca Smith:** I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention, which provides me with a great opportunity to say something that I realised again while preparing for this debate. We know that lots of working people claim universal credit, but what we do not know is how many hours those people work, which would enable us to ascertain how many of them are full-time workers and how many are part-time workers. Of course, if they are full-time workers, there is one argument to be made, but if—as I would assume—the vast majority are part-time workers, we need to be encouraging them to work more hours. Later in my speech, I am going to get to a point where this is a problem, given all the other passported benefits that they get once they are entitled to universal credit.

How can it be fair to expect working parents to subsidise other families' decisions that lie beyond their own financial reach? We also must not forget the single people whose household overheads are higher than in dual-income households. In 2024, there were 8.4 million people living alone in the UK—nearly 30% of households. They, too, should not be saddled with the extra tax burden that scrapping the two-child limit will inevitably create.

This Labour Government prefer handouts to hard choices. Giving away cash will always be more popular than exercising fiscal responsibility—the Back Benchers like it, and the left-wing think-tanks like it. The families who will get thousands more pounds every year like it, and who can blame them? Spending other people's money is an easy way for the Government to feel good about themselves, but that money must come from somewhere. This Government are only pretending that they can afford to scrap the cap; originally, they said that doing so was unaffordable. That is true—the cost of this policy will be about £3.5 billion—but instead of sticking to his guns, our Prime Minister has capitulated to his Back Benchers. It requires backbone to bring the welfare budget under control, and backbone is exactly what Labour lacks.

In contrast, previous Conservative Governments did indeed control spending; until the pandemic, spending on working-age welfare fell in real terms. That is why we have committed to save £23 billion. We will crack down on the abuse of Motability, we will stop handing out benefits to foreign nationals—because citizenship should mean something—and we will stop giving benefits to people with low-level mental health problems, to ensure that we can target support to the people who need it most.

Under Labour, the overall benefits bill continues to balloon. By the end of this decade, health and disability benefits alone are set to reach £100 billion—I did read that right. Scrapping the cap is fiscally irresponsible and Labour knows it. This Bill will only increase the tax burden on hard-working men and women whose household budgets are already being stretched to the limit.

**Jim Shannon:** I feel I have to disagree with the hon. Lady, for a very simple reason. The Minister has mentioned my comment on Second Reading that 50,000 children will be lifted out of poverty in Northern Ireland, and some 13,000 families will have a better standard of living. The mark of any society is that whenever those who are less well off need help, we must help them. That is why I think the Government are doing the right thing: they are helping to lift people out of poverty, and what is wrong with that?

**Rebecca Smith:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. Of course how we care for the most vulnerable is the mark of our society, but as Conservatives we do not believe that it is simply about trying to lift them up by giving them extra cash. All we are doing is changing the relative poverty measure; we are not suddenly lifting all these people out of poverty because we are giving them more money. We do not know what they are going to spend that money on. What we need to do is spend the money not on sticking plasters, but on putting things in place that actually have a systemic impact. We need to bring people from long-term poverty into a long-term position in which they can afford what they need.

Inflation has soared to nearly twice as high a level as when this Government entered office. Food prices are rising. Utility bills are rising. Even the cost of relaxing at the pub with a beer is rising. We cannot lift children out of poverty by making the whole country poorer, as my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) has argued so persuasively. When inflation rises, spending power falls. The money people earn buys less, because each pound is worth less than before; indeed, the money people receive on benefits is also worth less because of inflation. Families feel it at the checkout, at the petrol station and with every bill that drops through the door.

Inflation not only squeezes families' budgets, but narrows their choices. With the cost of everyday essentials continuing to climb, many working families are being forced to delay or even abandon plans for another child. Scrapping the two-child cap gives families on benefits a choice that many working households can no longer dream of: the ability to grow their family without facing financial choices.

This unfairness erodes trust in our social contract. The social contract is an implicit agreement between citizens and the state that gives the state its legitimacy.

People work and pay their taxes; in return, they trust the state to step in if they fall on hard times. They trust the state to spend their taxes responsibly on their behalf, but the welfare system has become totally lopsided. Over half the households in this country now receive more from the state than they pay into it. Taxpayers are supporting a system larger than themselves. Scrapping the two-child limit will further exacerbate the imbalance.

The problem does not stop there. There is an entire shadow system working alongside universal credit. As I have mentioned, passported benefits are costing the taxpayer £10 billion every single year. They include healthy food cards, discounted broadband and free prescriptions. Together, they distort work incentives, leading to a cliff-edge denial of entitlements when a claimant comes off universal credit. Many parents want to work, but are better off remaining on benefits once they factor in their loss of eligibility for those extra entitlements. Yet again, they have been let down by a system that should be supporting them into work, not trapping them on benefits.

**Debbie Abrahams** (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Can the shadow Minister remind the Committee of the weekly rate for the standard UC allowance?

**Rebecca Smith:** I am not particularly well today, so the right hon. Lady will forgive me if my memory is foggier than normal. That is why I am wearing my glasses, and it is why I am struggling not to cough throughout this debate. I am happy to have a conversation with her afterwards, but testing me on those sorts of things at this particular time is perhaps not the kindest thing to do.

The two-child limit is about basic fairness to working parents—the very people whose taxes fund our welfare system. They are already making tough decisions about the size of their own families, and we cannot exempt people on benefits from those hard choices. Scrapping the cap is a direct insult to the working families on whom this country relies.

The Government should remember the case that they once made for keeping the cap. When the Prime Minister suspended seven of his own MPs in 2024 for voting to scrap it, he did so on the basis that the policy was simply too expensive. He has now bowed to pressure from his Back Benchers, but nothing has changed—it is still unaffordable. Why are this Government preparing to spend billions by removing the two-child limit, when they cannot even get a grip on rising unemployment? We should be expanding real routes into work, not deepening incentives to remain on benefits.

**Rebecca Long Bailey** (Salford) (Lab): I speak in support of new clause 4, tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), me and others, and I will try to be as brief as I can. Scrapping the two-child limit in full remains the single most impactful step we can take to reduce child poverty, and will lift 450,000 children out of poverty by 2030. When combined with other measures in the child poverty strategy, more than 550,000 children will be lifted out of poverty by the end of the decade.

Some Members of this House have said, “How can the country justify this multibillion-pound spend?” It is around £3 billion a year, but child poverty costs the UK

economy £39 billion annually—more than 10 times as much. That £39 billion reflects poorer health, lower educational attainment, increased pressure on public services and lost economic potential. Investing £3 billion to reduce a £39 billion problem is not reckless spending; it is a highly targeted, cost-effective investment with long-term returns. It is preventive policy at its very best.

Other Members have asked why taxpayers should support larger families. Well, the honest truth is that only a very small number of families have more than four children, and almost all are working hard to provide for them. The two-child limit has had no measurable impact on family planning and has not influenced fertility rates; it simply punishes children who are already here. Every child, regardless of birth order, deserves enough food, a safe home and a fair start in life. When children are supported to thrive, they do better in school, stay healthier and contribute more fully as adults, and that benefits all of us.

Those who argue that support should not go to families out of work should remember that six in 10 children affected by the two-child limit live in households where at least one parent works, and those families are taxpayers too. As my mum says, there but for the grace of God go I. A crisis can happen in an instant at any moment, and bereavement, illness, redundancy or family breakdown can push any household into temporary reliance on universal credit. A humane and flexible social security system exists to provide stability in those moments of crisis.

I urge all Members to support the passage of the Bill today, but it must be just the start and we must go further. Alongside scrapping the two-child limit, we have to address the wider benefit cap, which was introduced in 2013. It has bored down on the backs of many families like a rucksack full of lead. Organisations including the Child Poverty Action Group, the End Child Poverty Coalition, Save the Children UK, the Children's Society, Barnardo's, Action for Children and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation have all highlighted the damaging impact of the overall cap. It places arbitrary ceilings on support, regardless of rent levels, local costs or family size. It disproportionately affects single parents—overwhelmingly women—and families in high-cost areas. It drives rent arrears, temporary accommodation and homelessness, and the evidence is clear that it does not meaningfully increase employment; it increases hardship.

If we are serious about tackling structural poverty, we cannot remove one barrier while leaving another firmly in place. Lifting the overall benefit cap would complement the removal of the two-child limit, ensuring that the gains we make today are not clawed back through arbitrary ceilings that fail to reflect real living costs. I applaud the Government for scrapping the two-child cap, which is the right thing to do, but I hope that the Minister can give us some assurances that his next step will be to look at lifting the benefit cap.

**The Second Deputy Chairman:** I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

9.15 pm

**Charlie Maynard** (Witney) (LD): It has been a very painful path to get to this point, but I simply want to welcome what the Government are bringing in. Reversing

[Charlie Maynard]

the decision on the two-child limit will lift 540,000 children out of absolute poverty, and it is unquestionably the right thing to do—certainly for those children and for their families, but also for our economy, our public services and our society as a whole. Children growing up in poverty face worse educational outcomes, poorer physical and mental health, and fewer opportunities in adulthood. As the hon. Member for Salford (Rebecca Long Bailey) pointed out, this has a huge economic cost on our society, and investing a relatively small amount now for great gains later is very sensible.

This change will be worth up to £5,000 per year for each of the more than 500 families in my constituency who have been impacted by the cap. I have had heartbreaking emails from and surgeries with constituents impacted by this cap, as I am sure we all have. They have had to skip meals to ensure their children do not go without, because each month their money simply does not stretch far enough. Our food banks help enormously, but relying on them is obviously not the solution.

Too many children and families have been trapped in poverty because of the previous decision to impose the cap and this Government's stubborn decision to keep it until now. I wish this change had happened a year ago, which would have saved a lot of trouble and stress for families and children involved, as well as for a few Members in this Chamber. I commend the Labour MPs who lost the Whip for fighting to end this policy for their courage. I am sure that their voices and actions have played a large part in the Government now bringing forward this Bill.

However, the Bill is very narrow in scope, and we should recognise that it is only one step towards tackling child poverty. There is much more we need to do, as highlighted by new clause 3, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Steve Darling). Ministers will no doubt have seen the report published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation that, while welcoming the decision to lift the cap, warned that progress on tackling child poverty as a result of removing the two-child benefit cap is likely to stall after April—two months away—unless it is supported by further follow-up measures. The headline from that report was that the number of people living in very deep poverty is at the highest level in more than 30 years, based on 2023-24 figures.

The Government must now make it an absolute priority to address that, which is why we are calling on them to look at the much wider issues of overall levels of child poverty, destitution and deep poverty among households with children, as well as at educational outcomes and physical and mental health outcomes for children in households affected by poverty. They need to thoroughly assess those a year after the passage of this Bill and report back to the House on its impact.

**Debbie Abrahams:** Is the hon. Member aware of the tackling child poverty strategy and the inquiry by the Education Committee and Work and Pensions Committee looking at just that, as well as at the data the Education Secretary published before Christmas?

**Charlie Maynard:** Yes, I am. I congratulate the Chair and members of the Work and Pensions Committee on doing all that good work; many thanks to them.

Assessing the wider issues may encourage the Government to take steps beyond this welcome but narrow Bill to support children and their families who are struggling to get by from week to week. Those include auto-enrolment of all those eligible for free school meals, so that children are automatically considered eligible when their parents apply for relevant benefits or financial support, and giving people the ability to juggle caring responsibilities alongside work without falling into hardship by increasing the value of carer benefits, particularly for those on low incomes.

**Rachael Maskell:** There could be no greater cause for a Government than to lift children out of poverty, which is why I very much welcome the removal of the two-child limit. However, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has reported that 141,000 children will not see the full benefit of the change and 50,000 children—the poorest of our children—will get no benefit whatsoever because of the benefit cap. We must therefore examine the impact of the benefit cap on these families and how it is holding those children back in poverty.

We must strain every sinew to address poverty, looking at issues such as the sanctions in the welfare system; the spare room subsidy, which the Government championed in the bedroom tax campaign; and many more. We know that the impact of growing up in poverty, especially on disabled children, results in a greater cost to the state than were their poverty and destitution to be addressed.

Poverty is a source of many adverse childhood experiences, causing multiple disadvantages to children and changing their life trajectories. My work looking into the intersection of child poverty and the 1,001 critical days shows the causal link. When I recently met with a director of midwifery and discussed poor maternal outcomes, she impressed on me how addressing the multiple indices for which poverty is at the root is the most significant step we could take.

Low birth rate, domestic violence, substance abuse and intergenerational disadvantage lead to setting a baby, a child and then an adult on to a negative trajectory. When it comes to lifting children out of poverty, we have to look at what is currently holding 4.5 million children in poverty—2 million in deep poverty and 1 million in destitution. The steps that the Government have made are to be celebrated, but there is much more to do.

Last week, I had the privilege of launching Kate Pickett's new book "The Good Society", so I have spent the last couple of weeks engrossed in statistics and research on the impact of poverty on our society, its causes and the solutions. If the Minister has not read it yet, I suggest he makes it his priority. I describe the book as a manifesto because I believe it echoes our values and provides the evidence base that the Minister needs regarding why holding children down in poverty is a moral ill, when the evidence says that removing the cap will save the Government substantially, and lead to better outcomes for those children in health, education and employment, in the justice system and in society.

The Government said that they were going to invest in a decade of renewal and so would reap the benefits within two terms of office were they to remove the benefit cap. The four new clauses before us call for an assessment, which the Government must be keen to make. If we do not, academics will drive out the data and present it to us.

Conservative Members are wrong on the evidence base. We need to look at the number of children who have been pushed into poverty over the last 14 years. Life expectancy in our developed country is now ranked 24th out of 38 in the OECD, and our infant mortality is now ranked at 29th. There is a causal link. Whether it is health outcomes, educational outcomes, the impact on families, or the justice system, the roots of the issues can be traced back to poverty in childhood. If we are serious about cutting the social security cost or the prison population cost to the Exchequer, our only path is to invest in ending child poverty and taking our ambition beyond that of the child poverty strategy launched by our Government.

The evidence from York, where we have introduced free school meals, is that lifting children out of poverty has significantly enhanced their health and education outcomes.

**Rebecca Smith:** Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Rachael Maskell:** I am going to continue.

Risks including exploitation can be addressed if we put the right security around a child, so we must move all children out of poverty. A strong correlation exists between children in the justice system and poverty, with over half of children in secure accommodation being eligible for free school meals.

The evidence set out in “The Good Society” is powerful regarding why we need to lift children out of poverty. While we are rightly grateful for the steps that have been made, we have more to do. We know that 30% of disabled people live in poverty, and the risk of deep poverty is 60% higher in families with a disabled person. It is right, therefore, that in new clause 2 we seek to find deeper evidence. One reason to look at the benefit cap is that in my constituency we have among the highest costs of living in the country. The cost of housing is holding back families, as they do not have the resources to pay for the basics for their children. That is why I have worked with Citizens Advice in York, and said that I would raise these issues with the Minister.

As Pickett and Wilkinson point out in “The Spirit Level”, inequality is the root of each strand of social disadvantage, with the UK second worst in the world. Successive works of academics leading to two reports by Sir Michael Marmot have shown the impact on health outcomes, and whether in education, justice, housing or welfare, or indeed having any agency at all, we have a social and moral imperative to end the inequalities that widened following the 2008 economic crash.

I call on the Minister to look specifically at the benefit cap and to move those children forward and lift them out of poverty. We know that if we can turn the tables on their life outcomes, that can make such a significant difference.

If we are serious about our society gaining from the economic and social advantage of ending child poverty, we must look further, with a minimum income guarantee as a next step. We must also seriously consider a universal basic income so that no child experiences the deep and pernicious poverty that this place has for far too long held them in, suppressing their life chances and causing such harm.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Caroline Nokes):** Order. I remind Members to speak specifically to the amendments.

**Siân Berry** (Brighton Pavilion) (Green): The Government should have brought this Bill forward as soon as they were elected 19 months ago, but they failed to do so. They could have listened to the families and children—with more than 200,000 children affected—enduring the overall benefit cap before making their final plans, but they failed to do so. Ministers still could have listened to the many hon. Members, including myself, who said on Second Reading that the policy was too narrow. They could have widened the scope of the Bill, but they failed to do so. The Bill is not wrong, but it fails to do right by far too many children.

I speak in support of new clause 1, which has wide cross-party support. It would mandate a full assessment within six months of the families left in poverty by the failure of the Government to tackle the overall benefit cap, showing its impact on each of our constituencies and the families we represent. We need to know who is left out from the help provided in this Bill, including those who are left in poverty.

We also need to know the wider impacts as the change takes hold. That includes the removal of exemptions, because this Government are seeking at the same time to remove people from the few qualifying benefits that exempt people from the cap, including disability benefits. This wider attack on benefit claimants threatens to make the gap in the Bill even worse.

**Jeremy Corbyn** (Islington North) (Ind): Does the hon. Lady have any idea why the Government have left the overall benefit cap in place, knowing full well that it will lead to a massive anomaly with other children driven into poverty at the very time that we should be taking all children out of poverty?

**Siân Berry:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman sincerely for that intervention. When I raised this matter on Second Reading, Ministers gave answers that echoed, rather horribly, the prejudicial, stereotypical arguments that we heard moments ago from the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for South West Devon (Rebecca Smith), implying that leaving the cap in place would incentivise people to work, when we know that it really only drives people into poverty.

We also have excellent proposals in new clauses 3 and 4, which have the same goal. I appreciate fully the request for consultation and the provision of cost estimates in new clause 4. New clause 3 is very helpful in looking at the impact of the Bill on families with disabled people and on mental health, which are all important considerations.

The debate on Second Reading and today, and the amendments, reflect a near consensus across many parties—excluding the Conservative party—that the Government are not going as far as they should. The fact is that the overall benefit cap is just as cruel and just as driven by prejudice and stereotype as the two-child limit, and the Conservatives should never have introduced it. Those affected include nearly 1,000 families in my constituency—a high proportion due to our excessive housing costs.

[*Siân Berry*]

That is the point: whatever extreme examples those on the right wing of politics wave around, these families do not get to keep and enjoy the funding they get from social security; instead, it goes straight out again on the absolute basics. Sky-high rents are responsible for most of the higher living costs putting people on benefits, with the money they receive, often on top of hard-won low wages, going straight out and into the pockets of landlords.

This cap punishes the wrong people. Today I want a clear commitment from the Minister to set out how the Government will collect data, analyse it, and report back to this House very swiftly on the families that they are not helping with this Bill. Then I want a clear commitment for the Government to fill this huge gap in their child poverty strategy, which is something that many charities agree with. Some might call this a U-turn, but through another lens it can be seen as a very welcome last-minute equaliser. Real help and more support, not spin and delay, is what these children's lives deserve.

9.30 pm

**John McDonnell** (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): New clause 4, in my name and the names of many hon. Members, echoes new clauses 1 and 3. I take reference from points made by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon); when we came together to discuss the two-child limit and this Bill, the House was filled largely with compassion, because we had the view that we just could not stand by and watch so many of our children living in poverty. That is why we welcome the Bill and have campaigned for it for so long.

We were building an element of consensus across a large part of the House, but the problem that we have, as has been pointed out by my hon. Friends the Members for Salford (Rebecca Long Bailey) and for York Central (Rachael Maskell) and the hon. Member for Brighton Pavilion (Siân Berry) is that a good Bill is being ruined—or damaged, anyway—by avoiding the issue of the overall benefit cap. As it is impossible for Back Benchers to move amendments that will incur Government expenditure, we could not move an amendment to abolish the overall cap, so through the amendments we have tabled we are simply saying to the Government, “Please acknowledge that the abolition of the two-child limit leaves a large number of our children in poverty.”

My hon. Friend the Member for York Central has said that 141,000 children are affected by the overall cap, but from the last estimate the figure is about 150,000, and there are 50,000 families who gain nothing as a result of the Bill, which is excellent but does not go far enough. Another 30,000 families only get some partial benefit. All these amendments say to the Government, “Because we cannot move an amendment tonight that will scrap the cap, at least consult on the implications of this Bill and those it leaves behind.”

New clause 4 lists a number of the organisations that we depend on for the analysis of poverty and the discussion of the implications. The amendments are not revolutionary; they are straightforward. They ask the Government to please tell us what their next steps are, because they must include the tackling of the overall cap. I welcome the reviews that are going on, but meanwhile time is ticking over. It took us a year to

arrive at the final conclusion on the two-child limit, and there could be another year of all those children still living in poverty.

**Debbie Abrahams:** The response to my right hon. Friend will be that everything that is being asked for—the outcomes that he would like—are in the terms of reference and will be addressed within the Education Committee's child poverty strategy inquiry.

**John McDonnell:** That is why I urge Ministers to act swiftly in response to that review. I believe that all logic will drive these reviews to recommend the elimination of the overall cap, once and for all. I hope we will get something from the Minister tonight—some form of words that acknowledges the seriousness and urgency of the issue. I hope the reviews will report swiftly, so that we can, almost consensually, get legislation on this issue though this House incredibly speedily.

I am sorry that the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for South West Devon (Rebecca Smith), is not very well, and I hope that when she recovers, she will discover compassion, because that is not what we heard tonight. We need to understand the genesis of the overall cap and the two-child limit. It goes back to the financial crisis of 2008-09. Our financial sector operated like a casino. We came to a financial crisis, and when George Osborne became Chancellor in 2010, he decided that it was about not the deregulation of our financial sector but Government overspending—it never was—so he introduced a policy of austerity, which targeted the most vulnerable. He targeted—

**Alicia Kearns** (Rutland and Stamford) (Con): “There is no money left!”

**John McDonnell:** The claim that there was no money left was disproved time and again. The argument that the Tories put forward was that we were spending too much on tackling poverty, on paying teachers and on our health service, but the crisis was a result of speculation, due to deregulation under the Tories for over 30 years—

**The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Caroline Nokes):** Order. The right hon. Gentleman is experienced enough to know that he has strayed some distance from the Bill.

**John McDonnell:** True, true, so I will bring this section of my remarks to a fairly rapid conclusion. What happened was that the Chancellor at that time—

**The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means:** No, we are going to return to the amendments to the Bill.

**John McDonnell:** My amendment to the Bill would tackle the inequity that was introduced as a result of George Osborne's policies, which targeted children and disabled people. That is what they did; that is what that was about. What the Conservatives have done today is what they did in 2013 when they introduced the policy. They thought, “How can we construct a moral argument for this?”, so they reverted to the 19th-century Poor Law and the argument of less eligibility. The idea behind the 19th-century Poor Law was that someone in need of support should never be raised to the level of decency of an ordinary labourer. This policy echoed the argument from the 19th century that we cannot allow people to be

raised out of poverty; they must remain in poverty. That is what the Poor Law did, and that is what this policy did. It thrust hundreds of thousands of children into poverty and deep poverty.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** Was it not the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) who, on a visit to Glasgow, discovered that there was much poverty, and decided that it was all the fault of there being too many children? He decided to punish the children for being poor in order to teach the next generation a lesson. That moral nonsense belongs with Malthus, not with any logical, socially minded human being.

**John McDonnell:** The moral case for the Poor Law's principle of less eligibility was disproven, because the result was to drive people—in particular, children—into poverty and real hardship. That is what the two-child limit did, and that is what the overall cap has done. All we are appealing to the Government to do in introducing this excellent piece of legislation, which will lift 450,000 children out of poverty, is not leave the 150,000 behind. Will they give us an indication that they have a plan to tackle that issue?

We were virtually united in compassion when this Bill was introduced, and we can be united in compassion once again in scrapping the overall cap, but there is a sense of urgency now. I do not want children in my constituency to continue to live in poverty in accommodation for the homeless, and in temporary accommodation. I do not want them to live in deep poverty, not be able to go on school trips with the other kids in their classroom, or not be able to afford new shoes, a new coat and all the rest of it. We have heard almost the same sort of speeches that were made in this place in the 19th century, the sort that are why the Labour party was founded. It was founded to represent working-class people, and we want to eradicate poverty from our society. As we pass this Bill into law, I urge the Minister to give us some indication of what the next Bill will look like. Surely it must ensure the abolition of the cap.

**Katie Lam** (Weald of Kent) (Con): I will speak in support of amendments 1 and 2, tabled by my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately). One of the most basic principles of any successful society is that those who work hard are able to reap the rewards, yet under this Government, millions of families are being squeezed by high tax rates, rising prices and increasing energy bills. They are not working any less hard, but many of them are ending up with less money at the end of the month, every month. That is less money to spend on day-to-day essentials, and less money to save for a house, a holiday, a birthday present or a school trip for their children.

Those are the real-life consequences of this Government's decisions. Many of those families see their money taken by the Government and wasted, or spent on those who choose not to work. A recent study suggested that once the cap is lifted, a family with three children in which both parents work would need to earn £71,000 to match the income of a three-child family in which neither parent works. How can it be right that one couple can wake up early every day, go to work and perhaps even take extra hours at their job, and end up with the same amount of money as their neighbours who do not work

at all? It is their money that will pay for those who do not work. The Prime Minister and the Chancellor know that, but they are choosing to lift the two-child cap anyway. That is a disgraceful way to treat millions of people across the country who are doing everything they are supposed to do and are being punished for it.

**Brian Leishman** (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): There are pockets of Grangemouth with the deepest poverty in Scotland. Tonight in Clackmannanshire, 29% of children will go to bed living in destitution. Hunger and hardship are becoming more common. That is why I support the new clause tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell).

It is obvious that four decades of de-industrialisation and the economic and social consequences that followed have been devastating for communities like mine. Of course, I understand that we cannot reverse 40 years of decline in 19 months, but we must be bolder than we have been so far, because delay will be lethal.

Let us forget talk of stability. After 14 years of austerity, a global pandemic that exaggerated the inequality that austerity created, and a cost of living crisis that is making people poorer, stability just will not cut it. It is transformation we need. Truthfully, there is plenty of money in society; the problem is: who holds it? Through solutions like an annual wealth tax on the very wealthiest in society—those with assets of over £10 million—and the redistribution of that wealth into public services, education and health, we will improve people's living standards and effectively tackle the scourge of poverty. Doing that will mean making very different political choices. Our Labour Government must meaningfully shift the dial on poverty in my constituency and across the entire country. We have to make those choices because, frankly, no one else will. There is no doubt that lifting the two-child cap will help many families in my communities, but we cannot stop there, as my hon. Friend the Member for Salford (Rebecca Long Bailey) said.

Sadly, Labour Governments do not come round all that often. We have the chance to be a Labour Government who will transform Britain into a fairer, more equal place, which is what my communities, and others like them all over the country, so desperately need. Tonight, I urge the Government to do much, much more. I urge them to think of previous Labour Governments' records on lifting people out of poverty, and the words of a previous Labour Prime Minister: we are a moral crusade or we are nothing. It is about time that we acted on those words.

9.45 pm

**Ann Davies** (Caerfyrddin) (PC): I stand to speak in support of new clause 1, tabled by the hon. Member for Brighton Pavilion (Siân Berry). The two-child cap should never have been introduced in the first place. As one of four siblings, I gently ask the hon. Member for South West Devon (Rebecca Smith): was I, the third born, worth less than my two older sisters or my younger sister? I am the mother of three daughters; was any one of my children worth less than any of the others? Absolutely not. At its most basic, that is what this policy is about.

I was in receipt of free school meals, and I remember well queuing up outside the school secretary's door to collect my dinner token. I would have been one of these

[Ann Davies]

statistics—one of the 31% of children in Wales growing up in financial poverty. It was not emotional poverty—I was not poor in love—but financial poverty. There is a huge difference there, and that is why this Bill is necessary. Ending the two-child cap will cause an 11% fall in child poverty and a nearly 20% drop in deep poverty, according to modelling by the Bevan Foundation and Policy in Practice, but the Bill's success in tackling poverty is limited by other Government policies, especially the benefit cap.

The benefit cap limits total income from certain social security payments to £22,000 a year—not the £71,000 that has been mentioned—for couples and single parents outside London. It has been frozen at that rate for 2026-27 by the Labour Government. Over 3,000 households were already affected by the benefit cap in Wales as of May last year, and 83% of those were households with children—the majority with three or more children. Those families will not benefit at all from the Bill. In fact, the Bevan Foundation estimates that more than one in five households affected by the two-child limit will not fully benefit from its removal because of the benefit cap.

The hon. Member for Brighton Pavilion's new clause 1 would place a duty on the Secretary of State to publish an impact assessment of the effects of the Bill. It would include an estimate of those households that would not see the full benefits of removing the two-child limit because of the benefit cap. I support this new clause as a way to allow us to understand the real impact of leaving the benefit cap where it is on families across our nations and our communities, but it does not go far enough, as many have said. As Plaid Cymru spokesperson, I tried to ensure that the UK Government tackled the benefit cap as well as the two-child limit, but the narrow scope of the Bill meant that I could not table amendments to do that. Only the Labour Government can make this Bill include changes to the benefit cap and help further reduce the unacceptable poverty in our communities.

The UK Labour Government have said that they are committed to tackling child poverty. With 31% of children in my constituency in poverty, now is the time for the Government to show that commitment in action. I therefore urge the Secretary of State to use the powers available to him to legislate to scrap the benefit cap alongside the two-child limit, to make a real difference to children and families across all our communities.

**Amanda Martin** (Portsmouth North) (Lab): I want to speak in favour of the Bill, and against amendment 1, as it is an attempt to gut the Bill and defeat its purpose entirely. There are moments in politics when the questions before us are not complicated, but simple, and when they are about dignity, compassion and the kind of country that we choose to be.

I will start with an important aspect of the Bill. Forcing women to disclose and prove rape in order to feed their child was one of the most cruel and indefensible features ever embedded in our welfare system. Scrapping that clause restores something fundamental: humanity. There have been, and there are, constituents in Portsmouth carrying trauma quietly, while still working, parenting and trying to hold their family together. They have

needed and still need support, not interrogation. No mother should ever have to relive the worst moments of their life just to put food on the table. This requirement should never have been introduced in the first place, and it needs to go.

Alongside this injustice sits another harmful narrative: the suggestion that families affected by the two-child limit are somehow avoiding responsibility, and that just knocking out kids is a case of being lazy and going after money. The facts simply do not support this claim. Around 59% of affected households are already in work. They are nurses, teaching assistants, shopworkers, cleaners, carers—I could go on. In Portsmouth North, I meet parents finishing night shifts or juggling childcare, and parents who through tragedy, such as accidents, redundancy, relationship breakdown, illness or the death of a partner, find themselves in situations they did not start out in when planning their families. Many of them work additional jobs and still skip meals so their children do not have to eat less, only to be told that support stops because of an arbitrary rule. This is not fairness; it is hardship being locked in.

As the Child Poverty Action Group and many others make clear, child poverty damages health, education and long-term opportunities. These are not statistics; they are Portsmouth children with dreams, talents and futures that are—in my and this Government's opinion—worth investing in. Removing the rape clause and ending the two-child limit says something powerful: dignity matters, work should be respected, and no child should be punished for the circumstances or the place in their family that they are born into.

As the Opposition mentioned the economic impact of the policy, I want to look at the economic picture. Inflation is falling, and the Bank of England expects inflation to get to the target quicker than expected. There have been six interest rate cuts since the election, which is the fastest rate of cuts in 17 years, taking an average of £1,400 off new mortgages. All that has happened without austerity and without making the most vulnerable in our society pay. In Portsmouth, the average mortgage has seen a reduction of £1,750, and £62 million has been provided for local services, such as roads, libraries and reviving high streets. That also includes 15,711 young people benefiting from youth investment. The national debt was cut last week, and we have the largest Budget surplus since records began—without austerity. Thanks to the choices we have made and Bills like this, the economic plan is the correct one, without putting our country's and my city's children into poverty. As my hon. Friend the Member for Salford (Rebecca Long Bailey) noted, meeting the cost of tackling poverty at source, rather than paying 10 times more to support children in poverty throughout their lives, is not just morally but economically correct.

This is not just good social policy; it is the mark of a decent society and something I am proud to stand up for. I ask the Minister in his summing up to tell me more about the work the Government will do to monitor the impact of the changes and how they will work across Government in a joined-up, consistent way to improve outcomes for young people and families, such as on workers' rights, renters' rights, breakfast clubs, free nursery hours, the skills agenda for apprenticeships and trainee partnerships, and the youth guarantee to name a few.

**Kirsty Blackman:** It is great to get a chance to speak in Committee on the two-child limit Bill. I am so pleased that this Bill is progressing and that this has happened. This is something we have stood from these Benches and argued about for so many years. It finally seems that it will be real. I got into trouble with a Government Minister for not welcoming the Bill—I have welcomed it at every opportunity and am pleased that the two-child limit is being removed. In fact, I had my own Bill to remove the limit, so I could hardly do anything but welcome this Bill.

I stand to talk about the amendments. We support all three new clauses that have been put forward. New clause 1 would ensure that we look at the benefit cap, and I agree with the points that have been put forward about that. I particularly enjoyed the speech by the hon. Member for Portsmouth North (Amanda Martin) just now. It was spot on in talking about the impacts of poverty on the life chances of children forever. It is not just the two-child limit that has caused this. It is one element that has increased and exacerbated child poverty, but so has the benefit cap. Of the families covered by the two-child limit, 40% have a disabled family member in the household, whether it is one of the children or one of the parents. The benefit cap overwhelmingly hits people with disabled family members.

If we are saying that personal independence payment and the additional payments made through the universal credit system, whether it is the child element or the limited capability for work element, are paid to recognise the additional costs of disability and the complex circumstances people face that contribute to their poverty, inability to work more hours, illness or ill health, why are we putting a cap on it?

Why are we saying, “We believe that children cost more money and that people on universal credit deserve more money depending on how many children they have because children should not go hungry”, which I believe is what the Government are saying here, but then capping it? Why are we saying, “Children should not go hungry—unless you hit the benefit cap, can’t take on additional hours because of a set of complex circumstances or have complex health needs that require an adapted house that costs more to rent”, for example? Why are we saying that those additional payments are reasonable, but only for some people? The Government need to look at the benefit cap again. That is covered by new clause 1. There are a number of things the Government need to look at again, which are covered by the other new clauses.

The Government have made welcome moves on clawbacks and universal credit repayments. They have reduced the percentage that people can pay back in clawbacks. However, they have not taken any steps to look at the affordability of clawbacks. They are just set at a percentage without taking into account whether people can afford to pay back universal credit that has been overpaid or paid as an advance. That means that some families are significantly disadvantaged. They may have more outgoings because they live somewhere like Brighton, where rents are absolutely through the roof, or like the north of Scotland, where heating costs a fortune because it is freezing more often than it is down here. None of the repayment schemes look at these additional issues or at whether people can afford them. I also urge the Government to look at whether that is contributing to child poverty.

The hon. Member for South West Devon (Rebecca Smith) said something along the lines of, “We don’t solve poverty by ensuring that people have money,” but we literally do. We literally solve poverty by ensuring that people have enough money. That is the solution. The cure for poverty is to have enough money to pay for the heating, the food your children need, or a pair of shoes when your child needs them. It is incredible how fast they grow, by the way. I think my son went through about five sizes in the space of a year and a half. It is impossible to keep children in shoes that quick, or even to get to the shops that quick. Children grow really quickly and it costs an awful lot of money. It is therefore really important that the Government’s child poverty measures are monitored correctly to ensure that they make all the differences the Government are proposing. We need to see whether enough of a difference is being made and whether the measures are having the effect on outcomes that we want to see.

The Government put forward a child poverty strategy that I felt was deeply unambitious. Other than the two-child limit stuff, it mostly laid out things that the Government had already announced. It was also almost entirely about only England or England and Wales and did not apply in Scotland, other than the universal credit stuff. For example, none of the childcare, free school meals or school uniforms stuff applies in Scotland.

I still feel that we do not have enough information about monitoring, so the three new clauses, which would provide for additional monitoring of the reduction in child poverty, are incredibly important. The Government will not produce their baseline monitoring and evaluation report on the child poverty strategy until summer 2026, so we do not yet have enough information about how they will measure that.

I would love it if we had Governments who were absolutely up front and honest about which measures are working and which are not, but we have consistently had Governments who introduce primary and secondary legislation but fail to do post-implementation reviews of it. They fail to tell us whether the legislation has had the intended consequence. Did it make £30,000? Did it make £30 million? That is perhaps what the Government told us the legislation would make, but because a post-implementation review does not happen, we do not see whether it was effective.

10 pm

The new clauses would ensure that it is clear whether a difference has been made. How many children’s lives are improved by the removal of the two-child limit? How many more children’s lives are improved by the removal of the benefit cap? How much of an effect does that have on school readiness, for example? Some of the background information to the child poverty strategy considers a number of studies of school readiness and whether giving people additional money and an income boost assists in readying children for school—a number of studies have found that it does. Maybe there has not been a specific study to consider whether the two-child limit has had an impact on school readiness, but we know that giving families extra money means that children are more likely to be school-ready. Given that the measures would give families extra money, we can draw the conclusion that their children are more likely to be school-ready as a result.

A lot of the arguments rehearsed today relate to the fact that it is not children's fault that they are in this situation—children deserve to be able to eat.

**Tom Hayes** (Bournemouth East) (Lab): The hon. Lady makes an important point about it not being a child's fault that they are growing up in poverty. I grew up in poverty, caring for two disabled parents, and I would also say that it is not the parents' fault; it is society's fault. When we say that people should be poor, and we create the structures and systems that enable that, we are all responsible. The Bill is just one way in which this Parliament can say to the country, "We will not put up with poverty for anyone ever again—it is not people's fault." Does she agree?

**Kirsty Blackman:** That is absolutely true. I accept the rebuke, which is completely reasonable. It is not the parents' fault—I should have been far clearer about that. I tend to think that poverty and a lack of privilege are caused by a lack of choices. Poverty means that people cannot make mistakes, while privilege means that they can. I can make mistakes because I have enough of a financial cushion and family support. For people who live in poverty, without family support or with poor mental health, one mistake can mean very quickly spiralling into an un-rescuable situation. That is how I think about privilege: those situations are not anybody's fault. Just because I am lucky enough to be in a more privileged position, I am allowed to make far more mistakes than someone who is struggling on the breadline. How is that fair?

Conservative Members made comments about people working hard. A lot of the people who are on universal credit while working are in the jobs that we really need people to do. They work as carers, shopworkers and all sorts of other jobs that not one of us would say are easy. I do not know if any Members have worked as care workers. The hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes) has been a carer and knows how physically and emotionally demanding that is. Someone working in care and being paid the minimum wage is doing a physically demanding, very necessary and hard job, yet they might still be in receipt of universal credit because they earn so little. I hate the distinction made between people who work hard and people who do not, when that is based simply on salary—not the fact that lots and lots of people work hard for very little money, because the minimum wage is not a real living wage but just a minimum wage.

I think I have been clear about some of the issues raised in the debate, including the benefit cap, issues faced by disabled family members and disabled children, and the effect of these measures on child poverty, destitution and wider social outcomes. On that last point, all of us, and particularly Governments, could probably do more about the impacts of poverty and ensuring that those are also measured.

Some of the monitoring and evaluation suggestions for the child poverty strategy look at the cold, hard measure of how many children are in poverty, and at how those numbers are reduced or increased as things go on, but they look less at some of the impacts. To be fair to the hon. Member for South West Devon, how do such measures impact on school readiness? Can we see more information on whether the Government's plans

have had an impact on school readiness? Has there been an improvement in the mental health of young people as a result of these measures on child poverty?

I still think that the Government are deeply unambitious and they could do more on the benefit cap. They could also do more, for example, to match the Scottish child payment; child poverty has been reducing in Scotland because that is the key mission of our SNP Government. It is worth looking at what works anywhere in these islands, and seeing whether it could or should be replicated to ensure that we reduce poverty and protect children, and that everybody has those opportunities—no matter how much their parents earn, how many children are in the family and whether there is a disabled family member. It is important that every one of us champions every child in our constituencies, and tries to ensure that they get the best possible start in life.

**The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Caroline Nokes):** I call the Minister.

**Sir Stephen Timms:** I thank all Members who have contributed to the debate. Interventions in the child poverty strategy will lead to the biggest expected reduction in child poverty over a Parliament since comparable records began. I well understand the concerns of those saying we should go further, and it is certainly right to urge the Government to do that, but let us recognise how big a change this will be. Removing the two-child limit is the key step. It will help children to live better lives, fulfil their potential, have better mental health, do better at school, and thrive in the future. That change is in the national interest.

The amendments propose a number of reports on different topics, and I am grateful that everybody who has spoken to them has indicated that they support the Bill. New clauses 1 and 4 ask the Secretary of State to report on the effect on children in households subject to the benefit cap. Indeed, new clause 4, tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), fulfils a commitment that he made on Second Reading to devise an amendment that would have that effect. It is an important point, and something we need to monitor carefully, but it is in the best interests of children to be in working households—and keeping the benefit cap in place protects the incentive to work. Work incentives are important. Under the policies of the last Government, far too many people gave up on work and concluded that it was not worth their while. We want it to be clear to everyone that it is worthwhile to be in work, and the Universal Credit Act 2025, enacted last summer, made an important step in that direction.

Removing the two-child limit does not undermine work incentives. From time to time, the Conservatives suggest that it does, but actually it does not. Removing the two-child limit increases the income of many families in work and increases the reward for work, and it does not undermine work incentives.<sup>1</sup>

**John McDonnell:** There is an element of contradiction in what the Minister has said. Until now, the Government's argument has been that one of the most disastrous disincentives to work is low wages, so they have rightly concentrated on raising the minimum wage and aiming for a proper living wage. Our argument has never been that lifting people out of poverty is a disincentive to work—it has always been about low wages.

1.[*Official Report*, 2 March 2026; Vol. 781, c. 5WC.](Correction)

**Sir Stephen Timms:** My right hon. Friend is right that raising wages has been a crucial part of the Government's strategy, but removing the benefit cap would reduce work incentives. My hon. Friend the Member for Salford (Rebecca Long Bailey) said that there is no evidence that that is the case, but actually there is such evidence—from the Institute for Fiscal Studies, for example. It is not a huge amount of evidence but nevertheless there is evidence that the benefit cap provides a modest but significant incentive for work. Our view, for the time being at least, is that that should be maintained.

We have published an impact assessment as part of the Bill. It sets out the number of households that will not gain in full or will only partially gain from this measure because of the benefit cap. The Department publishes quarterly statistics on the benefit cap, which includes the number of households that are capped and how that changes over time. The most recent quarterly statistics show that of 119,000 households capped at the start of the quarter that ended in August last year, 40,000—about one third—were no longer capped by the end of the quarter, although others were newly capped, so there is a lot of churn in the cohort of capped households. The 40,000 households that left that cohort included 2,900 who had ceased to be capped because their earnings exceeded the threshold of full-time earnings at the national living wage. We want to encourage more people to make that transition.<sup>1</sup>

We also publish statistics on the number of households affected by both the two-child limit and the benefit cap, with the next annual statistics to be published in the summer. After that, the quarterly benefit cap statistics will show how the number of capped households has changed after the two-child limit has been removed.

**Kirsty Blackman:** Those statistics will show the number of households that are capped, but they will not show how many have come into the benefit cap as a result of the removal of the two-child limit. Will the Minister be able to show a link between how many new families are being capped as a result of the two-child limit, meaning that those households are now disadvantaged again, even though the two-child limit has been removed?

**Sir Stephen Timms:** We have set out estimates of the effects that we think will result from the removal of the two-child limit, and there will be more information in the baseline evaluation report that we will publish in the summer.

My hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North (Amanda Martin) made some important points. I particularly agree with her about the importance of scrapping the rape clause, which had been a feature of the legislation since the two-child limit was introduced. She is right that we need to understand properly the impacts of policy interventions. We have published a monitoring and evaluation framework alongside the child poverty strategy that sets out how we will track and evaluate progress, reflecting our commitment to transparency, accountability and continuing to learn from what is effective. The baseline report will be published in the summer, as I have said, and set out details on plans alongside the latest statistics and evidence, and we will report annually on progress after that.

The information that we are committed to publish will provide the information looked for in these new clauses. I very much look forward to the report from the Work and Pensions Committee, which was referred to in an intervention by the Chair, my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams).

10.15 pm

**Siân Berry:** Will the Minister tackle the point that I made in my speech? There is a possibility of people being denied disability benefits, as the result of separate work for which he is responsible, and potentially falling into the cap by losing the exemptions. That worries me greatly with respect to my own constituents.

**Sir Stephen Timms:** One of the new clauses touches specifically on disabled people. That new clause was not moved, but, as the hon. Lady knows, we are undertaking a review of personal independence payments, which I am co-chairing with others. We will see what the outcome of that is, but if there are to be changes in eligibility we will certainly set out details on the effects on the benefit cap and other things as those things progress.

I ask my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) to place an order on my behalf for Kate Pickett's latest book, which I am very keen to have a look at.

New clause 2 is specifically about households in poverty with a disabled family member. I agree that monitoring and evaluation of that and other things is very important, but we should not have an assessment that sits in isolation from the impact assessment that I have described, which we are committed to delivering alongside the wider child poverty strategy.

New clause 3 asks that we review the impact of child poverty on destitution and wider social and economic outcomes. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Witney (Charlie Maynard) for his support for the Bill. We have set out a second headline metric; we will measure deep material poverty in the child poverty strategy in the monitoring and evaluation framework. In that evaluation, we will track progress against two headline metrics. The first metric is relative low income—a metric embraced by David Cameron when he was the leader of the Conservative party but sadly not now recognised by the Conservatives. The second metric is deep material poverty, which will pick up on the concerns that the hon. Gentleman raised.

**Rebecca Smith:** I have been wanting to mention this point throughout the debate, but I have not had the right opportunity. Obviously a large number of these new clauses look at reporting back. I appreciate that the child poverty strategy involves a lot of reporting back, but is the Minister aware that the Department for Education does not yet have the records of which local councils have taken up auto-enrolment for free school meals? While the child poverty strategy has introduced universal breakfast clubs, there is no matrix to be able to decipher whether auto-enrolment for free school meals is working. In some cases, such as in the county that I represent, that has meant a significant amount of money for those local authorities deliberately to try to tackle poverty. Will he look into tackling that?

1. [Official Report, 2 March 2026; Vol. 781, c. 5WC.] (Correction)

**Sir Stephen Timms:** I am sure that the hon. Lady will raise that matter with the Department for Education. That is a very important point.

We are extending free school meals to all children in families claiming universal credit; that is an important additional element of the child poverty strategy. There will be a comprehensive programme of analysis of the drivers of child poverty and the impact of specific interventions so that we can better learn what works and assess what further steps are needed. We will continue to gather evidence for further interventions beyond those that we have announced so far.

For too long, the tide of child poverty was allowed simply to rise. It is high time to turn that tide. This Bill is the centrepiece of our child poverty strategy. It will deliver the most substantial reduction in child poverty of any Parliament since records began and make a decisive break from the inaction and indifference of the past. Government can make a difference: we can help children and their families to lead better lives now and in the future for the benefit of all. It is for all those reasons that I hope the Committee will support the Bill and reject the new clauses.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Clause 1 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

*Clauses 2 and 3 ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

### New Clause 3

#### REVIEW OF THE IMPACT OF THE ACT ON CHILD POVERTY, DESTITUTION, AND WIDER SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC OUTCOMES

“(1) The Secretary of State must, within 12 months of this Act coming into force, review the effect of this Act on—

- (a) overall levels of child poverty in the UK;
- (b) levels of destitution and deep poverty among households with children;
- (c) households in receipt of Universal Credit which include children;
- (d) educational outcomes for children in households affected by poverty;
- (e) physical and mental health outcomes for children in households affected by poverty; and
- (f) longer-term impacts on economic participation, workforce skills, and demand on health and welfare services arising from child poverty and destitution.

(2) The Secretary of State must lay before Parliament a report setting out the conclusions of the review.”—(*Charlie Maynard.*)

*This new clause would require the Secretary of State to undertake a review of the effects of the Act on child poverty, destitution, and wider social and economic outcomes.*

*Brought up, and read the First time.*

*Question put, That the clause be read a Second time.*

*The Committee divided: Ayes 73, Noes 286.*

**Division No. 432]**

**[10.21 pm**

### AYES

|                            |                        |
|----------------------------|------------------------|
| Adam, Shockat              | Chadwick, David        |
| Amos, Gideon               | Chambers, Dr Danny     |
| Aquarone, Steff            | Chope, Sir Christopher |
| Babarinde, Josh            | Chowns, Dr Ellie       |
| Bennett, Alison            | Coghlan, Chris         |
| Berry, Siân                | Collins, Victoria      |
| Brewer, Alex               | Corbyn, rh Jeremy      |
| Brown-Fuller, Jess         | Davies, Ann            |
| Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair | Denyer, Carla          |

Dillon, Mr Lee  
Doogan, Dave  
Dyke, Sarah  
Easton, Alex  
Forster, Mr Will  
Gibson, Sarah<pa>  
George, Andrew  
Gethins, Stephen  
Glover, Olly  
Goldman, Marie  
Green, Sarah  
Harding, Monica  
Heylings, Pippa  
Hobhouse, Wera  
Jardine, Christine  
Jarvis, Liz  
Jones, Clive  
Lake, Ben  
Leadbitter, Graham  
Lockhart, Carla  
MacCleary, James  
Maguire, Ben  
Maguire, Helen  
Martin, Mike  
Mathew, Brian  
Maynard, Charlie  
Medi, Llinos  
Miller, Calum  
Milne, John

Moran, Layla  
Morello, Edward  
Morrison, Mr Tom  
Munt, Tessa  
Murray, Susan  
O'Hara, Brendan  
Olney, Sarah  
Perteghella, Manuela  
Pinkerton, Dr Al  
Reynolds, Mr Joshua  
Robinson, rh Gavin  
Roome, Ian  
Sabine, Anna  
Savage, Dr Roz  
Saville Roberts, rh Liz  
Shannon, Jim  
Slade, Vikki  
Sollom, Ian  
Stone, Jamie  
Sultana, Zarah  
Swann, Robin  
Taylor, Luke  
Voaden, Caroline  
Wishart, Pete  
Wrigley, Martin  
Young, Claire

### Tellers for the Ayes:

Charlotte Cane and  
Kirsty Blackman

### NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy  
vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-  
Ady*)  
Abbott, Jack  
Abrahams, Debbie  
Ahmed, Dr Zubir  
Akehurst, Luke  
Alaba, Mr Bayo  
Alexander, rh Mr Douglas  
Alexander, rh Heidi  
Al-Hassan, Sadik  
Ali, Rushanara  
Ali, Tahir  
Anderson, Callum  
Anderson, Fleur  
Antoniazzi, Tonia  
Arthur, Dr Scott  
Asato, Jess  
Asser, James  
Athwal, Jas  
Atkinson, Catherine  
Atkinson, Lewis  
Bailey, Mr Calvin  
Bailey, Olivia  
Baines, David  
Baker, Richard  
Ballinger, Alex  
Barker, Paula  
Barron, Lee  
Beavers, Lorraine  
Begum, Apsana  
Bell, Torsten  
Benn, rh Hilary  
Betts, Mr Clive  
Bishop, Matt  
Blake, Olivia  
Blake, Rachel  
Bloore, Chris  
Brackenridge, Sureena  
Brash, Mr Jonathan  
Bryant, Chris  
Buckley, Julia  
Burgon, Richard  
Butler, Dawn  
Byrne, Ian  
Byrne, rh Liam  
Cadbury, Ruth  
Caliskan, Nesil  
Campbell, rh Sir Alan  
Campbell, Juliet  
Campbell-Savours, Markus  
Carden, Dan  
Carling, Sam  
Carns, Al  
Champion, Sarah  
Charalambous, Bambos  
Charters, Mr Luke  
Clark, Feryal  
Coleman, Ben  
Collinge, Lizzi  
Collins, Tom  
Conlon, Liam  
Coombes, Sarah  
Cooper, Andrew  
Cooper, Dr Beccy  
Cox, Pam  
Craft, Jen  
Crichton, Torcuil  
Curtis, Chris  
Daby, Janet  
Dalton, Ashley  
Darlington, Emily  
Davies, Jonathan  
Davies, Paul  
Davies-Jones, Alex  
Dean, Josh  
Dearden, Kate  
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh  
Dickson, Jim  
Dixon, Anna

Dixon, Samantha  
 Dodds, rh Anneliese  
 Dowd, Peter  
 Eagle, Dame Angela  
 Eagle, rh Maria  
 Efford, Clive  
 Egan, Damien  
 Elmore, Chris  
 Esterson, Bill  
 Evans, Chris  
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta  
 Falconer, Mr Hamish  
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh  
 Fleet, Natalie  
 Foody, Emma  
 Fookes, Catherine  
 Foxcroft, Vicky  
 Foy, Mary Kelly  
 Francis, Daniel  
 Frith, Mr James  
 Furniss, Gill  
 Gardiner, Barry  
 Gemmell, Alan  
 Gill, Preet Kaur  
 Gittins, Becky (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami*)  
 Glindon, Mary  
 Goldsborough, Ben  
 Gosling, Jodie  
 Grady, John  
 Greenwood, Lilian  
 Hack, Amanda  
 Haigh, rh Louise  
 Hamilton, Fabian  
 Hamilton, Paulette  
 Hardy, Emma  
 Harris, Carolyn  
 Hayes, Tom  
 Hazelgrove, Claire  
 Healey, rh John  
 Hendrick, Sir Mark  
 Hillier, Dame Meg  
 Hinchliff, Chris  
 Hinder, Jonathan  
 Hopkins, Rachel  
 Hughes, Claire (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami*)  
 Hume, Alison (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami*)  
 Huq, Dr Rupa  
 Hussain, Imran  
 Ingham, Leigh  
 Irons, Natasha  
 Jameson, Sally  
 Jarvis, Dan  
 Jogee, Adam  
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana  
 Jones, rh Darren  
 Jones, Gerald  
 Jones, Ruth  
 Jones, Sarah  
 Josan, Gurinder Singh  
 Joseph, Sojan  
 Juss, Warinder  
 Kane, Mike  
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami*)  
 Khan, Naushabah  
 Kinnock, Stephen  
 Kirkham, Jayne  
 Kitchen, Gen  
 Kumaran, Uma  
 Kyle, rh Peter  
 Lamb, Peter  
 Lavery, Ian  
 Law, Noah  
 Leadbeater, Kim  
 Leishman, Brian  
 Lewell, Emma  
 Lewis, Clive  
 Lightwood, Simon  
 Long Bailey, Rebecca  
 MacAlister, Josh  
 Macdonald, Alice (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami*)  
 Madders, Justin  
 Martin, Amanda  
 Maskell, Rachael  
 Mayer, Alex  
 McAllister, Douglas  
 McCarthy, Kerry  
 McCluskey, Martin  
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain  
 McDonald, Andy  
 McDonald, Chris  
 McDonnell, rh John  
 McDougall, Blair  
 McEvoy, Lola  
 McFadden, rh Pat  
 McIntyre, Alex  
 McKee, Gordon  
 McKenna, Kevin  
 McKinnell, Catherine  
 McMorris, Anna  
 McNally, Frank  
 Minns, Ms Julie  
 Mohamed, Abtisam  
 Moon, Perran  
 Morden, Jessica  
 Morris, Grahame  
 Morris, Joe  
 Mullane, Margaret  
 Murphy, Luke  
 Murray, Chris  
 Murray, rh Ian  
 Murray, rh James  
 Murray, Katrina  
 Myer, Luke  
 Nandy, rh Lisa  
 Nash, Pamela  
 Newbury, Josh  
 Niblett, Samantha  
 Nichols, Charlotte  
 Norris, Alex  
 Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami*)  
 Onn, Melanie  
 Opher, Dr Simon  
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena  
 Osamor, Kate  
 Osborne, Kate  
 Osborne, Tristan  
 Paffey, Darren  
 Pakes, Andrew  
 Patrick, Matthew  
 Pearce, Jon  
 Pennycook, Matthew  
 Perkins, Mr Toby  
 Phillips, Jess  
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David  
 Pitcher, Lee  
 Pollard, Luke  
 Powell, Joe  
 Poynton, Gregor

Prinsley, Peter  
 Race, Steve  
 Rand, Mr Connor  
 Ranger, Andrew  
 Rayner, rh Angela  
 Reed, rh Steve  
 Reeves, rh Rachel  
 Reid, Joani  
 Reynolds, rh Emma  
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan  
 Rhodes, Martin  
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell  
 Rigby, Lucy  
 Rimmer, Ms Marie  
 Robertson, Dave  
 Roca, Tim  
 Rushworth, Sam  
 Russell, Sarah  
 Rutland, Tom  
 Ryan, Oliver  
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun  
 Sandher-Jones, Louise  
 Sowards, Mark  
 Shah, Naz  
 Shanker, Baggy  
 Shanks, Michael  
 Siddiq, Tulip  
 Slaughter, Andy  
 Slinger, John  
 Smith, David  
 Smith, Jeff  
 Smith, Nick  
 Smith, Sarah  
 Smyth, Karin  
 Stainbank, Euan  
 Stone, Will  
 Strathern, Alistair  
 Streeting, rh Wes  
 Swallow, Peter  
 Tami, rh Sir Mark  
 Tapp, Mike  
 Taylor, Rachel  
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick  
 Thompson, Adam  
 Tidball, Dr Marie  
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen  
 Toale, Jessica  
 Tomlinson, Dan  
 Trickett, Jon  
 Tufnell, Henry  
 Turmaine, Matt  
 Turner, Laurence  
 Uppal, Harpreet  
 Vaughan, Tony  
 Vaz, rh Valerie  
 Vince, Chris  
 Wakeford, Christian  
 Ward, Chris  
 Waugh, Paul  
 Webb, Chris  
 Welsh, Michelle  
 West, Catherine  
 Western, Matt  
 Wheeler, Michael  
 Whitby, John  
 White, Jo  
 White, Katie  
 Williams, David  
 Woodcock, Sean  
 Yang, Yuan  
 Yasin, Mohammad  
 Yemm, Steve  
**Tellers for the Noes:**  
**Imogen Walker and**  
**Mark Ferguson**

*Question accordingly negated.*

*The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair.*

*Bill reported, without amendment.*

*Third Reading*

10.34 pm

**Sir Stephen Timms:** I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

Scrapping the two-child limit is an investment in the future of children and of the country. Two million children will benefit from this Bill. We will be held to account on progress through the monitoring and evaluation arrangements we have put in place to ensure that the change we are making is genuinely lasting. I want to thank every Member who has contributed to these debates. Removing the two-child limit from universal credit will help more children to fulfil their potential, to grow up make a positive contribution and to be part of a fairer, stronger country. I hope that the whole House will now support this vital measure.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes):** I call the shadow Secretary of State.

10.35 pm

**Helen Whately** (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I thank my hon. Friends for their contributions during the passage of this Bill. In particular, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for South West Devon (Rebecca Smith), who has argued with true passion against the Bill,

[Helen Whately]

drawing on her own experience as well as her sound principles. I also thank my hon. Friends the Members for Solihull West and Shirley (Dr Shastri-Hurst) and for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans), my right hon. Friends the Members for Tonbridge (Tom Tugendhat) and for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) and my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater (Sir Ashley Fox), who spoke on Second Reading, and my hon. Friend the Member for Weald of Kent (Katie Lam), who spoke in Committee this evening, and pointed out with customary clarity the flaws in the reasoning of Labour Members.

We have all seen the strength of feeling among MPs who support this Bill, but passion does not make a policy right. Children are a blessing, but they are also a responsibility. Parents up and down the country work long hours and make sacrifices to bring up their children. Many couples question whether they can afford one child, let alone three, four or five. They make tough but responsible choices, yet this Bill means they will be taxed to fund other people who make choices they know they cannot afford, and that is fundamentally unfair. It is unfair to people who make responsible decisions, unfair to people who decide to live within their means and unfair to the people who cannot get a job, let alone afford to start a family, because this Government are wrecking the economy with ever higher spending and higher taxes.

People do not get a pay rise from their employer when they have another child; they make their money stretch further. However, for people on universal credit, this Bill means their benefits will rise by thousands of pounds for each extra child they have. Some families are about to get tens of thousands of pounds extra. A single parent with five children will be able to get £10,000 more, and an annual income just from benefits of over £45,000 untaxed. To get the same through work, someone would need to earn £60,000.

I heard that the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, who is standing behind the Chair, was due to talk about welfare reform this evening. I say to him and all Labour Members that anyone serious about welfare reform or about ending the welfare trap would vote against a Bill that makes benefits pay this much more than work. Anyone serious about fiscal responsibility would not vote for a Bill that adds £3 billion a year to the ballooning welfare budget and costs £14 billion over the next five years. That money is not just sitting there jingling in the Treasury bank account waiting to be spent on this; it will have to be taken from a small business desperately trying not to let staff go, from a family already struggling with food and energy costs, or from the next generation through higher borrowing. However Ministers dress it up, someone else will pay.

Labour Members have said that this Bill cuts child poverty. What they generally mean is that it reduces relative poverty, a statistic that tells us nothing about whether children's lives are actually looking up. They ignore that relative poverty tends to look better when the country gets poorer, which is exactly what their policies are doing to this country. They have done it before and they are doing it again—taxing more to spend more, killing growth and killing jobs.

What really makes a difference to children's lives is having their parents in work, but what are the Government doing about that? They are making it less likely. Under this Government, we have seen—[*Interruption.*] I know that Labour Members do not want to hear it, but we have seen the fastest increase on record of children growing up without a parent in work. Unemployment has gone up every month; now it is at its highest for five years.

This debate is about more than just one policy; it is about two different visions for our country. Labour's answer to every challenge is the same: spend more money. Labour Members see people as victims of circumstance, and their instinct is always to compensate rather than change the circumstance. We see it differently. We know that children are better off if the country is better off; if there are more jobs, higher wages, lower inflation and stronger growth. Look at the moments in our history when living standards rose for everyone. It was when people were motivated to strive, ideas were turned into businesses and hard work reaped rewards. That is how countries get ahead and their children thrive. [*Interruption.*]

I do not expect the argument that I am making to be popular in this Chamber, although—[*Interruption.*] I am not expecting Labour Members to like what I am saying, but it is popular out there in the real world. I know that every other party represented here wants to expand the state—not just Labour, but the Lib Dems, the Greens, the SNP, Plaid, and who knows how Reform will vote tonight? I can see one Reform MP is here; maybe somebody will help his colleagues to find their way to the right Lobby tonight.

I think Reform now says that it would keep the cap, but it still does not back it in principle; it is just a question of timing. Well, well. The Prime Minister has decided that the time is now because he needed to save his skin. He is not a Prime Minister who will take the tough decisions to control the welfare bill and make work pay, because that would require a backbone and the support of his Back Benchers. Only Conservatives are prepared to make the argument for welfare savings and stand up for principles like fairness, personal responsibility and living within your means. Other parties compete to be more generous with other people's money; we do not. Conservatives believe in a country where work pays, responsibility is valued, and welfare is a safety net, not a lifestyle choice. That is the difference not just over the two-child cap, but over the direction of Britain itself.

10.42 pm

**Kirsty Blackman:** The SNP has been at the forefront of opposing this policy since the very first day it came in. Since the very first day that we spotted in the legislation the rape clause, which meant that people were going to have to tell the Department for Work and Pensions that they had been raped in order to get an exemption from the two-child limit. Women had to go through that cruel, inhumane system just to ensure that their children were eligible for the social security payments. From day one, this was a cruel policy from the nasty party.

This is not a debate about whether people should be working or not. This is not an issue that pits the workers against the workless. This is about children. This is about kids being able to afford to eat. This is about their

parents being able to ensure that they can grow up in a house that is warm; that they can have food in their tummies before they go to school; that they can have shoes that fit. This is about ensuring that kids are looked after and have the best possible life chances. This is about ensuring that poverty is reduced. No child should be growing up in poverty. No child, whether their parents are working or not, should be growing up in poverty.

The Conservatives talk about making work pay. Well, they could have put in a real living wage, but they did not; they put in a pretendy living wage and called it the living wage, knowing that people could not actually live on it, so I am not sure they have a huge amount of high ground when it comes to making work pay. In fact, the system we have had until now has been the system the Conservatives created, so they do not have a great amount of high ground over the size of the social security system that Labour has been working with either, because that is the system they made.

I am pleased that Labour is removing the two-child limit today. I am pleased that it will come in from April. I am not terribly happy that it has taken us this long to get to that point.

Before I sit down, I want to commend every person across this House who has supported the removal of the two-child limit, and particularly those who have chosen to do so when their party did not want them to—that is the worst and most difficult position to be in. I really appreciate those who were willing to stick their head above the parapet and do what was right on this. I know it is incredibly hard to take that step.

We have heard lots of criticism today, with lots of people saying that the Bill could go further and that there is more that could be done. There is, inevitably, more that could be done; there is always more that could be done to keep children out of poverty. However, this is a good step. Children will be better off as a result. Children will have improved life chances. What are we all here for, if not that?

*Question put, That the Bill be now read the Third time.*

*The House divided: Ayes 361, Noes 84.*

**Division No. 433]**

**[10.46 pm**

**AYES**

|                                                                     |                       |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Abbott, rh Ms Diane ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy</i> ) | Atkinson, Catherine   |
| Abbott, Jack                                                        | Atkinson, Lewis       |
| Abrahams, Debbie                                                    | Babarinde, Josh       |
| Adam, Shockat                                                       | Bailey, Mr Calvin     |
| Ahmed, Dr Zubir                                                     | Bailey, Olivia        |
| Akehurst, Luke                                                      | Baines, David         |
| Alaba, Mr Bayo                                                      | Baker, Richard        |
| Alexander, rh Mr Douglas                                            | Ballinger, Alex       |
| Alexander, rh Heidi                                                 | Barker, Paula         |
| Al-Hassan, Sadik                                                    | Barron, Lee           |
| Ali, Rushanara                                                      | Beavers, Lorraine     |
| Ali, Tahir                                                          | Begum, Apsana         |
| Amos, Gideon                                                        | Bell, Torsten         |
| Anderson, Callum                                                    | Benn, rh Hilary       |
| Anderson, Fleur                                                     | Bennett, Alison       |
| Antoniazzi, Tonia                                                   | Berry, Siân           |
| Aquarone, Steff                                                     | Betts, Mr Clive       |
| Arthur, Dr Scott                                                    | Bishop, Matt          |
| Asato, Jess                                                         | Blackman, Kirsty      |
| Asser, James                                                        | Blake, Olivia         |
| Athwal, Jas                                                         | Blake, Rachel         |
|                                                                     | Bloore, Chris         |
|                                                                     | Brackenridge, Sureena |

|                            |                                                            |
|----------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|
| Brash, Mr Jonathan         | Footy, Emma                                                |
| Brewer, Alex               | Fookes, Catherine                                          |
| Brown-Fuller, Jess         | Forster, Mr Will                                           |
| Bryant, Chris              | Foxcroft, Vicky                                            |
| Buckley, Julia             | Foy, Mary Kelly                                            |
| Burgon, Richard            | Francis, Daniel                                            |
| Butler, Dawn               | Frith, Mr James                                            |
| Byrne, Ian                 | Furniss, Gill                                              |
| Byrne, rh Liam             | Gardiner, Barry                                            |
| Cadbury, Ruth              | Gemmell, Alan                                              |
| Caliskan, Nesil            | George, Andrew                                             |
| Campbell, rh Sir Alan      | Gethins, Stephen                                           |
| Campbell, Juliet           | Gibson, Sarah                                              |
| Campbell-Savours, Markus   | Gill, Preet Kaur                                           |
| Cane, Charlotte            | Gittins, Becky ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami</i> ) |
| Carden, Dan                | Glendon, Mary                                              |
| Carling, Sam               | Glover, Olly                                               |
| Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair | Goldman, Marie                                             |
| Carns, Al                  | Goldsborough, Ben                                          |
| Chadwick, David            | Gosling, Jodie                                             |
| Chambers, Dr Danny         | Grady, John                                                |
| Champion, Sarah            | Green, Sarah                                               |
| Charalambous, Bambos       | Greenwood, Lilian                                          |
| Charters, Mr Luke          | Hack, Amanda                                               |
| Chowns, Dr Ellie           | Haigh, rh Louise                                           |
| Clark, Feryal              | Hamilton, Fabian                                           |
| Coghlan, Chris             | Hamilton, Paulette                                         |
| Coleman, Ben               | Hanna, Claire                                              |
| Collinge, Lizzi            | Harding, Monica                                            |
| Collins, Tom               | Hardy, Emma                                                |
| Collins, Victoria          | Harris, Carolyn                                            |
| Conlon, Liam               | Hayes, Tom                                                 |
| Coombes, Sarah             | Hazelgrove, Claire                                         |
| Cooper, Andrew             | Healey, rh John                                            |
| Cooper, Dr Beccy           | Hendrick, Sir Mark                                         |
| Corbyn, rh Jeremy          | Heylings, Pippa                                            |
| Cox, Pam                   | Hillier, Dame Meg                                          |
| Craft, Jen                 | Hinchliff, Chris                                           |
| Crichton, Torcuil          | Hinder, Jonathan                                           |
| Curtis, Chris              | Hobhouse, Wera                                             |
| Daby, Janet                | Hopkins, Rachel                                            |
| Dalton, Ashley             | Hughes, Claire ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami</i> ) |
| Darlington, Emily          | Hume, Alison ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami</i> )   |
| Davies, Ann                | Huq, Dr Rupa                                               |
| Davies, Jonathan           | Hussain, Imran                                             |
| Davies, Paul               | Ingham, Leigh                                              |
| Davies-Jones, Alex         | Irons, Natasha                                             |
| Dean, Josh                 | Jameson, Sally                                             |
| Dearden, Kate              | Jardine, Christine                                         |
| Denyer, Carla              | Jarvis, Dan                                                |
| Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh | Jarvis, Liz                                                |
| Dickson, Jim               | Jogee, Adam                                                |
| Dillon, Mr Lee             | Johnson, rh Dame Diana                                     |
| Dixon, Anna                | Jones, Clive                                               |
| Dixon, Samantha            | Jones, rh Darren                                           |
| Dodds, rh Anneliese        | Jones, Gerald                                              |
| Doogan, Dave               | Jones, Ruth                                                |
| Dowd, Peter                | Jones, Sarah                                               |
| Dyke, Sarah                | Josan, Gurinder Singh                                      |
| Eagle, Dame Angela         | Joseph, Sojan                                              |
| Eagle, rh Maria            | Juss, Warinder                                             |
| Easton, Alex               | Kane, Mike                                                 |
| Eastwood, Colum            | Kaur, Satvir ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami</i> )   |
| Efford, Clive              | Khan, Naushabah                                            |
| Egan, Damien               | Kinnock, Stephen                                           |
| Elmore, Chris              | Kirkham, Jayne                                             |
| Esterson, Bill             | Kitchen, Gen                                               |
| Evans, Chris               | Kumaran, Uma                                               |
| Fahnbulleh, Miatta         |                                                            |
| Falconer, Mr Hamish        |                                                            |
| Fenton-Glynn, Josh         |                                                            |
| Fleet, Natalie             |                                                            |

Kyle, rh Peter  
Lake, Ben  
Lamb, Peter  
Lavery, Ian  
Law, Noah  
Leadbeater, Kim  
Leadbitter, Graham  
Leishman, Brian  
Lewell, Emma  
Lewis, Clive  
Lightwood, Simon  
Lockhart, Carla  
Long Bailey, Rebecca  
MacAlister, Josh  
MacCleary, James  
Macdonald, Alice (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami*)  
Madders, Justin  
Maguire, Ben  
Maguire, Helen  
Martin, Amanda  
Martin, Mike  
Maskell, Rachael  
Mathew, Brian  
Mayer, Alex  
Maynard, Charlie  
McAllister, Douglas  
McCluskey, Martin  
McDonagh, Dame Siobhain  
McDonald, Andy  
McDonald, Chris  
McDonnell, rh John  
McDougall, Blair  
McEvoy, Lola  
McFadden, rh Pat  
McIntyre, Alex  
McKee, Gordon  
McKenna, Kevin  
McKinnell, Catherine  
McMorrin, Anna  
McNally, Frank  
Medi, Llinos  
Miller, Calum  
Milne, John  
Minns, Ms Julie  
Mohamed, Abtisam  
Moon, Perran  
Moran, Layla  
Morden, Jessica  
Morello, Edward  
Morris, Grahame  
Morris, Joe  
Morrison, Mr Tom  
Mullane, Margaret  
Munt, Tessa  
Murphy, Luke  
Murray, Chris  
Murray, rh Ian  
Murray, rh James  
Murray, Katrina  
Murray, Susan  
Myer, Luke  
Nandy, rh Lisa  
Nash, Pamela  
Newbury, Josh  
Niblett, Samantha  
Nichols, Charlotte  
Norris, Alex  
Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami*)  
O'Hara, Brendan  
Olney, Sarah

Onn, Melanie  
Opher, Dr Simon  
Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena  
Osamor, Kate  
Osborne, Kate  
Osborne, Tristan  
Paffey, Darren  
Pakes, Andrew  
Patrick, Matthew  
Pearce, Jon  
Pennycook, Matthew  
Perkins, Mr Toby  
Perteghella, Manuela  
Phillips, Jess  
Pinkerton, Dr Al  
Pinto-Duschinsky, David  
Pitcher, Lee  
Pollard, Luke  
Powell, Joe  
Poynton, Gregor  
Prinsley, Peter  
Race, Steve  
Rand, Mr Connor  
Ranger, Andrew  
Rayner, rh Angela  
Reed, rh Steve  
Reeves, rh Rachel  
Reynolds, rh Emma  
Reynolds, rh Jonathan  
Reynolds, Mr Joshua  
Rhodes, Martin  
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell  
Rigby, Lucy  
Rimmer, Ms Marie  
Robertson, Dave  
Robinson, rh Gavin  
Roca, Tim  
Roome, Ian  
Rushworth, Sam  
Russell, Sarah  
Rutland, Tom  
Ryan, Oliver  
Sabine, Anna  
Sandher, Dr Jeevun  
Sandher-Jones, Louise  
Savage, Dr Roz  
Saville Roberts, rh Liz  
Sewards, Mark  
Shah, Naz  
Shanker, Baggy  
Shanks, Michael  
Shannon, Jim  
Siddiq, Tulip  
Slade, Vikki  
Slaughter, Andy  
Slinger, John  
Smith, David  
Smith, Jeff  
Smith, Nick  
Smith, Sarah  
Smyth, Karin  
Sollom, Ian  
Stainbank, Euan  
Stone, Jamie  
Stone, Will  
Strathern, Alistair  
Streetering, rh Wes  
Sultana, Zarah  
Swallow, Peter  
Swann, Robin  
Tami, rh Sir Mark  
Tapp, Mike

Taylor, Luke  
Taylor, Rachel  
Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick  
Thompson, Adam  
Tidball, Dr Marie  
Timms, rh Sir Stephen  
Toale, Jessica  
Tomlinson, Dan  
Trickett, Jon  
Tufnell, Henry  
Turmaine, Matt  
Turner, Laurence  
Uppal, Harpreet  
Vaughan, Tony  
Vaz, rh Valerie  
Vince, Chris  
Voaden, Caroline  
Wakeford, Christian  
Ward, Chris  
Waugh, Paul

Anderson, Stuart  
Andrew, rh Stuart  
Argar, rh Edward  
Atkins, rh Victoria  
Bacon, Gareth  
Badenoch, rh Mrs Kemi  
Baldwin, Dame Harriett  
Barclay, rh Steve  
Bhatti, Saqib (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)  
Blackman, Bob  
Bool, Sarah  
Bowie, Andrew  
Bradley, rh Dame Karen  
Brandreth, Aphra  
Cartlidge, James  
Chope, Sir Christopher  
Cleverly, rh Sir James  
Cocking, Lewis  
Cooper, John  
Costa, Alberto  
Cross, Harriet  
Davies, Gareth  
Davies, Mims  
Davis, rh David  
Dewhurst, Charlie  
Dowden, rh Sir Oliver  
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain  
Fortune, Peter  
Fox, Sir Ashley  
Freeman, George  
French, Mr Louie  
Fuller, Richard  
Garnier, Mark  
Grant, Helen  
Griffiths, Alison  
Harris, Rebecca  
Hayes, rh Sir John  
Holmes, Paul  
Huddleston, Nigel  
Hudson, Dr Neil  
Hunt, rh Sir Jeremy  
Jenrick, rh Robert  
Johnson, Dr Caroline  
Jopp, Lincoln  
Kearns, Alicia

Webb, Chris  
Welsh, Michelle  
West, Catherine  
Western, Matt  
Wheeler, Michael  
Whitby, John  
White, Jo  
White, Katie  
Williams, David  
Wishart, Pete  
Woodcock, Sean  
Wrigley, Martin  
Yang, Yuan  
Yasin, Mohammad  
Yemm, Steve  
Young, Claire

**Tellers for the Ayes:**  
**Mark Ferguson and**  
**Imogen Walker**

### NOES

Kruger, Danny  
Lam, Katie  
Lamont, John  
Leigh, rh Sir Edward  
Lewis, rh Sir Julian  
Lopez, Julia  
Mak, Alan  
Malthouse, rh Kit  
Mayhew, Jerome  
Mohindra, Mr Gagan  
Moore, Robbie  
Morrissey, Joy (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)  
Morton, rh Wendy  
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew  
Norman, rh Jesse  
Obese-Jecty, Ben  
Philp, rh Chris  
Reed, David  
Robertson, Joe  
Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec  
Simmonds, David  
Smith, Greg  
Smith, rh Sir Julian  
Smith, Rebecca  
Snowden, Mr Andrew  
Spencer, Dr Ben  
Spencer, Patrick (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)  
Stephenson, Blake  
Stride, rh Sir Mel  
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond  
Thomas, Bradley  
Timothy, Nick  
Vickers, Matt  
Whately, Helen  
Whittingdale, rh Sir John  
Wild, James  
Williamson, rh Sir Gavin  
Wood, Mike  
Wright, rh Sir Jeremy

**Tellers for the Noes:**  
**Rebecca Paul and**  
**Gregory Stafford**

*Question accordingly agreed to.*  
*Bill read the Third time and passed.*

## PETITION

### Coastal Erosion in Start Bay

10.59 pm

**Caroline Voaden** (South Devon) (LD): Coastal erosion has had a devastating impact on residents and businesses in communities across Start bay in South Devon in recent months. Coastal protections have been breached, properties have been damaged and the partial destruction of the A379 Slapton Line will have a significant economic and social impact on the wider area, including on our tourism industry. A petition running online and in my constituency about this issue has reached over 39,000 signatures in just over two weeks, signed by people from across the UK, illustrating the impact on locals and visitors alike. I thank all those in the local community who have gathered signatures.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that accelerated coastal erosion in the villages of Torcross, Beesands and Hallsands has had a devastating impact on residents and businesses including significant damage to properties; and further declares that the partial destruction of the A379 Slapton Line will have a significant economic and social impact on the wider area, due to increased travel times including for the emergency services.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to support coastal communities affected by coastal erosion in Start Bay, including the villages of Torcross, Beesands and Hallsands, in the short and long term.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P003163]

## Kinship Carer Identification

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

11.1 pm

**Tom Collins** (Worcester) (Lab): Sometimes, a child's birth parents cannot look after them. Around 100,000 children in the UK are looked after by the state, and most of us are familiar with the concepts of adoption and fostering. But it is estimated that well over 100,000 children in the UK are being raised by members of their extended family, or by friends of their family; they are being cared for by kinship carers. An ever-increasing number of children are now in kinship care, and staying with a family member or friend has a range of benefits over being looked after by the state. Kinship care can reduce trauma, provide valuable stability and help children preserve their sense of identity and connection to their community.

Yet, despite being both widespread and beneficial, kinship care has remained undervalued and under-recognised by our systems. It is astonishing that, as of yet, councils are under no obligation to ensure that potential kinship placements are always explored and assessed for suitability before children become looked after. Yet children who grow up in kinship care are more likely to be kept with their siblings compared with those in foster care, have better social and emotional wellbeing and better long-term physical health, and are more likely to have stable permanent homes, achieve higher levels of employment later in life and report that they feel loved. Making kinship care the first choice rather than the lucky product of chance is a simple change, and I hope the Minister might speak to its pursuit.

There are other ways in which kinship carers could be put on a more equal footing. For example, many would be helped to stay in active employment by being allowed employment leave rights equal to those of parents who are adopting. That is another simple change that could make a big difference.

There is one way in which our systems are very clearly failing children and their dedicated carers that I would like to address. I would like to share some experiences of kinship carers that, sadly, are typical, as they frequently struggle to prove to hospitals, schools, doctors and dentists that they have parental responsibility.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for rightly bringing forward this issue. I spoke to him beforehand and he knows partly what I am going to say. The Minister might be aware of and want to follow the example of Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland has a higher rate of kinship care—31% of looked-after children, compared with England's 16%. That is largely due to a long-standing cultural emphasis on family placements. There is also the fact that Northern Ireland offers the most consistent support, as all approved kinship foster carers are legally entitled to the same would-be allowance as mainstream foster carers, ranging from £149 to £268 per week. Does the hon. Member agree that, as is often the case, what we are doing in Northern Ireland might be an example of the very thing that he and the Minister wish to see?

**Tom Collins:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising good cases and good examples that we might like to follow. I also appreciate his having spoken to me beforehand about his experiences with the situation in Northern Ireland.

I would like to share the experiences of Clare. She said:

"I rushed into A&E in a complete panic. I was carrying my two-year-old nephew...who was struggling to breathe. The receptionist barely looked up as she asked me my nephew's name and date of birth. Her next question filled me with fear: Who are you? As I answered, she looked up and I knew what was coming—a barrage of questions about why I had taken care of this child. Where was his mother? Could I prove that social services knew he was in my care? And—most terrifyingly of all—did I know that the hospital could not treat him without the consent of someone with parental responsibility? He was struggling to breathe, his face white as a sheet and his chest heaving, while this person was calmly telling me they couldn't help."

Donna's step-grandchild was badly injured. The only thing she could do was call the local authority to see if it would vouch for her. It took two hours for the call to be returned. The child had lost blood and was in tremendous pain. Only once it was explained by the social worker that Donna was the legal guardian did they give him pain relief and begin to treat the injury. However, the injury required surgery and at a hospital in the next county, an hour's drive away, Donna once again had to explain who she was. No one from the first hospital was there to verify that Donna was the carer. She had to call children's services again and wait four hours for verification.

**Melanie Onn** (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): The examples that my hon. Friend cites are incredibly traumatic. These situations are even more complicated for those who do not have legal parental rights and who have an informal kinship arrangement. Has he had any thoughts about what could be done to support those families?

**Tom Collins:** It is true that there is a real diversity in the situations of kinship carers, both in the causes of people finding themselves caring for young people and in the legal structures that they are operating under. We totally recognise that, as we move forward in trying to tackle these issues, we need to be really open-eyed to that full range of different experiences and situations.

Caroline tells her story:

"Eve landed on her arm, screamed out in pain, one look and I knew it was broken. I took her to the emergency department...and she was admitted immediately to the children's ward. An X-ray was taken and Eve was administered morphine. The consultant booked Eve in for an operation the following day. She had been on morphine all night to help her with the pain. The surgeon came round and explained the procedure. Eve was prepped and then the anaesthetist came with a form to sign. He asked who I was. I told him I was aunt and the legal guardian. He then asked to see my legal order. I told him that no one had asked...He said, 'I refuse to administer anaesthetic without seeing the legal document.' I had been up all night with a crying young girl; the last thing I thought about was a legal order. I called my husband, who had to leave work to go home and find the document. It took two hours for the photo ID to be sent...During this time, Eve was hooked up to morphine. We had to wait for the anaesthetist to finish his surgery list to look at the photo on my phone, which was accepted in the blink of an eye."

Steph points out that this happens consistently:

"I have to show copies at all doctors, dentist, school, etc. Any time we have to make a decision for him I have to show proof. Can you imagine if I lost that piece of paper? It's not right having to explain that you are the carer in front of the child again and again. Imagine how the child feels."

Sadly, these situations are typical and, as Steph points out, they can be deeply traumatising for both children and carers.

Christine says:

"I really don't want to carry my SGO with me; I'm worried I will lose it or it will get into the wrong hands."

She is not alone. It is also perhaps unfair of us to expect clinical professionals to recognise the various forms of legal document that are not recorded on any Government system but instead live as paper artefacts with mysterious acronyms such as SGO, special guardianship order, or CAO, child arrangement order. How can we be failing children and kinship carers so badly?

Yet there is hope. Christine goes on to say:

"We should be given a card with a barcode and all the details they need to know so that you can keep it in your purse."

Caroline agrees:

"We need an ID card that will live in my purse, so I don't have to go through this again."

Kinship Carers UK, a national charity based in my constituency of Worcester, has the answer. It is ready to help develop an authorised photographic kinship carer ID card and app for all carers, regardless of the type of legal order. This card would allow kinship carers to live fully prepared for any eventuality. It would allow clinical staff to immediately recognise and validate a kinship guardianship situation and to deliver best practice in trauma-informed care, never requiring a family to retell their story or relive past trauma simply to access basic care.

The benefits go further. Preventing the situation described by our kinship families would save money as well as distress. The cost savings to councils on social worker time no longer spent answering queries or to the NHS in rebooked appointments are hard to quantify, especially as the Office for National Statistics has not managed to identify all kinship children, and health trusts do not record instances of rebook treatments for that reason. Even conservative estimates show a kinship carer ID card paying for itself within a year.

Kinship Carers UK has already been in talks with the Department of Health and Social Care and has received a positive response. It is ready to fundraise to secure resources for development, but talks have stalled, as work on the NHS app pushes a full digital implementation of a kinship carer ID back to potentially 10 years away. For kinship families, that is too long, and we as a Government of action, innovation, partnership and collaboration can do better. With a co-ordinated plan in partnership with the Department for Education, DHSC and possibly the Ministry of Justice, Kinship Carers UK can lead a consortium of charities to realise the ID card and information resources for NHS workers. That could be realised within two years, with later digital integration with the NHS in a decade.

My ask of the Minister is simple: will he and the Secretary of State for Health arrange to meet Kinship Carers UK and myself to formulate a plan with the goal of having authorised kinship carer ID cards issued by the end of 2028, for final adoption by the NHS by 2035? It is time for us to act and do what kinship carers are asking us to do and make the system work for them, not against them. Kinship carers work tirelessly to give the children they raise the very best opportunities in life; let us match their commitment. Let us commit to

ending the stories we heard this evening and begin a new one: when this Government stepped up and delivered the kinship ID card.

11.12 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Josh MacAlister):** I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Tom Collins) for securing a debate on this important matter. Like him, I recognise the enormous contribution that kinship carers make to children's lives. This Government are committed to helping more children grow up in safe, stable and loving homes within their family networks, wherever it is in the child's best interests.

I want to begin by acknowledging the incredible commitment and generosity of kinship carers. By opening their hearts and homes to some of the country's most vulnerable children, they are transforming the future generation. We should not underestimate the life-changing difference that kinship carers make every single day to children across this country. Kinship children and families need support to navigate the very challenging circumstances they find themselves in.

**Mark Swards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab):** The Minister is giving a comprehensive answer to the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Tom Collins). My constituent Natalie had seven nephews and nieces brought to her door and was told by the police and social services that it would be really good if she could take them in. She was then told that she was not entitled to any support whatsoever because it was a family arrangement, but she had not made the arrangement herself. She is a hero for taking those children in. I accept that multiple campaigns state what kinship carers should be entitled to, but would the Minister agree that in this circumstance with these unambiguous details that she absolutely should get the support that she is entitled to?

**Josh MacAlister:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising that point. It is because of stories exactly like that one—from aunts, uncles, grandparents and other relatives across the country who often step into these children's lives at sometimes no notice, waking up one morning to find that they are now responsible for very young children, sometimes babies and newborns—that I recommended a whole series of changes when I undertook the independent review of children's social care in 2022. In that review, I described kinship carers as the “silent and unheard majority” of the care system.

Under this Government, they are now being heard.

I will set out a few of the things the Government are taking forward now and in the coming weeks to change the situation for kinship carers across this country. To ensure that family networks and kinship care are always fully explored—there are good examples in Northern Ireland, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned, and elsewhere in the UK—we are legislating right now to require all local authorities to offer a family group decision-making process such as a family group conference to all parents, or those with parental responsibility, whose child's case has reached the pre-proceedings stage. That will bake in the need for services to engage proactively with the whole family network, not just parents, to establish whether the family themselves have a better answer for looking after that child than

the care system. That, more than anything else, will probably be the factor that shifts the culture within children's social care to put the initial focus on kinship networks.

That will be backed by the roll-out of family network support packages so that councils can fund some of the more informal arrangements that are a way of avoiding the need for children to enter the care system.

**Sam Carling (North West Cambridgeshire) (Lab):** My hon. Friend was a big advocate for kinship carers before becoming a Minister, and he still is. Kinship care is incredibly hard for everyone involved. It often arises from really difficult circumstances, and the family members who make that commitment often give up a lot to do so. Will the Minister join me in paying tribute to Sue Nash, a local volunteer in my constituency who runs the Peterborough Kinship Care Group, which provides support to kinship carers all across Peterborough and North West Cambridgeshire and assists them in sharing best practice and learning among one another?

**Josh MacAlister:** I would be absolutely delighted to recognise Sue Nash and the amazing work that she and so many others are doing across the country through kinship support groups.

The Government have supported the charity Kinship to run 140 peer support groups and training packages across England so that kinship carers have a platform to support one another and navigate the complex systems that sit around the kinship family system. We widened therapeutic help for children through the adoption and special guardianship support fund, for which I recently announced an extension of two years and a 10% increase so that we can continue to meet the needs of adoptive and special guardianship families. We have introduced the first national definition of kinship care, published statutory guidance and appointed a national kinship care ambassador.

We will continue to go further. I know that many kinship carers face financial hardship. That is why the Government will very soon launch a large trial, which will represent the largest single financial investment in kinship carers this country has ever seen, to test the impact of providing a weekly financial allowance equal to the national minimum allowance for foster carers in a number of local authorities across the country. The allowance will not be means-tested and will not impact benefits such as universal credit.

**Melanie Onn:** I thank the Minister for the serious consideration that has been given to this pilot. It is exceptional. We heard from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) what a difference financial support makes. I congratulate the Minister on making sure that this happens for these families, who are not asking for the earth—they're really not. They just need a little bit of help, and they want that money to go towards the children they are looking after.

**Josh MacAlister:** I thank my hon. Friend for mentioning that. The tireless campaigning of so many kinship families over the years has led the Government to the point of setting in train these changes, which will be announced in full very soon. The fantastic work done by the all-party parliamentary group on kinship care, which my hon. Friend chairs, means that we are now in a position to take these steps in the next few weeks.

[Josh MacAlister]

Through the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, we are legislating to require every local authority to publish a clear and accessible kinship local offer setting out the support available to kinship carers and children. The national kinship care ambassador will provide support and expertise to help local authorities to implement that new national duty, and will shortly release a national report summarising learning generated through engagement with the sector. That is the first step in creating a national kinship standard for a consistent kinship care framework across the country, tackling directly the current postcode lottery in support.

My hon. Friend the Member for Worcester raised the importance of kinship carers having employment leave rights equal to those of parents who are adopting. I reassure my hon. Friend and the House that the Government are considering that. We have launched a review of the parental leave system, and it is clear that kinship carers, and the parental leave to which they are entitled, are within the scope of the review. I thank all the carers who have taken the time to respond to the review. We will also improve data by adding a kinship indicator to the schools census in autumn 2026, and launch the first national study focused on children's experiences in kinship care.

It is vital to ensure that children have someone advocating for them in education. We will ensure that the virtual school head role has statutory footing for children in kinship care in 2027. Of course, the generational reforms to special educational needs and disabilities announced today will support many children in kinship families. We know that the legal routes through which kinship care arrangements are made can be confusing, and carry different assessments and entitlements to different forms of support, which is why we have asked the Law Commission to review the kinship legal frameworks. Together, those actions show how serious the Government are about ensuring that kinship carers, children and families are recognised, supported and valued.

On the specific issue of identification for kinship carers, I am aware that there is an existing campaign promoting the need for kinship carer ID, led by Kinship Carers UK. I thank that organisation for the work that it has undertaken to shine such an important spotlight on the issue. It is of the utmost importance that our national health service and other public services have robust systems in place to ensure that parental responsibility is recognised quickly and efficiently in all situations in which a child is no longer being cared for by their parents, whether temporarily or permanently. It is concerning to hear of instances in which vulnerable children have been denied access to appropriate and

timely medical treatment because of a combination of existing processes failing and a lack of understanding by professionals about kinship care.

The issue of professionals not understanding kinship care is not unique to health services. Just last week, I was in Newcastle speaking to kinship carers who told me about their experience working with their children's schools, and the continued need to re-explain the status of their special guardianship order. I have also heard of cases in which kinship carers have copies of their SGOs, but professionals still seek further verification of the validity of those documents. The challenge is not simply to have a document that sets out parental responsibility or the role that a carer has in a child's life, but to ensure that services understand the nature of the orders. I agree that we need a clear way for kinship families to demonstrate where they have parental rights, and that it is a recognised and accepted process wherever it is needed. However, the more pressing concern is ensuring that professionals across all our services recognise and understand kinship care.

I am committed to having conversations with Kinship Carers UK, my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester, the Department of Health and Social Care, the Ministry of Justice, and local authority colleagues to explore the best way to ensure that the situation of kinship children and their carers is recognised and understood, and that they get the support they need in a timely manner, ensuring that public services do not add more stress during what can already be extremely stressful times. Across the House, we agree that kinship carers are remarkable people who step in during extraordinary circumstances and times to give their kin a safe, stable and loving home within their family network. We all agree that it is not acceptable that there are situations in which children are experiencing unnecessary delays in receiving important medical treatment or other public services, due to challenges in providing the legal status of the guardian.

I am grateful for my hon. Friend's contribution to this debate. He is a strong advocate for kinship care, and I thank others for their interventions. I look forward to speaking to my hon. Friend in future about the progress we are making for kinship children and families, and to working with him on the specific issue of ensuring that kinship carers and family members are able to prove parental responsibility as easily as possible, so that they can step up and step into the lives of those children readily and easily.

*Question put and agreed to.*

11.25 pm

*House adjourned.*

# Westminster Hall

*Monday 23 February 2026*

[SIR ALEC SHELBRooke *in the Chair*]

## Firearms Licensing

4.30 pm

**Ben Goldsbrough** (South Norfolk) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 750236 relating to section 1 and 2 firearms licensing.

It is, as always, a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Alec. I refer hon. Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

In preparing for today's debate, I spoke with experts on both sides of this issue. I thank everyone who took the time to speak with me, including the petition creator, Lisa, the British Association for Shooting and Conservation, the Association of Professional Shooting Instructors, the Gun Control Network and a professor of criminology. I also thank everyone who took the time to meet me, and I thank the excellent staff of the Petitions Committee for their support.

Colleagues will be unsurprised to hear that strong views were expressed on both sides of the issue, but what impressed me most was the broad agreement that I found on the need for legislative reform and the need to ensure safety. I know that some hon. Members here today represent constituencies that have been touched by gun violence tragedies in recent years. I trust that everyone here will agree that we must be in full listening mode when hearing from those colleagues. We all want the best for our constituents; we all want to ensure that they are kept safe, and it is crucial that even when Members disagree, today's debate is kept respectful.

**Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): On that point, does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is vital that we consult fully the farming community? Shotguns are not just a sporting accessory; to farmers, they are an essential aspect of their life in order to control vermin, so will he ensure that the debate carries on? The last Government wisely decided not to proceed with this proposal. We have had separate legislation for shotguns and other firearms since 1920. That is really important for farmers, so the current Government should be very wary about proceeding with the proposal.

**Ben Goldsbrough**: I thank the right hon. Member for his intervention. I will be addressing those issues in my speech.

We need to be clear on what today's debate is about. We are discussing a specific policy point: a proposal to merge sections 1 and 2 of the Firearms Act 1968—in other words, to align licensing controls on shotguns with those that already apply to rifles. In introducing this debate, I will do my utmost to explore how we can protect the shooting industry and rural economy, tidy up and update the legislative framework, and ensure the safety of all our constituents. At its heart, the debate is about balance. It is about recognising the legitimacy of lawful shooting and the economic and cultural contribution that it makes.

**Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. I want to pay tribute to a stalwart of the British Association for Shooting and Conservation, Christopher Graffius, who died in his sleep last week. There were many issues on which we had different views, but he was extremely kind and helpful to me when I was a shadow Minister. He had a huge depth of knowledge and passion for the countryside and would have been following this debate closely. He was a true gentleman, and I hope that my hon. Friend will agree with me that we will all miss his kindness, integrity and fellowship.

**Ben Goldsbrough**: That was excellently put by my hon. Friend. All of us who had the pleasure of spending time with Christopher send our heartfelt condolences to his family, because he was, as my hon. Friend rightly says, a gent.

We also need to ensure that we respond to the risk, protect the vulnerable and ensure that our laws reflect the reality of the world that we live in today, not the world as it was 60 years ago.

Let me begin by setting out clearly where we are. In the United Kingdom, there are about half a million gun owners—they are roughly 1% of the population—and about 90% use their firearms for leisure, for sport or for legitimate countryside management. The overwhelming majority of owners are responsible. The National Crime Agency has said that firearms certificate holders are highly unlikely to be involved in serious and organised crime. That important fact deserves to be stated clearly in this House.

The shooting sector is also economically significant. It contributes £3.3 billion a year in gross value added to the UK economy, generates £9.3 billion in wider economic activity and supports an estimated 67,000 full-time equivalent jobs. Those jobs are not abstract; they are jobs in rural pubs, hotels, small family-run retailers, manufacturing, tourism, land management and pest control. They are jobs that sustain rural communities and working people across our country. In my constituency of South Norfolk and those of many across the House, the leisure sector is not a lifestyle choice, but the backbone of the local economy. We must always be mindful that decisions taken in Westminster have real-world consequences in such communities.

At the same time, our legislative framework is undeniably outdated. Much of it dates back to the 1960s and, while amendments made since then, in particular after tragedies such as Dunblane, have strengthened safety, the overall framework has evolved in a piecemeal way. Such reforms, including the ban on handguns, were necessary and proportionate responses to unimaginable horror. They reflected the will of the public and the duty of Parliament to act in the interests of safety. I do not believe that anyone serious about public safety would suggest reversing those protections, but it is equally true that legislation cannot stand still, because the world does not.

**Robbie Moore** (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): The hon. Member is making some important points, but did he note that the Law Commission, in its 2015 report on firearms, did not recommend moving section 2 licences into the section 1 system? He references the points made to do with previous incidents, but the Law Commission was very clear in its 2015 recommendations to the Government of the time.

**Ben Goldsborough:** Later in my speech, I will address some of the reforms that I think are needed. There are pressures on 3D-printed firearms, amendments and adaptations; those sorts of issues are more pressing matters that we need to address, but I will come to them later.

In existing law, the distinction between sections 1 and 2 is clear. Under section 2, an individual may obtain a shotgun certificate and, once it is granted, may own multiple shotguns without specifying each individual firearm in advance. Under section 1, the process is more restrictive: applicants must demonstrate a good reason for owning each firearm; each weapon must be individually authorised; and use is generally restricted to specific land and subject to police oversight. That distinction reflects differences in use, tradition and lethality.

Fortunately, gun violence in the United Kingdom remains rare by international standards. In the year ending September 2025, 4,851 firearms offences were recorded in England and Wales, a 9% decrease on the previous year. That is welcome progress, but behind the numbers are still lives lost, families grieving and communities changed forever.

**Olly Glover** (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): Will the hon. Member give way?

**Ben Goldsborough:** I will continue a little.

In the year ending March 2025, 32 people were killed by shooting. When we look more closely at the figures, we see deeply troubling patterns. More than 60% of women killed with guns were shot using a licensed firearm. That statistic should give pause to everyone in the Chamber. It reminds us that the greatest risks often arise not from organised crime, but from breakdowns in systems that are supposed to protect people. Domestic abuse featured prominently in many of the conversations I had ahead of this debate. Firearms in the home can be used not only as weapons, but as tools of coercion and control. Their presence can deepen fear, make escape feel impossible and turn moments of crisis into irreversible tragedy.

We must also recognise the wider context. Mental health challenges are particularly acute in rural communities, and isolation, financial pressure and barriers to accessing services all play a role. Access to a lethal means during moments of acute distress can turn temporary despair into permanent loss.

**Mark Garnier** (Wyre Forest) (Con): I should alert Members that I am the chairman of the British Shooting Sports Council. On that point about mental health issues, does the hon. Gentleman agree that medical markers on doctors' records would be a perfect solution to that problem, rather than necessarily doing what is proposed in the petition?

**Ben Goldsborough:** I thank the hon. Gentleman; I think he has read a bit of my speech.

Technological change is introducing new risks. The conversion of blank-firing weapons and imitation firearms, and emerging technologies such as 3D printing, are changing the landscape of firearms crime. Such developments do not respect the boundaries of legislation written decades ago. We face a dual responsibility: we must protect public safety, and we must do so in a way that is fair, proportionate and grounded in evidence.

The petition before us, signed by more than 121,000 people, reflects genuine concern. Many petitioners fear that merging section 1 and section 2 licensing would increase bureaucracy, create delays and impose additional costs without delivering meaningful safety benefits. Those concerns are not just abstract; they reflect real frustrations with an already stretched licensing system. Many applicants experience long waits and many police forces face a capacity challenge. Will the Minister ensure that any proposed changes are accompanied by robust economic modelling, including of the potential impact on rural businesses, on employment and on participation?

**Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): As Chair of the Petitions Committee, I can say that the hon. Gentleman is doing a damn good job of opening the debate. The Father of the House referred to farmers needing shotguns to control vermin. The crofters in my constituency have huge trouble with hooded crows, who come to peck out the eyes of lambs—no wonder they need their guns. I wish that Members from the Scottish National party were here today, because policing in the north of Scotland is a shadow of what it was, and the proposals would put an additional strain on those cops. They have not got the time to do all this.

**Ben Goldsborough:** I thank the hon. Member for that intervention.

**Leigh Ingham** (Stafford) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

**Ben Goldsborough:** I am going to make some progress.

We must never fall into the trap of believing that good intentions alone are sufficient. Policy must be judged on outcomes. We must also recognise the distinct nature of different firearms. Shotguns and rifles serve different purposes, they have different characteristics and they are used in different contexts. Farmers and pest controllers rely on shotguns as tools of their trade. Any reform must recognise that reality and ensure that legitimate working use is protected.

At the same time, we can take clear and practical steps to strengthen safety without imposing unnecessary burdens. We can ensure that licensing decisions are informed by the fullest possible information, including appropriate engagement with medical professionals. We can strengthen safeguards in cases involving domestic abuse. We can modernise licensing systems, embracing digital technology to reduce delays, improve consistency and free up police time.

**Edward Morello** (West Dorset) (LD): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Ben Goldsborough:** I am going to make some progress.

We can ensure that legislation keeps pace with technological change, closing loopholes before they can be exploited, and we can ensure that our approach is coherent, joined up and fit for the 21st century. Ultimately, this is not about choosing between safety and the rural economy; it is about recognising that both matter and deserve our attention, and that good legislation must deliver both.

In my constituency and constituencies across the country, people expect us to get this right. They expect us to listen carefully, act responsibly and put safety first while respecting lawful activity and rural livelihoods.

This debate is not about ideology; it is about responsibility to victims, rural communities and the many thousands of people who participate in shooting safely and lawfully. Let us approach the issue in that spirit, seeking not easy answers but the right ones, not driven by fear but guided by evidence, and not choosing between safety and prosperity but delivering both. When we get legislation right, listen, and act thoughtfully and carefully, we strengthen not only public safety but public trust. That is our most important duty of all.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Sir Alec Shelbrooke (in the Chair):** Order. I ask Members who wish to speak to remain standing for a moment. They probably know that it is helpful to tell the Clerks before the debate that they wish to speak, because then they will be on the list and will be called before anybody else. This is a long debate; it can go on until 7.30 pm. If Members leave the Chamber, they are expected to be back for the winding-up speeches, and those speeches may come before Members expect. Some Members have approached me and offered apologies for prior commitments, which I have accepted, but I expect everybody else to follow the protocols.

4.43 pm

**John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Sir Alec. I thank the hon. Member for South Norfolk (Ben Goldsborough) for opening the debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee and the manner in which he did so, in a very measured speech.

I acknowledge the deeply emotive and tragic cases that have been raised in wider debate on this issue and which are perhaps the motivation for the changes proposed by the Government. These incidents shock us all, and I know that the thoughts of everyone in the House are with those affected by gun crime. I thank the more than 400 people in the Scottish Borders, among 120,000 people across the United Kingdom, who signed the petition. I also thank the many constituents who contacted me to express their concerns about these proposals, including Paul Allison and Rob Pile, both from Hawick, Jeremy Bidie from Lilliesleaf and Mary McCallum from Lauder.

The Government's proposal to merge sections 1 and 2 firearms licensing has caused deep concern in our rural communities. Shooting is worth £3.3 billion to the UK economy and generates 67,000 full-time jobs, many in my constituency on the Scottish Borders. The proposal would represent one of the most significant shifts affecting countryside industries in decades and, most important, it would not make people feel safer.

The UK already has one of the most effective and strictest systems of firearms licensing in the world. Between April 2024 and March 2025, only four homicide cases involved a licensed firearm—a similar number to the previous year. Sadly, in many of the cases that I am sure right hon. and hon. Members will raise today, the proposed change would not have prevented tragedy; however, it would have a significant impact on those such as farmers, land managers and pest controllers, who require a shotgun for their job. It could even affect clay pigeon shooting, which is an activity enjoyed by many who do not even consider themselves to be shooters

or part of rural industry. It would also have a negative impact on gun shops—businesses whose expertise ensures that firearms are sold only to those legally permitted to possess them.

Furthermore, plans to merge sections 1 and 2 firearms licensing would place an even greater burden on our already overstretched police forces.

**Manuela Perteghella** (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD): Rural police forces already handle the highest concentration of firearms licensing work in the country. Does the hon. Member agree that merging sections 1 and 2 will increase administrative burdens and lengthen waiting times for law-abiding applicants? Is there not also a risk that diverting more police time to additional paperwork could reduce the focus on illegal firearms and serious organised crime, which pose the greatest threat to public safety?

**John Lamont:** The hon. Lady makes an important point, which nicely leads into my next point. Poorly resourced police forces could be overwhelmed, and might even refuse to accept new applications, which happened in Gloucestershire in 2024. That would have a significant impact on people who rely on firearms for their job and livelihood. I am afraid that this is an example of the Government not really understanding how rural communities work.

**Sir Ashley Fox** (Bridgwater) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree with the concerns raised by the Highbridge, Huntspill and Burnham District Wildfowling Club in my constituency that aligning these licences will put an undue burden on shotgun owners and suppliers, and put increased pressure on our rural communities?

**John Lamont:** That is absolutely right. I do not know the club in question, but that is the same point that many of my constituents and others have made as part of the debate on this proposal.

If the Government wish to improve public safety, I encourage them to accept the proposal for mandatory medical markers, which is backed by organisations such as BASC. They would ensure that medical concerns are identified as they arise, rather than waiting for licence renewal. That proposal has cross-party and industry support, yet the Government have rejected it. However well intentioned, the Government's proposals would not improve public safety, but would simply harm our rural communities and the hundreds of thousands of people who use shotguns lawfully.

**Kit Malthouse** (North West Hampshire) (Con): My hon. Friend is making some important points. We must have an eye, as the hon. Member for South Norfolk (Ben Goldsborough) said, for the overall lethality of the population of firearms. Will my hon. Friend reflect on whether we are in a “careful what you wish for” situation? I am a shotgun certificate holder and an owner of a shotgun. If I am forced to go through the procedure to effectively get a firearms licence, I am much more likely to acquire a firearm, so although the number of shotguns out there might fall, the number of rifles, and therefore the overall lethality of the population of firearms, might actually rise.

**John Lamont:** My right hon. Friend makes an excellent point. It is important that the Government and the civil servants supporting them consider the wider impacts of

[John Lamont]

these changes if they are implemented. Firearms legislation has been crucial to keeping people safe and there are practical, workable measures that the Government could take to improve it, but this proposal is not one of them. It will make it harder for those who work in our rural communities to do their jobs. The Government must listen to the evidence, to those who have responded to the consultation and to the Members across the Chamber. I urge them to abandon these plans because they will not work and they will severely impact jobs, the economy and our rural way of life.

4.50 pm

**Torcuil Crichton** (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Alec. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Ben Goldsborough) for the balanced way in which he introduced the debate. I will say at the outset that my constituents completely understand the need to consult on regulations. The fatal shooting involving a shotgun on the neighbouring Isle of Skye some two and half years ago cast a shadow over all highland communities, and my sympathy and concern go out to everyone affected by that incident.

Notwithstanding that, I come to this debate not in support of shooting but with a conservation concern. Being a Labour MP who believes in radical land reform, I hold no more of a candle for the shooting and fishing brigade than for the urban rewilders who, through the power of their laptop, want to reintroduce rapacious species to hunt flocks of sheep in the countryside. My concern is with conserving the human population and the agricultural and crofting economy that sustains the livelihoods of my constituents in Na h-Eileanan an Iar.

We often hear that in New Zealand, sheep outnumber human beings four to one. In my archipelago, greylag geese outnumber our sheep 10 to one. Literally thousands of these marauding greylags, the largest breed of geese in the British Isles, now find their permanent home feeding on the machair grass on the crofts of the Western Isles, which my crofting constituents crop and use to feed livestock. According to the Scottish Crofting Federation—I declare my membership and support for that organisation—we have gone beyond the tipping point, and these birds are causing significant damage to crops and grass.

The problem is particularly acute in Uist and Benbecula, where the geese can be seen feeding on the precious grassland at any time of day or night and in any season. The damage that they are causing to the crofting system, and dare I say to the distilling process—the North Uist Distillery, which produces Downpour gin, relies on locally grown grain—is now dangerous. Uist short oats, over 1,000 years old, are a dying strain of seed in such short supply that it is now not available for crops all year round. As one of my correspondents put it:

“We are unable to buy because it is in such short supply—because the flippin geese have eaten it all.”

What does all this have to do with shotgun licensing? There is a cull of the geese, fully supported by NatureScot, the national nature agency, but it—and by implication the oats and the economics of crofting in Uist—depends on having local marksmen to shoot the geese. I met the

Uist goose group a few days ago to hear members’ concerns. They, like the vast majority of people who hold gun licences, are the most law-abiding people one would care to meet. They take their firearm licensing and culling work responsibilities very seriously, and they are seriously good marksmen. One member represents the Western Isles at clay pigeon shooting, which would also be affected by the change in regulation, and competes at national level. The shooters have been reporting difficulties in getting gun licences of late, which has occasionally led to individual marksmen not being available to take part in the cull when required.

The islanders are not against firearms regulations—far from it. They see the logic in consolidating licences, but they see practical difficulties, too. The reclassification of shotguns would increase their own administration in getting properly certified, and the rising cost of licences acts as a disincentive to new entrants to the scheme. There is also concern that shooting and culling skills will not be passed on if no new entrants come through from clay pigeon shooting or from holding and handling shotguns. They worry that their skill, which must be maintained and repeated to be kept at a high level, will be lost as well.

There are administrative concerns and practical difficulties for island and rural geographies involving the storage of weapons and ammunition, with shotgun cartridges being much larger than the .223-gauge bullets commonly used in shooting. There is also the issue of transferring shotguns between licence holders and dealers. Borrowing and lending under current regulations is a common enough practice, where there are a limited number of guns or shooters and not all are available at the same time. The burden of administration would fall not only on the licence holder but on the police firearms licensing unit. My constituents speak highly of the highland firearms officers and their expertise. The measures would also have an effect on the limited number of licensed firearms dealers in the Western Isles and the west coast.

We must also consider the tourism impact; there is concern that shooting parties would decrease under the new legislation, but, as I said at the start of my speech, I hold no candle for the sporting or shooting lobby, any more than I do for radical conservationists. My concern, which I hope the Minister and the Government will take into account when considering any changes, is with the protection of crofting and croft land from the menace of greylag geese and, perhaps, the unforeseen consequences of a change in regulation.

Our manifesto in 2024 promised to promote biodiversity and protect landscapes and wildlife. When it comes to crofting agricultural practice in the Hebrides, especially on the machair, we need to cull the geese to maintain the biodiversity of the ecosystem, to maintain the rural population, and to protect us all.

4.56 pm

**Dave Doogan** (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Alec. First, I would like to correct the record; as you can clearly see, Sir Alec, the SNP are very much in this debate, contrary to the claims of the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone).

**Jamie Stone:** I think it is only fair that I offer an abject apology to the hon. Member, and a large refreshment will be his later today.

**Dave Doogan:** It is only fair that I accept both of those from the hon. Member. We are here because of the 121,000 signatures on the petition, and many of the constituencies with the highest counts of signatures are in Scotland, where gun ownership per capita is much higher than it is elsewhere in these isles, for entirely predictable and understandable reasons.

Angus and Perthshire Glens has the highest response rate in the United Kingdom; 550 opponents of the Government's proposal have come forward from my constituency. They have good reason, because whether someone is up Glen Prosen, Glen Isla, Glen Clova, Glen Esk, or Glen Lethnot, or in Strathtay, Strathummel or Strathmore, their possession, operation, use and discharge of their shotgun is just a part of everyday life. It is an essential tool for the maintenance of a rural way of living. As other right hon. and hon. Members have attested, concern is growing that perhaps this Government are not fully conversant—or nearly conversant enough—with what goes on in rural communities.

In terms of the evidence on public safety, I do not think that anybody in the Chamber is minded or motivated to get in the way of something that would improve firearms or shotgun control to protect the public. No one would object to that. What people in this Chamber, and many people outside it, object to is a vast increase in the bureaucratic burden that will deliver no significant increase in public safety.

As other Members have pointed out, during this debate we should remember those who have suffered at the hands of delinquent use of shotguns and firearms. That is vital, but so too is ensuring that any measures to modify the regulation around public safety are effective. Where it is seen to not be effective—and it is clearly demonstrated that these measures will not be effective—we should be very sceptical indeed.

I will not cover again the points that others have made on the well-documented difference in effect and lethality between firearms and shotguns. That substantial difference in lethality is why, dating back to 1920, they have been categorised differently. That difference has not changed; it is the same difference in 2026. If we look to tragedies such as that which happened in Plymouth, the problem that facilitated that tragedy was one not of regulatory impropriety, but of application of the regulation. If the regulation had been applied effectively in that instance, there is a good probability that that tragedy would never have happened.

Around 25% of firearms applications already take more than a year to process and 30 out of 43 police forces in England and Wales have missed the four-month processing target already. Licensing fees have risen by 133% and applying section 1 checks to all shotguns risks overwhelming an already underperforming system, which will present clear demonstrable challenges to our rural communities. Police Scotland operate a single national licensing unit, which consistently outperforms forces in England and Wales—I say that not as a cheap political point but because, quite clearly, if we centralise, standardise and properly resource the licensing regime, we will see substantial improvements in turnaround times.

As well as that, we need far more robust public protections. Do not let me forget to mention that, despite the work that Police Scotland's licensing unit does, many of my constituents and others in Scotland still have to run the gauntlet with the general practice regime, which is by no means straightforward; that is certainly also something that should be looked at.

Strengthening firearms licensing units throughout the United Kingdom would be positive; standardisation of it would be positive; electronic record keeping would be positive, and so would closing the gaps in private shotgun sales by requiring sellers to verify buyer certificates directly with issuing police via a secure online portal. Those are all reasonable and practical changes that can be presumed to have a positive effect on the regime, in contrast to what the Government are proposing with their merger of the two sections.

Today's debate is well attended and people are speaking passionately about the strength of feeling that they from their constituents all up and down these islands—mine included—that there is enough burden on ordinary people in rural communities trying to maintain the countryside in the way that we all expect them to. They are trying to make their farm businesses work properly and deal with the effects of challenges ranging from the family farm tax to employer national insurance contributions, and from the business property relief to the tax on crew cab pickups. Many people across rural Britain are thinking, "What next from central Government?"

**Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con):** A farmer in my constituency who runs a shoot in Hedgerley has told me repeatedly that, if the legislation goes through, he will lose his family-run farm business. This proposal will put him, and many other farmers who run shoots that have kept them viable, out of business. Does the hon. Member agree that the legislation is not the way forward?

**Dave Doogan:** I completely agree that the Government have to look again at it and listen carefully. I know it is a serious Minister who has come to speak to the debate today, so I am hopeful that we will get clear remarks on how the Government intend to properly interrogate the consultation and divine from the responses precisely how seriously licence holders take the issue. Licence holders are not looking for an easy life—if they were, they would not be in the employment they are in. They are not looking for any shortcuts. They are looking for a robust regime, but one that respects and understands the rural way of life.

5.4 pm

**Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Alec. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Ben Goldsborough) for introducing the debate. I also thank the 323 residents of my constituency who signed the petition and the many more constituents who contacted me directly about the matter.

It goes without saying that our first duty as legislators should be to safeguard the public, but in doing so we also have a responsibility to ensure that any change we make is evidence-based, proportionate and operationally sound. Any loss of life is a tragedy and it is important that lessons are learned; but, most importantly, in responding

[Ms Julie Minns]

to tragedy we must be mindful of being led by the evidence. I note in that the response to the petition the Government state:

“legally held shotguns have been used in a number of homicides and other incidents in recent years including the fatal shootings in...Plymouth, in...2021...Recommendations relating to strengthening shotgun controls had been made to the Government by the Coroner in his preventing future deaths report issued in May 2023.”

I would like to place on the record my deeply felt sympathy for the families and friends of all of the victims of that incident, and all those of other shootings.

I have taken time to read the coroner's report and note that the coroner made several recommendations, including nationally accredited training for firearms licensing staff; proper assessment of medical information; ensuring decisions are made at the correct seniority level; improved oversight, governance and audit systems; clearer guidance and consistent application of national policies; and better communication and information sharing. All those recommendations, I believe, are supported right across the House.

However, the coroner was silent on the merging of the two licensing regimes. That is not to say there might not be advantages in doing so. Rather, we need to be clear that the coroner's report in that case did not necessarily recommend it. Key organisations across the shooting sector, as we have heard, including the Clay Pigeon Shooting Association, the British Association for Shooting and Conservation and the National Farmers Union, have raised significant concerns about potential changes. They argue that merging the two licensing systems is unnecessary and disproportionate and that current evidence does not support the claim that such a merger would enhance public safety. With those concerns in mind, it is also important to note that crime involving legally held firearms remains at historically low levels.

At the same time, evidence suggests that licensing departments in our local police forces have been overstretched and inconsistent in applying the guidance as it stands. Adding hundreds of thousands of additional shotgun holders into a system designed for far fewer section 1 applicants risks creating unmanageable delays and increasing the administrative burden and substantial cost to certificate holders and the police. It has consequences far beyond the shooting sports community. Rural economies, pest control, game management, conservation and the businesses that rely on seasonal shooting activity could all be placed under pressure.

**Andrew George (St Ives) (LD):** The hon. Lady is making a very strong point about evidence-based policymaking. She will be aware of the truism of what we do in this place: that we need to draw lines in legislation between freedoms and responsibilities, and in this case between rights and public protection. She acknowledges that the Government should certainly keep the matter under review and that they have come forward with a set of proposals; but, like many other speakers, she seems to be opposed to this particular proposal. Does she agree that the Government should have the opportunity to at least review the policies? Is she effectively saying that the Government need to go back to the drawing board and look at the matter again?

**Ms Minns:** It is absolutely incumbent upon any Government to carefully consider any issue. In this regard, I urge the Minister to approach the consultation with an open mind and not to have a predetermined outcome for the conclusion.

For many, this proposal represents a far-reaching regulatory shift, with consequences that might not have yet been fully understood. The anxiety that has been expressed to me and other Members is not rooted in resistance to safety. My constituents want safe gun use. They want dangerous individuals to be prevented from accessing firearms. What they question is whether creating a larger, potentially more congested system will achieve those outcomes, or whether it risks the opposite by overwhelming the departments responsible for ensuring public safety and taking away these incredibly useful and effective pest control tools from farmers, landowners and pest control agents.

There are other, more targeted and effective, steps that might be taken. Properly resourcing our police licensing teams, ensuring consistent national standards and rigorous application of the Home Office's statutory guidance should be the priority, so that those who should never have access to a shotgun do not get one under any licence and those who use them responsibly in their work and on their land are not penalised for doing so.

I therefore urge Ministers to ensure that any reform focuses on what will genuinely improve safety—properly resourced licensing teams, consistent national standards and measures that address illegal firearms—rather than imposing burdens on those who use shotguns responsibly for work, sport and conservation. Evidence, not symbolism, must guide our decisions. I encourage Members across the House to examine the proposal closely during the consultation to ensure that public safety is strengthened without causing disproportionate harm to rural communities.

5.11 pm

**Stuart Anderson (South Shropshire) (Con):** It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Sir Alec.

I want to put on record that I enjoy shooting. I have also been shot—so I am one who has seen both sides of this equation. I thank the more than 738 South Shropshire residents who had signed this petition as of last week.

As the hon. Member for Angus and Perthshire Glens (Dave Doogan) mentioned, a large proportion of firearm licences are held in remote regions and mainly up in Scotland. However, South Shropshire is among the top two or three areas within the country in terms of licence holders, so this issue is important to my constituents. It has an impact not only on people who use shooting as a pastime, but on farmers and people who use guns for pest control, such as gamekeepers. Shooting also brings a lot of money into rural communities and the rural economy, particularly in the winter months when a lot of the tourist areas—of which South Shropshire is obviously the best—are impacted; it helps to bring extra trade in.

One of the numbers I picked up when researching this topic is that on 31 March 2025 there were around 170,000 section 1 firearm licences. The hon. Member for South Norfolk (Ben Goldsborough), who did very well in introducing this debate, mentioned that there are more than half a million section 2 shotgun licence holders. I will come on to that later, because it will cause

a significant issue if section 1 and 2 firearms licences are merged. Many differences have been mentioned, but they are based not just on the recognition of lethality, but on the user profile—how holders are going to use them and in which circumstances they will be used—which starts to get very complex between the different section 1 and 2 licences.

A person must prove a “good reason” for each section 1 firearm they wish to possess, whereas with a section 2 licence, the holder only needs a “good reason” for having a shotgun. There are also different restrictions on the buying, selling and storing of ammunition, which start to become very complex, given what a shotgun will do compared with other firearms.

I understand the reasons for introducing the changes, but let us look at the two tragic incidents in 2021 and 2024; my thoughts go out to everybody that was killed at that tragic time. First, Jake Davidson murdered five people with a legally held shotgun, even though local police had warned about his unsuitability to carry a shotgun. The merging of section 1 and section 2 would not have made any difference in that tragic incident. In 2024, Nicholas Prosper committed a criminal offence by forging a section 2 certificate to acquire a shotgun and used it to murder three family members. Merging section 1 and 2 would have not made an impact on either of those tragic incidents, horrible as they are.

Let us look at the impacts these proposals will have on my residents and many others across the country. This is a very reasoned debate, and all sides are putting forward measured responses. We all want to see appropriate measures in place to protect citizens, and we currently have some of the most robust measures in place to deal with licensing.

If someone holds a shotgun licence, it is quite easy, over five years, to casually shoot a few clay pigeons, do a few game shoots and occasionally work with a farmer to deal with pest control. It becomes very hard if they then have to go through the same restrictions as under section 1, where specific land is needed to cull deer or things like that. There is a limit to how many people a farmer can allow on their land to do that, and that starts to restrict the ability to do these things.

BASC—I must also declare that I am a member—has done extensive research suggesting that upward of £1 billion of the £3 billion in gross value added contributed by shooting is at risk of being lost overnight, as well as 20,000 jobs. There is also a huge amount of conservation that goes unnoticed, but according to the 2024 “Value of Shooting” report the about £500 million per annum that goes into conservation would be lost. A reduction in shooting would lead to fewer cover crops and less predator control—the list goes on. There would be a huge impact on conservation.

Let us turn to our farmers and the great work they do. We have heard from different speakers about the impact this proposal would have on them. I grew up working on a farm, although I did not live on one, and pest control was part of farmers’ everyday life—hon. Members have mentioned crows and things like that. If someone has to get a section 1 firearms licence, pest control on that farm is not going to happen. There will be a huge impact. The administrative burden on farmers, with everything else they have to go through, will have a massive impact. I have spoken to many of my local farmers, and it feels like this is another attack on their rural way of life.

**Kit Malthouse:** My hon. Friend is making a strong point about the administrative burden, but does he agree that the most burdensome element would probably be the restrictions placed on ammunition? In particular, individual licence holders would have a limit on the amount of ammunition they could own at any one time. I think something like 250 million cartridges are sold every year in the UK, and that would all have to be recorded and auditable; there would have to be an audit trail and probably an inspection regime to ensure that people were not buying or acquiring more than their limit. The administration of that would involve enormous numbers of people and probably result in the end in the acquisition of a huge computer system at vast cost, just to track something that is not at the moment identified as a problem.

**Stuart Anderson:** My right hon. Friend makes a really valid point, which will often be overlooked when people are looking at the difference between section 1 and section 2. People will bulk order shotgun cartridges; they will be able to pick them up when they need them for a shoot, legally, with a licence—they cannot buy them without that licence. As I raised at the beginning of the debate, there are about 170,000 section 1 licences and 500,000 section 2 shotgun licences. The administrative burden for the police would be off the scale, and it is hard to see how they could even deal with this.

That moves me nicely on to my next point, about the impact on the police. As we have heard, the National Crime Agency has stated:

“Legally-held firearms are rarely used”

in criminal activity. On top of that, as I mentioned at the beginning, how on earth will police authorities deal with 500,000 additional licences if they are merged into section 1? That is a significant burden, particularly, as my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) just mentioned, in terms of ammunition. That issue is often overlooked, but people buy pallet loads because they are organising or planning shoots; it is quite a regular thing for people who shoot week in, week out. That will create a significant burden that I do not believe any police force will be able to deal with under the constraints they currently face. I speak regularly with my police authority, West Mercia police, and they do a great job in this area, but the current system already places pressures on them.

This has been a reasoned debate, and it is only fair that I mention what some of my constituents have said. Anthony, who regularly shoots, said:

“This is yet another culture war inspired attack”

on rural communities.” Tom, who is also from my constituency, said:

“the latest proposals seem more designed to punish”

than to legislate. That is the impact; that is how this proposal is landing out there. I know that that is not the intention, and that the Government are listening, and we are trying to have the most reasoned debate on this issue.

The Countryside Alliance has suggested an alternative solution. The hon. Member for South Norfolk mentioned that people are aware that the legislation on licensing might need to change, and the Countryside Alliance has suggested the good idea of having a single, centralised firearms licensing body—like the Disclosure and Barring Service or the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency—which would allow the police to perform their normal roles,

[Stuart Anderson]

rather than becoming a licensing body, which they are not set up to be. A centralised digital system could work with local police authorities, and I am sure the Countryside Alliance has much more information if the Minister requires it.

To conclude, a merger of sections 1 and 2, although it has been set out with good intentions, will have far-reaching consequences that have probably not been thought through in great detail. It will result in a loss to the rural economy, with far fewer people having licences and the police facing an unsustainable administrative burden.

5.21 pm

**David Smith** (North Northumberland) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Alec. I approached you beforehand to tell you that, unfortunately, I cannot be here at the end of the debate because of a Select Committee, so I apologise to the Minister. That is a genuine shame, because this has been one of the most productive and thoughtful Westminster Hall petition debates I have had the pleasure to be involved in during my short time as a Member of Parliament. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Ben Goldsborough) for the thoughtful way in which he opened the debate, covering a wide range of the issues we want to put before the Government.

I recognise that the debate comes in the context of some terrible tragedies, including one in Plymouth several years ago, as well as those in Skye and elsewhere. I want to make it clear that I am not opposed to tight gun controls; in fact, I am very in favour of them, and one of the great strengths of our country, when we compare ourselves with other developed nations, is how we approach gun control. Our thoughts are absolutely with those affected by these tragedies, but I would be grateful if the Government at least provided an exemption for farmers, and possibly others, from the merging of section 1 and 2 licences, if it does go ahead.

Some 483 of my constituents signed the petition, and my North Northumberland constituency contains at least 800 farms, with probably well over 1,000 people working in or around agriculture. A number of them have contacted me about the consultation and the changes to firearms licensing that have been floated.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I declare an interest as a member of the BASC and Countryside Alliance Ireland, and I have had the opportunity to shoot on certain occasions. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that there is little evidence that merging sections 1 and 2 will improve public safety? Indeed, it will do the contrary. For land managers, pest controllers, farmers and gamekeepers, a shotgun and a rifle are the tools of their jobs. If the Government pursue this policy in any way whatever, it will reduce the proven economic, employment, environmental and social benefits currently available to us.

**David Smith:** As my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (Ms Minns) said earlier, we need must base our decisions on evidence. That is why I welcome the fact that there is a consultation, but it should be a genuine consultation on the facts of the matter.

Speaking of facts, I would expect every farmer in my constituency to own at least one shotgun, and that goes for all farmers and agricultural workers across the United Kingdom, of whom there may be up to 300,000. For all of them, as we have heard, shotguns are not a pastime but a necessary tool of their trade, much like a stethoscope, a power drill or a laptop. Farmers are responsible and sober shotgun owners because they are professionals. They know the damage that firearms can deliver, because they are required to use them so that we can eat our food.

There is no evidence base to suggest that it is farmers or agricultural workers whom we need to be worried about. Impositions on farmers will not make us safer; they will just make people worse farmers, because they will spend more time securing the tools they need in order to do their job than doing it. Fundamentally, if we want food, they need shotguns.

Incidentally, it should be no surprise that Northumbria police are the second worst police service in the country for firearm licensing processing times, because their remit covers thousands of farms. I have been assured by them that they are working on the situation, but there is a compelling case for the standardisation of firearms licensing, as we have heard, and I welcome that element being part of the proposed changes.

There are a number of ways to secure an exemption, if that was how we wanted to do it, and to differentiate farmers and agricultural workers—those who need these tools of the trade to do their jobs. That could, for instance, include retaining section 2 for pest control; that could be the categorisation. Or we could simply keep section 2 for those who are clearly working as farmers and agricultural workers. Police forces are clever enough to make a common-sense call on whether an individual is a farmer—usually the tractor gives it away. Alternatively, other policy events have shown the need for a central register of active farmers. Increasingly, we need to distinguish who our farmers are.

**Mr Angus MacDonald** (Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire) (LD): Will the hon. Member consider the impact of defining what a farmer is? Is it somebody who is part time and has another job? Is it a vermin control guy? I do not think we can take out just farmers when considering this, because we are talking about multi-rural employment.

**David Smith:** I am absolutely open to the idea of having a broad category of those who need firearms for their jobs. Farmers in my constituency definitely need them, and that is my starting place, but I am very open to that category being wider than just farmers.

The need for a register may be a reminder to the Government that it is a good idea to know who our food growers are in a volatile world. I know, as we all do in this place, that farmers' mental health has faced challenges. They are isolated and face immense pressures at times. I strongly support calls for empowering GPs to routinely use markers if there is a relevant change in the mental health of a gun owner. We need to provide wraparound support, so that someone can step in when people need help.

North Northumberland farmers and others are safe gun owners. They should not be penalised for using the tools of their trade to grow our food, and it is clear that

a common-sense farming exemption—or some such exemption—would save farmers and police a lot of time, money and stress.

5.28 pm

**John Milne** (Horsham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Alec. I thank the hon. Member for South Norfolk (Ben Goldsborough) for his balanced introduction to the debate.

One of the things we get right in this country is our rigorous gun control laws. In the US, we can see the consequences of slack controls, which have resulted in gun carnage at a horrible scale—no matter what President Trump may claim. The lethality of weapons that are routinely available there is extraordinary. Here at home, we already have strong laws, and I am not convinced that merging section 2 shotgun licensing into section 1 is a necessary further step. As other Members have said, there is a risk of serious unintended consequences for the rural economy and community.

**Olly Glover:** My hon. Friend makes a compelling point about the UK's successes in controlling gun crime to date. Does he agree with the hon. Member for South Shropshire (Stuart Anderson) that the August 2021 murders in Plymouth highlighted significant problems with the implementation of the current regimes around gun checks and that that—as well as any changes to the law—should be a key consideration for the Government?

**John Milne:** Absolutely: let us apply the laws that we already have, as they are well equipped to do the job.

I have been contacted by many constituents about this issue. One constituent, Rob, works as a farm vet, so he is well placed to get an oversight of what is going on. He works with livestock farmers, visits large and small holdings, and sees at first hand how rural businesses operate. He had never written to his MP before but felt it necessary to write to me about this proposal. Rob has seen how shotguns are used responsibly for pest control, protecting animal food stores, managing predation and safeguarding livestock. He understands how tightly regulated the system already is, and he is deeply concerned that a blunt merging of sections 1 and 2 risks placing new financial and bureaucratic barriers in the way of businesses and people who are already under immense pressure.

The proposal to align sections 1 and 2 is presented as a public safety measure, but if that had been in place already, to what extent would it have prevented recent tragedies? The answer is far from clear. The serious failures identified in past cases were ones of process, enforcement and oversight—not failures caused by the legal distinction between shotgun and rifle certification.

This proposal would, however, impose additional administrative burdens on already overstretched firearms licensing units. There are 43 separate licensing authorities across England and Wales, and even more in Scotland. Many already struggle with delays that are measured not in weeks, but in many months. In parts of the country, such as the south-west, it can take years. Some forces have faced backlogs so severe that they have stopped accepting new applications.

**Dr Al Pinkerton** (Surrey Heath) (LD): My constituency is home to the National Shooting Centre at Bisley, and therefore also to the National Rifle Association.

One constituent contacted me to say that it took a year to have the address on their certificate changed, after they moved from Hampshire to Surrey. Does my hon. Friend agree that to improve efficiencies, we need a centralised, digitised licensing regime that enables some of the processes to be sped up, rather than adding further bureaucracy into an already cumbersome system?

**John Milne:** I absolutely agree. We should be doing work to improve what we already have; we do not need a radical change. I question whether taking action that would overwhelm licensing units would actually enhance public safety. Can we seriously expect people to wait years for a licence? We run the risk of turbocharging the black-market demand for guns.

Shooting contributes billions of pounds to the UK and supports tens of thousands of jobs. It underpins conservation work, supports game meat production, sustains rural tourism and hospitality, and provides income in areas where alternative economic activity can be limited. Setting higher barriers to certification will lead to lower participation. The proposed change would be the most significant since 1988, and, according to some estimates, could mean a reduction in the number of licence holders of up to a third. That would be difficult to absorb for farm businesses that are already dealing with rising costs.

We should also bear in mind that the legal test of whether someone is fit to possess a firearm is the same, whether under section 1 or section 2. The background checks, character assessments and medical requirements are already rigorous, and recent reforms have aligned referee requirements. If the objective is public safety, as it should be, we should focus on improvements that would make the most difference—for example, introducing medical markers and consistent medical engagement. During a previous debate in this Chamber, my hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire) set out a more effective approach to identifying vulnerable or potentially dangerous individuals.

**Jim Shannon:** In Northern Ireland, we already have strict medical controls. Those work, and that is because of the participation of shooting organisations and individuals. Perhaps when the Minister is summing up, she could consider taking a glimpse at what is done in Northern Ireland, as that might be a way forward.

**John Milne:** I think a trip to Northern Ireland is on offer to the Minister, and I am sure that she would have an excellent host in the hon. Gentleman.

**Jamie Stone:** I mentioned killing hooded crows in an earlier intervention, and I think one way that we could boost the industry that the hon. Member is talking about is by eating more game. I am not for one instant advocating eating hooded crows, or cormorants, which I am told they eat in Iceland—although I do not fancy one myself. But game is terribly good food, and children love it once they get a taste for it. I do not know why we do not offer pheasants on school menus. It would save the Exchequer a lot of money to eat the game that we shoot.

**John Milne:** I thank my hon. Friend for his suggestion. I am a big game meat fan, so I am certainly ready for that.

[John Milne]

Moving to a centralised, fully digitised licensing body akin to the DVLA or the DBS, with real-time verification at the point of sale, would directly address weaknesses, improve consistency, reduce fraud and allow police forces to focus on law enforcement rather than administrative licensing functions. If we are serious about safety, that is where our attention should go. The wrong kind of reform could damage viable farm businesses and undermine food production for no clear benefit.

I urge the Government to listen carefully to rural communities, licensing professionals and the evidence. Let us modernise licensing and strengthen the medical safeguards. As a result, we will improve public safety while supporting this valuable industry and community.

5.36 pm

**Lizzi Collinge** (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Alec. I thank the hon. Member for South Norfolk (Ben Goldsborough) for his excellent introduction.

I came here today because I want to listen to the arguments and help inform my thinking about gun licensing. This debate is about one very narrow aspect of shotgun licensing and, while my instinct is always towards stricter gun control, my starting point has to be that any change to the law must make people safer in a meaningful way. It should not add complexity or bureaucracy unless there is a clear and proportionate safety benefit.

I am proud that Britain has strong gun control. Public safety has long underpinned our approach to gun control, and that is reflected in our relatively low levels of firearms offences. Shotguns have legitimate uses, both for sport and animal control. The process for obtaining a shotgun licence is simpler than that for other firearms. Police must be satisfied that the applicant can be trusted with a firearm, has a good reason to own one and will not endanger public safety. At the moment, shotgun licences are generally granted unless there is a good reason to refuse one, whereas rifles, which are more powerful, require a higher level of proof. They require applicants to demonstrate a good reason for the use of each firearm.

The consultation that the Government introduced asked whether those tests should be joined together under a single framework to make application rules for shotguns the same as those for rifles. The current framework has worked well for the vast majority of licence holders, but we have seen tragedies with legally held firearms, such as in Plymouth in 2021 and Woodmancote in 2020. The Government therefore launched a consultation on whether the existing distinctions still made sense. I came here today because I am genuinely undecided. I do not know the best way forward, so it has been interesting to hear the debate, particularly the details of coroners' reports and of what underpinned the tragedies that we have seen with legally held firearms.

I grew up in a very small Cumbrian village of about 300 people. I may have shot a few tin cans in my time, so I understand that the vast majority of gun owners are responsible, and I understand how important shooting is to rural life. A number of my rural constituents have reached out to share how these potential changes would

affect their community. I am glad that the Government are committed to listening to what is said about the role that shooting plays in the rural economy and in rural culture. My constituents have reminded me just how strict the safeguards that are already in place are—background checks, medical markers, police interviews and renewals every five years are not trivial hurdles.

Of course, there are substantial differences between the ways that shotguns and rifles are used. Shotguns are generally less concealable, more associated with game and pest control, and less commonly used in organised criminality than other firearms. However, at the same time we have to look at the logic of the system. There are practical difficulties to having different legal tests for different weapons, and it can feel inconsistent to the public, particularly to those who are not used to being around guns and the legal use of firearms. It can be difficult for the police to apply different tests.

Of course, those who have been bereaved by gun violence, those who have been harmed by guns, those who work in domestic abuse settings, and those who have experienced domestic abuse in which firearms were a part will rightly ask what we are going to do to help prevent future tragedies. Given how deadly they are, we of course need tight controls on weapons; I think that everyone here agrees with that. There have already been important steps in this area to try to prevent harm, including a greater focus on screening for any signs of potential future violence, and police interviewing partners or household members, where reasonable, to spot signs of domestic abuse or other red flags.

I will touch on suicide prevention. We know from studies of suicide prevention that restricting the means of suicide can save lives. That is why we have controls on the sale of paracetamol, and why we have blister packs for medication. Interrupting the suicidal impulse before harm can be caused is really important. Shotgun deaths are a very small proportion of total deaths by suicide but people who attempt suicide by shotgun normally die. Making it harder to obtain a gun could possibly prevent impulsive acts or accidents.

The question before us is not whether we want to prevent tragedies; everybody in this Chamber wants to do so. This is about whether aligning the licensing regimes would reduce deaths and serious harms, whether any benefits would justify the additional burdens placed on applicants and police forces, and whether there would be any unintended consequences. I know that police forces are already under pressure on the licensing of firearms.

**Stuart Anderson:** The hon. Member is making an excellent speech, in coming here today to try to find those answers. On the police force side, West Mercia currently takes about 12 months to renew a licence. Licences are for five years. My constituents say that they start to apply at the three-year to three-and-a-half-year point. If, for some reason, someone leaves renewal until six months before it is due, they will have six months without a licence that they might need for their job. There are already huge pressures on the police; does the hon. Member realise how big a concern that is?

**Lizzi Collinge:** The hon. Gentleman makes a very interesting point. We already have backlogs for firearms licensing. Some people rely on firearms for their living. If there are changes to the licensing laws, those need to

come with proper resourcing to make sure that they are actually enforceable. As we have heard in this debate, it does not really matter what is on the page; it matters what happens in reality—as with any law that we pass. That needs to be thought about very carefully.

We need to make sure that these rules would meaningfully increase safety, not just ramp up bureaucracy, and that they are evidence-led, proportionate and targeted at genuine risk. I will continue to listen; this debate has been absolutely fascinating. I will also listen to my constituents, the police, and experts in lots of different areas. I urge the Minister to ensure that any way forward be informed by the evidence and by the practical realities on the ground.

5.43 pm

**John Cooper** (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Alec.

Scotland has been talked about quite a lot here today. Policing in Scotland is separate, but the proposed changes would affect Scotland, and it is worth having a look at some of the figures associated with Scotland. Figures from the British Association for Shooting and Conservation show that there are something like 68,000 active participants in shooting in Scotland, and many of them are in my Dumfries and Galloway constituency—it is not quite a gun by every fireside, but it is not far away. Much of the shooting in my area is not about toffs; it is not about people helicoptering in to shoot grouse. Obviously, there will be some people who use guns as tools of the trade, but it is mostly very much locals—locals who enjoy rough shooting, keep dogs and will go out of an afternoon in the beautiful Galloway hills and may fire off only one or two cartridges at pheasants, which are of course a non-native species.

Shooting is also a great driver of tourism in my area. The area struggles, because it tends to be “go-through”—we have the port of Cairnryan, which is very close to the Northern Ireland constituency of the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—but we are trying to make it “go-to”, and shooting is one of the things that can help us with that.

BASC puts the total economic activity in Scotland from shooting at around £760 million. That is not an inconsiderable sum considering the economy of remote and rural Scotland. It is a big number, but I like to bring it down to a smaller scale. I think of businesses such as D&W Countryways in Newton Stewart—a small shop that sells various items of clothing that people need when they are out and about, because we do occasionally get rain in Dumfries and Galloway. It also sells shotgun shells and associated items. That business would potentially disappear under this new burden, because the number of shotgun owners would reduce dramatically. That would leave a gap on the high street, and we have no end of difficulties with our high streets at the moment. We also have places such as the Penninghame estate, which, unusually, is a converted prison. It is trying to bring in high-end shooting parties. That is a great generator of the thing we lack most of all in Dumfries and Galloway: jobs.

Depopulation is what kills areas like mine. When remote and rural Scotland suffers depopulation, it tends to be disastrous. Those jobs help insulate us from and protect us against that. With deference to my hon. Friend the Member for South Shropshire (Stuart Anderson),

I do shoot but I have not been shot. I would like to keep it that way, if at all possible. As a schoolboy, I saved the life of someone who managed to shoot themselves—to be clear, the round that he shot himself with was stolen.

The issue is that it is very difficult to legislate to prevent criminals from doing things. Obviously, they tend to ride roughshod over the law. We have heard from hon. Members that shotgun and firearms owners tend to be among the most punctilious, careful and law-abiding people. They tend to avoid any involvement with the police; in fact, very often the only contact they will have with the police is when the police come to check up on their firearm certificate. As such, we are possibly looking at—to coin a phrase—the wrong target, and I wonder what problem we are trying to solve.

Obviously, there are horrendous incidents, which are very difficult to prevent, and we must think about the people who are victims of those things, but we have some of the tightest regulations in the world already. I know how tight they are: when I was renewing a shotgun licence and the police came to interview me, they asked me where I kept the shotgun and I jokingly said, “Under my wife’s side of the bed, because no one ever goes there.” The officer said, “Shall I note that down?” and I said, “No, let’s not go there.”

This is a really serious matter. The tone of the debate is tremendous, but let us not pretend for one second that this is a tidying-up exercise. The proposed change is really quite profound, and the move to merge sections 1 and 2 would have a deleterious effect on shooting, and thereby on the rural economy. The key message I am picking up—I hope the Minister might touch on this—is that better enforcement trumps more law for the sake of more law. There is no point in us passing laws here and saying, “Never mind the quality, feel the width.” The danger is that we pass the law that, unfortunately, we pass most often in this House: the law of unintended consequences. There are better ways to address the nut that we are trying to crack.

5.48 pm

**Rupert Lowe** (Great Yarmouth) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Alec. I should start by saying that I am a shooter and a fisherman, as the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Torcuil Crichton) referred to, and an active farmer—I do all those things.

I am entirely opposed to this latest urban metropolitan attack on rural Britain. Merging licences would create yet more delays, more cost and more bureaucracy. Responsible gun owners are not the enemy. Let us be absolutely clear who we are talking about. We are talking about farmers, gamekeepers, sportsmen and women, and rural families. They are people who follow the law to the letter, store their firearms safely, and undergo background checks, police scrutiny and ongoing oversight. These are not criminals; they are among the most law-abiding people in Britain.

Keeping section 1 and section 2 licensing separate recognises an important distinction in both law and practice. These systems have existed for decades and they work. They provide proper oversight while allowing legitimate, responsible ownership. Merging the two systems would not target criminals, because criminals, by definition, do not apply for licences. They do not fill out forms.

[Rupert Lowe]

They do not submit to background checks. They do not follow the law. They do what they want. They do not care about what we say in this place.

**Lizzi Collinge:** I appreciate the point that the hon. Gentleman is making, but does he accept that there have been instances where firearms have been lawfully obtained by people without a previous criminal record who have nevertheless used them to commit harm, particularly to themselves or someone very close to them?

**Rupert Lowe:** Of course some incidents have happened, but then incidents have happened with baseball bats and with other instruments that have not been banned and will not be banned. The hon. Lady makes a valid point, but the issue needs to be looked at very carefully, because I think there are less incidents of the kind she described than she might think.

Merging licences would create more bureaucracy, as I have said, as well as more delay, more cost and more pressure on police licensing units, which are already struggling to process applications on time while the police prioritise prosecuting people for social media posts. Trust me—I understand this more than most. I had my guns seized in a late-night armed police raid following the Reform party's false allegations about me. It took me months to get them back—a process based on subjectivity, which is dangerous. Despite Reform's best efforts, I remain both a shotgun and a firearm licence holder, and a gun owner.

Further delays would have real consequences for rural livelihoods, and for a long and respected British tradition that contributes to conservation, employment and the rural economy. Public safety is not improved by targeting those who already comply fully with the law; it is improved by focusing on illegal weapons, organised crime and those who present a genuine risk.

Responsible firearm owners are not the problem. They are citizens who follow the rules, respect the law and deserve to be treated accordingly. We should not burden them with unnecessary bureaucracy that achieves nothing except making their lives harder. I urge the Government to rethink these plans and to finally start treating responsible gun owners with some respect. Further gratuitous conflict between the urban and countryside communities is an undesirable development when there is no justification to puerile legislation that is based on ideology, not common sense. Criminality with legally registered shotguns and firearms is not the issue; a malign civil service agenda is.

5.53 pm

**Jerome Mayhew** (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): Thank you very much for chairing the debate, Sir Alec. I congratulate the hon. Member for South Norfolk (Ben Goldsborough), my constituency neighbour, on opening it in such a measured way, which I think has been noted by all of us.

I need to start by declaring my interests. I hold a firearm certificate and a shotgun licence. I believe that I am still a member of the Countryside Alliance; I have not checked recently, but it is very good at taking the direct debit. I also represent a rural community. That is

not a formal declaration of interest, but it is why I am here today. In my constituency, there is, overwhelmingly, a mixture of bafflement and anger. People are baffled because they cannot see what problem the Government are trying to fix with this potential legislative change, and they are angry—very angry. I recognise that it may not be the Government's intention and that we are talking about a consultation, so it is early stages, but this feels like another ignorant attack on rural communities, with no proper interest as to the adverse consequences caused.

We have heard many excellent speeches today, and I will do my best not to repeat the points that have already been made, but I want to start by acknowledging that this is a deeply emotive issue, because every death caused by a gun—or any other weapon, for that matter—is in itself a tragedy. However, we are legislators and it is our duty to put aside emotion, focus on the facts and take a rational approach, even if that can sometimes lead us to slightly uncomfortable and emotive responses, so let us try to do that.

It is the first principle of government, when considering curbing individual liberties, that the Government must have cause and that the benefit sought must significantly outweigh the damage caused as a result of the removal of liberty, so what is the issue that the Government are trying to deal with here? The quick answer is public safety, but how much crime has been committed by legal holders of shotguns? Of all crime, it is a vanishingly small percentage. In fact, 0.00006% of crime is undertaken by legal holders of shotguns. I am told that homicides with legally owned shotguns averaged 3.8 per annum over the last decade, so people have a significantly higher chance of winning the lottery than of being a victim of homicide with a legally held shotgun. It is about a one-in-15-million chance.

To put that in context, 50 people tragically lose their lives every year because of faulty cooking appliances and 40 lose their lives because of accidents with ladders. We are talking about an average of 3.8 people tragically losing their lives as a result of legally held shotguns, so that is the size of the prize: reducing a long-term average of 3.8 deaths per year—but to what? It will not be to zero, because any system will contain a remaining risk. Sensibly, we all recognise that no system would be 100% successful, other than a system that removed all shotguns from the public, and we know that even if the Government were successful at removing all shotguns, other forms of lethal weapon are readily available.

There are more than 200 deaths per annum as a result of knives. For as long as we like to cook food and eat it, knives will be available, so even if the Government were successful at reducing the number of fatalities because of legally held shotguns, it does not necessarily follow that there would be a reduction in the number of killings. We are talking, at best, about a partial reduction in the number of killings from a maximum of 3.8, and yet the potential cost of the proposals that the Government are considering is enormous.

We have already heard from right hon. and hon. Members that there would be a huge impact in the form of a need for increased police resources. People like me apply for a firearms licence, and at the moment about 3,700 of those are renewed each year, which places a significant administrative burden on our police forces. On average, 150,000 shotgun licences are renewed annually.

Even if we look just at the economic cost of the application fee, that would amount to an additional cost of £7 million, and that is before the cost of the police resources. Many people will think that it is not worth the candle and will give up shooting because it is simply too onerous. Other Members have already talked about the potential loss of about 20,000 full-time equivalent jobs and a loss to the economy of getting on for £1 billion.

**Kit Malthouse:** My hon. Friend is giving us a fascinating perspective on the statistics, but if the Government were interested in reducing the overall harm from firearms, does he not think that there would be greater benefit from taking all the police effort that we acknowledge would go into the enforcement of this wider regime, and focusing it on those firearms that are more likely to be used in crime? If smuggled handguns, converted antiques or replicas, and blank-firing guns that are brought in illegally were enforced against, would it not have a bigger impact on harm than this measure? My hon. Friend has spoken to the tiny number of incidents involved.

**Jerome Mayhew:** My right hon. Friend is of course right. I do not have the data—I am trying to stick with data in the argument I am constructing—but the principle he mentions is a sound one. If we focus our resources in the area where the risk is greatest, we are likely to have a better beneficial impact.

[PAULA BARKER *in the Chair*]

The Countryside Alliance estimates that the measures will have a huge impact on the value of shooting to the economy, with a loss of about £875 million. And for what gain? This is the difficult bit, because I am going to consider the value of a life. Of course, in one sense, every life is priceless, but in policy terms, we already attribute an economic value to life. In my other job as shadow Rail Minister, I asked the Office of Rail and Road to give me the economic cost of a saved life on the railways; the answer is £4 million. It is worth spending £4 million on a piece of infrastructure if, over the course of its use, it saves a life. That is the rule of thumb for rail. For road transport, it is actually much less than that.

I am not suggesting that every death has the same value economically, because as a society we would be prepared to pay a lot more to prevent a violent murder than even a tragedy on the railway. But that is the level of magnitude at which, in policy terms, we as legislators have decided the economic value of a life sits. However, with these measures, the Government appear to be proposing a change in the law that will have an impact of several hundred million pounds—getting on for £1 billion—in order to reduce the number of deaths from a maximum long-term average of 3.8 to some number less than that, but still well above zero.

On any rational basis, there is simply no argument that holds water that suggests the price of 20,000 jobs and an economic hit, particularly to the rural economy, of close to £1 billion, in order to save a percentage of 3.8 lives over the course of a year, is a credible policy position. I recognise that what I have said is deeply uncomfortable, because we are talking about real people who suffer from tragedies. I join everyone in my deepest sympathy for people who have been affected by this issue in their family, or among their friends, but as a

legislator it is my duty to look beyond that. That is why I have set out the data—to help the Minister approach this issue in the right way.

I have said that my constituents are baffled, but they are also angry, because this feels like a tin-eared approach to the rural way of life. The measures fail to understand the community connections that bring rural communities together, and it feels like a Government who would propose them have no idea of who we are or how we live our lives. It feels like the Government do not understand and do not care—or perhaps they do, which would be even worse, but instead disapprove of our way of life. It feels like an attack on the rural way of life and economy without justification. The previous Conservative Government, as has been mentioned, did not consult on the proposed change to the law for a very good reason: it is a terrible idea.

6.4 pm

**Ben Lake** (Ceredigion Preseli) (PC): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Barker. I thank the hon. Member for South Norfolk (Ben Goldsborough) for opening the debate in such an effective and measured way. Some 292 of my constituents signed the petition, and I thank all those who have contacted me in recent weeks to relay and explain their concerns about the proposed merger of the section 1 and section 2 firearms licences. A number of hon. Members have already outlined those concerns, so I will try not to repeat them, other than to summarise them. The proposed changes, although perhaps well intentioned, are disproportionate and will not realise the Government's stated objective.

I will begin with the concerns about the proportionality of the changes. Many of my constituents pointed out that many of the safety checks in the current regime are similar for both section 1 and section 2 applications, including medical and background checks. There are very good reasons for those checks. Every constituent who has written to me or visited me in surgeries recently has said that they support tight gun controls. They are proud of the fact that this country has a very good record on firearms regulation, but they do have questions of the Government about the proposed changes, which I shall relay to the Minister. As far as they can see it, the changes and the proposed merger would not improve safety by much for the public, not least because the suitability test—the core tenet of both section 1 and 2 applications—is already robust.

My constituents also wanted me to convey that, even if we were to agree that the proposed merger would enhance public safety, whether or not it would realise that objective would depend on the efficacy and resourcing of the system. They have been clear to me that the current system is already creaking under great pressure. Across England and Wales, there are 43 different police licensing units, each operating with slightly different standards. The inconsistency in the system has been described to me as a postcode lottery. Surely we can agree that we need a more standardised, nationally consistent approach to processing applications for firearm licences.

Perhaps most importantly, the capacity of the existing system would struggle to deal with the proposed changes. At present, I think there are more than 500,000 section 2 certificates. There are concerns that that number would

[Ben Lake]

reduce under these proposals, but even if we were to have only 250,000 certificates for what would currently be section 2 licences, it would still be more than double the number of section 1 licences at present. There are severe delays and units under pressure across the country, with significant inconsistencies in processing times—from 12 weeks to, at the worst, more than three years. Even if we were to agree that the merger was a good idea and would enhance public safety, can we be confident that it could be implemented, given the operational difficulties that the current system is shouldering?

Like many of my constituents, I argue that instead of the proposed merger of sections 1 and 2, we should look at the system itself. Other hon. Members have already mentioned the need for greater resourcing, which I very much support, but a bolder idea, which was presented by the hon. Member for South Shropshire (Stuart Anderson) and others, is a centralised national licensing body. It strikes me as eminently sensible that we should have a specialised, centralised body, much like the DVLA for motorists, to realise efficiencies of scale, introduce expertise and ensure a more effective system overall.

My other concern, if we proceed with these changes, is that an already overwhelmed system will find itself even more overwhelmed. Firearms applications, which our predecessors correctly deemed to carry more risk because of the greater lethality of the weapons, will inevitably be prioritised, so there are clear risks that what were section 2 applications will fall to the bottom of the pile. That means that many of my constituents—farmers and those involved in pest control—will find that they are facing even longer delays in securing the relevant licences so that they can operate and perform their crucial function in the rural economy.

**Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The hon. Gentleman's point about the DVLA is an interesting one. If I consider my casework load over the years, I would not necessarily hold up the DVLA as a model of the advantages of centralisation.

Are we not losing sight of the fact that, when Parliament legislated in the first instance for two different classifications, it did so for a reason? That reason, in essence, has not changed. There is a risk that, in pursuing something that is essentially procedural, we come away at the end of the day with worse outcomes, which are surely what matter to all those who care about the safety issue.

**Ben Lake:** I must concede that the DVLA was perhaps not the best of examples to cite. The right hon. Member is correct that the original Firearms Act—back in 1920, I believe—differentiated between the smooth barrel and the rifle for very good reasons. Others have touched upon that, and my hon. Friend the Member for Angus and Perthshire Glens (Dave Doogan) elaborated on the point about the differentiation of lethality and effective range. Those are very important points that surely remain salient and key if the objective of this exercise is to ensure public safety.

Leading on from that point, my concern is that, if we merge sections 1 and 2, we will have an already overwhelmed system where licence applications for less risky weapons fall to the bottom of the pile, with an impact on legal

and lawful uses such as those in my constituency—whether for conservation, farming or sport—or, controversially, we might have a situation where the riskiest, most dangerous weapons also find themselves lost in an overwhelmed system, which is surely not what we want. That is one potential unintended consequence that we should be mindful about as legislators.

For those reasons, I should like to urge caution and impress upon the Government that we need to be mindful of many unintended consequences, and that, rather than looking to embark on this very significant change, we might be better off first looking at ways of making the current regime work better. I commend to the Minister the idea of a centralised body—not like the DVLA—that could free up police resources to tackle illegal firearms and ownership. That would represent a far better way forward and achieve what I think we all want, which is to improve public safety.

6.13 pm

**Blake Stephenson** (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Barker. I thank the hon. Member for South Norfolk (Ben Goldsborough) for introducing what has been a really balanced and thoughtful debate. I hope that the Minister has found it useful and will take lots of useful comments from it as the Government move forward with their plans. I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this important debate on firearms licensing and the reforms we need to strengthen public safety while retaining the trust of responsible shooting communities.

I begin with a case that has been referred to by hon. Members in this debate: the tragic Prosper case in Bedfordshire, which revealed serious vulnerabilities in our current licensing system. An individual, Nicholas Prosper, obtained a shotgun using a highly convincing forged certificate, which appeared legitimate to a lawful vendor. On the following day, he went on to commit a triple murder within his own family. That was on my doorstep in north Luton. Police later confirmed that he had also planned an attack on a local school, prevented only through the swift actions of Bedfordshire's officers.

Just last week I again met with a member of the extended Prosper family—someone whose life has been utterly shaken by this tragedy. Listening to their grief, their unanswered questions and their determination that no other family should ever endure such devastation has shaped my contribution to this debate. It took courage for them to speak out and to speak to me about something so profoundly painful; I am grateful, and I am hopeful that their experience will help drive the reforms needed to prevent such a tragedy from ever happening again.

For that family and for our wider community, change must be about preventing real, life-altering harm and ensuring that the system designed to keep people safe cannot be exploited again. It is important to acknowledge that that case was not an isolated vulnerability. There has been at least one further attempt to use a similar forged certificate; fortunately, it was spotted by a vigilant registered firearms dealer, whose professionalism prevented a potentially catastrophic situation. However, we cannot depend on vigilance and instinct alone—public safety must rest on systems, not luck.

At the centre of this issue lies the national firearms licensing management system. It is an outdated platform, unable to provide real-time certificate validation and no longer fit for the demands placed upon it. The Home Office is now tendering for its replacement, which is expected in mid-2027.

Crucially, the new system will introduce real-time online certificate verification, akin, in my mind, to the MOT checking service that people are familiar with, and is strongly supported by the police, licensing experts and responsible shooting organisations. The replacement platform will enable wider modernisation, new digital licensing formats, stronger anti-fraud measures and a public portal allowing certificate holders to update basic information themselves. Those changes will reduce pressure on police forces, improve data accuracy and support a move to a more efficient and secure licensing environment.

Serious concerns remain in the interim, however. The seven-day review mechanism is helpful, but it cannot eliminate the risks exposed in Bedfordshire and across the country. If a firearm is transferred before police notification, there is a dangerous window in which harm can occur. Bedfordshire police made clear to me in our interactions that the system must be capable of validating a certificate before the transfer proceeds, in order to make the secondary market much safer, and I agree.

Some have suggested that the solution lies in a far more radical structural change: merging the section 2 shotgun licensing regime with the stricter section 1 system used for rifles and higher-powered firearms. I understand why people reach for a radical change in the wake of tragedy—it happens after every tragedy, and we have the strictest gun laws in the world as a result. Constituents understandably want reassurance and decisive action to ensure it never happens again, but the evidence simply does not support the approach being proposed by Government, for all the reasons explained by hon. Members here today.

Shooting organisations and licensing specialists tell me that merging section 1 and 2 would not materially improve public safety. Both regimes already require rigorous background checks, suitability assessments and medical scrutiny. Tragedies have arisen from failures in the system, outdated technology and administrative gaps, not from the distinction between certificate types. A merger would generate significant unintended consequences: increased strain on already overstretched police licensing teams, slower processing times, higher costs for responsible shotgun owners, and damage to rural economies, game management and conservation work.

At the same time, I must highlight the unacceptable licensing delays that residents and shooting organisations consistently report—delays that are particularly acute in my Mid Bedfordshire constituency, which falls under the Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Hertfordshire firearms licensing unit. That unit is now formally recognised as the worst performing in the country: some applicants are waiting up to two years for renewals or grants, placing livelihoods, rural businesses, conservation activity and community clubs under real pressure.

**Leigh Ingham:** One of my constituents, Martin Price, who holds both a section 1 and a section 2 licence, got in touch with me before this debate. He is clear that

ownership is a privilege and safeguards are essential for the system, but he also describes significant delays as well as inconsistency between forces where applications are in place. Does the hon. Member agree that, whatever the outcome of the consultation—although I have had to dip in and out of the debate, I think the message has been pretty consistent—improving consistency and efficiency across firearms licensing departments would be a vital step in ensuring public safety?

**Blake Stephenson:** I absolutely agree. My constituents, like the hon. Lady's, want a system that works, that is swift and that is safe.

The delays coincide with rising licensing costs, meaning that responsible, law-abiding certificate holders are paying more while receiving a poorer service. That is not sustainable, and any reform must ensure that those who follow the law are not unfairly penalised by the overstretched system. Crucially, merging regimes would not address the real vulnerability: the absence of real-time verification. I would be grateful if the Minister in her summing up could assure us that she understands that distinction and will take on those views as she moves forward with the legislative proposals.

Across Bedfordshire, more than 1,000 residents, including nearly 300 in Mid Bedfordshire alone, have signed the national petition calling for section 1 and section 2 licensing to remain separate. Their message is clear: we must focus reforms on the real risks, not on measures that burden those who already comply with the law. A modern verification system will improve public safety; a structural merger of shotgun and firearms licences will not.

I want to put on record my thanks to Bedfordshire police for their professionalism, insight and commitment to preventing further loss of life, and for the compassion they have shown to the Prosper family and the wider community. Their insight into the system's shortcomings must shape the reforms that follow—we must empower them, not encumber them. Can the Home Office Minister now set out the precise timetable for delivering real-time verification, what interim safeguards will be put in place before 2027, and how both technological and legislative reforms will be accelerated?

Our objective must be to ensure that what happened in Bedfordshire can never happen again. We owe that to the Prosper family, every family in the county and every community in the country—but we also owe it to the responsible shooting community to ensure that regulation is proportionate and supportive, rather than a block to their participation in country sports, conservation and stewardship.

Before I conclude—I should have said this up front—I declare an interest: I have worked closely with BASC on this issue and I have been on a deer management course with BASC to improve my knowledge of firearms. I am not a firearms licence holder, but I have in the past held shotgun licences.

6.23 pm

**Charlie Maynard** (Witney) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Barker. I thank the hon. Member for South Norfolk (Ben Goldsborough) for introducing this important debate so well and with such balance—I really appreciate it.

[*Charlie Maynard*]

I am proud and relieved that we live in a country with some of the strictest gun laws in the world. Obviously a painful history that got us to that point, but it is something we are fortunate to have. As my hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (John Milne) mentioned, there are many places that have much worse laws than we do.

In December, emails began flooding in to my inbox on this issue. For some reason, one Saturday morning at about 5.30 am I found myself awake and wanting to dig into the issue on the internet. I dug into the murders that had happened, how they had happened and what had gone on. Obviously there was a mix; I grew up with shotguns and I am still a shotgun owner and certificate holder, but not a firearm holder, and I had not understood in detail section 1 versus section 2. As I looked into that, my thought was, “Holy smokes, this is going to change rural life enormously if it goes through.” That gave me the heebie-jeebies—it led to two hours of internet research and an email to my spokesperson to say, “Let’s get on top of this fast, if we’re not already.”

The consequences of this proposal will be enormous and very damaging. Various Members have come to the debate with a great deal of knowledge, and some have attacked the stats on the number of people who have been killed. Every death is one too many—I get that—but we must also highlight where the licensing is or is not working, as well as the changes that came in last August.

What happened in August 2025? New checks were brought in and changes were made to the references system. For example, the number of referees required increased from one to two, anyone connected with domestic abuse or violence can no longer be licensed and other medical checks were introduced. Those new changes are only six months old, so it is important that we see how they land and their impact—hopefully a very positive impact—before we take further steps.

As many Members have said, the firearms licensing system, with the 43 licensing authorities, is a mess. It is an excellent candidate to be consolidated and run as one unified, well-resourced, digitised system that allows people to get recertified quickly and effectively. I recommend that we head in that direction as quickly as possible, rather than in the direction of the proposal under discussion.

I am still relatively new to this House, but one of the reasons we are all here is to serve our constituents well. We want to keep the temperature of debate low, because situations such as this, where people have died, matter. If we ramp up the temperature, I do not think we are serving ourselves or our communities well. These are serious issues, and they deserve a serious debate. However, our rural communities are certainly wary, and measures such as the family farm tax and the sustainable farming incentive have really hurt them, so I urge the Government to go very carefully. I want to avoid any narratives of this elite or that elite pushing things down on people; that does not do us any good. We all need to stay away from such a narrative, and taking this issue on its merits would really serve us all well.

6.27 pm

**Robbie Moore** (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Barker. I thank the hon. Member for South Norfolk (Ben Goldsborough)

for introducing this important debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee. More than 121,000 people have signed the petition, and I believe it has been signed more quickly than any petition the Committee has received for a long period of time.

I think we will all agree that this has been a very worthy debate. I have engaged my constituents in Keighley and Ilkley on this important issue: most recently, BASC kindly invited me to speak at an event at Ilkley rugby club. Many farmers, land managers, pest controllers and those participating in game shoots and clay pigeon shoots turned up to express their concern about the Government’s aspiration to merge section 1 and section 2 licences under the Firearms Act 1968.

It is widely recognised that firearms licensing is effective at protecting public safety, and there is no evidence that moving section 2 to section 1 will improve that protection. I think it is right to look at the data, as my hon. Friend the Member for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew) rightly went into. Of course, any death is horrendous, but we know from Home Office data that homicides committed with legally held firearms have averaged about 3.8 deaths per year for the past decade—or, to put that in context, around one for every 15 million of the UK population. Meanwhile, an average of 280 people die each year from knives, and 32 people died in 2023 alone from handling fireworks.

I raise those points because it is important to understand that, despite the coroner’s report into the deaths in Plymouth and the level of reasoning he came out with, he did not conclude by recommending the merging of sections 2 and 1. Therefore, I ask the Minister why this consultation is even being brought before the public and why the Government want to pursue this narrative, despite the data held by the Home Office and despite this proposal not being a recommendation of the coroner.

I raise the point about fireworks because, as a member of the Petitions Committee, I know that we have had two petition debates about them in this Chamber in the last 12 months alone, which were attended by many Members of Parliament. It has been an ongoing request that Governments of the day bring out tougher regulations on fireworks, yet nothing has been forthcoming from this Government. However, here we are in another petition debate, on a consultation that has not been requested by the wider community or by those who hold firearms, and that consultation is forthcoming.

We all know that, despite the regular tightening of controls on firearms since the 1968 Act, there has been no correlation between the rate of deaths from firearms and increased controls. I therefore advocate, as the coroner did in the Plymouth deaths, that we focus on all the other aspirations that have been rightly expressed, around tightening the existing control mechanisms, rather than on merging sections 2 and 1. I also note, as I indicated in an intervention earlier, that the Law Commission’s 2015 report on firearms law did not recommend moving section 2 into section 1. Therefore, I again ask the Minister why this consultation is coming forward.

It is important to look at the inefficiency we are experiencing across the country in the way that firearms licensing departments are working. There are 43 licensing authorities, and the vast majority are operating inefficiently. A quarter are taking more than a year to process grant applications, and some are taking well over three years.

Many of those who want to renew their applications or make them in the first place are suffering delay. Processing applications under section 1 for rifles involves more checks and more costs, so this proposal will inevitably place a greater burden on those 43 authorities. Why, therefore, are we going forward with it despite it not being requested?

I also want to look at the impact on the wider shooting community. Shooting alone is worth £3.3 billion to the UK economy. It generates £9.3 billion in wider economic activity and supports 67,000 jobs. Those jobs are not limited to licence holders: there is also the farming community; those carrying out pest control; gun shops; shooting grounds, instructors and coaches; ammunition, firearms and accessory manufacturers; country clothing; pubs, hotels and the hospitality sector; farms and estates; game dealers and processors; vets; feed merchants; agricultural services; and event staff. All of those will be negatively impacted if the Government pursue their agenda. Therefore, I urge them not to pursue this narrative.

In my view, this issue is actually about politics. Under this Government, firearms licensing costs have increased by 138%. We have seen the Government ignore the scientific information put to them about how our moorland is controlled, and ban the controlled burning of heather. We have seen them attack other country pursuits, and we have seen the family farm tax and other negative impacts on our wider farming community. I therefore think the Government are actually pursuing our rural economy in a negative way.

To conclude, I ask the Government why we are in this scenario. I have mentioned the data and the fact that we have had request after request to bring out tougher regulation on fireworks, yet we see nothing from the Government. Meanwhile, we are in a scenario where the courts, the Law Commission and coroners have specifically not put forward this recommendation, yet we are debating it in the House and a consultation is forthcoming. I would like to understand from the Minister why we are even having this conversation about the consultation.

6.35 pm

**Greg Smith** (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Barker. I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, and particularly to the deer management course that my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Blake Stephenson) also attended last December, which was hosted by the British Association for Shooting and Conservation. For transparency, I should also say that I am a member of the Countryside Alliance and of BASC, and both those memberships predate my election to this place. I myself shoot, and I am a shotgun certificate holder.

However, I have come to this debate to talk not about my own passion for shooting—even though I am my own MP—but about the importance that shooting has for my constituency. Some 477 constituents signed the petition, and I have had many emails from fellow shooters in the constituency, as well as from those considering taking up shooting, having their first go at a clay ground and applying for a shotgun certificate. Indeed, I cannot exemplify the importance of shooting to my constituency better than my constituent Stuart, who

said that you only need to spot the game feeders in the fields from any train passing through Buckinghamshire to see how important shooting sports are in the constituency.

Of course, it is not just shooting sports that would be affected by the changes in the petition. As others have said eloquently throughout the debate, yes, it is about shooting sports; yes, it is about the clay grounds; yes, it is about game shooting; but it is also about farmers, pest control and predator control. It is about things like deer management, and if we did not have deer management and people willing to get a firearms licence to stop our countryside being overrun—people who often get called out by the police themselves to deal with a deer that might have been knocked over in the road and need humanely dispatching—we would be in great difficulty.

My hon. Friend the Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) concluded by saying that the wider economic impact is not just on those who hold a shotgun certificate or a firearms licence; it is also on people such as David and Nicky Florent in my constituency, who run—despite its name, it is in Buckinghamshire—the Oxford Gun Company in the village of Oakley, which is a gun shop and shooting ground. They do sell not just shotguns, rifles, cartridges and ammunition, but the clothing ranges, boots, glasses, ear defenders and everything else that goes into shooting at large. That would be at risk if the change that is being consulted on by the Government, and that this petition is about, goes ahead.

As others have said, this change could lead to a huge number of people saying, “It’s just not worth it any more.” They would not put themselves through the process of renewing a shotgun certificate or even getting one in the first place. After the last significant reform of the licensing regime—back in 1988—there was a decline of about a third in the number of participants in shooting. Estimates out there suggest that this change from section 2 to section 1 would lead to a similar reduction in the number of people wishing to put themselves through the process of renewing their firearms licence.

**Jamie Stone:** The hon. Gentleman is talking about the benefits. At the moment, the United Kingdom has a stable system; he mentioned people thinking about taking up shooting, and we have a system whereby people are taught correctly, from the word go, to point their gun at the sky or at the ground and, when they finish shooting, to clean it, put it away and lock it up. Those are invaluable rules, and we should be very proud of how well we run things in the United Kingdom. I only have to go back to 2006, when Dick Cheney unfortunately managed to pepper somebody at a quail shoot in the United States. The safety standards we have in this country are the envy of the world.

**Greg Smith:** I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman; he puts it very well. Someone said earlier that holding a shotgun or a rifle is a privilege. Yes, it is a massive privilege, but it also comes with an absolutely ginormous responsibility, and I believe that everybody who legally holds a shotgun certificate or firearms licence takes that responsibility very seriously. They have often been taught from a young age the proper safety protocols around handling a firearm, and the importance of keeping it locked away and of cleaning it, which is important for one’s own safety when handling a firearm—if it is not clean, that can lead to significant problems. We should

[Greg Smith]

acknowledge just how seriously legitimate, legal, properly licensed shotgun and rifle owners in this country take their responsibilities. We all want a safe system; for those of us who have the privilege of owning a shotgun or a rifle—I do not have a firearms licence, and I have never applied for one—it is imperative that there is a safe system underpinning that, because it protects those who own them as well as those who do not.

My hon. Friend the Member for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew) went through the statistics in considerable detail, so I will not repeat them. It is worth acknowledging that our hearts go out to anyone who is affected by or a victim of a tragedy at the hands of someone wielding a firearm illegitimately—whether they somehow cheated the system and got a certificate or not. However, fatalities involving legally held firearms are extraordinarily rare: around one in 15 million annually, as other Members have said. The significance of that, which I do not think anyone else has mentioned in the debate, is that that falls far below the Health and Safety Executive's intervention threshold of one in a million. That is not to say that there cannot be proportionate, evidence-based reforms to the licensing system. In many respects, there probably should be, to tweak it and make it safer. But what I do not see—I do not think anybody in the debate has advocated this—is that merging section 2 into section 1 will solve any problems or make anybody in our great country safer. It would, however, bring considerable cost and bureaucracy. I am lucky, with Thames Valley, to have one of the better-performing police force firearms licensing departments in the country. But as others have said, some forces have been found considerably wanting when it comes to new grants and renewal lead times.

On the other side of the coin is the enormous financial cost to our economy: shooting is worth £3.3 billion each year in its own right and generates £9.3 billion of wider benefits. My constituent Scott believes that merging sections 1 and 2 could cost £1 billion a year and 20,000 jobs, and evidence from the Countryside Alliance looking specifically at alignment between sections 2 and 1 shows that it would reduce the total value by £2.38 billion in the first year, with a loss of between 13,600 and 17,400 full-time jobs.

This debate is looking at a live consultation. I urge the Minister to stop and reflect on what she has heard this afternoon and what the shooting community in my—and I dare say in everybody's—constituency is saying on this matter. As she goes through the process of reforming police forces, per se, she should perhaps pause any conversation on the changes until we know what those police forces will actually look like. I have heard arguments on the other side of the debate about a national firearms licensing scheme, and particularly that the existing system has local officers who, although they cannot know every certificate holder or licence holder in their constituency, are closer to the people they are licensing. The Minister should look at the bigger picture—where we have significant change to the policing landscape—and pause, look at the evidence, and understand the potential for significant damage to both safety and the economic survival of this sport and of wider conservation activity.

Finally, a lot has been said about this being an urban versus rural matter, but I do not believe that it is. My constituency is entirely rural. Yes, there are many shotgun certificate holders and firearms licence holders in my constituency, and there are clay grounds, many shoots and lots of farms. But if we look at the number of certificates issued across the country, this is just as important to many people who live in our cities. Every year, 21,000 certificates are issued by the Metropolitan police to London residents. This matters to people who shoot, no matter where they live. They might go to a game shoot or a clay ground in the countryside but live in our cities. This is far bigger than just a rural issue.

6.46 pm

**Sarah Dyke** (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): It is an honour to serve with you in the Chair, Mrs Barker. I thank the Petitions Committee, and I thank the hon. Member for South Norfolk (Ben Goldsborough) for introducing the debate in such a balanced manner. I also thank the 445 petitioners of Glastonbury and Somerton.

Gun controls should be strengthened only when there is a clear necessity to protect public safety. We Liberal Democrats share concerns that any changes to firearms licensing, including the reclassification of shotguns, must be evidence-based and go hand in hand with the appropriate support. The Health and Safety Executive suggests that intervention is required only when the risk has reached one death per 1 million of the population. In the UK, the average rate of homicide using legally held firearms stands at one per 15 million people. That is not to say that any death is not a tragedy, but what it does show is that we already have one of the most robust firearms licensing systems in the world.

However, balancing responsible gun ownership with public safety and public perception is a delicate task. The Liberal Democrats stand opposed to the Government's proposal, as the current evidence indicates that there is no need to merge section 2 and section 1 licences. Both licences already require rigorous and identical health and safety checks. However, the system must be sufficiently resourced, and currently it is not. The policy poses a real risk to rural communities, both culturally and economically, so I would welcome the Minister's feedback on what evidence the Government hold that indicates that individuals who own more than one gun are more likely to commit more crimes, and on how the proposed changes will deliver actual improvements to public safety.

Last week, I held an informative roundtable discussion in Street in my constituency, with more than 20 stakeholders from the shooting industry. The key feedback from that group was that the merger is ideological, and that it is a solution in search of a problem. One attendee, Steve—the owner of Ivythorn Sporting in Street, which specialises in firearms—reiterated that his primary responsibility, above being a gun dealer, is to protect public safety. He is acutely aware of his responsibility and will sell guns only to those he deems fit, with the correct paperwork. Like many gun dealers, Steve feels that he is just as effective at spotting fake licences as the licensing authorities, because officers in those authorities are given very little training.

As we have heard, shooting is a vital part of the rural economy, contributing over £3.3 billion annually and leading to £9.3 billion in wider economic activity, supporting 67,000 full-time jobs, and investing £500 million into conservation efforts every year. It is highly likely that increasing barriers to obtaining a firearms licence will drive people out of shooting. It has been estimated that this could lose the economy over £1 billion and cost more than 20,000 jobs in rural areas.

For farmers, making shotguns subject to more stringent section 1 licensing controls, particularly in relation to the location, use and purchase of ammunition, would eliminate the flexibility that they require to undertake effective pest control. Cameron, the farm manager at The Newt in Somerset, told me that he currently has multiple gun users active on his farm estate. In future, if he is required to monitor this and keep a record, he said that it is very likely that he would revoke those permissions. That would impact pest control on his estate and businesses whose job is to control pests. In addition, for many farmers operating under increased economic pressure, diversification into game or clay pigeon shooting can sometimes be the only option to keep their farm business viable.

I have also spoken to Andy, who is the founder of Avalon Guns Ltd. in Street. He sells thousands of shotguns and rifles every year, and has built a successful business from the ground up since opening in 1983. He told me that this policy would simply devastate his business and the UK gun trade, because 90% of UK gun sales are of shotguns, and the proposed merger would decimate demand and force licensed gun shops across the country to close for good.

Although the Liberal Democrats are supportive of the Government's consultation on this policy, there is much frustration across the industry, because the consultation on the merger was expected before Christmas. Can the Minister provide some clarity today about when the consultation will be forthcoming and further details about what will be considered in the Government's intended policy? The wait is fuelling great uncertainty within the sector. It is affecting future planning and the viability of many rural businesses.

I turn to sport, because the merger risks damaging the sporting pathway that has underpinned British shooting successes. Clay pigeon shooting is often the entry point for young people taking up shooting as a competitive sport, providing a safe and structured introduction to it. Shooters must hold a full section 1 licence and potentially formal membership of every club that they might visit. That would make it nigh-on impossible for shooters to qualify for professional events. Team GB won gold in the men's trap event and silver in the women's skeet event at the last Olympics in Paris. We should celebrate and nurture British shooting's success and widen access to participation, not narrow it down.

I have also spoken to some enactors, such as Jane, from Montacute, who is a member of the English Civil War Society. This merger will significantly increase the costs of control for blank-firing, muzzle-led weapons, with black powder weapons requiring a separate certificate for use. The change will not only add to the costly administrative burden that enactors already face. Their society plays a key role in stimulating interest in our

cultural past, but this policy risks losing enactors if they are not given the same exemption as those using theatrical guns.

Currently within the UK, responsibility for the issuing and implementation of firearms licences rests with the local police force's firearms licensing department. As we have heard, each of the 43 licensing units operate with different standards for assessing and issuing licences.

At this point, I should declare an interest as a shotgun licence-holder—or indeed, I was until about a month ago, when my brother and I decided that we should give up our licences because we do not use them enough. I hold a licence in Somerset; my guns were kept in my brother's gun cabinet on a farm two miles down the road in Dorset. It was such an administrative headache that he and I sadly decided, given the amount of use we got from them, to give up our licences.

That just proves how difficult things can be, even with some very simple elements. This proposed merger, while well intentioned, risks adding significant costs, complexities and delays to an already overstretched and underfunded system. Under the proposal, those wishing to use or own a shotgun would be required to go through the same application processes as a rifle owner. Police firearms licensing departments would be required to carry out more stringent checks on potential shotgun owners, necessitating land inspections, enforcing specific restrictions on where and when a gun can be used, and requiring a justification for possessing specific firearms.

The merger will add enormous administrative pressure to police forces, which are already overwhelmed by the current system. Over a quarter of forces take more than a year to process applications, and some take up to three years. For example, in the second quarter of 2025, Avon and Somerset police completed 99% of its applications within four months; however, Cambridgeshire police was able to process only 37% of its applications during the same period.

Rural police forces, which are responsible for areas with the highest level of gun ownership, will now face a potential fourfold increase in workload, with no corresponding uplift in resources. Will the Minister confirm what assessment has been made of the scale of the additional workload that police forces will face because of the proposal? Currently, Avon and Somerset police's firearms licensing department is not able to take telephone enquiries due to its unmanageable workload. Without the additional resource that the Home Office proposals will require, it will simply not be able to provide a viable service.

In addition, the current process is archaic, bureaucratic and reliant on a paper-based system. It is simply not fit for purpose, and it is certainly not fit for the future. If driving licences—although, as we have heard, they are probably not the best example—and passports can be processed digitally, surely it would be more efficient for gun licences to be issued in that way, especially when we consider the 138% increase in gun licence fees brought in last February. The fee hike was implemented to help to tackle processing inefficiencies across all departments, but concerningly, less than half of all forces have used the additional resources to improve their processing timeframes.

[Sarah Dyke]

Those are the reasons why the Liberal Democrats are calling for a centralised national firearms agency that would shift to a digital processing system, standardise fees, reduce wait times, and ensure that safeguards, such as medical markers, are implemented effectively and consistently. Such a reform to gun licensing authorities would remove the administrative burden crippling police licensing departments, allowing the police to focus on their primary role of frontline community policing.

Many across the industry feel that the Government are trying to find a solution to a problem that the evidence suggests does not need addressing. Stakeholders argue that the current system would work if it was enforced and resourced properly, rather than there being a gap in the current law. Firearms licensing must protect public safety while remaining fair, workable and proportionate for those who hold licences responsibly and lawfully.

6.58 pm

**Matt Vickers** (Stockton West) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Barker. I thank the hon. Member for South Norfolk (Ben Goldsborough) for so ably bringing forward this debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee, as well as the more than 121,000 people who signed the petition. It is clear from the turnout in the Chamber and the many valuable points made that the measures proposed are important and will have huge consequences for rural communities.

A number of Members have been incredibly active in lobbying the Government on the issue, including my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Stamford (Alicia Kearns)—not known for being quiet, let's be honest—who has been unable to contribute to the debate due to her shadow role. She is determined to ensure that the Minister knows about the impact on her constituents in the real world.

Public safety must always be the first duty of any Government, but when we legislate, particularly in an area as serious as firearms, we must ensure that what we do is proportionate, evidence-led and genuinely effective. If we are to change the law, we must be able to demonstrate clearly that those changes will actually make the public safer. Many such changes have been set out today, but the Government's proposal is not one of them.

The tragic cases that we have heard about in this debate are heartbreaking, and our thoughts remain with all those affected. Where there have been failings in the licensing system, and where improvements are needed, the Government must act. That is why previous changes were made following instances involving shotguns. It is also why the previous Conservative Government committed £500,000 to support the roll-out of a national training package developed by the College of Policing and the National Police Chiefs' Council in an effort to strengthen firearms licensing standards. Standards matter, as the Home Office has repeatedly made clear.

The UK already operates one of the strictest and most effective firearms licensing systems in the world. Between April 2024 and March 2025, there were 522 homicides. Of those, 32 involved a firearm, but just four involved a licensed firearm—the same figure as in 2023-24. Every loss of life is a tragedy, but the data shows that licensed

firearms account for a very small proportion of those crimes. The National Crime Agency's 2025 report confirms that firearms crimes in the UK remain among the lowest in the world.

That is not a reason for complacency—far from it. We have seen recent reporting highlighting the growing threat of more powerful weapons being smuggled into the country. That underlines the importance of robust enforcement against illegal firearms. It does not automatically follow that additional burdens on lawful, licensed owners will address that threat. In fact, as has been pointed out, it perhaps illustrates the better use of targeted resource. The question raised by the petition is whether merging section 1 and section 2 licensing will actually improve public safety or simply create more cost, delay and bureaucracy without delivering meaningful benefit.

When the policy was first announced, the Government said that a consultation would be published by the end of 2025. Can the Minister confirm when that consultation will be finished and give assurances that the voices of rural communities and shooting organisations will be properly heard? There is significant concern about the proposal among those groups, including the British Association for Shooting and Conservation and the Countryside Alliance, which have raised these issues directly with the Minister.

Section 2 licensing, while distinct from section 1, is not lax. It involves robust checks and safeguards that are integral to protecting the public. The petition does not call for weaker rules, it calls for properly maintaining the current prudent framework. Shotguns and rifles are different, and Parliament has long recognised that distinction in law. The regulatory framework reflects differences in use, function and risk. If the Government now wish to remove that distinction, then they must explain clearly how doing so will enhance public safety in a way that is proportionate to the hundreds of thousands of law-abiding shotgun owners who will be affected.

We should also recognise that, for many, shooting is a legitimate and long-standing sport. If aligning the regimes increases cost, complexity and delay then the reality is that entry-level access will become harder. That risks pricing out younger participants and those from ordinary working families, making the sport less accessible at the grassroots level.

The likely outcome of such a change will be fewer shotguns in lawful use. That will not be without consequence. In rural communities, shotguns are not simply a sport or leisure item, they are tools of work. Farmers and pest controllers rely on them. Wildlife management and conservation efforts are closely tied to responsible shooting activity. Surveys show that habitat management and conservation linked to shooting cover millions of hectares. Ground-nesting species such as curlew and lapwing are often cited as examples of wildlife that benefit from such management.

We must also consider the wider economic impact. Research cited by the Gun Trade Association estimates that aligning the regimes could reduce gross value added in the UK shooting sector by £875 million, with a broader impact of over £2 billion across the wider economy. Protecting the economy carries costs, but those costs must be justified by clear, demonstrable gains in safety.

There is also a practical point: the firearms licensing system is already under strain. Data from the National Police Chiefs' Council shows that many forces struggle to meet service level agreements, even after the recent fees increase. A January 2026 inspection by His Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary and fire and rescue services found "significant backlogs" in some collaborative licensing units, including cases outstanding for more than two years. Adding further complexity risks compounding those delays and placing additional burdens on our already stretched police forces. Some have suggested a compromise: that any merger should not proceed until the licensing system is demonstrably efficient and effective. Given that the Government have also floated broader reforms—including possible centralisation of firearms licensing—is there not merit in ensuring the system works properly before imposing any further structural change?

There is fear that moving shotguns from section 2 to section 1 will disproportionately impact rural communities and law-abiding citizens who use their shotguns responsibly. Our firearms legislation has helped keep Britain safe. It must remain robust and prevent those who pose a danger from accessing weapons. However, it must also be proportionate, workable and grounded in evidence. At present, I have yet to see clear and compelling evidence that this proposed alignment would deliver any level of additional public safety that justifies the costs, disruption and impact on rural Britain. Public safety must be strengthened by evidence, not weakened by unnecessary and disproportionate bureaucracy. If the Government cannot clearly demonstrate that this proposal will make the public safer, then they should not proceed with the delays, costs and bureaucracy that it will create.

7.6 pm

**The Minister for Policing and Crime (Sarah Jones):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Barker. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Ben Goldsborough) on an excellent introduction to what has been an excellent debate. It has been measured and thoughtful, and I thank Members from across the House for an informative and useful debate. I hope that it does justice to the number of people who signed the petition and are looking to this place and rightfully asking us questions.

We have heard a lot of points made in different ways, but which are actually quite similar, and I want to reflect on those. The starting point is that nobody in this House is minded to get in the way of safety. As the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) said, nobody in this place wants to do anything that will harm more people or that will do anything to increase the number of people who are killed through the use of firearms. That is clear—and has been very clear from everybody who has spoken.

Another point that has been very clearly made is that when looking at the potential changes that we are consulting on, we need to balance quite a lot of different aspects. First, there is the basic principle of freedoms versus responsibilities. There is also the bureaucratic burden of changing the licensing system versus the economic necessity and benefit that the use of shotguns brings—Members have talked about that in many different ways throughout this debate. We have heard powerful

facts from BASC, the Countryside Alliance and others on the economic benefit of shooting. I think that the wider economic benefit is £9.3 billion—although the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley said £3.9 billion—and there are tens of thousands of jobs as well. The need to strike the right balance has been a powerful message, which I have very much heard.

Finally on the principles on which we can all agree, everybody would say that we need to think about this in terms of responsibilities and a common-sense approach instead of ideology. We need to get this right, and I have heard that loud and clear. Some Members talked about how their constituents perceive a lack of understanding of rural communities from the Government. As Members would expect me to, I reject that. Someone could think that I, as an MP from Croydon, do not know much about shooting, and they would not be wrong. I have been clay pigeon shooting, but that is the extent of my knowledge. There are, however, people in my constituency who have signed the petition, and the benefit of my position is that I have access to a huge array of experts, colleagues from across the House, organisations and others who can educate and inform me. It is my business to be educated and informed on these issues.

**Stuart Anderson:** I hope that the last three hours have been an informed debate that will help the Minister shape a way forward. Without a doubt, if the two licences merge, additional resources for the police will be needed, at huge cost. Will the Minister seriously look at putting that money into stopping illegal weapons on the streets, rather than merging these two licences?

**Sarah Jones:** I will come to that. In short, I do not think that we should look at one thing at the expense of another at the same time. We are capable of tackling several things in several different ways, but I will come to that later.

A basic principle that we can all agree on is the need to avoid unintended consequences, in whatever we may or may not do. I have heard that loud and clear. I have had multiple conversations with MPs, colleagues and organisations on that front already. I should acknowledge Christopher Graffius, who has very sadly died after a long illness. I met him both in opposition and in government recently, and he was still working very hard. He made a tremendous contribution not only in his role in BASC, but in supporting the all-party parliamentary group on shooting and conservation. He was very forthright in his views, as probably all hon. Members in the Chamber might have experienced, but he always argued clearly and strongly in the interests of the community that he represented. My condolences go to his family, friends and colleagues at this difficult time.

There is one issue on which I diverge from others in how I look at this issue. Some Members said that they could not see the problem that we are trying to fix. Christopher used to give statistics to me about more people drowning in a bath than dying from a licensed shotgun. I understand that argument, up to a point, but there is something powerful about the gravity of granting a licence. As the state, we hold the power to allow somebody to hold a weapon. That is different from spending money to avoid accidents. We should understand the burden on the state of granting a licence.

[Sarah Jones]

Although cases where people have been killed are small in number, they are uniquely horrific for their impact on the immediate family and community, and on the country. I think all of us in the Chamber are old enough to remember Dunblane; we are headed for its 30th anniversary. It was an enormously difficult time not just for that community, but for the whole country. There is something slightly different about the giving of a licence and how we think about that, which we need to consider. I approach that as something that gives me a sense of responsibility.

Let me say that we are looking at doing things in due course. I know that the “in due course” answer is not always satisfactory for the Opposition, but that is the answer. We are not minded to do one thing or another; we are conducting the consultation and listening to the evidence and the debate. There are a range of different things we could do: from doing nothing to completely merging sections 1 and 2, and a whole raft of interventions in between.

Some Members asked me to confirm that we would take into account the voices that we have heard expressed today, which included those in the rural community and the urban community—a point was made about the number of licences granted in London—and of course we will. I understand the points about unintended consequences and needing a balanced system. The point of the consultation is to try to understand those issues.

Members also said, “Don’t do this; do that.” I sort of understand that, but surely we can do more than one thing at a time. Lots of people pointed to something that we are already beginning to think about: calls for centralised licensing. Members will know that we published the White Paper on police reform recently and we are setting up a national police service. That is an opportunity to look at whether we should have a national licensing system. I think there would need to be some local element at all times, because visits to the home, for example, are made by local police and we would need to retain that, but there is an interesting conversation to be had as we go through the reform process and the opportunity of setting up a national police service: “Actually, is now the time to have a centralised licensing system?” That is something that I am happy to look at and have already had conversations about.

Points were made about the licensing system, including about how slow it can be and how different it is in the 43 forces. Again, the police reform programme is looking to reduce the number of forces, and if we had a national police service, that could help us with standardising training. The College of Policing has introduced a new system of training, and I am going to go and have some of that training next week so that I can understand what it is and how good it is. As the hon. Member for Stockton West (Matt Vickers) said, there is new training in place.

There is huge inconsistency, and we need to make improvements across the country to the speed with which licences are granted. His Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary and fire and rescue services is conducting a thematic review at the moment, and it has highlighted so far—

**Robbie Moore:** Will the Minister give way?

**Sarah Jones:** Yes.

**Robbie Moore:** I am interested to understand why this consultation is before the public. It goes against the grain of the Law Commission’s 2015 report and the coroner’s report, which contained no such recommendation. Would the Minister also mind answering my question on fireworks? Fireworks are licensed, too, so why are the Government not willing to explore tougher fireworks regulation, given that in 2023 there were 35 deaths associated with firework usage?

**Sarah Jones:** As the hon. Member will know, the Department for Business and Trade has the lead on fireworks. I have had a conversation with a colleague in the last couple of weeks about that exact point, but that speaks to the point I was making that we can do lots of things at different times. His question is a bit of what-aboutery, but the point about taking seriously the issues with fireworks, and the regime around them, is valid and of course I will take it away.

The hon. Member asked why we are consulting, which is a fair question. We feel a sense of responsibility to make sure that the system works as well as it could and should. I think that everybody would agree that if it needs to change, we need to change it.

A point was made about the Keyham shootings, and the senior coroner’s prevention of future deaths report. He concluded that a shotgun is no less lethal a weapon than a firearm if misused. The Independent Office for Police Conduct recommended, following its independent investigation, that the two should be aligned, and that legislation and necessarily related national guidance should be

“amended to remove any distinction between the processes and requirements in relation to shotgun and firearms certificate holders.”

Other reports have recommended the same, including one by the Scottish Affairs Committee—it was pointed out during the debate that, for obvious reasons, a lot of licences are granted in Scotland. We are looking at this, but that is not to say that we have made a decision. We are open-minded about what would be the right course.

So, on training, yes; on centralising, potentially—we are looking at that; and on improving the licensing system, definitely. The police have recently started producing monthly data on the time it takes for people to get their licence, which is a good way of ensuring that they are operating as they should.

**Ms Minns:** On the speed of licensing, I can recommend none more strongly than the example of Cumbria constabulary, which has really put its house in order over the last 18 months, since David Allen became the police, fire and crime commissioner for Cumbria. I urge others to apply its good practice in the rest of the country.

**Sarah Jones:** I am very happy to praise Dave Allen, of whom I am a big fan. My hon. Friend is right that there are big inconsistencies and that some forces are doing very well. As the hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Blake Stephenson) pointed out, Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Hertfordshire is particularly problematic, given the struggles that it has. The inspector highlighted that, and the thematic review will give us more data on that front.

**Blake Stephenson:** While we are on the topic of Bedfordshire, will the Minister reflect on the lessons that have been learned from the Prosper case? I went into it in some detail. It is of concern to not only my constituents but constituents in Luton—the hon. Member for Luton South and South Bedfordshire (Rachel Hopkins) is here—so I am interested to hear the Minister’s reflections on it. In particular, what can be done to improve controls on the secondary market and the onward sale of guns?

**Sarah Jones:** I thank the hon. Member for that intervention. He may wish me to meet family members; if he thinks it appropriate and they want to, I am happy to do so. The onward sale of guns—the illegal market in guns—is a massive issue that we need to tackle, and indeed we are.

As many people have said, we are fortunate in this country that we have a very strict regime and do not have a very significant gun issue. The number of murders involving the use of illegal guns is coming down, but of course there is always more that we can do in this space. We work with the National Crime Agency, Border Force and police forces to look at these issues, and, again, the setting up of a national police service that can have more specialism in some of these areas will help us to do that. If the hon. Member would like me to have a meeting to learn more, I am very happy to do that.

We have not been idle since we came into government. There are always changes that we can make, and we have made a number of significant ones, including reissuing, in August 2025, the statutory guidance to chief officers of police on firearms licensing. That ensures that the police carry out robust and consistent checks on the suitability of those who hold or apply for a shotgun or firearms licence. I will not go into the other things we have done, but we have made other changes and are always open to ideas.

I should briefly say that medical markers are really important and are already working. We will keep under review whether to mandate, but we already have 98,000 active digital markers on patient GP records. In 2024-25, there were over 1,100 cases in which the GP notified the police of a medical concern. That is a good thing, but it is worrying that people who have mental health issues,

or whatever it might be, and obviously need support are going to the GP and the GP has raised a marker. It shows how important the system is, but also how careful we need to be when licensing.

To conclude, I hear, I understand and I will continue to learn—I learned about geese today, which I did not know much about, and crofting. I cannot say I am an expert, but I absolutely understand the economic benefit and the need for the use of guns in this country. I want to make sure we have the best regime possible, and that is why we are conducting the consultation. I am very open to hearing more views and to learning more from hon. Members. We will publish the consultation in due course.

7.26 pm

**Ben Goldsborough:** This has been a brilliant debate, which is what our constituents cry out for. It has been measured in tone, with solutions and not just mud-slinging. A fair amount of social media clips will have been thrown in here and there, but that is just the nature of the beast.

**Jerome Mayhew:** Speak for yourself.

**Ben Goldsborough:** The hon. Member for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew) always needs to have the final word.

It is really helpful that we have put forward pragmatic solutions to an issue that we all care about deeply: the safety of our constituents and the United Kingdom. They are not just throwaway suggestions; they are grounded in facts and evidence, to protect both the rural economy and the lives of our rural constituents. I look forward to working closely with the Minister in the months ahead, when the review comes forward—in due course—to make sure that the policy lands in the best place possible.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered e-petition 750236 relating to section 1 and 2 firearms licensing.

7.27 pm

*Sitting adjourned.*



# Written Statements

*Monday 23 February 2026*

## ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

### Storm Chandra and Flooding

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy):** Storm Chandra brought heavy rain to the UK on Monday 26 and Tuesday 27 January. This was the seventh named storm overall to hit the UK so far for the 2025-26 storm season starting on 1 September. Storm Chandra closely followed Storm Ingrid, which brought heavy rain to southern areas of the UK the previous week.

As of the afternoon of Sunday 22 February, the Environment Agency reports that around 401 properties have flooded across England with 373 of these in Devon and Cornwall and Wessex EA areas, with a further 28 in other parts of Hampshire, Herefordshire and Yorkshire. This is in addition to extensive farmland and some local infrastructure flooding. Approximately 24,500 properties have been protected by Environment Agency assets across all locations.

#### *South-west impacts*

The south-west of England has been particularly impacted and three severe flood warnings were issued in the initial days of the storm, indicating a risk to life. The south-west has seen nearly twice the long-term average rainfall so far this year. Records have been broken in many parts of the south-west for water levels in rivers, groundwater levels and amounts of rain falling in a day.

A major incident was declared by Somerset council on 27 January to support the co-ordinated response to flooding in the Somerset levels and moorland. This was only lifted on Wednesday 18 February, as the multi-agency efforts have stabilised the situation. The Environment Agency is following its Somerset moors and levels flood management plans, and operating flood storage areas and pumps.

Before recess, I visited Somerset with the hon. Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke). I saw at first hand the impact of the flooding, with villages cut off by submerged roads, and the strain this has placed on people's mental health. I met a local farmer to see the impacts to his farmland, and I met the local internal drainage boards and Somerset Rivers Authority to hear their views.

Following my visit, the Environment Agency committed to reviewing the issues around water level management in Somerset once this incident has come to an end. It will work closely with the internal drainage boards and the local council as part of the wider recovery plan. That review will look at several important questions: when pumps should be activated, whether the current trigger points are right, and whether installing permanent pumps in certain locations could offer better value for money in the long term.

I want to again acknowledge the vital contributions of Somerset council, Devon and Somerset fire and rescue service, the police, ambulance services, the members of the internal drainage boards, and many others who have played essential roles in the multi-agency response.

A number of properties on the seafront at Torcross were significantly impacted during Storm Chandra and the high spring tides of 2 and 18 February, with wave overtopping causing internal flooding and other damage, although the degree of impact varies between properties and in some cases is still being assessed. The Environment Agency is working with local partners to support the community and engage with the hon. Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden).

#### *Government action*

Protecting communities around the country from flooding is a priority for this Government. That is why we set up a flood resilience taskforce to provide oversight of national and local flood resilience and preparedness ahead of and after the winter flood season. The taskforce will be meeting again next month to review winter preparedness and response.

The Government are investing at least £10.5 billion over ten years to construct new flood schemes and repair existing defences, protecting communities from the impacts of climate change. Through the largest flood programme in history, this record investment will benefit nearly 900,000 properties.

In October, the Government announced major changes to our flood funding policy to make it quicker and easier to deliver the right flood defences in the right places. This will increase investor confidence, close funding gaps, and reduce administrative burdens on local communities. The new rules, which take effect in April 2026, will optimise funding between building new flood defences and ongoing maintenance, capturing all damages avoided, including to agriculture, and will ensure that deprived communities continue to receive vital investment. Projects will be prioritised by their benefit-to-cost ratios to drive value for money, and we are giving equal weighting to all the different types of benefits, such as agriculture and environmental damages.

The Government are investing £91 million to support internal drainage boards to modernise and upgrade assets, recognising their essential work to manage water levels and reduce flood risk in rural communities. This funding has provided benefits to over 400,000 hectares of farmland and over 200,000 properties to date.

Under our environmental land management schemes, we are funding actions to improve the environment and mitigate flood risk, with proactive actions in our management of the land and water. These actions help make farmland more resilient to the effects of climate change, including reducing the impact of flooding by improving soil health, creating areas of water retention that protect more productive areas and slowing the flow across the landscape. In October 2025, the "FloodReady" report identified gaps and opportunities to grow the property flood resilience market, resulting in a new action plan for all relevant parties to take forward. The FloodReady leadership group, now chaired by UK Finance, is taking forward the work with DEFRA and the Environment Agency, leading on the recommendations for Government. The chair of the leadership group is now a member of the flood resilience taskforce.

We are supporting communities to adapt to coastal change. In January, the Government announced £30 million for coastal adaptation pilots over three years. This will deliver advanced adaptation in the East Riding of Yorkshire, Norfolk and Suffolk, including selective property purchases or long-term financing solutions in areas where homes face imminent risk from erosion. It will support adaptation in other places facing coastal erosion across England, empowering communities to take practical steps, including moving community buildings away from at-risk areas, testing early warning systems for erosion events, and improving beach access and coastal tourism infrastructure.

#### *Ongoing risk*

Since Storm Chandra passed through, the situation has remained finely balanced, with numerous Met Office severe weather warnings issued over the south-west of England and elsewhere in the four weeks since the storm. Further rainfall has exacerbated flood risk in some areas and slowed recovery. Flood warnings have been removed from some areas in the south-west, but added in others, further east and along the south coast. Record groundwater levels combined with high river levels continue to risk flooding of properties and businesses in the south-west and elsewhere in the country.

Unsettled weather is set to continue into next month, with high groundwater levels meaning the risk of further flooding remains. High tides and strong winds may also bring tidal flood risk in some places during this period. Dozens of Environment Agency flood teams will continue to work across the country to respond to flooding and protect vulnerable communities.

[HCWS1343]

## FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

### Media Freedom Coalition

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Chris Elmore):** The United Kingdom remains steadfast in its commitment to media freedom around the world, and we recognise the vital role that journalists play in upholding human rights, supporting accountable governance and protecting democracy. As Moldovan President Maia Sandu put it well,

“Peace cannot survive without information integrity, and democracies cannot survive without those who protect it.”

From Gaza to Georgia, Mexico to Myanmar, and in dozens of other countries, the UK regularly speaks up alongside our international partners to defend media freedom, and to condemn incidents where reporters, commentators, photographers, videographers and bloggers have been harassed, intimidated, detained, assaulted or killed simply for doing their jobs.

Since it was co-founded by the UK and Canada in 2019, the Media Freedom Coalition has played a vital role in exposing the risks faced by journalists around the world, co-ordinating international statements on their behalf and supporting reforms to promote media freedom. Membership of the MFC has grown to 51 countries across six continents, working globally as well as in local networks.

A panel of independent lawyers, chaired by my noble Friend Baroness Kennedy of The Shaws, provides pro bono legal assistance to members on media legislation. Many UK civil society organisations also input into the MFC’s work. Through advocacy, statements and events, the coalition has played a consistent role over the last seven years in highlighting and supporting individual journalists in danger.

I am therefore pleased to tell the House that, as part of our commitment to this crucial agenda, the UK has agreed to co-chair the MFC for a two-year term, commencing on 1 March. We will take over from Germany, which has co-chaired the MFC since January 2024, and we will partner with Finland, which began its two-year term in July 2025. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary formally accepted the co-chairship from her German counterpart, Johann Wadephul, at the Munich Security Conference. As she said to the Foreign Affairs Committee recently, this Government view media freedom as a “hugely important” issue.

With our own proud traditions of a free press here at home, our long-standing commitment to promoting media freedom around the world, and our continuing support for the work of the BBC World Service, the UK is well positioned to guide the MFC at this critical juncture, ensuring that it remains a powerful collective voice in support of public interest journalism around the world.

At a time when independent public interest media is facing multiple threats—from intimidation and censorship to disinformation and financial pressures—the UK will use our role as co-chair to help the coalition step up its response.

We will work to include new voices, strengthen the sharing of expertise, and support timely, effective advocacy of journalists at risk. We will also ensure that the MFC helps nations around the world to nurture public interest media, navigate the opportunities and risks that stem from new technology, tackle the specific challenges facing women journalists, and use our collective voice to speak out for those in need.

Ultimately, the Media Freedom Coalition provides a powerful collective voice for countries like ours, which believe in the crucial importance of a free media for democracy, human rights and good governance. Now—as the world becomes more turbulent and fragmented—that voice is needed more than ever.

[HCWS1342]

### Ukraine: British Embassy Office in Lviv

**The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty):** I am pleased to announce to the House that the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office formally launched a permanent British embassy office in Lviv, Ukraine, on 12 February 2026. The office, headed by a member of country-based staff, represents the UK in Lviv, Ivano-Frankivsk, Ternopil, Volyn, Rivne, Zakarpattia, Khmelnytskyi and Chernivtsi regions.

The British embassy office in Lviv was established in 2023 as a temporary measure in the uncertain aftermath of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Its transition to a permanent British presence in western Ukraine is a firm demonstration of the UK-Ukraine 100-year

partnership in action. Signed on 16 January 2025 by UK Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer and President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelensky, the 100-year partnership is an investment in our two countries for the next century, bringing together technology development, scientific advances and cultural exchanges, and harnessing the phenomenal innovation shown by Ukraine in recent years for generations to come. Core to that partnership is enhanced collaboration between regions and local administrations across the UK and Ukraine.

Lviv is a critical hub for the UK's presence in Ukraine, serving as a centre of governance, diplomacy and humanitarian co-ordination in the west of the country. Lviv serves as Ukraine's western gateway to the EU and NATO. It is a vital corridor for trade, humanitarian aid, military logistics and diplomatic engagement. Since the full-scale invasion, Lviv and other regions in the west of Ukraine have become a humanitarian hub, attracting displaced civilians, non-governmental organisations and international missions.

Lviv is also one of the most dynamic economic regions of Ukraine: Lviv's IT cluster is Ukraine's largest association of tech companies, universities and other organisations, working to transform Lviv into a global innovation and investment hub. The region's tech sector, alongside energy, transport and defence, is central to Ukraine's efforts against Russian aggression, and provides significant growth opportunities for British companies.

The office was formally opened by His Majesty's ambassador to Ukraine, Neil Crompton CBE, alongside the governor of Lviv region, Maksym Kozlytskyy, and mayor of Lviv, Andriy Sadovyi. This was then formally announced by the Foreign Secretary at the Munich Security Conference on Sunday 15 February who said:

"The formal opening of our office in Lviv is a symbol of our enduring commitment to Ukraine. We will stand with Ukraine until it is victorious against Putin's invasion—and we want to increase trade and cultural links with the whole of Ukraine.

Our formal presence in Western Ukraine will allow us to do just that, benefiting Ukrainian businesses and supporting its reconstruction."

[HCWS1344]

## HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

### Adult Social Care, Tobacco and Vapes Consultation, and Urgent Dental Care

**The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock):** I would like to inform the House of several updates from the Department of Health and Social Care over the February recess.

*Social care: allowances uplift for working age adults & disabled facilities grant 2026-27*

The Government have confirmed that they will be uplifting the social care allowances, which ensure that people drawing on adult social care retain sufficient income to cover essential living costs.

From 6 April 2026, these allowances will rise in line with consumer prices index inflation—3.8%—recognising pressures from rising food, clothing and utility costs. For working-age adults, we are going further: the minimum income guarantee will increase by 7%, the first above

inflation rise in over a decade. This will put over £400 more a year into the pockets of more than 150,000 working-age disabled adults, or around £510 for those also receiving the disability premium.

This uplift protects disabled people on low incomes, supports greater choice and control, and forms part of our wider programme to build a stronger, fairer national care service. We will continue to work closely with local government, disabled people's organisations and sector partners to ensure the system remains sustainable and responsive to people's needs.

The Government can also confirm that £723 million will be made available for the disabled facilities grant in 2026-27. This grant helps eligible older and disabled people on low incomes to adapt their homes to make them safe and suitable for their needs so that they can remain independent. Practical changes include installing stairlifts, level-access showers, or ramps. The Government are also taking action to allocate disabled facilities grant funding to local authorities in England in a fairer, more evidence-based way from 2026-27, with transitional protections to allow local authorities time to adjust. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government has published the details of local authority allocations here. We expect funding to be distributed to local authorities in May.

*Launch of consultation on smoke-free, heated tobacco-free and vape-free places in England*

Smoking is the number one preventable cause of death, disability and ill health in England. Vaping is less harmful and can help adult smokers quit, but it is not without risks, and the long-term health effects are still being studied. Exposure to second-hand smoke can be particularly damaging for children, pregnant women and people with existing health conditions.

A consultation on smoke-free, heated tobacco-free and vape-free places in England is open until 6 May 2026. It sets out proposals to extend current indoor smoking restrictions to some outdoor places, specifically public children's playgrounds, and outside certain health and social care settings and education settings.

The consultation also proposes to make indoor places that are already smoke-free places, heated tobacco-free and vape-free as well, and extending these restrictions to some outdoor places.

The consultation does not propose extending any measures to outdoor hospitality settings or private outdoor spaces.

Responses will inform the measures that are ultimately taken forward and following the consultation, we intend to make and implement secondary legislation during the course of this Parliament.

*Urgent dentistry appointments*

The Government are committed to ensuring people can access urgent dental care when they need it. Over the past year, integrated care boards have been commissioning additional urgent dental appointments and there is now an urgent care safety net available in all areas of the country.

From April 2026, we will cement our commitment to urgent care by making it a requirement for high street dentists to offer a minimum number of urgent appointments, including to patients who are new to the practice.

We have listened to clinical advice from the chief dental officer for England, as well as feedback from the sector that the current definition of the national target, focused on clinically urgent care, is too narrow and has meant that some patients with serious and ongoing needs are still missing out.

We will therefore broaden the scope of our pledge to deliver not just additional urgent appointments, but more appointments of all types. This will open up capacity to more patients, preventing people resorting to DIY dentistry, while retaining the urgent care safety net.

Data published on Thursday 19 February shows that the NHS delivered an extra 1.8 million courses of dental treatment over the first seven months of 2025-26 compared to the same period in the year up to the general election and almost half of these were delivered to children.

[HCWS1345]

### Puberty Blockers Clinical Trial

**The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting):** Today, I am updating the House that the preliminary work to establish the pathways clinical trial into the prescription of puberty suppressants for children and young people with gender incongruence has been paused.

The MHRA, the agency authorising the clinical trial, has written to the trial sponsors, King's College London, to raise concerns regarding the trial which will now be discussed with clinicians. On Friday, DHSC published a copy of the MHRA letter, which is available here: <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6998b06d047739fe61889efb/Sponsor-letter110226.pdf>

Discussions between the MHRA and King's College London will begin this week to address these new concerns. I will review the outcome of those discussions, taking clinical advice.

I have always been clear about the red lines regarding this trial and the prescription of puberty blockers, the safety and wellbeing of the children and young people and always being led by the expert clinical evidence. Those have been—and will remain—the driving considerations in every decision being made.

The clinical trial will not start to recruit until the issues the MHRA raised have been resolved. It will only be allowed to go ahead if the expert scientific and clinical evidence and advice conclude that it is safe to do so.

[HCWS1347]

## HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

### Local Government Finance Reforms

**The Minister for Local Government and Homelessness (Alison McGovern):** Earlier this month, this Government delivered the first multi-year local government finance settlement in a decade, coming good on our promise of reforming the system—which previous Governments failed to do.

After 14 years of austerity and decades of centralisation, councils around the country were on their knees. After being forced to cut libraries and youth clubs, there was nothing left—especially in the most deprived communities—as funding was not matched to need.

Our reforms tackled this head-on, delivering a fairer settlement which puts funding where it is needed most. As a result, by the end of the multi-year settlement period, the most deprived places will receive 45% more funding per head than the least deprived. Before our reforms, only around a third of councils were given the funding that broadly matched their assessed need. Our reforms bring that up to nine in 10 councils by 2028-29.

Getting funding to where it is needed is a critical step to support local government—but we are going further. For too long councils have been left footing the bill for expensive services that do not support residents quickly enough, and operating in a wider system that has not provided the right safeguards on financial risk. That is why, alongside our funding reforms, this Government are:

Resolving special educational needs and disabilities deficits by writing off 90% of councils dedicated schools grant (DSG) high needs deficits accrued to the end of 2025-26—projected to be worth over £5 billion.

Investing in prevention to end the cycle of councils footing the bill for expensive statutory services—with £2.4 billion into the Families First Partnership and £2.7 billion in homelessness, rough sleeping and domestic abuse.

Taking action to strengthen safeguards over local government borrowing—bringing forward a consultation on the use of powers to reduce capital risk.

Rebuilding the broken local audit system—including the local audit backstop programme and, through the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill, creating the Local Audit Office in autumn 2026.

Granting additional council tax flexibilities to seven councils with below average bills to help them reach financial sustainability.

These steps are helping to fix the foundations, but we know that recovering from the legacy of the broken local government finance system overseen by previous Governments will take time.

That is why today, I am confirming in principle support for councils in the most difficult positions. Unlike the reckless attitude of the previous Government, our approach will ensure that support is predicated on transforming services, so that councils in difficult situations move towards a sustainable recovery.

#### *Failing system that exposed councils to increased risk*

We know that the financial risk that councils have been carrying has increased in recent years, amid underfunding and the broken local government finance system.

And we also know that the most extreme financial failure in the sector was driven by a small number of councils who have amassed extreme levels of debt.

Between 2016-17 and 2018-19, councils spent an estimated £6.6 billion on acquiring commercial property, a fourteenfold increase on the preceding three years. This rapid expansion of debt-financed commercialism took place against a backdrop of funding reductions and a failure to stop bad practices that has left some councils highly exposed to risk and led to severe financial failure in others—leaving some residents facing the consequences of hundreds of millions of pounds of unsupported debt. The previous Government's failure

to address fundamental problems with the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities system has left the sector billions of pounds in deficit, forcing councils to borrow to meet costs—adding to sector debt and soaking up capacity to invest in communities.

Sensible capital investment by councils is essential to support decent services, provide jobs and build much-needed homes. We need councils to have the capacity to play their part in delivering growth. But this needs to happen in a system with the right safeguards to ensure that councils invest prudently. Too often, this was not the case under the previous Government. Residents do not deserve to pay the price for bad decisions they never made.

We are already taking extraordinary action to provide debt repayment support for two councils: Woking and Thurrock. Debt repayment support is not a decision this Government are taking lightly, especially in the context of constrained public finances. But past failures left us with little other choice if we want to protect taxpayers from the spiralling cost of ever-increasing debt, and to protect services for residents in these areas. To safeguard against such failures arising in future, we will fully utilise the statutory capital powers available to Government to ensure the capital system is effective at supporting good, value-for-money investment while preventing reckless practices.

The steps this Government have taken to reform the local government finance system will reduce the unacceptable risk that built up in the sector throughout the previous Government.

But we know that the legacy of the previous system has left some councils struggling to set balanced budgets, with crisis spending leaving them unable to deliver long-term plans for service transformation.

We have been clear that we will continue to support councils in the most difficult positions and I have today agreed in principle exceptional financial support for councils where I have been assured that there is a need in 2026-27 or in relation to previous years. In some cases, these agreements reflect a reprofiling of existing support.

Under the previous Government, increasing numbers of councils seeking exceptional financial support became an accepted part of the finance system. This should clearly not be the case, and I am determined that we begin to break this cycle as part of our reforms to the system—but we cannot undo 14 years of damage overnight.

I am pleased to inform the House that several councils have told me that our reformed settlement has made it unnecessary for them to request support. Many of those who have requested support will go on to see significant increases in core spending power over the Parliament—demonstrating that we are getting money to where it is needed most.

Our reforms have allowed some councils to move away from a long-term reliance on Government support. The total figure is significantly lower than some of the extreme numbers speculated in the media.

The in-principle support agreed today is necessary to enable councils to get on with their budget processes, protecting services for residents in the context of the deep fragility left by the previous Government. But I am clear that this sort of flexibility is designed to be temporary.

Our package of reforms will directly help these councils. Most will also benefit from our 90% write-off of DSG high-needs deficits, which will free up capital budgets and reduce the amount spent on finance costs. That means more money available for services every year. And we will continue to reduce pressure on councils in receipt of exceptional financial support by removing the payday loan premium imposed by the previous Government, which made it more expensive for such councils to borrow to get out of crisis situations.

But the work does not stop there. We will continue to support these councils to transform their services to make them sustainable. As part of the exceptional financial support framework, we will ask these councils to develop robust plans for improving services, so they reach a stable position over the multi-year settlement.

We know that investment in prevention can deliver better outcomes for people and improve financial sustainability. That is why we will take a targeted approach to supporting and challenging these councils to deliver better, more efficient services.

While Government recognise the challenges all councils face, in a minority of cases, these have been exacerbated by poor decision making, excessive risk taking, and a lack of the capability and leadership needed to ensure councils are delivering modern and efficient services.

We will not hesitate to act where there is any evidence of failure. Residents deserve high-quality services, and responsible and prudent financial leadership from their councils. We are also clear that individuals should be held to account where the actions of councils have not been good enough. We are continuing to strengthen local safeguards and ensuring we have a fit-for-purpose framework for stepping in when councils are not delivering—including rebuilding the audit system and updating best value guidance.

[HCWS1346]

## Local Government Reorganisation

**The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Steve Reed):** On Monday 16 February, the Government wrote to the High Court, setting out that I had decided to withdraw my decision to postpone the council elections for 30 local councils due to take place in May 2026 in the light of legal advice.

I invited the Minister for Housing and Planning to reconsider the position afresh on an urgent basis, recognising the pressing timescales involved, and he decided that elections should proceed in May 2026.

I confirmed on 16 February that all local council elections in May 2026 will go ahead, and we have brought forward an order to revoke the previous postponement order laid on 5 February.

I recognise that many of the local councils undergoing reorganisation voiced genuine concerns about the pressure they are under as we seek to deliver local government reorganisation. My officials have been working with them to understand whether any practical support is required.

In addition, I am pleased to be able to confirm that we will provide up to £63 million in additional capacity funding to the 21 local areas undergoing reorganisation across the whole programme, building on the £7.6 million

provided for developing proposals last year. I will shortly set out further detail about how that funding will be allocated.

This Government remain committed to ending the two-tier system—and the two-tier cost premium—and establishing new single-tier unitary councils. In many parts of the country, residents face uncertainty about which of their two councils is responsible for vital local services, while their council tax is spent on duplicated structures. This duplication is inefficient and costly, amounting to tens of millions of pounds that could be better directed towards frontline services.

Through this reform, we will build stronger, more effective councils that are equipped to drive economic growth, improve public services, and empower the communities they serve.

[HCWS1349]

TRANSPORT

Court Case on Gatwick Airport Development  
Consent Order: Disclosed Documents

**The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander):**  
On 19 February I wrote to the judge hearing the above claim in respect of my ongoing duty of candour in those proceedings.

Pursuant to an order of the Court from 10 December 2025, on 12 December 2025 I approved the disclosure of a number of documents that related to forecasts of greenhouse gas emissions from aviation. The documents were produced to fulfil a request from the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero and supported preparation of the Government’s carbon budget and growth delivery plan.

The information contained in the disclosed documents was not relevant to my original decision to grant a development consent order for the expansion of Gatwick airport, as the decision-making process for considering development consent orders requires me to consider published policies and relevant legislation. The disclosed data did not represent final policy and were produced solely for the purposes of discharging the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero’s duties under the Climate Change Act 2008.

During the process of updating the Department’s aviation model in preparation for the development of new forecasts to support the setting of carbon budget 7,

and the quality assurance processes involved in this, officials in the Department identified that the disclosed data contained a small error. I have apologised to the Court and the parties and submitted a statement from a senior official in the Department to explain the error and correct our position. Those parts of the documents previously submitted that require updates to remedy the error were also provided.

The error came from the incorrect application of fuel efficiency measures—and therefore incorrect emissions values—to next-generation planes that were modelled as flying beyond their standard operating range. This meant that in the small number of cases where an aircraft is modelled as flying beyond its optimal range, its emissions values were wrong.

As a result of this correction, the headline difference between the average annual total aviation emission figures as provided to the Court and the corrected figures for the CB6 period is an increase of 4.1 MtCO<sub>2</sub>e over the five-year carbon budget 6 period—i.e. with an annual average difference of 0.8 MtCO<sub>2</sub>e. The table below shows the corrected figures, which have been subject to enhanced quality assurance procedures and checks:

| Year           | Disclosed figures<br>(MtCO <sub>2</sub> e) | Corrected figures<br>(MtCO <sub>2</sub> e) | Difference<br>(MtCO <sub>2</sub> e) |
|----------------|--------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 2033           | 32.9                                       | 33.3                                       | 0.4                                 |
| 2034           | 32.3                                       | 32.6                                       | 0.4                                 |
| 2035           | 31.6                                       | 32.3                                       | 0.6                                 |
| 2036           | 31.1                                       | 32.1                                       | 1.0                                 |
| 2037           | 29.9                                       | 31.6                                       | 1.7                                 |
| <b>Average</b> | <b>31.6</b>                                | <b>32.4</b>                                | <b>0.8</b>                          |

The Department’s quality assurance processes are fully aligned with the Government’s AQuA book—the quality assurance guidance—but I have asked my officials to strengthen our current practices further.

This small error does not affect the decision I have taken. This is because I maintain to the Court that the information contained in the disclosed information was not material to the decision at the time, and even if it had been taken into account, it is highly likely the outcome of the decision would have been the same.

With regards to the CBGDP, my officials have informed DESNZ officials of the error. DESNZ has confirmed that the error, which represents 0.5% of the required additional carbon savings from the baseline projections for carbon budget 6, is marginal. The CBGDP remains the Government’s extant plan to meet carbon budgets.

[HCWS1348]

# Written Corrections

Monday 23 February 2026

## Ministerial Corrections

### TRANSPORT

#### Rail Transport and Economic Growth

*The following extract is from Transport oral questions on 12 February 2026.*

**Mark Pritchard:** Could the Secretary of State reassure all my businesses and constituents in the Wrekin that there is no conflict of interest between Great British Railways and the Office of Rail and Road when deciding these applications?

**Heidi Alexander:**...I can also assure him that in the past I have been as supportive, from the Department for Transport, as Network Rail has been of the open access application from Wrexham, Shropshire and the west midlands, and I will maintain my support for the proposals going forward.

[Official Report, 12 February 2026; Vol. 780, c. 909.]

*Written correction submitted by the Secretary of State for Transport, the right hon. Member for Swindon South (Heidi Alexander):*

**Heidi Alexander:**...I can also assure him that **in the past I have been supportive, from the Department for Transport, of the open access application** from Wrexham, Shropshire and the west midlands, and I will maintain my support for the proposals going forward.

### Topical Questions

*The following extract is from Transport oral questions on 12 February 2026.*

**Martin Wrigley:** Roadworks in my constituency are causing traffic hell, and residents have had enough. With the two-year closure of the A382 for much-needed work, utilities companies are taking advantage by doing roadworks everywhere, and the county council is powerless to cause them to co-operate and co-ordinate. What does the Secretary of State suggest I say to my residents, whom I am meeting this evening?

**Heidi Alexander:** The hon. Member may wish to tell his residents about the Government's determination to tackle these issues. For example, we have doubled the fines that local authorities can charge utility companies when works overrun. I recognise how disruptive these works are for local communities, and it is an issue that the Government take very seriously.

[Official Report, 12 February 2026; Vol. 780, c. 918.]

*Written correction submitted by the Secretary of State for Transport, the right hon. Member for Swindon South (Heidi Alexander):*

**Heidi Alexander:** The hon. Member may wish to tell his residents about the Government's determination to tackle these issues. For example, we have doubled **fixed-penalty notices** that local authorities can charge utility

companies **and extended overrun charges**. I recognise how disruptive these works are for local communities, and it is an issue that the Government take very seriously.

## ATTORNEY GENERAL'S OFFICE

### Serious Fraud Office

*The following extract is from the Westminster Hall debate on the Serious Fraud Office on 3 June 2025.*

**Lucy Rigby:** As I noted, recovering ill-gotten gains and returning money to victims and the taxpayer is a crucial part of the SFO's role. It is highly skilled at recovering funds under the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002: it recovered £160 million between March 2021 and March 2024.

[Official Report, 3 June 2025; Vol. 768, c. 115WH.]

*Written correction submitted by the Economic Secretary to the Treasury, the hon. and learned Member for Northampton North (Lucy Rigby):*

**Lucy Rigby:** As I noted, recovering ill-gotten gains and returning money to victims and the taxpayer is a crucial part of the SFO's role. It is highly skilled at recovering funds under the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002: **it recovered £145,787,440.40 between 1 April 2021 and 31 March 2024.**

## CABINET OFFICE

### Russian Influence on UK Politics and Democracy

*The following extract is from the Westminster Hall debate on Russian Influence on UK Politics and Democracy on 9 February 2026.*

**Dan Jarvis:** The Government's first duty, as I hope any Government's would be, is to keep the country safe. We are absolutely committed to taking all necessary measures to expose and disrupt any attempt to interfere with our sovereign affairs.

That is why on 18 October last year I set out the Government's counter-political interference and espionage action plan, to ensure that our democracy is the hardest possible target for foreign threat actors.

[Official Report, 9 February 2026; Vol. 780, c. 270WH.]

*Written correction submitted by the Minister of State, Cabinet Office, the hon. Member for Barnsley North (Dan Jarvis):*

**Dan Jarvis:** The Government's first duty, as I hope any Government's would be, is to keep the country safe. We are absolutely committed to taking all necessary measures to expose and disrupt any attempt to interfere with our sovereign affairs.

That is why on **18 November** last year I set out the Government's counter-political interference and espionage action plan, to ensure that our democracy is the hardest possible target for foreign threat actors.

**WORK AND PENSIONS****Pensions and Social Security**

*The following extract is from the debate on Pensions and Social Security on 10 February 2026.*

**Sir Stephen Timms:** For 2026-27, the standard allowance in universal credit will be uprated by September's consumer prices index plus an additional 2.3%. That represents the first ever permanent above-inflation rise to the universal credit standard allowance, and I believe that it is the first permanent real-terms increase in the headline benefit rate since the 1970s.

[*Official Report*, 10 February 2026; Vol. 780, c. 732.]

*Written correction submitted by the Minister for Social Security and Disability, the right hon. Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms):*

**Sir Stephen Timms:** For 2026-27, the standard allowance in universal credit will be uprated by September's consumer prices index plus an additional 2.3%. That represents the first ever permanent above-inflation rise to the universal credit standard allowance, and I believe that it is the **highest** permanent real-terms increase in the headline benefit rate since the 1970s.



# ORAL ANSWERS

Monday 23 February 2026

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**not later than  
Monday 2 March 2026**

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Members may obtain excerpts of their speeches from the Official Report (within one month from the date of publication), by applying to the Editor of the Official Report, House of Commons.

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