

**Tuesday
1 September 2026**

**Volume 790
No. 35**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Tuesday 1 September 2026

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

MEMBERS OF THE CABINET

(FORMED BY THE RT HON. ANDY BURNHAM, MP, JULY 2026)

PRIME MINISTER, FIRST LORD OF THE TREASURY, MINISTER FOR THE CIVIL SERVICE AND MINISTER FOR THE UNION—
The Rt Hon. Andy Burnham, MP

FIRST SECRETARY OF STATE, CHANCELLOR OF THE DUCHY OF LANCASTER AND MINISTER FOR THE CABINET OFFICE—
The Rt Hon. Louise Haigh, MP

CHANCELLOR OF THE EXCHEQUER—The Rt Hon. John Healey, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT AFFAIRS—The Rt Hon. Ed Miliband, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR THE HOME DEPARTMENT—The Rt Hon. Shabana Mahmood, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR DEFENCE—The Rt Hon. Wes Streeting, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE—The Rt Hon. Yvette Cooper, MP

LORD CHANCELLOR AND SECRETARY OF STATE FOR JUSTICE—The Rt Hon. Alex Norris, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR EDUCATION—The Rt Hon. Lucy Powell, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR WORK AND PENSIONS—The Rt Hon. Pat McFadden, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR BUSINESS, INNOVATION, SCIENCE AND TRADE, AND PRESIDENT OF THE BOARD OF TRADE—
The Rt Hon. Jonathan Reynolds, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT—The Rt Hon. Angela Rayner, MP

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

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

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT—The Rt Hon. Lisa Nandy, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS—The Rt Hon. Dame Angela Eagle DBE, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND—The Rt Hon. Sir Chris Bryant, MP

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

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR WALES—The Rt Hon. Stephen Kinnock, MP

PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY TO THE TREASURY (CHIEF WHIP)—The Rt Hon. Anneliese Midgley, MP

LORD PRIVY SEAL AND LEADER OF THE HOUSE OF LORDS—The Rt Hon. Baroness Smith of Basildon

LORD PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL AND LEADER OF THE HOUSE OF COMMONS—The Rt Hon. Sir Alan Campbell, MP

MINISTER FOR WOMEN AND EQUALITIES—The Rt Hon. Bridget Phillipson, MP

ALSO ATTENDS CABINET

CHIEF SECRETARY TO THE TREASURY—The Rt Hon. Emma Reynolds, MP

ATTORNEY GENERAL—The Rt Hon. Ellie Reeves, KC, MP

MINISTER FOR INTERGOVERNMENTAL RELATIONS AND EUROPEAN RELATIONS—The Rt Hon. Hamish Falconer, MP

MINISTER FOR ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE—The Rt Hon. Kanishka Narayan, MP

MINISTER FOR HOUSING AND PLANNING—The Rt Hon. Matthew Pennycook, MP

DEPARTMENTS OF STATE AND MINISTERS

Business, Innovation, Science and Trade—

SECRETARY OF STATE AND PRESIDENT OF THE BOARD OF TRADE—The Rt Hon. Jonathan Reynolds, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

The Rt Hon. Kanishka Narayan, MP (Minister for Artificial Intelligence) §

Chris McDonald, MP (Minister for Science, Innovation and Investment) §

Kate Darden, MP (Minister for the Future of Work)

Anas Sarwar (Minister for Trade)

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Blair McDougall, MP §

Baroness Lloyd of Effra CBE §

Lord Leong CBE

Cabinet Office—

PRIME MINISTER, FIRST LORD OF THE TREASURY, MINISTER FOR THE CIVIL SERVICE AND MINISTER FOR THE UNION—
The Rt Hon. Andy Burnham, MP

FIRST SECRETARY OF STATE, CHANCELLOR OF THE DUCHY OF LANCASTER AND MINISTER FOR THE CABINET OFFICE—
The Rt Hon. Louise Haigh, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

Hamish Falconer, MP (Minister for Intergovernmental Relations and European Relations) §

The Rt Hon. Kanishka Narayan, MP (Minister for Artificial Intelligence) §

The Rt Hon. Dan Jarvis MBE, MP (Minister for Security) §

PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARIES—

Sally Jameson, MP

Dan Tomlinson, MP §

Mark Ferguson, MP

Baroness Twycross §

Defence—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Wes Streeting, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

Luke Pollard, MP (Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry)
Lord Coaker

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Louise Sandher-Jones, MP (Minister for the Armed Forces)
Calvin Bailey MBE, MP (Minister for Veterans and People)

Digital, Culture, Media and Sport—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Lisa Nandy, MP

MINISTER OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Ian Murray, MP

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Vicky Foxcroft, MP
Stephanie Peacock, MP
Ruth Mackenzie CBE
Baroness Lloyd of Effra CBE §
Baroness Twycross §

Education—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Lucy Powell, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

Georgia Gould OBE, MP (Minister for School Standards)
The Rt Hon. Baroness Smith of Malvern (Minister for Skills) §

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Josh MacAlister OBE, MP
Paul Waugh, MP

Energy Security and Net Zero—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Miatta Fahnbulleh, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

Michael Shanks, MP (Minister for Energy)
Katie White OBE, MP (Minister for Climate Transition)

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Martin McCluskey, MP
Polly Billington, MP
Blair McDougall, MP §
Baroness Curran

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Dame Angela Eagle DBE, MP

MINISTER OF STATE—Emma Hardy, MP

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter, MP
Stephen Morgan, MP
Baroness Hayman of Ullock

Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Ed Miliband, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

The Rt Hon. Hamish Falconer, MP (Minister for Intergovernmental Relations and European Relations) §
Kirsty McNeill, MP (Minister for International Development)
Stephen Doughty, MP

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Uma Kumaran, MP
Chris Elmore, MP
Lord Wood of Anfield
The Rt Hon. Baroness Winterton of Doncaster DBE

Health and Social Care—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Yvette Cooper, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

The Rt Hon. Dame Diana Johnson DBE, MP (Minister for Public Health and Patient Safety)
Alison McGovern, MP (Minister for Social Care)
Karin Smyth, MP (Minister for Secondary Care)
Chris McDonald, MP (Minister for Science, Innovation and Investment) §

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

James Frith, MP
Baroness Merron

Home Office—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Shabana Mahmood, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

The Rt Hon. Dan Jarvis MBE, MP (Minister for Security) §

Sarah Jones, MP (Minister for Policing and Crime)

The Rt Hon. Anna Turley, MP

The Rt Hon. Lord Hanson of Flint

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Satvir Kaur, MP §

Lord Collins of Highbury §

Jo White, MP

Housing, Communities and Local Government—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Angela Rayner, MP

MINISTER FOR WOMEN AND EQUALITIES—The Rt Hon. Bridget Phillipson, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

Matthew Pennycook, MP (Minister for Housing and Planning)

Florence Eshalomi, MP (Minister for Homelessness, Democracy, Communities and Faith)

The Rt Hon. Sir Stephen Timms, MP (Minister for Equalities)

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Sally Jameson, MP

Jim McMahon OBE, MP

Baroness Taylor of Stevenage OBE

Baroness Blake of Leeds CBE §

Satvir Kaur, MP (Minister for Equalities) §

Simon Lightwood, MP (Minister for Equalities)

Lord Collins of Highbury (Minister for Equalities) §

Justice—

LORD CHANCELLOR AND SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Alex Norris, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

Catherine McKinnell, MP (Minister for Prisons, Probation and Reducing Reoffending)

Sarah Sackman, KC, MP (Minister for Courts and Legal Services)

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Lord Lemos CMG CBE

Alex Davies-Jones, MP

Jake Richards, MP

Law Officers—

ATTORNEY GENERAL—The Rt Hon. Ellie Reeves, KC, MP

SOLICITOR GENERAL—Andy Slaughter, MP

ADVOCATE GENERAL FOR SCOTLAND—Baroness Smith of Cluny, KC

Leader of the House of Commons—

LORD PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL AND LEADER OF THE HOUSE OF COMMONS—The Rt Hon. Sir Alan Campbell, MP

Leader of the House of Lords—

LORD PRIVY SEAL AND LEADER OF THE HOUSE OF LORDS—The Rt Hon. Baroness Smith of Basildon

DEPUTY LEADER OF THE HOUSE OF LORDS—Lord Collins of Highbury §

Northern Ireland Office—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Sir Chris Bryant, MP

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Sarah Owen, MP

Baroness Anderson of Stoke-on-Trent §

Scotland Office—

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

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE—Melanie Ward, MP

Transport—

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

MINISTER OF STATE—Lord Hendy of Richmond Hill CBE (Minister for Rail)

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Justin Madders, MP

Simon Lightwood, MP

Keir Mather, MP

Treasury—

CHANCELLOR OF THE EXCHEQUER—The Rt Hon. John Healey, MP

CHIEF SECRETARY—The Rt Hon. Emma Reynolds, MP

FINANCIAL SECRETARY—The Rt Hon. James Murray, MP

ECONOMIC SECRETARY—The Rt Hon. Lucy Rigby, KC, MP

EXCHEQUER SECRETARY—Dan Tomlinson, MP §

PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARIES—

The Rt Hon. Anneliese Midgley, MP (Chief Whip)
 Torsten Bell, MP §
 Lord Pitt-Watson

LORDS COMMISSIONERS—

Claire Hughes, MP §
 Gregor Poynton, MP
 Shaun Davies, MP
 Christian Wakeford, MP
 Jade Botterill, MP

ASSISTANT WHIPS—

Uma Kumaran, MP
 Laurence Turner, MP
 Rachel Hopkins, MP
 Harpreet Uppal, MP
 Michael Wheeler, MP
 Liam Conlon, MP
 Sarah Coombes, MP

UK Export Finance—

PRESIDENT OF THE BOARD OF TRADE—The Rt Hon. Jonathan Reynolds, MP

Wales Office—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Stephen Kinnock, MP

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Anna McMorrin, MP
 Claire Hughes, MP §

Work and Pensions—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Pat McFadden, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

The Rt Hon. Baroness Smith of Malvern (Minister for Skills) §
 Andrew Western, MP
 The Rt Hon. Sir Stephen Timms, MP §
 Baroness Sherlock OBE

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Torsten Bell, MP §
 Lilian Greenwood, MP

His Majesty's Household—

LORD CHAMBERLAIN—The Rt Hon. Lord Benyon GCVO

LORD STEWARD—The Earl of Rosslyn

MASTER OF THE HORSE—The Rt Hon. Lord Ashton of Hyde

TREASURER—The Rt Hon. Sir Mark Tami, MP (Deputy Chief Whip)

VICE-CHAMBERLAIN—Emma Foody, MP

COMPTROLLER—Gen Kitchen, MP

CAPTAIN OF THE HONOURABLE CORPS OF GENTLEMEN-AT-ARMS—The Rt Hon. Lord Kennedy of Southwark (Lords Chief Whip)

CAPTAIN OF THE KING'S BODYGUARD OF THE YEOMEN OF THE GUARD—Baroness Anderson of Stoke-on-Trent (Lords Deputy Chief Whip) §

LORDS IN WAITING—

The Rt Hon. Lord Wilson of Sedgefield
 Lord Katz MBE

BARONESSES IN WAITING—

Baroness Blake of Leeds CBE §
 Baroness Ramsey of Wall Heath
 Baroness Antrobus MBE
 Baroness Dacres of Lewisham OBE
 Baroness Hyde of Bemerton

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

SECOND CHURCH ESTATES COMMISSIONER, REPRESENTING THE CHURCH COMMISSIONERS—Marsha De Cordova, MP

REPRESENTING THE SPEAKER'S COMMITTEE ON THE ELECTORAL COMMISSION —The Rt Hon. Sir Jeremy Wright, KC, MP

REPRESENTING THE HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION—Nick Smith, MP

REPRESENTING THE RESTORATION AND RENEWAL CLIENT BOARD—Nick Smith, MP



HOUSE OF COMMONS

THE SPEAKER—The Rt Hon. Sir Lindsay Hoyle, MP

CHAIRMAN OF WAYS AND MEANS—Ms Nusrat Ghani, MP

FIRST DEPUTY CHAIRMAN OF WAYS AND MEANS—Judith Cummins, MP

SECOND DEPUTY CHAIRMAN OF WAYS AND MEANS—The Rt Hon. Caroline Nokes, MP

PANEL OF CHAIRS—

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan, Paula Barker, Mr Clive Betts, Dawn Butler, Sir Christopher Chope, Peter Dowd, Clive Efford, Gill Furniss, The Rt Hon. Sir Roger Gale, Carolyn Harris, The Rt Hon. Sir John Hayes, Wera Hobhouse, Dr Rupa Huq, Christine Jardine, The Rt Hon. Sir Edward Leigh, Emma Lewell, Dame Siobhain McDonagh, The Rt Hon. Esther McVey, The Rt Hon. David Mundell, The Rt Hon. Dr Andrew Murrison, The Rt Hon. Mark Pritchard, The Rt Hon. Sir Alec Shelbrooke, Graham Stringer, The Rt Hon. Graham Stuart, The Rt Hon. Sir Desmond Swayne, Karl Turner, Derek Twigg, The Rt Hon. Valerie Vaz, Martin Vickers, Matt Western, Pete Wishart, The Rt Hon. Sir Jeremy Wright, KC.

SECRETARY—Lynn Gardner

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION—

The Speaker, The Rt Hon. Sir Lindsay Hoyle, MP (Chair), Marianne Cwynarski CBE (Director General), Mr Shrinivas Honap (External Member), Tom Goldsmith (Clerk of the House and Head of the House of Commons Administration), Elizabeth Honer (External Member), The Rt Hon. Steve Barclay, MP, The Rt Hon. Sir Alan Campbell, MP (Leader of the House), Bobby Dean, MP, The Rt Hon. Jesse Norman, MP, Nick Smith, MP

SECRETARY TO THE COMMISSION—Lloyd Owen

ASSISTANT SECRETARY—Edward Potton

ADMINISTRATION ESTIMATE AUDIT AND RISK ASSURANCE COMMITTEE AND MEMBERS ESTIMATE AUDIT COMMITTEE—

Mr Shrinivas Honap, Elizabeth Honer, Luke Akehurst, MP, Nick Smith, MP

SECRETARY TO THE COMMITTEES—Edward Potton

COMMONS EXECUTIVE BOARD—

Tom Goldsmith (Clerk of the House and Head of the House of Commons Administration) (Chair), Marianne Cwynarski CBE (Director General), Sarah Davies (Clerk Assistant and Managing Director, Chamber and Participation Team), Dr Grant Hill-Cawthorne (Librarian and Managing Director, Research and Information), James Rhys (Managing Director, Select Committee Team), Vicky Rock (Finance Director and Managing Director, Finance, Portfolio and Performance), Saira Salimi (Speaker's Counsel), Richard Shoreland (Managing Director, People and Culture), Andy Smith (Managing Director, Parliamentary Digital Service)

SECRETARY TO THE BOARD—Hannah Bryce

SPEAKER'S SECRETARY AND CHIEF OF STAFF—Helen Wood

SPEAKER'S COUNSEL—Saira Salimi

SPEAKER'S CHAPLAIN—The Venerable Andrew Hillier

PARLIAMENTARY COMMISSIONER FOR STANDARDS—Daniel Greenberg CB

THE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE SECOND 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 790

FIFTH VOLUME OF SESSION 2026-2027

House of Commons

Tuesday 1 September 2026

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

NEW MEMBER

The following Member took and subscribed the Oath required by law:

Nigel Paul Farage, for Clacton.

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: I inform the House that I have received letters from the hon. Member for Vauxhall and Camberwell Green (Florence Eshalomi) informing me of her resignation as Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, the hon. Member for Hammersmith and Chiswick (Andy Slaughter) informing me of his resignation as Chair of the Justice Committee and the hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) informing me of her resignation as Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee. I therefore declare those Chairs vacant.

Nominations for the elections to fill those vacancies are now open and will close at 2.30 pm on Monday 7 September. Nomination forms will be available from the Vote Office, the Table Office and the Public Bill Office. Only Members from the Labour party may be candidates in these elections. If there is more than one candidate in any election, the ballot will take place on Monday 14 September between 3 pm and 6 pm in the Aye Lobby.

I remind Members that new rules in relation to campaigning for Select Committee Chair elections, which were proposed by the Procedure Committee, were endorsed by the House on 28 April 2026. A briefing note with more information will be made available from the Vote Office and online.

Oral Answers to Questions

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Arms Export Licensing: Israel

1. **Brian Mathew** (Melksham and Devizes) (LD): If he will take steps with Cabinet colleagues to review arms export licensing to Israel. [901093]

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): If I may, Mr Speaker, I want to start by acknowledging the devastating floods in Nepal. I know many Members are supporting constituents who have been affected by this tragedy, and our intention remains to support British nationals and the people of Nepal. We have engaged with the authorities in Kathmandu and Beijing, and we stand with them at this incredibly devastating and difficult time.

We categorically do not export any bombs or ammunition for use in military operations in Gaza. We suspended 29 licences in September 2024, and approximately 50 licences have been refused since then. All licences are assessed in line with the strategic export licensing criteria and are kept under continual review.

Brian Mathew: Will the UK ban all trade with illegal Israeli settlements in the west bank, East Jerusalem and the Golan heights, sanction companies profiteering from this trade and enforce the International Court of Justice ruling against illegal occupation?

Stephen Doughty: The hon. Gentleman will have heard the statements made by the Prime Minister and my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary on this issue, and he should expect further announcements in due course.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): In September 2024, the Government suspended some arms sales to Israel over its war on Gaza. Given the escalating Israeli violence in the west bank, will the Government review their export licences to ensure no British military equipment is supplied to Israel that could be used there?

Stephen Doughty: My hon. Friend makes a very important point, and as I assured the hon. Member for Melksham and Devizes (Brian Mathew), we keep all our licences under review. We only approve licences that are consistent with our legal obligations, and all of them are kept under careful and continual review, as standard. We will of course keep the House updated on the implications of any other announcements we make.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): I welcome the Foreign Secretary and the new Ministers to their places in the House.

As previous speakers have mentioned, the UK's trade relationship with Israel includes the trade in goods from illegal settlements. Members across the House will have been shocked to see the violent scenes of settlers acting with apparent impunity and with overt support from Israeli Ministers who have set out their support for those settlements. May I push the Minister a little bit further, and ask him to confirm whether the Government will introduce new sanctions to target those settlers involved in these attacks as well as the extremist Ministers who are encouraging them; whether their reported progress towards a trade ban on illegal goods will extend to services; and most importantly, whether they will set out the consequences if those bans are breached?

Stephen Doughty: I share the hon. Gentleman's horror at some of the things we have seen going on in those illegal settlements, and we have absolutely condemned the settler violence—the settler terrorism—that we have seen. We absolutely condemn the proposals for E1 and all illegal settlements; we have joined other countries around the world in condemning that proposal. We have been clear with the Government of Israel that this must stop. The Prime Minister has been clear that we need to do more, including looking at further sanctions on those involved in the violence in Gaza, as well as at measures to ban trade in goods with illegal settlements. We have been clear that British companies should not be financing, constructing or advertising new settlements.

UK-Mauritius Chagos Treaty: Future Spending

2. **Dr Luke Evans** (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): Whether his Department has budgeted for future spending on the UK-Mauritius Treaty on the Chagos archipelago. [901094]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Uma Kumaran): This Government inherited a situation from the previous Conservative Government where UK control over the vital UK-US military base in Diego Garcia was under threat. This is about the long-term safety and national security of the United Kingdom and the British people. Maintaining the long-term operational control and security of the base remains a top priority; that is the entire basis for the UK-Mauritius agreement. A financial element was a crucial part of that deal.

Dr Evans: We have heard that line for the last two years. The question that the public want answered, and the one I asked the former Defence Secretary, the right hon. Member for Barnsley North (Dan Jarvis), before the summer, is: where is the case? The former Defence Secretary said that he was looking at the details closely. Six weeks on, can the Minister confirm that the deal is now dead, as it should be?

Uma Kumaran: The hon. Gentleman asks about the payments, but he knows that this is about the long-term safety and national security of the United Kingdom and the British people. Diego Garcia is a key strategic military asset for both the United Kingdom and the United States that has protected our shared security for nearly 60 years. At the time, the Conservative Government held 11 rounds of negotiations with the Mauritians; at the time, they argued that Britain's defence was best served by having legal certainty over the Chagos islands. Funding for the treaty will be provided within the existing spending review settlements for the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and the Ministry of Defence.

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

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): I begin by welcoming the Foreign Secretary and his new team to their places. In particular, I welcome the Minister; I am cross with her for leaving the Foreign Affairs Committee and we will miss her very much. She was a formidable member of our Committee, and I am proud to see her take such a well-deserved place on the Front Bench.

Now to the work. On the issue of islands that the UK—and now supposedly the United States—takes a great interest in, will the Minister provide an official response to President Trump's latest nonsense that he might withdraw support for UK sovereignty over the Falklands?

Uma Kumaran: I thank the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee for her warm words. The UK has no doubt about its sovereignty over the Falkland Islands: they are, and will always remain, a British overseas territory, in line with the wishes of the Falkland Islanders. The UK is steadfast in our support of the Falkland Islanders' right to self-determination. While I have seen the comments that the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee referred to, our position remains unchanged.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I welcome the new Foreign Secretary and his Ministers to the team, and I convey the apologies of the shadow Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge (Tom Tugendhat), who is overseas. May I associate Conservative Members with the Government's condolences following the devastating floods in Nepal and Tibet? Our thoughts are with all those who have lost loved ones, those who are still missing—including British nationals—and the emergency workers undertaking extraordinarily difficult rescue operations.

In April, after the US withdrew its support, Ministers admitted that the Chagos treaty had become: "impossible to agree at political level".

However, the Government now say that they are again trying to push the deal forward with Washington. What has changed? I will give the Government another change to answer the question. Has the US agreed to amend the 1966 UK-US agreement governing Diego Garcia, and why is the Department budgeting for a deal that remains blocked by our closest security ally?

Uma Kumaran: We worked in lockstep with the US in developing and testing the deal to ensure that it meets both UK and US security requirements. I am not going to give a running commentary on this matter. The US Administration have repeatedly supported this agreement, and nothing in this treaty has changed since the US originally gave its endorsement to the deal. We have always been clear that the US Government must be content with the agreement before we proceed in ratifying the treaty, and we will continue to work with the US and Mauritius to find a way forward that is in the UK's best interests and protects our national security.

West Bank: Illegal Settlements

3. **James Naish** (Rushcliffe) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to help oppose the expansion of illegal settlements in the west bank. [901095]

17. **Martin Rhodes** (Glasgow North) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to help oppose the expansion of illegal settlements in the west bank. [901109]

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Ed Miliband): Israeli settlements are illegal under international law. Last month, we saw the issuing of tenders for the E1 settlement, long regarded as the crossing of a red line because it cuts through the heart of the west bank and risks making a Palestinian state unviable. This action was rightly condemned by a whole range of countries in the international community, including the United Kingdom. In recent weeks, we have also seen appalling settler terrorism and Palestinians driven from their homes. This Government will not acquiesce in the destruction of the two-state solution—we will act. I will set out a comprehensive set of measures in the coming weeks.

James Naish: The UK told the Security Council on 29 June that more than 6,000 settlement housing units had already been approved this year, alongside the declaration on 24 June of a further 465 dunams of Palestinian land as state land, in violation of international law. The situation has only deteriorated since. Does the Foreign Secretary accept that this pace of expansion shows that current UK measures are failing to change Israeli Government behaviour, and that a trade ban is now the necessary next step?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend speaks with great sense on this matter. I am deeply worried about the pace of what is happening. Let us be honest about what is happening here: we are seeing the creation of facts on the ground that seek to destroy the prospect of a two-state solution. We cannot simply stand by and let that happen. My hon. Friend will know that shortly before becoming Prime Minister, the Prime Minister talked about doing more on measures to ban the trading of goods with illegal settlements, and we are working across Government

and with our allies on those measures. If my hon. Friend is a little patient, we will have more to say in the coming weeks.

Martin Rhodes: I thank the Foreign Secretary for his answer and for his condemnation of the Israeli Government's policies in the west bank. Does the Foreign Secretary agree that action against these illegal settlements must include banning the trade in services—as well as goods—such as mortgages, financial support and legal services from UK companies to illegal settlement builders?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend makes another important point. We need to look at our wider economic relationship with the occupied territories, as we are doing, and at the different tools we have. I want to be clear, as my hon. Friend says, that we do not want British companies financing, constructing or advertising new settlements. The work we are now undertaking is on how we can stop that; as I say, I will have more to say soon.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): Does the Secretary of State recognise that the situation that we find ourselves in, in the west bank and Palestine more widely, represents an almost complete failure of British foreign policy in this regard? As a British citizen, one of the most distressing aspects of this conflict, aside from the death, destruction and savagery, has been the sight of British Ministers being sent out to mouth platitudinous condemnations like goldfish, and promise action, only being dragged to take pathetic ineffectual steps by pressure from their own Back Benchers. My question is this: is anything going to change?

Ed Miliband: Yes. I associate myself pretty much entirely with the right hon. Gentleman's remarks. We need to face facts on both sides of the House here. It has been the policy of successive Governments over a long period to be for the two-state solution, but if we are for the two-state solution and we see it being destroyed by the facts on the ground, we must act. The right hon. Gentleman has a long-standing interest and expertise on these issues, and I assure him that we will do so.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): I welcome the Foreign Secretary to his new role. He will be aware that none of his recent predecessors were ever short of an angry word or condemnatory statement about Israel's actions in Gaza or the west bank, but they were woefully short on any meaningful action to back up their supposed outrage. What is happening in the west bank is happening right now, so time is of the essence. When will he spell out exactly the consequences for the state of Israel and for any UK national or UK-based company found to be complicit in this illegal E1 expansion programme?

Ed Miliband: I do want to defend the record of my predecessors for a moment. Recognition of the Palestinian state was a historic decision made by this Government, and action was taken on arms licences. As the Prime Minister has said, we on this side of the House recognise the need for a step change in our approach, given the urgency. As I say, the hon. Gentleman will not have to wait too long.

Damien Egan (Bristol North East) (Lab): The Secretary of State will no doubt be aware of the Israeli Government's removal of Dutch representatives from positions monitoring

the ceasefire in Gaza following trade bans by the Dutch Government recently. What reassurances can he give the House that in the event of any decision to impose new trade restrictions, the UK's ability to influence events in the middle east will not be undercut further as a result?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend raises a legitimate point, but I just want to say this: we must listen to the voices across the piece on these questions, including the Palestinian Authority. People rightly worry about the impacts that it can have, but I think it is very important when we weigh our decisions to listen to those who represent Palestinians and who say, "The time to act is now". That is what we are going to do.

Dr Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): I welcome the new Foreign Secretary and his team to their places. He is the third Labour Foreign Secretary in just over two years. We have had so many hand-wringing statements. He has just said that the time to act is now, but he is asking us to wait weeks more for a statement about banning settlement trade, which it is absolutely clear is essential. What is he waiting for? Will he ban trade in goods, services and investment in both directions immediately, because the facts on the ground are changing now, at pace and faster than ever before? What are the UK Government still waiting for?

Ed Miliband: I can assure the hon. Lady that we are working intensively on this, and as I said in earlier answers, she will not have to wait long. I want to get this right, because we need a comprehensive reset of our policy across the piece. Many Members on both sides of the House have made very important points about not only trade but a whole set of issues, including the International Court of Justice judgment on legality. I want a comprehensive reset of our approach on these issues, for the reasons that the right hon. Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) and many hon. Members said. It is necessary and high time.

Climate Change: National Security

4. **Gill Furniss** (Sheffield Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of international action on climate change on national security. [901096]

11. **Melanie Onn** (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of international action on climate change on national security. [901103]

14. **Perran Moon** (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of international action on climate change on national security. [901106]

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Ed Miliband): Keeping the British people safe is the first duty of government. This summer we have seen the effects of the climate crisis in starker terms than ever. We are impacted here at home and by what happens overseas. Showing leadership on this will be a core priority for me as Foreign Secretary,

and I will bring a group of Foreign Ministers together at the United Nations later this month to discuss how to respond.

Gill Furniss: My thoughts are with the victims of the flooding in Nepal and Tibet last week—a horrifying and pertinent reminder that climate change and its inevitable consequences are the biggest threat to our health, our homes and our way of life. Already drought and resource scarcity are actively fuelling regional conflicts around the globe and driving mass displacement. What diplomatic initiatives is the Secretary of State leading to combat climate change and prevent resource-driven conflict?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend makes a really important point. Correct me if I am wrong, but I believe the Met Office said today that this was the hottest summer on record. That brings home to us that whatever one's views on net zero and associated issues—I know there are various views on all sides of the House—this is one of the biggest national security threats that we face. I undertake to my hon. Friend and Members across the House that as Foreign Secretary I will treat this with the seriousness that it deserves.

Melanie Onn: The Humber generates 20% of our electricity and is critical to delivering UK energy security. We have to work with our international allies to build a stronger framework of the friendly to protect all our critical infrastructure. The memorandum of understanding between Humber Marine and Renewables and Norwegian Offshore Wind is a really good example of collaboration that will keep the turbines turning. Has the Foreign Secretary had any discussions with allied partners to protect and grow clean energy projects, to improve collaboration and to better support global energy security?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend—I used to say this at Energy Security and Net Zero questions—is a brilliant advocate on these issues, with huge expertise from before she came to the House. I assure her that, as part of the work that we are doing in alliance with my right hon. Friend the Energy Secretary, we will be working with other countries on these questions. We have to tackle the problem of emissions and we have to help countries adapt—both are crucial.

Perran Moon: I associate myself with the comments of the Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), about the appalling scenes in Nepal.

The success of our action on climate change is dependent on working collaboratively with international allies to secure resilient supply chains and limit dependencies on states hostile to the national interest. Cornwall council, as part of its international strategy, is working with the likes of the Breton government and the Quebec government to enhance the resilience of renewable energy and critical minerals supply chains. What is the Foreign Office doing to support national security through such outward-looking initiatives?

Ed Miliband: We love Cornwall, and we love my hon. Friend for his brilliant advocacy on behalf of his constituents and for what Cornwall is doing. He is right, and I will look at his initiative, because working

with Governments across the world on these issues—including state governments—is crucial. This is a collective action problem and we have to tackle it collectively.

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): May I put on record that the Liberal Democrats' concern and thoughts are with the people of Nepal and Tibet as this tragedy unfolds? I urge the Government to stay the distance with them.

The UK's spend on international aid and development aids our national security not only in climate change but in keeping extremism, pandemics and illegal immigration from our shores, but the Government have slashed aid brutally, and the true impact of the cuts was finally realised only in the final hours before summer recess. The cuts are deep and worrying. Will this Administration reverse them? Will the Secretary of State set out a timeline for when UK aid will return to 0.7% of GNI—a commitment that the House legislated for?

Ed Miliband: The hon. Lady makes an important point, but I do say to her that we inherited an incredibly difficult fiscal position, with extraordinary pressures on the public finances. We are doing everything we can on development—indeed, I associate myself with the remarks she made about Nepal and will say more about it later—which is why, as soon as the tragedy happened, we were one of the first countries to show that we would provide financial assistance to the Government of Nepal. We take these issues incredibly seriously and have a proud record.

Mr Joshua Reynolds (Maidenhead) (LD): With the United States stepping back from multilateral climate co-operation, what specific coalitions is the UK convening to fill the gap that the United States is leaving? Which countries have signed up to that so far?

Ed Miliband: In my six weeks or so in the job, I have met a wide range of Foreign Ministers and have talked to many of them about these issues. Frankly, this has not been at the forefront of Foreign Ministers' agendas, but in a sense—I know that we have said this many times before on climate issues—this summer is a wake-up call. Important as Energy Ministers are—of course, I was one recently—it also has to be a matter across Government, with a cross-Government approach to these issues. I assure the hon. Gentleman that that is what we will do.

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): We know that food security is part of national security, and it has been another tough year for agriculture, with a record wet winter and now a record hot summer. We also have bluetongue disease going through livestock—when I was at vet school, that was a disease of northern Africa and southern Europe—which has spread through Europe to the UK and now to Scotland because of climate change. Does the Foreign Secretary agree that it is hugely irresponsible and scientifically ignorant for the Leader of the Opposition to ban Conservative candidates who believe in taking serious action to tackle climate change from standing at the next general election?

Ed Miliband: The Leader of the Opposition will have to take responsibility for her own candidates. I was once Leader of the Opposition—it is a hard job, as I proved.

There is an interesting point here, which is that a debate has broken out in the pages of *The Daily Telegraph*—an organ I obviously read a lot—on climate change, and people are saying, “Hang on a minute; how can the Conservative party, which cares about preservation of our way of life, ignore this issue?” I urge people across the House to take the issue seriously.

Ukraine

5. **James Wild** (North West Norfolk) (Con): What diplomatic steps he is taking to support Ukraine. [901097]

19. **Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst** (Solihull West and Shirley) (Con): What diplomatic steps he is taking to support Ukraine. [R] [901111]

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Ed Miliband): This Government are determined to follow the leadership of every British Government since the Russian invasion and stand shoulder to shoulder with the people of Ukraine against Russian aggression, which has intensified in recent weeks, with July the worst month for civilian casualties since 2022. My first Foreign Minister call was with my Ukrainian counterpart, Foreign Minister Sybiha, and I had the privilege of meeting President Zelenski, alongside the Prime Minister, in my second week in this role. On Russian sanctions, on helping Ukraine with its defence and on helping it ensure that it can prevail in the conflict, we will be with the people of Ukraine and their Government for as long as it takes.

James Wild: The Government rightly champion long-term support for Ukraine and deterrence against Russian aggression, but that diplomatic approach has to be backed up by credible pledges on military capability. Will the Foreign Secretary confirm that this Government are committed to spending 3% of GDP on defence by 2030—something the Chancellor said was essential to defend our country only a few weeks ago?

Ed Miliband: These are matters for the Chancellor to determine, as the hon. Gentleman well knows, but I say this specifically on Ukraine: we will do whatever is necessary to support the Government of Ukraine. It is clear to me that we have shown, at so many different levels, our solidarity—that of the British people and of the Government—with the people of Ukraine, and I pay tribute, as I did in my opening answer, to previous Governments, beginning with the Government of Boris Johnson. Not just solidarity, but action, are absolutely crucial. This conflict matters in principle and it matters to our future security too.

Dr Shastri-Hurst: We know that the Kremlin uses disinformation and misinformation to thwart Ukraine's effort and that of its allies in the fight against Russian aggression. In recent weeks, there has been evidence that Meta has permitted Russian state propaganda, including threats that Britain should be punished for its assistance to Ukraine, to be targeted at individuals. What steps are the Foreign Office and the Government more widely taking to hold Meta to account?

Ed Miliband: On the end point made by the hon. Gentleman, Russia can make its threats, but we will not be deterred from our solidarity and support for Ukraine. I put that on record and make it clear in the House. I have been reading the back catalogue of Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office questions, because that is the kind of thing I do, and I know that the issue of disinformation and misinformation, which the hon. Gentleman raises, has come up a lot. I undertake to work on that, and specifically on the Meta issue that he raised, with my colleagues across Government.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I congratulate the Foreign Secretary and the ministerial team, and I wish them well. In recent months I have been proud, alongside the former Prime Minister, to negotiate the UK's participation in the EU support loan for Ukraine. Does the Foreign Secretary agree that, going forward, there should be no unnecessary delays in procurement, and that the kit and the weapons need to get to the frontline in Ukraine, where they are needed, as soon as possible?

Ed Miliband: I take this opportunity to pay tribute to the excellent job that my right hon. Friend did in government on Europe and those very difficult negotiations. I pay tribute to him for the brilliance with which he undertook that. The answer to his substantive question is: absolutely, yes. I say to the House that this winter is crucial for the conflict, and we must do everything we can not just to support Ukraine, but to do so in a speedy way.

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): Members across this House remain deeply concerned about the 20,610 Ukrainian children stolen by Russia since the start of its illegal war. My right hon. Friend's predecessor established this country's proud record on that issue, committing £4 million to tracing efforts that have located more than 1,000 children, imposed more than 130 sanctions and supported Ukraine in establishing a special tribunal for the crime of aggression. Will the new Foreign Secretary commit to working with me to continue the Government's vital work in that area?

Ed Miliband: I pay tribute to the work of my hon. Friend and other Members across the House on this incredibly important and profound issue. I can say yes, 100%, I commit to working with her and other Members from all parties on this issue.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mr Andrew Snowden (Fylde) (Con): We remain steadfast in our support for the Ukrainian people and in our determination that Putin must not prevail. Russia has responded to Britain's decision to share Storm Shadow technology with Ukraine by threatening British factories with attacks from so-called unknown sources. Mr Speaker, you will know as well as I do the worry that this will cause for workers and residents in places such as Warton and Samlesbury in Lancashire, and across the country. With Putin continuing to reject meaningful steps towards peace, what formal representations has the Foreign Secretary made to Moscow in response, and what diplomatic action is he co-ordinating with our NATO allies to increase international pressure on Russia?

Ed Miliband: I endorse absolutely the spirit and substance of the hon. Gentleman's important question. Let us be clear where the aggression comes from: it comes from Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the wider threat to our allies. I say very clearly that we will stand shoulder to shoulder with the people of Ukraine and we will not be intimidated by Russian threats.

Strait of Hormuz

6. Alison Taylor (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking with international partners to help protect freedom of navigation through the strait of Hormuz. [901098]

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): The strait of Hormuz should be open to safe, secure and unimpeded transit, in accordance with international law. In the United Kingdom, the Foreign Secretary and I are working closely with international partners to drive diplomatic efforts to restore navigational rights and freedoms. We continue to make it clear to Iran that it must cease its egregious attacks on shipping and on our partners and allies, and it must engage in negotiations to reopen the strait in good faith.

Alison Taylor: My constituents in Paisley and Renfrewshire North are feeling the impact of higher energy and petrol prices, and they will appreciate the efforts that my hon. Friend's Department is making. Would he agree that military action by the world's superpowers is risking a return to pricing instability, and that all efforts must be made to cease military activities?

Stephen Doughty: I entirely understand the concerns of my hon. Friend's constituents, particularly in an advanced manufacturing district such as Paisley and Renfrewshire North—I know her constituency well and understand why she is speaking up for her constituents. These events are affecting communities across the United Kingdom. The Prime Minister is taking action at home to support people with energy bills and the cost of living, but we absolutely need to see a diplomatic solution involving negotiations and the reopening of the strait of Hormuz, and to stand up for the fundamental principles of trade and maritime security.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Clearly, the free flow of shipping through the strait of Hormuz is vital to western economies, but the threat is that Iran will seek to take complete control over shipping through the strait. What sanctions do the Government propose to take to prevent Iran from succeeding?

Stephen Doughty: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that we need to see the strait reopened. We need to have an agreement between Iran and Oman, and we need to ensure that there is a free flow of trade, with no tolling, and that the attacks on shipping and on partners in the region cease immediately. We have already imposed 240 sanctions on Iran, and we will continue to work with international partners to apply economic pressure, but a diplomatic settlement is the right way to restore the right of passage in the strait of Hormuz.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mr Andrew Snowden (Fylde) (Con): The Iranian regime is deliberately weaponising the strait of Hormuz, using rockets, drones and sea mines to menace international shipping and to hold the global economy to ransom. Its aggression threatens British vessels, drives up fuel prices, and places our energy, aviation and food supply chains at direct risk. Following the latest American strikes and the Iranian retaliation, will the Minister set out what specific and concrete measures the Government are taking with our international partners to resolve this crisis, restore the safe and sustained passage of commercial shipping, and ensure that Tehran can no longer threaten Britain's energy security with impunity?

Stephen Doughty: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to set out the situation, the threats and the impact on our economy. Across this House, we share a desire to get the strait reopened. That is why, over recent weeks, the Foreign Secretary and I have been engaged in so much diplomatic action with our partners in the Gulf, and made it clear to Iran, directly in conversation, what we expect to happen. I mentioned the sanctions that are already in place. We keep other measures under review. Iran cannot be allowed to develop a nuclear weapon, and cannot continue its destabilising activity in the region or its threats to Jewish and Israeli communities around the world. We need to see this as a whole package of activity. Those are the things that we have been making absolutely clear to Iran and working on closely with partners.

China: Threat to UK Interests

7. Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): What assessment he has made of the level of threat China poses to UK interests. [901099]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Chris Elmore): This Government fully recognise that China poses a series of threats to UK national security, from cyber-attacks, foreign interference and espionage targeting our domestic institutions to the transnational repression of Hongkongers. Yet China, as the world's second largest economy and the UK's third largest trading partner, presents the UK with opportunities—not engaging is no choice at all. Our approach to China is consistent: we will co-operate where we can and challenge where we must.

Bradley Thomas: It is good to hear the Minister acknowledge that China is a threat. The directors of GCHQ and MI5 have been clear that China presents the most significant state-based threat to the UK. The Government have previously talked about their China audit; will they commit to publishing it in full?

Chris Elmore: As the hon. Gentleman knows, there have been a series of questions on this issue in recent times. I am happy to update him again in writing.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): We have all seen the corrosive impact of the Chinese Government's policies in Africa, in the south Pacific and throughout the Commonwealth. That is as important for our national interest as it is for the countries affected. What are we doing about it?

Chris Elmore: We continue to work internationally. My hon. Friend will know that I am also the Commonwealth Minister, and part of that work involves showing that some of the United Kingdom's most important relationships are with those countries, whether across Africa or in the Caribbean.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Stamford) (Con): Nine weeks ago, the Government were told that Chinese embassy guards were brandishing prohibited electroshock weapons and threatening peaceful vigil holders with them. The Chinese Communist party either breached articles 41 and 27 of the Vienna convention, or it procured these weapons illegally in the UK. The Chinese Communist party will not waive diplomatic immunity, so when will Ministers stop hiding behind a dead-end Metropolitan police investigation and do something to deter future hostilities in the UK?

Chris Elmore: Let me be clear: any attempt by a foreign state to coerce, intimidate, harass or harm individuals on UK soil will never be tolerated, but the hon. Lady knows as well as I do that there is a live investigation by the Metropolitan police. Members of this House should respect the fact that the Metropolitan police are investigating. Frankly, she knows better, and I hope that she will wait for the investigation. That is when we will listen to what it has to say.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for his comments about the terrible floods in Nepal. A number of residents in my constituency have lost family in the region, and they will be listening to what the Government have to say on the issue.

What work is the Minister doing with Cabinet colleagues to tackle the important issue of online disinformation? We know that a lot of that disinformation comes from bad state actors.

Chris Elmore: My hon. Friend will know that we work across Government to tackle disinformation. Within my portfolio we have increased funding for the BBC World Service, which is the most trusted newscaster across the world. That is a way in which the Foreign Office tackles disinformation.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): The new shadow Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge (Tom Tugendhat), is in Taipei, where Taiwan's Defence Ministry has warned that an increasingly unpredictable China is intensifying preparations to blockade and encircle the island. That comes in the same week that the US exposed another extensive Chinese state-sponsored hacking operation against Government institutions and critical networks. With Beijing threatening Taiwan, targeting our allies and conducting espionage against this country, will the Foreign Secretary finally state plainly that China poses a threat to British interests, and will he place China in the enhanced tier of the foreign influence registration scheme?

Chris Elmore: The right hon. Lady knows that we keep all these things under review. As ever, I am happy to write to her.

Detention of UK Nationals Abroad

8. Douglas McAllister (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to secure the release of UK nationals detained abroad. [901100]

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): I pay tribute to our Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office consular teams, particularly for their current work on the Nepal-China flooding crisis. It is also important to pay tribute to the work they do to support the thousands of British nationals who are arrested or detained abroad each year. We are strengthening that support, including through the appointment of the first dedicated envoy for complex detentions, our former colleague the right honourable Alistair Burt. I am sure that was welcomed across the House. He is supporting British nationals and their families in the most difficult detention cases. I have met him to discuss those cases, and I look forward to his challenge and his review of all of those cases.

Douglas McAllister: Today marks 3,224 days of my constituent Jagtar Singh Johal's arbitrary detention and torture in an Indian prison. I welcome the Foreign Secretary to his place—he is the ninth Foreign Secretary in office since my constituent's detention. What steps has he taken since his appointment to secure Jagtar's release? Will he do more than just raise his case? Will he use his authority and take decisive action to end this injustice, and will he agree to meet Jagtar's family as a priority?

Stephen Doughty: I thank my hon. Friend for his sustained and continued advocacy on behalf of his constituent, which is deeply powerful. I know it is of concern to many Members across this House. Despite some progress in Mr Johal's legal proceedings, eight of the cases against him remain outstanding. We continue to raise concerns about his detention with the Government of India at every appropriate opportunity, emphasising the need for a prompt, full and just resolution of his cases within India's independent legal system. The former Foreign Secretary raised the case on 4 June. The Foreign Secretary's envoy for complex consular detentions met Mr Johal's brother on 7 August, and I can confirm that we will meet the family in due course. Consular officials most recently visited Mr Johal on 29 July.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I raise the cases of Ryan Cornelius and Jimmy Lai—both United Kingdom citizens—to the attention of the Foreign Secretary, who I welcome to his position. Ryan Cornelius has been incarcerated for 19 years—trumped-up charges by a corrupt regime that is supporting a war in Sudan at the moment. In his case, will the Government first bring sanctions against that regime to persuade, or force, them to release this man, as he should have been? In the case of Jimmy Lai, would the Foreign Secretary also threaten clear sanctions? I now know that Sebastien Lai wants to see the Prime Minister. Would the Foreign Secretary please say to the Prime Minister that he should see him because, again, Jimmy Lai has been wrongly incarcerated by a despotic regime?

Stephen Doughty: The right hon. Gentleman raises important cases. I can assure him that we continue to support the clemency applications of Ryan Cornelius and Charles Ridley and to raise their case with the UAE authorities. In fact, I did so recently; the former Foreign Secretary did so as well and has met the families.

As the right hon. Gentleman knows, we condemn the politically motivated prosecution of Jimmy Lai in the strongest terms. At the age of 78, his sentence is tantamount to a life sentence, and we are deeply concerned for his health and continue to call for his immediate release. The Foreign Secretary has raised this with his Chinese counterpart and will, of course, be happy to meet the family.

Sojan Joseph (Ashford) (Lab): I have been in regular contact with my constituent, Chloe Pepper, who has expressed serious concerns regarding the welfare of her brother, Ryan. Ryan has been detained in Dubai since the beginning of November, and he has reported that he has experienced mistreatment while in detention, which is a matter of significant concern. The UAE authorities have conducted an investigation and found no evidence of mistreatment. What scope do consular officials have to seek information about the UAE's investigation to ensure that Ryan's allegations were properly investigated?

Stephen Doughty: We raise all cases with authorities in line with the appropriate consular protocols. I am happy to speak with my hon. Friend about the case involving his constituents and see what further we can do.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I congratulate the Government on the hiring of Alistair Burt—he is a good hire and will do great things for some of these most complex of cases—but does the Minister agree that many of these cases are extremely difficult and exceptionally traumatic, and that it is far better to prevent them happening in the first place? What more can be done to advise discretionary travellers on the risks they run when travelling to some of these exceptionally challenging locations, and particularly to advise them in advance of the finite nature of any consular support that may be forthcoming if they get into trouble?

Stephen Doughty: I absolutely concur with the right hon. Gentleman's praise for Alistair Burt. He held my position in the past, and commands immense respect across this House; it has been a pleasure to work with him so far. I certainly will welcome his challenge and review of the most complex cases—as the right hon. Gentleman said, some of these cases are incredibly difficult. He rightly says that prevention is crucially important. We provide FCDO travel advice, as well as tailored advice in some cases, but we absolutely want to make sure that British nationals are aware of the full range of risks of travelling to a number of locations, and we attempt to make those risks very clear in advance.

Climate Change: International Partners

9. Liz Twist (Blaydon and Consett) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking with international partners to help tackle climate change. [901101]

25. **Ms Julie Minns** (Carlisle) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking with international partners to help tackle climate change. [901117]

The Minister for International Development (Kirsty McNeill): Tackling the climate and nature crisis is an urgent priority for us all, as recent extreme wildfires and droughts have only served to reinforce. The UK is working with international partners to drive progress, whether through our forest partnerships with countries such as Brazil and Indonesia, or through our global clean power alliance to accelerate the worldwide transition to clean energy. The Foreign Secretary will act as the UK governor to the World Bank, taking personal leadership of the UK's engagement on development and climate finance, and later this month he will also convene Foreign Ministers at the UN to address climate security challenges.

Liz Twist: My constituents in Blaydon and Consett have suffered through a summer of extreme heat, seeing trains cancelled, signal interruptions and wildfires. Climate change affects every single one of us—not only in the UK but globally, as we have heard today—so how is climate change resilience being embedded directly into our core diplomatic and security strategy?

Kirsty McNeill: I sympathise deeply with my hon. Friend's constituents, who have been subject to such appalling disruption over the summer. We are very committed to strengthening international co-operation to anticipate, prevent and respond to climate-related risks of all sorts, including extreme weather. The French Minister for Foreign Affairs and the Foreign Secretary have recently reaffirmed their commitment to expand early warning initiatives, including through the climate risk and early warning systems programme, to strengthen protection for the most climate-vulnerable countries and populations, as well as for her constituents.

Ms Minns: The Minister will be aware that the world's peatlands play a critical role in tackling climate change, storing twice as much carbon as all the world's forests combined. Thanks to previous EU funding, work to restore the Bolton Fell Moss peatland in my constituency began in 2015. Can the Minister outline what international peatland restoration programmes the UK Government are currently engaged with, and will she press DEFRA colleagues to ensure that the UK continues to provide long-term funding to restore Cumbria's upland bogs?

Kirsty McNeill: We are committed to peatland restoration, which is critical to tackling the climate and nature crisis and meeting our Environment Act targets, as my hon. Friend laid out. The UK supports international peatland conservation through programmes such as the Darwin Initiative. Darwin projects are, for example, helping communities in Peru and Indonesia to manage peatland ecosystems sustainably. Many tropical forests are also part of peatland ecosystems, and the UK has a long-standing portfolio of work supporting them. Of course, the Department continues to work closely with DEFRA to protect and restore important ecosystems.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): After a horrendous summer of wildfires and the catastrophe in Nepal and Tibet, it is clear that if we are going to

solve these problems, we need to act globally but think locally. It is really important that the public trust the information they receive on climate change. Will the FCDO work with Cabinet colleagues to ensure that the public are educated, and will it consider funding a national programme of public information, or perhaps screenings of the "People's Emergency Briefing", so that we can all understand more about the situation?

Kirsty McNeill: I could not agree with the hon. Lady more. It is very important that people trust the information they receive. She will have noticed the alert that was sent out across England, which was a sign of how seriously this Government take their commitment to communicate with the public responsibly.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her answer. There are 67 wars across the world—countries in conflict with other countries. What can she do to ensure that sworn enemies come together to tackle climate change, which is the real enemy of every country in this world?

Kirsty McNeill: I very much agree with the hon. Gentleman: climate change is a common enemy, and we have to face it across this House, across this country and across the world. We are committed to working with everybody who is taking climate action seriously.

EU Foreign and Security Co-operation

10. **Richard Foord** (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): What steps he is taking to improve UK-EU foreign and security co-operation. [901102]

The Minister for Intergovernmental Relations and European Relations (Mr Hamish Falconer): There is no British security without Europe and no European security without Britain. The EU is one of our closest partners on foreign and security policy. That is why I was in Austria yesterday meeting a number of our European counterparts, and it is why the Foreign Secretary will travel to Ireland later to meet EU Foreign Ministers. The ambitious security and defence partnership agreed with the EU is boosting co-operation and—as my excellent predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), noted already—we recently struck a deal to join the EU's \$90 billion Ukraine loan initiative.

Richard Foord: Four EU member states have written to the European Commission, asking that it explores new options for Ukraine to make use of immobilised Russian state assets for its self-defence. They propose that EU states spread the legal and financial risks of seizing those assets. When the Foreign Secretary goes to Ireland this evening, will he support that initiative?

Mr Falconer: The Foreign Secretary and I have discussed many of these questions, and he will of course be discussing Ukraine. We have made a signal contribution to European security through our efforts in Ukraine; we will continue to do so, and it will be a top priority in our discussions in the weeks ahead.

Ben Coleman (Chelsea and Fulham) (Lab): At the moment, the European Union is taking big decisions to address the challenges it faces. Those decisions affect us,

too, but we are not at the table—I am thinking of tariffs on steel made in Europe and the Security Action for Europe defence procurement programme. Will the Minister reassure my constituents in Chelsea and Fulham that the Government will press ahead with a summit this year, that they will get good deals for young people and on the price of food and energy, and that they will seek to be more ambitious and bold in getting us back a seat at the table so that we can play a part in making the decisions that affect us?

Mr Falconer: I can reassure my hon. Friend's constituents that, after many years of neglect, we are getting back to the table: I was at the table yesterday and the Foreign Secretary will be at the table this evening. We are pressing British interests in relation to steel made in Europe and on a whole range of really important questions. We have applied considerable pressure. Young people and research and development institutions will have access to a closer relationship with Europe, and we will push ahead in the coming weeks and months.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): Labour's decision to recruit a new Prime Minister directly led to the cancellation of the UK-EU summit in July, but a month and a half later, we still have no date, leaving businesses in the dark about the future relationship. Businesses also want to know whether the Prime Minister is truly committed to a bolder approach to our European relations, or if he will follow the pedestrian approach taken by his predecessor. Will the Minister today provide some certainty by telling the House when the UK-EU summit will take place? Will he also confirm whether the Government will heed Liberal Democrat calls to put the UK's entry into the single market on the table at those talks?

Mr Falconer: The hon. Gentleman knows how diplomacy works: we do not announce a summit until it has been agreed with our partners. I turn to his substantive question. Are we ambitious to go further and faster? Yes, we are. I said that in Europe yesterday and we have said it repeatedly. We are making every effort that we can make to ensure that there is a partnership that works for both the UK and the EU, and that we are advancing quickly towards it.

Topical Questions

T1. [901118] **Sir Iain Duncan Smith** (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Ed Miliband): I am sure the whole House will want to join me in expressing our deep sorrow for the flooding on the Nepal-China border that has caused widespread death and devastation. There are 987 confirmed deaths and 3,916 people still missing, of whom 36 are British nationals. From the moment the tragedy unfolded, we have sought to provide all the help we can to the Nepalese authorities and to support British nationals, including £5 million in additional humanitarian assistance. Our humanitarian and consular specialists are on the ground in Nepal, and FCDO crisis

teams are working around the clock to support relatives of those missing. My deepest condolences go to all those who have lost loved ones in this tragedy, particularly British nationals and their families.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: Has the Secretary of State been made aware of the case of Joshua Wong, a Hong Kong resident who is being prosecuted by the Administration in Hong Kong using the national security law? The Secretary of State will know that Hong Kong has trashed the Sino-British agreement and decoupled the concept of common law from rights and responsibilities. All Joshua Wong has done is to ask for the same rights and privileges that we in this country hold dear. Will the Secretary of State take up that case with the Chinese Government and say to them, "Enough is enough. It's time to stop chasing peaceful protesters?"

Ed Miliband: I absolutely will take up that case. I know the right hon. Gentleman has a long-standing interest on a whole range of such issues. Because of that interest, I say to him that we will be forthright on human rights when it comes to China, and we will be strong in relation to foreign interference, espionage and on any threats to this country that we find.

T2. [901119] **Callum Anderson** (Buckingham and Bletchley) (Lab): I welcome the Foreign Secretary's decision to show personal leadership in acting as the UK Governor to the World Bank, given the wildfires that we have seen in Europe across the summer and the flooding in Nepal. Will he tell us how he intends to use the UK's influence to ensure that adaptation and resilience finance is accessible much more quickly to those countries that need it most?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend raises a really important point. The reason I took up this role is that I want the World Bank to do more to make adaptation and resilience go further and faster and to make it simpler and more accessible. We know from events around the world how vulnerable countries on the frontline of climate breakdown are, and I undertake to him and to the House that I will make that a top priority.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): The Foreign Secretary has declared that development and climate finance will be "central" to his tenure, yet the aid watchdog has found that the system has too often focused on meeting a spending target, rather than clear priorities or value for money. Before he embarks on an expensive road map back to 0.7%, will he commit to a full national interest review that includes considering value for money for the taxpayer?

Ed Miliband: The right hon. Lady makes a very important point. Any aid spending that we do must be value for money, but this is not just the right thing to do in principle to help to support the world's poorest countries; it is the right thing from our point of view. That is a very important point, which I hope those on both sides of the House can agree on. If we do not deal with problems around the world, they come to Britain.

Wendy Morton: Let me touch on Nepal and Tibet. The situation there is truly harrowing, with hundreds of lives lost, thousands still missing and British nationals among those unaccounted for. We welcome the deployment

of the UK's rapid response team and the humanitarian package, but when it comes to British nationals, can the Foreign Secretary reassure the House that our consular teams have secured full access on both sides of the Nepal-Tibet border? What specialist British search, rescue and victim identification assistance is being and will continue to be offered?

Ed Miliband: The right hon. Lady raises a very important and sensitive issue about the families of British nationals who are missing. I assure her that we are engaging with the authorities on both sides of the border. We are making available all the resources that we have at our disposal to help in this process; I have said that from the morning after the disaster, when I spoke to the Nepalese Foreign Minister.

T6. [901123] **Gurinder Singh Josan** (Smethwick) (Lab): Will the Minister update the House about the steps that the Government are taking to tackle the Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of the Congo?

The Minister for International Development (Kirsty McNeill): We are working closely with international partners to support the African-led response. We acted early to allocate an initial £26.9 million to fund the immediate response in the DRC and Uganda and to support the World Health Organisation and Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention in co-ordinating the regional response. I am pleased to announce to the House a further £51.8 million, which takes our total funding to £78.7 million. We are also taking a leading role internationally. I met Dr Jean Kaseya, the head of Africa CDC, in Addis Ababa last week, and I will discuss this issue with ministerial counterparts ahead of the UN General Assembly later this month.

T3. [901120] **James MacCleary** (Lewes) (LD): Last month, 12 protesters were arrested in Tbilisi just for displaying a banner criticising Georgian oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili, who controls the Georgian Dream Government. The European Union and the United States have taken steps to sanction Mr Ivanishvili. When will the UK Government follow suit?

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): The hon. Gentleman knows that we do not comment on future designations, but we have sanctioned a number of individuals in Georgia in relation to actions. We urge Georgia to respect rights and freedoms and an inclusive and open democratic society.

T8. [901125] **Gareth Thomas** (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): The catastrophic events in Nepal last week have had a profound impact on the significant Nepalese community in my constituency. As well as underlining the need for further, sustained effort to tackle climate change internationally, do not those events also underline the need for continuing aid to Nepal?

Stephen Doughty: My hon. Friend speaks up powerfully on behalf of his constituents with connections to Nepal. I can absolutely assure him that we are looking at what further support we can offer to Nepal. Let me emphasise that we had stuff prepositioned, and our work on disaster risk reduction over many years has enabled us

to be in a strong position to respond. We will stand by Nepal as it has always stood by us, and we will work closely with China.

T4. [901121] **David Reed** (Exmouth and Exeter East) (Con): As bond yields climb sharply and turmoil in the middle east revives inflationary pressures, how is the Foreign Secretary reassuring international partners that Britain can pay its way? More importantly, is he warning the new Prime Minister of fresh, non-essential spending?

Ed Miliband: I take incredibly seriously my role in helping to tackle the cost of living crisis that the British people face, and that means working tirelessly to get back to the strait of Hormuz being reopened so that we can get oil and gas flowing. That is what we need to do.

T9. [901126] **Rachel Taylor** (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): Around the world, countries such as Seychelles are leading the way in decriminalising same-sex acts, while others, such as Ghana, are passing appalling new laws that attack the LGBT+ community simply for being who they are. Can the Minister assure the House that the UK is doing all it can to work with like-minded countries around the world to advance equality and protect the fundamental rights of LGBT+ people?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Chris Elmore): My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this issue, and I was pleased to confirm to the House back in May the £21 million fund over three years to advance LGBTQ rights internationally. This Government will always support the international rights of LGBT people for evermore.

T5. [901122] **Chris Law** (Dundee Central) (SNP): It is beyond doubt that Israeli settlements in Palestinian territories are illegal, and the Foreign Secretary has stated that sanctions for those who participate in illegal settlement expansion will be brought forward. Sadly, Labour MPs in this House are trying to prevent that on the basis that it could result in retaliatory measures from the US. Can the Foreign Secretary assure the House that the UK's adherence to international law will not be traded away, that the rights of the Palestinian people are not bargaining chips, and that he will not be bullied by Back Benchers or President Trump into allowing continued settler violence and the deliberate destruction of the two-state solution?

Ed Miliband: I can assure the hon. Member that Labour MPs are very keen that action be taken, and it will be.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the International Development Committee.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): Globally, the rights of women and girls are being stripped away at alarming speed, particularly when it comes to education and sexual and reproductive rights. Does the Foreign Secretary plan to honour his predecessor's commitment to making sure that women's and girls' rights are embedded across FCDO programming?

Ed Miliband: I take this opportunity to pay tribute to my predecessor, now the Secretary of State for Health

and Social Care, for her excellent work leading the campaign globally on violence against women and girls. My answer is 100% yes, I will continue her brilliant work.

T7. [901124] **Marie Goldman** (Chelmsford) (LD): I have heard at first hand from many Palestinian business owners how illegal Israeli settlements ruin lives and disproportionately impact women and girls. I have received hundreds of emails from my Chelmsford constituents demanding comprehensive Government action. Will the Foreign Secretary therefore reassure my constituents and pledge that any trade ban will include services and investments?

Ed Miliband: As I said earlier, we are looking at all the economic issues in relation to the occupied territories. The hon. Lady raises an important point, which is that

what has happened in Gaza and the west bank has pricked the conscience of a generation, and that is why we will act.

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): Does the Foreign Secretary share my concern that the British company, Dana Petroleum, is involved in a consortium that has been granted licences for oil exploration in Palestinian waters off the coast of the occupied Gaza strip? Does he agree that it is illegal and amounts to the war crime of pillage? What does he intend to do to challenge this illegal action by a British-based company?

Stephen Doughty: My hon. Friend raises an important issue. The United Kingdom recognises Palestine as a state and therefore its entitlement to a territorial sea. Let me be clear: I expect any UK company to abide by its obligations under international law.

Direction of Government

Mr Speaker: We now come to the statement from the Prime Minister. There has been a lot of speculation over the recess, and I just say that this is in accordance with the rules of government. The ministerial code is clear. For those who have asked why I have not commented, it is because it is within the rules, which I do not make. It is this House that abides by them.

3.38 pm

The Prime Minister (Andy Burnham): With permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement on the direction in which I will lead our country.

I come before this House having visited each of the regions and nations of the UK over the past six weeks, and Ukraine on the occasion of the 35th anniversary of its independence. The UK's steadfast support has helped sustain Ukraine's resolve over the past four and a half years, and particularly so in the last two. That was the achievement of my predecessor, and as he stands down from this place, I want to pay tribute to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer). He has given this country a lifetime of public service, particularly for those fighting for justice. When he delivered in this House on his promise to the Hillsborough families and everyone involved in the Hillsborough law campaign, it was a moment that I will never forget. His leadership took our party from one of its worst defeats to its best victories, and created a platform to change this country for the better. We will use it well, and we wish his family the very best for the future.

The position that my right hon. and learned Friend took on Ukraine, building on the work of his predecessors as Prime Minister, is one that I will not change, whatever the threats that we face. We do not seek escalation, but instead will stand firm in providing what help we can to enable Ukraine to defend itself from this illegal invasion. Britain's defence starts in Ukraine, and the defence of our nation will always be my first priority.

On public safety, I know that the whole House will wish to join me in expressing our deepest condolences to the family, friends and colleagues of PC Matthew Blades and PC Tom Clough, who were killed in the line of duty on the A66. We will do our best to support the Middlesbrough community, which is hurting and grieving right now, and we hear the call from the Members of this House who represent it for a discussion about investment in policing and police numbers.

I know that I also speak for the whole House in expressing my profound shock and horror at the devastating scenes on the Nepal-China border. My sympathies are with all those affected, including the families and loved ones of those missing in this appalling tragedy. The Foreign Secretary is doing everything he can to support the Nepalese Government and British nationals in the region. This is what the climate crisis looks like. We have just ourselves experienced what is likely to have been the hottest summer on record. This Government will meet the climate challenge, and I can confirm to the House that I will attend COP31 in Turkey in November.

I will build on the work of my predecessor in other areas. When I visited Dover in early August, staff from Border Force and HM Coastguard told me that extra

police numbers on French beaches were beginning to deliver real results. I can report to the House today that that has continued throughout the last month, with the numbers arriving over the summer halved on last year, making this year, to date, the lowest for crossings since 2021. Tomorrow, when I welcome President Macron to the UK on the occasion of the opening of the exhibition of the Bayeux tapestry, I will thank him for the co-operation that has enabled us to prevent more than 48,000 people from crossing.

Where it is right to do so, I will build on what has been achieved. However, where necessary, I will not hesitate to make changes. One of the first things that I did after taking office was to review the plans to relieve pressure on prison places with the Lord Chancellor, who will provide a full update to the House following my statement. We took an early decision to exempt rape, grooming and serious child sex offences, and to fast-track work to see whether we could go further, after hearing the calls from the family of PC Andrew Harper and many others. As a result, we are now confirming that anyone convicted of manslaughter, death by dangerous driving or indecent assault will not see any change in their prison term. We will find additional prison places by deporting more foreign national offenders and finally grasping the nettle on an issue that the House has ignored for too long: indefinite imprisonment for public protection sentences—a now abolished policy, but one which to this day keeps people behind bars despite having already served more than their sentences.

None of this is easy, but I did what I always do: apply my values to a challenging situation and a care for people, which I spoke about in Downing Street. I believe the public will support me in recognising the clear difference between those who have served their time and more, and those who have not. We will bring forward legislation soon, but we can find a solution to end this injustice that balances public safety and basic fairness, and I urge colleagues on both sides of the House to help us do that.

This is politics done differently: problem solving over point scoring. It is what the country needs, it is what the public want more of, and it will characterise my time in office. I was pleased to begin cross-party talks over social care in the summer, and I thank the leader of the Liberal Democrats and the right hon. Member for Daventry (Stuart Andrew) for the spirit in which that endeavour began. I wish the latter well as he leaves the Opposition Front Bench.

When it comes to the biggest issues facing the country—the economy and the cost of living crisis—people are looking for much more substantial change, as promised in our manifesto, and that is what I will bring. Britain is not where any of us would wish it to be. Things are not working as they should. Life is too expensive and too hard for too many. That is why this Government's first moves were to give businesses and people a little breathing space. On tax, in my first week in office we cut VAT on electricity bills and cut business rates for pubs, social clubs and live music venues. We reinstated the £2 cap on bus fares for the whole of 2027. These measures will provide some relief. They were funded by reprioritising within Government, as the bedrock of our approach will be grounded in fiscal responsibility. But in the long term, lifting growth and living standards will require much more.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): Who wrote this?

The Prime Minister: What I bring back to the House after 10 years away is a clear diagnosis of what has gone wrong. Let me lay it out clearly, particularly for the right hon. Gentleman, since he asked.

From the 1980s, this country took a series of wrong turns. Political power was centralised, economic power privatised and the country deindustrialised. Austerity followed, hollowing out councils and depriving them of the agency to act to reverse any of it, and then Brexit compounded the damage, ushering in a decade of low growth and stalled regeneration. *[Interruption.]* Change begins with honesty, and I am not hearing much of it this afternoon. Unless we are blunt about what went wrong, we will not turn things around. Far from “taking back control”, the combination of those policies took control out of the hands of communities up and down Britain.

For 40 years, too many places have been drifting. Too many British high streets tell the story of this decline. People yearn to see them restored to what they once were, as the Communities Secretary and I heard on our visit to Ilkeston in the summer, but they see no hope if we continue on the same path with a failed economic model, which does not trickle down much to places like theirs and instead allows wealth to be extracted and siphoned out. Britain’s water industry stands as a leaking monument to that approach—a country run in the private rather than public interest. That is now abundantly clear to voters of all parties, including the Conservative party.

The Government I lead will be relentless in giving people and places what they were promised 10 years ago: ownership and control. From that control over their destiny comes change and growth. I say this with confidence. *[Interruption.]* I do, and let me explain why. It is backed by a decade of personal experience of turning around one of the UK’s former industrial heartlands and turning it into the fastest growing city region in the country, bucking the low-growth trend. It has given me a clear theory of growth and I will apply it to all parts of the UK, learning from what has been achieved in Greater Manchester. For a long time the country did not have ambitions for its regions outside of London. It even talked of the “managed decline” of Liverpool. It took the devolution of power out of this place to allow our big city regions the ability to set new ambitions for themselves. Now, I want every single place across our regions and nations to be able to do the same, creating the conditions for good growth in every postcode.

In that spirit, I was glad to meet the Liberal Democrat leader of Cornwall council, with my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Jayne Kirkham), on my recent visit. I know, like many rural economies across the UK, that Cornwall lacks a basic level of infrastructure, which in turn harms growth and holds back living standards and life chances, and I heard the cross-party call for a devolution deal. I understand concerns in this House about the potential emergence of a two-tier England—those with devolved power and those without—and I will not ignore them. So, I have asked No. 10 North to begin work with Cornwall council and its six MPs on a devolution deal with or without an elected mayor.

I today extend the same offer to all parts of England without devolved power. The First Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Heeley (Louise Haigh) will today write to every Member of this House setting out how they can engage No. 10 North in the service of the places they represent. I extended the same offer to the First Ministers of Scotland and Wales, and the First and Deputy First Ministers of Northern Ireland when I met them over the summer. As they rightly pointed out, their situations are different, but there is interest in what a local model of devolution could look like in each of the home nations, and we will discuss that with them at a special meeting of the National Economic Council next month.

This Government will oversee the biggest redistribution of power this country has seen. In July, we published a statement on the next stage of English devolution. It will include powers long requested by mayors, such as: post-16 technical education; employment support; and fiscal devolution, starting with the ability to set an overnight visitor levy to commence towards the end of the financial year 2027-28. The driving force behind it all will be No. 10 North. It will oversee the rewiring of the British state, the rebuilding of resilience in our communities and the reindustrialisation of our regions. The creation of No. 10 North was one of the first acts of this Administration and I believe that in time it will be seen as one of its most significant. It is a clear answer to the question with which this country has long wrestled: who, in government, drives growth? My theory of growth requires it to be driven with the full authority of the very centre of Government, in close partnership with HM Treasury.

No. 10 North has been set up with that full focus; the single front door on which regions can knock to get quicker, joined-up decisions from Whitehall, and through which power and resources will be passed to them. Resources will include human resources. This is because a state that has grown too large at the national level now needs to redirect civil service capacity regionally and locally, repairing the damage of austerity and making the service of place the state’s first priority. We can already see what is possible. I am glad No. 10 North was able to stand behind Mayor Richard Parker when he took urgent action in August to prevent the collapse of bus services across the west midlands, and I congratulate Mayor Steve Rotherham who this weekend, after four decades of deregulation, will see the first buses return to public control in the Liverpool city region. Taking back control of essential services such as transport is an enabler of a more productive economy, because it allows local areas to grab hold of the levers of power for themselves.

But driving growth demands we go further. It is taking far too long for businesses to get grid connections and they are being quoted prohibitively expensive sums of money if they try to bring those dates forward, as I heard on my visit to a farm near Truro. Household energy bills are the highest in Europe, and the cost of energy is impacting business and inward investment. Too many areas have seen water supplies disrupted this summer due to a lack of reservoir capacity. Our tourism industry is damaged by too many sewage spills. *[Interruption.]* “Why?” the Opposition say. It is a question they should ask themselves. This summer has shown us very clearly that water companies are failing to rise to

the climate challenge. It cannot go on. Later in the year, our 10-year plan for Britain will set out plans for stronger public control over these essentials, making them work for people and places again.

Alongside that, we will empower all areas to expand the public housing stock, building on the first allocations from the social and affordable homes programme announced by the Communities Secretary last week. Bringing forward the biggest council home building programme since the post-war period is the Labour way to get the welfare bill down, as is reforming our education system, so that it balances academic and technical, and offers a path in life for all young people. Michael Gove calls this “bringing back stupid”, when in fact, for too many young people written off by his reforms, it is bringing back hope. Allowing mayors to shape technical pathways and provide work placements for young people, building back into colleges and schools from the needs of the regional economy, is the way to support more young people into work. So is prioritising more accessible, community-based mental health services, as we announced in the summer.

That will be a major part of our response to the forthcoming Milburn report, which will follow its publication in the autumn. For it to work, a more intentional approach to the reindustrialisation of Britain is required. We will support all parts of the country to take more public control over investment strategy, learning from the Greater Manchester model of a consolidated good growth fund drawn from their own funds, prudent loan borrowing and fragmented budgets held by Government bodies. We will back local industrial strategies—a policy of the Theresa May Government I am happy to revive—by identifying priority sectors and developing the triple-helix approach to economic development by entwining business, academia and Government behind the plan. This is the way we will build a pro-business culture and an innovation-led economy in all parts of the UK, finally capturing the long-term benefits of the invention that is in the DNA of our nation, backing our start-ups and scale-ups to stay in the UK where they were founded.

When I stood outside Downing Street six weeks ago, I said that Britain needs a circuit breaker after a decade of turbulence, negativity, point scoring and divisive politics. This is what I have outlined today: a clear, coherent and credible approach to growth that can unlock a feeling of positivity and possibility in every postcode in Britain. Our job here is to make it real by taking a place-first rather than a party-first approach. It starts with reasserting basic standards for Britain—that this is a country where no one sleeps rough and no community is blighted by an illegal waste tip—and, from there, working together to build a new sense of optimism around the country. We can make this next decade better than the last. We can lift the prospects of all our people and places. We can put more power into every postcode. We can let Britain believe again. We can bring back hope. I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the Leader of the Opposition.

3.59 pm

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (North West Essex) (Con): Can I welcome the Prime Minister to his place at the Dispatch Box and take this, my first opportunity to congratulate him on becoming Prime Minister? He has been in office

for 43 days, during which I have learned how he puts the milk in his tea and exactly what he thinks about pork scratchings, but I have not had the pleasure of asking him any questions. We are all grateful that he has finally found time to come to Parliament to answer some.

It is only fair to be gentle with someone on their first day at work, so I am only going to ask the Prime Minister a few very simple but very serious questions. I hope that he can provide me with some simple and serious answers. I genuinely wish him well as he seeks to live up to the dignity and importance of the role. I was pleased to see him in Ukraine over the summer, continuing the Conservatives’ world-leading support for Ukraine’s fight against Russian aggression. That being said, I am also very relieved to see that he has not brought his guitar with him today. His predecessor stood at that Dispatch Box two years ago sounding very triumphant, having just won a landslide victory. What went wrong? Where is he now? Gone. That job is not as easy as it looks from the outside. Labour MPs have not explained why they got rid of him. *[Interruption.]* They are laughing, but they have not explained it.

We on this side of the House understand that the country’s problems will not be solved by lofty promises alone. In the end, the Prime Minister will be judged on what he actually delivers. This is a very different job from being Mayor of Greater Manchester—a job where he did not have to pick winners and losers, make difficult trade-offs, or have to worry about our national security. He does now.

A Government’s first and most important duty is keeping the country safe. The last Prime Minister and his Chancellor left an enormous hole in Britain’s defence budget. We know that because the current Chancellor quit as Defence Secretary over that black hole, saying that it could put British troops at risk. He said that there could be an attack by Russia on NATO as soon as 2030, and that not funding the defence investment plan reduces the readiness of our forces. Let me ask the Prime Minister very clearly: will he provide the funding that his own Chancellor said was necessary to keep British troops safe? That means 3% by the end of this decade.

Keeping this country safe also means defending our borders. The Prime Minister mentioned boat crossings, but we must be honest: boat crossings have not gone down because of anything that Labour has done. *[Interruption.]* They have not. We have to be honest. Boat crossings are down across all of Europe, and have been down for much longer. Let us be honest: the problem is still not solved.

The Prime Minister will have seen the extraordinary scenes in Ceuta over the summer, in which more than 70,000 people tried to cross into Europe. Many of those people would like to end up in the UK. This is not just a British problem; it is a growing global problem. Even Denmark is starting to send illegal migrants to other countries as a deterrent. That is exactly like the Rwanda scheme that the Conservatives put in place and Labour scrapped. We now hear that the Home Secretary is thinking about reviving a Rwanda-style scheme, so can the Prime Minister tell me—yes or no—if that is the plan?

Next, the Prime Minister must keep British people safe from dangerous criminals. It was interesting to hear the comments in his statement about early release. Before the summer, I sat with women who had experienced

[Mrs Kemi Badenoch]

some of the most horrific crimes imaginable, and the perpetrators of those crimes were about to be let out of prison early. The Prime Minister told those women that it was too difficult to keep their perpetrators in jail. Then he changed his mind. The family of PC Andrew Harper appealed to the Prime Minister not to release his killers early. Again, the Prime Minister told them that it was a non-starter. Then he changed his mind. The Conservatives told the Government to create new spaces in the existing prison estate, and to get foreign-born criminals out of our jails. The Government said that we were wrong, but now they are doing both. The Prime Minister has had five different positions on early release in six weeks, putting the victims through hell with his indecision. Will he now set out a timeline for his promise to get more foreign national prisoners out of British prisons?

As well as keeping the country safe, the Prime Minister's next big challenge will be making people in this country feel richer. The biggest mistake that Labour has made in office so far, and there have been quite a few to choose from, is that it has crushed our economy under the weight of nearly £70 billion in new taxes. The Prime Minister was not here for that, so I will give him the list: the jobs tax, the family farm tax, the family business tax, taxes on pensioners, taxes on workers and taxes on businesses. That is £3,500 a year for every working family. He says that he cares about the cost of living; Labour's taxes have made that worse. Those taxes have cost people their jobs—thousands of jobs in oil and gas, and thousands of jobs in industry across our country. The recruitment market for new graduates is the worst it has ever been. There are 50% fewer vacancies than last year, which was already the worst on record. If the Prime Minister does not change course, he too, like every other Labour Prime Minister, will leave office with unemployment higher than it was when he came in. Can he guarantee, here and now, on the Floor of the House, that there will be no more tax rises in the autumn Budget?

The year is 2026, yet the Prime Minister said in his statement that everything has gone wrong since the 1980s. He is still complaining about Margaret Thatcher. I am 46 years old, Mr Speaker—I may not look it, but I am. He is talking about a woman who became Prime Minister before I was born. He is living in the past, and he wants to take us back to the 1970s. We Conservatives are for the future, not the past. That is the difference between them and us. His ideas are all about more Government control, more spending, more tax and more politicians. The Conservatives want people to keep more of their own money. We want businesses to grow, invest, expand and create more jobs. That is the difference between the Labour party and the Conservative party. His diagnosis is completely wrong. His theory of growth is completely wrong. He thinks that if the Government spend more money, we will all get richer, but that is not how this works. Companies are not leaving our shores because there is not enough government.

Another difference between us is in dealing with the ballooning welfare bill. Up and down this country, hard-working people are fed up of going to work and paying for their neighbours to sit at home with mild health conditions that do not stop them working. They are fed up of hearing, as we did this summer, that working in Boots is not good for your mental health—ridiculous.

We are on the side of those hard-working, fed-up people. I ask the Prime Minister: will he stand up to his Back Benchers in a way that his predecessor never could and cut the benefits bill? It is a simple question.

The Prime Minister engineered it so that he could have as long a summer holiday as possible, so he should be ready with some answers. I am even hearing rumours that he does not want to do Prime Minister's questions next week, but it is my job to ask him serious questions, and it is time for him to start answering. *[Interruption.]* I know Labour Members do not like hearing the questions, but they are going to hear them. It is my job to speak on behalf of all the people out there who want to know what he has planned, and it is time for him to start answering some serious questions. Governing is hard, but the country needs the Prime Minister to succeed. Where it is in the national interest, I will help him. He may find that Conservative votes come in handy when Labour MPs are too scared to do the right thing.

Britain faces many serious challenges to our national and economic security. There are difficult decisions to make, and they will show whether the Prime Minister is serious about governing. On defence, his own Chancellor said that 3% spending was needed to keep British troops safe; now, apparently, he does not believe that. On illegal migration, Labour scrapped the Rwanda scheme; now it appears to be considering a Rwanda-style scheme of its own. On prisons, the Prime Minister said that dangerous criminals could not be exempted from early release, and then he changed his mind. This country cannot afford a Government swerving all over the place. Labour has already tried government by U-turn, and it does not work. If he wants to be different from his predecessor, and wants to live up to the optimistic vision that he is painting, he is going to have to start taking this job seriously. That is not what we heard from the Prime Minister today, but that is what the Conservatives are offering.

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Lady for the welcome that she gave me and her kind words; I appreciate the tone of some of what she had to say. I do want to try to work with her across the Floor of the House where we can. She mentions my summer. I notice that she spent hers travelling all the way to Rome to be told by the Italian Prime Minister not to do a deal with Reform. If she had called me, I would have told her that and saved her the trip.

The right hon. Lady was right to start with Ukraine, as I did. I mentioned the work of previous Prime Ministers in setting the right tone. Boris Johnson, Liz Truss, Rishi Sunak—everybody played a role in setting that tone, and it has been carried on by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer). It is a very challenging situation, but I was there to send a very clear message that with a change of Prime Minister there does not come any change in Britain's approach. I hope that I speak for the vast majority of Members of this House in making that completely plain.

The right hon. Lady said that the job of Prime Minister is different from the job of Mayor of Greater Manchester. I can vouch that I know that now, after six weeks in the role. She was wrong, though, to say that in that role I did not have to worry about national security. I did. Within two weeks of taking office, I had to deal with the appalling terrorist attack at the Manchester Arena.

I send all my best wishes to those who gathered last night at the Heaton Park synagogue to remember our friends who lost their lives and the incredible efforts of Rabbi Daniel Walker and others to hold the attackers at the door. We all send them our very best wishes and reaffirm again, hopefully from all sides of the House, that antisemitism is a scourge that we should work together to remove from our society.

The right hon. Lady mentions defence. She is right to, because it is a changing and challenging world in which we live, but I say to her directly: I appointed this Chancellor of the Exchequer precisely because of his commitment to the defence of our realm and the arguments that he has made. He will set out at the spending review the path to honouring our international commitments in full, as I said that we would when I was before the steps of Downing Street.

Those listening at home will find it hard to accept what the right hon. Lady said about the boat crossings, which are significantly down—halved on last year. She said that had nothing to do with anything that this Government have done. That is plainly not the case. I heard an Opposition spokesperson on the radio this morning trying to find any excuse to justify the numbers going down—the weather and all kinds of things. Can they not just accept that the action that we are taking is making progress? That includes the co-operation with the French that I mentioned. The Home Secretary and I will continue to look at all measures, and will be relentless in making sure that we continue to make progress, but the Conservatives would do well to recognise that significant progress has indeed been made.

On the early release of prisoners, I do not think there is any moral high ground for any party in this House. The Justice Secretary will shortly make a statement and lay out the timeline for the return of foreign national offenders. I hope that we can work together on the question of imprisonment for public protection sentences. Too often, issues in this House just get left. I left 10 years ago worried about this issue, and I come back to find that it is not resolved. Social care was something that I spoke about a lot when I left. I come back, and it is not resolved. We have to do better, don't we? We have to find more ways of working across the House and not just leave issues unresolved with all the harm that that causes.

On growth, I cut tax twice in my first week. I say to the right hon. Lady that I am committed to bringing down the welfare bill not through crude cuts but in a way that provides the right support for people—particularly young people—whom, in my view, the education system has let down.

The right hon. Lady mentioned the 1980s, the legacy of which, I have to say to her, we are still struggling to reverse. It is the reason why—[*Interruption.*] Well, let us have the argument in this House. Why are people paying such high water bills, while the infrastructure is crumbling before our eyes? Why are energy bills in this country the highest in Europe? Why do Opposition Members represent constituencies where, year after year, bus services have been cut and the fares have gone up? They know the truth of what I am saying. Let us have some honesty so that we can deal with these issues properly.

The right hon. Lady raised an ideological point. I noticed that yesterday she appointed a new shadow Cabinet, with a new shadow Chancellor—the hon. Member for

Arundel and South Downs (Andrew Griffith); I welcome him to his position—who I believe was the author of the mini-Budget. [*Interruption.*] I think at least half the shadow Cabinet supported the Liz Truss Government. The right hon. Lady said that I have been in my position for 43 days. Well, may I turn that around? In six days, this Government will have outlived the Truss Government, and we will be here for a lot, lot longer.

I will work with the right hon. Lady where I can—we should make that commitment to each other today—but I will still point out where she is wrong. We will not take lectures when the country is moving in the right direction. You can see that on the economy, on small boat crossings and on the cost of living. We will continue to do that to turn this country around.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Prime Minister to his office and to the Dispatch Box—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. People should not leave when a Member is on their feet; it is discourteous.

Dame Meg Hillier: I and my fellow Committee Chairs look forward to welcoming the Prime Minister to the Liaison Committee very soon so that we can drill into his agenda in more detail.

I was pleased by the announcements over the summer on housing, which in London is really holding people back. One of the many challenges is releasing public land that was previously used for education or health, for example, for building on. Will he undertake to put a rocket under the release of that land where appropriate to best deliver housing?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend. I look forward to my first appearance before the Liaison Committee. On the question of public land, she raises a really important issue. We have got to look at how we build as many council and social homes as we can to bring down the housing benefit and temporary accommodation bill, which is ruinous in London for London councils. We must find ways of doing that within the public purse. Public land is one way in which we can achieve that. I will be looking at a programme for the release of public land to build council and social homes, and I look forward to working with her on that.

Mr Speaker: I call the leader of the Liberal Democrats.

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I thank the Prime Minister for advance sight of his statement and I welcome him to his place. I associate myself with the condolences that he has sent to the family and friends of the police officers killed on the A66 and with his comments on the disaster on the Nepal-China border.

I wished each of the Prime Minister's predecessors well, but given how that went for them perhaps he would prefer that I did not bother this time. I sincerely hope that he can turn things around, and quickly, because we all know how fed up people are. We hear it all the time. Every year, it gets harder to make ends meet, waiting lists seem to go up, more and more things seem broken, and the populists and extremists are eager to keep things that way so they can profit from it.

[Ed Davey]

Everything the Prime Minister has described in his statement would be possible only if we fundamentally change the way we do politics in our country. Growing the economy, cutting the cost of living, fixing our public services, restoring people's trust: those are things that every new Prime Minister has talked about. Yet they failed because they stuck to a broken political system; a system that makes it impossible to really change things for the better. The reason so much is broken in our country and can never be fixed is partly that our political system concentrates too much power in the wrong hands—in Westminster, in Whitehall and in big multinational companies. I think the Prime Minister gets some of that, judging by what he has been saying.

There are so many more problems in our political system: too much power in the hands of social media barons who interfere in our politics and crypto billionaires who use donations to buy influence; and too little power in the hands of our people. Britain's political system too often rewards corruption and leaves everyone else feeling powerless. Our great country is being held back, and it will only be free to thrive again if we put real power in people's hands.

We have been campaigning on that for decades and the Prime Minister has written about it. His decision over the summer to finally start cross-party talks on social care—talks I have been desperate to start for years and which Conservative and Labour Prime Ministers promised but failed to deliver—is a welcome step in the right direction. There is, however, a lot more work to do, and more fundamental change is needed to make our politics work for the people we serve. Will the Prime Minister start that work today? Listening to the calls of over 170 Members on the Opposition Benches and on his own, will he launch a national commission to change politics so that we can fix our country?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his contribution. There is plenty there that I can agree with and work with him on. Too much power in the wrong hands—that is what I was saying to the right hon. Member for North West Essex (Mrs Badenoch) a moment or so ago. Can anyone in this House say that the water industry is sufficiently accountable to their constituents?

Chris Law (Dundee Central) (SNP): Yes!

The Prime Minister: Okay, Northern Ireland—[*Interruption.*] Scotland. My apologies. There are models elsewhere that we can follow.

Can anyone say, with water in England, that the money that is siphoned out in salaries and dividends is justifiable when the system could not provide a basic service to people this summer? When sewage spills out on to our beaches and into our lakes, can anyone justify that? I am surprised that there is not more recognition of that from the Conservative party. Thirty years of privatisation has not left the system in a good state.

Changing some of those big things will require the different approach that the right hon. Gentleman calls for. I was pleased that he came, while on his holiday, to the cross-party talks on social care. I give him a commitment that I will keep them going until Louise Casey reports

next year with her options. I hope, even then, that we might be able to find a consensus option that we take forward. I do not want to leave this position without having put all my political capital into solving this issue. As Health Secretary 16 years ago, I could not defend leaving people to lose everything they had worked for, but often only getting in return care that was sub-standard and not good enough. I know from my own family experience that that cannot carry on any longer. Nor can we defend the poverty pay for those people who care for other people's parents and give everything of themselves to those roles. We owe it to millions out there to fix that. This is a test for this Parliament—what remains of it—to see if we can do that. I will work with the right hon. Gentleman to do that.

On the right hon. Gentleman's suggestion of a national commission, there is a democracy taskforce working out of the Cabinet Office and I could certainly involve him in the work that that is doing. I am interested in political reform. I am interested in looking at how we restore trust in politics. I am prepared to look at all those issues—alongside the voting system, too—and I think he knows that. I believe that this Parliament needs to be a circuit breaker for the country. I do not believe we can carry on as we are. We are losing the trust and faith of the public. We need to act together to turn it around, and I look forward to working with him, precisely on that theme.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): The Prime Minister is absolutely right: we must free our politics and bring back trust, and it seems to me that we could start doing it tomorrow. We could take foreign influence out of our politics by banning foreign money from our politics. I welcome the fact that the Government are going to amend the Representation of the People Act 1983 and cap such donations at £100,000, but given what has happened since the Rycroft review, I worry that the cap is not strong enough, and I think that the public agree with me. Given that this will probably be our last chance to protect our democracy before the next general election, will the Prime Minister give serious consideration to supporting my new clause 85, which would ban all foreign donations?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend and agree with her very strongly that we need to restore trust, particularly when it comes to foreign donations that seek to influence our politics. I am pleased she recognises the amendments that have been brought forward to the Representation of the People Act, which will be debated in this House later this week. I mentioned the defending democracy taskforce, which has been set up in the Cabinet Office. It needs to continue to look at these issues, and this will not be the last chance. We can come back to these issues in this Parliament, such is their importance.

Mr Speaker: I call the Father of the House.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): May I congratulate the Prime Minister on what he said about Ukraine and on how he conducted himself there? Our enemies should know that this House is completely and utterly united in standing behind the Ukrainian people. That was the most powerful part of his statement, precisely because we are working together, so may I encourage

him in that direction? We all know that we are under mortal threat, that we must increase the defence budget and that the decisions to pare back the bloated welfare bill are extremely difficult, so why does he not take up the offer of the Leader of the Opposition to deal with this, to meet our international commitments, to reduce dependency, to ensure that we are living within our means, to work together and to do this now? “Action this day.”

The Prime Minister: I thank the Father of the House for what he said about Ukraine. I saw the sincerity with which he said it, and I appreciate it. It was important for me to make the journey last week. I know it was appreciated by President Zelensky, and he asked me to relay to this House and beyond how much he and the Ukrainian people appreciate the support that we have provided. We will continue to do so for as long as it takes.

On meeting our defence commitments and bringing down the welfare bill, I cannot defend a position where too many people in their 20s are on benefits, but what I say is, “Why is that the case?” I do not believe we have an education system that is setting up all young people for success. There is more that we can do to give young people work-related opportunity at 16, and there is more support we can provide for their mental health. Those are the approaches that we can take, I hope with cross-party support, to set our young people up for life, invest in their success and bring down the welfare bill in a sustainable way.

Barry Gardiner (Brent West) (Lab): The Prime Minister has spoken powerfully about the devolution of power and giving back control. Will he therefore ensure that the proposals for commonhold and leasehold reform, for which 5 million leaseholders in this country are waiting with bated breath, do give that power and control back to those people, through the right to enfranchise and the right to manage?

The Prime Minister: May I thank my good friend the Member for Brent West (Barry Gardiner) and say to him that I am looking at every facet of the cost of living crisis and at where people face unfair charges that they cannot avoid? This area of leasehold is absolutely in that territory. I make a direct commitment to him today that it is my intention, and the intention of the Government, to bring forward the commonhold and leasehold Bill, so that we can finally reform this unfair system. We will do that in this Session.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): May I welcome the Prime Minister to his place and sincerely wish him well for the future? He will know the vital importance of livestock farming to this country. It is pivotal to the North Dorset economy. He will also know that there have been 783 confirmed cases of bluetongue since just 1 July. The cost of vaccination is £3 per sheep and £6 for cattle. What support can the Government give to livestock farmers, who are already hard pressed as a result of a very dry summer and a very wet winter?

The Prime Minister: I say to the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) that I am probably not renowned for spending much time on farms—I am more likely to be found in the northern quarter of Manchester—

but I was on a farm in Cornwall in the summer, precisely to engage and understand the issues that they are facing. I heard very clearly the issues that have been presented by this very difficult summer for farmers up and down the country. I will focus on farming because, for me, farming and food production are part of this country's sovereign production and manufacturing capacity, which we will need to strengthen in the years to come. We will need to depend upon it, and therefore we need to strengthen it more. That is a clear commitment.

To give the hon. Gentleman some sign that I mean what I say, I did not go empty handed to Colwyn farm. I took a commitment to allow more flexibility over Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs funding, so that areas that previously could not be used for grazing can be used for that, and to funding to build reservoir capacity on farms, so that summer '27 will hopefully be less painful than summer '26. That is my commitment. I look forward to working with him to improve measures for farming.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend's commitment to continuing Britain's global leadership on climate action, including by going to COP31. I also welcome his focus on breathing space for people and businesses, but, as he said, it will take a lot more than that to deliver the growth and reindustrialisation that he is so committed to. I encourage him to read the Energy Security and Net Zero Committee's report on the cost of energy, which includes our recommendations on how to bring down the disastrously high costs that are crippling the competitiveness of so much of British industry.

The Prime Minister: I thank my good friend the Chair of the Energy Committee for that contribution. In the words of the Chancellor, we need to focus on the cost of living but also on the cost of business. We need to address those two things together and bring down the cost of energy, which is ruinous for households but also for businesses. As I said in my statement, the cost of grid connections can be huge, and the long wait that businesses can face is damaging for inward investment. We need serious reform to deal with those issues, and I look forward to working with him on that.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I welcome what the Prime Minister just said about strengthening farming. If he is serious about this, one of the first things he can do is ensure that our farmers do not have to compete with imported food that is produced to lower standards than we expect. On Thursday, the European Union will ban the import of beef from Brazil, because it is not satisfied that it is produced safely, and the USA, China and Norway are likely to do the same thing. Will the Prime Minister offer to our consumers and farmers the same protections that those Governments offer theirs?

The Prime Minister: I am listening carefully to what the right hon. Member is saying. All these issues are on the table at this moment in time, but particularly public procurement. I have been working with the First Secretary of State and the Chancellor to consider how we change British public procurement to support our own production and manufacturing base. I believe that there is so much more we could do to make sure that food grown on

[The Prime Minister]

British farms is served in our schools, hospitals, prisons and beyond. I do believe that we can do a lot more through public procurement before we reach to protectionist measures, but I hear what he has had to say today.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough and Thornaby East) (Lab): I congratulate the Prime Minister on taking office and thank him profoundly for his tribute to the Cleveland police officers, PC Matthew Blades and PC Tom Clough, who were so tragically killed on 22 August. My constituents, and indeed constituents across Teesside, welcomed his remarks in the past week on support for Cleveland police, and I look forward to the Home Secretary's statement later today.

The Prime Minister's remarks on greater public control of public service and public utility provision are most welcome, and I look forward to discussing the nature of that public control in more detail in the coming weeks and months. One core aspect of that is the continued waste of public funds through the continued use of outsourcing to provide core public services. I trust that he will engage with key stakeholders who have provided yet more evidence that it makes complete economic sense to insource provision of our services. Does he agree that we must ensure that the new public interest test does its job of economic transformation and delivers, as we promised, the biggest wave of insourcing in a generation?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend. I was really distressed by what I saw in his community following the tragic death of our two police officers, and the seven lives lost in total. I know it has sent shockwaves through the community. I know from my previous role about the unfairness in police funding—or that is how it is felt in some parts of the country—and I know he and his colleagues feel that. We do need to look at that question as part of the Home Secretary's wider police reform programme.

On the second part of my hon. Friend's question, the manifesto commits us to the largest wave of insourcing in a generation, and my right hon. Friend the First Secretary of State is overseeing that work. Taking one example that I mentioned in my statement, if we bring in employment support, often delivered through outsourced contracts, and put it under the control of mayors and combined authorities, who can spend that funding through the community, voluntary and social enterprise sector, I personally believe that money would achieve far greater results than it currently does.

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): Could the Prime Minister explain what was so particularly deserving about the Avanti train drivers that they warranted such a pay increase, or was it done just to avoid the embarrassment of the Cabinet not being able to get back and forth to his “No. 10 of the North” vanity project? Or do we take it that this Prime Minister will cave in to every trade union demand that comes across his desk?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Lady knows as well as I do the misery that her constituents have suffered on the west coast main line, particularly since her Government handed it over to Avanti West Coast.

They should not be expected to put up with that. Manchester lost its services under her Government. We have to have a functioning railway line, and the agreement reached with the drivers will give that security of a good service to people in her constituency and across the north-west.

Dawn Butler (Brent East) (Lab): The Prime Minister has hit the road running and is running into issues where action is long overdue. Following my six-year campaign to scrap “aim to permit”, I thank the Prime Minister for making that announcement over the summer. Local people will now have a say in what their high street looks like and the vibrancy of them, and local councils will now have a say too. Will the Prime Minister work with me to reinvigorate our high streets, and will he also implement a few more of my campaigns?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend, who has been a doughty campaigner for improved services on our high streets, particularly pointing out the risks of the “aim to permit” regime, which has allowed the proliferation of adult gaming centres, for instance, in some of our more deprived communities. My whole approach will be to create an incentive regime that supports the businesses that are bringing good things to our high streets—hospitality businesses and others that give people a place to go and bring communities together—and to take action against those who do harm. In the summer we announced tougher action on vape shops, alongside adult gaming centres and other gambling venues. She deserves great credit for the campaign she has run, and I am pleased that she feels we can now begin to turn our high streets around.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): I was encouraged to hear the Prime Minister talk about his support for political reform and, indeed, looking at the voting system, but can I push him to be a tiny bit more specific? He could bring in a change to the voting system ahead of the next general election if he wanted to—we would strongly back him—but if he does not want to do that, will he at least commit to kicking off a national commission on electoral reform?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Lady, who I know well, for that question. She may have heard me speak before about leaving this place 10 years ago, standing for the first time under a proportional system and seeing how it changed the conversation on the doorstep, where all of a sudden there was an incentive to look for a point of agreement, rather than to score points, as I have been saying. That experience changed me. Where I disagree with her is in saying that we should do that ahead of any general election, because I believe there needs to be a mandate to make that change. There are different views in this House, but I believe that we will need to get a consensus at the next election, and if there is that consensus, a change can be made in the next Parliament.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Friern Barnet) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for the work he has done to date on tackling the scourge of rough sleeping, which is so prevalent in many of our cities and towns and outside them. What vision does he have to include the voluntary sector in the crucial task of tackling rough sleeping?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend—I was going to say leadership rival, but I do not think she was ever fully in that category. She is absolutely right to point to the role of the voluntary sector in the mission that I have launched to end rough sleeping, if we can, by the end of this year. I do not think public funds alone will get us all the way; we will need to rely on voluntary contributions and the work of our charities. In the end, they are doing the work to tackle rough sleeping across the country. I believe it is incumbent on all Members of the House to put their shoulder behind this. I am looking at the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), because I remember the work he did and the private Member's Bill that he brought forward. It should be a cross-party matter. In my view, nobody should sleep rough on our streets. We all have charities in our constituencies that are doing the most amazing work to support people. Any of us can find ourselves in that position, such is life these days. We should all get behind this drive. We should thank those organisations for their work, and let us see if we can give an offer to everyone in this country to come inside by Christmas.

Stuart Andrew (Daventry) (Con): In a volatile world, I think we can all agree that energy security is important, but so too is food security. I was interested in the answer the Prime Minister gave to my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) a moment ago, because in the eastern side of my constituency there is an application for a huge solar farm on prime agricultural land, when on the western side there are huge distribution warehouses with not a single solar panel on their roofs. Will he commit to review this situation, so that we can have a policy that safeguards both our food and our energy?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman's point is characteristically clear and he makes a good suggestion that I will take up. I meant what I said when I thanked him for coming to those cross-party talks in the summer. I have always enjoyed working with him and wish him well in whatever comes next.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I welcome what the Prime Minister has said, and I particularly welcome his commitment to go to COP31. What will be even more important than him going there is what he says when he gets there: we look forward to him showing that the UK will continue to remain committed to fighting climate change here in the UK and to doing our bit overseas. Will he say whether, when he goes to COP31, he will be able to commit to the tropical forests forever facility, which the Government have been looking at? Will his fight on the cost of living continue to encourage people to make choices that support the environment, such as by having an electric vehicle, and will he bring down the cost of electric to support heating choices?

The Prime Minister: I strongly support my hon. Friend's last point. I know from my experience in my previous role that when we electrified bus depots and the bus fleet in Greater Manchester, the running costs of the system came right down, which helped us to sustain the £2 fare cap that had been removed elsewhere. That is proof that action on climate can reduce the cost of living. Those two things should not be pitched as opposites—they

can be causal. We can act on climate and we can bring down the cost of living. I will be at COP31, as he said. I recognise the importance of the rain forest, and we continue to provide support in the form of loans to support work to conserve it. I look forward to working with him on these issues and I hope to see him in Turkey.

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): I welcome the Prime Minister to his place. In so doing, I extend my best wishes not only to him but to his family, as he takes up the manifold burdens of his new role. In his ascent to high office, he was heard to report that the UK is not working and Westminster is not working—well, I am 100% in agreement with him on that, although my prognosis would be terminal rather than treatable. He understands that energy bills are now £600 higher than Labour promised they would be at the general election, and there is another large increase coming before Christmas. He touched on energy in his statement, so will he give us a date—between now and whenever the general election will be—by which energy bills will be £300 lower, just in the way that Labour promised?

The Prime Minister: I thank the leader of the SNP in Westminster for his very kind words, which my family will appreciate. When I left this place, I could relate more to what I used to hear from SNP Members than when I used to be here, particularly when I sometimes found frustrations, let's say, with Westminster and the way it works, but that is precisely why we need to rewire the system and get power out of Westminster and into the country. In my view, we do that and we keep the United Kingdom together, because then all parts of it will feel that it is working for them in the way that perhaps they do not feel at this moment in time. When it comes to energy bills, I have acted already to bring in that VAT cut on electricity bills. I recognise that is just a start, but I hope the hon. Gentleman sees it as a sign of intent.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the Prime Minister and welcome him to his place. I also welcome what he said about serving British food across the public estate in this country, but may I push him further to suggest that British food should be served on a British plate, made by British ceramics, and that the houses that he wishes to build should be made with British bricks? Could I encourage him to go as fast as he can on rewiring public procurement, so that British jobs in this country can be benefited by the British taxpayers' pound?

The Prime Minister: I will be a staunch defender of the Potteries in this House, if not their football clubs. I do not know whether the Potteries are the north-west or the west midlands, but I am certainly very fond of them and I know the crucial importance of the ceramics industry to that part of the country. I do think that there is much more that we can do with public procurement in Britain to support crucial industries; I do not think that we have done enough in the past. Social value weighting can be applied to all public procurement, which makes it more likely that contracts will be awarded to British-based entities. I do not think that we should allow the culture of sending everything outside this country to continue—this will be a big change under this Government.

Sir Roger Gale (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): In welcoming the Prime Minister to his place, let me say that I noticed his criticism of the water companies—a justified criticism, in many cases. May I direct his attention to the predatory activities of another private company? National Grid is seeking to pre-empt the construction of a station on the Minster marshes, with no planning consent whatsoever and while the results of a Planning Inspectorate inquiry are still awaited. Would he be kind enough to intervene?

The Prime Minister: It is good to see the right hon. Gentleman again, and I appreciate what he said in endorsing my criticism of the water industry. We need to find significant reform; if that can be done cross party, so much the better. I am not familiar with the planning situation and the issue that he mentions, but I will look out for him, have a word with him and see if I can do something to look into it.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for visiting Port Talbot steelworks last week, and for highlighting the importance of securing and protecting our sovereign steel industry, which I know he will do in his role. Steel communities have long faced unfair global trading practices, but our new safeguards will still leave some steel manufacturing unprotected, including galvanised steel made by Llanwern steelworks in Newport. Will the Prime Minister work with business, trade, Tata and the trade unions to see what more can be done?

The Prime Minister: I was really pleased to visit Port Talbot last week. I know the importance of the steel industry in my hon. Friend's part of the world—the history of it. I came away with a clear sense of what is possible: carrying through an industrial transition that will set up steelmaking for the rest of this century. Industrial transition is definitely another one of the things I have spoken about today that this country has not done well—in the past, we have allowed deindustrialisation before trying to help industry into a new era—and we need to make it work this time in south Wales. I said it to the trade unions last week, I said it to the leadership of Tata and I will say it to my hon. Friend in this House: we will make that happen, and we will guarantee steelmaking in south Wales for generations to come.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): The Prime Minister has spoken a lot about the increase in the cost of living. Much of that is driven by the increase in energy prices, because of the rush towards net stupid zero and the multiple increase in renewables such as solar farms on our productive agricultural farmland. It is madness to import gas from overseas when we have our own gas in the North sea. When will the Prime Minister do the right thing: approve the licences at Rosebank, Jackdaw and elsewhere in the North sea?

The Prime Minister: I do not know if the hon. Gentleman was listening a moment ago when I was talking about how renewables can bring down the cost of living. I gave a very clear example in Greater Manchester: it costs £30 to charge a bus with electric charge, but it costs £200-plus to fill a tank of diesel. He really does need to look into the facts a little bit more before he makes statements like that in this House. Solar panels

on people's homes can bring down the cost of their energy. Yes, we need to be pragmatic—we will still need to rely on oil and gas for some years to come. The mistake he makes is saying that it has got to be one or the other, for political purposes; the truth is that it is going to have to be both.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): I was proud to support the Feltham Convening Partnership's young leaders summer programme last month. What struck me was their ambition for themselves and their community, as well as their call for more work experience opportunities. When the Tories and Lib Dems in coalition made work experience optional, placements fell by 60,000 in the first year—a drop from which we have never recovered. Does the Prime Minister agree that this Government's work with employers like Sainsbury's is now bringing hope, but that we must go further and faster, and we must not deny the next generation the promise of Britain?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for her work on this matter, and on apprenticeships in particular. What she has just said needs to be understood when we consider the Milburn report, because the decline in apprenticeships for young people lies behind some of the statistics that Alan Milburn has revealed. I give some credit to the Conservatives, because my experience in Greater Manchester was that the work placements that came with T-levels were a huge and positive innovation. Those 45-day work placements made a difference for young people. It was enough for them to feel that they could belong in the place where they were. I would like to work with Members across this House to see if we can turn a commitment of a 45-day work placement into a guarantee to all young people as part of our response to the Milburn report. The evidence I have is that those placements are hugely successful. Alongside that, we need more apprenticeships at 19 and more degree apprenticeships beyond that. That is how we give strong, structured pathways to our young people. The technical route is not bringing back stupid, but bringing back hope.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I share the Prime Minister's vision of ending rough sleeping for good. He was very kind to refer to my private Member's Bill, but there are two actions that he could take now that he is in office. First, the various different attempts at progress on Housing First could be brought together across the country, because ending rough sleeping is one thing, but building that network of support around people is vital. The second aspect relates to my second private Member's Bill, which became law in 2023, but is still to be enacted. It would regulate the use of supported housing. Will he act now to make sure that it is enacted, so that vulnerable people are protected from rogue landlords?

The Prime Minister: I meant what I said earlier in praising the hon. Member. He has done a huge amount of work in this area, and I recognise it. He mentions Housing First. I think he was one of those who persuaded Sajid Javid, when he was in the Communities Secretary role, to pilot Housing First in three big city regions: the West Midlands, Greater Manchester and Liverpool. Exactly as the hon. Member said, it was hugely successful.

It was about prevention, rather than paying for crisis. What I have experienced in my career is that it is more expensive to leave somebody sleeping rough than it is to give them simple accommodation every night, because of the cost of many visits to A&E, long stays in hospital or time in police custody, which add up to be more expensive than the simple provision of a room. I will look at the Bill that he mentions, and I will speak to the Communities Secretary about it, but this is something we can fix. When issues are fixable, we should work across the House to fix them. We can end rough sleeping—we did it in the pandemic, and I see no reason why we cannot do it again.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I welcome my right hon. Friend to his place and thank him for his statement. I particularly agree with what he was saying about social security and tackling the drivers of the high rates of young people not in education, employment or training. If I may, I direct him to a report by the Work and Pensions Committee that came out just before the recess specifically on that point.

My question relates to the middle east. I know he has made reference in the past to the importance of being able to hold Israel to account. What does he think is the appropriate action that we and our partners can take not only in ensuring humanitarian aid and access, but in relation to the unlawful settlements? On so many occasions, the law has been broken, and there is a real danger that the Palestine state will not be viable if we carry on in this way.

The Prime Minister: I thank my dear friend for her question, and I will certainly look up the Select Committee report. In answer to her point about the middle east, before I became Prime Minister, I issued a statement saying that I thought we needed to look again at the approach that we had taken, and to be clear about our values and what we believe is right. Obviously, matters are changing quickly. We have seen the worrying statement about the E1 settlements extension and the fast-track tender process. I think that that would lead to decisions being made before the Israeli election, which I understand could imperil, if not end, the two-state solution. These matters are urgent and need to be confronted, and I believe that we will be updating the House on them soon.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Just across from No. 10 North in Manchester, but also in many towns and cities throughout the country, women are being secretly filmed on a night out, and the videos are then posted online along with vile, degrading, misogynistic contents and comments. The women only find out once the videos have been shared 100,000 times and more, and they do not know what to do. We need to change something. Will the Prime Minister support the campaign to end this vile practice, and consider reform to make misogyny a hate crime?

The Prime Minister: These issues are very much at the forefront of my mind. As the father of two daughters, I think about them a lot, while remembering the change that we introduced in Greater Manchester following the appalling murder of Sarah Everard. It was a moment that created a powerful change in the conversation, challenging men, lads and boys for their behaviour and making it absolutely clear that violence against women

and girls of any kind, including everyday harassment, is an issue with which they must be confronted and which they must address.

In recent days, I have met Georgia Harrison, who is doing amazing work in campaigning to protect women online and making the very reasonable request for any non-consensual explicit video to be taken down immediately rather than being removed after 48 hours, which is the current totally unsatisfactory approach. I can tell the hon. Lady that I will support her 100% in implementing that change, and also that we will think about the other points that she raised.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South and Walkden) (Lab): There are 4.5 million unpaid carers in England. I have first-hand knowledge of the impact of that on carers and their families, having been a carer for two members of my own family, but I also know that for millions of carers the emotional and financial toll is far greater than what I faced. Can the Prime Minister assure the House that when the Casey review has been completed, funding will not be the reason for its recommendations not to be implemented?

The Prime Minister: I know that this issue matters to my hon. Friend personally, as it does to me. The leader of the Liberal Democrats, the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey), pointed out during our cross-party talks—and, powerfully, in the media—that family carers are often simply not seen, and sink slowly as the situation becomes more and more unbearable and unsustainable for them. I know that from my own family experience.

I give my hon. Friend my word from the Dispatch Box that social care will be a huge priority for me. We do need to support family carers, as the right hon. Gentleman said, and we also need to give much more support to paid carers, who, as I have said, are working on poverty pay. I will not leave this role until we have introduced a social care system that we can be proud of.

Alison Griffiths (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton) (Con): My constituents will have been pleased to hear from Sir Jon Cunliffe, who produced 88 recommendations last July. However, his diagnosis is rather different from that of the Prime Minister. He believes that governance and regulation are the key to better performance, rather than some ill-defined version of “better public control”, which, according to the Government’s own assessment, would cost more than £100 billion. Will the Prime Minister promise to enact all 88 of those recommendations without delay?

The Prime Minister: I appreciate that the Cunliffe report takes us forward, but it was to some degree limited in what it was able to consider, and I believe we need to look at all possible solutions for the water industry. I do not think we are in a position to say that what is being proposed will solve everything. It is very regrettable that the privatisation of water has left us in a position that we will find it very difficult to reverse. What has happened is that funding has left through salaries and dividends. Bills were kept low for a period of time, but it is the infrastructure that is suffering. Now, when we need to put those infrastructure problems right, it is bill payers who are being asked to pay 20%-plus on their bills—not those who siphoned the money out in the first place. It is an unsatisfactory situation. It is an

[*The Prime Minister*]

industry where the shareholders never lose and the bill payers never win, and I say to the hon. Lady that it is simply wrong and unsustainable.

Mark Swards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): The Prime Minister's commitment to regulate the funeral industry was extremely welcome. It was especially welcomed by those families who have been victims of rogue funeral operators, and I commend him for it. They are now asking when regulation will be brought into effect. Is this still a priority for the Prime Minister, and if so, when will the funeral industry finally be regulated?

The Prime Minister: I say to my hon. Friend that I was truly appalled when I heard about what happened, and I feel for any family who was a victim of that despicable crime. Today I offer him a meeting, on behalf of those families, to listen and to see how we can build a programme of change that will meet what has been exposed by this terrible crime.

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): Within a few days of the Prime Minister taking office, he announced business rates relief for pubs, clubs and live music venues, but I have spent the summer talking to businesses like hair salons, post offices and booksellers, all of which are just as important in the high street as those that have already been given help. Will he now commit to give business rates relief to all high street businesses and to get rid of this cost, which is destroying jobs?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Member for making a point that I made myself in the Makerfield by-election. I do think that there is more we need to do to support our high streets. I have made a start with pubs and live music venues, but I do believe we need to go further, in exactly the way he describes. I think it is a case of rebalancing the system—some of the large entities and warehouses do not, in percentage terms, pay the same amount in business rates—so that we can support those businesses on the high street that are doing public good and they are able to get a reduction to enable them to survive. That is something that I am looking at. I think we need to get serious about our high streets. We need to take action on those that cause harm—I have mentioned vape shops and adult gaming centres—and we need to do more to support those that do good.

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): May I welcome the Prime Minister back to this place and to the Dispatch Box, and welcome the ambition that he has brought to this country? He will know that he will need time to achieve the things he has set out today, which is why I know that he will share my concerns about what is happening in British politics. Reform has accepted £9 million in donations this year alone, with £8 million of it coming from just three UK-based donors. That is more than has been received by the Labour party and the Conservative party combined. Chequebooks are already circling the next general election, and if we wish to defend our democracy and make sure that all voices can be heard equally, we need to make sure it is not money that talks.

I heard what the Prime Minister had to say to my colleagues about the defending democracy review. I welcome it and tomorrow's legislation on UK donors, but he will know that there are people closer to home who wish to use their money to influence the process too. Can he confirm that his democracy review will look at caps on UK individual and company donors, and that we will legislate before the next general election so that we act?

The Prime Minister: I recognise the importance of the issues my hon. Friend is raising, for the reasons I gave earlier. The Bill we will debate later this week is a start, but I do not think that anyone on the Government Front Bench is saying that that is the end of the matter. We do need to go further. I encourage her to engage with the defending democracy taskforce and, certainly, I have an open mind about what those further measures might be.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): We in northern Lincolnshire look forward to the Prime Minister's first visit in his new position. He will find that if he travels by train from Manchester there is an hourly service, but that if he travels from London there is no direct service. The Father of the House, my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), and I have been campaigning for 15 years to restore the direct service. If the Prime Minister could give us an early win, it would be a victory for me in 15 years but he could deliver it in 15 weeks. Will he have a word with the Transport Secretary and ask her to have yet another look at providing this service, which I know will be supported by his Parliamentary Private Secretary—the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Sir Nicholas Dakin)—sat behind him? [*Laughter.*]

The Prime Minister: Yes, I have only just got back to this House and already my PPS is lobbying me from behind, which is obviously helpful. My hon. Friend is right to do so and the hon. Member for Brigg and Immingham (Martin Vickers) is right to raise this issue. I remember, as chair of the Rail North Committee in my previous role, the concern of people in his part of the world. The rail connections to my part of the north are nowhere near what they should be. I heard scepticism on the Opposition Benches. If he is interested, I will fix a meeting for him with the team at No. 10 North so that he can put his case. This is why we took public control of the railways: so that we can start to put services back. There is no point in having public control if it does not deliver public benefit. In my view, every area needs a basic level of connectivity if we are to connect people to opportunity and get growth going in every postcode.

Dr Zubir Ahmed (Glasgow South West) (Lab): It is a lamentable tale, but when my father started driving buses in the west of Scotland in 1964, Glasgow was better connected and cheaper to get around than it is now in 2026. With the centralising forces of the SNP Government in Holyrood and a lack of attention by the SNP council in Glasgow, could I ask my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to lend his moral clarity and expertise on this matter and get Glasgow's buses moving again?

The Prime Minister: I have had a number of approaches from colleagues in Glasgow on how we can support them to move the bus system forward. I was surprised

to hear how expensive bus fares are in the city. I believe that there have been moves to put them back under public control, but I am not aware that they have been supported by the Scottish Government. I hope the Scottish Government will provide funding and support to enable the Greater Glasgow area to move in that direction. *[Interruption.]* If I am wrong, I am happy to be corrected, but I did have a lot of people coming to me saying, “We’re not getting any support; can you help us move things forward?” A great city such as Glasgow should have public transport under its own control. From what I see in Scotland, there is something of the same problem as in England, where the capital city has a public transport system that is way beyond what anywhere else has. It is not that we are anti-London or anti-Edinburgh—it is great that they have those transport systems—but all parts of the UK need to have a level of infrastructure that is seen to be fair and, as I said before, connects all people to jobs and opportunities. Glasgow deserves that, too.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): I welcome the Prime Minister to his place and I welcome his commitment to put power back into the heart of communities through a devolution programme, but in places such as Shropshire, where there is no immediate plan for a combined authority or a mayoral authority to be put in place, people are really worried that we will be left behind. Will the Prime Minister elaborate on his earlier comments and explain when authorities such as Shropshire will get those devolved powers—and, crucially, the resources to go with them—so that they can start turning around the lives of people in places such as North Shropshire?

The Prime Minister: It was a serious offer that I made at the Dispatch Box earlier today, to say that there could be a devolution deal for every part of England with or without an elected mayor. I do believe that it will only work if it is based on unitary local government. I do not think it will work with a two-tier system, but that is why I said to colleagues in Cornwall that I am quite happy to see if a deal can be done for a single unitary authority. That is what I understand Members of Parliament for Cornwall to want, working with the leader of Cornwall council. If that is the settled view, I am not going to try to impose anything else—let us work with that. The same could be true in Shropshire, but it needs to be effective and functional, and to be able to stand on its own two feet.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome my right hon. Friend to his role.

Ten months ago, my constituents were promised a public inquiry into our mental health trust, after 10 years of campaigning for it. People have died in the interim, and it is simply unacceptable. In writing about unaccountable power over the summer, I have seen the weaknesses not only in the decision-making processes, but in the lines of scrutiny to ensure that we can deliver for our constituents. Will my right hon. Friend work with me and join me in the work I have been doing to ensure that we are talking about the devolution not just of power, but of scrutiny to hold such bodies to account?

The Prime Minister: That is entirely what the Hillsborough law is about. It builds on a duty of candour that was already there in the NHS, but will now go

further to those running NHS organisations and all NHS bodies. I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss this in more detail, because I can see how much it matters to her. I hope that is a helpful commitment.

Chris Law (Dundee Central) (SNP): The Prime Minister has spoken about his desire for a written constitution, arguing that a formal legal framework is necessary for the devolution agenda, yet in his short time in office he has already attempted unilaterally to defy the legally binding Good Friday agreement by declaring that a border poll is “off the table”. Does the Prime Minister recognise that he has no mandate to defy the constitutional wishes of the people of Northern Ireland, the people of Scotland or the people of Wales, and that any written constitution or devolution agenda must include a pathway for each of those nations to choose their own future?

The Prime Minister: I think the hon. Gentleman has misunderstood what I said. I answered a media question on a visit to Northern Ireland before meeting the various parties. The question was whether a proposal was being put to the meeting about a border poll, and my answer was that the purpose of the visit was to get functional Government in Stormont, because in my view that would most serve the people of Northern Ireland right now, and that I was not there to distract from that to other issues. I am very aware of every word in the Good Friday agreement, and I will stick to it 100% as Prime Minister. I care about Northern Ireland, which I visit often, and—how do I put it?—that situation pre-empted the meeting we were about to have and I was not there to discuss that.

The Good Friday agreement—if the hon. Gentleman reads it, as I am sure he has—is quite clear on the circumstances in which that issue arises, and as I have said, I honour the words of the Good Friday agreement. However, our common challenge right now is achieving functional Government in Stormont, and I believe everybody should work together to achieve that. I have asked the Northern Ireland Secretary to support that process, and I recognise the concerns people have about the budget in Northern Ireland. Those are the issues to be dealt with first and foremost, and that was the answer I gave to the media.

Katrina Murray (Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch) (Lab): I welcome my right hon. Friend to his place.

During the summer recess, I spent time engaging with organisations in my constituency that work with children and young people, and I was struck by their talking about young people being unable to interact with anything except their phones. Can I urge the Prime Minister to move forward at pace with the social media ban for under-16s?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to give my hon. Friend that commitment.

Dr Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): The climate crisis is hitting hard already, and I was glad to hear the Prime Minister acknowledge that in his statement. We have just had the hottest summer since records began, farmers are facing the worst arable harvest since records began and the Met Office tells us today that extreme summers such as this year’s have been made

[Dr Ellie Chowns]

130 times more likely by burning fossil fuels. In that context, will the Prime Minister remember his words of last year, when he warned against the “siren voices” taking us down the path of “dependence on fossil fuels”? Will he stick to the manifesto promise not to drill any more oil and gas, and will he rule out Rosebank and Jackdaw, because the climate damage they would create hugely outweighs any possible benefit and will lead to more disasters such as we saw on the Nepal-Tibet border just last week?

The Prime Minister: I am ready to work with the leader of the Greens in this place, because I carry from my last role into this one a clear commitment to a carbon-neutral future. I do not resile from that in any way; I am proud of what I have done on that front. What the hon. Member has said is almost the opposite of what the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Richard Tice) said a few moments ago, but the wrong approach here is to be one or the other. We are going to have to find a way to make a transition from oil and gas to a renewable future, and that does not mean that it is all one or the other. There has to be a process where we can make a transition and do it as effectively and affordably as possible.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister back to this place and thank him for his statement.

We have rightly reset our relationship with the European Union, and now is the time to build on that progress and redouble our efforts to strengthen UK-EU co-operation. With the upcoming summit next month, can the Prime Minister reassure me and my constituents in Battersea that he will be bold and ambitious in seizing that opportunity, going further and faster to boost economic growth, remove unnecessary trade barriers and strengthen our economic relationship with Europe, as well as creating opportunities for young people in my constituency and across the country?

The Prime Minister: I recognise the work of the former Prime Minister, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras, who changed the conversation with Europe when he came into office. I have had that played back to me from a number of European leaders. There is something to build on; good steps have been taken. The UK-EU summit is in front of us; it may be the month after next—we are still waiting to finalise. I hope we can make further progress there. There is no doubt that our growth has been hit in the last decade. There is no prospect of getting what we want for our farmers if we take an isolationist approach. We have to work more closely with Europe. That is the approach that I will take unapologetically. I hope my hon. Friend will have some success to celebrate soon.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): I welcome the Prime Minister back to the House of Commons and genuinely wish him well in his endeavours. I gently point out, however, that No. 10 North is three hours south of my constituency; I hope his view of the north involves a whole-of-the-north approach. One measure that would not cost him anything and would be popular in the north, and across the

whole of the UK, would be to rule out something that appeared in the previous Prime Minister’s Green Paper on the future of television: the suggestion that terrestrial free-to-view television could be switched off in 2034. That would mean that everyone would have to pay to watch television, which particularly affects the elderly, vulnerable and those who live in rural areas.

The Prime Minister: I assure the right hon. Gentleman that No. 10 North will be as much at the service of Scotland and his constituency as it will anywhere else. Members of this House will get used to seeing what an improvement it might be in getting answers out of Whitehall on many issues, including the one that he has just raised. I will give the right hon. Gentleman an honest answer: I am concerned about those plans too. I know that some of my constituents in Makerfield rely on Freeview. There is perhaps an opportunity to look at that as part of the BBC charter renewal process. I cannot give him a final answer today, but I recognise that he has raised a genuine issue that is of concern to his constituents. Let me have a proper look at it.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): I heartily congratulate the Prime Minister on bringing back to the House a bit of optimism and hope, and on his summer tour. Had he made it round our way, he could have seen how, amid a hosepipe ban, Thames Water has been leaking 10,000 litres of water an hour in North Acton. He could also have seen how, at the same time, fat cat bosses are getting pay rises while they dump sewage into our beloved River Brent. I was pleased by the Prime Minister’s words on water today, so I ask him: when can we take this failing company back into public hands?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for what she said; it is my intention to bring back a bit more optimism around the country, to give people the feeling that things can be fixed. That is my style—to face things and fix things. It is the approach I will take to water, too. I do not know whether those on the Opposition Benches were supporting the status quo—it sounded like it, to a degree—but it is not defensible, in my view, for precisely the reasons my hon. Friend just gave. We are looking at options. I believe that we need a strengthened response, particularly when it comes to legislation. I am happy to work with my hon. Friend and plot out a path to repair our water infrastructure, bring down people’s bills and ensure that it is not always the public who are expected to pay for everything.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): On behalf of the DUP, I wish the Prime Minister well in his job. I hope that he does deliver on his promises on energy, the economy and so on. I note, however, that it took him only about 30 seconds to break his promise on no point scoring when responding to the Leader of the Opposition, although a bit of point scoring is not a bad thing.

The Prime Minister has pointed out that confidence in Government is important. In Northern Ireland, it has recently been shown that the Parades Commission—a public body with a very significant role in curtailing people’s freedoms—acted illegally, showing bias and showing disdain for applications from the Unionist community. The commission failed abjectly in its duty,

and yet its arrogant members have refused to resign, even though they know they do not enjoy any public confidence. Will the Prime Minister have discussions with the Secretary of State to ensure that there is an immediate dismissal of this discredited body?

The Prime Minister: It is good to see the right hon. Gentleman again. I thank him for his comments; I am bringing a problem-solving approach. There will still be the odd point scored here and there—it would be a bit dull if I did not do a little of that—but where we can find common ground, we should. The public expect it. I think they are fed up of watching the television when things are broken and seeing us playing politics with those things. Let us see where we can make progress, and score the points where we cannot.

The right hon. Gentleman raises a very serious issue. As I said a moment ago, I was in Northern Ireland last week, where I met his colleagues as well as colleagues from other parties. I know there has been a serious loss of trust in the commission, and I know it needs to be addressed. The Northern Ireland Secretary has taken some action, but I believe more is to come.

Abtisam Mohamed (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I warmly welcome the Prime Minister to his place and commend him for the direction and spirit of his statement.

Small and independent businesses are the lifeblood of my constituency. I hear regularly from owners such as Colin and Jack, who own two Feast coffee shops in Sheffield, that they are facing an onslaught of financial pressure. On my way here this morning, Jack told me how rising VAT and electricity prices have meant that there is very little left at the end of the month to pay himself. I know that this is the case for many other owners, and that it goes beyond the normal ups and downs of businesses. I welcome the Prime Minister's decision to cut VAT on energy bills from October, but is he willing to explore how else we might be able to help small and independent businesses?

The Prime Minister: As I said to the right hon. Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale), I believe we need to do more to support the businesses that my hon. Friend talked about, and there will be more to come. The cost of doing business is too high. As I have said this afternoon, energy bills are too high for businesses and households, and we need the determination to bring those bills down and lower the cost of doing business. There will be more to come on that. This will be a pro-business and pro-small-business Government. Nobody should make any mistake about that. The approach that I led in Manchester was all about the public taking control of what they need to do in order to make a place functional for businesses and people. That is Manchesterism, and that is what we will bring nationally. It is all about setting businesses up to succeed. I look forward to working with my hon. Friend to improve that business, and her high streets, too.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): As someone who was politically active in the Thatcher decade, may I gently remind the Prime Minister that it was the period that she did so well in because the Labour party was in a terrible state? For example, it embraced unilateral nuclear disarmament at the height of the second cold war—mercifully, a position that it has long left behind.

I welcome what the Prime Minister said about wishing to work consensually and across party lines. In that spirit, will he look again at the shameless gerrymandering around the local government reorganisation? At the beginning of the process, the hon. Member for Oldham West, Chadderton and Royton (Jim McMahon) promised us that there would be no unnecessary fragmentation or boundary changes without strong reason for them, yet my constituency is being torn apart, with the Waterside, which has looked towards the New Forest for centuries, being taken over by Southampton. The same is happening elsewhere. That was not in his party's manifesto. It is a good opportunity for the Prime Minister to show that he means what he says about consensus.

The Prime Minister: I will take on that challenge and ask the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government to consider what the right hon. Gentleman has said this afternoon. These changes do benefit from having the maximum consensus. On the Thatcher Government, we will probably have to agree to disagree, but I make one observation: we have a public housing stock that has 1.5 million fewer homes than in the '80s and '90s, and we now have 1.5 million people on housing waiting lists up and down the country. I would put it to him that that is a cause of further public cost, in terms of the number of people who are in a crisis situation. I think we can do better. I have been prepared to criticise the Government that I was in; maybe one day he might criticise the one that he was in, and then we will be able to find some solutions.

Matt Bishop (Forest of Dean) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister to his place and associate myself with all his comments about the two police officers sadly killed up in Cleveland. I speak with first-hand experience when I say that any police officer will start a shift not expecting to be able to go home at the end of it. It is really important that we recognise that. In that spirit, I ask the Prime Minister to give the commitment that the Government will always have our police officers' backs, and to ensure that police forces are properly funded, so that my former colleagues can look after communities up and down this country.

The Prime Minister: I agree wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend. I point to my record as Mayor of Greater Manchester: I had the back of all the thousands of officers who were out serving, keeping Greater Manchester safe, day after day. I pay tribute to the families of those officers we lost in Middlesbrough in the line of duty, sacrificing themselves for their community.

I also want to assure my hon. Friend that I heard the voice of PC Andrew Harper's family before making my decisions on early release. Before I was here, this House passed Harper's law. The spirit of that legislation really should have been honoured in that early release scheme, and it now will be. It always should be that this House gives the maximum recognition to those who put themselves at risk for our safety and that of everyone else.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): The Prime Minister says that he puts devolution at the heart of his agenda, and I believe him. We both know that decisions are best made closer to the people they affect, but Wales still lacks the powers already available to Scotland, and even to Greater Manchester. That cannot

[Liz Saville Roberts]

be right. When he meets the First Minister next month, will he work with Plaid Cymru to make good that devolution gap on policing, on the Crown Estate, on rail and on the fiscal powers that Wales needs to build and prosper?

The Prime Minister: I am ready to have a constructive conversation with the First Minister, as I did when I met him in July in my first week in office. I believe from my own experience that a form of local devolution in Wales and Scotland might further strengthen the economy and public services. That is the point that I am making in relation to buses in Glasgow and other services as well. Where power is too centralised and too remote, sometimes poor decisions are made. My agenda is all about putting power in the hands of people at the community level, so that they can drive changes that are right for them. There is a model of local devolution that could be made to work in Scotland, in Wales and possibly in Northern Ireland, and I am ready to support that, if that is what the right hon. Lady wishes.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): Social media and the harm that it does to our young people is one of the biggest issues brought to my attention by my constituents in Putney, as well as by people across the country. I am really glad to hear the Prime Minister's affirmation that he will carry on with raising the age of those covered by the social media ban from 13 to 16. Will he further say that the ban will not be watered down at all, but will remain a full ban for all of the day, to reduce the harm done to our young people?

The Prime Minister: I think I am right in saying that the Leader of the Opposition made strong statements early in the year—going back to January—on this very issue, and I indicated then that I supported the strongest action, recognising the damage to children's mental health that social media has been doing. That is an example of how I work and how I will work in this role. Where something is obviously wrong and causing harm, particularly to children, it is incumbent on all of us to act. From my point of view, there is no watering down; we do need to take action. Those of us with children can sometimes see the damage being done, and we should not just accept it. I will lead from the front on this issue.

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): I welcome the new Prime Minister to the Dispatch Box. I note that in his statement he referred to the biggest issues facing the country as being “the economy and the cost of living crisis”. Will he accept that one of the things that has damaged our economy and caused prices to be higher is the tax-and-spend Budget in November 2024? He has cut taxes twice—two small tax cuts—since he became Prime Minister. Will he commit that in the Budget there will be no further searching for new things to tax? The biggest message of hope he could send to the country today would be to rule out further tax rises.

The Prime Minister: May I say clearly to the hon. Lady and to the country more broadly that I fully understand the pressure that businesses are under? The cost of doing business is higher than it should be, owing to the pressures from energy costs and other things. I do

not come into this position in any way in denial about that. We need to take further steps to reduce the cost of business, and I have indicated a direction of travel on that today.

These are matters that we need to give the utmost consideration to. We need to get growth up. The hon. Lady tried to give an analysis, but we have had a decade of low growth—these issues go back, and are much deeper—which is why, in my statement, I laid out the issues very clearly, and put forward a plan for growth. That plan requires us to be pro-business, and to provide what support we can.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Before I call for the next question, may I remind Members that I am trying to get in as many people as possible? If the questions could be shorter, that would be very helpful for everyone.

Tahir Ali (Birmingham Hall Green and Moseley) (Lab): I will follow your advice, Madam Deputy Speaker. Neighbourhood police numbers are down, and youth services have been cut to the bone. Is it any surprise that youth crime is rising? Does the Prime Minister agree, as do the constituents of Birmingham Hall Green and Moseley, that we need to commit to both, not as optional extras, but with long-term ringfenced funding, so that we do not lose another generation to the streets?

The Prime Minister: If we are closing down digital space for young people, it is incumbent on all of us to open up more physical space in communities, and to repair the damage to youth services that was done 15 or so years ago. We will not get crime down without that. That is the other side of the coin to increasing police officer numbers. My hon. Friend has my commitment on that.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): The hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) asked the Prime Minister about bluetongue. He gave an answer about farming, but he will recall that he did not address the issue directly. He was elected for the first time to this place in 2001—I welcome him back—in the election that was postponed because of the foot and mouth disease outbreak. There are 754 reported cases of bluetongue in Great Britain already. It takes three weeks after the first dose of vaccine for sheep to become immune, and six weeks for cattle. This is an animal welfare disaster, a human tragedy, and a farm business nightmare. Will the Prime Minister make the tackling of bluetongue and the immediate delivery of the vaccine an urgent priority for him and his Government?

The Prime Minister: On my visit in the summer, I heard concerns about the availability of vaccine, and the time it was taking for farms to access it, so I am aware of the issue. I will seek an update from the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Secretary and, if necessary, I am prepared to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss this.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister's visit to a farm in Cornwall over the summer, where, I believe, the work of the Labour Rural Research Group was mentioned to him. One of the LRRG's

campaigns is to end the rural penalty, whereby the cost of living is higher in rural areas, and there is weaker access to transport, energy, food and digital services. Will the Prime Minister confirm that it is his intention to make rural areas a priority during his premiership?

The Prime Minister: As I said before, and I am pleased to give my hon. Friend this assurance, I want to ensure that we do not have a two-tier England in which rural and coastal areas feel in some way shut out or left behind. There is a devolution deal that can be done for everywhere; he has my commitment on that. I encourage him to look at the letter from the First Secretary of State about No. 10 North; it is about providing for practical areas. I also encourage Members on all sides to start being practical about agreeing a combined authority, where that can be brought through. That, in our experience, is the best way to secure a building block for economic growth and to sustain important services. I want rural areas to benefit from exactly the same.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Over the summer, the Prime Minister opposed development on green spaces in his constituency, saying:

“It offers no benefit to the local community and will place huge strain on local infrastructure.”

My constituents face the same pressures, so will he commit to new and meaningful green-belt protections, to protect those green spaces in both our constituencies; make sure that houses are built only when there has been meaningful consultation with communities, when communities are being listened to, and when infrastructure is in place; and please, scrap the ridiculous “grey belt” definition?

The Prime Minister: My new constituency—in fact, it includes a good chunk of my old Leigh constituency, so I know it well—has been hugely developed over the years, and we have brought through significant new housing. Anyone who visited during the by-election will know that the infrastructure is struggling to cope with the number of houses that have been built in the constituency. All I am saying to the right hon. Lady is that I support taking a balanced approach where there has been significant development, but I do not think that it is sustainable to turn our back on all development completely. It is about a balance, and I will work in this role to find that balance with the right hon. Lady.

Deirdre Costigan (Ealing Southall) (Lab): I hugely welcome the Prime Minister’s £422 million investment to end rough sleeping, but in Ealing Southall many of those on the streets have no recourse to public funds, so it is illegal for the council to spend money helping them. Many would go home, but they face delays getting travel documents and from closed police cases being left open. Will the Prime Minister ensure that the relevant Home Office and Housing Ministers meet me to ensure that Ealing Southall is not left behind when it comes to his groundbreaking pledge to end street homelessness?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for that question, and we will absolutely work in the way that she has described. The commitment is real, and it is not a temporary commitment. The money that she mentions is, as far as I am concerned, ongoing. “Everyone in” should be and will be the permanent policy of the

Government that I lead. I do not believe that we should accept that anybody sleeps rough on a British street at any time, but I also know that if we are to help people on a journey away from the streets, it requires a whole-person approach, with all Departments working together. It can be done and I look forward to working with my hon. Friend on it.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): Earlier today, Members from across this House and the other place, along with stakeholders from throughout the United Kingdom, met to discuss the scourge of microplastic pollution. I chair the all-party parliamentary group on microplastics, and today we launched our report, the second in 10 years. I have an easy ask for the Prime Minister: will he organise a meeting for me, the stakeholders and Members from across the House to meet the relevant Minister to discuss the report’s recommendations?

The Prime Minister: I have given quite a few commitments to meetings today, so I will say to the hon. Gentleman, recognising the seriousness of the issue, that I will ensure that the relevant Minister meets him at his or her earliest convenience, given the seriousness of the issue and the report that he has done.

Josh Dean (Hertford and Stortford) (Lab): Over the bank holiday weekend, a treasured green space in Sawbridgeworth was decimated by building work without planning permission. Thanks to our community’s exceptional response, East Herts council was able to move quickly and secure an injunction, but across the country that is sadly the exception and not the rule. While this kind of unpermitted development is not a specific offence, residents in my community certainly felt that what started on Saturday was criminal. The Prime Minister has made it clear that he wants to tackle the thorny issues that make a real impact on people’s lives in communities like mine, so will he agree to meet me to discuss why we need to change the law to ensure that the police and local authorities have the right powers to stop this kind of unpermitted development in its tracks?

The Prime Minister: It is a real commitment of mine to ensure that the right powers are held at local level to take action on issues that matter to communities. We have had similar issues with illegal waste tipping in constituencies that leave people feeling that there is no accountability—almost a sense of lawlessness—and we cannot allow that to continue. I absolutely will look out for my hon. Friend to discuss this further. We can do more to empower local authorities, and he will have heard something I said in my statement: it was a real commitment to taking resources from a national level and bringing them back down, particularly to support local councils, which have in recent times, I am afraid, seen themselves hollowed out and they do not have the enforcement capability that they once had. We need to find ways of putting it back so that the people who do these things in communities can be held accountable and councils can enforce their own laws.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): Our schools and colleges cannot be fuelled by hope alone. At the start of the summer, the Prime Minister outlined an overhaul of 14-to-16 education. This comes on the back of far-reaching

[Munira Wilson]

reforms to special educational needs provision and a new—and as yet un-resourced—requirement to expand enrichment activities in our schools. Could the Prime Minister tell schools, and indeed parents, across the country how he is going to find the people and the cash to deliver all this? Our schools are at breaking point and teachers are leaving in their droves already.

The Prime Minister: I do recognise the need to fund education in exactly the way the hon. Lady describes. This goes back to the point I made about investing in success rather than paying for failure. We need to be serious about giving all young people a path to success, and therefore reducing the number of young people dependent on benefits in their 20s. This is a shift that we need to make. The Milburn report will hopefully lay out a way to do that, and I look forward to working with the hon. Lady on this important issue.

Al Carns (Birmingham Selly Oak) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister to his place. In this short time in government, we have done a fantastic job of changing the lives of young people—I always say that the next generation is our greatest legacy. The number of people not in education, employment or training is now below 1 million for the first time. Will the Prime Minister lay out what the strategy will be for people not in education, employment or training, and make it a national mission to give them the opportunity that they deserve?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that this should be a national mission. I talked earlier about a guarantee of a quality work placement between 16 and 18. We could look at doing more to support young people with transport costs, as we did in Greater Manchester. We need more youth apprenticeships—those went into decline, and we need to turn that around—and we need to see many more degree apprenticeships.

The point I am making is that we need to lay out a technical path from 14 for all our young people, so that we do not have a situation where it seems to them that the university route is the be-all and end-all—important as that is for those who want to go on it. Too many young people hit their middle teenage years, in year 10 and year 11, and cannot see where the path is going, and then they start to drop out. That is what I am determined to fix. I look forward to working with my hon. Friend on that.

Sorcha Eastwood (Lagan Valley) (Alliance): It is hard to disagree with a lot of what the Prime Minister has set out, but I am going to make sure my conscience is clear. I worry. I worry about our economy. Whenever I hear the Chancellor refer to a continuity Starmer Administration, that is a red flag for me. My Lagan Valley constituents cannot pay their bills. They are struggling with life in a way that they have not known before. I believe that this Prime Minister is serious about wanting to reach those people. Believe you me, when we met in Northern Ireland last week, rest assured that I can guarantee this House is not interested in hearing about the stuff from our past. My constituents want to get on with life in the here and now—right here, right now. The VAT cut for electricity is soon to be engulfed by rising prices. Did the Prime Minister not have it right the first time, when he said that our people need a new economic model?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. We had a good meeting last week. I do not disagree with what she says, and nor do I disagree with the power with which she says it, because many people watching this will be saying, “It’s too hard now; we need help.” The VAT cut on electricity did lead to a funding offer to the Northern Ireland Government, but I would be the first to say that that is only a start; it is a small step, for the reasons that she gives. We can do more to bring down the cost of transport, and we are going to set out more plans in the Budget to help with the cost of living. She should keep that level of determination to support her constituents. We will make this country feel better, more contented and more united if we are dealing with these issues in a meaningful way for them. I want that to be the hallmark of this Government.

David Smith (North Northumberland) (Lab): I warmly welcome the Prime Minister to his place and thank him for his recent visit to the north-east, where he committed to trying to tackle the totemic infrastructure issue of the north-east, which is the dualling of the A1. I thank him for committing to find alternative ways to fund that. This afternoon, I and 12 other MPs, the mayor and—in the spirit of cross-party working—the local Conservative leader wrote to him to ask what more we can do to work with him and his Government to secure this generational change for infrastructure in the north-east.

The Prime Minister: I will ask the Transport Secretary to work with colleagues at No. 10 North to see what can be done to bring forward a new way of delivering this much-needed infrastructure. I know how critical it is. I do not think any region of the country—certainly not the south-west and the north-east—has a level of infrastructure that is acceptable. This is something that has been long promised and not delivered. Let us see whether No. 10 North can make the breakthrough.

Sir Gavin Williamson (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for articulating a desire to reach across the political divide on issues that are common among all our constituents. across all our constituencies, more and more people are struggling to have a family—to have children. This is a greater and greater issue all across the country. In Staffordshire, for example, if a family need NHS IVF treatment, they are not even entitled to one round of treatment, despite the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence saying that they should be entitled to three.

The Prime Minister has a Health Bill coming to this House next week. I have tabled an amendment that would ensure that across England all our constituents can have the basic minimum recommended by NICE, so that they can have a family. Will the Prime Minister encourage his Health Secretary to look at the amendment and see whether there is a way to work across parties and have an impact on something that is so important to so many people?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman will be speaking for many people in his area, and I can see the passion with which he does so. I am not aware of the detail of the amendment at this point in time, but I will certainly ask the Health Secretary to take a close look. I do not like the idea of a postcode lottery in the national

health service. There should be an expectation that services available anywhere should be available everywhere, particularly when it comes to an issue as important as this. I give him a commitment to look at the issue, but I will have to come back to him to let him know what we are able to do.

Rachel Blake (Cities of London and Westminster) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Prime Minister to his place. In July he pledged to end rough sleeping, and that is warmly welcomed by me and my constituents in Cities of London and Westminster, which faces the highest levels of rough sleeping in the country. We have already heard people raise this issue in the Chamber today. When I speak to people who have been sleeping rough, they talk to me about feeling passed from pillar to post; when they have been offered somewhere to stay in a hostel, they simply do not feel safe and secure in it. The Prime Minister has made important statements in the Chamber today. Will he work with me on the way in which local authorities are applying the issue of local connection and on the condition of hostels in this country, which is simply not good enough? We need a real focus on that if we are to meet this ambitious pledge.

The Prime Minister: I will certainly work with my hon. Friend on this issue. I credit The Passage—I believe it is in her constituency—which is a wonderful charity that supports homeless people, and which I was proud to support on the morning I went into Downing Street. It focused me on what I needed to be focused on before I did that.

I agree with everything that my hon. Friend has said. If people are passed from pillar to post, they will not settle enough to be able to begin their journey of recovery—that was all my experience on this issue in Greater Manchester. We had it right in the pandemic, when people were given a settled place to stay. When people are in the same place every night, that is when they begin to recover. I do not believe that it is beyond us to provide now what we provided then. That is why my commitment to Everyone In is a permanent commitment. That should allow organisations such as The Passage, and others doing brilliant work in this area, to start planning for the long term, and to turn around what is, sadly, a tide of misery for so many people. We are wasting money on failure when we could be investing in recovery. That is what we should do.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): I welcome the Prime Minister to his place and thank him for his show of cross-party support for my campaign to scrap the time restriction on disability bus passes. I genuinely and sincerely appreciated the fact that he came to the parliamentary event and drop-in that we held last year with Whizz Kidz, the Royal National Institute of Blind People, Bus Users UK, Transport for All, and many other charitable organisations, as well as the likes of Jackie Snape from Disability Action Yorkshire. The Prime Minister showed what cross-party working can do when he delivered that change for Greater Manchester, and is now rolling it out across England. I am grateful to him that, come next year, disability bus passes will not start at 9.30 am, because disabilities do not either.

The Prime Minister mentioned in answer to another question that he does not like postcode lotteries. With that in mind, one issue that will still exist relates to companion

bus passes, which are granted to disabled people who need someone to accompany them. This is an issue where we will still see a postcode lottery. The right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) has been campaigning on this vigorously. Will the Prime Minister look at this issue, and deliver the same cross-party success to scrap those injustices too?

The Prime Minister: I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman; he was kind enough to invite me to a meeting of the all-party group when he was campaigning on that issue, and we did work on it cross-party. I was pleased to be able to make that change as Prime Minister. It is something that will benefit a huge number of disabled people, but he is right that the job is not done because many disabled people will say that they cannot go out and live their life without a companion, and sometimes they cannot afford to pay for that. There is further work to be done, but let's celebrate—I was going to say, "let's celebrate the small wins," but I do not think it is a small win because it means everything to somebody who now can, or will soon be able to, get out whenever they need with that change. I pay credit to the hon. Gentleman; he ran a great campaign. It was something I did in Greater Manchester—I was proud to support him. And that is the thing I am saying today: let's do more of that.

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister to his place. According to the Office for National Statistics, manufacturing directly contributes 15% to the economy of Staffordshire—double the national average—so I really welcome the Prime Minister's commitment to reindustrialisation, which is vital for towns like Stafford. Will he meet me and other interested MPs, particularly those who are members of the Reindustrialisation Research Group, so we can speak about this issue, specifically as it relates to towns? We know that towns have more manufacturing employment than cities, so to have growth in every postcode, with manufacturing booming again in towns, is going to make such a difference.

The Prime Minister: I could not agree more. The agenda of reindustrialisation goes hand in hand with lifting high streets, and I know that my hon. Friend has campaigned on both those things. I am serious in saying that we need quite a change in British public procurement to support our industries. As she will see as we go towards the Budget, we will talk more about what can be done to support high streets. Too many tell a story of decline. If we can turn them round, it could completely change the way people feel about the areas where they live. It could build that sense of optimism that can then make many more things possible. That is what I intend to do for her constituency and many others, working with her.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Your Party): I congratulate the right hon. Member on becoming Prime Minister and on his stamina at taking questions for already even longer than the longest world cup match. He has said some helpful and useful things about housing, particularly on rough sleeping. Could I ask him to look seriously at the issue facing renters living in the private rented sector, where the local housing allowance, in most cases, comes nowhere near the level of rent being charged? In reality, less than 2% of private sector rents are within the local housing allowance. Raising the local

[Jeremy Corbyn]

housing allowance often means chasing the market all the time, and it therefore costs more and more. He must know the numbers of people living in the private rented sector. Surely the obvious answer is to bring in some kind of ceiling—a rent control of some sort—to the sector, and immediately look at not postponing the rise in the local housing allowance, but to bring real relief to people who are desperately up against it and subsidising their rent out of their benefits. The current situation is not fair, it is not right, and I am sure that he would agree with me.

The Prime Minister: While I may have already outlasted the longest world cup match, I am sure that my right hon. Friend and I did a longer Q&A at a hustings in 2015—so this is just a small one.

I agree with what my right hon. Friend says about the change we need to see to the housing market. He mentions local housing allowance. It has been repeatedly frozen in recent years, and that has meant that the gap between benefits and rents has grown bigger and bigger. It is the biggest reason that London councils have a huge temporary accommodation bill, which I think has gone over half a billions pounds now. The freeze does not save money, because it just creates an unfunded pressure in council budgets. He may have seen that in our first allocations from the social and affordable homes programme, which I mentioned in my statement, London is the biggest beneficiary by some distance, particularly through the building of council homes in London. We have made a significant down payment there. I hear what he says about local housing allowance. We need a package of measures to turn the housing market around. Hopefully, some of what I have said today answers his concerns.

Sarah Russell (Congleton) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for his words on cross-party working, which I know my constituents believe in very strongly. On that basis, I would like to endorse comments made by Opposition colleagues around farming, drought and bluetongue, all of which are very important to my constituents. To move on to the matter most immediately at hand for my constituents, Jodrell Bank in my constituency faces a significant problem in the medium term because of funding cuts. Would it be possible for the Prime Minister and No. 10 North to work with me and my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Tim Roca) to address this issue?

The Prime Minister: Every one of my generation went on a school trip to Jodrell Bank, and there is no way that we can see its demise—it will not happen under my Government. I know that changes have been made in relation to research funding, but Jodrell Bank is a heritage asset for the country as well as a research asset. I will indeed set up the meeting that my hon. Friend requires. There must be a way to save Jodrell Bank, and I give her a commitment today at this Dispatch Box: we will find it.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): We have had the hottest summer on record, and we have had an exceptionally high number of tragic deaths in the rivers and seas around the country. At the same time, so many children are no longer able to learn

to swim; over 200 public and school swimming pools have closed since 2020. Will the Prime Minister look at how we can better fund leisure centres and swimming pools to make sure that every child knows how to save themselves and to float—with the advice from the Royal Life Saving Society? Will he ensure that we do not have such a terrible summer again?

The Prime Minister: There have been too many tragic deaths this summer, and the best way to prevent that is to do exactly what the hon. Member said. Swimming should be an entitlement for young people on the curriculum, and I look forward to seeing how we can deliver that, working with her.

Douglas McAllister (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): My constituency includes the towns of Dumbarton and Clydebank, and both share proud histories as industrial powerhouses, not least in shipbuilding. If we are to reindustrialise every part of our UK—every postcode—that must include West Dunbartonshire. We have two sites on the Clyde ready for investment: Carless in Old Kilpatrick, and the former Exxon site in Bowling. Will the Prime Minister help me to restore industry to these sites, and will he visit my West Dunbartonshire constituency?

The Prime Minister: I will at some point—as soon as I can. In relation to shipbuilding, I worked with the Mayor of Liverpool, who was setting a contract for a new Mersey ferry and found that there was pressure to have it built overseas. Using social value commissioning, he and I worked together to ensure that the ferry was built at Cammell Laird in Birkenhead, and it will soon come into service in Liverpool. We need to see more of that. Too many buses are being bought from companies outside our shores, when we have Wrightbus in Northern Ireland and Alexander Dennis Ltd in Scotland and Scarborough. We should be doing more to back British business, and my hon. Friend can expect that fully from me, as well as commitments to the shipbuilding industry.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): Can I say that I am flattered to be associated with the Prime Minister? It must be mistaken identity—I am not sure if he would be as flattered. I welcome him to the Dispatch Box and back to the House, and I welcome his commitment to Ukraine. I would like some clarity on the defence budget. It seems over the recess—of course, there has been no scrutiny of the Prime Minister and the Government over the recess—that there has been a talking up of the Government's commitment to spending 3.5% of GDP on defence by 2035. There has not been as much talk about meeting the 3% target by 2030. Would the Prime Minister like to inform the House and the country, given that his Chancellor, in his previous role as Defence Secretary, said that this country should prepare to be on a war footing?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman raises a crucial issue that matters greatly to me and to the Chancellor. We will meet all our international commitments, and we will set out how at the spending review.

Chris Kane (Stirling and Strathallan) (Lab): The Prime Minister is right to pursue further devolution within the United Kingdom, but in my work on the Public Accounts Committee, I am regularly struck by how little the different parts of the United Kingdom appear to learn

from one another, even when tackling very similar challenges. Devolution allows different places to take different approaches, creating real opportunities to learn from what works and what does not. As we devolve more power within the United Kingdom, does the Prime Minister agree that we must also get much better at grasping these opportunities, so that every part of the UK can learn from and benefit from the experience of others? Is he thinking about how we could bake this into further devolution in a way that it is not currently?

The Prime Minister: That is an excellent suggestion. It is exactly the thing No. 10 North was set up to do, and I will pass my hon. Friend's suggestion on to them.

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): I was pleased to hear the Prime Minister speak multiple times about his trip to Cornwall, and I hope he enjoyed Exeter services on his way through Devon. It is disappointing that he did not spend more time in rural Devon in particular, because the biggest issue I dealt with over the summer was the Government's local government reorganisation announcement, which will see a huge rural Devon constituency of 2,200 square miles with just 103 councillors, compared with 220 councillors for three urban centres of about 600 square miles between them. I accept the Prime Minister's ambition for growth in every postcode, but he mentioned earlier the lack of infrastructure in the south-west. How can that version of local government reorganisation produce growth in every postcode? I urge him to revisit that decision with the Minister responsible, because, quite frankly, constituents across rural Devon are devastated by what it might mean for them.

The Prime Minister: I did intend to visit Devon at the same time, but I was diverted to Stourbridge—I hope the hon. Lady will understand why—because of the devastating fire in people's homes that we saw in the middle of the summer. As I said before, I am prepared to look at local government reorganisation or ask the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government to do that. Where possible, we need as much consent as we can get. If the hon. Lady is telling me that we need to work harder to find that, I am always prepared to do what I can.

Mrs Elsie Blundell (Heywood and Middleton North) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for his statement and welcome him to his place. The Prime Minister knows the Hoolickin family from Middleton, who tragically lost their beloved Michael as a result of the callous actions of a violent reoffender who should have been recalled to custody far sooner, if only the local probation service had been more rigorous in its monitoring. Will the Prime Minister commit to looking seriously at the Probation Service's accountability and how it operates, so that serious further offenders are given no opportunity to cause further harm to constituents like mine?

The Prime Minister: I do know Garry and Lesley Hoolickin well; I have met them many, many times. The murder of their son was something that sadly could have been prevented. It was, in some ways, caused by chaos in the probation system, as my hon. Friend knows. When I was leaving this House in the middle part of the last decade, probation services were plummeting

into chaos, and only in recent times have we started to lift them back up again. Personally, I think there does need to be accountability for what happened to probation services in that period. It was a disastrous reorganisation that had real human consequences, and I have always supported the call for work to give answers to the families who lost loved ones—truth and justice.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): We know that Labour's NHS policy on mandatory advice and guidance and single point of access has led to deaths. We on the Opposition Benches warned about it, doctors warned about it, and patients warned about it, and we were told repeatedly that it was total nonsense, misinformation, opportunism and even conspiracy theories. Now the Health Services Safety Investigations Body, the Government's safety watchdog, has produced a report linking this system to deaths and asked for a rapid review. The right hon. Gentleman has been a Health Secretary before. Will he commit to that review, to ensure there are no further delays in diagnosis and no further deaths as a result of this policy?

The Prime Minister: I have not yet had a chance to read that review. I will, and I will then seek to speak to the hon. Gentleman, to see what we can do.

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): In my constituency, more than one in five people are employed in logistics and related industries, and they will welcome this Government's focus on growth in every region. Given the impact that business costs have on consumer prices, what steps will my right hon. Friend take to improve the operating environment for logistics businesses and help ease the cost of living pressures for families? Will he commit to meeting with small family-owned logistics companies in my constituency?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. Again, I cannot give a time commitment, but I will at some point do exactly as she asks and have that meeting. I recognise that the cost of doing business is too high. We need to show serious intent to bring it down, and that is what we will do.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): Given that Chequers is in my constituency, may I welcome the so-called king of the north to his new Buckinghamshire residence? Next time he is at Chequers, before he heads off to enjoy the wonderful pubs in Wendover, as I know he has, could I persuade him to take a drive to the Buckinghamshire villages on the Oxfordshire border—villages like Ludgershall, Marsh Gibbon, Oakley, Long Crendon, Boarstall and Brill—and see for himself just how inappropriate it is to put an asylum centre just over that border at MOD Bicester? He can then make an intervention with the Home Secretary to ensure that a more suitable site is found for such a centre. While he is talking to the Home Secretary, could he ask her to respond to my letter containing a series of very detailed questions about this site that my constituents have been asking, which I sent to her over six weeks ago?

The Prime Minister: I will certainly look carefully at what the hon. Gentleman says. He will have heard me say in my statement that small boat crossings are down, and the number of people coming over is down, but we still have a challenge in relation to accommodation.

[*The Prime Minister*]

I will look at the issue. I think Piddington is nearby, and I know there are concerns in that community as well. The only thing I would say is that it cannot be only the most deprived parts of this country that are asked to deal with the whole issue of asylum accommodation. A balance has to be struck, but it has to be fair for everybody. I of course recognise that large-scale institutions can put pressure on nearby villages. Let me look at the issues that he raises; I can see that they are genuine, but this is an issue that has to be dealt with as a whole country, and that is what I will do.

Lee Barron (Corby and East Northamptonshire) (Lab): September is Childhood Cancer Awareness Month. I raised with the last Prime Minister the case of Max Hall. During our summer recess, Max passed away. He will forever be 14. Will the Prime Minister commit in his direction of Government to prioritise brain cancer—the biggest cancer killer of those under 40—and get his Ministers to meet with Max’s family and the organisations that support families, such as Brain Tumour Research and Brain Cancer Justice?

The Prime Minister: I will absolutely give my hon. Friend the commitment that I will ask the relevant Minister to meet them, and would he do me the favour of passing on my sympathies to Max’s family? That is devastating news. There is so much more we need to do on brain cancer. You can be sure, Madam Deputy Speaker, that I will always do that in the name of my good friend Tessa Jowell, whose family still work on these issues. There is so much more that we can do. I know that these issues have been in the media recently. There is encouraging research being done. We need to see a breakthrough. I will keep a close eye on that meeting, and I am happy to work with him further on this issue.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): Today the Prime Minister has spoken with great passion about empowering local people and allowing them to make decisions that affect their own lives. On that theme, could I ask the Prime Minister what action he will take to restore the sovereignty of the United Kingdom and its people to Northern Ireland when it comes to making the laws? Currently, laws in 300 areas are made by a foreign Parliament, not by this United Kingdom. These are laws we do not make and cannot change. Indeed, the Prime Minister inadvertently put a focus on this issue when he referred to the cut in VAT on electricity bills—a cut that could not apply to Northern Ireland because we are subject to foreign EU law that no one has voted for. In his crusade to empower local people, will the Prime Minister set about the fundamental task of restoring UK sovereignty—people’s sovereignty—to my constituency? Speaking of my constituency, he mentioned Wrightbus. May I invite him to visit it at the earliest opportunity?

The Prime Minister: I always love visiting Northern Ireland, so who knows? On the hon. and learned Gentleman’s main point, I will probably disappoint him. Obviously, the arrangements put in place are about supporting the economy of Northern Ireland, because Northern Ireland can get the benefits of access to both markets. It is important that he sees the benefits of the arrangement that the Windsor framework brought as well.

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): The Prime Minister has rightly described council tax as “highly regressive”, saying that it is unfair that people in Greater Manchester often pay far more than people living in London. Does he agree that that same injustice is even more stark in towns like Hartlepool, where a band D household pays £2,556 a year compared with £1,048 in Westminster? He has rightly attacked that unfairness, so will he now commit to attacking the problem and replacing the hated council tax system that hammers towns like mine?

The Prime Minister: I do not think I can go all that way from the Dispatch Box today, but I understand the point my hon. Friend makes. A council tax system based on 1991 valuations is not going to deliver fairness across the country. The first steps at reform were taken in last year’s Budget. We need to proceed with consensus on this issue, if we can. I understand what he is saying, but the more wholesale reform might have to wait for another day.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): At the weekend, the Prime Minister stepped in to ensure that his No. 10 North railway service continued, so in that spirit of problem solving, will he use his office to ensure that rapid action is taken to restore a reliable service from King’s Lynn to King’s Cross for my North West Norfolk constituents, who had 380 trains cancelled in July and 280 in August?

The Prime Minister: I have said to the Transport Secretary, and she agrees, that the performance of the railways over the summer we have just had has been nowhere near good enough. On a very hot day, passengers on a train from Edinburgh to London had no working toilets on the entire train, and coming back from Cornwall and Devon, the train that I was on was abandoned at Taunton—I think we have all had those kinds of experiences. The railways need to improve and public ownership of them needs to drive that improvement. I will be convening a rail summit soon to discuss the summer just gone—I would be happy for the hon. Gentleman to write to me with details of the service he mentioned—because we need to see significant improvement on our railways.

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister’s commitment to grasp the nettle of social care reform. At Calderdale and Huddersfield NHS foundation trust, which is a well-performing trust, about 20% of beds are filled with people who should be getting better at home, but with a 10% vacancy rate in social care, we cannot fix the problem without having high-quality jobs and progression in social care. Will the Prime Minister direct Louise Casey to look at that area of social care so that we can build a national care service that people want to work in?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is exactly right. The first stage of any social care reform should be workforce reform to create the foundation on which to build a new approach and a more preventive, higher quality service that actually keeps people out of hospital. I think it starts with people’s pay, terms and conditions, their prospects for progression and their ability to move towards the NHS. I have always favoured seeing this as

a single approach across all care. I am happy to work with him on that, because from my point of view, he has articulated perfectly the first stage of social care reform.

Lewis Cocking (Broxbourne) (Con): The Prime Minister has spent all summer trying to be all things to all people. My constituents in Broxbourne want the Government to cut wasteful spending, lower taxes and get a grip on our immigration system, which all require tough decisions to be made by the Prime Minister. Will the Prime Minister choose his left-wing Back Benchers or will he choose the British people?

The Prime Minister: There was nothing easy about reopening early release. I was listening to the British people when I made changes to exclude rapists, groomers and those guilty of the most serious sexual offences against children from the scheme, and then went even further to exclude manslaughter and other historic child sex offences. Regardless of what the hon. Gentleman might read on social media, I do take difficult decisions. I have done that for 25 years as an elected politician and it is what I will carry on doing. The proposals that the Justice Secretary will outline soon show that that is exactly the nettle that I have grasped.

Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister to his place. He is right to say that we need more power and more ownership back in the hands of our communities. My constituency of Aylesbury is in a relatively wealthy part of the country, but if he were to talk to people at the Vineyard food bank or the Youth Concern drop-in he would not know it, because that overall wealth masks significant inequalities within Buckinghamshire. In fact, people in parts of Aylesbury live on average 11 years less than people in the wealthier parts in the south of the county. What does more control and more ownership look like for my residents, particularly those at the sharp end of the inequalities that I have described?

The Prime Minister: It is so important that rural communities do not feel shut out from the drive towards devolution. That is why I have made that clear commitment today. I believe that rural communities can benefit from public control of bus services, possibly more than urban areas, because bus services in rural areas are so fragile, expensive and often intermittent. It is only moving to a regulated service that can put in place a decent, reliable bus service for people. That is something that we should support for rural areas, working through No. 10 North, and we should put it into effect for our rural communities as much as for our urban areas.

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): Gorthugher da ha meur ras, Madam Deputy Speaker. On behalf of my Cornish parliamentary colleagues, I welcome the Prime Minister's recognition of Cornwall's special case, his visit to Cornwall and his kindness in communicating with me in advance of that meeting. Notwithstanding his experience in his previous job, does he recognise that the metropolitan template is not appropriate in all circumstances when dealing with devolution? There are Celtic regions and nations, such as Cornwall, that require a bespoke settlement. I know that we will be discussing the matter at No. 10 North and I welcome that opportunity. I hope that the Prime Minister will engage in it with a very open mind.

The Prime Minister: It is a very real offer and I am glad that it finds favour with my hon. Friend—I call him that because we have worked together over a number of years. I heard some groans from the Opposition Benches when I mentioned the overnight visitor levy, but bear in mind that many of us will have been on summer holidays where we have spent a few extra euros to recognise the benefit we get from using services in a local area. If such a power was extended as part of a devolution deal, it could be quite transformational for Cornwall because it could open up a new revenue stream to address infrastructure. That would be a choice for Cornwall, but I want to consider a devolution deal that gives real levers that can help Cornwall and other rural areas to start to improve their services. It might provide the revenue to sustain bus services, for instance. It is about fairness. We heard about the unfairness of council tax. It cannot be right to make residents pay for all the services when visitors should make a fair contribution as well. As British tourists, we pay it elsewhere, so I do not see why visitors to Cornwall should not pay a little extra. That is the type of discussion we need to have—it is not a fluffy discussion but a real discussion—about what can be done to move Cornwall forward. I am ready to do that and maybe make it a template for other rural areas across England.

Lloyd Hatton (South Dorset) (Lab): May I figuratively raise a glass to the Prime Minister's much-needed 20% cut to business rates for pubs, clubs and live music venues? That really is a win for our high streets, but other hospitality businesses—the hundreds of hotels, cafés, restaurants, fish and chip shops and takeaways right across my constituency—need support with the cost of business rates. These are family-owned businesses, and they are the backbone of our high streets. Ahead of the Budget, will the Prime Minister look closely at widening the support so that other hospitality businesses can benefit?

The Prime Minister: I assure my hon. Friend that I am giving close consideration to that very suggestion.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): I wish you, Madam Deputy Speaker, many happy returns.

I welcome the Prime Minister to his place, and I welcome his words. In an answer to someone else, he said that he will always demand the highest level of recognition for those who put themselves at risk to keep us safe. I am sure that after six weeks of being Prime Minister he includes in that our amazing armed forces, yet our Northern Ireland veterans face a never-ending process of prosecution, absent any new or compelling evidence. Does he think that our Northern Ireland veterans need more protection? If he does, what will he do about it?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Before the Prime Minister responds, let me say that questions need to be super short. Let us keep the responses tight as well, Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister: I mentioned the Good Friday agreement earlier. It is important to deal properly and fully with all the issues that are still there and need to be addressed. I do not think it is a case of leaving anything hanging over anybody. The commission proposed in the Bill allows answers to be given for those who are still

[The Prime Minister]

seeking answers. This is about the right protections for veterans, too. Amendments will be brought forward soon, and we can discuss them as a House then.

Lizzi Collinge (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab): I am extremely proud to have seen the huge expansion of clean energy over the last two years—a key way in which we are tackling the horrendous climate change that we have seen this summer. In fact, my constituency is the biggest clean energy generator in the whole country, with Heysham 1 and 2 nuclear power stations. Will the Prime Minister confirm that the clean energy revolution will continue under his Government and will continue to be a top priority?

The Prime Minister: I can absolutely give my hon. Friend that commitment.

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Your Party): The Prime Minister has reeled off a list of policies since coming into office. Interestingly, he has failed to mention one major intervention: his Government have continued his predecessor's policy of arming Israel—an apartheid state that has committed and continues to commit genocide in Gaza. Instead of deflection and the boring nice-guy act, will he finally admit to the House that he has chosen to continue arming Israel and is therefore complicit in the genocide of the Palestinian people?

The Prime Minister: I do not think the hon. Lady was in the House at the time, but I did signal a change on Israel and Palestine when I came into office as Prime Minister. A further statement will be made to the House very shortly.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): Happy birthday, Madam Deputy Speaker.

The Prime Minister will know that the commitment he has made on social and council housing will be very welcome in places such as Bracknell, where lots of families are waiting for a home. However, that is undermined when social housing providers sell off their social homes through the disposals process. I know that we are taking steps to address that issue through the Social Housing Bill, but I am concerned that we are not going far enough. It is good to see the Housing Minister in his place. Will the Prime Minister work with him to address this issue and ensure that we can stop disposals?

The Prime Minister: The Housing Minister has just assured me that we will look at the very issue my hon. Friend raises, so he may want to pursue that conversation with him.

Douglas Lumsden (Aberdeen South) (Con): The Prime Minister spoke earlier about deindustrialisation. That is exactly what is happening in my constituency, but that deindustrialisation is being caused directly by Labour's energy policies. The energy profits levy, the ban on new licences and the delay in approving Jackdaw and Rosebank are all having a huge impact on thousands of jobs. Will the Prime Minister take a different approach from his predecessor and protect jobs in the oil and gas sector?

The Prime Minister: I have been very clear that I will take a pragmatic approach, and the hon. Gentleman will see that in action soon.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for his statement. He mentioned the triple-helix model, but what is missing from that model in Scotland is that local authorities are not empowered to play their part. On Friday, Liz McAreavey from the Edinburgh chamber of commerce and the chief executive of the Glasgow chamber of commerce wrote to the Prime Minister asking that he works with the First Minister in Scotland and city region leaders right across the Edinburgh-Glasgow region to forge a devolution deal that enables these cities to meet their full potential. Will he take that offer seriously?

The Prime Minister: It is certainly an offer from me to have a devolution deal that does precisely what my hon. Friend says and gets business, academia and local government all pulling together. Obviously it is a matter for the Scottish Government—I am not going to go round their back—but I hope that we can agree something at the National Economic Council next month.

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): As the Prime Minister looks ahead to what is predicted to be one of the wettest winters on record, my constituents are expecting more of the same: Southern Water pumping sewage into our precious chalk stream, the River Lavant, which feeds directly into Chichester harbour. What does he believe is an acceptable timescale to get to grips with the water industry and regulate it properly, rather than a review that has delayed everything and is limited in scope?

The Prime Minister: I understand the last point, and I have hinted at it today. The Cunliffe review was too limited and should have looked at all options for the water industry. I do not want this issue to drag on, but I do not believe we have a water industry that is fit for the climate challenges of the future, for the reasons that the hon. Lady has given. We will come forward with our proposals soon; it will not be too long.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister's plans for the biggest redistribution of power that this country has ever seen. Does he agree that in addition to redistributing power via geography, we need to rebalance power between the generations? Will he have a look at my ideas of a youth triple lock and a dedicated Minister for younger and future generations?

The Prime Minister: I think this House will need to have a very profound debate when the Milburn report is published. We need to make a generational change in the way that we support our young people, and I will engage my hon. Friend fully in that discussion.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): Towns and villages across my constituency are often besieged by utility and engineering works. Will the Prime Minister look at and personally respond to my campaign for a statutory duty to co-ordinate those works to keep Runnymede and Weybridge moving?

The Prime Minister: Yes—this issue used to drive me mad as Mayor of Greater Manchester. Only the capital has had some of those powers, but everywhere should have them. I am in full support of what the hon. Gentleman says.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): It was a pleasure to welcome the Prime Minister to Portsmouth this summer when he visited His Majesty's naval base. It was especially good to welcome a fellow north MP to Portsmouth North! He saw at first hand the dedication of our armed forces, so does he agree that supporting personnel and their families remains a priority? Like the police, they should offer proper paternity leave for every serving father and ensure that our self-employed fathers are no longer left behind.

The Prime Minister: I fully agree with my hon. Friend. We need to provide the very best support we can to those who serve in our armed forces. I know that the Chancellor, in his previous role, did a lot to improve forces accommodation. There is more that we can do, and I look forward to working with my hon. Friend on that. I enjoyed my visit.

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): My mum and I survived domestic abuse when I was a child, but today many victims are petrified about their own survival in the light of the early release scheme. I know the Prime Minister has already excluded perpetrators of some offences from that scheme and pulled out the stops there, but what stops will he pull out to further protect victims of domestic abuse?

The Prime Minister: I do not want to steal the thunder of the Justice Secretary, but he will soon announce a much-enhanced licensing and tagging regime in which victims will be able to be given a say in the setting of the restrictions. We are moving for the first time to a system of restriction zones, rather than exclusion zones. That means that the victim is much more in control and we are not allowing people just to have places that they cannot go into; we are instead giving them a zone that is the only area they can go into. That completely alters the balance in favour of victims.

Alex Baker (Aldershot) (Lab): As the MP for Aldershot, I was really pleased to hear that the Prime Minister has held bilateral talks with Prime Ministers Carney and Frieden, who are leading the founding of the Defence, Security and Resilience Bank. For the past 18 months, I have pushed for the UK to join this multilateral bank, because I believe that we must work internationally to fund defence. Will the Prime Minister commit the UK to standing with our allies and joining this world bank for defence? It could unlock millions in investment for our British defence industry.

The Prime Minister: We will certainly look at that scheme, and indeed we are doing so. I have been in touch with the Canadian Prime Minister. There are other schemes in Europe. We need to be pragmatic about our defence commitments and look at all ways of collaborating so that we can save money, as my hon. Friend suggests.

Lara Bird (Arbroath and Broughty Ferry) (SNP): Scotland is not a region, and nor should it be treated as one. Those in Scotland are hurt and frustrated at the way the Prime Minister has conducted the conversation around devolution and so arrogantly dismissed the

pro-independence mandate that the Scottish people gave. Why does the Prime Minister think he can dismiss the democratically elected mandate of the Scottish people?

The Prime Minister: I certainly have not in any way disrespected Scotland. I came to Scotland to support the opening of the Commonwealth games in my first week in office. I met the First Minister. He shared some of his concerns about the Council of the Nations and Regions. He felt it did not give due consideration to the nations, and I listened to that, as well as putting the proposals on the table about more local devolution. I have not done anything of the kind the hon. Lady describes. Similar to Northern Ireland, it is about when public support changes and the position changes. I do not follow all the polls in Scotland, but I am not aware that they are consistently showing a change and a need for another referendum.

Baggy Shanker (Derby South) (Lab/Co-op): Across the east midlands, persistently low apprenticeship start rates mean that loads of our young children do not get the opportunities they deserve. As the Prime Minister witnessed in Derby, there are some excellent examples of young people with good apprenticeships. Will he work across industry to make sure that we increase the rate of apprenticeship starts, so that more young people can get a start in life?

The Prime Minister: It was brilliant to be at Alstom with my hon. Friend and to see all the apprentices that it employs, as well as those employed in its supply chain. It is a model for what we want to see elsewhere. We need to make a massive change in this area. It should be a big part of our response to the Milburn report, and I can give my hon. Friend a commitment that that is exactly what I will be seeking to do.

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): The Prime Minister's warm words about rural and coastal communities will be seen, I am afraid, like the chocolate Freddo bar that he said he could not affect the price of: sweet, but ultimately insubstantial. Similarly, his triple-helix theory of growth is like the purple sweet in Quality Street: largely nuts. We need much more detail, Prime Minister. Rural communities are crying out for help. We need action. We cannot have the Stone Roses' "Fool's Gold".

The Prime Minister: The hon. Member has worked hard at that question. Full marks for creativity. It must have looked great in front of the mirror, and it was still pretty good in the House. On the triple-helix model, perhaps he needs to speak to Baroness May down the corridor, because that was her theory in the local industrial strategies that I mentioned, and it has worked pretty well in Greater Manchester. I would not dismiss it quite so quickly. Greater Manchester had average growth for a decade of more than 3%; maybe there is something worth looking at there.

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for his statement, and also for the fact that his first visit after being elected as leader of the Labour party back in July was to the north—north Kent, in this instance. Does he agree that his visit showed him that we need to continue to invest in our infrastructure? In our case, that is the lower Thames crossing, but we also

[Jim Dickson]

must fix our crumbling roads, such as Galley Hill Road in my constituency. We need to double down on infrastructure to have growth in every postcode, do we not?

The Prime Minister: I completely agree. It was striking that people were pointing out the loss of the ferry service between his constituency and Tilbury. [Interruption.] Sorry, between Gravesend and Tilbury—have I got that right? That type of connectivity is crucial to local communities, and I completely agree with my hon. Friend. No. 10 North is there to get that infrastructure back in, and I hope he will work with it.

Martin Wrigley (Newton Abbot) (LD): I welcome the Prime Minister to his place with his message of optimism, hope and change for water, climate change and procurement. On procurement, may I be presumptuous and give him a quick win? We can remove Palantir from the federated data platform in the NHS and replace it with a Greater Manchester model that works today and supplies more than Palantir does or ever can. That is an easy win.

The Prime Minister: I have already got Members on the other side of the House championing my achievements as Mayor of Greater Manchester. The hon. Member makes a good point.

Linsey Farnsworth (Amber Valley) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister to his post. My constituency of Amber Valley is made up of three small manufacturing towns with surrounding villages, but it has been overlooked for far too long, so I am pleased to hear the Prime Minister speak of growth in every postcode. My constituents will be particularly pleased to hear about reindustrialisation after our largest employer, Denby Pottery, recently closed its doors for the last time after 217 years. Can the Prime Minister advise how we can prioritise constituencies like mine, which are still experiencing the effects of deindustrialisation?

The Prime Minister: I was sad to hear about Denby Pottery, and I know my hon. Friend's part of the world fairly well. We are serious about making sure that where there are world-class sectors in our communities, we back them properly and help them transition to future technologies. We have not done that well as a country in the past; we will do it much better in the future.

Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): I am glad that the Prime Minister had a nice tour of the UK over the summer. Had he come to the Isle of Wight, he would have heard about our No. 1 cost of living issue, which is the price of travelling to and from the Isle of Wight. It is astronomical, and it is harming our tourism economy and restricting access to health and education. If he stands by his comments about people power and putting power back into communities, will he at least be open to creating regulatory powers so that we can control the prices levied by private equity companies, put passengers first, and ensure that the Isle of Wight is treated fairly, just like every other community in the UK?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Member sounds like he could be speaking from the Government Benches. I got a lot of jeers from the Opposition when I talked about

public control earlier this afternoon, but that is precisely what he is calling for, and he is right to do so. It enabled me to reduce bus fares in Greater Manchester, and I do not see why it would not enable him to reduce ferry fares. Bring me a proposal—that is what I say to him. I will look seriously at it, because I understand completely how critical those transport links are to opportunity and growth, both on the island and on the mainland.

David Burton-Sampson (Southend West and Leigh) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister to his place, and I thank him for the positive actions he is taking, particularly to end rough sleeping by Christmas. Will he join me in thanking the amazing charities and organisations in Southend that do so much good work in this area, including the Homeless Action Resource Project—HARP—St Vincent de Paul, the One Love Project, the YMCA and Off the Streets? Can he give me an assurance that this policy is only the start of solving a problem that can often involve a complex set of individual circumstances?

The Prime Minister: When we think of rough sleeping and homelessness, bricks and mortar is only part of it. In effect, what we are talking about is a journey of recovery. That was the Housing First philosophy that was discussed earlier. It is about giving people a firm base, and then giving them the support to move forward. Every person in my view is capable of recovery. We just need to give them the circumstances in which it can happen.

Siân Berry (Brighton Pavilion) (Green): The extremes of this summer cannot simply be wished away with emollient phrases like it not being all “one or the other” when it comes to new fossil fuel drilling. Can the Prime Minister tell us whether he meant that all our climate commitments are at risk from his Government, or just this one?

The Prime Minister: The climate commitments in our manifesto are not at risk. I have made clear today that we need to plan for a carbon-neutral future. I am not one of those who will pander to those going in a different direction. I was convinced as Mayor of Greater Manchester that our future lay in adopting renewables, and I am of the same view as Prime Minister. Where I differ from the Green party is on its ideological, rather than pragmatic, approach to getting there. That, I am afraid, might delay the transition that the hon. Member seeks.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call Chris Vince—and how I have missed him!

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and may I wish you a very happy birthday?

I thank the Prime Minister for making one of his first visits as Prime Minister to Harlow. It was almost as if he knew that I was going to mention Harlow quite regularly. Very seriously, I want to refer to an announcement made recently by the German Government about an incident at Leipzig airport. Does he agree that we should condemn this outrageous act of Russian aggression, and send our support to our German allies?

The Prime Minister: This is a very serious matter indeed, and I believe that news has broken about it as we have been gathering a statement from the German Government about the incident at Leipzig. I want to leave the House in no doubt that the UK stands in full solidarity with Germany in the face of these egregious and unacceptable attacks. Russia's attempts to undermine our united resolve and our willingness to support Ukraine are futile and doomed to fail, and we will be steadfast in the face of them. I am in touch with Chancellor Merz, and we are working closely with our allies to defend any threats to NATO and our allies, and to NATO territory. I am glad that my hon. Friend has raised this matter; it is a very serious development, and it requires the most intense European co-operation in response.

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): I wish the new Prime Minister the very best, and welcome his commitment to a better kind of politics.

Nationally, 4.4 million people are now in council tax debt, 1.2 million more than in the previous year, and last year 1.7 million instructions were made for bailiffs. Bailiff use comes at a significant human and economic cost, so will the Prime Minister look at this issue? Will he, for instance, consider revoking regulation 45 of the Council Tax (Administration and Enforcement) Regulations 1992, which allows councils to call in bailiffs, and introducing a new duty of care that puts harm reduction at the heart of council tax collection and helps to write off unfair debt?

The Prime Minister: I happen to agree with the hon. Gentleman. I know that there have been moves to improve the regulation of bailiffs, but I would encourage the 10 councils in Greater Manchester to take a different approach to debt, because many people in the hon. Gentleman's constituency and mine fear the sound of the letterbox opening or a knock at the door. Personal debt can be completely destructive of people's mental health, and I think that there is a different and better way, which the hon. Gentleman has described.

Chris Curtis (Milton Keynes North) (Lab): When the Prime Minister travels up the west coast main line through Milton Keynes and Bedfordshire, he will be travelling through a bit of the country where there is a lot going on. We are building many new homes, we are building a new hospital, a new railway line and a new theme park, and we are expanding Luton airport. Without a devolution deal, however, we cannot make those projects a success for the area, and there is a fear that we will be left behind. Will the Prime Minister work with local councils and Members of Parliament to deliver a devolution deal as quickly as possible? Unlike many of the local MPs, including me, some local councillors are still not convinced of the benefits of devolution. What would the Prime Minister say to them about the benefits that it would bring to Milton Keynes and Bedfordshire?

The Prime Minister: I think that the evidence is undeniable when it comes to growth. I have mentioned Greater Manchester, and the Liverpool city region is now growing at a faster rate than the UK average, which, for most of our lives, was simply was not the case. It is not in managed decline; it is actually flourishing, and my hon. Friend's area is, as well. However, it can go even further. The model of devolution in England is working, and I want it to be available to all areas. If my

hon. Friend wishes to lead a delegation to No. 10 North, I will ensure that he receives the warmest possible welcome.

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): I know that the Prime Minister is a huge advocate for the combined authority system of devolution. I have good news for him: all of London's 32 boroughs called for exactly that in London, in a rare cross-party call last year. In the spirit of cross-party working, and to apply his experience from Manchester to the rest of the UK—as he has said that he wishes to do—will he reshape London's devolution settlement by at last giving London boroughs a seat at the table when making decisions with the mayor?

The Prime Minister: I am aware of that change. Obviously, the Greater London Authority was created by statute, and there are other voices in the mix, including those of London Members of Parliament. I will always respond to a change when it is brought to me with a clear consensus and cross-party support. I am not aware that that exists fully across London, but if such a proposal were brought to me, I would always look at it carefully.

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): The previous Prime Minister announced a £200 million fund to create a green industrial revolution in Grangemouth. My constituency needs to be reindustrialised, and my communities need to be re-energised. I know that the Prime Minister is as passionate as I am about both those things. Will he make it a top priority to reindustrialise Grangemouth, get good, secure jobs into the town, and build the industrial future that Grangemouth and all of Scotland need?

The Prime Minister: I understand that there is a possibility of sustainable aviation fuel production at Grangemouth. I find that very interesting, and I keep coming back to it. Perhaps my hon. Friend wishes me to persuade No. 10 North to support him in the development of that proposal; I know that there is a financial commitment, but if we do reindustrialise, the money that we put forward to support that process can pay us back over many years to come, through a bigger and flourishing economy in all parts of the UK.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): Last week, the High Court delivered a killer blow to the Parades Commission in Northern Ireland, uncovering unlawful decision making. For 28 years, the commission has denied Portadown District the right to return home from its annual church parade. All Unionists and grassroots loyalists have said that they have no confidence in the Parades Commission, but today, staggeringly, the Prime Minister's Government have said that it has their full backing. The belligerence and arrogance of these commissioners is staggering. May I ask the Prime Minister to intervene and give them their P45s?

The Prime Minister: I do not know whether the hon. Lady is right about the full backing. I believe that an independent review of the Parades Commission and the process that it undertook has been announced. The Northern Ireland Secretary has already taken some steps, and the review of the process will go further. We will work hard to ensure that the trust of all communities—but particularly the communities that the hon. Lady represents—in the commission is restored.

Dave Robertson (Lichfield) (Lab): I commend the Prime Minister for his commitment to building good growth in every postcode. Throughout Lichfield, Burntwood and the Villages, my constituents will say that there is a real opportunity to look at High Speed 2. There have been almost endless delays and disruption from roadworks and road closures on the stretch that would have linked Birmingham to Crewe and Manchester. There has been nothing but pain, and nothing but an anchor on our growth—and for all that pain we will see no gain. No station is planned anywhere in Staffordshire, and no new services are planned anywhere in the county. Will the Prime Minister meet me to discuss how we can make this project work for every postcode along the line?

The Prime Minister: I think there is a need for a resolution on what will happen from Handsacre to Manchester via Crewe, and a solution for the communities in between. This cannot be left where it is indefinitely. I understand the points that my hon. Friend has made, but given my past role, I hope he will be assured that this is something that I know a lot about.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): Happy birthday, Madam Deputy Speaker.

There are teachers in West Sussex who are giving up running after-school clubs so that they can take on a second job, because the cost of living, and particularly the cost of housing, is so high in the area. One of the issues is that West Sussex has the fifth-lowest secondary unit of funding in schools. Will the Prime Minister review minimum per-student funding levels, so that they truly reflect the cost of living in West Sussex?

The Prime Minister: I will ask the Education Secretary to look at precisely the issue that the hon. Lady has raised.

Neil Duncan-Jordan (Poole) (Lab): On the subject of social care, does the Prime Minister agree that there is a fundamental unfairness in dementia care being means-tested, while cancer care is funded by us all through general taxation? Is not that unfairness the issue that we need to address?

The Prime Minister: I have always said that we will not have a health and care system that is fit for the 21st century until it supports people with dementia as well as it treats people with cancer. We are some way from that, but it is the goal we should be working towards.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): I welcome the Prime Minister to his role, and I also welcome his commitment to restoring local ownership and control. Sadly, that has not been the experience of my residents in Bicester, Piddington, Blackthorn, Ambrosden and Arncott, who face a proposal for the building of a huge asylum centre, costing millions of taxpayer pounds. Fifty-five days ago, the Government said that this was

an urgent application, yet it remains veiled in secrecy and has not been published. Will the Prime Minister honour that commitment to restoring local agency, withdraw the urgent application, and publish the details, so that they can be scrutinised by the people who should be scrutinising them—local people and local representatives?

The Prime Minister: I am aware of the concern, and it is similar to the issue that was raised by the hon. Member for Mid Buckinghamshire (Greg Smith). All I can say is that I give the hon. Member for Bicester and Woodstock (Calum Miller) a commitment that I will familiarise myself with all the details of the planning application. I will happily report back from this Dispatch Box when I have done that.

Torcuil Crichton (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): May I welcome the Prime Minister to his place and invite him to my place? There are good flight connections from Manchester to the Western Isles, where he will see that we have the highest concentration of community-owned wind farms in the country. If he really wants to fulfil the potential of the energy transition, these communities should be given priority access to grid connections, and he should use the muscle of GB Energy to give communities and local councils the ability to buy shares in renewable schemes anywhere in their area. It is revolutionary, it is revolutionary, and the template for how to do it is in Na h-Eileanan an Iar.

The Prime Minister: That was put very well, and this is exactly the agenda that I have been talking about from the Dispatch Box today. All parts of the UK need to have control over basic services, and I look forward to working with my hon. Friend to support what he is saying.

Madam Deputy Speaker: For the final and 125th question, I call Gideon Amos.

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): Over the summer, the national maternity review confirmed what we all feared in Taunton: Musgrove Park hospital's maternity unit is the most challenging estate in the country. It cannot be right that mums are giving birth in 30° heat, and that staff are fainting when they are looking after them. If that is the most challenging estate in the country, they cannot wait until 2033. Will the Prime Minister please look at moving forward the new maternity unit at Musgrove Park as an urgent priority?

The Prime Minister: I remember well visiting Musgrove Park in my days as a Health Minister. I did some work shadowing at the hospital, so I know how much it is in need of renovation. I will look into the issue. Across the NHS this summer, staff have been working in unbearable conditions, and it is the same for patients. I know that this is high on the Health Secretary's agenda, and I will come back to the hon. Gentleman when I have had a chance to look at the latest status of that issue.

Criminal Justice Reform

7.2 pm

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Norris): With your permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will make a statement on the implementation of the Sentencing Act 2026. When this Labour Government took office, we inherited a crisis in our prisons. They were regularly at 99% capacity, with fewer than 100 places available at one stage. We were one bad day away from running out of space, which would have meant the courts being forced to suspend trials, the police being unable to make arrests, and there would be nowhere to put dangerous criminals—a total breakdown of law and order, with victims bearing the brunt.

My predecessors acted swiftly to stabilise our prisons by committing to the most ambitious prison-building programme since the Victorians and pledging 14,000 new prison places by 2031, with 3,200 already delivered. Compare that with the record of the Conservative party, which added just 500 net places in 14 years. We have also deported nearly 12,000 foreign national offenders, but we had to ensure that we never return to the shambolic emergency releases carried out, with little scrutiny or warning, by the previous Government. We passed the Sentencing Act, which introduced the earned progression model, whereby offenders on standard determinate sentences spend at least a third of their sentence behind bars, and longer if they behave badly. More serious offences require people to serve at least half of their sentence, with no upper limit for time spent inside for bad behaviour.

But release from prison is not the end of the story. We have overseen the largest ever expansion of tagging and, working closely with the police, we are giving the Probation Service access to the largest and toughest range of measures to manage offenders. Every single offender leaving prison can now be tagged, and strict licence conditions can include curfews and bans from pubs, clubs and even football matches. There will be exclusion zones where criminals cannot go. For the most serious sexual and violent offenders, we are introducing world-first “restriction zones” that confine them to specific areas, which are sometimes a few miles wide, curtailing their liberty in order to give victims more freedom. If conditions are breached, offenders can be recalled to prison.

This clearly asks more of our brilliant Probation Service, so we are also investing £700 million more in probation and community services by 2028-29, and we are hiring a further 1,300 trainee probation officers, on top of the 2,300 recruited in the past two years.

Let me be clear about who the model applies to. The most dangerous offenders, who have been locked up for serious violent and sexual offences, and those on life sentences were never eligible, but the Prime Minister and I were determined to look again. We moved quickly to exclude rape and many serious child sex and grooming offences, and we have gone further still by excluding all unlawful killing offences—including death by dangerous or drink-driving, causing or allowing the death of a child, and manslaughter—as well as indecent assault, which has been used to prosecute historical child sex abuse. This means hundreds more dangerous criminals staying behind bars for longer, including those who killed PC Andrew Harper in the line of duty. It is the

right thing to do, and I pay tribute to his wife Lissie and his mother Debbie, who campaigned for this. We would like to have gone further, but we were unable to do so due to the lack of investment by the previous Government over 14 years.

I want to reassure the House that victims in the victim contact scheme are being kept informed by dedicated victim liaison officers. We are rightly giving victims the opportunity to have their say on licence conditions for offenders in their case, and I have instructed my officials to attempt to trace all affected victims for whom we do not have the details. On top of that, we are boosting victim support with a £18.9 million funding package, including a dedicated free helpline offering emotional support for anyone affected, and specialist support for victims of violence against women and girls. I have asked the Prisons Minister to work with victims groups to shape our response, because victims must come first.

The Prime Minister and I have pushed the system to its limits. At the same time, my duty is to ensure that we always have the space to lock up offenders. Today I can announce a fast-tracked plan to create more headroom in our prison system by bringing forward more than £110 million of funding. We have identified where we can accelerate the delivery of more places, including by converting space within prisons into cells, and we are pushing to deliver current building plans more quickly. We will also invest in new land for prisons and build a credible pipeline of new sites to enable more prison building, because my top priority is to build a long-term, sustainable future for our prison estate.

We are also freeing up space in the shorter term. There are thousands of foreign national offenders in our prisons, at vast expense to taxpayers. We have increased removals by 41% compared with the last two years of the previous Tory Government, and we have changed the law to expand the early removal scheme. Now we will go further. Next year we will begin removing foreign national offenders serving determinate sentences immediately after sentencing, but I want to reassure the House that the most dangerous offenders, such as those already excluded from the Sentencing Act changes, will still be required to serve prison time before being deported. I want to be clear that all removed offenders will be barred from returning to the UK for life, because deportation is the anchor of that punishment. If you break our laws and abuse Britain's hospitality, we will permanently remove you.

We will also act on a long-standing injustice. More than 2,000 people are still trapped by indeterminate imprisonment for public protection, or IPP, sentences. They were rightly abolished a decade ago, but offenders are still locked up for far longer than envisaged, often for crimes that, if committed today, would see them spend much less time in jail. Of those who have never been released, 99% are beyond the tariff imposed by the court, and 80% have served 10 years or more beyond it. Tragically, with no end of their sentence in sight, some IPP prisoners have taken their own lives.

Concerns about IPPs have been raised across the political spectrum, including by the former Justice Secretary, Alex Chalk, who called them “a stain” on our justice system. The number of IPP offenders has been reducing, but the Prime Minister and I want to go further. We will soon bring forward legislation to end the sentence, once and for all, by the end of this Parliament. These are

[Alex Norris]

complex cases, and some of these offenders have committed serious crimes. Public safety will always be my top priority, but we must balance that with fairness on sentences. It will take time to get this right, but the work will begin immediately, and I offer Members of all parties and none in this place the opportunity to work together on a cross-party basis. I will listen to experts inside and outside this House, including the former Justice Secretary, Robert Buckland, and the former Home Secretary, David Blunkett. They are committed advocates of IPP reform, whom I thank for agreeing to work with me. In the meantime, we will do everything within the existing framework to support those in prison to move towards a safe and sustainable release.

I also intend to look at how we can improve outcomes for offenders with complex needs. Women in prison often have high levels of trauma, abuse, mental ill-health and addiction. Many are mothers and their children can be affected profoundly by them being in prison, so I want to reduce the number of women in custody where it is safe to do so, alongside a cross-Government agenda to address the drivers of women's offending. For youth offenders, I am announcing £4.5 million of investment for robust community alternatives to locking children up in expensive, ineffective and unsuitable prisons. To help solve the crisis in adult prisons, I have decided to temporarily hold some 18-year-olds in our youth estate for longer.

My job is to balance the sustainability of our prisons with public protection, the rights of victims and public confidence in the justice system. The decisions that the Prime Minister and I have had to take are difficult ones. We would like to have gone further, but the Government inherited a system on the brink of failure. I am clear that there must always be space for dangerous offenders, because protecting the public means fixing prisons for good. Otherwise, it is victims who are let down. We will never let that happen.

This Government will run towards problems, including the tough decisions needed to build a justice system that is firm, fair and that protects the public. Those aims will guide me as I tackle its challenges, reform it for a sustainable future and ensure it commands the confidence of the British public. I commend this statement to the House.

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

7.10 pm

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): I welcome the Justice Secretary to his place.

This is the Government's fifth early release policy in just six weeks, since the Prime Minister took office. At every stage we were told that Ministers had no choice but to include dangerous criminals, because the alternative would be the "collapse" of the "entire system". Now the plan is to stop one group of dangerous criminals leaving prison early by letting a different group of dangerous criminals out instead.

The Justice Secretary and the Prime Minister have justified the plan to release IPP prisoners as a matter of principle, but it is no such thing. It is a fag-packet policy

written to get them out of this crisis. Last year a Justice Minister rejected it, saying it would "put the public at risk". Some 1,415 IPP prisoners had to be recalled to prison after release. The Parole Board says that the rest—856 prisoners—are too dangerous to be freed. Despite the new exclusions, many violent criminals will still be released after one third of their sentence. That includes domestic abusers and some paedophiles.

The Justice Secretary says that if a domestic abuser breaches the terms of their release, tagging means that probation and the police will be alerted. He said this morning that these are "really good systems", but most breaches result in no action at all. In fact, the Justice Secretary said this morning that early release is now "business as usual" and will go on for years to come. With that in mind, the Sentencing Act provides no end date to SDS33, so is this a permanent provision? If not, for how long does he think it should last? Can he rule out letting prisoners out even earlier with home detention curfews? Will he publish detailed capacity projections and all relevant data?

Will the Justice Secretary give us a timeline and a target for his promise to get more foreign national prisoners out of the country? What is his plan to overcome barriers to deportation caused by the European convention on human rights, and in particular unqualified rights such as articles 2 and 3? How many cells will be established within the existing estate by the end of 2026, 2027 and 2028? Will he release every IPP prisoner by the end of the Parliament, as suggested in the Ministry of Justice statement on Sunday? Will prisoners who would have received a life sentence, had IPP sentences not existed, remain locked up? Will the Justice Secretary rule out watering down the criteria used by the Parole Board to assess IPP prisoners? And can he confirm that the changes to early release will come through secondary legislation, presenting MPs with a false binary choice and no chance to amend their plan?

We have more than 700 fewer prison cells than last year and 1,600 fewer prison officers since the election. No new prisons have been planned or approved by this Government since the election. There are more than 4,000 operational available places and 4,000 more that are certified but out of use because of rules and regulations, officer shortages, and, in the case of Dartmoor prison, levels of radon gas that local residents live with every day. Describing the early release of criminals, a dangerous and irresponsible policy, as "business as usual" is not just an insult to victims, but a dereliction of duty.

Alex Norris: I am grateful for the shadow Secretary of State's kind words of welcome. I do not know him well, but I know that he, like me, shares a love for this country and that everything he does is seen through that prism. My commitment to him is to work with him. There will be times, perhaps even including today, when we will need to disagree in the best traditions of this place, but I know there will be a lot that brings us together over the months and hopefully years to come.

On plans and changed plans, I make no apology—certainly not to the Opposition—for being able to grab hold of a system that, when we left here in July, was not going to exclude rape offences, child sex offences and those who have taken lives. We have now done that, which is good. I recognise that it has created uncertainty and I apologise to victims, but I hope they understand

that it was done with noble purpose. We must now use the time available to make sure that victims get the right support, particularly when it comes to shaping restrictions on offenders if they do come out.

The hon. Gentleman mentions plans. The reality is that if we followed his plan, we would have a prison system that would be bust before Christmas. What would that mean for justice in this country? How could that be right? He jumps on the phrase “business as usual”. The point I am trying to make is that this Parliament has changed legislation. The Sentencing Act is the basis on which standard determinate sentences will be governed, and that will be the case for the foreseeable future. Linked to that, he talks about how the changes will come into force. That will be done via varying the commencement order. He talks about home detention. I can say that I have no intention of going any further. The work we have put in as a result of the Sentencing Act is our way of managing the pressure in the system.

On capacity, the hon. Gentleman asks for clarity. Well, I can provide a little bit of clarity: we should be clear that we have added 374 places in the adult male estate since the general election. Now, that is nowhere near where we want to get to as the end state—that is why our building programme has 14,000 places in it—but I would hope that wanting to do more is a point of shared interest. Of course, things do come in and out of the estate, including because of fire damage; I would not underestimate the importance of contamination either. Nevertheless, there will of course be significant places added in this Parliament and in our programme to 2031.

The hon. Gentleman also asks about the chance to scrutinise the data. He will know that, under the Sentencing Act, we are committed to publishing an annual report. That is what we will do, and I am sure that he and I will get into it at that point.

On foreign national offenders, if the hon. Gentleman has doubts, I will state my record to him and to the House. We have increased by 41% the removal of foreign offenders in this country. I gently say that that was my role in the Home Office, so he should not doubt my vigour. He mentions changes to article 3. He will know about the important work done on that at the Council of Europe. The Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Jake Richards), has done a lot of important work in that space. Similarly, our work on article 8 is important and I hope the hon. Gentleman will support that when it comes before Parliament. He should not doubt our vigour; as I say, we are already doing well better than his predecessors—they are sat next to him, so he can talk to them about that—and we will go further.

Let me finish on the IPP point, because I am really interested to see how it does and does not hold. I know that the hon. Gentleman is a champion of individual liberty and a sceptic of what he thinks is uneven justice. If I am able to make this acknowledgment, I hope he will at least reflect on it: there is a real dissatisfaction, as a result of the changes we have had to make, that some people will leave prison earlier than their sentence dictated, and that in many cases there will be people who are still there 10 years after. There is no easy solution to that. All I ask of him is to engage in a process to bring that to its resolution.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Mother of the House.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): Opposition Members seem to need reminding that the early release programme was devised by a Conservative Government. We have been debating at great length, in the media and among politicians, keeping people in prison for longer. I support Government policy on this issue, but I remind the House that the only things, ultimately, that make people safer are: giving more support to prison officers, including their salary; putting money into improving the prison estate—some prisons are Victorian buildings; and, finally, putting effort and money into the rehabilitation of prisoners, not just keeping them in prison longer.

Alex Norris: I agree wholeheartedly with the value my right hon. Friend places on the important work of our prison officers and our probation officers. She is exactly right that what surely binds all of us is that we want to reduce reoffending. What I have presented to Parliament today is a measure to get us through a crisis, but we know that we have to build a new criminal justice system. That can be done from this Dispatch Box, but it also has to be done much more widely, including through work with our prison officers, our Probation Service, the police and our communities in order to reduce reoffending, which is what we all want.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): The Justice Secretary knows that the chaos and uncertainty for victims and their loved ones over the summer months from the handling of this scheme have been unforgivable. The Government have changed course countless times, leaving PC Andrew Harper’s family and countless others without the certainty that they deserve.

The reality, as we all agree, is that in a properly functioning justice system, no victim or loved one should ever be told that their perpetrator is being released earlier than they were told when that sentence was handed down. However, if tough decisions have to be made, they have to be made carefully, sensitively and preparedly, with the safety of victims, loved ones and the public front of mind. How, therefore, will the Justice Secretary be communicating these—I hope—final changes to those who received the generic letters, including victims of grooming gangs and sexual abuse, earlier this year, and will those letters be tailored to each victim? He mentioned in his statement those who are not in the victim contact scheme and an effort by the MOJ to contact them. Can he please provide an assessment of how many victims he thinks that is, and how much resource he will be given to try to track them down?

The reality for the new Justice Secretary is that his inheritance is now a public safety crisis. If probation staff go ahead with strike action, as threatened last month, is he confident that the system can safely manage the risks of releasing thousands of extra offenders? This has all the hallmarks of a national emergency waiting to happen, yet where is the emergency response? Can he explain why the national Criminal Justice Board has not met all year, despite these changes being discussed last year as part of the Sentencing Act, and will he now convene Cobra to give the situation the gravitas it deserves?

[*Jess Brown-Fuller*]

The prison capacity crisis is one that this Government inherited two years ago, but they now own the response. As highlighted by the chief executive of the Howard League, we are

“one major incident away from a disaster.”

Prisons such as Wandsworth have been operating at 62% above their intended built capacity as the new normal, creating dangerous conditions that undermine any effort to rehabilitate offenders. What confidence can the Justice Secretary provide that he can deliver this increase in capacity on time, given past failings to do so, and that he can adequately staff it?

Alex Norris: I am grateful for the Liberal Democrat spokesperson's contribution. As I hope she heard me say, I do accept that the impact of our taking the summer to carve more offences out of this regime in a way that is safe and means we have a resilient prison estate has had an impact on victims and survivors and on their families, as they wait with uncertainty. I hope that is not unforgivable, in the sense that I hope it is understood that our aims were noble ones and have allowed us to go further—I think all Members would say that was a good thing.

My mitigation and attempt to balance the situation is in what we do now. I am making a commitment from this Dispatch Box about the quality of engagement with victims and survivors. Everyone is being written to immediately to have a contact sent to them—trauma-informed engagement. This will introduce a conversation with a victim liaison officer specific to them and specific to the information about their offender's release date and whether it is changing, and will help them to tailor the controls on their perpetrator so they can live the fullest possible life.

On probation and capacity, I pay tribute to my predecessors as Lord Chancellor for the work that has been done to recruit more staff. That is not at its end state, but the £700 million investment is nevertheless starting to bear fruit. I think that gives us optimism for probation, but I am aware that there are still challenges. I have met staff and will continue to engage, and we of course want to avert strike action, as the hon. Member says.

The hon. Member's point on the national Criminal Justice Board speaks a little bit to the point I made to my right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott): I want to reinvigorate it as a place that takes real ownership of a reform of our criminal justice system. I think we would all accept that our criminal justice system is not delivering, and we are paying a lot for failure as well. I have not had very long in my role, as I hope the hon. Member would accept, but I certainly look forward to meeting the board.

On convening Cobra, I have to say that it is not in my gift, but it is in the Prime Minister's. However, the changes we have made are exactly to avert the scenario of getting to such a crisis. In the spirit of what the hon. Member says, I am conscious of the pressures we have put on over the summer—they have been for good aims—but now we need to build a much better system.

Olivia Bailey (Reading West and Mid Berkshire) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for the statement, which will be welcomed by my constituents after a period of great anxiety, and I also thank him for his engagement with me over the summer.

When PC Andrew Harper was killed in my constituency, it devastated our community, but it also left a deep determination to stand by our brave police, who run towards danger every day. Andrew Harper was the absolute best of us, and I would like to pay tribute to his family, who have fought so bravely in his memory. I would also like to thank everyone in my constituency and beyond who signed a petition and made their voices heard. Will the Secretary of State outline what steps he will take to show our brave police that this Government will always be on their side?

Alex Norris: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for her very direct campaigning to me over the summer about her and her community's expectations. I join her in what she said about PC Andrew Harper: he was the very best of us. I really respect both Lissie Harper and Debbie Adlam for never having asked for special treatment. However, I think it is reflected in the actions of this Parliament—we changed the law subsequently—that we do think it is different when our emergency service workers are killed in the line of duty. It is right that we did that did that, but it did create an inequity, and it is right that we have corrected it. Again, I have apologised to both of them about the time it took to do so, but I am glad that we have been able to do it.

On my hon. Friend's final point, what I want to do for our brave police up and down the country is to have a system that is not running as hot as this, so they are not having to chase around all those symptoms of failure. That is a long-term piece of work, but it is one that starts immediately, and my commitment to them is to have them in the room during the process.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I know the Government will be doing their best to protect potential future victims of early release offenders, particularly those who were in jail for domestic abuse or other fixated behaviour, but it is not good enough simply to try to improve tagging measures; what one has to do is to improve the ability of potential victims to summon help if attacked again. Can the Justice Secretary confirm that the Government will make a unified representation of how such potential future victims can protect themselves—for example, by emergency alarms being fitted as a matter of routine?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Before the Secretary of State responds, let me say that I understand how sensitive this topic is, but we have been in the Chamber a long time, and we have other items of business to get to, so please keep questions short and answers just as short.

Alex Norris: The right hon. Gentleman is right to raise that point. It is part of the conversations that victim liaison officers are having, so that every victim and survivor is able to shape the support around them to make sure that they are feeling safe and secure.

Matt Bishop (Forest of Dean) (Lab): I welcome the Government's decision to end early release for certain serious offenders, including those responsible for the

appalling killing of PC Harper, as we have heard. My former police colleagues and other emergency workers put themselves in harm's way every day to keep us safe, and they must be able to have confidence in our system. Does the Justice Secretary agree with me that this decision sends them and others a clear and unequivocal message that this Government value their service, stand firmly with them and their families, and will ensure that those who commit the most serious crimes against them face the consequences of their actions?

Alex Norris: I recognise my hon. Friend's service in the police. It was made clear to me by lots of colleagues and in conversations that I had that the policing family were looking closely at our actions in this regard. I hope they have got the message from the changes in the law that have happened, and the changes that we have now been able to make, and that they will measure us by the work we do with them to improve the criminal justice system going forward.

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): Cheshire police estimates that the additional cost to man-mark criminals who are back on the streets due to Labour's early release scheme will be £1.4 million a year. Can the Minister reassure police forces up and down the country that those extra resources will be handed to them?

Alex Norris: The right hon. Lady will know of the significant increase in funding to our police that we have already made. Through the National Police Chiefs' Council, representations have been made about police resourcing and the support we can give to policing. We are still having those conversations.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South and Walkden) (Lab): I welcome the Lord Chancellor's statement. As a former criminal law barrister, I represented defendants who were given IPP sentences. They were required to complete courses, treatments and rehabilitation before they could be considered for release, yet many were never offered any of those things in time, leaving them unable to be reviewed by the Parole Board through no fault of their own. Can the Lord Chancellor say what he is doing to ensure that prisoners get the help and courses that they need in time for their parole eligibility?

Alex Norris: I hope that my hon. Friend takes comfort from what both the Prime Minister and I have said about ensuring that the right support is in place for those who are paroled to stay out of prison, and for those who have not yet passed that stage to get to it and pass it. That has to be done with public safety in mind. Whether it is my hon. Friend's insights or insights from colleagues across the Chamber, we are up for that dialogue because we are resolute in our intention.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): When the Justice Committee visited a young offenders institute earlier this year, we found that most of the young people were not able to access even a minimal amount of education or training, which means that they are more likely to go on to commit more offences. What is the Lord Chancellor doing to improve access to education, training and financial preparedness to ensure that young offenders and their adult counterparts do not reoffend and fill up the prisons again?

Alex Norris: The hon. Lady hits on an important point: what are we using our facilities for if not to rehabilitate people, particularly our young people? That is a symptom of what happens when the estate runs as hot as it does. It is a big factor in the reoffending of young people and, frankly, all people. That is why we are taking pressure off. She has heard what I said about the investment that we are putting in to get to what we want, which is a system that prepares people properly for release.

Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab): I thank the Justice Secretary for engaging with me and other colleagues over the summer and taking action to bring forward the point at which the victims hotline will be up and running, so that it is available next month for victims who are worried about their offender's release. At present, offenders can be banned from a victim's local area, but that still leaves victims worried about running into them when they leave their area. Restriction zones reverse that burden by confining offenders to specific areas. Will the Justice Secretary be more ambitious about the use of restriction zones, so that it is the freedoms of perpetrators that are curtailed, not those of their victims?

Alex Norris: First, I recognise my hon. Friend's work in the Department, which we are building out from, particularly on the hotline. That is why we have brought it forward. I am pleased that she has given me the chance to talk about restriction zones, because they are world leading and we are introducing them for the first time. I received an email literally as I was about to stand at the Dispatch Box about how they could operate. The commitment I have made to campaigners is that we will bring into the room those who are interested in ensuring that the zones work in order to challenge us on what we are doing and to make sure we are going as far as we can to make them effective. It is going to take time to build up, and it has to be done in the right way, but the zones have high potential. My commitment from the Dispatch Box is that we will have maximum engagement, so that people know what we are doing and can help us do it well.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Stamford) (Con): Mark Sanders was a teacher who raped young girls. His sentence was nine years and nine months, yet in July, after serving just two years, he was moved to an open prison, free to come and go and have overnight stays. I raised his case at Justice questions with the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, the hon. Member for Rother Valley (Jake Richards), and also wrote to him. He promised to review the case, but I have had no response. I am sure the Lord Chancellor recognises that for survivors this feels like a form of early release. Mark Sanders should not be in our communities—which he now is—after serving only a quarter of his sentence.

Alex Norris: The hon. Lady will have heard what I said about who we have taken out of the scope of the progression model, but I will undertake to look at that specific case and get back to her as soon as possible.

Steve Yemm (Mansfield) (Lab): The Lord Chancellor may know that I have written to him about my constituent William Payne, whose girlfriend Abigail Eggleston was killed by Liam Bowes, who was sentenced to 12 years

[Steve Yemm]

for causing death by dangerous driving. I therefore welcome the Government's decision to exclude that offence from the new release arrangements. Is the Lord Chancellor able to confirm that, as a result, Mr Bowes' custodial release point will remain at two thirds of his sentence, rather than being brought forward to one half, and will he ensure that my constituent receives formal confirmation of that?

Alex Norris: As my hon. Friend knows, we have taken death by dangerous driving out of scope of the progression model, so anybody whose sentence was being reduced from two thirds to a half under the model and was in prison for death by dangerous driving is now not in scope. I will get full clarity on the release date for the case my hon. Friend raises.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): The daughter of one of my constituents was the victim of a knife attack in her own home in 2014. Thankfully, the perpetrator was convicted. He is now charged with another offence—that of rape—and is appearing in court next month. One can imagine the concern of my constituent's daughter when she received a letter from Victim Support to say that this individual was going to be released. I have written to the Lord Chancellor about the case. I appreciate that he might not have seen the letter, but could he give an assurance that he will look at the case and do all he can to ensure that this individual is not released?

Alex Norris: Again, I say to the hon. Gentleman that rape has been excluded from the progression model, but I will look at that case as a matter of urgency and come back to him. The important thing to say to all colleagues is that the victim-survivor should engage with their victim liaison officer, so that they can answer some of the questions. I will do anything I can to speed up that process.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): Does the Justice Secretary agree that one way of increasing prison capacity is to reduce reoffending, as 80% of people in prison are reoffenders? Far too often, we have prisoners who leave prison with no home, job, family or social connections. Are we doing enough to address that?

Alex Norris: The answer to that question is no. When the system is running as hot as it is, it becomes a self-defeating cycle of a system that runs hot and therefore does not do those things. I hope my hon. Friend will take, as I do, a lot of comfort from what the Prime Minister said in his statement earlier about addressing housing, so that people have a stable base from which to rebuild their lives.

Steff Aquarone (North Norfolk) (LD): I want the Lord Chancellor to know how grateful I am for the phone call he placed with my constituent, Rosie Shepherd, whose sister, Fenella Hawes, was killed by a drunk driver four times over the limit. The words he was able to speak to her were a great comfort to her family. Does he accept that the nature and timing of the communications that have gone out during the summer have been devastating for families? Have lessons been learned in general for future situations that require wholesale correspondence with victims?

Alex Norris: The hon. Gentleman is right, and I hope that he has heard me accept that. I hope that there will be a degree of recognition that it was done in the noble cause of wanting to go further, but I still recognise everything he says. On correspondence, particularly correspondence that is more general and may go out more widely, our commitment is to ensure that it is trauma informed.

Mary Creagh (Coventry East) (Lab): I welcome the Lord Chancellor to his place and congratulate him on the steps he has taken this summer to reduce prison populations while excluding the most dangerous offenders. We must never again be in the position of having more prisoners than prison places. Can he reassure the House that, as he looks at the use of prison capacity and spare places, he will not remove the workshops and training areas in prisons, in which our brilliant prison staff do so much work to reduce the cycle of reoffending?

Alex Norris: My hon. Friend has made an important point. I hope she heard what I said about our enthusiasm for those things that prevent reoffending. The Prisons Minister is looking closely at that in our estate plans, because we know that those areas help prepare people for release and keep them from reoffending.

Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst (Solihull West and Shirley) (Con): There is no dispute that the IPP topic is a difficult challenge. There is also no dispute that many of those IPP prisoners have been deemed a high risk to society by the Parole Board. Is it the Government's position that the Parole Board is incorrect, or are the Government willing to lower the threshold of risk?

Alex Norris: I do not think there has to be a binary choice between those two things. I want to recognise the good work that the Parole Board does. I think there is definitely a challenge, as the hon. Gentleman will have heard me say, around support for those who have been in prison for a decade longer than they were sentenced to. As I say, people in those circumstances might struggle to adapt to life on the outside. It is incumbent on us to work across Government; our Probation Service does so much, and other wraparound things can help us to go further. I think that the hon. Gentleman would accept, as I do, that these sentences have more than had their time—let us work together to bring them to an end.

Deirdre Costigan (Ealing Southall) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. His colleague the Minister for Policing and Crime wrote to me over the summer to confirm that from 26 October, police in Ealing Southall will have the power to use Labour's new respect orders, with persistent antisocial behaviour offenders facing up to two years in prison. Does he agree that the steps this Government are taking will help to ensure that there is room in our prisons for those who are making life a misery right now for many of my constituents in Ealing Southall?

Alex Norris: I totally agree. It is sad that this needs to be stated, but there must always be places for people to go to prison when they have committed serious offences; the worst-case scenario would be either trials collapsing or people being rebailed back to the situation in which they were offending. That is why we have made the changes we have made.

Siân Berry (Brighton Pavilion) (Green): The Secretary of State has spoken about sentenced prisoners, but he has not yet spoken about the 15,000 prisoners who are being held on remand, which includes one in four of all women in prison, particularly young women; those held for non-violent crimes, including protesters; and a higher proportion of people from minority groups. When will we see real action on remand decisions, and especially on the relevant recommendations from the Women's Justice Board earlier this year?

Alex Norris: I am grateful for the hon. Lady's question. The remand population is very much a material part of this consideration. There is an important place for remand in public protection, but, as she will know, court delays are often a factor in the size of the remand population. There is important legislation on that making its way through this House; we will no doubt have important exchanges on that shortly.

Jonathan Hinder (Pendle and Clitheroe) (Lab): I echo the remarks made by my hon. Friends the Members for Reading West and Mid Berkshire (Olivia Bailey) and for Forest of Dean (Matt Bishop), who are no longer in the Chamber, on Andrew Harper. What kind of message would it have sent to our 140,000 police officers if those killers had been released? It is important that those officers know that this House has their back, whether they are opening their locker at 6 am for the early shift or at 10 pm for the night shift, but I am afraid to say that due to Governments of all different stripes over a long period, police officers have not felt that. They are all used to politicians saying that they support the police and so forth, and we are grateful for that, but what police officers really need is for that support to be borne out in decision making and actions. I beg the Justice Secretary to bear that in mind in all the decisions he takes in what will, I hope, be a very successful tenure.

Alex Norris: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I recognise his service; he knows of what he speaks in this area. As I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean, I am well aware that the eyes of the policing family are on us. I ask them, as I ask my hon. Friend, to judge us by our actions. We want to get to the same place as them, which is a criminal justice system that is not running so hot, which means they will not have to be dragged away in all sorts of places, particularly on recall. We have lots of work to do, but my commitment is to do it with them.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): The Lord Chancellor will know that a substantial proportion of criminals released under Labour's previous early release scheme have reoffended and are now back in prison, yet his Department refuses to release the exact numbers. Will he commit to releasing that data and, going forward, to release data on the new cohort of early release criminals who reoffend, so that this House can judge the success, or otherwise, of his policies?

Alex Norris: I always enjoy a thorough debate on the statistics. The hon. Gentleman will know that the MOJ produces a wide range of statistics quarterly, and it will continue to do so. I will, of course, have a look at the important suggestion that he makes. It is really important that the public have the fullest amount of information in order to have the best public conversation.

Catherine Fookes (Monmouthshire) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement, and I am grateful that he has worked hard to exempt more criminals from early release, such as rapists and child sex offenders. The VAWG sector is clear that perpetrators of violence against women should not be included in the early release scheme. I know how difficult this is, because the Conservatives left us a complete mess to clear up. Welsh Women's Aid is really grateful that the victims fund has been announced, which will help it to look after victims. Could the Secretary of State reassure me that no survivor will be harmed as a result of these releases?

Alex Norris: I recognise the vigour and spirit with which my hon. Friend asked her question, and indeed the voice that she gives to a sector that is very concerned about these changes. I want to recognise that we wanted to go further than this. In being unable to do so, our commitment—what we are doing to close that gap—is to bring more support forward to ensure that there is direct support, whether through the victims hotline or the important work that the local sector does at a community level. It seems to me that the test for us to pass in order to prove that to victims is the process of engagement, getting quality information to people at the right time, and then designing the controls on perpetrators. That is the best thing we can do to seek to close that gap. Again, I appreciate that the burden of proof falls on us to demonstrate that we are doing that.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. In order to help me to get every Member in, questions must be just one sentence. I call Caroline Voaden.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): I am going to say this all in one breath, Madam Deputy Speaker. Prison governors talk about the revolving door of prisoners, with almost half reoffending, but those who go through the LandWorks rehabilitation project in South Devon reoffend at a rate of just 5%, with 90% of them going into employment and back into the community. It is proven to be a success; it works. Will the new Minister for Prisons please come to South Devon to see LandWorks and what it does? It is magic—it is cheaper than prison, and it works. We need to roll this out across the country.

Alex Norris: The Minister is very much looking forward to doing so.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Highgate) (Lab): Happy birthday, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. Officials will have given him a date or timeline for when the current prison system will reach full capacity. Could I ask how that compares to the previous assessment?

Alex Norris: Like pretty much every Lord Chancellor for a number of years now, the first thing in my inbox on day one was a note saying, "By the way, we are going to run out of prison places"—my note said in November. I am pleased to say that as a result of changes made by my two immediate predecessors, the Sentencing Act improves on that saturation date, moving it comfortably into the future. Where we are on that will be set out when we publish our capacity report later this year, but

[Alex Norris]

my commitment is to go much further. Colleagues will have heard the Prime Minister say that he wants us to take a 10-year arc on these things, and the same is true for prison capacity.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): The Government tell us that restriction zones will keep people safe, but victims need to see the small print to believe that, especially after the warnings in July's National Audit Office report into tagging. If an offender leaves a restriction zone, what guarantee can the Justice Secretary give that the GPS system will warn police and probation officers so they can act to keep victims safe in real time?

Alex Norris: Tagging is exceptionally important. The technology is improving, as is compliance with the contract. Similarly, we are making changes as part of this process. The presumption of tagging eliminates a point of failure, and tagging in prisons—a pilot that is developing—also reduces failure at that point. However, I appreciate the substance of the right hon. Lady's point: we have to demonstrate to those who are interested in this space that this big commitment will be impactful. That is why I have made the commitment to do challenge work with those who care about this issue to demonstrate what we are doing.

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): My constituent Terry Rowley received an IPP sentence on 8 February 2008 with a minimum tariff of one year and 126 days. That was 6,780 days ago—more than 18 and a half years—and yet he remains in prison. The Government have rightly committed to ending this injustice. Will the Justice Secretary ensure that as we do so, people like Terry will have a fair, transparent and genuinely rehabilitative route to release, while the public continue to be protected?

Alex Norris: I totally agree. It is worth pausing and reflecting on what my hon. Friend has just said: someone who went to prison for a one-and-a-half-year sentence is still there 18 and a half years later. All of us should feel discomfort about that. It is right that we put the best possible support in place for those who are on that journey and passing Parole Board processes in order to attain their release from prison. For those who are not, we have to look at a way to bring IPP to a close. I am committed to working with colleagues to do so.

Ian Sollom (St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire) (LD): I welcome the Lord Chancellor's announcement of investment in the Probation Service. Will he lay out what the Government are doing specifically to fix the vetting delays and staff attrition problems that have kept levels broadly stable despite previous investment, and will he commit to a date by which Cambridgeshire and Peterborough will exit prioritisation?

Alex Norris: The hon. Gentleman makes a very important point about vetting. I heard from probation frontline leaders about cases that have taken them the thick end of a year, and the attrition rates as people go and get other jobs. We do not want to see that happen. Vetting must be done properly, and my hon. Friend the Prisons Minister and I are working with the Cabinet Office to improve it. On the specific point about Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, I will revert directly to him.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is crucial that conditions are followed on release. However, automatic recall often means that people who miss a probation appointment end up in prison, often for months on end. Will the Secretary of State look at the recall process and ensure that it is fair and equitable and that if people do err on their conditions, there is work to support that person outside prison rather than their being brought back into custody?

Alex Norris: My hon. Friend makes a really important point. I think we could say unanimously across this place that if an individual out on licence contacted their victim, that would be a significant transgression, and it would have the most significant response, as would breaching their conditions flagrantly and clearly deliberately. There is an element around non-compliance that is more technical—I have to say, I do not think that this is happening widely, but I want to recognise it in the spirit of my hon. Friend's question. I would defend strongly the principle that people must turn up to the meetings that they are expected to attend, but as my hon. Friend has asked me to look at that issue, we will of course do that, because we want the recall system to be effective.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): I am sure that the Lord Chancellor is aware that it is estimated that 20% of the prison population is made up of young people or adults who have previously been in care. Will the Lord Chancellor take a leading role across Government to ensure that there are measures in place to prevent care-experienced people going into prison, and that if they are in prison they have the necessary support to make sure that they do not return?

Alex Norris: I absolutely agree. I have been having conversations with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education very recently on that point. I always took very seriously as a local councillor the role of corporate parent. For those children in care, we were their parents in law and in substance; we had to give them all the opportunities to thrive, and, as my hon. Friend says, when they were challenged to help them get out of that and build a more positive path. She is exactly right to raise that.

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford) (Lab): Happy birthday, Madam Deputy Speaker—a fellow Virgo.

I very much welcome the clarity in the Lord Chancellor's statement, but on the issue of additional prison capacity, the Prison Officers' Association has already raised extreme concerns about understaffing, under-resourcing, risk of extreme violence and overcrowding. What reassurances can he give today that additional resources will be provided to operate the extra spaces safely?

Alex Norris: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. I look forward to having these conversations with the leadership of the POA and its members, who do such a great job. I am very aware of the attrition rates and retention challenges among people working in our prison system because the estate runs hot. What we are doing is exactly in the service of making it a better place to work, so that they are not having to administer a system that is tense and running at its margins all the time.

Deflating it in the ways that I have talked about will help us to build a more stable regime and a better place to work.

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): We know that these decisions are not easy and that they reflect the state that the system was left in, but I have concerns, as do charities, about domestic abuse survivors, because perpetrators are going to be let out as early as next month. It is clear that we need to do more to support these victims, so can the Minister please tell me what services will be put in place to ensure that there is adequate support for victims of domestic abuse whose perpetrators are being released?

Alex Norris: I am grateful for the question. As I have said to other colleagues, I think that this is an important thing to demonstrate. My hon. Friend will have heard what I said about bringing the helpline forward and about support for local organisations to help support survivors through difficult periods, but the critical thing is high-quality engagement with victim liaison officers so that those individuals have certainty about what is happening and can help design controls around their perpetrator.

Dr Allison Gardner (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): Probation officers and their trade unions have expressed concern about the proposed removal of the workforce measurement tool used to ensure that staff caseloads are at safe levels, and no date has been set for a replacement. What assessment has the Secretary of State made of the capacity of the Probation Service to manage rising caseloads safely, and will a new platform be delivered before the current one is decommissioned?

Alex Norris: I am grateful for the chance to address that. That system is coming to an end because it is 15 years old. It is right that we address that. I want there to be much better tech enablement across the Probation Service. I met staff and heard about the importance of AI transcription, which is able to reduce their paperwork load. We of course want to have effective workload management tools in place. That is what myself and my hon. Friend the Prisons Minister are working closely on as we move to the new model.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for grasping the nettle of IPP prisoners. I remind the House that it was Bob Neill, the Conservative Chair of the Justice Committee, who built consensus on that Committee and brought forward a report to urge the Government to act and set up a number of proposals. I see that Bob's name is not on the list of advisers that the Secretary of State has mentioned. It would be useful having him on board, I believe.

Alex Norris: That is an excellent suggestion by my right hon. Friend; I will be in touch with Bob. We do not intend for this to be a long, drawn-out process. We want to build from the best evidence that is available from those who have been active in this space. I certainly will make sure that I contact Bob to see how he can help us in this process. I remember him very fondly from his time in this place.

Liz Twist (Blaydon and Consett) (Lab): The Secretary of State will be aware of my constituents Gemma Chappell and Rachel Walls, the great-aunts of baby Maya, who died

at the hands of her mother's partner. I thank the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister for reviewing the early release scheme so that Maya's mother, who was scheduled for early release this month, will not now be included in this scheme. I commend him for the proposals that he has explained to increase accommodation. Can he say how victims will be supported in the future?

Alex Norris: My hon. Friend raised directly with me and colleagues that appalling case, which when it came to public attention rightly sickened everybody who saw it. I am pleased that we have been able to make the changes that we have, but I again recognise the impact of the uncertainty across the summer. On the point about victim support, it is about high-quality engagement through victim liaison officers as well as access to local support services. We are augmenting our funding for that and the victims helpline.

Alex McIntyre (Gloucester) (Lab): I thank the Lord Chancellor for the focus on victims in his statement. Some of the most harrowing conversations I have had as an MP have been with victims and survivors. The failures in the tagging system have had a great impact on them, retraumatising them again and again. Can he explain to my constituents what the impact of the new restriction zones will have on them and their experience of the criminal justice system going forward?

Alex Norris: It is a really significant change. What I am about to say is not just about restriction zones, but it is really important that I say it. Traditionally, victims and survivors have lived their lives around the licence conditions of their perpetrator. We need to flip that, and restriction zones give us that chance. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is here on the Front Bench, which is very helpful, because she built this system out. That is the change that we want to see to ensure that victims are living full lives.

Sarah Russell (Congleton) (Lab): The Lord Chancellor has inherited an absolute mess in the prison system, and I feel heart sorry for him trying to balance the needs of victims with the need for justice and the need to manage the prison estate in a meaningful way. Exclusion zones could be absolutely transformative in enabling victims to live their lives going forward, but it is contingent on the tagging service being effective. At the moment, people and particularly victims would assume that if someone breaches their tag restriction zone, at the very least their probation officer would be automatically informed, but the IT does not function in that way. When will that be in place?

Alex Norris: The technology is rapidly improving, as is compliance. There are other points of failure, such as people not getting tags. That is why that presumption helps, as does tagging in prison. I was with staff on Friday and I was tagged, as colleagues may have seen. I have to say it worked very effectively in that case. We are absolutely resolute that it must work. That is why we are putting this effort and investment in.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): I welcome the Lord Chancellor's statement and the changes he is making. I know that victims have been at the forefront of his and the Prime Minister's minds. Families such as

[Amanda Martin]

those of Chloe Holland and Skye Nicholls have seen the devastating consequences of domestic abuse. How will these and future changes better protect victims and ensure that the psychological harm caused by domestic abuse, particularly coercive control, is properly recognised?

Alex Norris: I really recognise the importance of that question, and indeed the anxiety caused for survivors of domestic abuse as a result of the changes. We need clearer, earlier flagging. That is something that has been lacking, and we are resolute in addressing that. As I say, it is important that extra support is brought forward sooner and more investment is put into it. We also need really good engagement with victim liaison officers so that the victim or survivor knows exactly what will happen with their perpetrator and can shape the controls on them.

Policing in Cleveland

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Before the statement on Cleveland policing, I should inform the House that charges have been brought against a number of individuals in relation to the fatal collision on the A66 and the house fire in Grangetown. Those cases are now sub judice. It is possible that other charges may be brought.

Mr Speaker is granting a full waiver for today, and for future proceedings, to enable discussion on support for the victims and wider issues of concern raised in the context of these incidents. However, I must urge Members not to discuss the details of any individual case. That includes not discussing any motive, or the guilt or innocence of any individual. Members should avoid wider speculation that could be prejudicial in any future criminal trials.

8 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Shabana Mahmood): With your permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will make a statement about the fatal crash near Middlesbrough on 22 August, and the death of two brave police officers that day: Police Constable Matthew Blades and Police Constable Tom Clough. It is the most humbling duty of any Home Secretary to oversee the work of our police forces and the thousands who serve in them, and that is never more true than on a day like today, when we honour those who have fallen in the line of duty—those who lost their lives as they sought to protect us all.

The detail of what happened will by now be well known to most in the House and beyond it, but it is right to begin by recounting the facts. At 3.39 on the morning of Saturday 22 August, a Volkswagen Passat containing five young men, travelling the wrong way down the A66, collided with a marked Cleveland police armed response vehicle. The police car was, I should add, travelling on the correct side of the road. A significant emergency response was deployed. I must pay tribute to all the first responders who attended the scene and worked in extremely difficult circumstances. Despite their best efforts, PC Blades and PC Clough both died as a result of the collision, as did the five individuals who were driving on the wrong side of the road.

Following such an incident, it is mandatory that a referral is made to the Independent Office for Police Conduct. That has happened in this case, and the IOPC has begun an independent investigation. On 23 August, it issued an update, which I will now summarise. Prior to the crash, Cleveland police received intelligence regarding numerous incidents linked to a Volkswagen Passat. The Passat was later sighted and an armed response vehicle began a pursuit. The pursuit lasted just under seven minutes before the Passat crossed over to the wrong side of the A66. At that point, the pursuit was aborted by officers, who continued to travel on the correct side of the carriageway. However, about 10 seconds later, the Passat collided with a police vehicle that was not involved in the pursuit but was in the area to assist in the search. That car contained police constables Blades and Clough. This is an ongoing investigation, so we must heed the request of those best placed to examine the circumstances of this awful incident by avoiding speculation and giving them the time and space they need to carry out their vital work.

Significant police activity has followed the crash. Some 27 arrests have been made as part of a wide-scale investigation into suspected serious and organised crime. There are limits on what can be said publicly at this stage, but both the IOPC and Cleveland police have my full backing in their respective tasks.

Members may be aware that Cleveland police has also been investigating a house fire in Grangetown in which two people died, including, tragically, a child. It should be noted that the force is not treating that as connected in any way to the A66 crash. However, it has undoubtedly added to the sense of disquiet in a community already reeling from that earlier tragedy.

Many in the House and across the country will have also been troubled by the scenes in County Durham, where a number of vehicles were set on fire at a memorial for one of the occupants of the Passat. I recognise how unnerving it will have been for law-abiding citizens in both the affected areas and beyond to see a spate of incidents in close proximity and in quick succession. Let me therefore assert once more that lawlessness of any kind will never be tolerated, and the Government stand squarely behind the police as they face down criminality and disorder on our streets.

The Government are supporting the police in word and deed. Cleveland police, like all forces, is receiving a real-terms uplift this year, taking its total funding to £197.8 million—an increase of £7 million compared to 2025-26. Clearly, the events of recent days have placed exceptional pressure on Cleveland police, and I can confirm today that the force has received additional resource under mutual aid arrangements, which have seen officers deployed to Cleveland from around the region. I thank those forces and personnel who have stepped up and taken on this additional work.

I can also announce today that in the light of the situation Cleveland police has faced, we will allocate an additional £2 million to the force to tackle serious crime in the area. That will build on existing operations, including the “clear, hold, build” approach, which is tough both on serious crime and on the causes of serious crime, and has been shown to work across the country.

In addition, as I have said, we are committed to a wider review of the police funding formula to ensure that force funding is fair and keeps the public safe. A new approach to allocating funding will be brought in as part of our reforms to police structures. In the meantime, the Government will continue to work closely with Cleveland police to ensure that it has all the support it needs as it faces these challenging circumstances and grieves the loss of two of its own.

Let me end by paying tribute to those two men. PC Blades and PC Clough devoted their lives to the noblest form of public service, protecting their fellow citizens. In remembering them, we hold in our hearts those they leave behind—above all, their family and all those who love them. I think also of their colleagues in uniform, not just in Cleveland but across policing, who have lost friends, colleagues and fellow members of the policing family.

This tragedy speaks to an enduring truth: policing is not just a profession; it is a calling answered only by those who are willing to place themselves in harm’s way to protect us all. PC Blades and PC Clough epitomise

that courage. At 37 and 38, they were no age at all, but in their all too brief lives they gave so much. An extraordinary number of tributes have poured in, but I think we must leave the final words to their families, who knew them best and loved them most. PC Blades’s wife remembers a “beloved husband” and “the most devoted father” to their two young boys. She said:

“He was loved beyond words by all his family and friends, and his loss has left a space that can never be filled. He gave his life in the line of duty, protecting and serving others with courage, dedication and selflessness.”

PC Clough’s family describe him as their “hero”. They remember his “fantastic sense of humour” and pay tribute to a man who

“jumped into action whenever needed”

and who was

“always on public duty throughout his short life.”

A death in the line of duty is a moment of profound national sorrow, but our public loss is a fraction of the private and personal tragedy for these two families, so, across the House, let us offer them our love, support and prayers. Let us never forget who those two brave men were and how much they meant to those who loved them. For all they did and all they gave, PC Blades and PC Clough were the very best of us. Today, we remember them. I commend this statement to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the shadow Home Secretary.

8.8 pm

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): I thank the Home Secretary for advance sight of her statement. I know that the whole House will join the Home Secretary and me in paying tribute to those brave officers tragically killed in the crash on the A66 in the early hours of 22 August. Our thoughts are with the families of PCs Matthew Blades and Tom Clough, whose lives were cut short by a car recklessly driven on the wrong side of the road by criminals. Those brave officers made the ultimate sacrifice in the line of duty. They will never be forgotten.

Every day, police officers up and down the country risk their lives to keep us safe. We owe them all a deep debt of gratitude. This tragedy has sent shockwaves through Cleveland police and the public more widely. The Home Secretary has set out some of the steps being taken to support local police, but will she confirm that every request for extra assistance made by Cleveland police has been met?

In the aftermath of 22 August, I was shocked to see so-called tributes staged for some of the men directly responsible for PCs Blades and Clough’s deaths that included cars being driven dangerously and set on fire. Criminal activity of that kind is wrong in principle and deeply offensive in these circumstances. Will the Home Secretary join me in condemning that activity and calling on the police to ensure it does not happen again?

Organised crime was allowed to take hold in whole parts of Middlesbrough. Criminal gangs ran rampant and engaged in retaliatory attacks on one another. Homes and properties were attacked with no consequence, and that escalated even further in the days after 22 August. Although it is welcome that 27 people have finally been arrested, such lawless gang chaos should never have been allowed to take root in the first place. The police

[Chris Philp]

need proper resources to stop that. Many campaigners, including my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton West (Matt Vickers), the shadow police Minister, who I see in his place, have raised concerns for some time that there is a multi-million pound shortfall in funding for Cleveland police in the current financial year. Even the local Labour police and crime commissioner, Matt Storey, said this Government's financial settlement this year

"completely fails to deliver the resources required to meet the demand faced by Cleveland Police and falls far short of what is needed."

Does the Home Secretary accept her own police and crime commissioner's assessment that the funding she put in place for Cleveland police this year is inadequate? Lawless chaos followed that underfunding, and I think the Home Secretary should apologise for that. The £2 million just referred to is only 0.5% of Cleveland's budget and is clearly wholly inadequate in the circumstances.

I am afraid that that reflects a wider national trend that goes beyond Cleveland. The last Government left behind record ever police numbers, but there are now 1,800 fewer police officers under this Government. As a result, crime has increased by 10% and antisocial behaviour has gone up by 15% in just the last year. The Home Secretary must accept that cutting overall police numbers was a mistake. Will she take steps to reverse that decline? The truth is that only zero tolerance of crime and disorder will ensure that criminals are the ones who are afraid, and not the law-abiding public. We have seen the consequences, with the rampant gangs going unchallenged in Middlesbrough, and it is clear now that a zero-tolerance approach is required to keep the public safe.

Shabana Mahmood: Let me start by saying that I appreciate that, at the beginning of his statement, the shadow Home Secretary paid tribute and gave his condolences to the families of PC Blades and PC Clough. There is, at least, agreement across this House on their enormous sacrifice, and the need to support their family and friends as they face that loss. On the wider matters that he raises, he has absolutely no credibility when it comes to police numbers. It was his Government who cut police numbers, not by a few thousand here and there, or a few hundred, but by 20,000 police officers. They then decided to replace the 20,000 that they cut, but did so in a distorted way that meant that we have warranted police officers working in admin jobs and behind desks across police forces in this country.

The truth is that the Tory Government made an absolute mess of policing over their time in government. I have said this many times to the shadow Home Secretary, and though it falls on deaf ears, it remains true and I will keep saying it: he would have more credibility entering this debate if he fronted up on what went wrong under the Tory Government and apologised for it. I notice that he has the shadow Justice Secretary sitting next to him; he was a special adviser to a former Tory Home Secretary. Until there is humility about the mess that the Tories made of our public services and our policing in particular, they have no credibility, and I will take no lessons from them, especially given that his party oversaw the loss of over 200 officers in Cleveland.

This Government are righting those wrongs. We have increased funding for policing by £2 billion since being elected, and all forces will receive a real-terms uplift in

their funding this year as part of an overall £18.5 billion package. Funding to Cleveland has increased by £18.3 million since 2024, and that is a real-terms increase of 4.4% over two years. That is the truth of what we have had to deal with as an incoming Labour Government, and we will not stop until we have our police service functioning exactly as the public would expect.

Let me also say to the right hon. Gentleman that, on the issue of criminal gangs and the efforts made by Cleveland police, I do not think it is a fair characterisation of that police force to suggest that they have done nothing for all this time and have only sprung into action since this horrifying incident took place. They are responding to the incident, arrests have been made and they will continue, and this Government will stand shoulder to shoulder with them as they get control of the matter and of the streets in Cleveland. That is why we have announced the additional funding today and that is why there are mutual aid arrangements in place to assist them.

I agree with the right hon. Gentleman on the unlawful activity that has been taking place in relation to tributes and memorials for some of those who lost their lives in the crash. I of course condemn all unlawful activity and all attempts to breed public disorder as a result of what has happened. Again, we stand four-square behind the police as they respond to those incidents. People should be in no doubt that any attempt to instigate public disorder or to break our laws will be met with the full force of the law, and the Government will support the police as they carry out that incredibly important work.

There will be questions about the ability of the police to respond effectively and to ensure that we are able to give confidence to all the public about the standard of service that they can expect from their policing. Members of this House should have absolutely no doubt that this is a Government who have increased funding for policing and who are going to make sure that we reform policing so that the police are capable of dealing with every type of challenge that a modern force faces and we have a police service that we can all be absolutely proud of and can rely on in our time of need. I hope that all Members across this House, acting reasonably, can unite around that.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough and Thornaby East) (Lab): I join the Home Secretary in paying tribute to PC Matthew Blades and PC Tom Clough. I also pay tribute to all the officers of Cleveland police who, while grieving the loss of their two colleagues, have continued to serve with extraordinary professionalism, remaining visible in our communities, pursuing offenders and making arrests. My thoughts, those of my Middlesbrough and Thornaby East constituents and those of everyone across Teesside remain with the families of the officers, their friends and colleagues. That has been magnificently demonstrated by the overwhelming generosity shown in donations to the fund established to support the families of Matthew and Tom, and at the outpouring of love and solidarity at the Riverside stadium on Saturday, which reflect the decency of the overwhelming majority of people in our communities.

We must, however, confront the reality of crime honestly. The latest figures show around 123 recorded crimes per 1,000 people across the Cleveland police force area—the highest rate of any police force in England and Wales.

Yet Cleveland has experienced the largest percentage reduction in full-time equivalent officers since 2010, losing around 13% of its officers. Police numbers are not the only factor, but a force facing the highest demand in the country needs the resources to respond. I am truly grateful to the Home Secretary for the financial assistance she has announced for Cleveland today, and that will address the mutual aid bill and some. Will she meet me and my colleagues to discuss how that deficit in resources can be urgently and permanently corrected?

Shabana Mahmood: I thank my hon. Friend for his remarks. I know how deeply affected he and other parliamentarians who represent the local area have been by what has happened, and I pay tribute to their ability to give voice to what their communities are experiencing. I particularly agree with him on thanking the officers who are still on duty, who have lost one of their own. They are showing incredible bravery in very difficult circumstances.

I would be very happy to meet my hon. Friend and colleagues from neighbouring constituencies to discuss these matters in more detail. I hope he will take comfort from the additional resourcing that has been announced today. We believe that is important to get on top of the serious and organised crime issues in the area, but of course we will want to ensure that the force has everything it needs in order to respond. More widely, I would like to discuss with him how this matter makes the case for wider police system reform, so that we can ensure we have a service that can not only respond to local need but, at regional level, surge resources into areas that are experiencing particularly high levels of crime.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): I want to join others in extending my sympathies and those of my party to the families and colleagues of PC Matthew Blades and PC Tom Clough. My thoughts are with their loved ones at this extremely difficult time. By virtue of my in-laws, I am from a policing family, so I know the shock and grief that is being felt in the wider policing community, too. That should be acknowledged today in the Chamber.

At least one of those killed in the Middlesbrough crash is in multiple videos posted on TikTok depicting dangerous driving. This is part of a concerning wider trend on social media platforms, where lives are being risked in the pursuit of clicks, and we must ask: who is benefiting from this? It is some of the world's richest people. They are getting richer off the back of these platforms, which are currently under-regulated, while communities suffer the consequences. Can the Home Secretary explain why, despite her Government's intention to force platforms to remove dangerous content that leads to dangerous activities and deaths, such platforms still have no legal obligation to do so? Events in America have shown that these companies can be brought to heel, so will the Home Secretary work with the Culture Secretary to strengthen the Online Safety Act 2023, so that the glorification of dangerous driving is brought into scope?

It is, as others have said, deeply worrying to see the scenes of unrest that have followed this incident. We know that there are national pressures on police resources, so can the Home Secretary tell the House how long mutual aid will continue, and can she say something about the support given to the other forces that are losing resource under mutual aid arrangements? Given the apparent links, is she confident that her reforms will give the police and the National Crime Agency the resources and powers they need to tackle the scourge of organised crime that impacts not only Middlesbrough but so many communities across our country?

Shabana Mahmood: I thank the Lib Dem spokesman for his comments and questions. Let me assure him that I am already discussing with colleagues across Government the wider issues of social media platforms and the content that is posted on them. He will know that this Government have been implementing various elements of the Online Safety Act and that from the middle of next year the wider measures within the Act will come online. That will mean that the larger social media platforms, including TikTok, will be under a legal duty to act against harmful content that breaches their terms of service. That will include content of this nature. In the meantime, most of the platforms are taking this content down. It is a reactive process, in the sense that they are responding to content being flagged—it has then, for the most part, been removed from their platforms—but from the middle of next year there will be a duty on those platforms to act proactively, not just reactively.

However, as I have said to the hon. Gentleman before, there are wider questions about the efficacy of the Online Safety Act and whether we need to revisit the measures in that Act and go further, given the unique pressures that some of the content on those platforms poses for law and order, and for criminal justice more broadly. Those are matters that the Government are considering, and other Government colleagues will come to the House to update Members in due course. Let me assure him that I work closely with colleagues on the specific matters raised by this case.

On the hon. Gentleman's question on mutual aid, that will continue as long as it is needed by the chief constable in Cleveland, but I think this case shows the need for wider police structural reform. Cleveland is a relatively small force, and we can see the pressures on a small force that is having to do local neighbourhood policing as well as the much more specialist investigations that go with organised crime and public order-related issues. As I have made clear before, moving to a three-tier system with local forces, regional forces and also the new national police service will put us in the best possible position to provide a policing service that is able to respond to local issues in the way that local people expect, with a very visible local policing presence, as well as giving us the flexibility to respond to cases across a larger area, such as those we have seen in Cleveland, with the capacity and numbers needed to deal with public order risk, for example, without having to rely on mutual aid to get through and survive day by day, and having a national police service that can take up the types of crime that are prevalent nationally and also have an international dimension. We will bring forward our proposals on reform later this year, and I look forward to debating those with the hon. Gentleman and others across this House.

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): The whole of Teesside has been shaken by the tragic deaths of PC Tom Clough and PC Matthew Blades last week, and the real Teesside—the one not depicted in the media—is the one that filled up the Riverside with a standing ovation for those two brave officers on Saturday, that has raised over £1 million for their families and that stands with our emergency services every single day. However, those services need their Government to stand with them, too. I am grateful for the £2 million extra funding that has been announced today, and for the 300 extra officers who have been deployed from across the country to keep our streets safe in the short term, but what we need in the long term is funding formula reform, so will the Home Secretary bring that forward at pace and ensure that we get the fair funding settlement that Cleveland so desperately needs?

Shabana Mahmood: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the way that he has responded to this incident on behalf of his constituents, who I know have been deeply affected, as he has himself. The outpouring of support for the families of PC Blades and PC Clough is a real testament to the people he represents. Let me assure him, on ensuring that the Government proceed with their planned review of the funding formula, that as we change police force structures, the case for the necessity of changing the formula is also made out. We could not keep the same funding formula with a new policing system in any case. I say that to assure him that both reviewing and reforming the police funding formula are absolutely critical to the programme of police reform. We know that on many occasions over 14 years the previous Government promised reform of the funding formula but then ducked that reform at every opportunity. The move to a new structure for policing in this country provides the best opportunity to relook at funding, and let me reassure him that that is absolutely on the agenda. We will be updating the House on the timetable for that, once the independent review on police force structures has been completed and presented to the House.

Matt Vickers (Stockton West) (Con): As a local Member, I pay tribute to PC Matthew Blades and PC Tom Clough, and to every police officer who has worked tirelessly throughout these horrific and tragic events. Our thoughts remain with their families and colleagues. Despite having the highest crime rate in the country, Cleveland received the lowest increase in funding, with our local Labour police and crime commissioner warning of a £2.4 million shortfall. I very much welcome the mutual aid and the funding that has been announced, but will the Home Secretary guarantee that the new funding formula will properly reflect the pressures of serious and organised crime faced by Cleveland, so that this funding does not prove to be merely a sticking plaster?

Shabana Mahmood: The hon. Gentleman is a local Member, and he is taking the opportunity to ask a question from the Back Benches to reflect his local interest; I pay tribute to him for his response to this incident and the wider pressures in his local area. I assure him that, when we begin the work on reforming the funding formula, we will start with a first-principles approach to what we are seeking to achieve. That will include broader issues of demand for policing and will reflect the reality of what policing different areas looks like.

The new police force structure—a new regional force model that is big enough to surge capacity to local areas when required—will give the flexibility to ensure that forces are not condemned to permanently relying on mutual aid. It is to the credit of the policing system that people step up and do what is required to keep their areas safe, but nobody could argue that that is the right way to run policing in our country in the 21st century. It desperately needs reform. Most of the policing system leaders recognise that the structure needs reform. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that funding reform will flow as a result of that. The first phase of consulting on funding reform will relate to the first principles of what the funding is for and how to reflect the needs of different areas.

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): I join the Home Secretary and the whole House in paying tribute to PC Matthew Blades and PC Tom Clough, and in sending our heartfelt condolences to their families and loved ones. Matthew was a coach at my son's football club, FC Hartlepool, and at Seaton Carew FC. The teams played each other last Saturday, when I was proud to join so many other Poolies in paying tribute to a remarkable man who was so loved by everyone who knew him. I also pay tribute to our police and all emergency services personnel, who are getting up every single day grief-stricken at the loss of their two colleagues, but are still doing their jobs to an amazing extent.

These tragic events did not materialise out of the blue. The lawlessness that we are seeing in certain parts of our communities did not happen overnight. It is the consequence of systemic underfunding of our police and our fire service. I welcome the £2 million announced by the Home Secretary today, but does she agree—I join my colleagues in saying this—that we need a long-term solution to fix the funding formula, for both our police and our fire service, if we are to protect all of our communities? I hope that she is sincere about ensuring that that happens.

Shabana Mahmood: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his work in providing reassurance to his local community. It is particularly difficult when you have a personal connection to somebody who has lost their lives in these circumstances, so I pay tribute to him for the work he is doing in what are very difficult circumstances for local representatives and all members of our emergency services in the area. I reassure him that the work that we will do on police funding is a very real part of the wider police reform programme. I hope that when we discuss these matters, as we will when I meet local Members of Parliament for the area, we can see how this fits in with the wider programme of police reform.

This incident shows, in a very horrifying way, why we need to reform policing structures so that we have the right level of policing in each of our areas, such that we can respond to shop theft and antisocial behaviour on our high streets, ensure that we can deal with local organised and serious crime, and ensure that specialist investigation and public order are not left to be looked after by mutual aid arrangements. The case for reform is made out; as a necessary part of that reform, we will of course look at the funding formula. I look forward to discussing that with my hon. Friend very soon.

Lewis Atkinson (Sunderland Central) (Lab): The deaths of PC Matthew Blades and PC Tom Clough have, of course, been felt acutely in Cleveland, but they have also

been felt more widely across the whole north-east and the policing family. I pay tribute to colleagues across the House, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley), who has spoken with dignity as a local representative in the light of those terrible events.

As the Home Secretary said, some of the officers stepping forward to provide mutual aid are from neighbouring forces, such as Northumbria, Durham and others. Unfortunately, the sad reality is that three of the four forces that have had the highest fallen officer numbers from 2015 are north-east forces. That makes the Home Secretary's point about the need for fundamental change in the funding formula. Those officers are, despite the cuts, putting themselves back into duty and providing mutual aid at enormous personal cost. As she reviews the funding formula, will she ensure that officers have ongoing access to wellbeing and mental health support to help them respond to communities as they have been?

Shabana Mahmood: My hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point. I assure him that the usual arrangements on the engagement of the national police wellbeing service have been activated and support is being provided. We will obviously monitor that to ensure that it is adequate and can rise to the challenge of what we are seeing in Cleveland. His point is incredibly important because, at the end of the day, police officers are human beings; they are still running towards danger, working very long hours and helping people in their local community, but they do need support. When you have lost two of your own in such terrible, terrible circumstances, the case for that support is more than made out. That is being provided, but the Policing Minister will continue to talk to the chief constable and others to ensure that our officers are being supported and looked after.

I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend on the need for fundamental change in the way that we do the funding formula for policing. That is also tied to the fundamental change that we need on police force structures as well. He will know that Cleveland is a force of about 1,500 officers. Even before the cuts under the Conservative Government, it was around 1,700. That is very different from a force such as mine in the west midlands, which has 6,000 officers, or Greater Manchester, which has around 8,000 officers. We have a system that is very lopsided when it comes to police force sizes and, more importantly, the number of officers in each force. That sometimes limits what smaller forces can do without needing mutual aid to support them.

There is a case for structural reform, but it needs to be done in a way that ensures that the public have absolute confidence that their local forces will be highly focused on local issues and that regional forces can handle these specialist investigations and public order issues—and then there is the National Police Service on top of that. I look forward to discussing these issues with my hon. Friend; I know we will do so, because he is a member of the Home Affairs Committee.

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for her statement. I echo her words about the two brave police officers who lost their lives in this collision incident on the A66. My constituency has

experienced similar deeply antisocial and incredibly dangerous experiences of racing and speeding on our roads. Groups of predominantly young men gather along our main roads, watching cars speeding down those busy roads as content is filmed to be posted on social media. We had a particularly bad spike and hotspot over the weekend in a stretch of road called Bob Dunn Way, next to the Bridge estate. I thank local people who have raised this matter with me and BBC South East, which has highlighted the problem. This activity is clearly dangerous for other road users and is really disruptive for local residents. Does the Home Secretary agree that we must do absolutely everything we can to tackle this lawlessness on our roads and the social media trends that appear to be driving it?

Shabana Mahmood: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this matter in his constituency, which faces some of the same issues as we have seen in Cleveland; I see the same in parts of Birmingham as well. He is absolutely right that we have to do everything we can to clamp down on the emerging pattern of behaviour that glorifies this type of activity, which can lead to incredibly dangerous situations on our roads. As I said in response to an earlier question, social media platforms—admittedly, in a reactive way—are taking down the content flagged with them. I urge him to ensure that he shares any local examples he has with those platforms directly, but also with the Home Office, so that we can ensure that they are taken down. As the wider measures in the Online Safety Act are implemented, we can expect the platforms to take a much more proactive position, so that we can stop this trend in its tracks.

BILLS PRESENTED

VEHICLE EMISSIONS TRADING SCHEMES ORDER 2023 (REVOCATION) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Mr Richard Holden, supported by Claire Coutinho, Andrew Bowie, Sir Gavin Williamson, Richard Fuller, Jerome Mayhew, Greg Smith, Mr Gagan Mohindra, Katie Lam, Rebecca Paul, Rebecca Smith and Joe Robertson, presented a Bill to revoke the Vehicle Emissions Trading Schemes Order 2023; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 15 January 2027, and to be printed (Bill 134).

GREYHOUND RACING BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Lisa Smart, supported by Liz Jarvis, Anna Sabine, Tom Gordon, Will Stone, Neil Duncan-Jordan, Cat Eccles, Dr Simon Opher, Hannah Spencer, Alison Hume, Irene Campbell, presented a Bill to prohibit the racing of greyhounds on racetracks in England; to create offences in connection with the organising of, and the keeping, breeding or training of greyhounds for, such racing; to make provision about the welfare and rehoming of greyhounds retired from racing; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 19 March 2027, and to be printed (Bill 135).

Road Safety Plans

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

8.38 pm

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require local authorities in England to prepare and publish a road safety plan in respect of each school in their area; and for connected purposes.

It is good to be back. The reasons behind my bringing the Road Safety Plans Bill to the House are the events of December 2025 in Madeley Heath in the northern part of my constituency. A local dad was walking his daughter to Meadows primary school not far from their home and, on this fateful day, was struck down by a reckless and speeding driver. That is what this Bill is about. We are here to demand action and to ensure that those responsible—in our case, Staffordshire county council—get on with actually doing something rather than more warm, weasel words, on occasion, about understanding the problems.

Newcastle-under-Lyme is home to many brilliant schools, from Meadows primary school to St Wulstan's in Wolstanton to Hassell primary school—which I was outside yesterday with Labour's candidate in the town by-election scheduled for 8 October, Andrew Fox-Hewitt, who went to that school back in the day—up to Churchfields in Chesterton, St Mary's on Silverdale Road and, of course, May Bank infants school. They are all excellent schools, all returning this week, and all would be safer if the provisions of my Bill became law.

This is important, because no child, no parent, no carer—nobody—in Newcastle-under-Lyme or anywhere else in England should be at risk of injury, serious injury or, indeed, death when on the journey to school in the morning or from school in the afternoon. While we would all agree that no one should be at risk of losing a loved one, forced to push a child out of harm's way or, indeed, at risk themselves on that journey, we have seen far too many close calls in Newcastle-under-Lyme. Since my election to this place, I have heard countless reports from local people back home of serious incidents on our roads, whether that is the continued speeding on Hanbridge Avenue that has seen near misses for humans and family pets killed by reckless drivers, or concerns from a number of local people about speeding along Basford Park Road and Silverdale Road—not to mention the disgraceful boy racers who wreak havoc up and down the A34 and in the car parks of neighbouring hotels, or the junction at Bowsey Wood Road, where there was a recent fatality, and, of course, the incident at Meadows primary school back in December 2025.

Dangerous driving, boy racers and the associated impact are the very worst forms of antisocial behaviour. My constituents have had enough of this antisocial behaviour, and they want it sorted. Just a few days ago, I was copied into an email from a constituent of mine that was sent to Staffordshire county council. I want to share a few sentences from that email with the House:

"The community has established a Community Speed Watch Group, with volunteers dedicating their own time to conduct numerous monitoring sessions. More than 10,000 vehicles have been observed.

Police presence was recommended by the council as the primary and short-term solution; however, it has not proved to be a readily available option. Nevertheless, as previously stated, police presence cannot be considered a suitable substitute for a permanent solution, such as the provision of a pedestrian crossing.

In light of the above, we would be grateful for a clear update (from Staffordshire County Council) on the current position and, in particular, whether any specific road safety measures have now been identified for the A525/A531 junction.

The local community remains committed to working constructively with Staffordshire County Council and relevant partners to find a lasting solution."

I could not have put that better myself, and I am grateful to my constituent Zsuzsanna for her tenacity and to Carol, Rebecca, Louise and another of my constituents, Jill Whitmore, who has been a lollypop lady outside Meadows primary school for many years and sits on the borough council.

These brilliant campaigners had me out on a cold wet morning earlier this year. It was raining cats and dogs, although I think I used other words at the time, and it was clear from being with them that morning that the junction at Meadows primary school is not safe, nor is it fit for purpose. They have together, in all weathers, campaigned hard and demanded action from the county council and the police to do more to stop speeding drivers and to keep our community safe. That is why this Bill is so important and so timely, not just in my community back in Newcastle-under-Lyme but right across England.

I have repeatedly called out Staffordshire county council for falling short and failing on its duty to get a grip of the situation and finally install the necessary traffic-calming measures. While we wait for the county council and its leadership to wake up, there continue to be what feel like near misses every day. This Bill would mean that the council has no excuse. I know that members of the county council like to watch my speeches, so I hope that they watch this one and then get up from behind their desks and get on with doing whatever is needed to make our roads safe.

That starts with ensuring that journeys to and from school are made safe, but it does not stop at that. At one of my coffee mornings in the summer, I met a constituent of mine, a 97-year-old man who is in very good shape, who came along to the church hall at St Werburgh's in Clayton. He noted the speeding along Dartmouth Avenue outside the library, and outside the medical centre on Kingsbridge Avenue. My constituent told me that he has almost been knocked down several times and has seen families with small children in similar situations.

While my Bill starts with schools and making the school journey a better experience for all those concerned, let it be a catalyst for safer roads in Newcastle-under-Lyme and right across the country. There were 160 casualties in Newcastle-under-Lyme alone last year, including two fatalities. The case for my Bill is made by those statistics and the many, many families impacted by dangerous driving, speeding and criminality—this is a crime, and we need to tackle it.

I am proud that this Labour Government have made vital progress on road safety since the election in July 2024, and I welcome the publication of the first road safety strategy in over a decade earlier this year. I am particularly grateful to the excellent former Minister for Road Safety, my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), for her engagement with me on

issues of road safety in Newcastle-under-Lyme and for speaking to me about my Bill before the summer recess. Staffordshire county council could learn a thing or two from the Minister, because I am sick and tired of receiving responses that tell me that the councillor for the division will look at my request for action. To date, no county councillor has properly stepped up to be counted. Reviews, investigations, empty words and broken promises are all well and good, but they are boring. We need action and a comprehensive approach, not a ward by ward attempt at a solution. My Bill will help to make that so: it forces those who dither and delay to fix up and look sharp. I know that that applies to councils across the nation.

While accidents outside our schools often result from small, careless mistakes, the very worst consequences are felt by those impacted for the rest of their lives. As I bring this Bill before the House today, my thoughts are with all those in Newcastle-under-Lyme and beyond who have lost a loved one or suffered an injury on one of our roads.

By backing this Bill, we can make our road networks, specifically those surrounding our schools, safer for pupils, parents and teachers. School entrances should be among the safest crossing points for pedestrians in our communities. My Bill is about ensuring that everyone in Newcastle-under-Lyme and across England feels safe on their journey to school and back home by mandating all local authorities to develop and implement a bespoke road safety plan for every school in England. What a good idea!

Like people in my community and across the country, I know exactly where the problems lie, as do those who walk these journeys every day. Listening to those who share those experiences is important if we want to ensure that every child can make the journey between their home and their school safely, but we should not have to rely on the hard work of local campaigners to fight for change or wait around for another serious accident before action is taken.

As each and every school in England is nestled in different communities with different road networks, the existing macro approach to school road safety just has not worked. It has missed the concerns and challenges that children, parents and teachers face in different locations. One size clearly does not fit all, and that is why my Bill will provide local authorities with a mandate to take action to address specific problem areas. Dangerous crossings,

speeding vehicles and blind spots all contribute to near misses, and they need to be targeted on a case-by-case basis by proactive local authorities.

My Bill sets out a local-first approach, designing plans that respond to the concerns and experiences of local people who know their areas best. Every child and every parent and carer deserves to walk to school safely, without living in fear that they may not make it to the school gates, and the same goes for the end of the school day. Every teacher should also be able to expect their pupils to arrive safely for a full day of learning and to come back the next morning. And no Member of the House should be forced to come to the House with a Bill like this again.

I hope that the road safety plans Bill and its aims find swift and productive support. I look forward to working with one and all to keep people safe on the way to and from school. It is not difficult or controversial but it is vital, so let us get on with it because our children and their families in Newcastle-under-Lyme and across England deserve nothing less.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Anna Dixon, Callum Anderson, Dame Karen Bradley, Mrs Elsie Blundell, Sarah Russell, Dr Al Pinkerton, Leigh Ingham, Simon Hoare, Dr Allison Gardner, Jacob Collier, Anna Gelderd and Adam Jogee present the Bill.

Adam Jogee accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 16 October, and to be printed (Bill 136).

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That, at this day's sitting,

(i) the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on the Motion in the name of the Chancellor of the Exchequer relating to Sovereign Grant not later than two hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order, or at 10.00pm, whichever is the later; such Questions shall include the Questions on any Amendments selected by the Speaker which may then be moved; proceedings on that Motion may continue, though opposed, after the moment of interruption; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply; and

(ii) the business determined by the Backbench Business Committee may be proceeded with for up to 90 minutes or until 10.00pm, whichever is the later, and shall then lapse if not previously disposed of; those proceedings may be entered upon and may continue, though opposed, after the moment of interruption; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.—
(*Sir Alan Campbell.*)

Ways and Means

Sovereign Grant

8.48 pm

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Dan Tomlinson):

I beg to move,

That—

(1) provision be made amending the Sovereign Grant Act 2011—

- (a) to specify the amount of the Sovereign Grant for the financial year 2027-28;
- (b) to specify the percentage of the income account net surplus of the Crown Estate to be used by the Royal Trustees to determine the amount of the Sovereign Grant in subsequent financial years;
- (c) to confer a duty and a power on the Treasury to specify the amount of the Sovereign Grant in subsequent financial years in certain circumstances; and
- (d) for connected purposes;

(2) any increase attributable to such provision in the sums payable under that Act should be payable out of money provided by Parliament.

The motion stands in the name of the Chancellor of the Exchequer. If we approve it, the Bill to establish the sovereign grant will be published later today, and I am sure the House will have an opportunity for a longer and more detailed debate on Second Reading. The sovereign grant is the annual funding provided to support the sovereign's official duties and the work of the royal household, including staffing, official travel and the maintenance of the occupied royal palaces.

Since 2012, the level of the grant has been determined through a statutory framework that links it to a specified percentage of the revenue of the Crown Estate—an independent public business whose net revenue profits are returned to the Exchequer. Additionally, in 2016, the previous Government agreed a temporary £369 million uplift to the grant over 10 years from 2017-18 to 2026-27 specifically to fund the Buckingham Palace reservicing programme, a major 10-year project to modernise and safeguard the palace's essential infrastructure.

Periodically, Parliament requires the royal trustees to review whether the arrangements for the sovereign grant remain appropriate. Earlier this year, the then royal trustees completed that review and made recommendations for the appropriate level of sovereign grant funding from 2027 to 2032. The trustees recognise that with the Buckingham Palace reservicing programme nearing completion, the exceptional funding requirement for the scheme no longer exists. They therefore recommended that the overall level of funding provided through the sovereign grant should reduce from next year from £137.9 million to £99.9 million in 2027-28.

The recommendation was made based on an assessment of the royal household's expected costs and the Crown Estate's expected revenues between 2027 and 2032. The new level of the grant will ensure that the royal household can continue to deal with property maintenance backlogs, following some years of constrained funding during the pandemic. It will also allow the royal household to replace ageing systems to strengthen cyber-security and install energy-efficient heating systems.

With the consent of the House, given that we will debate the clauses in the Bill in more detail on Second Reading later this month, I will bring my remarks to a

close. Overall, these measures ensure that the grant will continue to fulfil its core purpose of supporting the official duties of the monarch and maintaining the occupied royal palaces. I hope the House will agree that the clauses in the Bill will improve the existing framework governing the sovereign grant so that it continues to operate just as Parliament intended.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the shadow Minister.

8.52 pm

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): The background to this motion dates from 1760, when the agreement was reached with George III to surrender the Crown Estate revenues to the taxpayer in return for Government support, but it was not until the Sovereign Grant Act 2011 that financial support was delivered through the sovereign grant. The purpose of the Act was to bring together a patchwork of funding streams and arrangements into a more transparent system with greater accountability to taxpayers.

The motion that the Minister has moved proposes three important changes: it sets the baseline for the sovereign grant for next year, it updates the percentage and, finally, it creates a mechanism to allow the Treasury to set the grant in future years in certain circumstances, which includes potentially reducing the amount in the sovereign grant. Given that the grant funds the duties of the monarch and the royal household, we support this approach and the motion.

It is worth reflecting that in an era when many institutions struggle to find public support and respect, the monarchy continues to play a unique role in our lives. Whether it is representing Britain overseas, supporting charitable organisations, strengthening diplomatic relationships or bringing communities together at moments of celebration or national reflection, the royal family performs an indispensable public service. We saw that in the response following the death of the late Queen and in the support that His Majesty the King has had as he has taken on the responsibilities of the Crown. I should note that His Majesty is a constituent when he is resident at Sandringham in my constituency—[HON. MEMBERS: "He can't vote!"] He cannot vote. Although Sandringham is a private residence, it hosts official events that are covered by the grant.

The value of the royal family is not simply symbolic. Independent analysis has shown the substantial soft power and economic benefits flowing from the institution, whether it is trade, tourism, cultural influence or the prestige associated with royal warrants, which many firms in our constituencies are fortunate to benefit from. The grant enables those benefits to be realised.

For this financial year, the sovereign grant stands at £137.9 million, with £97 million of that in core funding and £40 million as the final payment for the Buckingham Palace reservicing programme. When many construction projects—I could mention a number—seem to miss their budget and targets, it is right to acknowledge the National Audit Office's finding that the 10-year programme has managed to remain in budget, despite challenges, by making trade-offs, actively managing risk and learning lessons. Despite the completion of the reservicing programme, without these proposed changes the funding

would remain at the £137.9 million level in 2027, which clearly could not be justified. That is what lies behind the resetting of the baseline to £99.9 million, with the reference percentage raised to 20.5% for the period through to 2031-32.

At first glance, that looks like a significant reduction from the current level, but it comes after the completion of the 10-year programme, and core funding has actually increased to £97.6 million this year, from around £52 million in 2024-25. According to the House of Commons Library, if it had simply increased with inflation from 2016, it would now be £59.4 million. We have to ask what lies behind that growth. The jump from £52 million to £72 million in 2025-26 was largely driven by property maintenance, higher payroll and other spending, alongside a top-up to the reserve sovereign grant after a period of largely flat grants. More than half the total grant was allocated to the preservation of the occupied royal houses, which must be right.

The further rise to £97.6 million appears to mainly relate to royal travel, digital services, housekeeping and hospitality, although I would welcome the Minister shedding some more clarity on where the remaining costs come from. As we move forward, there is a considerable backlog of maintenance at the occupied royal palaces, a need to modernise ageing systems, to improve cyber security and to invest in more energy-efficient infrastructure. I am grateful to the royal household and the Keeper of the Privy Purse for the constructive conversations I have had with him on behalf of His Majesty's Opposition regarding the settlement, which does two things: preserve the historic national buildings and run a modern, secure, fit-for-purpose operation.

I have a few points that I would like the Minister to clarify. First, ahead of Second Reading, when we will be able to get far more into the detail than we can this evening, will he commit to writing to me with a breakdown of the planned expenditure behind the new £99.9 million figure? For example, why is payroll expected to rise by £7 million between 2026-27 and 2031-32? Core property maintenance rises by 25%. The case for addressing maintenance, particularly in stateroom areas, is clear. Is he confident that the broader programme reflects value for money? Can he confirm that any capital expenditure above £6 million, such as replacing the boilers at Windsor, would require Treasury approval of a business case?

Encouragingly, income supplementing the grant is forecast to increase by a quarter over the period. How confident is the Minister in those projections? It is important that there is a focus on efficiency. What external benchmarking of the royal household cost base has there been? Which comparator organisations were used, and what specific efficiencies have resulted or are planned as a result?

The reserve, as I have mentioned, fell with the impact of covid and now stands at £21 million. Is there a formal target reserve level that the household is managing toward for resilience purposes, distinct from the statutory 50% reduction trigger threshold? If so, over what timeframe is that expected to be reached?

The motion provides for the reference percentage used to calculate the grant rising from 12% to 20.5%, as the Government have set out. That is described as being calibrated to the household's expected costs for that five-year period. What specific cost forecast underpins that rate? Has it been independently tested or benchmarked,

or is it effectively set simply by reference to the household's own submitted budget? For those who may be concerned that this settlement is too generous, the reality is that there will be a real-terms reduction as the grant remains flat in cash terms over the period.

One of the significant parts of this motion, which we will scrutinise carefully in the legislation, is a mechanism to allow the sovereign grant to decrease when circumstances warrant it. This reforms a long-standing feature of the existing system, the "golden ratchet" provision in section 6 of the 2011 Act, under which funding cannot decrease in cash terms. The Government's briefing note on the King's Speech tells us that the proposed change means that

"the Grant can be reduced from one year to the next, preventing inappropriately high funding".

Of course it is important for all taxpayer funding to represent value for money, but can the Minister elaborate on the rationale for that, given that the settlement is expected to be flat cash over the period? In what circumstances would a reduction be considered appropriate, and what role would Parliament have in scrutinising any such decision?

We support the motion and the resetting of the sovereign grant following the completion of the Buckingham Palace works. It is important that we establish a sustainable funding framework for the years ahead. However, there are important questions that I have raised about the increases in the last year ahead of the setting of this new baseline, and in what circumstances the Government may look to reduce the funding. Those questions are asked in the spirit of supporting both the institution of the monarchy and the principle of responsible stewardship of public money.

9 pm

Neil Duncan-Jordan (Poole) (Lab): I welcome the Government's decision to introduce legislation to make it possible for the sovereign grant to be reduced, but there remain a number of issues surrounding the grant that I believe they should also address. The first is the link between the grant and the profits of the Crown Estate. The Crown Estate is quite separate from the monarchy, and operates to generate revenue for the Treasury. That seems a very odd form of indexation, and raises the question of why the grant is not based on the needs of the monarchy or its costs. That, I believe, needs to be reviewed. The fact that the grant could only ever go up—until the Government tabled this motion—was described by the *Financial Times* as an arrangement whereby in a good year the monarchy would win, and in a bad year the taxpayer would lose. It is therefore right that the Government are addressing that anomaly.

The motion also raises the question of how the grant should be set. I believe that the Treasury should have the power to specify the amount on an annual basis. It is important for the funding of the monarchy to be transparent and open to MPs for debate. On numerous occasions I have tried to table questions about these issues, only to be told that this is not something for Parliament to discuss. That has to change.

Finally, there are some anomalies relating to the monarch's wider financial arrangements. Why, for example, are they not subject to inheritance tax? Why is no account taken of the profits of the Duchy of Lancaster in the setting of the level of the sovereign grant, and

[*Neil Duncan-Jordan*]

why are the monarch's financial affairs exempt from freedom of information legislation? While the Bill might be viewed as an administrative adjustment, it is important that we ask why the grant needs to be 322% higher than it was when it was first introduced in 2012. Even when we allow for inflation, the proposed grant is well over twice the real value of its starting point.

I would be grateful if the Minister commented on those issues when he sums up the debate.

9.3 pm

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): The sovereign grant does not provide personal income for the King, the Queen or any member of the royal family. It funds the work of the institution, and the largest part of it funds buildings. Between 2025 and 2026, £67.5 million went on property maintenance alone, including the Buckingham Palace reservicing programme and the installation of more energy-efficient heating. These are heritage sites carrying a maintenance backlog that has built up over decades, and the purpose of the reservicing work is to stop a serious risk of fire and flood. We should, of course, take the action that is needed to protect these national heritage assets.

The grant is also funding green infrastructure across the estate and better cyber-security, which, in the current international climate, is not an optional extra for any national institution. However, we should treat the increase as temporary in nature, and it is right that the sovereign grant will be readjusted once those projects have been completed. The Government have already committed to legislating for exactly that when the reservicing works finish.

That brings me to a key issue: transparency. The taxpayer is funding this grant. Taxpayers are entitled to see where their money goes, and as the hon. Member for Poole (Neil Duncan-Jordan) has already mentioned, Parliament is entitled to hold the Government and the Treasury to account for it. Some of that framework already exists, and it works. Under the Sovereign Grant Act, the royal household's accounts are audited by the Comptroller and Auditor General and laid before this House, and the royal household sits within the National Audit Office's value-for-money remit. But that is not the whole picture.

We have an institution spending more than £130 million of public money a year, and its published accounts are the beginning and end of what the public can ask for. If one of my Hazel Grove constituents wants to know how a figure in the report came to be, there is no route for them to find out. May I encourage the Minister to let us know whether he has any plans to review the reporting requirements attached to the grant, so that Parliament and the public get spending detail at a level that allows genuine scrutiny? It is right that taxpayers will have questions about where and, importantly, whom this money goes to.

Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor holds no title, no office and no public role; as far as the state is concerned, he is a private citizen. As such, not a penny of this grant should reach him. Neither should any other taxpayer funding, and that has to include what happens at the end of his life. Frequently, members of the royal family have received publicly funded funerals, having either

ceremonial funerals or state funerals. For context, the Queen Mother's ceremonial funeral in 2002 cost more than £5.4 million, of which £4.3 million was spent on policing. Can the Minister confirm that no public money from the sovereign grant or any departmental budget will fund a ceremonial funeral, a lying-in-state or state honours of any kind for Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor?

9.6 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his introduction, and for setting the scene for the motion. Clarification is needed, and the Minister has provided that in a way that I think is transparent. The nation needs to know as well.

Do the Minister and this House agree that although we must always ensure absolute value for money for every single taxpayer in my constituency and right across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the monarchy provides an immeasurable service, stability and global prestige that far outweighs the costs?

Looking at the figures, we see that the Treasury is rightly acting to reduce the overall sovereign grant to £99.9 million for the 2027-28 financial year. Will the Minister acknowledge that that demonstrates a clear commitment from the palace to be transparent and to tighten its belt alongside the public, and that it will ensure that the continuous maintenance of our historic national heritage can continue?

9.8 pm

Dan Tomlinson: I thank Members from across the House for their questions and for beginning the scrutiny that will take place, should the House agree that the Bill should be laid and for debate to proceed at Second Reading. Let me turn to some of the points that were raised.

The shadow Exchequer Secretary, hon. Member for North West Norfolk (James Wild)—I hope he still has that title, given the Opposition's ongoing junior ministerial reshuffle—raised a whole range of important questions and asked whether I would write to him on these matters. I would be very happy to write to him, and I am sure the letter can be made available to others in this place, given that a whole range of questions were asked and I may not be able to cover them all in concluding.

One key question asked by Members on all sides was on the increase in the value of the sovereign grant above inflation. That is, of course, an important question, and one that the trustees went over in detail in making the decision to increase the grant, relative to the pre-Buckingham Palace servicing costs, up to £99.9 million. It is reducing by a quarter from the current year to next year because of the Buckingham Palace refit finishing. A large part of the increase in expenditure has been on the refurbishment and the servicing costs of the occupied royal palaces. That was at £18 million in 2016-17 and next year it will be at £33.6 million. That accounts for a large share of the above-inflation increase.

The shadow Minister mentions—the House of Commons Library and others have also pointed to these—other increases in expenditure faced by the royal household: yes, on buildings and maintenance, but also on ensuring the palaces can take proactive steps to improve the energy efficiency of their heating in line with broader net zero goals that have at least some level of consensus across the House. I hope that one day we may be able to rebuild that consensus, which seems

sadly to have been lost in recent months, on ensuring that we, along with our international allies, can reduce our domestic carbon emissions. There is the need for investment in cyber-security, which is growing in line with AI, and we must target other long-term measures to make sure the royal household is more resilient.

There was a whole range of questions on whether the trustees have ensured a focus on external benchmarking and on what work has been done to scrutinise the costs. I am assured that that work has taken place, and we can discuss it in more detail on Second Reading. That touches on the point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Neil Duncan-Jordan) and others about the fact that the sovereign grant will now be set at close to 20% of the revenue of the Crown Estate, rather than 12.5%. That reflects the bottom-up assessment that has taken place, looking across the needs of the royal household and making sure it is being funded adequately for the public duties that His Majesty the King and the royal family carry out.

It is worth pointing out that those activities have increased significantly in recent years. Towards the end of her reign, the late Queen was not carrying out a large number of foreign engagements and was also hosting a smaller number of state visits. The King has increased the engagement he is carrying out on our behalf as part of his public duties. That has involved more expenditure in staff costs and to ensure that those engagements and the benefits the shadow Exchequer Secretary talked about—the representation of our country and supporting good causes here in the UK—can get the funding and support they need.

It is worth noting, in response to the question raised by the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Lisa Smart), the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, that the sovereign grant is very clearly focused on the official duties that the royal family carry out on our behalf. It is not about supporting or funding their private activities, or things it would not be appropriate for the sovereign grant to fund.

My hon. Friend the Member for Poole raised the need for debate on these topics. We will get plenty of time on Second Reading to debate the issues that he and others have raised on transparency and clarity on where the sovereign grant is being spent. I have set out today some initial outlines. I will respond in writing and I am sure we will have a thorough debate later in the month.

I will have to get back to the shadow Exchequer Secretary on the business case thresholds, but the Treasury does of course make sure that every penny of our money is well spent, and that includes the £99.9 million that will be allocated.

I have, I hope, responded to many of the points that have been raised. I thank Members for their contributions. I look forward, if we proceed, to debating this matter on Second Reading.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That a Bill be brought in on the foregoing Resolution;

That the Chairman of Ways and Means, the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Secretary Alex Norris and Dan Tomlinson bring in the Bill.

SOVEREIGN GRANT BILL

Presentation and First Reading

Dan Tomlinson accordingly presented a Bill to specify the amount of the Sovereign Grant for the financial year 2027-28 and the percentage of the income account net surplus of the Crown Estate to be used by the Royal Trustees to determine the amount of the Sovereign Grant in subsequent financial years; to confer a duty and a power on the Treasury to specify the amount of the Sovereign Grant in subsequent financial years in certain circumstances; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 137) with explanatory notes (Bill 137-EN).

Backbench Business

Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation

[Relevant documents: Seventh Report of the Joint Committee on Human Rights of Session 2024-25, Transnational repression in the UK, HC 681, and the Government response HC 1405; Oral evidence taken before the Joint Committee on Human Rights, on SLAPPs: Human Rights Implications, 2 November 2022, Session 2022-23, HC 840.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call Alex Sobel, who will speak for up to 15 minutes.

9.15 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House notes the critical threat that Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs) pose to press freedom, public interest research, and the right of citizens and campaigners to speak out on matters of public concern; recognises that SLAPPs predominately target individuals, including private citizens, utilising novel legal tactics, with the weaponisation of libel law and data protection claims and the aggressive use of injunctions, which often come hand in hand with other forms of harassment including smear campaigns and surveillance; further recognises that the anti-SLAPP provisions within the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Act 2023 are ineffective due to their complexity and insufficient due to their narrow focus on economic crime; further notes the Solicitors Regulation Authority (SRA) view that the ‘main way to address the problem of SLAPPs is through a robust legislative solution that gives the courts more powers’, and that SRA regulation will inevitably be severely limited absent a new law; highlights concerns over the suppression of public interest information and acts of public participation in the absence of a universally applicable anti-SLAPP law; and also recognises the urgent need for the Government to find a legislative vehicle for simple, comprehensive anti-SLAPP provisions that filter out abusive lawsuits swiftly and fairly.

I rise to speak on this motion on the impact of strategic lawsuits against public participation, also known as SLAPPs. It is the custom to thank the Backbench Business Committee. This is our second attempt to have this debate. Last time, I agreed to pull it, so there could be a longer debate on settlement goods. However, I thank the Committee for giving us 90 minutes of protected time; otherwise, we would have had only 44 minutes for this debate. That is really why I am thanking it this evening.

A SLAPP is litigation, or commonly the threat of litigation, designed primarily to silence criticism, rather than vindicate a legitimate legal right. The objective is often not to win in court, but to make speaking out so expensive, stressful and risky that journalists, campaigners, academics, whistleblowers and ordinary citizens decide that remaining silent is the safer option. On the surface, SLAPPs may appear to be a niche media law issue. However, as we will no doubt hear in examples from Members today, by suppressing information that is in the public interest, SLAPPs undermine our democracy, our public watchdogs and the integrity of our justice system.

Back in June, during Justice questions, the then Secretary of State recognised the profound financial and psychological impact of SLAPPs, and the threat they represent to democracy and free speech. He also highlighted that SLAPPs extend beyond journalism and issues of free speech, and are used to silence sexual abuse survivors and tenants who have complained to landlords. That is

one of five reasons why this debate is particularly important and timely. Many think SLAPPs are confined to journalists being threatened by Russian oligarchs. In fact, the threat is more diverse than ever. The expanding scope of this abuse across all types of public interest is deeply concerning. There has been a significant spike in cases reported to the UK Anti-SLAPP coalition over the last 18 months, a large proportion of which are from private citizens who have spoken out about concerns in their local area, or services they have received. No doubt, we all have constituents affected by SLAPPs.

Secondly, the tactics are evolving. While defamation remains a common legal basis for use, SLAPPs are now being brought through claims such as harassment, data protection, privacy and trespass, demonstrating that any effective response must establish universal protections, irrespective of the cause of action.

Thirdly, the UK appears to be an attractive jurisdiction for this kind of legal abuse. Our expensive litigation and claimant-friendly reputation have made London a popular destination, while the European Union has moved ahead with an anti-SLAPP directive and 22 EU countries have taken action to progress anti-SLAPP legislation at a national level. In the UK, broad protection is still absent, and we risk becoming an outlier.

Fourthly, in recent months, the limit of the regulatory framework has been brought into sharp focus. The Solicitors Regulation Authority has faced challenges in progressing SLAPP complaints, particularly those that have reached the tribunal stage, and recent Solicitors Disciplinary Tribunal judgments have failed to address the fundamental issue of SLAPPs as an abusive tactic. Despite over 70 cases being opened since 2022, only three have so far progressed to the Solicitors Disciplinary Tribunal. Moreover, the Solicitors Regulation Authority has not publicly released any data regarding the state of its SLAPP-related investigations since 2024. While new legislation is urgently required, it must be accompanied by strong regulatory guidance and enforcement action.

Finally, Parliament now has an opportunity to act. Before the summer recess, two new private Members’ Bills were introduced: one by the right hon. Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale)—I am sure that we will hear more from him on that—and one in the other place by Baroness Stowell. The Bills aim to create broader anti-SLAPP protection. The issue before us is no longer whether the problem exists; it is whether we are prepared to legislate with the urgency the problem demands.

Many of Britain’s biggest national scandals only came to light because determined journalists, courageous whistleblowers and persistent campaigners refused to be intimidated, but SLAPPs have often been present. SLAPPs delayed reporting on the Horizon Post Office scandal, maternity scandals in teaching hospitals—such as those in Oxford and in my constituency in Leeds—and the Grenfell tower tragedy. Think about the scandals we have never discovered because someone successfully silenced those asking the questions. That is why the issue is about far more than protecting journalists; it is about protecting the public’s right to know.

I acknowledge that the previous Government recognised the problem. Following the Ministry of Justice’s 2022 consultation, reforms were introduced through the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Act 2023, creating protections against SLAPPs connected to economic crime, including an early dismissal mechanism and greater

protections on legal costs. Those were welcome reforms, but they are also flawed and limited; they only protect investigations into economic crime and depend on a complex and time-intensive process to determine the intentions or mindset of the claimant.

Those limitations matter. Public interest speech is not confined to speech about corruption, fraud and money laundering. It also concerns patient safety, environmental harm, housing conditions, human rights abuses, sexual violence, animal welfare and failures of public administration, among other things. People should not lose protections simply because the wrongdoing they expose does not fit within a narrow statutory category. That is why I am calling on the Government to use the opportunity of the two private Members' Bills to introduce universal anti-SLAPP legislation.

I will keep my remarks short because we are short on time, and I want to ensure that all Members who have come to this debate get to speak. I take the opportunity to thank all those who have been working on this issue for the last five years, supporting the cases that we will hear about, including the Foreign Policy Centre, the Index on Censorship, Global Climate Legal Defence, the News Media Association, the Bureau of Investigative Journalists, Reporters Without Borders, Spotlight on Corruption, Transparency International, and all the members of the UK Anti-SLAPP Coalition, as well as the Media Lawyers Association and the all-party parliamentary group on anti-corruption and responsible tax, which supports this work.

I also thank the targets of SLAPPs who have bravely spoken out about the legal threats they have faced. SLAPPs encourage silence to avoid increasing liability, but we only know about the scale of the issue because brave people across the country have spoken out. We are indebted to them.

9.22 pm

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel) on obtaining this debate. It is a subject that we have discussed in this place a number of times over the years, and each time the need for action becomes even greater. Indeed, the hon. Member picked up the baton from the hon. Member for Bolton West (Phil Brickell), who was initially going to hold this debate before he was elevated to high office.

I speak in my capacity as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on media freedom, and also, as the hon. Member for Leeds Central and Headingley said, as the sponsor of a private Member's Bill, which I shall introduce in November. SLAPPs have been a stain on this country's reputation as a defender of media freedom for too long. We actually set up the Media Freedom Coalition in 2019, and I am delighted that under the outgoing Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for Pontefract, Castleford and Knottingley (Yvette Cooper), the UK has taken back the co-chair position with Finland.

The UK's position on media freedom is one that we can be proud of. We have gone up in the world press freedom index ranking—we are now 18th—but in its commentary on the UK, RSF said

“lawsuits aimed at gagging journalists”

are one reason why we are not in a higher position.

SLAPPs are not new; they have been around for a long time. I spent part of my summer in my deckchair, reading an excellent book by David Hooper that recounts the history of SLAPPs, starting with James Goldsmith and his war on *Private Eye*, followed by Robert Maxwell, who took on Aurum Press and the biography written about him, and then, perhaps most notoriously, Mohamed al-Fayed, whose appalling actions in abusing young employees at Harrods were known about and reported on, but then suppressed as a result of the lawsuits that he sprayed around liberally, using very expensive lawyers.

It is generally the case that SLAPPs are used by rich people seeking to suppress information that is clearly in the public interest. When I chaired the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, now 15 years ago, we looked at the advent of libel tourism—the fact that the UK courts were specifically being used by people with very little connection with the UK to bring libel suits, because we were seen to be sympathetic to the idea of libel actions, in order to suppress information. Since then, Russian oligarchs in particular have queued up to come and use the British courts. As the hon. Member for Leeds Central and Headingley said, we have talked to and met some of the brave people who have sought to expose those oligarchs' actions and have been subjected to SLAPP cases—people like Catherine Belton, the author of “Putin's People”, and Tom Burgis, the author of “Kleptopia”. It continues today. I am not going to go into a number of cases; we will perhaps have more opportunity to do so when the private Member's Bill comes forward. However, I am particularly grateful to the Anti-SLAPP Coalition for its help in taking forward this campaign.

Progress has been made: the Defamation Act 2013 sought to address some of the worst aspects of libel tourism, and the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Act 2023 focused specifically on those who are alleging economic crime, and it put in place some protection. However, the problem is that some of the worst cases—I go back to the work of both Catherine Belton and Tom Burgis—were not allegations of economic crime, but were more serious than that. Clearly, the provisions in that Act would not have been sufficient. In the previous Parliament, Wayne David sought to extend its provisions to cover a far wider range of actions, but sadly his private Member's Bill did not complete its passage due to the calling of the general election. My intention is to try to complete the work that Wayne David started with his Bill.

As the Minister will be very much aware, at the beginning of this year, 120 editors—including the editors of every major publication not just in the UK, but across the world—called on the Government to act. I know that the Government were committed to taking action, but unfortunately could not find a slot to do so. I am extremely grateful to the Minister for the discussions that we have already had about how we might work together to bring that legislation on to the statute book.

The hon. Member for Leeds Central and Headingley is right that Baroness Stowell has introduced a private Member's Bill in the other place. Her Bill has been published. There is some debate as to the mechanism that is most effective; there were concerns that the attempt in Wayne David's Bill to set out lengthy definitions might make it more complex, and there is an argument for trying to make the test of a SLAPP simpler. Those are details that we will want to continue to discuss with

[Sir John Whittingdale]

the Minister and her officials. For my part, I very much hope that we can find an agreement that all of us are happy with and that will achieve the objective we all share.

I should say that I am not opposed to people having the right to bring defamation actions or other suits where they feel that they have been wrongly accused of something—that is a fundamental right. What I am opposed to is the abuse of lawsuits with the deliberate intent of suppressing information that is clearly in the public interest. It is that definition that we will seek to explore how best to set out in legislation.

I look forward to further meetings with the Minister. I welcome this as perhaps the first opportunity to debate what I believe is a very important issue for the freedom of speech and journalism in this country.

9.29 pm

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on anti-corruption and responsible tax, I would like to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel) for working with me to secure today's debate. It has been about nine months since I initially presented the application to the Backbench Business Committee, but I am pleased to say that it has already been worth the wait.

I also congratulate the Minister on her reappointment. It was a real pleasure to work with her in my role as a Ministry of Justice Parliamentary Private Secretary in the last Government. I found her no less supportive, engaged and collaborative when I have come to her with constituency issues, as I will speak to in more detail later.

I would like to take this opportunity to share at least one particularly egregious example of vexatious litigation in the form of a SLAPP. Before I go any further, let me confirm that the cases I will mention today are not subject to ongoing legal proceedings. Back in 2016, Jennifer McAdam invested the inheritance that she received from her late father into a cryptocurrency called OneCoin, but OneCoin was a £3 billion lie. In reality, it was a global Ponzi scheme. When it collapsed the following year, millions of people from 125 countries lost money.

In order to raise awareness and protect other investors, in 2017 Jennifer organised a webinar for other victims and cryptocurrency experts to explore ways to hold the company to account. Three weeks later, she received a legal threat from OneCoin and its co-founder Ruja Ignatova, dubbed the "Cryptoqueen" in the viral podcast that followed. That threat, sent via law firm Carter-Ruck claimed that Jennifer had defamed the so-called "Cryptoqueen" during the webinar. It went on to say that the only way to avoid a court case was to refrain from publishing similar allegations and to retract the webinar video. Even as legal action was threatened against Jennifer, regulatory action against OneCoin was already under way in a number of countries. Jennifer should have been celebrated for trying to help other victims and prevent future ones, not threatened and harassed.

In 2025, Claire Gill, a partner at Carter-Ruck, instructed by OneCoin, was referred to the Solicitors Disciplinary Tribunal by the Solicitors Regulation Authority on

allegations that she sent a letter to McAdam that contained an improper threat of litigation. However, by the end of the year, the Solicitors Disciplinary Tribunal refused to dismiss the proceedings, stating that Gill had acted on explicit client instructions and had no reason at that stage to disbelieve them, and that the SRA's allegation was founded on hindsight rather than evidence of professional misconduct. The SRA has also been ordered to pay Gill's costs, which Carter-Ruck claims to be around £1 million. Naturally, such sizeable costs raised fears that they may dampen the regulator's appetite to challenge similar SLAPP-related cases in the foreseeable future.

There are serious questions to be asked about the tribunal's approach in setting such a high bar of actual knowledge of wrongdoing—effectively requiring evidence of complicity—before professional ethics really kick in. My concern is that the high bar makes it conveniently easy for lawyers to simply avoid asking questions that they do not want to know the answers to. If lawyers are allowed to blindly and ignorantly pursue their clients' interests—even when that involves silencing the police and "in furtherance of fraud", to use the tribunal's wording before the case was thrown out—then we will never stop SLAPPs.

This is not just about London lawyers and international scams. According to reporting by the *Manchester Mill*, back in 2021 a solicitor named Andrew Milne acquired 67 residential freeholds at auction for around £130 per property in Horwich, in my constituency. Milne then proceeded to demand thousands of pounds from my constituents in return for their freeholds, often citing spurious breaches of lease covenants. Yet when the *Sheffield Tribune* sought to report on Milne's equally outrageous behaviour in Yorkshire, he sent them a message that included the following threat:

"We will definitely bring proceedings for defamation and malicious falsehood if you publish such complete and malicious lies".

This is how it works: bullies, charlatans and chancers like Milne using their privileged positions to seek to silence journalists and whistleblowers from lifting the lid on their abhorrent actions.

On a general policy point, I have been encouraged by noises coming out of the SRA since the regulator's change in leadership, but as in the cases described, it strikes me that the regulatory framework as it currently stands is not up to the job. That is why a universal anti-SLAPP law is needed to ensure that those who speak out in the public interest are protected.

I welcome the recent comments about the Government's commitment to introduce universal anti-SLAPP legislation and the opportunity that the two private Members' Bills on SLAPPS present both in this House and in the other place. In particular, I know that the right hon. Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) is keen to work with the Government in what I trust will be an exemplar of cross-party working. I hope that across party lines we can seize this opportunity to put to bed the spurious litigation put forward by individuals who seek to silence dissenting voices.

To close, let me reiterate the ask from the UK Anti-SLAPP Coalition that legislation must be accompanied by strong regulatory guidance and enforcement action to ensure that lawyers are held to account for abusive legal tactics. I hope that the Government can deliver on that in the fullness of time.

9.35 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I am the secretary of the National Union of Journalists parliamentary group and will speak in that capacity, but I am also a victim of the Goldsmith foundation, which the right hon. Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) referred to. If Members are unaware of what the Goldsmith foundation was all about, it was basically an organisation funded by James Goldsmith that employed Carter-Ruck to identify people who James Goldsmith politically disagreed with, and targeted them. In my instance, I was writing to expose the then MP for my constituency—a Conservative MP—who was being hosted on a series of trips to Iraq by Saddam Hussein and then coming back here to justify the gassing of the Kurds in Halabja, where 4,000 people were gassed to death. I was then sued by Carter-Ruck.

It was the same issue overall: you just cannot afford to fight. In fact, as a result of that action, I had to hand over the deeds to my property—we simply could not fund it. Even though there was some Labour party support for funding, the general view was that we could not match that sinking pit of funding. That is just one example of how the Goldsmith foundation operated. It is an example of the operation of SLAPPs, which, as the right hon. Gentleman said, have happened over a long period of time—that was way back in the '90s.

Reference has been made to how the issue of SLAPPs is not just about journalists. It is not, but they have been the main target, and the consequences for some have been devastating because of the legal costs they have had to incur just to try to demonstrate that they have been writing truthful analyses of the events they have been trying to report. SLAPPs stifle free speech and undermine the right of the general public to know information. Exactly as has been said, there is a deterrence effect: they are a form of intimidation against telling the truth.

The previous Prime Minister gave a commitment with regard to legislation; unfortunately, that was not in the King's speech. Now is the time to pick up the pace. I am grateful to the Minister for now offering briefings on how we can move forward, as well as for working on a cross-party basis. The issue for us is that although everyone who has spoken so far welcomed the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Act 2023, it just applies to economic crime reportage. Therefore, even though some journalists will be protected under that legislation, the individual they have been reporting on will find another matter on which to take action, and as a result the journalist is not protected. The thresholds and criteria of judgments taking place—whereby the judge has to consider the intent of the SLAPP filer and the intent of the defendant—are far too high. We can cite case after case, but the most recent to have caught publicity was that of Dan Neidle. He exposed a firm operating a tax avoidance scam and won the case, but he was left with £146,000 of legal fees.

As has been said, there have been various attempts by hon. Members to try to tackle the issue. The Scottish Government have also said that they are awaiting an opportunity to bring forward legislation. The NUJ is part of the Anti-SLAPP Coalition. The proposals put forward include: clear, 10-point criteria to identify SLAPPs; a higher merits threshold for likely success at trial; and a

filter mechanism for swift disposal of actions that clearly seek to gag individual journalists and others. We welcome the Government's engagement now—hopefully including with the NUJ over these coming weeks—so that we can get this legislation on the statute book as rapidly as possible and protect freedom of speech.

9.39 pm

Rachel Blake (Cities of London and Westminster) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel) on securing this important debate. I really welcome being here with friends who are so committed to this issue, and who have been for such a long time. This debate is about much more than press freedom, although it is very much about that; it is about whether ordinary people can speak out in the public interest without fear of being silenced by those with deeper pockets, greater resources and access to expensive legal representation.

Strategic lawsuits against public participation—SLAPPs, as they are so unattractively described—are designed not necessarily to win in court, but to intimidate, exhaust and suppress scrutiny. They are increasingly deployed against journalists and campaigners, whistleblowers, survivors of abuse, community activists and ordinary citizens. Anyone who raises legitimate concerns about matters of public interest can find themselves on the receiving end of aggressive legal threats, as we have heard. The consequence of that is a chilling effect that extends far beyond the individual target. When one person is punished for speaking out, countless others are forced to conclude that it might be safer for them to remain silent. That should concern every Member of this House.

One case that demonstrates that danger particularly clearly is that of my constituent, the investigative journalist Clare Rewcastle Brown, founder of Sarawak Report. Ms Rewcastle Brown played a key role in exposing the 1Malaysia Development Berhad scandal in Malaysia—one of the largest corruption scandals in recent history. Her reporting helped bring international attention to allegations involving billions of dollars that had been diverted from a Malaysian state investment fund. Those allegations subsequently became the subject of investigations and prosecutions across multiple jurisdictions. But instead of scrutiny being met simply with accountability, it was met with legal pressure. Between 2017 and 2019, Ms Rewcastle Brown was pursued through the London courts in a libel action brought by Abdul Hadi Awang, the president of the Malaysian political party PAS. The claim was eventually withdrawn and settled in her favour before trial.

The significance of that case lies not merely in its outcome, but in what it demonstrates about the power imbalance at the heart of SLAPPs. As Ms Rewcastle Brown has described, she understood that the objective was not simply to challenge particular words on a page; rather, it was to place immense pressure on a journalist through the prospect of years of costly litigation, with the hope that, eventually, that pressure would force a retraction, damage credibility and discourage further reporting. Even when defendants ultimately prevail, they cannot recover the years lost to litigation, the stress inflicted upon them, or the time diverted away from public interest work. That is why campaigners often say that in a SLAPP, the process becomes the punishment.

[Rachel Blake]

Let us consider what is at stake. Without investigative journalists such as Clare Rewcastle Brown, one of the world's most significant corruption scandals might never have received the scrutiny that it deserved, important information might never have reached the public domain and powerful individuals might never have been held accountable; yet our legal system left the burden on the journalist to endure years of legal challenge before reaching that outcome. The reality is that many people do not have the resilience, resources or support to do what Clare did. Many local journalists do not, many campaigners do not, many victims of wrongdoing do not, and many ordinary citizens certainly do not.

Increasingly, these tactics are evolving. They are no longer confined to traditional defamation claims; we now see claims framed through privacy law, data protection law, harassment claims and injunctions. The legal mechanisms change but the purpose remains the same: to drive up cost, create fear and suppress participation in public life. That is why the existing protections are insufficient. The anti-SLAPP provisions in the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Act, as we have heard, were an important first step. However, they are limited to economic crime reporting and leave many people vulnerable. A journalist investigating corruption may receive some protection; a survivor speaking about abuse may not, a local campaigner raising concerns about environmental damage may not, and a resident exposing wrongdoing in their community may not. That cannot be the right approach.

I am also concerned about questions surrounding enforcement and regulation. The Solicitors Regulation Authority has made it clear that solicitors must not pursue abusive litigation tactics, must not advance unmeritorious claims and must not use their professional position to intimidate those engaged in lawful public interest activity. Those principles are absolutely right, but principles alone are not enough if those subjected to abusive legal threats do not have confidence that the system is working. That is why legislation and regulation must go hand in hand in this scenario. We need a robust statutory framework that allows judges to dismiss abusive claims at the earliest possible stage, we need strong cost protections for defendants, and we need effective professional regulation that ensures lawyers who facilitate abusive tactics are held to account.

This should not be a partisan issue. Members across this House depend on a free press. We depend on campaigners, researchers, whistleblowers and engaged citizens bringing serious issues to public attention. Democracy itself depends on scrutiny. I therefore urge the Government to work constructively with all colleagues from all parties to bring forward comprehensive anti-SLAPP legislation that protects public interest speech, upholds press freedom and ensures that our courts cannot be used as instruments of intimidation by those seeking to escape scrutiny. We should ask ourselves what is holding us back from tackling this, because ultimately, this debate is about a simple principle. In a democratic society, the law should protect those who speak truthfully in the public interest, not provide powerful individuals with the means to silence them.

9.46 pm

Markus Campbell-Savours (Penrith and Solway) (Lab): When debating this issue, I crudely used to think of Greenpeace activists taking on multinationals or journalists writing books about oligarchs—Erin Brockovich-style figures exposing injustice—but, as has already been raised, SLAPPs are far more relevant to ordinary people than these cases indicate. Those people include my constituent Jeff Thomson.

Jeff moved to Penrith to enjoy his retirement. What he did not expect was the Penrith pong, a foul odour that periodically hangs over the town. Many residents believe the smell is linked to the Omega Proteins rendering plant operated by Leo Group. The company disputes that it is the only source of the odour. Jeff set up a Facebook group called Fresh AIR for Penrith—a place for residents to moan about the pong, share information and learn how to make complaints to the Environment Agency. For running a Facebook page, Jeff received his first legal letter in February 2023 and found himself living under the threat of a defamation claim, with all the stress and fear of legal costs that that brings, all because he spoke up on an issue that he and his neighbours cared about.

When I was elected, I said publicly that I wanted to tackle the pong. I grew up in Cumbria and people have talked about the smell for decades, so I was genuinely surprised by how many people warned me not to get involved. People said I might be sued, but until I learned about Jeff's case and the basis of the action against him, I dismissed those warnings as absurd. I will be honest: when I was first elected, Jeff got right under my skin. Every MP has someone in their inbox with legitimate concerns who is awkward, and some who are extremely awkward. Jeff is one of them. He is very demanding and good at irritating people, but over time I have come to see Jeff in a different light.

I now cast Jeff in the tradition of awkward people: the people who pester, who prod and who refuse to let things go. The truth is that without people like Jeff—and there is at least one in every town in my patch—nothing changes. Communities rely on them to keep pushing until someone listens. Jeff also had the courage to fight back, and in June 2026, more than three years after the first legal letter, Omega Proteins and Leo Group finally issued a notice of discontinuance. They agreed to pay Jeff's legal costs, and he is now free to speak about what he describes as a living hell. But for every Jeff, there will be many out there now who are simply gagged, and their stories will not be told as part of this debate. That is why his story matters. His case shows exactly why we need an anti-SLAPP law.

The UK Anti-SLAPP Coalition and Index on Censorship helped my constituent in ways I never could, but they need us to act now. They have set out one crucial step that would have protected Jeff: a simple early dismissal mechanism based on objective signs of abuse—not a subjective test about what was in the claimant's mind, not years of litigation; just a clear, fast filter that lets a judge say, "This is a public interest issue. This is a citizen speaking about their community. This case should not proceed." If that mechanism had existed, Jeff would not have spent three years under threat, he would not have faced the stress, cost or fear, and the company would not have been able to use litigation as a tool of intimidation.

No constituent should fear being sued simply for speaking about an issue that they believe is wrong. We must ensure that our legal system protects public participation rather than punishes it.

9.50 pm

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): Our society is grossly unequal. Local councils have been hollowed out by years of austerity, people need food banks to survive, kids go to school hungry and people are trapped in low-wage, precarious employment, all while corporations make record profits and the super-rich become even wealthier. Inequality destroys society and ultimately reduces people, places and systems to nothing more than commodities and assets to be used and exploited by the wealthy. That is obvious in our legal system. With SLAPPs, the law can be used as a weapon by the powerful and wealthy, making a mockery of things we like to believe are the foundations of our justice system: fairness, equality, transparency, and the notion that money should have no bearing on someone's receiving justice.

Every debate that we have in this place comes down to the fundamental issue in British politics and society, the same issue we have had for hundreds of years: class. SLAPPs are the embodiment of capitalism and the inequality it creates, because SLAPPs are used to intimidate people, restrict activists and campaigners, and exhaust their time, energy, emotions and, crucially, as we have heard from so many hon. Members, finances—all to suffocate freedom of speech.

I wish now to speak about Lucy and Verity Nevitt, who in 2018 reported allegations of sexual assault and rape to the police. Following an investigation, at the end of January 2019 the police decided that they would take no further action due to insufficient evidence. After Lucy and Verity's cases were dropped, the ladies decided to speak out online to warn others about him. Specialist Metropolitan police officers encouraged them to speak out online, but told them not to name him, to say "alleged" and to call it serious sexual assault instead of rape. However, the sisters decided to say who he was and what he had done. Their attacker responded by bringing a legal action against the sisters, based on accusations of misuse of private information, harassment and defamation. As legal action continued, the sisters became aware of cease and desist letters being sent to CrowdJustice, where they were raising money for the defence, and to supportive MPs.

In May 2020, the High Court decided on a number of applications made by Lucy and Verity and by the claimant. The sisters were allowed to lift their anonymity order to allow themselves to be publicly identified, while the court allowed the claimant to remain anonymous. However, the court rejected his application for reporting restrictions. In its intervention to oppose this application, PA Media, then called the Press Association, argued that

"the main thrust of the claimant's application for anonymity is to protect his reputation rather than his privacy".

In her rejection, Justice Steyn stated that

"a reporting restriction order is a peremptory order affecting the right to freedom of expression of the press and the public. It is a form of censorship."

After numerous hearings and, obviously, hugely increasing legal costs, all parties agreed on a settlement, allowing Lucy and Verity to speak about what happened to them, as long as they did not name their abuser. Lucy said,

"It was a really difficult decision...If we had the money we would have gone the whole way...This wasn't just about us, there are so many other victims out there."

After founding the Gemini Project in 2018 and fighting back against their attacker's attempt to shut down the organisation during the legal battle, the sisters' campaign in support of survivors against SLAPPs and other abusive tactics continues today.

As legislators, we in this Chamber are not exempt from blame. We, the state, allow this practice to happen. Our inaction makes us complicit in this inequality. I say to the Minister tonight that we must stop wealth, both corporate and personal, from buying silence and evading accountability and justice. We must do everything in our power to equalise the legal system and wider British society. An end to SLAPPs would be a big step forward towards achieving that.

9.56 pm

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel) on leading today's important debate and for setting out comprehensively, but also succinctly—I am very grateful for that—why we are here debating SLAPPs. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Bolton West (Phil Brickell) on originally securing today's debate.

Our justice system was built on the principle of fair and equal treatment for all who go through it. It should not be a tool for the rich and powerful to systematically silence accusers and avoid accountability, but the growing use of SLAPPs makes it abundantly clear that the system is in fact tilted towards those who harness power or wealth. Victims, journalists, academics, whistleblowers and many more, all attempting to speak truth to power, are being silenced by mechanisms within the justice system that are being weaponised and abused. Those mechanisms are not intended to protect these rich and powerful individuals but are doing just that and preventing access to justice. Lawsuits and threats with immense financial implications and additional time constraints are being used to intimidate and coerce individuals into stepping out of the legal system and stopping their actions. They are keeping cases of immense importance and significance to the public out of the courts, undermining the fair and equitable justice system that we should all strive to achieve.

I know many today have been supported by the work of the Anti-SLAPP Coalition, which has done so much to expose these cases and push for the legislative changes that are necessary. The coalition has reported spikes in the number of cases sent to it in recent years, blaming an environment in the UK that is claimant friendly and in favour of those suing. That is not something that we should be proud of. Of course, there have been high-profile cases that have come to light, and some have been alluded to today. Mohamed al-Fayed, the Horizon scandal and Grenfell all provide serious regrets, and attempts to bring those scandals to light were continually blocked from the courts, elongating the pain of their victims and meaning that many never saw justice served at all.

[Jess Brown-Fuller]

One case provided by the Anti-SLAPP Coalition illustrates many of these issues. It is the case of Heidi who, having contracted a building firm to carry out an extension of her home, became concerned about the quality of the work carried out. She terminated the work, but having taken a six-figure loss, made a complaint to the trading standards authority. She was informed that she would need other cases to take the case forward, which she then requested on social media. Having done that, Heidi was challenged by the building company's lawyers with a letter stating that her actions amounted to harassment, defamation and malicious falsehood and falsely questioning her legal qualifications.

It is very similar to a case brought to me by a gentleman connected to the UK Anti-SLAPP Coalition, who spoke to me about the intense level of legal correspondence he received from an estate management company that he had accused of poor service and mismanagement. He had created a Facebook group not just for that estate management company but to find other cases of estate management companies that had been failing their residents. He was relentlessly pursued by the estate management company's legal team, with letters insisting that he remove the group or he would face legal action.

There is also the harrowing case study that was covered by the BBC's "Woman's Hour" of a clinic that performed plastic surgery. Having encouraged customers to leave reviews on its website and on Trustpilot, the clinic had its lawyers pursue legal action against at least five individuals who dared to write negative reviews of its service. Those reviews related to legitimate concerns about the quality of treatment provided by the clinic, yet the customers were pursued with vigour—threatening legal action of taking individuals to court and defamation claims of thousands of pounds. One woman said that she hid the whole case from her husband for fear of losing their family home. She felt totally silenced by this plastic surgery company that was threatening to take away her home. It resulted in a number of the individuals removing their completely legitimate concerns about their treatment from the online forums.

All of these cases highlight situations arising up and down the country in which the legal system is being used to intimidate and to scare individuals into not speaking out—and those are the ones we know about. As many Members have said today, this is just the tip of the iceberg, because a number of people will have folded under the immense pressure and immense amount of money being thrown at them. We do not know how many cases we do not know about.

What we need to combat such practices are universal statutory protections to counter SLAPPs in UK law—something eminently achievable, as has been shown in the US and Europe. Currently, well-meaning journalists, whistleblowers, campaigners and victims speaking out on matters of public interest unrelated to economic crime have no legal recourse, and these gaps must be addressed. New legislation should be introduced that ensures equal access to the justice system and does not allow those with vast amounts of money the opportunity to silence victims or those undertaking legitimate scrutiny. That legislation must include a filter mechanism that allows courts to swiftly dispose of SLAPPs; an extension

of early dismissal procedures; cost protections for defendants in all SLAPP cases, not just those involving financial crime; and the empowerment of courts to impose financial penalties on those who bring forward abusive SLAPP claims or use SLAPPs relentlessly against multiple claimants.

We must also strengthen the regulatory powers of professional standards bodies and ensure that there is robust enforcement against lawyers and law firms that engage in abusive SLAPP litigation, while at the same time improving access to legal advice and support for those facing SLAPP threats. This is a position that the Liberal Democrats have consistently held—we were the only party to support such legislation in our manifesto in 2024—but the point is now clearly recognised across the House.

The previous Conservative Government's amendment to the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Act provided protections in cases of economic crime, as has this Government's public recognition of the issues in this area. We have seen two private Members' Bills in this Session containing anti-SLAPP provisions, including one due to be presented by the right hon. Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) in November. Will the Minister confirm the Government's position on those two private Members' Bills and whether it is the Government's intention to support them in their passage through the House? Could she outline what conversations she is having or planning to have with the legal profession to stamp out these sorts of practices?

The current context, the attention and the support across the House demonstrate that the time is right to take steps to protect victims and protect the chance of equitable justice. That will only happen with legislation that stamps out malpractice as early as possible, avoiding extortionate costs for victims and allowing the truth to finally be heard.

10.4 pm

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in the debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel) on securing it and the hon. Member for Bolton West (Phil Brickell) on his previous efforts. I also thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) for his long-standing work in this area. It was helpful that he set out in his contribution that the issue is not new and that similar attempts to use the law in such a manner go back quite some time.

Free speech is not simply a "nice to have"—it is one of the foundations on which free society is built. It allows whistleblowers to come forward, victims of abuse and misconduct to tell their stories and be heard, and journalists and campaigners to hold the powerful to account. However, free speech is not real if it can be exercised only by those wealthy enough to defend it. When people are frightened into silence not because what they have said is false but because of the cost of being right is too high, something is fundamentally wrong. That is the danger posed by SLAPPs.

At their worst, SLAPPs are not really about winning in court but about using the process itself as a punishment. They are designed to make the journey to court so expensive and exhausting that the journalist, campaigner,

whistleblower or victim gives up before a judge ever considers the merits of the case. That chilling effect is not accidental—it is the point. Claims that go all the way to trial can cost an enormous amount in legal fees. Even a defendant who wins can be left with thousands of pounds of unrecovered legal bills. The threat being made is not always “We will win”; very often, it is “We can afford this for longer than you can.” Asymmetry is the weapon.

We have seen that in some of the most high-profile cases involving British journalists and publishers. Catherine Belton and her publisher faced multiple legal actions after the publication of “Putin’s People”; Tom Burgis and HarperCollins faced litigation over “Kleptopia”; and Eliot Higgins and Bellingcat were pursued through the courts by Yevgeny Prigozhin. I pay tribute to those publishers and businesses who resisted that pressure and were willing to pay those legal bills that enabled those publications to survive, when we know others do not.

These cases show how wealthy and powerful overseas actors, including Russian oligarchs, Kremlin-linked figures and large foreign corporations have been able to use or threaten to use English courts to put pressure on British journalists who are investigating corruption, kleptocracy and misconduct. That should concern every Member of this House. We have to have a situation in which journalists can continue to act without fear or favour. We want charities to be able to raise concerns about wrongdoing and survivors of abuse to speak publicly about what happened to them.

I have spoken in the House before about how the UK is the most frequent international origin of legal threats against journalists, accounting for 31% of all such cases. There are lots of things that we can be proud of about our judicial system and its popularity around the world, but that should give us pause for thought. Around 30% of SLAPPs in 2023 were used to prevent reporting of sexual misconduct. We cannot think of that as an intangible threat to freedom of speech alone: it is being used to silence victims of some of the most personal violations imaginable.

The shadow Justice Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for West Suffolk (Nick Timothy), put it plainly in a previous debate on this subject:

“SLAPPs have been deployed by those with deep pockets against company employees, non-governmental organisations, campaign activists, survivors of abuse and people from many walks of life.”—[*Official Report*, 21 November 2024; Vol. 757, c. 423.]

He was right. This is experienced not only in Fleet Street, but by charity workers who have documented wrongdoing at care homes, by campaigners who have published evidence of environmental harm and by the victims of sexual violence.

Let me be clear about the Conservatives’ position: we support the principle of regulating further to stop abusive SLAPP litigation. It is not right that wealthy individuals, foreign oligarchs or large corporations can use disproportionate spending power and the threat of financial ruin to silence legitimate public interest. Any legislation must be well drafted and carefully considered. People must still be able to defend their reputations in court. If a person is genuinely being defamed or false allegations have been made against them, they must have access to justice. I am sure we have all had our own experiences.

During a previous election campaign, a so-called journalist decided that my record as a volunteer policeman was entirely fantastical and made up, and that I was a criminal, and I had to get a solicitor involved to get that taken down. I am sure that we have all had similar experiences.

Clearly, at the moment the balance is wrong. The question is whether the courts should be used by those with the deepest pockets to intimidate critics, bury investigations and frighten others into silence. They should not. It is important, as many hon. Members have already done, to recognise the progress to date. The previous Conservative Government introduced the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Act 2023 that provided the first statutory definition of a SLAPP and created a power to strike out abusive claims at an early stage in cases relating to economic crime. We recognise, as the motion notes, that those provisions were narrow, but they were a start.

The previous Government also ran a call for evidence in 2022, covering the wider landscape of SLAPP abuse, and supported the private Member’s Bill from the then Member of Parliament for Caerphilly that would have extended those protections significantly. That Bill fell before the election and a new version of it was not proposed by the new Government.

The current Government’s record on the issue has been underwhelming. The former Prime Minister, the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), described the abuse of courts by the rich and powerful as intolerable. In October 2024, the Justice Secretary promised legislation as soon as parliamentary time allowed, but it did not appear in the King’s Speech. We then learned that plans had been drafted and were ready to go, but they were reportedly shelved due to fear of the backlash from some lawyers.

Some 111 peers, including eight former Cabinet Ministers, signed a cross-party letter in April demanding action. In its 2022 model law, the UK Anti-SLAPP Coalition set out a possible clear legislative framework and has been waiting for a response ever since. The co-chair of the UK Anti-SLAPP Coalition described action on SLAPPs as “a relatively easy win”, not only for a Government, but for the protection of public interest speech and the overall health of our democratic society. I acknowledge the work done in the other place by Baroness Stowell of Beeston. For some time, the Lords have been an important advocate of legislation in this area.

The point I make to the Government is simple. They do not need to start from scratch; they have years of cross-party debate, expert testimony and the lived experience of victims. They have campaigners, journalists, lawyers and Members from across both Houses calling for action. The building blocks are there, and the Government have accepted the principle. The previous Prime Minister has called SLAPPs intolerable.

The Justice Secretary has said that legislation will be brought forward, but the King’s Speech has been and gone, so what is the Government’s plan? If the answer today is only warm words, I think the 111 peers who signed the cross-party letter, the editors of *The Times*, *The Sun* and *The Guardian*, the National Union of Journalists, the UK Anti-SLAPP Coalition and every Member who has spoken in this debate are perhaps entitled to a little something more. People must be free to defend their reputations in court, but wealthy individuals

[Dr Kieran Mullan]

and corporations must not be able to abuse that freedom and use disproportionate legal firepower to silence legitimate free speech.

10.10 pm

The Minister for Courts and Legal Services (Sarah Sackman): Let me start by echoing the thanks to my hon. Friends the Members for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel) and for Bolton West (Phil Brickell) for securing time for this important debate. I thank everybody across the House who has contributed so thoughtfully to it. I also thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate and ensuring that time has been given for considering this vital subject. It is perhaps all too rare that cross-party consensus breaks out on such an issue, as it clearly has done at this slightly ungodly hour, but it is all the better for it.

Let us be clear: SLAPPs are an abuse of power and the legal system, designed to shut down scrutiny, not to seek justice. As we have heard, they are brought to harass, intimidate and wear down opponents through financial pressure and psychological strain. They are often brought by wealthy individuals or corporations to silence journalists, authors, publishers and academics, and, as we heard particularly powerfully from my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and Solway (Markus Campbell-Savours), to silence ordinary individuals and to seek to exploit the power imbalance that exists in our society.

In this David and Goliath situation, it is not just individuals who lose out. This issue is corrosive to the principle in our society that respects the rule of law and says that everyone should be equal before the law. This is a media freedom issue, but it is not just that; it is about access to justice. When SLAPPs predominate, we all lose out. As we heard eloquently from my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Rachel Blake), they pose a threat to our democracy, because the purpose of SLAPPs is intimidation—to silence critics through fear and to deter public interest reporting through the threat of costly litigation.

As the Minister for Courts, I want to underline that the courts should always be a forum for justice, not a weapon of intimidation. The Government's position is clear: freedom of expression and investigative journalism must never be undermined by abusive litigation. The calls that we have heard tonight from across the House for universal anti-SLAPP legislation are calls that the Government welcome. As others have pointed out, we have begun to take the stepping stones towards that universal framework.

I pay tribute to the previous Government, who put on the statute book the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Act 2023, which this Government began to implement. It was designed to stop wealthy elites from effectively silencing critics, journalists and activists, but, as a number of Members have pointed out, that definition of SLAPPs—defined in statute for the first time to help courts to identify abusive claims—was confined narrowly to economic crime. As we have heard, SLAPPs are used in a far wider context. While it is a vital stepping stone, it is just that. As we have heard tonight, there is agreement that we need to go wider, because many alleged SLAPPs fall outside the current framework, including cases involving sexual abuse allegations, medical

negligence concerns, academic research and consumer reviews. Such things are in the public interest, so we need a wider definition of SLAPPs that goes beyond economic crime and adopts an objective test of what is reasonable behaviour in the conduct of litigation. We recognise as a Government that the test needs to be simplified, so that we can deploy that early dismissal mechanism—that cost protection in the 2023 Act framework—in a more refined and effective way. I and the Government find an objective test attractive. A better definition of harassment, alarm or distress is needed, and we will look to work on that with those who bring forward the private Members' Bills.

Other Members have spoken about the need not just for legislative action, but for a culture change in the legal profession and among our independent regulators. To be clear, the overwhelming majority of solicitors and legal professionals in this country and in this jurisdiction act with honesty, professionalism and a deep commitment to the rule of law. There is a reason why England and Wales is rightly regarded as world-leading when it comes to legal services and as a legal jurisdiction. Lawyers play a vital role in upholding justice and protecting rights, but that should not detract from the high standards that need to be demonstrated right across the profession, because maintaining public confidence requires recognising not just the profession's strengths, but those cases where legal processes are being misused and abused by legal professionals. That is why I welcome the calls for further action and robustness from our independent regulator, the Solicitors Regulation Authority.

We need to look again at the SRA's enforcement powers and whether it has the tools it needs to charge fines and place disciplinary sanctions on those lawyers who let down the reputation of the profession. That culture change is important, and it needs to be a cross-government initiative. Legislation is not worth the paper it is written on if it is not applied properly. That is why the initiative led by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, working with the National Committee for the Safety of Journalists—it brings together Government, the media, the legal profession and civil society—to track the use of SLAPPs and how journalists are being targeted is so important.

The hon. Member for Chichester (Jess Brown-Fuller) asked what work we are doing with the legal profession. I can assure her that I meet regularly with the Solicitors Regulation Authority, and that this matter is frequently a topic of discussion. She asked, rightly, about the Government's position on the forthcoming private Member's Bill from the right hon. Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale). As he acknowledged, he and I are in constant contact. We are working together, because there is much common ground. We see that there can be a good way forward that gets the results that we need on the statute book, and that strikes a coherent balance between the right to access the courts—that must be maintained, so that people can protect their reputation and their right to privacy—and freedom of expression for journalists and individuals, which many have spoken about tonight. Our conversations have been constructive. We are working closely with one another, as well as with Baroness Stowell in the other place. I am confident that we can get a carefully balanced and proportionate approach that the Government can support, and I look forward to continuing that work with him.

To conclude, our focus is on tackling all SLAPPs. This abusive litigation is used to intimidate and silence public participation. It is necessary to tackle it for the integrity of our legal system, to protect freedom of expression and to protect democracy itself. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central and Headingley once again for his championing of this critical issue. I thank not just those in the Chamber, but all those ordinary individuals and brave investigative journalists who determinedly campaign against the abuse of our legal system and for freedom of speech, for bringing these matters to the nation's attention.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call Alex Sobel to wind up the debate, briefly.

10.19 pm

Alex Sobel: I think that tonight's debate has shone a light on the practice of SLAPPs, and that the whole House now understands the urgency with which we need to move forward, and we have two opportunities to do so through private Members' Bills.

All the contributions to the debate, but particularly the Minister's winding-up speech, have made clear the determination throughout the House and across parties to ensure once and for all that those who speak up about these vital public interest issues can be heard, and are not crushed by those with the money and power to use our legal system to ensure that their voices are not heard, so that we can end this terrible practice for good.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House notes the critical threat that Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs) pose to press freedom, public interest research, and the right of citizens and campaigners to speak out on matters of public concern; recognises that SLAPPs predominately target individuals, including private citizens, utilising novel legal tactics, with the weaponisation of libel law and data protection claims and the aggressive use of injunctions, which often come hand in hand with other forms of harassment including smear campaigns and surveillance; further recognises that the anti-SLAPP provisions within the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Act 2023 are ineffective due to their complexity and insufficient due to their narrow focus on economic crime; further notes the Solicitors Regulation Authority (SRA) view that the 'main way to address the problem of SLAPPs is through a robust legislative solution that gives the courts more powers', and that SRA regulation will inevitably be severely limited absent a new law; highlights concerns over the suppression of public interest information and acts of public participation in the absence of a universally applicable anti-SLAPP law; and also recognises the urgent need for the Government to find a legislative vehicle for simple, comprehensive anti-SLAPP provisions that filter out abusive lawsuits swiftly and fairly.

Sudden Cardiac Death: Young People

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Jade Botterill.*)

10.20 pm

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): I have initiated this Adjournment debate on behalf of my late constituent and his family. It concerns a tragic case that raises serious questions about emergency response, clinical training, information sharing, and whether the systems meant to save young lives are fit for purpose.

On 31 January 2024, Adam Ankers, aged just 17, collapsed while playing football for the Wycombe Wanderers Foundation's under-19 development team. He was a much-loved son, brother, friend and team-mate. He dreamed of a career in professional football, and on the captain's armband that he was wearing that day he had written the words "strength, inspiration, leader, desire." Despite the presence of first-aid-trained coaches, despite a defibrillator being brought straight to the pitch, and despite multiple calls to 999, no one recognised that Adam was in sudden cardiac arrest. No cardiopulmonary resuscitation was started.

The coroner found that Adam's brain had been starved of oxygen for about eight minutes because no one had attempted CPR, and heard evidence that for every minute without CPR, the chances of survival decrease by 10%. South Central Ambulance Service's serious incident review reached the same conclusion independently, acknowledging an eight-minute period in which CPR should have started and did not. The ambulance arrived within 11 minutes of the first 999 call, at 2.31 pm, but by then the critical window in which to act, having been led by telephone, had already been missed.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Member has raised a heart-rending and very difficult case, and I congratulate him on that.

The British Heart Foundation estimates that in Northern Ireland one person under the age of 35 dies every month from an undiagnosed heart condition. In view of that, does the hon. Member agree that more must be done to ensure that the public are equipped to perform effective CPR and to use a defibrillator, and are confident about carrying out bystander CPR?

Greg Smith: I do agree with the hon. Gentleman, and I will explore many of those issues later in my speech.

When paramedics arrived, they found Adam cold, blue, not breathing, and without a pulse. They immediately started CPR, and took him to Harefield hospital, with the support of Thames Valley Air Ambulance. Despite the best efforts of clinicians, Adam was declared brain-stem dead on 4 February—in law, that was the moment of his death—and his heart stopped for the final time on 5 February, when life support was withdrawn. His parents, Alastair Ankers and Naomi Wakefield, both work in healthcare. Through devastating experience, they came to the conclusion that Adam's death could have been prevented.

Adam's parents fought for more than two years for a proper, in-depth inquest, rather than the four-hour online hearing first offered. They were represented by a single barrister, paid for by remortgaging their house, against an array of solicitors and counsel for the NHS bodies

[Greg Smith]

and the Football Association. That is not a fair fight. The underlying condition was arrhythmogenic right ventricular cardiomyopathy—ARVC, a genetic heart disease, the first sign of which can be sudden cardiac arrest. This was a failure to identify a life-threatening emergency in real time, and it is why recognition, escalation and response matter so much.

The inquest raised serious concerns about the handling of 999 calls and the ability of call handlers to recognise abnormal breathing and cardiac arrest. Ambulance services in England use one of two systems: MPDS—the medical priority dispatch system—and NHS Pathways. NHS Pathways is used by just over half of 999 services and by all 111 services in England, and it was the system used on the call that day. The inquest heard expert evidence from paramedic David Davis—not the one of this parish—who told the court,

“I am unable to say that NHS Pathways as is currently configured can always properly support members of the public to identify agonal or ineffective breathing. I am also uncertain as to whether NHS Pathways can adequately identify potential out-of-hospital cardiac arrest where there is seizure-like activity at the outset.”

That is about as serious a warning as an expert witness can give. If the system cannot reliably recognise the signs of cardiac arrest, people are being put in danger, and if the public are left uncertain about whether to follow the advice they are given or to act on instinct, that is a public safety problem.

The coroner issued a five-point prevention of future deaths report on 16 April this year. It was addressed to 13 bodies, including NHS England, the Department of Health and Social Care, the Football Association, South Central Ambulance Service, the UK National Screening Committee and Cardiac Risk in the Young. Responses were due by 11 June. There is a pattern in those responses: every organisation expressed sympathy and described some work under way, but almost none attached a date to anything. NHS England says that a genetic service specification is “currently being revised”, but with no timetable. Staff at Resuscitation Council UK say that responsibility sits with NHS England and the Department of Health and Social Care, not them. The Association of Ambulance Chief Executives says that it is

“not constituted to mandate or instruct ambulance services”.

Everybody has pointed to somebody else, and there have been warnings for years about call handlers and cardiac arrest, sepsis and other conditions, with no clear public evidence of improvement. Why?

I therefore ask the Minister to instruct the Care Quality Commission to urgently and regularly assess ambulance services on call-handler skill in detecting and managing abnormal breathing and suspected cardiac arrest. A CQC inspection of South Central Ambulance Service before Adam’s death had already found call handlers struggling to recognise abnormal breathing, with serious incidents leading to patient harm as a result—this is not new information to the trust. South Central Ambulance Service’s own response to the coroner’s report suggests that the public should understand that call handlers follow a fixed script, and that callers may need to act independently of the advice given. If it is genuinely the Government’s position that people in the worst moment of their life should second-guess the

emergency services, the public deserve to hear that plainly, not discover it buried in a filing after a child has died.

Training alone will not be enough. NHS Pathways plays a central role in how millions of emergency and urgent care calls are handled every year, yet there is strikingly little publicly available data on its safety and effectiveness. That is not good enough. Will the Minister commit to a fully independent review of the effectiveness and the culture of NHS Pathways—not simply a restatement that the National Clinical Assurance Group already provides oversight? That body assures the clinical safety of dispositions; it does not examine culture. Its terms of reference are set by NHS England and it reports to NHS England, which is the body that runs NHS Pathways.

I want to press further on one other point, because it speaks to whether the Government can even get the basic facts right in responding to a dead child’s inquest. NHS England’s own prevention of future death response states that Adam was triaged through “Protocol 12, Convulsions/Fitting”—an MPDS reference. However, the coroner’s findings state that NHS Pathways, a different system owned and run by NHS England itself, was used as the script for that call. Why did NHS England’s response point to the wrong system entirely, rather than confront the failings of the system it actually runs? Did national leadership check its own response against the coroner’s findings before sending it? Will it now formally correct the record and explain how that error ever happened?

Moving on, there is the question of how genetic risk is communicated within families. Distant relatives in Scotland had known since 2018 that a genetic variant, PKP2, which is associated with ARVC, ran in the family, but that was not passed to Adam’s immediate family in full until after his death, and only then because Adam’s parents themselves had to go back to that distant relative and ask directly whether there was a letter he had not shared. There was. Once the risk was confirmed, the genetic service’s answer for cascading that information further to the wider family was a brown paper envelope containing 10 photocopied letters, which the family were left to hand round themselves—a grieving family doing the NHS’s job of tracing and warning their own relatives, with no support offered.

Adam’s grandmother had, in fact, raised the family history with her cardiologist at Papworth hospital, who accepted that it was recorded in three places in her notes but said he had not seen it. A 2022 referral from the GP was read by this doctor but never followed up due to an administrative error. Separately, NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, which held the original genetic records, refused to disclose them to the English coroner’s inquest as it fell outside its jurisdiction. The coroner considered applying to the Scottish High Court to compel co-operation, but decided against as it was not a proportionate use of public funds. No family should be told that it is not proportionate to pursue the truth about their son’s death across a devolved border. I ask the Minister to raise this issue with counterparts in the devolved health systems, so that no hospital anywhere in this United Kingdom refuses to co-operate with an inquest into a child’s death ever again.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making an incredibly powerful case. The tragic case of Adam will be felt across the country, including by my

constituents in Sandhurst where we remember the tragic death of Lewis Marsh in not dissimilar circumstances while he was taking part in a sporting activity. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that screening is available for young people who might be at risk of cardiac death. I pay tribute to the work of the charity Cardiac Risk in the Young. Does he agree that we should see more of that rolled out, so that young people, in particular those who might be at a heightened risk, have screening made available so that they know they face that risk?

Greg Smith: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I agree with him on that point and I will come on to screening in one or two moments.

Families should not be left to act as their own caseworkers in the aftermath of grief. We need to review how genetic findings are communicated to all relatives, and how families can be properly supported in doing that work; we should not simply be told, as NHS England and the British Society for Genetic Medicine have both said so far, that a service specification is under review with no date attached.

The coroner also asked whether there is adequate sudden cardiac arrest training for coaches and referees at organised football matches. If young people are taking part in organised sport, those supervising them must know how to respond when something goes wrong. I welcome the fact that the Football Association is exploring improvements and that Adam's parents have engaged constructively with that work, but this should not depend on a grieving family campaigning after a tragedy. It should be standard for every club, not just the accredited ones.

I am also concerned that the English Institute of Sport, Sport England and the Faculty of Sport and Exercise Medicine UK—all recipients of this prevention of future deaths report, and all in receipt of public or national lottery funding—did not respond to it at all. Public funding should carry a basic obligation to engage when a coroner writes to them about a child's death.

Finally, I come on to the point made by the hon. Member for Bracknell (Peter Swallow) about screening, and here there is a specific, checkable gap. Cardiac Risk in the Young estimates that 12 apparently fit and healthy young people die of undiagnosed cardiac conditions every week in this country, with no prior symptoms in about 80% of cases. These are not abstract numbers; they are lost sons and daughters.

The UK National Screening Committee is currently consulting on the evidence, and the Government should be guided by that work. However, I have checked directly what that evidence map actually contains, and I want the House to hear this clearly. Its literature searches were conducted on 10 April 2025. On 24 February 2026, the *Journal of the American College of Cardiology* published the largest and most relevant UK study ever conducted on this exact question. With outcomes from over 104,000 young people screened by Cardiac Risk in the Young over a 10-year period, led by City St George's, University of London, it had real-world data on what actually happened to people after a positive result, which is precisely the evidence the 2019 review said was missing. That study did not exist when the map's searches were run, and I have confirmed directly against the published document that it is not in it. If anyone reaches tonight for the map's citation of an unrelated 2022 cricket

screening paper by a different MacLachlan study, I want it on the record now that that is not the same study.

So my question is direct: will the Government confirm that the evidence map has not considered the February 2026 JACC study, and commit tonight to its being formally included in the deliberations of the committee when it meets in November, rather than filed away for a further three-year wait, as the map's own conclusion currently recommends? If the committee does not recommend population-wide screening, will the Minister commit to implementing the FIFA 2025 consensus statement, which recommends screening young footballers aged 12 to 18 as best practice? This is football's home country and football is our national sport. We should be asking whether we do enough to protect the young people who play it.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): My constituent Sue Carter lost her son Ryan, aged 25, to sudden arrhythmic death syndrome, and her friend Charlie Gradidge lost her brother, Danny, who had been a friend of Ryan's when they were at scouts together. Had they been screened, both those relatives believe that their lost ones would still be alive. They now spend their time fundraising, £7,000 at a time, and they have done this three or four times to enable CRY to screen 100 youngsters and pick up people with irregularities. That is great work, but it ought not to be done by private individuals, ought it?

Greg Smith: I entirely agree with my right hon. Friend and commend his constituents' wonderful fundraising, but his master point that it should not be left to individuals to have to fundraise for that is absolutely correct and well made.

To conclude, I have seven requests: first, that the CQC regularly assesses call handlers' skill in recognising cardiac arrest and abnormal breathing; secondly, a fully independent review of NHS Pathways' effectiveness and culture; thirdly, a correction to the record on which triage system was used, and how that error occurred in Adam's case; fourthly, a dated review of how genetic findings are communicated to relatives, including funding—currently dependent on British Heart Foundation charity money—to embed genetic testing into coronial pathways; fifthly, proper consideration of the FIFA 2025 statement and the JACC study by the National Screening Committee before it reaches its conclusion in November; sixthly, a statutory duty requiring NHS hospitals in one devolved UK nation to co-operate with coronial inquests in another, so that no hospital anywhere in this United Kingdom can again refuse to disclose records relevant to a child's death; and seventhly and simplest, a meeting between a Minister and Adam's parents. The Football Association has already met this family, and I struggle to see why the Government cannot manage to do the same.

Adam's family deserve answers, and they deserve action. Every organisation that responded to the coroner has been sympathetic, and I believe that sympathy is sincere, but sympathy did not bring Adam home and it will not stop the next 17-year-old collapsing on the next pitch this winter. What will stop it is somebody in Government saying, "This is mine to fix and here is the date." Adam's family have shown extraordinary patience throughout an inquest, a prevention of future deaths process, and now this debate. What they are asking for

[Greg Smith]

is not extraordinary: that the Government read the evidence, tell the truth about what their own agencies have and have not done, and commit—with dates—to ensuring that no other family buries a child because a system could not tell the difference between a boy fighting for breath and a boy breathing normally. I look forward to the Minister's response.

Amanda Hack (North West Leicestershire) (Lab) *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I am conscious that another Member has risen, but we have only 10 minutes left. The hon. Lady might prefer to confine her comments to an intervention on the Minister in the interests of time.

10.40 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Mr James Frith): I am honoured to be standing at the Dispatch Box as the new Minister for Health Innovation. Let me start by thanking NHS staff for their heroic shifts over the summer months. I also thank the hon. Member for Mid Buckinghamshire (Greg Smith) for bringing this debate forward and speaking with such deep conviction. I am humbled that this is the subject of my first outing in this new role, and I thank him and other Members for their work in this important area. I know that the hon. Gentleman, through his work on the APPG, already met a previous Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson), in July.

Reading about it and then listening to the hon. Gentleman's account again in this debate, we agree that Adam's death was an absolute tragedy. As a dad, I cannot begin to imagine what Adam's mum and dad continue to go through, and I pay tribute to them. It goes without saying that I would of course be happy to meet with the hon. Gentleman and Adam's parents to discuss what more we can do to change the system, to go through the seven requests in detail, and to help save other parents from the same heartbreaking loss that they have endured.

I am determined that the benefits of innovation are felt first and fastest by patients and families, as quickly and safely as possible. That means accelerating the adoption of technology, digital services and the Government's single patient record, and better integration between our national platforms, so that relevant information about known conditions, family associations and medical history can follow the person across services, professionals and organisations.

Tim Roca (Macclesfield) (Lab): In January 2023, Mia Jennings died suddenly from a cardiac event. She was a swimming instructor, star apprentice, and, by all accounts, a wonderful young lady. Since her passing, her family have made incredible efforts to raise money for CRY—over £50,000—bringing screening directly to communities across Macclesfield. Will the Minister join me in commending Mia's family for their extraordinary efforts in her memory?

Mr Frith: I never fail to be impressed by the sheer determination of humans who have endured the worst of losses to turn such loss into a positive contribution. Without hesitation, I pay tribute to Mia's family for their fundraising efforts.

Done properly, innovation can support more joined-up care and personalised services, and faster sharing and implementation of new guidance and learning.

Let me now turn to some of the specific points raised by the hon. Member for Mid Buckinghamshire. NHS England has made changes to the call script in response to new advice from Resuscitation Council UK, issued in November 2023. That advice was given just two months before Adam's death. It is tragic that it had not yet come into force by the time that Adam stepped on to that pitch. As healthcare professionals, Adam's mum and dad will know that those changes would have given him a much better chance of survival, as callers now receive advice to begin life support, as well as the certainty of using a defibrillator on a teenager.

The hon. Gentleman raised a number of important points about the NHS pathways system. The challenge we face in improving the sensitivity of cardiac arrest identification is to do so in a way that does not generate false positives. Ongoing performance monitoring of NHS pathways finds that the system accepts over-triage; this is an intentional safety feature of triage systems. As the hon. Gentleman knows, at a time when many ambulance services are under such significant strain, the management of stretched resources is paramount.

The hon. Gentleman is right in saying that NHS England works with the NHS pathways clinical team, ambulance services and specialist organisations, including Resuscitation Council UK, to review data and emerging evidence and to see where we can do better.

Michelle Scrogg (Barrow and Furness) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to intervene during this important debate. This is an issue that I care about deeply, both because of the impact on young people in Barrow and Furness, and because I have the privilege of serving as chair for the APPG on cardiac risk in the young. I came to be chair of the APPG after learning about the tragic loss of two Barrow and Furness residents, Wilson Shepherd and Vicky Parker. Wilson and Vicky died only two weeks apart and a few miles away from each other in 2023, and both deaths should have been preventable. I pay tribute to their mums, Lesley Mease and Donna Parker, for their tireless campaigning. Will the Government commit to developing a national strategy for the prevention of sudden cardiac death in young people in places like Barrow and Furness and across the country, bringing together screening with experts on cardiac pathology and inherited cardiac conditions and on the identification and investigation of blackouts?

Mr Frith: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. I would be very happy to discuss those requests in person. I also pay tribute to the families of Wilson and Vicky. The impact of more and more defibs being available is incredibly important, and I am very happy to speak in more detail on that issue.

Amanda Hack: In the summer, I went to Glenfield hospital to talk to staff about the amazing genetic testing done there. Something that strikes me through all the conversations I have had as the former chair of the APPG is how much work could be done in A&E to strengthen that pathway. What can the Minister tell us about looking at ECGs after people have been tested in A&E, which could go back to cardiologists?

Mr Frith: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention; I hope I will cover and do justice to those important points.

NHS pathways also give providers call-level CPR data to support local reviews and improve quality, as well as reviewing data and emerging evidence to see where we must do better. They send quarterly reports to the national clinical assurance group, which is made up of senior clinicians drawn from royal colleges, professional bodies and urgent and emergency care services. These professionals can and often do submit constructive feedback on the way that pathways are run.

At present, NHS clinical staff are trained in CPR, but from April 2027, this will be extended to all NHS staff, including those in A&E. The roll-out of this training will take time, but it will hugely increase the number of people in the country with valuable lifesaving knowledge.

Finally, when it comes to recognising cardiac arrest, I can confirm that the Care Quality Commission does assess call handlers' skill as part of its inspections. We know that no human system is perfect, and I am all too aware that a list or accounts like this can risk sounding defensive, so let me repeat my openness to sitting with the hon. Member for Mid Buckinghamshire, Adam's parents and other colleagues to see how and where we can do better and go further.

Turning to the hon. Member's points about genetics, I am hugely optimistic about the potential of genomics and life sciences over the next 10 years. The NHS clinical genetics services deliver a comprehensive clinical genetics and genetic counselling service for individuals with a family history of genetic conditions, including cardiac conditions. They provide a detailed review of

family history that can direct the diagnosis, risk assessment and lifelong clinical management of patients of all ages and their families who have, or are at risk of having, a genomic condition.

The current specification for the clinical genetics services was published more than a decade ago under the previous Government and is no longer fit for purpose, not least because this is one of the most innovative fields in healthcare. Today, specialist clinical services simply do not have the capacity or infrastructure to contact family members proactively, except where a particularly high risk has already been identified. For me and my work, it is a clear example of why innovation must help connect our public services.

NHS England's genomics programme, working with the genomics clinical reference group, has done a review of the 17 regional NHS clinical genetics services. This has shone a light on the challenges to be addressed for this service to match the Government's expectations.

I am unable to confirm a specific date for the hon. Member for Mid Buckinghamshire, but suffice to say, there is much more to be done before expectations are met by service. On his point about the UK National Screening Committee, it is true that the draft recommendations, which have been consulted on, did not find that the current scientific evidence—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order.

10.51 pm

House adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 9(7)).

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 1 September 2026

[PETE WISHART *in the Chair*]

Face-to-Face Banking: Rural Areas

[Relevant document: Oral evidence taken before the Scottish Affairs Committee, on The future of Scotland's high streets, 8 July, HC 168.]

11.30 am

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the provision of face-to-face banking services in rural areas.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wishart. Banking services in rural areas have been decimated. While big banks make billions in profits, they close branches with impunity, turning their backs on customers and leaving small businesses struggling with the impact. Last year, Lloyds reported a £6.7 billion pre-tax profit and yet in the same period it shut 218 branches, with a further 95 to close this year. Sixty-four per cent of all bank and building society branches that were open in January 2015 have closed in the past 10 years, numbering more than 6,000. In my constituency, which covers about 450 square miles, we have one bank branch left, and I wonder how long that will be there.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Does the hon. Member agree that the scale of closures is phenomenal and that while the banking hub roll-out is welcome in rural areas such as mine and hers, the scale of the closures is defeating that roll-out? We need an increase in the number of banking hubs to meet the demand on the streets.

Caroline Voaden: I will get to banking hubs in just a minute.

Why do we allow closures to happen? Why do the Government not act with urgency to turn around the decimation in rural banking, which has the biggest impact on the most vulnerable people—the elderly, the disabled—those who cannot use online services and areas where digital connectivity is so bad that using online services can literally be impossible? It is simply outrageous that banks have been able to get away with this to such an extent and at such speed. I call on the Labour Government to address the issue with urgency.

People still want to use in-person banking services, even young people and those who already bank online: 81% of UK adults say that they have accessed in-person banking services at least once in the past two years, while 48% say they have accessed in-person banking services every month. It is simply not true that everyone is happy to bank online all the time.

Stuart Anderson (South Shropshire) (Con): In a remote area such as South Shropshire, just over half of my constituents have high-speed internet, so face-to-face banking is absolutely important. We have seen the issue in Bridgnorth, Church Stretton and Ludlow. Does the hon. Lady agree that the Government have to take that into consideration? It is not one size fits all.

Caroline Voaden: I absolutely agree. On my tour this summer, I met someone who was frozen out of her bank. She could not get the confirmation code on her phone because she has no mobile phone signal, so her bank account is now closed to her. She will have to travel more than an hour to get to a bank to get back into her bank account. It is an absolute mess.

Face-to-face banking is simply essential for millions of people and thousands of small businesses across the UK. When a loved one has died and finances have to be sorted out, it is normal to want to speak to another human being, not to a chatbot. People might need emergency access to funds, to make a complicated transaction or to send money abroad—out-of-the-ordinary banking matters that chatbots simply do not understand and cannot help with. Businesses might want to take out a loan, or extend or increase borrowing. Yes, people could do that over the phone, but for many a face-to-face conversation is more manageable. The rapid and ruthless shift towards online banking may suit those of us who work odd hours, travel around a lot and would frankly find it hard to pop into our high street branch, but at the same time, it is potentially disenfranchising millions of people from banking services.

Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): In response to some of the things that the hon. Lady is describing, the last Conservative Government legislated to protect access to cash, but I think we now all recognise the need to legislate for access to face-to-face banking. Will she join me in calling on the Minister to support my In-Person Banking Services Bill to deliver more banking hubs?

Caroline Voaden: I will come on to the legislation passed by the previous Conservative Government in just a minute.

In rural areas, poor internet, non-existent public transport and a higher proportion of elderly residents who are less likely to manage their money online mean that losing the local bank can have a huge impact. The wipe-out in rural areas is mind boggling. A staggering 86% of people in rural areas have seen their closest bank branch—which 10 years ago was within a mile—close. For them, there is no alternative bank to switch to. As banks have closed, the impact of losing access to banking services has been disproportionately felt by those in rural areas, who simply cannot go to another bank in town. Instead, they are left navigating sporadic or non-existent public transport, having to set aside half a day for the outing just to visit the bank. It can be a major mission in a community that is poorly serviced.

Rachel Gilmour (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): Like my hon. Friend's constituency, mine is large at 1,250 square miles and the population is elderly. The No. 25 bus runs every two and half hours. If a constituent needs to bank in Taunton, it takes five hours to get there and back. Does she agree that increasing face-to-face banking services, particularly in enormous constituencies such as mine, is crucial?

Caroline Voaden: I could not agree more. We are facing a perfect storm of decimated public transport; appalling digital connectivity that must be addressed, as we repeatedly say in this place; and closure of banking services. Those three make a toxic combination.

[*Caroline Voaden*]

Consumers and small businesses are frustrated with the service they are left with, as is the case in Totnes in my constituency. In September last year, Lloyds announced it was closing the final bank in town, leaving residents without access to banking services beyond a couple of free ATMs and the post office. It seemed obvious to me that, when Lloyds closed its doors, the remaining banking services in the town would be insufficient and that it would get a banking hub. We have a thriving market once a week, where many people use cash. We have 120 independent high street businesses, an older than average population, very poor digital connectivity and poor public transport to other towns. Not only does the town have 13,500 residents, but thousands more people in surrounding villages use it for banking.

The cash access request that I submitted to Link was turned down. I appealed but, to my huge disappointment, Link upheld its original decision, despite my meeting officials from the Treasury and raising the matter with the Prime Minister.

Becky Gittins (Clwyd East) (Lab): The hon. Lady's description of using Link for a cash access assessment for banking hubs rings true in my experience of helping my community apply for one in the rural town of Holywell, which serves lots of villages. It is not properly understood how important access to cash is, not only for local people—and the age demographic point is also true of my constituency—but for local businesses, particularly rural ones. Does the hon. Lady agree that rural and semi-rural towns should be recognised in the outcomes of the review when it is published in October?

Caroline Voaden: I absolutely want to see that. When Link assesses rural locations, it considers whether alternative access to cash facilities are available within three miles or 30 minutes on public transport. For Totnes, it noted that alternative facilities were available within a 19-minute bus journey—that is on a really good day. But that is only relevant to those who live in the centre of Totnes. If someone starts from one of the many satellite villages that use the bank in Totnes, it is a completely different story. There may not even be a bus to get into Totnes to pick up the other bus to get to Paignton and the bank.

The impact on local residents and businesses will be familiar: queues at the post office, which become impossible in the run-up to Christmas; hundreds of extra customers for the post office, which has no extra space or staff to cope; and businesses less keen to accept cash, because the only place they can pay it in is the post office. If someone is running a shop on their own, as I did for six years, it is impossible to shut up shop and go down the road to queue at the post office, because they have to keep the shop open to make money.

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): Bridport in my constituency is sometimes referred to as Totnes-lite. Like Totnes, it has a high concentration of independent retailers, tradespeople and small businesses who rely on cash deposits. On average, a small or medium-sized enterprise deposits cash about 25 times a year and withdraws cash about 15 times a year. Groves Nurseries highlights the exact issue that my hon. Friend mentions: how to keep the business open, run a successful operation and drive to the nearest town every time there is a need to deposit or withdraw cash.

Caroline Voaden: I could not agree more. It is really important that we protect access to cash. My residents do not want to feel that they are being forced into a cashless society. Small businesses used to use the bank's night safe, but that option has now gone.

Amanda Hack (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): There are lots of similarities between Coalville and Totnes, including a monastery just a few minutes away. The biggest issue is that banking hubs, although incredibly important, do not provide the excellent business banking services that businesses need. Does the hon. Member agree that the issue is about business support as well as cash access, and that we need to expand the theme of banking hubs?

Caroline Voaden: The hon. Member is absolutely right. We have two banking hubs in my constituency, opened before the rules were tightened. People have said to me that even those banking hubs do not provide all the services they need. In a 21st-century banking offer for rural Britain, banking hubs are the obvious solution—rather than a branch of every bank—but they must be competent and capable of offering all the services that people need.

Five years ago, the rules for receiving a banking hub were much broader, and Dartmouth got one just in time. The current criteria for banking hubs are far too narrow. In September 2024, the Financial Conduct Authority substantially tightened the rules, placing the focus solely on access to cash. The current criteria completely discount all other reasons why someone might need to use a bank. They also do not take account of poor public transport and an older than average population. They ignore the fact that banks do so much more than just give out cash.

I urge the Government to expand the rules for granting a banking hub. I have met with the Economic Secretary to the Treasury, who shares my view that the current criteria are far too narrow. I heard the former Prime Minister tell the Chamber that a banking hub can be rolled out wherever a community needs one, but the policy that Link adheres to does not reflect that, so it must be changed. If necessary, we need legislation to make the banks listen. There simply must be a better minimum service coverage of banking hubs across the UK. So many MPs are campaigning for them that it is clearly a country-wide problem. We know that the banks can afford it, so for once, this is not a question of finding the money or funding. They can afford it.

The Financial Services and Markets Act 2023, passed by the Conservative Government, gave the Financial Conduct Authority powers to protect cash access but, astonishingly, did not extend those powers to protecting wider banking services but limited them to cash. Back then, Labour tabled amendments to the Bill to extend the power to protect banking services, but they were not taken up by the Conservative Government. Now in government, Labour has been very slow to do what it pushed for in opposition.

I urge the Government to rediscover their passion for protecting banking services by amending the Financial Services and Markets Bill that is currently making its way through the other place. We must ensure that face-to-face banking services receive the same protections as access to cash, whether that be via banking hubs,

as should be the case in Totnes, or via other means, such as increasing the provision in post offices. As the Post Office is in trouble these days, with many branches closing, surely there must be an all-encompassing solution to make these places viable.

Liberal Democrat peers in the House of Lords have tabled an amendment to the Financial Services and Markets Bill, and I wholeheartedly support it. It would require the Treasury to consider whether assessments following bank closures should extend beyond access to cash to evaluate local community needs for essential in-person banking services when making regulations. The answer is, “Yes. Absolutely, it should,” because banking is about more than just getting cash out of a hole in the wall. I hope that the Government will adopt the amendment.

I look forward to hearing the outcome of the Government’s access to banking services review, which is due to be published shortly. I am sure that it will lay bare the evidence of the real-world impact of bank branch closures and demonstrate that the Government must go further in ensuring that people can access banking services.

Having a bank account and being able to access a range of banking services are a necessity in modern society, not a luxury. The Government must rebalance things in favour of our high streets and communities and put an end to the favourable treatment for big banks, which repeatedly cut their services with no regard for the impact on the lives of their customers. Enough now—it is time that the Government took action to protect and restore face-to-face banking services across rural areas.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Pete Wishart (in the Chair): Order. As everyone can see from looking around the Chamber, this is an exceptionally heavily subscribed debate. We will have to move straight to a two-minute time limit. We shall start with Dr Peter Prinsley.

11.44 am

Dr Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Wishart. Welcome back from the summer holidays, everybody. I thank the hon. Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) for securing this important debate. I will focus my remarks on what the loss of banking services means for rural communities such as those in Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket.

Let us imagine an older resident living in Ixworth, Stanton or one of the smaller villages surrounding our two market towns. A payment that they do not recognise appears on their statement. They are worried that they might have been scammed, and they want to speak to somebody they trust, show them the letter they have received and understand what to do next. For somebody living in a city or a town, that would be a short walk to the nearest branch, but for a person in rural Suffolk, it means arranging a lift, relying on an infrequent bus service or paying for a taxi—only to discover, perhaps, that the bank is closed. That is the reality behind every announcement of another bank closure.

We hear that customers are moving online. Revolut, which is now the fastest-growing bank in the country, has no branches. But the fact that most people use an

app does not mean that everybody can, and it certainly does not mean that every banking problem can be solved through one. There are moments when people need to talk to somebody. That is particularly important in my constituency of Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket, where there are large numbers of elderly residents. When a bank closes, the impact spreads everywhere. The planned closure of the Halifax branch in Bury St Edmunds is another reminder of the services that we cannot take for granted.

I am happy that the Government have a manifesto commitment to working with the banking industry to deliver 350 banking hubs by the end of this Parliament. Banking hubs are sensible alternatives that give customers access to cash and the opportunity to speak privately with representatives of their bank. However, rural communities must be properly considered when deciding where these hubs are located. Residents in rural Suffolk should not receive a second-class service simply because of where they live.

11.46 am

David Reed (Exmouth and Exeter East) (Con): I thank my near neighbour, the hon. Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden), for bringing this important subject to the House. Like her, I have seen many of these problems in my constituency.

We have had a number of problems in Budleigh: every major bank has left the town. Importantly, there are a number of smaller surrounding villages, such as East Budleigh and Colaton Raleigh, meaning that the town supports around 6,500 people, yet we have no access to cash whatsoever. The area is a tourist economy, with people coming down during the summer, but there is no access to cash for tourists. On multiple occasions, people have tried to take out money from the cash machine on the side of Tesco, but the money has simply run out. That is not good enough for a place that relies on tourists. We have seen a similar problem in Exmouth, where our post office is closing and we have one remaining bank. Exmouth is one of the largest towns in Devon, so that is just not acceptable.

Looking at the demographics, we are a largely elderly constituency where people have mobility issues, and access to transport is not the same as in London, Manchester or other bigger cities, so this needs to be sorted out rapidly. We have heard strong calls for a banking hub, and we have been trying to work with Link for the past year but have been rejected twice. From what we have seen, Link does not incorporate the geographic and demographic issues that I have just raised. I strongly call on the Minister to reassess the criteria that Link is using to make sure that constituencies like mine are not left out.

11.48 am

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Mr Wishart. While I welcome the many improvements to the digital banking experience over the past decade, I am concerned that those changes are moving services further away from the most vulnerable and from remote constituencies where digital connectivity is very poor. I thank the hon. Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) for securing this debate.

[Perran Moon]

In my remote coastal constituency of Camborne, Redruth and Hayle, the most southerly Labour constituency in the country, 85% of bank and building society branches have closed. We have just four branches left, two of which are due to close in a month's time, and one of the remaining two is open only on Mondays. We must appreciate that online banking is far less accessible for older people, the vulnerable and the disabled, and that it is not a silver bullet for charities and small businesses that receive and need to deposit cash. I welcome the roll-out of the banking hubs in my constituency, and I look forward to the first permanent hub in Camborne opening in the coming weeks. We also have temporary hubs in Redruth and Hayle and a deposit machine in Perranporth. Planning permission has gone in for a permanent hub in Redruth, which I hope progresses smoothly.

I welcome the Government's review, and I urge the Minister to ensure that rural and remote coastal communities are, for once, at the heart of Government thinking as we consider what further action might be necessary to prioritise digital connectivity and secure permanent banking provision in places such as Redruth and Hayle.

11.50 am

Steff Aquarone (North Norfolk) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Wishart. Making sure that people can still access cash and speak to someone from their bank has been one of my longest-running campaigns in my time working for the residents of North Norfolk. I remember well the trip that the council leader Tim Adams and I took to Acton in London to see one of the first banking hubs in action back in 2023. There were only seven in the whole country then, and I am glad to report that there are now three in my constituency alone.

However, in the coming months I will still be campaigning to secure services in both Stalham and Hoveton, which are without any high street banks. There are clusters of thousands of people in the villages in my constituency who are left underserved because the current criteria do not guarantee them access to services, as we have heard from many hon. Members today.

People in constituencies such as North Norfolk still rely on physical banking and the benefits of handling financial matters with a friendly face in person. A constituent from one of those broads villages told me that she considers herself to be fairly digitally able, but that she finds herself anxious about online banking when large sums or important transactions are at stake. Banks need to accept that is a perfectly reasonable position and deliver reassurance for their customers.

Access to non-digital alternatives should be a right, not a privilege. It is about providing security and comfort for those who are not native to the digital world. It is not just about age; it is also important for those in rural areas for whom digital access is a challenge.

I know that the answer to many of the questions raised today will be, "Wait for the access to banking services review." I want to be able to look my constituents in the face and tell them that the review will make a meaningful difference to them. If the Minister will not give us an early hint today, all I ask is that she gives us

the reassurance that rural communities such as North Norfolk will be well served by the findings of the review and that the concerns raised today on their behalf are being heard and acted upon.

11.52 am

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Wishart. I congratulate the hon. Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) on securing such a vital debate. We are obviously talking about a largely defensive issue—defending cash access for our communities and defending the banking services that our communities need—but we need a much more broad-ranging debate about what the Government could do proactively to bring banking services to more rural communities.

Opening a banking hub months after a community has lost a bank branch will give access to only some of the services that have been lost. Access to cash is great if that is a person's only need, but a banking hub can never provide the kind of support that people might need, no matter where they live. I am thinking about things such as delegated power of attorney or some of the additional support that young entrepreneurs need to bring jobs and investment into rural areas, for which towns such as Haltwhistle in my constituency are crying out. The town has not received nearly enough support from the "Keystone cops" at Northumberland county council.

Given the time available, I particularly want to focus on Haltwhistle. We have been trying to get better banking services in the town since I was elected—it was the subject of one of the first speeches I gave as an MP—but it consistently fails to meet the guidelines for a banking hub. There is some access to cash through ATMs at supermarkets or through the post offices' services with partner banks, but those are not enough. The ATMs are often out of order and the post offices do not meet the needs of the local business community.

I am particularly concerned about the damage that the lack of cash access does to the business community. It does not just discourage entrepreneurs from setting up in the area; it also forces people to use online giants in a town where 30% of the population is over 65. It is also a dispersed community, with the service serving not just the town of Haltwhistle, but Featherstone, Melkridge, Plennmeller, Gilsland and Greenhead. I would like to invite the Minister to meet some of the Haltwhistle businesses that have real concerns about the ongoing lack of access to cash, and to discuss how we can better support businesses in rural areas through better banking provision.

11.54 am

Graham Leadbitter (Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Wishart. I congratulate the hon. Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) on securing the debate. Members will be aware of the half-hour Adjournment debate that I recently led, in which there were 19 interventions on me and the Minister. Many of those Members are present today, which demonstrates the strength and breadth of cross-party support on this issue. It is important to bear that huge cross-party support in mind.

In my constituency, I have communities that are 65 miles from the nearest bank branch. For context, that is the same distance as from here to Hastings or Cambridge.

It is an enormous distance, and people are hours of travel from a bank branch. That includes people who may be seeking entrepreneurship advice, perhaps on the first steps in setting up their own business. They may not know who to contact, but if they are able to see someone face to face in a branch, they can be told, “These are the people you need to speak to. This is how you set up an account”—not detailed business advice, but just the basics of how to access the system. People risk falling at the first hurdle otherwise.

I restate the point about people who may be unsure about digital services, or who are attempting to use apps but need a bit of advice. They might do something on the app and then think, “Oh, I’m not sure I’ve done that right.” They need the opportunity to go into a bank. If someone has suffered a bereavement, they are looking for face-to-face contact and reassurance that their joint bank account will be sorted out. These are critical points in people’s lives.

Finally, many of us will have been at highland games and agricultural shows, where charities hold lots of raffles and collect lots of cash. For people in my constituency, it is hours of travel to go to bank that cash.

11.56 am

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wishart. I congratulate the hon. Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) on securing today’s important debate.

I represent a very urban constituency, but I also chair the Scottish Affairs Committee and we have been looking at this issue as part of an inquiry into Scotland’s high streets. I do not have to tell you, Mr Wishart, that many Scottish communities are rural and/or remote. It is also important to note that Scotland’s population is older, relative to the UK average, and that in many areas, access to reliable internet at a decent speed is extremely poor, if it exists at all. Those factors are clearly very significant, but *The Herald* reported earlier this summer that three in four bank branches in Scotland have closed in the last decade. For remote and rural areas, that means, as we have heard, lengthy journeys and unreliable travel connections to access alternative branches—often for people who cannot easily move to online banking. We have heard from Members whose constituents are travelling more than 100 miles to get to the nearest bank to access the kinds of services that they used to be able to get locally.

UK Finance responded to our concerns by noting that only 2% of the UK population rely exclusively on in-person branches to do their banking, but it was unable to provide us with an equivalent figure specifically for rural Scotland. We were also disappointed at its very poor understanding of how much further—

Mr Angus MacDonald (Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire) (LD): The metropolis of Gairloch in Wester Ross—[*Laughter.*] It is a major town, I will have you know. It has seen its only bank closed, and Dingwall has seen its bank closed, so people have to travel two hours, each way, to get to Inverness city, and there is only one bus a day. That is bringing the town to its knees, and it is happening up and down the west coast. Does the hon. Member agree that this sort of thing is an enormous reason why we are seeing such major depopulation in remote areas?

Patricia Ferguson: The hon. Member makes a very valid point. I know that this issue concerns him greatly, because he has spoken to me about it on many occasions. There is an issue, as has been mentioned, about access to cash. Access to cash is important, but access to wider banking services is also crucial—something that Link acknowledged to us.

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): In my constituency, 89% of my banks have closed in the last 10 years. Alongside that, this year, Barclays has said that it will withdraw its banking van, which has helped to contribute to the provision of face-to-face banking for my constituents. Does the hon. Lady share my frustration and agree that banks need to do better?

Patricia Ferguson: If I can speak for colleagues, I think that that would be the conclusion of everyone in the room.

Importantly, our Committee asked witnesses what they would like to come from the Government’s review. I will briefly run through those points: a clear definition for what reasonable access to in-person banking services looks like, with consideration for geography and a minimum service level for consumers and small businesses, and a clear definition of what basic services should be offered in any in-person banking facility. They also wanted further investment in the banking hubs model so that it can provide more support to customers; for example, enhanced video links would allow customers to speak with specialist advisers who might not be able to travel to the region. That is not a panacea, but those steps might be helpful and I hope that the Minister will address them in her response.

12 noon

Aphra Brandreth (Chester South and Eddisbury) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wishart. In my constituency, there is not a single bank branch. This issue is a particular challenge for rural communities because not only do we lack bank branches; public transport is extremely limited and, in some areas, non-existent.

While many people are comfortable with using digital banking, we should not assume that everyone can simply move online. For older residents and those less confident with technology, the loss of face-to-face provision can be particularly challenging. In rural areas, poor broadband and unreliable mobile coverage only compound the problem. There is real irony in increasingly telling people in precisely those communities where digital infrastructure can be least reliable to rely on digital banking.

Alongside the social impact, there is an economic impact. Many small businesses still handle significant amounts of cash and need practical ways to deposit takings, obtain change and manage their finances. Having to travel long distances to do that means lost working hours and additional costs, as well as greater security risks. Of course, I recognise that banking habits are changing and that alternative provision has an important role to play, but alternatives work only if they exist, are accessible and are sustainable.

We are also seeing post offices under pressure, with local branches closing in villages including Malpas and Kelsall. It is important that access to banking is measured not simply by the distance to the nearest bank branch but by whether people can genuinely access banking services,

[Aphra Brandreth]

and that we take a holistic approach that ensures that rural communities like mine are not simply expected to make do, but properly supported.

12.2 pm

Torcuil Crichton (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wishart. I thank the hon. Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) for raising this important issue, and I welcome Members back after a long summer. First, I have a holiday confession: I spent a week in Spain without touching a euro or a cent—not that I made my partner pay for everything; I just used a digital app. On my return, there was that quaint item in the post: a cheque, which I banked yesterday using a digital app.

The truth is that we are using banks and handling cash less and less, but that does not mean that communities like mine in the Western Isles do not need banking services. This summer, the Bank of Scotland branch in Benbecula in my constituency closed its doors. That followed the closure of branches in Harris and in the port town of Lochmaddy. Those closures have raised concerns about banking services across the islands and in other parts of rural Scotland. My constituents cannot simply drive to the next bank, because it is across the sea on the mainland. In passing, I pay tribute to the mobile banking service, the bank van, which the RBS is still providing in the islands and other parts of Scotland.

The closure of banking services has profound effects on islands, because another truth is that communities in my constituency, particularly in Uist, face a stark depopulation crisis. There is an ageing population and economically active families are being pushed away by unaffordable housing, lack of childcare and lack of digital and physical connectivity, with failing ferries and unaffordable air fares. Without correction, we will lose not just people but communities. Banking services, as well as housing and a growing economy, have to be part of the jigsaw to retain populations.

In cash-heavy local economies, the loss of any branch is important. That is why I welcome the banking services review, but remind Ministers that they must move quickly and make sure that the approach is not one size fits all. Rural and island areas like mine rely on these vital services. Under the rules, an area should have a population of 10,000 to have a banking hub, but the population of Uist is 4,500. We need flexibility in the banking review because one size does not fit all.

12.4 pm

Adrian Ramsay (Waveney Valley) (Green): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Wishart. I want to talk about my experience in my constituency. In Harleston, we have a temporary banking hub that has been operating for some time. I have been working with the community to press for a permanent location to be confirmed, but it is taking some time to do so. In Halesworth, the last remaining banking presence closed in December 2025, leaving the market town without a bank. The post office closed around the same time, and while we have secured a temporary post office, we do not yet have a permanent post office back on the high street. The market town of Eye has no bank branches and was without a post office for two years. It took a huge

amount of work by Green councillors to secure the return of a post office, which was thanks to a local shopkeeper taking it on.

The market town of Bungay perhaps illustrates the biggest problem here. The town once had branches of HSBC, Barclays, NatWest and Lloyds, but those have all gone. Link concluded that Bungay does not meet the banking hub requirements because cash facilities remain available, but access to cash is not the same as access to banking or the personalised support that staff, branches and banking hubs provide. Link also said that a banking hub would not be granted for Bungay because there is one in Harleston, but in rural communities, getting from one market town to another is not always easy.

As the Government review access to banking services, will the Minister look at whether communities such as Bungay, where there is a clear demand for face-to-face services, can qualify for banking hubs even if cash withdrawals are accessible? Can Link's assessment criteria be updated to reflect that, and can the bureaucratic obstacles to getting replacement post offices and banking hubs be reduced?

We have heard clearly from Members across the Chamber how crucial banking services are, particularly to rural communities, to avoiding isolation and ensuring that our market towns can flourish. I hope that Government policies will make that easier.

12.6 pm

Terry Jermy (South West Norfolk) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) for securing this important debate. It is pertinent for the whole of my constituency, but particularly for Thetford where, towards the end of last year, we lost the last two banks in our town centre. Those closures coincided with the loss of our town centre post office, leaving the fourth largest settlement in Norfolk—a town of nearly 30,000 people—and the many surrounding villages that rely on it as a service centre without a single bank or post office.

I am appalled that Post Office Ltd allowed our town centre post office to close last November, claiming that a new one was imminent, only for there to be no provision nearly a year later. With the last two banks and the main post office closing, it is no wonder that retailers told me that footfall was significantly down in Thetford last Christmas and that, consequently, sales were bleak. A temporary banking hub did follow, but there was a gap in services and a lot of confusion due to limited publicity. As time has dragged on, it has become clear that what I regard as temporary is not the same as what Cash Access UK regards as temporary: we are still in the temporary banking hub nearly a year later, with no date set for the permanent site to open.

Of course, a temporary service, and even a permanent service, does not come with like-for-like services. We do not have Saturday banking access, for example, and there is no external ATM—no like-for-like replacement for what we had with a fully functioning bank. When I challenged the decision about the ATM, I was told that a review indicated that there was sufficient coverage. I was highly amused: “sufficient coverage” included the ATM located in the local bingo hall; that is accessible only to members and only when the bingo is open, which they have to pay to get into, and they then have to pay to use the ATM. We must have like-for-like services when branch closures happen.

12.8 pm

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wishart. I congratulate the hon. Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) on securing this debate. The timing is fantastic: we have a dynamic Minister at the Dispatch Box, we have an imminent Government review from Richard Lloyd in response to this and we have the opportunity to listen to this cross-party call for change.

After a review, the Conservative Government recognised the need for cash and legislated for it; the introduction of banking hubs, and eventually cash hubs, was all part of that. I am very proud of what the Conservative Government did there, but, as the hon. Member for South Devon set out and other Members have supported, face-to-face banking is an important part too. I hope and expect that we can move forward in the right way and get the balance right between being overly prescriptive to the banking industry and setting a clear sense of direction to make sure that no one is left behind, as so many Members have set out.

It is a happy coincidence that we are having this debate today, because it is the day that Lloyds customers can once again deposit a cheque at a post office or banking hub. Mr and Mrs Proctor came to see me in Withernsea with a simple problem: they could not pay a cheque into their Lloyds account at their local banking hub, which surprised me. I wrote to Lloyds about it, but nothing came about. I then raised it with the Chancellor, and colleagues from right across the House signed a joint letter to the chief executive of Lloyds Bank. I am pleased to say that Lloyds listened and, as of this morning, people can deposit cheques at those places.

These issues being raised by Members across the House today are important. I trust that given the timing of the Richard Lloyd report, the Minister in her seat will make sure that they are resolved to everyone's satisfaction.

12.10 pm

Jonathan Davies (Mid Derbyshire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wishart. Mid Derbyshire has no banks left. Not only is that a source of frustration for local people and businesses, it really irks them because the Government stood behind the banks with public money during the financial crisis. Now we need our banks to stand with our communities. That is why I welcome the Government's commitment to delivering 350 banking hubs by 2029. Belper in my constituency has one of those banking hubs. It has been a huge success, reporting over 1,500 customer interactions a week, and residents tell me that it has been a lifeline.

The evidence is clear: there is huge demand for banking services. I experienced that recently when I was sent a cheque that was a peculiar shape, perhaps designed specifically so that I would not deposit it. It would not be scanned by the app, so I had to make a trip to the bank. I appreciate that more of us are using online services, but there is still a need for in-person services. Hubs like the one in Belper also drive footfall into towns. A vibrant high street is one of the things that creates a real sense of place, which I know is a priority for the Government.

There are substantial places in Mid Derbyshire, such as Allestree and Spondon, which remain unserved by in-person banking. A recent constituency survey I conducted

drew to my attention local people's demand for such services. That is why I have written to Link on several occasions to ask for a review of access to cash in those areas. However, Link's remit is not broad enough to consider banking services as a whole; it only considers access to cash. My ask of the Government, which I have written to the Economic Secretary to the Treasury about, is to broaden Link's remit so that it can look at how people access services as a whole—not just cash, but advice and guidance when they have concerns. That is particularly important to people in rural communities and those who cannot access online services as many people have begun to do, perhaps because of disability or other factors such as internet access.

12.12 pm

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Wishart. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) on securing this debate. I am sure that many Members have had the same frustrating experiences I have had when I meet a bank that is planning to close a branch. It has all this data and statistics telling us about the number of people who use that branch, but never asks how many people would use it if they knew that they could get access to it. Link also cannot tell me why, despite the measures that are in place, the percentage of people with access to cash in my constituency continues to reduce. It is also important to remember that in many of our communities, the bank branches that do exist often have very reduced hours. Business customers in particular express real frustration to me about that.

I do not want to repeat the things that have been said today, but I want to pick up on scams and vulnerable constituents. Rural poverty is real. We all deal with it. Citizens Advice locally and food banks are seeing an increase in people's need for support. Banks have a responsibility to improve financial literacy. In addition, rural transport is non-existent, as many people have touched on. Over the summer, I went out with a constituent who used a wheelchair. We had to take two buses to make the journey and, to add to her distress, one of the bus's lifts was not working and the whole bus had to decant while she was left on the pavement. We need to remember that it is not always easy for people to get to banks.

I am very conscious that the party that talks about broken high streets and broken Britain is not represented in this debate, but if we think back to the past, the bank manager was someone we knew. I have a constituent who subject to a very distressing scam involving a significant amount of money. I am confident that if they had been going into their bank branch, the staff would have known them and asked the right questions to prevent the scam in the first place—it is not about the person asking for advice. The Government know what they need to do; I hope they get on and do it.

12.14 pm

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Wishart. I thank the hon. Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden)—who faces issues similar to those we have in Cornwall—for securing this debate. Lloyds,

[Jayne Kirkham]

the last bank in Falmouth, closed in March. Big banks have been pulling their branches out of our towns and cities at great speed since covid. From the Moor to Market Street in Falmouth, the most obviously empty and degrading buildings are those that used to have banks in them.

The population of Falmouth and Penryn, plus the villages, is approaching 30,000. We now have a banking hub, which opened when Lloyds closed. However, like the hub mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for South West Norfolk (Terry Jermy), our hub has only a temporary location, in the town council offices, and I am concerned that it does not have a more permanent home. None of the numerous empty buildings in Falmouth—most of which used to be banks—is decreed suitable for a more permanent banking hub. Ours is one of the 230 banking hubs now in the UK. I support the Government's commitment to increase that number to 350—if not more—by the end of this Parliament. I hope that more of those banking hubs find a permanent home.

The Post Office had been the last bastion against that change until now. Customers are directed to post offices by closing banks, but that is now changing. The franchise model that the Post Office has adopted means that it relies on bigger stores to run post offices, which leaves it vulnerable to high street closures. The post office in Truro—Cornwall's capital—is closing in October because it resides inside a TGJones that used to be a WH Smith. Due to the Post Office insisting on finding another franchise rather than a direct store, we have to wait for a commercial procurement process for a host company, which will leave the capital of Cornwall without a post office—we do not know for how long—and vulnerable to the same thing happening again. The Post Office can justify that by saying that there is another post office just under a mile away as the crow flies, but it is a tiny shop across a dual carriageway, and it is in no way suitable to serve the capital city of Cornwall.

12.16 pm

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wishart. I know that you like good news, so I will start with some.

Last week I met Stuart Miller, the chief executive of the Cumberland building society. He confirmed that the building society will keep all its branches open indefinitely—including those in Dumfries, Lockerbie, Langholm, Annan and Gretna—and that it is already seeing an uptick in customers coming from banks that have closed.

My constituency—which, as you will know, Mr Wishart, is larger than any constituency in England—has seen the wholesale closure of all Lloyds and Bank of Scotland branches. We have only one Royal Bank of Scotland NatWest branch left. The branch in Biggar is about to close, and there is no real arrangement in place for what will replace it. There is very poor mobile reception, as I experienced yesterday, and there is no commitment to a free-to-access cash machine.

The hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Jonathan Davies) made an important point, which I have also raised with the Minister's predecessor: Link abides by the rules—it is

a rules-based organisation. In Moffat in my constituency, there are technically two other cash machines—one is in a shop and never has any money in it, and the other is in another location that is not open 24/7—so we are unable to get a free-to-access cash machine in the centre of what is a very busy town. That issue needs to be looked at.

As the Minister and others may know, Henry Duncan founded the world's first savings bank in my constituency in 1810. It seems rather ironic that it was easier to access banking 200-odd years ago than it is now.

12.18 pm

Jon Pearce (High Peak) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Wishart. I thank the hon. Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) for securing this debate.

I will also start with some good news. When Lloyds closed the last bank in Glossop, and Halifax closed in Buxton, Link was very good, and we were able to secure banking hubs for both those major towns. Both those hubs are looking for permanent homes, which we expect to see later this year.

Across the middle of my constituency, the story is very different. In New Mills, there is a community bank that is open for only five and a half hours on a Monday, and there is no access to banking for the rest of that belt. There are post offices in Chinley and Whaley Bridge, but both have been under threat and have nearly closed. We have only recently managed—touch wood—to secure their long-term futures. It is vital that my constituents have access not only to cash, which was the original impetus for this, but to face-to-face banking. That was a big issue for those who came along to hear about the banking hubs in Glossop and Buxton.

The ability to talk to someone about savings, to take hard-copy documents and to talk things through makes such a massive difference for so many people. I very much welcome the Minister's announcement of the review into access to banking, and I look forward to the outcome. I encourage the Government to consider changing the rules applying to Link, to move away from access to cash alone and towards face-to-face services. That is, as we have heard, what our communities are desperate for.

12.21 pm

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): I join this debate to speak about an appalling bank heist. It is happening not just in one town but in rural towns across the country. It is not a vault being raided, and it is not cash being snatched; it is the very banking services that support our most vulnerable being taken away. Too often, people's concerns about bank branch closures are misrepresented as issues of convenience, but they are about lives and livelihoods. Let me offer an anecdote or two in support of that argument.

Jack and Jacqueline Barrass from Honiton have an adult daughter who has significant learning difficulties. Unable to remember her PIN without prompting, or to conduct telephone banking without a parent present, she relies on in-person banking. Virtual services are too complex and leave vulnerable adults like her dangerously exposed to online scams.

Another constituent of mine, who is in her late 70s, had a miserable experience of using a banking hub. She wanted to pay her husband's care insurance with cash.

She was told that, because her local branch of Lloyds bank was closing, she would have to use the post office. The post office said that it could not make the payment and told her to ring Lloyds bank. After using an automated system, she gave up. She went to a banking hub, where she was reduced to tears as the helper again tried to navigate her through the Lloyds automated service.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) for securing this debate. The figures she set out are stark: Lloyds closed 218 branches across the country last year, including in Seaton, and will close 95 more in the next year, including in Honiton, while reporting £6.7 billion of pre-tax profits. That is an outrage, and the Government need to do more than just set up an independent review into access to banking services. They need to ensure that the most vulnerable in our society get the services they need in rural regions.

12.23 pm

Lizzi Collinge (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Wishart.

We all know that there has been a marked decline in the number of bank branches across the UK over many decades. The main message I want to get to the Minister is that the response to bank closures has focused too much on access to cash—important though that is—and not enough on the loss of face-to-face services, as my constituents know all too well. We have had bank closures in Sedbergh, and the NatWest branch in Kirkby Lonsdale closed earlier this year. It had not even been noticed that the ATM was closing, so it took far more effort than it should have done to ensure that access to cash was retained.

Face-to-face banking services offer a lifeline for vulnerable people and protection against fraud and digital exclusion. Some things are simply too complex to do over the phone or through an app. Setting up powers of attorney and delegated authority has been mentioned. Anyone who has lost a partner or a parent knows the complexity of dealing with grief—there might be a mortgage to deal with, money to transfer out of a joint account or bills to continue paying from the estate. Those processes are complicated and upsetting enough without having to explain the situation over and over again to different call centre staff or spending 20 minutes listening to hold music—sometimes people just need to sit down with a member of staff. Of course, rural inequalities compound that problem; people are told to travel to another branch, and anyone who has tried to get around Morecambe and Lunesdale on the bus will know how challenging that is.

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): This summer I did a rural tour in my constituency of Stafford, Eccleshall and the villages. Interestingly, a resident said to me that they had been directed to Stafford, where we are also getting bank closures. That is not a rural area; it is a town—quite urban. The issue they had is that their nearest bus stop was three miles away and they did not have good mobility. Where there are these interconnecting complex issues, rural communities in particular are being poorly served. Does my hon. Friend agree that we must consider access to proper local transport when making these recommendations?

Lizzi Collinge: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I also know that other Members present struggle with broadband access. We are blessed in Morecambe and Lunesdale with Broadband for the Rural North, but that interplay of complex situations can make life so hard for people when they lose their bank branch. In Morecambe, which is a town, we did get a banking hub—I helped to secure it after the shutdown of the Halifax. I think it is working well, but, again, even in a town it cannot provide everything that is needed, although I really do appreciate it.

Online banking is convenient for many people, but it does not work for everyone and everything; people still need face-to-face services like hubs or mobile banks. Services need to be reliable. The people of Sedbergh could tell us what an unreliable bank bus does to a town. I encourage the Minister to continue working closely with rural MPs on the issue, and I say gently that access to cash is not the be all and end all.

12.26 pm

Charlotte Cane (Ely and East Cambridgeshire) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Wishart. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) on securing this debate.

When Dad died a few years ago, I was able to go with Mum to our local bank branch to deal with all the issues that come from a bereavement. Subsequently, Barclays has closed that branch in Ely and its branch in Newmarket. That means that the residents of Ely and East Cambs no longer have that facility available to them. I am grateful that Barclays has opened a hub in Ely, but it does not provide all the services that a bank used to. I have a lot of farmers in my constituency. They need a bank branch that understands their business, the ebb and flow of their cash flow, and, in a summer like this one, the extra pressures that their businesses are under.

We heard from the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Torcuil Crichton) that when he came back from Spain he was able to deposit a cheque online. Community groups cannot do that. As they have two signatories, they have to go to a bank or post office to deposit cheques. I heard on Sunday from someone who had gone in to pay some cash from his community group. The post office refused to take the Scottish notes, as many of my Scottish colleagues will have experienced, no doubt—that is a problem as well. As we have heard from everyone, Link just looks at access to cash. That is not the real problem any more; it is about access to that wide range of banking services.

Adam Dance (Yeovil) (LD): With fraud on the rise—we are seeing quite a lot of it lately—does my hon. Friend agree that all banking hubs should have fraud-trained staff?

Charlotte Cane: I agree. As we have heard already, bank scams are a real nightmare for people. If people can go into their local branch and talk to people who know them, they are much better protected against online scams. I am afraid that we have basically advised my mum not to do online banking, and not to click on any links, unless one of us is with her, because there is too much risk. If there were a local branch, things would be so much better.

[Charlotte Cane]

I call on the Minister to seriously consider widening Link's remit so that it looks at the wider range of banking services and we can keep them in our various constituencies.

12.29 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Wishart, and a big thanks to the hon. Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) for raising this debate. As the Member for Strangford, I am growing increasingly concerned about the effects of bank closures on vulnerable individuals in our rural communities, because face-to-face banking is about much more than simple convenience. Local bank branches have long been an important point of social contact, particularly for older people, those with disabilities and those who struggle with technology. It is a safe place for young people to get sound advice on savings and ISAs, and a place where people learn, get to know the staff and build protection for themselves.

I stress that online banking is simply not a straightforward substitute for an in-person service. Fewer bank services mean reduced footfall, as people have fewer reasons to visit town centres, and the impact of that on the high street is clear. Eleven banks have closed in my largely rural constituency, and as the MP for Strangford, I am deeply concerned about what this means for my constituents and particularly the older people in my constituency, a large proportion of whom rely on cash. The loss of local bank services will mean significantly longer journeys to access basic financial services. More must be done to ensure those in our rural communities are not left behind and continue to have unfettered access to essential banking services. Unfortunately, there is no longer a single permanent bank on the Ards peninsula where I live, and only very spotty internet services. The situation must be reversed.

It is not all doom and gloom: I thank the Nationwide Building Society, which has pledged to maintain all branches until 2030. My own local branch is an example of consumer-led safe banking, and I believe that we must hold main street banks to a higher standard. The banks must do better. Rural constituents deserve the same service as city dwellers, and the rural inequality must be addressed from this house down. For my constituents in Strangford, we need to do more.

Pete Wishart (in the Chair): Before I call the Lib Dem spokesperson, I thank colleagues for their assistance and restraint. We have had 25 Back Benchers in for this debate.

12.31 pm

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the chair, Mr Wishart. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) on securing this particularly important debate. The decline in face-to-face banking services is evident across the country—just visit any high street—but it is felt most acutely in rural areas. While the Government have taken steps to protect access to cash, protecting cash is not the same as protecting access to banking services. The number of bank and building society branches has declined dramatically, from 21,600 in 1986 to fewer than 6,900 in 2025, with more closures scheduled for 2026 and 2027.

In rural areas, only 33% of people live within three miles of a bank branch, compared with 93% in urban areas. When bank branches are closed in rural market towns, it does not just inconvenience people, but can be the difference between a small business thriving and a small business failing.

Wendy Chamberlain: One of the problems we have experienced with the Link criteria is that the town is classed as urban by the Office for National Statistics, but is actually servicing a rural community. That mismatch means that some hubs are being missed out.

Sarah Dyke: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. She makes a very good point, which I wholeheartedly agree with.

Small businesses also suffer from bank closures because they are not able to deposit their takings, transfer money between accounts, manage fraud or get simple advice on opening a business account. This has a large impact on small businesses in rural areas. For local charities, closures can mean the difference between banking the proceeds of a coffee morning and not banking them at all.

This also demonstrates the impact of the rural premium that people in rural communities face when living their everyday lives. My constituency of Glastonbury and Somerton has felt the full consequences of the decline. Many market towns have lost all banking facilities already, and the Lloyds branch in Street is due to close next March. I have collected many signatures from concerned constituents who will be impacted by this change, and I have urged Lloyds—and will continue to do so—to reconsider the decision. I recognise that a community banking hub is expected to begin visiting Street from early 2027, and I welcome that effort to maintain some local presence of banking services, but let us be clear: a fortnightly visit from a community banker is not a substitute for a staffed bank branch. Of course, banking hubs and community bankers do have an important role to play, but they must be integrated as part of the conversation around banking services, rather than being the Government's answer to it.

In addition, the Coventry Building Society branch in Wincanton will close in nine days' time, leaving the town without any face-to-face banking services. Coventry Building Society has informed its members that they will be able to deposit their cash at their nearest branch in Frome, but that is a 40-mile round trip, so the closure will undoubtedly affect both rural local residents and local businesses, who will now need to make alternative arrangements.

Jim Shannon: Does the hon. Lady agree that there is something immoral about banks that make such exorbitant profits money closing branches and penalising their customers?

Sarah Dyke: The hon. Member makes a very good point. For people wishing to access banking services in Wincanton only the post office remains, despite the town's continued growth, with more homes being built. Yet research from the Post Office found that 82% of consumers find it important to be able to access at least one in-person banking service, and the many small local and independent businesses that make Wincanton such a lovely market town will undoubtedly be inconvenienced.

In a rural county such as Somerset a significant number of businesses are SMEs: 78% employ fewer than five people. As the Countryside Alliance outlined earlier this year in its submission to the Treasury's call for evidence on access to banking services, cash plays "an important role across much of the rural economy."

Business owners in rural areas are forced to travel further to bank their takings, deposit cash and obtain change. That reduces their productivity, increases fuel costs and adds to their administrative burden when they already operate on tight margins. SMEs, on average, deposit cash twice per month, but rural businesses may now postpone cashing in until they have more to deposit in order to avoid additional travel. However, that makes them more vulnerable to a growing rural crime epidemic. The total cost of rural crime in 2025 was estimated by the National Farmers Union Mutual to be £41.5 million, and increasingly sophisticated and organised gangs are operating in rural areas.

If rural economies are to thrive it is vital that rural businesses are not put at a disadvantage simply due to their location. That is why Liberal Democrats in the other place tabled an amendment to the Financial Services and Markets Bill that would require the Treasury to assess alternative frameworks, including the post office banking framework, for providing access to banking and cash services.

In many rural areas the post office network has become a lifeline. It is often the only local place to make cash withdrawals, deposits, and everyday banking transactions. During the summer recess I was delighted to support the reopening of two post offices in my constituency. Henstridge post office recently opened after local residents Lesley and Andy Scard and their neighbours Barry and Helen Howlett worked tirelessly to reopen the much-missed and much-needed community shop and post office. In Somerton the long-awaited post office has also returned, based inside the Stationery House, after Malcolm Adams stepped up and refurbished part of his shop to accommodate it. However, many local post offices are still under threat and we have seen closures recently in Butleigh and Charlton Adam.

Following last year's Green Paper, the Government must commit to rural-proofing the post office and look at ways in which the post office can drive wider access to banking as part of the Treasury's ongoing access to banking services review. Without adequate investment post offices cannot replace bank branches. Will the Minister commit to properly rural-proof the post office network so that postmasters are adequately resourced to take on the increased demand for local banking, rather than forced to absorb the cost when they are providing such a vital service?

The Liberal Democrats support the introduction of a fair banking Act to tackle financial exclusion. We have committed to the introduction of a national financial inclusion strategy that would require both the Financial Conduct Authority and the Prudential Regulation Authority to have regard for financial inclusion, such as by protecting access to cash in remote areas and supporting banking hubs.

Of course, the impact of bank closures is compounded by a deeper problem of digital exclusion. Across the country 1.7 million households have no broadband or mobile internet at home, around 2.4 million people

cannot complete a single basic online task such as opening an internet browser, and over 5 million employed adults cannot complete essential digital tasks at work. Basic digital skills are set to become the UK's largest skills gap by 2030. With the cost of living still biting, up to 1 million people have cut back or cancelled their internet packages altogether in the past year, while banks push them to access services online. In rural Somerset, patchy mobile signal and frustratingly slow broadband are not just an inconvenience; they are the difference between banking and not banking at all. Older and disabled residents, and those with visual impairments, are too often advised to download an app as if that were an appropriate solution; instead, it simply causes a further barrier.

Rural communities are not asking for special treatment or to be treated differently. They ask for a fair formula so that they are not left behind. Face-to-face banking, a functioning post office network and reliable connectivity are not luxuries; they are part of the basic infrastructure of rural life. Will the Minister commit to rural-proof banking policy and to bring forward without further delay a national financial inclusion strategy that genuinely supports rural communities? Unreliable access to face-to-face banking stymies economic growth and drives people and businesses out of rural communities. Somerset cannot wait, and neither can rural Britain.

12.40 pm

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): Thank you for your leadership, Mr Wishart. I welcome the Minister back to her position as the Economic Secretary to the Treasury for the second time. It is a great pleasure to see her in her place. Much more importantly, I congratulate the hon. Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) on securing this important debate. The fact that 25 Back Benchers have contributed illustrates just how important the subject is to our constituents. The debate has also illustrated the fact that the nature of banking in the UK is evolving quite fast.

According to data from Finder, just under 30% of adults used online or remote banking in 2006. In 2024, that figure had increased to 88%. It is simply the case that fewer people are using face-to-face banking services, but that does not mean we should get rid of branches altogether. As we have heard, many people still rely on them. We need to strike the right balance between allowing our banking system to evolve with changing consumer habits and protecting those who rely on traditional banking services, such as vulnerable people and local businesses.

Before I go further, it is valuable to provide some context to this debate. According to Which?, 6,871 bank branches have closed since 2015, meaning that 69% of branches closed in that period. Which? also found that 56 of our constituencies, from Norwich North to Mid Bedfordshire, are now without a single bank branch, and that 101 constituencies have just one branch left. The South Devon constituency is part of that category, following the recent closure of the Lloyds Bank branch in Totnes. As the hon. Lady set out, the impact on all her constituents, but especially the vulnerable and older constituents she serves, is significant.

In the increasingly digital world in which we live, it is easy to forget that many people struggle to use technology. The Government's own statistics suggest that 1.3 million

[*Mark Garnier*]

adults in the UK are deemed to be digitally excluded. Although that has decreased from 6.8 million in 2017, there are still a significant number of people who find the digital alternatives difficult to navigate.

David Mundell: Does my hon. Friend acknowledge that some people who would otherwise be willing and able do not have access to these services? Many of my constituents do not have good enough mobile service to operate apps.

Mark Garnier: My right hon. Friend raises another big argument that we could have on the issue of rural broadband, but it is worth making the point regarding internet connectivity that I was just coming on to. I know this is as painful in other constituencies as it is in Wyre Forest. According to the financial lives 2024 survey, adults living in rural areas were,

“disproportionately more likely to report having poor or no connectivity.”

We must also remember that many of our local businesses rely on face-to-face banking services. According to the House of Commons Library, an average small business deposits cash twice a month, withdraws cash once a month and gets change for their cash registers once a month. It is worth bearing in mind that, typically, we have about 3,500 businesses per constituency, so an awful lot of people rely on these services.

I remember the impact that was felt in 2015 when HSBC closed the last bank in Bewdley in my constituency; people were utterly dismayed. Happily, the post office stepped in and was able to help resolve the issues, but since then we have now discovered that that the post office is under threat. We are working on it, but it demonstrates the point that things are changing very quickly.

There is also a more subtle outcome of a sharp reduction in bank branches: the relationship between a bank and the local economy is being dramatically reduced, which has implications for our wider economy. Local branch managers living in a community, providing banking services to local businesses and understanding local economic opportunities as well as pressures, are well placed to understand the commercial value of a loan application by a local business. That is important.

An application for a business loan is usually something that business owners and managers want to get in place as fast as they can, but the reality is that applications for smaller business loans now take an average of nine months to be approved. That is not good for our local economies. Furthermore, banks need to lend money. That is the business they are in. Each loan creates a banking asset. Indeed, 95% of the money in circulation is the result of banks lending it into existence through fractional reserve banking. It is in the interest of both our banks and our economy that they lend, but if it takes too long, others will step in. That can be good, but it can be bad.

Private debt is gaining traction alongside private equity. Meanwhile, unregulated loan notes have been central to some recent mis-selling issues at the smaller end of the market. That is not the fault of the banks, but the lack of local banking services opens doors to alternatives, not all of which are properly understood,

risk-assessed and regulated. However, we must recognise that banks are businesses. I do not want to be an apologist for banks, but they do provide a very important service, which they have to do in a profitable way. They have to make commercial decisions, and they have to consider the footfall in their branches and the take-up of digital banking.

Caroline Voaden: The hon. Member says that banks have to make profits. Last year, Lloyds made £6.7 billion in profit. Does he agree that £6.7 billion is such an incredible amount of money that asking banks to put more money into maintaining services for customers across rural Britain is not an exceptional or particularly demanding ask? The money is there. Nobody needs to be making £6.7 billion of profit a year.

Mark Garnier: As I say, I am not an apologist for banks, and I am keen to ensure that we get a balanced argument. The hon. Lady is absolutely right that that is an awful lot of money, but it all comes down to what should be the right and proportionate response. I do not disagree with her fundamental point, but the question is slightly more complicated.

I will give the hon. Lady an example from my constituency. Not so long ago, I went into a branch of Santander. It was a Thursday, and I was banking a cheque. I was the fourth customer that the bank teller had seen that week. It was utterly dismal, and that was in the centre of Kidderminster. The branch was closed the following week. There are issues for banks—whether they should necessarily be opening branches that could get one or two customers coming in a week. There is a balance to be struck. If a branch is not viable, should the bank keep it open?

We must look at the other opportunities. The last Conservative Government recognised that and were committed to retaining vital banking services. That is why we provided a system of free and convenient access to banks through the post office branch network, why we introduced protections for access to cash and why we enabled the development of banking hubs through the Financial Services and Markets Act 2023.

I am glad that the Government have continued our positive trajectory, especially through their commitment to 350 new banking hubs by 2030, but I also welcome the independent access to banking services review chaired by Richard Lloyd. We are interested to see its outcomes and recommendations, but would be grateful if the Minister gave us a clue as to when it will report. Decisive Government action could ensure support for underserved communities in good time and mitigate the impact of bank branch closures.

This and previous debates on this subject have shown just how much Members support bank branches, especially in rural areas. Members have emphasised how many of their constituents and local businesses still rely on those services, which is especially true in rural areas such as South Devon. It is vital that the Government step up to support communities who lack adequate banking services provision.

The publication of the access to banking services review will help to identify the next steps, but many people will be frustrated that the Government are undertaking another review and not taking action. As the previous Prime Minister, the right hon. and learned Member for

Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), said, people are “impatient for change”. When it comes to this issue, our constituents do not want to wait much longer.

12.49 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Lucy Rigby):

It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Wishart. I am very grateful to the hon. Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) for securing this debate. I recognise that she has been a consistent advocate for her constituency on this matter.

I was going to make the point that access to banking attracts considerable interest from across the House. However, I hardly need to say that, given the number of hon. Members who have attended today, or who have personally raised this issue with me while I have been in this role—or indeed who raised it with the former Prime Minister at the Dispatch Box, as the hon. Member for South Devon did recently.

I shall endeavour to respond to all the points that have been raised today. I am, I fear, under pressure to do so in a dynamic fashion—following the remarks of the right hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart)—so I will do my best.

I am particularly grateful to all those Members who have shared the practical and, in some cases, very personal circumstances of their constituents—that is especially important. I recognise that in rural communities—the subject matter of this debate—the loss of a branch can make everyday banking much harder. That was recognised by the hon. Member for South Devon, as well as my hon. Friends the Members for Clwyd East (Becky Gittins), for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Dr Prinsley) and for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Lizzi Collinge), and the hon. Member for North Norfolk (Steff Aquarone), and plenty more besides—too many to name.

It is right to acknowledge, as many hon. Members have, that the way people bank has changed significantly in recent years. Many customers now benefit from the convenience and flexibility of online and mobile banking. For many people, those changes have made managing their finances easier, more convenient and also more accessible. However, it is important that we recognise that while digital services work well for many customers, many people still need to access banking services in person—a point that has been set out thoughtfully and, in some cases, very movingly by hon. Members today. Those include some members of our communities who are older or may be more vulnerable, and those who face barriers to digital banking, not least because of connectivity—a point well made by the hon. Members for South Shropshire (Stuart Anderson) and for Chester South and Eddisbury (Aphra Brandreth). Many small businesses also continue to rely on face-to-face support and cash services.

Around 3.3 million current account holders did not bank online or through a mobile app in 2024. That is a significant number. As has been detailed in this debate, branch closures can have a significant impact on communities, especially where transport links are limited—even on a good run, as the hon. Member for South Devon put it—and where towns provide essential services for a much wider rural area. That is exactly why access to banking services remains important. As a Government, we are committed to ensuring that people who need in-person banking can continue to access essential services.

As the hon. Member for Havant (Alan Mak)—who is no longer here—recognised, access to cash is protected by the Financial Services and Markets Act 2023, but access to banking services is currently not. That is why in May the Government announced an independent review into access to banking services chaired by Richard Lloyd. That review will assess whether changes in access to in-person banking services are causing detriment. It will gather evidence on the extent of that detriment, and look into which groups are affected and which of those are most affected. As hon. Members know, that review has been gathering evidence from consumers, businesses, charities, community organisations, local authorities and industry right across the UK. It will consider whether current arrangements are meeting the needs of customers and communities. That includes banking hubs and other alternative banking services.

I know that many Members—not least those in this Chamber—would like immediate answers to these questions, but it is important that interventions in this space are based on robust data and evidence, and a clear understanding of where the problems are and who they affect. That is why the Government’s review matters. I am not making a case for it to be a substitute for action; it is the evidence base that will enable the Government to act in the right way. Importantly, as Members have said, the Financial Services and Markets Bill, which is currently in the other place, includes a power that will allow the Government to take action to protect access to banking services. Together, the review and the Bill will enable the Government to respond swiftly and proportionately to the results and evidence from the review.

Graham Stuart: Banking hubs themselves came out of an industry response from the NatWest executive. Does the Minister agree that we must present the information from the Lloyd review to the banking groups, be clear about what we want, and give them the opportunity to respond and provide a solution, as they did with banking hubs, so that we can perhaps avoid a more heavy-handed governmental approach?

Lucy Rigby: I do not want to prejudge the way that we will deal with the conclusions of the review. In response to one of the questions that I was asked, I can say that the Lloyd review’s results and report will be published next month. We can expect it in that timeframe.

The Government’s commitment is further reflected in our support for the roll-out of 350 banking hubs by the end of this Parliament. I am pleased to report that we continue to make real progress against that target. More than 280 banking hubs have been announced, and 240 are already open. As hon. Members know, they provide assisted cash services and allow customers to receive face-to-face support from community bankers representing individual banks. I very much welcome the progress that has been made on the roll-out and on expanding the services available via the hubs. Community banker services now more closely resemble those of traditional branches.

Torcuil Crichton: Island communities like mine simply do not fit the parameters of banking hubs. The population of Uist, for example, is half the size of that required for a banking hub. Will the Minister consider island solutions in the roll-out of new banking hubs?

Lucy Rigby: We are considering the entirety of the geography of the United Kingdom, as my hon. Friend would want us to. His point relates to not just access to cash but access to banking services, and it is important that the Government take action in that area.

Let me go back to the services now available via banking hubs. Customers can now get help not only with account opening and changes of address, complaints and powers of attorney, but with things such as bereavement support and concerns about fraud and scams, which have been raised in the debate. They can also get help with digital banking. We and the industry recognise that digital banking services are not always completely intuitive, so some people may need assistance to use them. Many hubs are piloting further improvements, including Saturday opening hours and customer liaison officers.

A number of hon. Members raised concerns about how decisions are made about the location of banking hubs under the existing legislation, and whether the current arrangements adequately reflect the circumstances of rural communities in particular. Decisions about the location of banking hubs are made independently by Link, following an access to cash assessment. Link assesses a range of criteria and factors, including population size, vulnerability, transport links, the local retail environment and post office facilities. There is a real strength of feeling across the House about how those criteria are applied, and many feel that there should be a wider consideration of access to face-to-face banking services, beyond access to cash alone—

Motion lapses (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Science Facilities and Laboratories

1 pm

Pete Wishart (in the Chair): I will now call Alison Hume to move the motion. I hope that anybody seeking to speak has already asked permission from the hon. Member in charge of this debate, as is the convention. There will then be an opportunity for the Minister to respond.

1.1 pm

Alison Hume (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the future of science facilities and laboratories.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Wishart. Few debates can boast such an out-of-this-world subject as the search for dark matter; it is up there with the incredible physics of the Higgs boson, black holes and the big bang, and it is a field in which the UK has traditionally led the world.

My own interest in particle physics was sparked when I came up with the idea for a children's science fiction television show called "The Sparticle Mystery", which follows a group of children after an experiment at a cut-price British version of the large hadron collider goes wrong, sending everyone aged 15 and over into a parallel dimension—a kind of "Home Alone" planet Earth.

During the development of the series, I immersed myself in physics, spending lots of time researching at laboratories and science facilities, including visiting the ATLAS—A Toroidal LHC Apparatus—project at CERN in Switzerland and filming a series finale inside the ISIS science facility near Didcot. Little did I know that my adventures would continue when I became the Member of Parliament for Scarborough and Whitby; the incredible Boulby underground laboratory is located just on the edge of my patch—and just on the edge of making discoveries that will change our understanding of the universe.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady on securing this debate. This is an immense issue: it is about providing the world-class science facilities and laboratories of tomorrow. Does she agree that, when it comes to spreading the moneys across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University in Belfast should be key places to ensure that money is available? The NHS, future science, apprenticeships and helping agri-tech—all those things come off the back of what she is saying.

Alison Hume: I thank the hon. Member; he is right that those areas of academic expertise must continue to be a hotbed for physics talent.

Boulby underground laboratory, nestled between Saltburn and Whitby on the north-east coast of England, is the UK's only deep underground science facility. Located 1.1 km beneath the Earth's surface, in a working polyhalite and rock-salt mine, it is the deepest laboratory in the UK and one of only a dozen such facilities worldwide. I will never forget visiting the lab for the first time and descending for what seemed like an hour—it was actually about eight minutes—in a tiny lift towards

the centre of the Earth, before walking out towards a pristine laboratory sitting in the dusty, science-fiction-like moonscape.

Inside, Boulby lab is home to an extraordinary range of research, from environmental science and biology to quantum physics. The lab's greatest advantage lies in its depth: a quiet place in the universe, where studies can be carried out almost entirely free from interference from natural background radiation, including the search for dark matter.

Peter Fortune (Bromley and Biggin Hill) (Con): I commend the hon. Lady on securing this debate. I share her passion for physics, although I make this point objectively: some of the proposed £160 million-plus reduction in funding will reduce the ability of younger people to learn a passion for physics. That is something we can all get together to encourage the Government to look at again.

Alison Hume: I thank the hon. Member for making that important point. We lead the way in physics in the UK, and we want to continue that and continue to inspire young minds.

Jonathan Davies (Mid Derbyshire) (Lab): I draw colleagues' attention to the fact that I chair the all-party parliamentary group on UNESCO world heritage sites. There is a question over the future funding of Jodrell Bank at the moment. Will my hon. Friend join me in asking the Minister to look at what we can do to ensure that that site, which has inspired many young people, will continue to be funded properly and retain its UNESCO designation?

Alison Hume: I thank my hon. Friend for making that important point. I will come to Jodrell Bank later in my speech; I completely agree that it needs to be saved.

Dark matter is thought to make up most of the matter in the universe. It has played a major role in shaping the cosmos, but despite decades of effort it is yet to be detected. Discovering what dark matter is made of will be one of the biggest discoveries of our time. The Boulby lab has been a frontrunner in the race since the 1980s. It is the birthplace of the ZEPLIN technology that is now used in the world's leading dark matter experiments. I want to welcome some of the incredible scientists working at the Boulby underground laboratory to the Public Gallery today, and thank them for making the journey down to Westminster.

In recent years, Boulby has been preparing to host a massive international experiment seeking to detect dark matter. This is not the stuff of films and TV—it is really happening. It is called the XLZD, and it is a \$1 billion international science project that would build upon the legacy of ZEPLIN to create the most sensitive dark matter detector ever constructed. Only a small number of underground laboratories worldwide are considered capable of hosting such an experiment, and Boulby is one of them.

Kevin Bonavia (Stevenage) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for bringing this important debate to us today. In Stevenage we have a leading life sciences sector. Our biggest employer is GSK. It was helped to set up there by the council and the Government in the 1990s. However,

in the last few weeks it has announced it will be leaving Stevenage, despite plans to expand in the last couple of years. Will my hon. Friend join me in asking the Minister to do all that we can to make the most of that amazing life sciences site that GSK is leaving behind?

Alison Hume: I thank my hon. Friend for making that important point. I am sure the Minister is aware that many hon. Members here are fighting for fantastic facilities and laboratories in their constituencies.

Preparations for the experiment have been under way since 2020. Boulby has attracted millions of pounds in investment, but hosting the experiment in the UK is still not guaranteed. Boulby is competing against underground labs across the world. In that context, the lab's worst fears were realised in July this year, as the Science and Technology Facilities Council prioritisation review proposed cutting Boulby's operating budget by a massive 40%, creating a perception of uncertainty about continued support for XLZD. Boulby has substantial fixed operating costs, so the bulk of required savings might have to be found from cuts to the staffing budget, potentially leading to redundancies at the lab as well as limiting opportunities for future expansion. The cuts are so drastic that they pose an existential threat to Boulby's future—and, as hon. Members are aware, the issue goes far beyond Boulby. STFC's prioritisation review has proposed sweeping cuts across the board for fundamental physics, nuclear physics and astronomy.

Barry Gardiner (Brent West) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a superb case for the importance of funding for her deep earth facility. I had the privilege of going to the National Oceanography Centre's deep oceans facility, and the innovative science there on carbon sequestration is superb. Does she agree that the sustainability of that world-leading science is dependent on long-term funding certainty? The chop and change that goes on is damaging not just to the world-class science that we do in this country, but to our economy and our skills base.

Alison Hume: My hon. Friend makes a really important point. Certainty of funding is so important. We risk cutting off everything at the knees and, with our plan for growth, that is not something that the Labour Government can afford to do.

The cuts are £162 million in cumulative savings by 2030. Brian Cox, TV scientist and professor at the University of Manchester, has likened the impact of these cuts to the "destruction of the future". His concerns have been echoed by academics across the field, who fear that physics departments at universities will close. Professor Jeff Forshaw, also at Manchester, has said that these cuts are "annihilating" a field of research that inspired young people into physics.

Multiple physics facilities carrying out world-leading research now face serious funding challenges or the threat of closure. Diamond Light Source and the ISIS Neutron and Muon Source are facing cuts of 15% apiece. The Jodrell Bank observatory, home to the UK's largest radio telescope for nearly 70 years, faces closure as early as 2028.

Sarah Russell (Congleton) (Lab): The Jodrell Bank observatory has been doing fantastic, cutting-edge physics in my constituency and that of my hon. Friend the

[Sarah Russell]

Member for Macclesfield (Tim Roca) for a very long time, but it is regularly updated and retains its reputation for cutting-edge science. Does my hon. Friend agree that it would be an absolute travesty if its funding were withdrawn?

Alison Hume: My hon. Friend is absolutely right—it would be catastrophic. I completely agree with her. Other hon. Members have also mentioned Jodrell Bank. These cuts are threatening some of the UK's most important scientific assets and arguably the entire discipline of UK physics.

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour for giving way. I am immensely proud to represent Boulby, which sits on the cusp of our two constituencies, and to have joined her on the incredible visit to that facility a few months ago. As she says, it is the UK's only deep underground science laboratory, providing skilled jobs in a region that desperately needs them, yet it faces a 40% cut to its operating budget. That is not equitable with cuts across the country. Does she agree that, where STFC needs to make savings, it needs to do so in an equitable way, to ensure that we are not cutting from the regions that have already suffered the most?

Alison Hume: My hon. Friend and constituency neighbour is absolutely right in that important intervention. The constituency he represents has some of the most deprived communities in the UK and would benefit most from the expansion of the Boulby lab.

Involvement in LHCb, the large hadron collider beauty experiment—one of the major experiments at CERN's large hadron collider—is also in doubt. STFC has cancelled UK participation in the next upgrade programme because of cost pressures, despite the UK being a major contributor. It is not clear to scientists working on the project exactly why it has been deprioritised.

Cancelling projects and closing facilities will lead to the loss of talent and reduce UK competitiveness in high-precision science and international collaborations. There is also the negative impact it will have on the success of Labour's industrial strategy. The proposed expansion at Boulby and the construction of the XLZD will generate substantial economic benefits for the north-east, North Yorkshire and the UK.

Tristan Osborne (Chatham and Aylesford) (Lab): My hon. Friend makes an outstanding point about the multiplier effect on surrounding economies. I have had the pleasure of visiting Sussex University and its leading quantum lab. The proposal it has put together would make a net contribution not only to the local economy, but in terms of direct drivers to jobs linked to airports and other transport corridors. Does my hon. Friend agree that cuts to simple science budgets have a material impact on communities, and also a multiplier effect?

Alison Hume: I agree with my hon. Friend entirely. This is about looking forward and investing in the future.

Independent analysis by Arup shows that the proposed expansion of the Boulby site and the construction of XLZD would bring approximately £587 million to the UK economy through the creation of skilled jobs, by increasing supply chains in advanced manufacturing

and by attracting scientific investment into the region. There are also plans for a visitor centre to showcase the north-east's remarkable contribution to our understanding of the universe, which could attract hundreds of thousands of visitors annually.

Although the Government are increasing spending on research and development, I would be grateful if the Minister could answer a couple of questions. First, why does the facility in the north-east face more than double the cuts faced by facilities in the south? Will she set out how the Department, UK Research and Innovation and the STFC assessed the relative value of investment in fundamental physics compared with other areas of research and development? Will she publish the evidence that underpins the decisions? Has the Minister looked at the cumulative impact of the cuts on physics as a discipline in the United Kingdom?

On Boulby specifically, will the Minister please explain how the Government have assessed the laboratory's unique strategic position? What weight has been given to the projected economic impact of the expansion of the Boulby lab? Finally, will the Minister explicitly restate the Government's interest in and support for the XLZD project? It is a project of such international stature that it could deliver the discovery of dark matter, which would be worthy of a Nobel prize.

I appreciate that I have asked my hon. Friend the Minister a lot of questions, but I assure her that they pale in comparison with the number of questions physicists ask themselves every day. Science facilities such as Boulby are places where discoveries are made, young people are inspired, international partnerships are forged and the foundations of future industries are laid. With XLZD at Boulby, we have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for the UK to make one of the biggest discoveries of our age in the search for dark matter. It offers transformational economic opportunity for the north-east, and would strengthen our industrial strategy, skills base and reputation on the world stage. I therefore urge the Minister to recognise the exceptional national value of Boulby underground laboratory and other UK science facilities and laboratories, and to ensure that Britain remains at the forefront of scientific discovery for decades to come.

1.16 pm

The Minister for the Future of Work (Kate Dearden): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Wishart.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Alison Hume) on securing this really important debate on the future of the UK's science facilities and laboratories. She has been a strong advocate for the Boulby laboratory, which is just outside her constituency, and I thank her for her brilliant speech, which reflected her creative and unique insight into this vital sector. It is always great to hear about her work before she entered this place, and her adventures—it is pretty cool. I welcome and thank the incredible scientists from Boulby underground laboratory and the many other attendees who have joined us in the Gallery for this debate—it is a pleasure to see you all.

The Government are committed to ensuring that the UK remains a leading nation in science and technology, which are fundamental to our economy, our public services and our national security. On average, every £1 of public research and development investment leverages

£2 of private investment and generates £8 in net economic benefits for the UK in the long term. That investment is about backing the people, facilities and technologies that turn excellent research into practical benefits.

Tim Roca (Macclesfield) (Lab): My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Sarah Russell) talked powerfully about it being a travesty if e-MERLIN and Jodrell Bank were to cease scientific endeavour. Will the Minister take back from this place to her colleagues in the Department the strong message that we want a viable future for the continuation of amazing science at Jodrell Bank, and in particular the Bernard Lovell telescope and the e-MERLIN network?

Kate Dearden: I thank my hon. Friend for that important intervention, and also thank him, my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Sarah Russell) and the many other colleagues who have raised that issue, not just today but with the Government and Ministers consistently, for their continued campaigning and advocacy. I will take this opportunity to address the concerns about the future of the world-famous Jodrell Bank site, which have been heard loud and clear—I will feed them back to the relevant Minister. UKRI has confirmed that its funding for the e-MERLIN network, which makes use of telescopes at Jodrell Bank, will wind down in 2028. However, I want to provide reassurance that Jodrell Bank will continue to be a significant centre for radio astronomy, science and research, with a strong future ahead.

Andrew Cooper (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): Is the Minister aware that staff at the Daresbury laboratory, not too far away from Jodrell Bank, have been asked to mothball CLARA—the compact linear accelerator for research applications—which is a 250-mega-electronvolt electron accelerator, alongside the biology lab that sits above it? Incidentally, that lab has never been used, as it has only just been put in. Is the Minister prepared to meet me and other Cheshire colleagues, because I am really concerned about what is happening to science in the north Cheshire corridor? It looks to me like the STFC is circling the wagons around facilities in the south of England at the expense of those in the north, so I would be interested in meeting my hon. Friend or the relevant Minister to look at how we can reverse some of the damaging cuts.

Kate Dearden: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that important issue on behalf of his constituency and the sector more widely. I have heard him loud and clear and will feed that back to the Minister for Science, Innovation and Investment, who I am sure will be happy to discuss it further with my hon. Friend and any other colleagues who are keen to be kept in the loop.

I have mentioned how investment that backs people, facilities and technologies can not only turn research into practical benefits but strengthen our economy and support the high-skilled jobs that colleagues have mentioned throughout the debate. Such investment is vital to keeping the UK at the forefront of global science. The sites across the country are essential to that work, which is why I am proud that the Government have put forward the largest ever investment in research and development, with a record £86 billion to be invested between 2026-27 and 2029-30.

Some £38.6 billion of that investment will go to UK Research and Innovation, the UK's largest research funder, with a mission to advance knowledge, improve lives and drive growth. UKRI supports the full spectrum of research and development, from curiosity-driven discovery research through to business innovation and commercialisation.

Barry Gardiner: The Minister will know that the grant structure on which UKRI is based gives out grants for a maximum of three to five years. Very few are for five years—most are for three years or under—yet the sort of long-term scientific development that my hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Alison Hume) elaborated on depends on certainty into the future. Will the Minister and her colleagues give real consideration to changing UKRI's structure so that there is long-term funding certainty for fundamental science in this country?

Kate Dearden: I thank my hon. Friend for his work in this area. I have heard his reflections and his desire to see longer-term certainty, which I will feed back to the relevant Minister and the Department.

The benefits of our investment, building on the previous funding that I mentioned, will be felt right across the UK. Particularly in respect of this debate and the Yorkshire and the Humber region—I am a Yorkshire MP myself—UKRI's £580 million investment in 2023-24 was significant.

My hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby mentioned a long list of vital science facilities, including Boulby, Diamond, ISIS and Jodrell Bank, which we have touched on, and I completely agree that they are not merely items on a balance sheet; they are national assets. Boulby is unique in that respect, as it is the UK's deepest underground science facility. Located more than a kilometre beneath Yorkshire in a working mine, its depth and the surrounding salt rock mean that it is shielded from radiation, enabling world-leading research in areas such as dark matter and quantum technologies. I hope to answer many of my hon. Friend's questions throughout my speech.

Our science and research ecosystem has lots of important research infrastructure. The UK's science and technology successes are built not only on researchers making groundbreaking discoveries, or engineers developing new technologies, but on our world-class R&D facilities and capabilities—the essential tools that our research communities use every day. Those include the facilities that allow us to explore the building blocks of matter and the computing systems that allow scientists to turn raw data into models of the universe or treatments for disease, as well as the international collaborations that enable us to tackle grand scientific challenges that no country can solve alone.

Our research infrastructure makes the UK's R&D achievements possible. The facilities are not only tools for research and industry but national assets, as I have mentioned. The landscape is changing rapidly. Facilities are becoming more connected and data-intensive than ever before, researchers are increasingly collaborating across borders, and the most powerful scientific instruments are often of a scale, cost and geographical reach beyond the capacity of any one nation to deliver alone. To ensure that our research facilities are ready for tomorrow,

[*Kate Dearden*]

we must lay the groundwork today by supporting the facilities that allow researchers and innovators to produce the most insightful and impactful research.

I will briefly highlight some examples of the impact of our facilities on our understanding of science and the lives of people across the UK. As we heard from colleagues, the Diamond Light Source at Harwell in Oxfordshire is the UK's national synchrotron. Currently undergoing a £500 million upgrade, Diamond generates intense beams of X-rays, allowing research to examine materials in extraordinary detail. This enables discovery and innovation in fields ranging from medicines and battery technology to advanced manufacturing and aerospace, including for companies such as Rolls-Royce. We are also a leading partner in major international facilities, sharing the costs and benefits of scientific endeavours that, as I have said, no country could undertake alone.

Also included in respect of our investment, and the Government's absolute commitment to the sector, is the Square Kilometre Array observatory, headquartered in the UK at Jodrell Bank. I will come to that in just a second, but we are investing more than £300 million over 10 years to build the world's largest radio telescope, enabling scientists to study the cosmos with unparalleled sensitivity, from the first stars and galaxies to signs of life beyond Earth.

Peter Fortune: The issue underlying a lot of this is the £160 million saving. My understanding is that that saving has come about because a previous agreement to match expanding costs for research has been reversed. Perhaps the Minister could tell me, or could ask the relevant Minister to let me know, who took the decision not to match those costs, which has resulted in the need for £160 million of savings.

Kate Dearden: I am coming to the difficult choices about how to prioritise funding. We can of course follow up with any further information that the hon. Gentleman requires from the relevant Minister.

Ensuring that the UK remains at the forefront of global research requires not just record levels of investment, but difficult choices about how to prioritise funding. When a country has world-class research projects across so many disciplines and sectors, prioritisation is unavoidable. The fact that we cannot fund every excellent idea is a reflection of the depth, ambition and international competitiveness of UK research and innovation. But, of course, our responsibility is to ensure that the infrastructure we do support continues to deliver the greatest scientific, economic, industrial and societal benefit for the country, including in the places we have heard about today. That means taking long-term decisions.

Alison Hume: I thank the Minister for being generous in giving way—I am aware of the time. Given the Government's stated commitment to place-based growth, regional rebalancing and the growth mission, how can a reduction in support for Boulby laboratory be reconciled with their objectives?

Kate Dearden: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention and for the passion we have heard in the debate, as well as her desire to fight for Boulby, her constituents and the sector as a whole. The Minister for Science has written to her today and will be happy to discuss with her the budget pressures and the difficult decisions that UKRI has taken to ensure that STFC remains financially sustainable and is able to support world-leading science in the future.

Luke Myer: The Minister knows that I am a supporter of her work to champion the north in the Department. Given that the team from Boulby have travelled all this way, will she take a couple of seconds out of her day to meet them after the debate and discuss the challenges they are experiencing? I know she is not the Minister directly responsible, but I am sure they would appreciate it.

Kate Dearden: Of course—that would be a pleasure and I would be honoured to do so. I reiterate that Boulby will remain an internationally significant research facility. It will continue to support a range of world-leading underground science and provide highly skilled employment in the region, with the potential to play an even larger role in the UK's scientific future.

My hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby highlighted in her speech the challenges with the operational budget at Boulby. UKRI has also announced funding that will sustain the UK's continued engagement with the international XLZD dark matter experiment, which my hon. Friend mentioned, beyond the current £7.8 million infrastructure fund grant, which ends in 2027. Boulby will remain well placed to pursue future funding opportunities alongside its outstandingly significant work.

I thank colleagues again for being in Westminster Hall to support this debate. I want to offer reassurances that UKRI and STFC are engaging directly with facilities, laboratories, partners, staff and trade unions throughout the implementation of the saving plan, including in respect of any potential workforce implications. However, to be clear, no staff exits are expected this financial year, and formal processes will follow where needed.

The UK has an extraordinary scientific heritage, but our task today is not merely to celebrate past achievements but to ensure that the next generation of discoveries and the innovations they will enable happen here. The Government will achieve that goal, not just through record investment in public R&D but through responsible stewardship of our national assets, international co-operation, and taking the difficult decisions necessary to ensure we have a portfolio of research facilities that are fit for the future, because the future of British science will depend not only on the brilliance of our researchers but on the strength of the infrastructure that supports them. I once again thank all colleagues for being here to support the debate.

Question put and agreed to.

1.30 pm

Sitting suspended.

UK Financial Services

[DEREK TWIGG *in the Chair*]

4.30 pm

Callum Anderson (Buckingham and Bletchley) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the future of UK financial services.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. Before turning to the topic of this debate, I congratulate the Economic Secretary to the Treasury, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Northampton North (Lucy Rigby), on her reappointment. In her first spell in the position, she was a formidable advocate for UK financial and professional services, so we are all very fortunate that we have her back for a second act. I wish her well for the time ahead.

Today, I want to make a positive case for the future of the UK's financial services sector. I will say why it should lie at the very heart of this Government's strategy for backing Britain's wealth creators, standing behind the entrepreneur with a bright idea and ensuring that we channel capital toward the innovators and builders who will drive growth in every part of this country, while also ensuring that the sector provides people, wherever they live and whatever their circumstances, with the tools to participate fully in a modern economy and a modern society through a bank account that works, savings and investments that build real financial security, and insurance that protects families, homes and businesses when life throws its inevitable curveballs at them.

With financial and professional services employing around one in every 13 workers across the UK, two thirds of them outside London, they are no longer a niche interest in the UK or a City of London story alone. They are a genuine national endeavour. When I meet in Parliament the people I represent from Buckingham and Bletchley—from the owners of small businesses to the families who I also meet on the doorstep and the staff at Allica Bank or Santander UK, both of which have their headquarters in Milton Keynes while serving customers the length and breadth of Britain—I see the same thing: a national industry built for all of us. In the time available, I will set out five challenges and opportunities facing the sector in the years ahead.

First, there is the need to go even further in mobilising a greater share of domestic capital toward domestic assets, in particular high-growth businesses and especially those aligned with the eight sectors set out in the industrial strategy and infrastructure development. I welcome the Mansion House speech in July by the former Chancellor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West and Pudsey (Rachel Reeves), and the progress that this Government have made against the financial services growth and competitiveness strategy one year after its publication, building on the progress made by the previous Government. We have seen that £28 billion of equity capital has been raised in London since the start of last year. The Pension Schemes Act 2026 was also passed in the last parliamentary Session, which is expected to deliver an additional £29,000 in pension savings over an average career. Eight firms have now been authorised to provide targeted support to savers, benefiting around

18 million consumers—our constituents—over the coming decade. All of that is welcome progress in turning the overly cautious British saver into the responsible investor, but I believe that we can—indeed, must—go even further in unlocking our largest pools of pension, insurance and retail capital.

When we were debating the Pension Schemes Act earlier this year, the case against mandating UK investment rested on two grounds: first, the principle that Government should not tell institutions or individuals where and how to invest; and, secondly, that if UK investments were good enough, funds would already be backing them. However, what I think that argument missed is the trend towards passive global indexing that we have seen over the last few decades, which has mechanically reduced UK equity allocations to around 4%, regardless of the underlying fundamentals. I suspect that without further intervention, that trend will increase, leading to further declines in the years ahead. That risks creating a self-reinforcing cycle of declining investment in British companies by funds, regardless of where they are domiciled, depriving UK plc of domestic patient capital, and it would ultimately weaken our public equity markets and the strength of the London stock exchange.

In the light of that, I encourage the Government to look again at how they can actively incentivise our largest pools of domestic capital. For instance, we could build on the Pension Schemes Act by requiring default pension funds to adopt a UK-weighted approach to listed equity, with UK equities making up, say, 20% to 25% of listed holdings in order for them to continue enjoying the various tax reliefs on offer, but giving funds and individual savers full agency to opt out. According to the New Financial think-tank, that could unlock as much as £75 billion of additional investment into UK companies. I am aware that this idea is held by a number of right hon. and hon. Members in this House, as well as Members of the House of Lords.

We could also scale up the British Business Bank's British growth partnership so that it is more in line with the scale of France's *Tibi* initiative, while giving the British Business Bank and the National Wealth Fund complementary mandates to crowd in capital for the larger funding rounds. We could support UK scale-ups—which my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister just mentioned in his statement in the main Chamber—with the British Business Bank focusing on those companies from series B to C, and the National Wealth Fund acting as a direct investor in later-stage companies.

Finally, we should maintain our focus on unlocking some proportion of the £600 billion of retail capital currently held in cash, in individual savings accounts or other savings accounts. With the right mix of financial education, a simpler ISA product framework, tax incentives and, crucially, accessible investment research, we can ease access to capital from growing domestic companies while enabling British people to own a greater share of our economy's future success.

Peter Fortune (Bromley and Biggin Hill) (Con): I agree with many of the hon. Member's potential solutions to increase investment. Does he agree with the Treasury's assessment that the Financial Ombudsman Service is not fit for purpose? Does he agree with the Opposition's suggestions that a new independent body to replace the Financial Ombudsman Service would probably increase legal certainty and encourage investment into the UK?

Callum Anderson: I confess I have not read the Conservative party's full recommendations in this regard. The Government are clear that the Financial Ombudsman Service needs reform; it is not working for the sector, consumers or the UK's international competitiveness. The Conservative party will put forward its recommendations, and the Government will make their considerations as part of the Financial Services and Markets Bill, which will be debated in the House of Commons Chamber in October. I recognise the downsides that the hon. Gentleman identified in his intervention, so I thank him for it.

The Minister already knows my views on retail capital. There is an excellent opportunity in the months ahead—certainly, in the run-up to the Budget in October—for the UK to establish a long-term retail investment strategy that is co-designed by industry, Government, civil society and regulators to be the best mechanism to realise the full potential of UK investors' savings.

The second challenge that I want to turn to lies in how we manage artificial intelligence, which I became very familiar with when I was Parliamentary Private Secretary at the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, and the broader digital revolution in financial services. Distributed ledger technology and tokenisation are having an ever-increasing influence on the international financial ecosystem. The UK should continue to act as a global leader and embrace that change now so that regulators, industry, investors and consumers alike can benefit from lower costs, widen access to capital, deliver a more efficient industry and enjoy the benefits of more productive investment.

At the same time, that requires us to fully build the infrastructure, regulatory framework and market confidence to allow innovators to scale safely and responsibly. I welcomed Chris Woolard's first report as the UK's wholesale digital markets champion. It marked an important step in delivering the Government's wholesale financial markets digital strategy, but we now need to shift up a gear.

I would focus on two immediate priorities. First, the Government should publish a clear road map for DLT-enabled capital markets. UK financial markets—and global financial markets more broadly—need certainty about the sequence of reforms, the regulatory framework that the UK proposes to put forward and how new infrastructure will connect with the systems that are already in use by market participants. Second, we should use DIGIT—the digital gilt instrument—to build momentum across the market by setting a clear timetable for regular, benchmark-scale digital sovereign bond issuance so that we are properly mainstreaming UK Government debt in the financial market system.

On artificial intelligence, it is right that AI can transform productivity, investment management, fraud detection and customer service across the economy and society. But those opportunities also bring new and unfamiliar risks, from automated decision making that leads to unintended consequences to cyber-attacks by belligerent forces and operational disruption due to a greater dependence by industry on a small number of technology providers. With that in mind, I was proud to partner with Community trade union, which I should disclose that I am a member of, in May to launch its responsible AI charter for financial services; Zurich UK was its first signatory. The charter sets out practical principles for

ensuring that AI is adopted responsibly, transparently and with people at the heart of its deployment. The Bank of England's recent work makes it clear how quickly the risks that I just identified are growing. That is why we must maintain the urgent momentum on implementing the financial services AI adoption plan.

The third challenge facing the sector, which I want to address briefly, concerns the clean energy transition. I will not discuss the benefits or otherwise of which energy sources we may like to prioritise, but in my view, net zero cannot be delivered by public investment alone, however committed the Government are to that mission—and rightly so. Long-term, patient private capital also has a crucial role to play in supporting tomorrow's energy infrastructure, from onshore and offshore wind and grid upgrades to next-generation nuclear power. In order for that capital to be committed effectively, I would welcome an annual published pipeline of investable clean energy projects so that firms and asset owners can plan and deploy investment at the scale and pace that our net zero commitments demand.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): My hon. Friend will not be surprised to hear that I very much agree with the point that he just made. We have some excellent, innovative businesses in Bristol that came up through the Science Creates innovation hubs and attracted private capital. They are flourishing, but they need signals from the Government that we are sticking to our net zero agenda so that there will be a market for their products in due course. Does my hon. Friend agree that those signals are important?

Callum Anderson: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. In this space and across many policy areas, what business and investors require and demand from us as policymakers—regardless of which party happens to be in power—is policy certainty. When we risk lurching in various directions, with various priorities and changing timelines, the only result is that investors withdraw or deploy their capital in other countries. Frankly, with regard to the clean energy transition, that will ensure that other countries, be they our competitors or our foes, will have a massive, global competitive advantage over us. I do not think it is a good idea for us to enable that.

Changing tack, the UK also faces the challenge of our constituents accessing affordable financial services and products. We need to honestly confront the barriers that still prevent too many of our constituents from opening a basic bank account, building even a very modest savings buffer for when times are hard, and accessing safe and affordable credit or securing the insurance that protects people from life's shocks.

Andrew Pakes (Peterborough) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend's constituency sounds a lot like mine, which is underserved in many ways by financial institutions. The recent takeover by Nationwide of Virgin Money means that, in a constituency like mine, Nationwide's high street network will soon be able to offer support to small businesses and innovators in the postcodes covering Peterborough. Does he agree that that highlights the vital role the mutual sector, credit unions and member-owned banks play in extending financial services to every postcode of the city, widening prosperity in our country?

Callum Anderson: I could not agree more. Since entering Parliament in 2024, my hon. Friend has been a leading voice for the role that co-operatives and mutuals can play in the broader ecosystem of UK financial services. He will know well that the Government are committed to doubling the size of the co-operative and mutual sector. Financial services should play a big role in helping to deliver that agenda.

I started my career supporting the development of credit unions and community development financial institutions, which have many similar economic and social objectives to building societies, co-ops and mutuals. My conviction is as strong as it was 15 years ago that they have an important role, not to replace or be a substitute for mainstream high street banks but to be part of the integrated financial ecosystem described by my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Andrew Pakes). The UK has a lot to learn from other countries, such as Germany, Canada and Australia, about how best to do that in a sustainable way.

The Government can already be proud of a strong record, from last November's financial inclusion strategy to the commitment to roll out 350 banking hubs across the UK. My constituents in Buckingham and the surrounding rural communities greatly value the hub that opened just before I was elected in 2024, and the expansion of the reach of the Help to Save scheme to more than 3 million people through universal credit.

Specifically on the financial inclusion strategy, although it is no doubt thoughtful and well considered, I encourage the Government to go even further and prepare clear, measurable performance indicators against all six of its pillars, so that we can see in a year or five years how far it has advanced the UK in being financially more inclusive or otherwise. Government, industry, regulators and civil society can then best identify where the barriers to inclusion continue to lie.

I am conscious that I have spoken for almost 20 minutes, so my final point is about skills. Skills gaps in the financial services sector, if left unaddressed, not only threaten the sector's productivity and future global competitiveness but, most importantly, its collective ability to innovate, grow and best serve our constituents, who are ultimately the customers of those companies. I commend the financial services skills compact, which according to my latest research is now signed up to by more than 20 firms, covering more than 250,000 employees.

Although such industry-led initiatives are crucial and valuable, the Government also have an essential role to play. Two things would strengthen that essential private-public partnership. First, Government can be much more ambitious in using the flexibility of the growth and skills levy to fund dedicated conversion pathways into financial services for adults outside London, perhaps matched by employer-funded boot camps in regional clusters, be that in Bournemouth, Edinburgh, Leeds or Belfast. The talent pipeline should grow where the jobs already exist and are growing.

Secondly, Government and industry, through the Financial Services Skills Commission, should build a shared live map of regional skills gaps, which would allow apprenticeship places, training, investment and further educational funding to target the specific shortages that each region faces, rather than rely on a slightly arbitrary national formula that takes no account of where the sector actually needs people.

Those are just a few of my summer observations on the future of UK financial services. The underlying drive and rationale are ultimately the same, starting from a familiar place. The UK already has a lot of the ingredients that allow it to be a global leader in so many parts of financial services. However, if we are to stay ahead of the other great global financial centres, be that New York, Frankfurt, Singapore or Hong Kong, we need the Government and Parliament to work together with industry to provide the right regulatory framework, the spirit of innovation and the commitment to making our constituents' money work better for them so that the financial services sector itself can further strengthen the UK's economic, energy, industrial and national security and sovereignty. I look forward to the contributions from Members across the House this afternoon and I would be happy to meet the Economic Secretary later this autumn to discuss any of the points I have raised if that would be helpful.

4.50 pm

Sir Jeremy Hunt (Godalming and Ash) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I speak today as chairman of the all-party parliamentary group for financial markets and services. I refer hon. Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, which states that I accept speaking engagements from financial services companies.

I thank the hon. Member for Buckingham and Bletchley (Callum Anderson) not just for securing this debate, but for an excellent opening speech. He has a background in the City—in the stock exchange and working for the City of London corporation—which is probably unusual in his party. I thank him for deploying his expertise, because it is incredibly important for UK financial services that the world sees that there are experts in financial services on both sides of the House. I particularly welcome his comments today.

I welcome the Economic Secretary to the Treasury back to her role, which she carried out previously with great distinction. She has always engaged extremely constructively when it comes to the interests of the City and financial services. I know that her return to that post was widely welcomed. It is also a pleasure to speak alongside my hon. Friend the Member for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier)—an old friend—who himself has a background in the London stock exchange.

After the financial crisis in 2008, financial services had a pretty bad name. The Government had to put up around £1 trillion to support the sector. Chief executives of banks made very ill-judged decisions to continue paying themselves large bonuses at a time when the rest of the country was suffering, and the country suffered a longer and deeper recession at that time as a result of our exposure to the financial services sector, which was much greater than that of our peers. We learned many painful lessons in that period.

As well as the financial crisis, the sector had to deal with the loss of passporting rights post-Brexit. Despite those body blows, the sector employs 2.5 million people—more than at the time of Brexit—and two thirds of the jobs are outside London. It is worth around 11% of our national output. It generates more than £110 billion in tax revenues, which is more than any other single sector. Put another way, it funds more than half the cost of running the NHS.

[Sir Jeremy Hunt]

Whatever one's interest in financial services, from a fiscal perspective alone they simply cannot be ignored. The sector is also thriving today in very challenging circumstances. The City think-tank Z/Yen tracks the competitiveness of global financial service hubs. In 2020, London trailed New York. Now it has caught back up. It remains the world's premier centre for foreign exchange and specialist insurance. It helps to make the UK the world's second largest services exporter.

When I was Chancellor, I introduced the Edinburgh and Mansion House reforms to support this important sector. Regulations, including listing rules, were simplified and the mighty task of making our pension fund industry fit for purpose was started. To their credit, this Government have built on those reforms with the Leeds reforms, the Pension Schemes Act 2026 and the forthcoming Financial Services and Markets Bill, all of which are extremely welcome. But, as the hon. Member for Buckingham and Bletchley said, our competitors are not standing still.

With smart policies, our financial services sector could do even more for growth in the UK. Easy access to finance, alongside having the most respected universities in the world outside the United States, has helped to create, for example, the world's third-largest tech ecosystem. In artificial intelligence, the UK has the potential to be the world's next silicon valley. If we get there, easy access to finance will have played a major role in making that possible.

What needs to happen next? The first thing is to do no harm—in particular, to do no harm with additional taxes in October's Budget that could potentially damage the sector. Uniquely, the UK already charges higher corporation tax to banks. Total bank taxes are about 45% here, compared with 32% in Dublin and 28% in New York. I totally understand the temptation—finances are extremely tight, and the banks have few friends—but international capital is mobile, and hiking taxes further will mean that the sector ultimately generates less tax revenue, not more, for the Chancellor.

Secondly, we need to make regulation in UK financial services more proportionate. Consumer protection really matters, but we cannot eliminate all risk, which is what our regulators sometimes appear to be trying to do. Compliance now costs the sector more than £39 billion a year—about 13% of operating costs. We should aim to at least halve that using the new international competitiveness and growth objectives, which the Financial Conduct Authority should apply to authorisation, supervision and enforcement decisions.

Kerry McCarthy: I too worked in the financial markets, although I think I have done a better job of hiding it in my 21 years in Parliament. I was more on the debt market side. In fact, I am so old that I was part of the salvage operation for Barings bank when it went under. That brings me to the right hon. Gentleman's point about regulation. The management of Barings did not have a clue what its traders were doing, and the regulators certainly did not have a clue what Barings was doing. I strike a note of caution. I worked for an American investment bank, so I saw the Securities and Exchange Commission as well as the UK regime. Where do we strike the balance between ensuring that there is not another collapse of a bank and light-touch regulation?

Sir Jeremy Hunt: I thank the hon. Lady for her role in helping to salvage Barings. I did not know that before. She is absolutely right to raise that issue. I do not say this in a party political way, because my party pretty much supported it at the time, but there is no doubt that, in the run-up to the financial crisis, regulation was not as tight as it needed to be. That is one of the reasons why we needed such expensive rescue missions for the banks. Since then, regulation has made the UK financial services sector much more secure.

The Prudential Regulation Authority and the sector as a whole are very resilient. In one of my most difficult moments as Chancellor, one of the most reassuring things that happened was that the Governor of the Bank of England said to me, "This sector is solid. You don't have to worry. We are in a much, much better state than we were in 2008." But I do think that it has gone slightly too far in the other direction. Sometimes we can over-correct. Particularly when it comes to consumer risk, there is a danger that we restrict consumer choice by being over-restrictive about the products that banks and financial services companies can offer. That is not to say that we want a free-for-all but, in terms of competitiveness, we need to keep a weather eye on the relative burdens of our regulatory regime, compared with those in other places.

I echo what the hon. Member for Buckingham and Bletchley said about AI, tokenisation and digital identity. The UK legal system is widely respected, and this is an area where good regulation could attract a lot of investment. We really could be leaders in it. London should be the world's most trusted centre for tokenised wholesale finance, with clear rules for tokenised securities, custody settlement, digital money and market infrastructure.

We also need to speed up the consolidation of the pension industry, not least, as the hon. Member for Buckingham and Bletchley said, to encourage more investment in UK infrastructure, equities and tech start-ups. If that was done in a sensible, controlled way and as part of a balanced investment strategy, the returns for pensioners would be much higher than they currently are. That would start to stem the tide of British unicorns, of which we have more than Tokyo, Paris and Berlin put together, but which invariably at the moment tend to go to New York when they want to IPO, rather than doing it in the UK.

The fifth thing we could do is to encourage more saving. If we are going to transform the way this country grows, we need an investment-led growth strategy, not just a consumption-led growth strategy. Although it is painful for me to say this, scrapping our crazy system of giving people a new pension pot for every job, and instead copying the Aussies' pension system—giving everyone one pension pot that follows them around for their whole lives, but with the freedom to change provider whenever they want—would make saving much simpler. It would mean people could go into an app on their phone and immediately see the value of their pension pot. It would encourage them to top up their pension pots if they were able, perhaps because of an inheritance or whatever. The impact of doing that in Australia has been that they save more, they get better returns, and there is much fiercer competition to attract those savings in the domestic pension fund industry.

I know that everyone here today will agree with this, but I think it needs to be said: it is imperative, whatever the pressures, to keep Britain open to the world. Our advantage

has always been our openness. We are at our strongest when we connect global capital, trusted law, deep markets and world-class professional services all together. That means the painful, often boring, but absolutely vital work of negotiating trade deals, securing digital market access, agreeing mutual recognition deals, and making sure we have proper mobility for talent.

I am really grateful to the Minister for coming today, and would ask her to briefly address the following questions. When he is considering measures for the Budget, will the Chancellor of the Exchequer keep the competitiveness of the City and financial services central to his considerations? Will the Government undertake a review of the UK's international tax competitiveness, particularly when it comes to financial services? Will she set out some specific steps that the FCA and PRA can take to deliver their competitiveness and growth objectives? What further reforms will the Government bring forward to help London to become the world's leading centre for tokenised finance?

What progress has been made in further unlocking pension fund investment into productive UK assets? What further action will the Government take to improve access to finance for small and medium-sized enterprises and scale-ups, which has been a particular issue in the period since the financial crisis? Finally, does the Minister agree that maintaining the UK's position as a leading global financial centre should be treated as a core element of the UK's growth strategy? The prize, if it is, is absolutely enormous. TheCityUK says that we could add £53 billion to our additional annual output by 2035. That is the entire output of the life sciences sector, and would generate about £22 billion of extra tax revenues—around the entire budget for the police or the Department for Transport. The opportunity is huge. The question is whether we have the political will to get there by going further and faster.

5.4 pm

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Twigg. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham and Bletchley (Callum Anderson) on securing today's important debate. He is a distinguished advocate for the financial services sector, and I reiterate his points about unlocking cash sat on deposit in ISAs and making it work harder, not only for savers but for British businesses. The previous Chancellor of the Exchequer, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West and Pudsey (Rachel Reeves), was keen to support in that challenge, and I want to stress it again as we look towards this autumn's Budget.

My contribution will make a slightly different point from that of my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham and Bletchley. Before entering this House, I, too, spent my career in financial services: first, in a brief stint in commercial banking, and then, for a long time as a specialist tackling financial crime. I saw first hand the strengths of our world-leading financial sector and the vulnerabilities that can be exploited by those seeking to abuse them. That experience taught me a simple lesson: the future of financial services in this country has to be a clean one. A successful City—a successful financial services sector that works for everyone up and down the length of the country and, ultimately, a successful British economy—is not built on turning a blind eye to dirty money, but on trust, transparency and integrity.

As chair of the APPG on anti-corruption and responsible tax, I regularly engage with UK Finance, the City of London, compliance professionals and senior representative from across financial services. The message I hear repeatedly is that businesses do not want weaker regulation; they want smarter regulation, a point that the right hon. Member for Godalming and Ash (Sir Jeremy Hunt) alluded to. That should mean regulation that works to prevent bad faith actors, maintains the integrity of our economy and is looked at with envy by investors and competitors from further afield. A secure financial system is inherently more investable, as investors seek certainty, strong institutions and robust enforcement of the rule of law.

This Labour Government, building on the platform provided by the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Act 2023, have made significant strides on that issue. It would be remiss of me not to thank them for the anti-corruption and fraud strategies published over the last 12 months, and I welcome the Treasury's move to consolidate the fragmented anti-money laundering professional body supervisors under the FCA via the forthcoming Financial Services and Markets Bill. However, to really capitalise on the opportunities that are available, I would like the Government to commit to two core deliverables as part of their wider approach to economic crime: better regulatory enforcement and better transparency.

On enforcement, the FCA will need to be adequately supported to fulfil its new regulatory obligations. The reality is that enforcement pays for itself many times over, across the wider landscape. The compliance work of His Majesty's Revenue and Customs has generated around £22 for every £1 spent on compliance staff. Those are extraordinary returns on investment. We should view spending on economic crime enforcement not as a cost but as an investment in Britain's prosperity and security.

Of course, we are in a difficult period for public finances, which is why we should look carefully at how financial penalties for firms that do not abide by the rules are used. Between 2016 and 2025, the FCA secured more than £1 billion in regulatory and criminal fines, but significant sums are ultimately returned through rebate mechanisms rather than being used to strengthen the enforcement capabilities that generated the penalties in the first place. There is a strong case for allowing the FCA to retain a greater proportion of anti-money laundering fines to meet its enforcement costs, particularly as it takes on significant new supervisory responsibilities.

I welcome the Economic Secretary to the Treasury to her place. As she knows, I am a long-term advocate for establishing an economic crime fighting fund, allowing a proportion of enforcement receipts to be reinvested in the agencies responsible for protecting our financial system. The financial sector rightly pays its way via the economic crime levy, so what about the criminals? Let us make them pay too. At present, billions of pounds have been raised through economic crime fines and enforcement activity, yet frontline agencies continue to face resource pressures. A sustainable, multi-year funding model would allow the likes of the FCA, the National Crime Agency and the Serious Fraud Office to further invest in specialist expertise, to build capability and to plan strategically for the long term.

[Phil Brickell]

The Financial Action Task Force is already in town, ahead of next year's mutual evaluation review, in which it will mark the UK's homework on enforcement against economic crime. I would welcome the Minister's initial reflections on whether existing schemes, such as the asset recovery incentivisation scheme, are performing as hoped, and on whether we might expect to see some reform to police funding in the forthcoming economic crime plan. I appreciate that that might not all fall squarely within the Minister's brief, but I know that she has taken a keen interest in these matters previously and has a strong grasp of the cross-cutting nature of these issues across Whitehall.

On the second point—transparency—equitable, clean growth can be achieved by reducing the compliance costs faced by legitimate firms, freeing up capital that could be more productively invested elsewhere. A major reason for those costs is the continued difficulty of identifying the true owners of companies hidden behind opaque offshore structures, as I saw first hand in my previous career.

That is why I have long argued that the UK's overseas territories must finally implement meaningful and accessible public registers of beneficial ownership, as we have in this country via Companies House. Every hour spent by compliance teams untangling complex offshore ownership chains is an hour not spent supporting customers, financing businesses or driving growth. Every duplicated check increases costs for legitimate firms, while benefiting those who rely on secrecy.

Public registers of beneficial ownership would make "know your customer" checks faster, cheaper and more accurate. They would reduce duplication, lower compliance costs and strengthen confidence in our financial system. That would help to ensure that honest firms are not left carrying the burden created by hidden ownership structures and dirty money.

I will not relitigate past debates on the issue, but I do want to place on record once again my wholehearted desire to see all British overseas territories, particularly the Cayman Islands and the British Virgin Islands, finally fulfil long-made promises by throwing open their books.

Dirty money is not just a financial crime problem. It is a threat to economic growth, it distorts markets, it undermines trust, it damages fair competition and it weakens our institutions. I want a future financial services sector that is competitive because it is trusted, successful because it is transparent, and prosperous because it is clean. I will do everything in my power to support the Government achieve that objective.

5.11 pm

Bobby Dean (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for Buckingham and Bletchley (Callum Anderson) for securing this debate and for bringing his great experience to it. I hope to build on his comments encouraging the Government to build on the momentum of the pension reforms they have recently introduced.

The UK investment system holds £6 trillion-worth of investable capital, mostly via pensions and life insurance schemes, so there can be no doubt at all that the financial

services sector will be key to growth when it returns to this country properly, but access to that capital has become a problem. We hear it all the time from businesses. That can only be a systemic failure.

Central to the problem is the UK's allocation of its pension funds, which, as has been noted, collapsed from levels of around 50% back in the '90s to an average of just 4% now. Some of that is explainable. Some of it was inevitable, as capital markets went global and people diversified their portfolios—we were always going to see a decline from those heights of around 50%—but the UK sits below the global average of allocation, which is 13%, so the UK has a specific problem that it needs to address.

We have to ask how we got here. I think the root is a certain naivety in the way that we applied laissez-faire economics. As a liberal, I support free and open trade with the world, but with a narrow interpretation of what free and open means. We have marginalised the state's role. We have moved its role of shaping the conditions for UK businesses to thrive to the periphery. We have been so hands-off that we have allowed our economy to be dominated by a handful of actors who have accrued pretty unchecked power in a fairly anti-competitive manner.

An example I would point to is the proportion of our pension funds that passively invest into big global indexes. An example is the MSCI world index. It allocates more of British pension savings to Apple than to the entire UK economy—around 5% to Apple and 3.8% to the UK.

What does that mean in practice? It means that when brilliant UK tech start-ups want to scale and are seeking out capital, their only option is to be sold out to one of the big US competitors that pension savers in the UK are funding. So the cycle continues, whereby Britain fails to scale its businesses to the level required.

Britain needs to be more streetwise and a bit more hands-on. We need to redesign our system so that it can still take advantage of global capital markets, while being clever about the way it incentivises and actively supports the growth of the UK economy. One way in which I believe we can do this has been suggested by the New Capital Consensus project, of which I am a member: to right-size some of our defined benefit pension funds so that they are big enough to actively manage funds and to identify and invest in the opportunities that exist across Britain. They should not be so big that they find those kinds of regional opportunities more hassle than they are worth, and they should not be so small that they choose to manage their funds passively in the way that I have just described.

At the moment, we have around 5,500 small defined benefit pension funds, and while each charges low fees for a fair return, I ask: at what cost is that a fair return? Is it really good value to get over 8% for the individual saver if the country around them is in decline? Should the real test of value not be about the return to not only the individual but society? After all, this is the country in which they seek to live and retire.

I encourage the Government to build on the progress they have made so far with the pension reforms and to look more broadly at investment funds across the sector. I believe that if we can right-size some of those pension funds to incentivise them to identify and invest in UK businesses, things will be delivered for not only those savers but the country as a whole.

5.16 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Twigg. I thank the hon. Member for Buckingham and Bletchley (Callum Anderson) for setting the scene incredibly well, and for highlighting a vital debate around the future of our financial services sector. I thank him for bringing this matter to the Floor of the House; if there is one thing that affects every single household, from the City of London right across to the beautiful shores of Strangford lough, it is the stability, accessibility and integrity of our financial systems.

It is also a joy to see the Minister in her place again. I think we are level pegging for how many times we can speak in Westminster Hall today. We are both at the touchline, and if she manages to stay for the third debate, she will find herself equal with me. I thank her for all her answers this morning and this afternoon, in anticipation of the passion she has for the subject matter of this debate. I mean that sincerely, because I think we are all encouraged by her knowledge and helpfulness in trying to answer the questions we pose.

When we talk about the future of financial services, the pundits and the media often look straight at the glass towers of London—they look at fintech, AI and the complex global trading systems. I am a proud Unionist; I want the City of London to remain the pre-eminent financial powerhouse of the world—as it is and as it should be—because that benefits us all. It brings billions to the Treasury, and a strong City means a strong United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

The hon. Member for Peterborough (Andrew Pakes), who just left, referred to Nationwide in an earlier intervention. As I said this morning, the Nationwide branch in Newtownards has committed to working with the community and to staying in the town until 2030, and we hope that the commitment will go beyond that. I am not a member, stakeholder or customer, but I have noticed the large numbers of people who come in, and I understand that Nationwide is filling in where the banks sometimes fall short.

My main concern—indeed, the common concern of the DUP—is what the future of financial services looks like for the working man and the working woman. That is what I want to focus on. It is about the squeeze on the middle class and the ordinary families who are trying to navigate volatile inflation and changing economic climates. If financial services are to have a successful future across the whole of this United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, we must ensure that they are built on three fundamental pillars: financial inclusion, regulatory fairness for small businesses and unwavering integrity.

As banks look to a digital future, they are shutting physical branches at an alarming rate, which we discussed this morning. It is all well and good to say that everything will be on a mobile phone app, but what about the elderly constituent in Portaferry in my constituency, who relies on the face-to-face chat to manage their life savings, and who has to travel some 22 or 23 miles up the road to Newtownards because there is no bank in the entire Ards peninsula? What about the young people trying to understand credit and mortgage products without an accessible high street presence? The future of banking cannot be one that locks out the vulnerable,

the elderly or those without reliable internet. We must protect physical access to cash and also look after consumer support.

There is a duty to protect our small and medium-sized enterprises, our small charities and family-run shops. In Newtownards we are privileged and honoured to have so many family-run shops. Whether they are agribusinesses or local hospitality venues, they are the backbone of our economy—certainly they are in my constituency. The future regulatory framework of the Financial Conduct Authority must be tailored to protect those businesses from hidden credit liabilities and predatory lending practices. The hon. Member for Buckingham and Bletchley referred to that in a previous debate in Westminster Hall—I remember it well. We need a financial system that acts as a springboard for entrepreneurship, providing firm, clear foundations of support rather than wrapping our local shopkeepers in suffocating red tape.

The future must be defined by absolute transparency and a transformation of corporate culture. Trust in our financial institutions was severely damaged in the past. As the FCA continues its work on transforming the culture in financial services, we must demand that the big banks treat customers with the respect they deserve. Every pound looked after by a financial institution is a pound earned by hard work. There must be no question of dishonesty or systematic unfairness.

The United Kingdom's financial services sector has a bright future—I believe that with all my heart—but only if it remembers its core purpose, which is to serve the people. As we as MPs serve the people we are elected to serve, they should also serve the people that we represent. So let us ensure that as we innovate, we build a system that levels up every corner of our great nation, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and preserves our high streets, supports our small businesses, and protects the hard-earned money of the working-class families who are the backbone of this country.

5.22 pm

Charlie Maynard (Witney) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chair, Mr Twigg. I thank the hon. Member for Buckingham and Bletchley (Callum Anderson) for securing this important debate and for making it a large enough subject for us all to pick and choose, because it is hard to cover such an enormous range. It is much appreciated. I thank him for such good points made, and I thank the Minister for returning to her role. I look forward to working with her. I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests and my ownership stake in BDA Partners, the business I founded in 1996, which focuses on Asian mergers and acquisitions, in which I have no management role.

Everybody here believes that our financial services sector is a strategically important national asset and a key competitive advantage for our economy. We all want the sector to continue to thrive, boosting businesses, jobs and growth all across the UK. We all want Britain's financial and professional services industry to remain possibly the leading such services cluster globally. Such services make us a trade superpower. We benefit from our unique combination of language, law and location. We have strong institutions and dynamic markets. We are the world's second largest destination for fintech investment after the US, and we are a material player in the AI space.

[Charlie Maynard]

Those are huge strengths that we must continue to build on, but we must also be clear about the challenges. Our financial services sector has lost ground on a relative basis and on a global basis. Other economies are rapidly growing, innovating, investing and preparing for the future. We have no cause for complacency. We need to be ambitious and take decisions now, which will help the UK over the short, medium and long term.

Post Brexit, the City has continued to be an excellent location to base a global financial services business. However, our departure from the EU has substantially weakened our financial services industry, both in terms of the UK serving as the centre of European finance and a slower-growing UK economy that has not provided the traditional tailwind that it previously did. UK financial services remain a bright spot, but it would be a lot brighter if we were inside the EU's single market. Do not just take that from me. TheCityUK notes that even though overall services trade has held up,

"Exports of financial services have declined 5.9 per cent...likely at least in part due to the impact of Brexit frictions."

If the Government are serious about growth, they need to fix this. We should be pursuing a growth and defence partnership with Europe, including joining both the single market and the customs union. That would be revolutionary for the future of the UK financial services sector; it would tear down the barriers to trade in services that we have erected, which are still holding back our financial sector. In particular, joining the single market would secure again passporting rights for the sector, reducing costs and administration burdens and enabling financial firms to offer services across the whole of the EU without requiring further authorisations.

In the shorter term, the Government should move quickly to immediately improve financial services co-operation with Europe. For example, they should be making the most of the UK-EU financial regulatory forum to secure a deal on the mutual recognition of professional qualifications, building on the dialogue that was agreed at the UK-EU reset last May. We must also finally see the UK-EU youth mobility scheme, which was agreed in principle last year, through to implementation.

Secondly, if the Government are going to boost financial services and seriously compete with the US, they must look at the business landscape as a whole. We need far more ambition to boost UK plc—especially our high-growth, high-tech businesses—and pull every available lever to encourage capital formation, so how can we do this? Traditionally, the UK has been a fantastic harbour for international capital on the back of a cast-iron reputation for strong, fair regulation that safeguards investor rights. We need to ensure that our regulators continue to live up to that benchmark, and I think there is a question about that today.

The same goes for competition. The Competition and Markets Authority needs to be using its powers under the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Act 2024 to demonstrate it has the will to enforce both quickly and effectively against strong players as well as weaker ones and, where applicable, it should be working closely with its EU counterpart to magnify its impact. This is not an issue that is just floating in the ether; it matters to people across my constituency, because it

brings down costs. Everybody talks about the cost of living; if we allow people to control markets so that there is no competition, costs go up, and everybody feels that in their pockets. It is really important to draw that link, so having the CMA move fast, at scale and at speed matters.

We also need to fix how we support business innovation. Research and development tax reliefs are a powerful tool, but too often they are undermined by uncertainty, delays and a "compliance first" mindset. A more liberal, pro-innovation approach should move towards an expert-led pre-clearance system for R&D tax reliefs. We could have up-front assessments by scientists and engineers—people who understand the technology—rather than retrospective scrutiny by compliance teams. Models in countries like the Netherlands show that this can work effectively. It provides certainty to the founders, reduces disputes, and ensures support is directed towards genuine innovation.

We must also look at reducing regulation where it is not required, as the right hon. Member for Godalming and Ash (Sir Jeremy Hunt) mentioned. For example, why is the regulatory burden on the venture capital industry so much higher in the UK than in the US, including in terms of time, which is as critical as cost? How about the UK taking the approach of using exempt reporting advisers—as they do in the US, focused on professional investors—to more effectively balance regulation with levels of risk?

Many Members have talked about AI, and I am going to do so too. Any discussion of the future of financial services has to take AI into account. Earlier today, the Governor of the Bank of England, Andrew Bailey, published an open letter warning G20 Finance Ministers that artificial intelligence could pose a major cyber-security risk to financial systems. Writing in his capacity as chair of the international Financial Stability Board, he said that the potential impact of frontier AI is "the most immediate concern" for the global financial system, and that financial institutions, financial market infrastructures, and technology providers all need to

"strengthen vulnerability management, response and recovery capabilities, and prepare for more severe scenarios involving simultaneous disruption across multiple firms or shared technology dependencies."

These risks are inherently international, and many jurisdictions still lack the systems to manage them—frankly, I think we do too.

The UK Government must make AI security a top priority to safeguard not just UK financial services but the international financial markets on which we all depend. I would therefore be grateful if the Minister could set out what steps the Government are taking to promote the safe and responsible deployment of AI internationally, and how the cyber-security of the financial system is being strengthened.

The other technological revolution that will shape the future of financial services is digital assets, stablecoins and cryptocurrency. A few days ago, the Treasury gave the Bank of England the new objective of supporting payment systems innovation. That is welcome, and having the right regulatory conditions in place to make the most of digital innovations is critical, but we need more clarity from the Government about how they intend to balance the opportunities and risks generated by new digital assets.

A key question is what stance the Government intend to take on stablecoins and a central bank digital currency or digital pound. The global stablecoin ecosystem is now dominated by two US dollar-pegged issuers, Tether and Circle, which together account for around 90% of the market. The UK's own GBP stablecoin is, per the House of Lords Financial Services Regulation Committee's assessment, "nascent". Many are therefore worried that the digital financial infrastructure of the future is likely to default to dollar-denominated instruments issued by foreign private firms.

I urge the Minister to address those concerns clearly, and to set out how this Government plan to make the most of the opportunities presented by this new technology while safeguarding against the risk and, crucially, whether there is or will be a timeline for a decision to be made jointly with the Bank of England.

5.31 pm

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your stewardship, Mr Twigg. I thank the hon. Member for Buckingham and Bletchley (Callum Anderson) for securing this debate. He speaks with great authority, and it is refreshing to hear a positive vision of the financial services sector, especially given his experience working for the London Stock Exchange Group. He raised a number of points, some of which I will deal with in my speech.

The hon. Member raised some interesting points that are strongly related. The first was the lack of growth capital and the fact that we are not seeing a huge amount of money invested into the UK by UK pension funds. Companies looking for growth capital seem to go to places such as America, where they can do better. He also talked about the undervaluation of the UK stock market, which is part of that problem, as well as clean energy and the fantastic opportunity it provides for investment in long-term patient capital. It is interesting that, during the passage of the Pension Schemes Act, one complaint thrown up by a very large annuity asset manager was that it wanted to invest in the equity of wind farms, where there is a predictable income because of contracts for difference, but the Pensions Regulator would not allow it because it had to be invested in bonds, which have a more liquid market.

Although the Conservatives completely support the Mansion House compact and the Mansion House accord, there is too much stuff getting in the way. We had a long debate on this during the passage of the Pension Schemes Bill, now an Act. We are trying to work with the Government on how not just to force more money into the UK equity market, but to clear away the clag that gets in the way of investments. That comes to the point about regulation and the regulatory environment. I will discuss more of the hon. Member's points in the main thrust of my speech, but I wanted to get that point over early on.

As we heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for Godalming and Ash (Sir Jeremy Hunt), the financial services sector matters hugely to the UK. It is often described as the engine room of our economy, for two good reasons. The first is that the banking sector provides the plumbing that moves finance around our economy, making sure that money, where it is accumulated through wealth, is distributed to people who need it. The second

is our international position: the financial services sector generates 11% of national economic output and contributes £12 in every £100 of tax paid—it pays for a lot of the NHS. As we heard, the sector makes up more than 3% of all jobs in the UK, with 2.5 million people employed in it, and we have the most unicorns in Europe. The sector here is the second-largest asset sector globally, the third-largest insurance market globally and the fifth-largest domestic banking market globally. I could go on, but the point is that the UK is absolutely a world leader in financial services, and we need to continue to be that. It is vital that we get this right.

It is worth comparing London to New York. New York is the biggest financial services centre in the world and London is the second biggest, but in New York, 80% of the turnover is driven by the domestic market of America, while just 20% is international; those numbers are reversed in the UK, where 80% of the activity is international. International competitiveness is four times as important for us as it is for those in America. The Conservative party recognises that, and that is why the Leader of the Opposition has promised to deliver a new economic revolution and to create conditions that will allow the financial services sector to innovate, take risks and be an economic powerhouse.

Before discussing the future of UK financial services, we need to understand the past. The City of London has been innovating and leading the way for a few hundred years now. The Knights Templar issuing receipts to crusaders for their gold created the first ever bank notes. In the 17th century, Jonathan's Coffee House—the hon. Member for Buckingham and Bletchley will be familiar with it—was the first to advertise share prices. From there the London stock exchange grew, setting the model for equity ownership the world over. Similarly, Lloyd's Coffee House created the insurance market that we see today. By continually innovating, the UK led the way for centuries. It is vital that the UK continues that spirit of innovation to maintain its international lead.

Although we have enjoyed much success over the years, a recent report by TheCityUK and PwC shows that over the past decade growth has stalled. Technologies such as artificial intelligence and distributed ledger technology are fundamentally rewiring financial market infrastructure, and it is vital that the UK keeps up with the pace of change. Financial services firms are ready to do that, but they need policy makers to create the right conditions and then get out of the way, allowing them to innovate and take advantage of that.

That brings me to what we need to do to unlock the future of UK financial services. First, we need to look at regulation in the UK. Although it is important to recognise that the UK's regulatory and legal frameworks make us an attractive destination—that is really important; our rule of law is vital to this—we believe that the UK has gone too far and that regulation has become too burdensome. Research from TheCityUK suggested that the cost of regulatory compliance across the financial services sector now exceeds £33.9 billion. That represents more than 13% of firms' annual average operating cost.

An interesting number was presented to the Treasury Committee by Nationwide Building Society, which estimated that, as a result of over-regulation by the regulators and over-compliance by their own internal compliance department, their lending book was £35 billion smaller than it would have been, had they been complying

[Mark Garnier]

with the original rules and regulations. That is an awful lot of money taken out of the economy, getting stuck in one building society—admittedly the biggest one, but none the less, that is an important measure that we need to consider. This money could have been better spent across the whole of the wider sector, but more worryingly, it has affected our international reputation. The chief executive officer of Marsh McLennan said that it cost six times more to comply with regulation in the UK than in any other country it operates in. That does not foster an attractive business environment. Something needs to change.

That is why the Conservatives recently announced three policies that would reduce the regulatory burden. First, we would remove the ringfencing on banks. Secondly, we would reduce bank capital requirements. Thirdly, we would replace the Financial Ombudsman Service with a financial adjudication service.

Bobby Dean: The description of the regulatory regime since 2008 is fair. There has been a degree of over-correction, particularly on things such as capital requirements, and the regulators themselves are saying that we could do with some tidying up, but abolishing the ringfencing regime—one of the fundamental protections put in place for everyday bank users in relation to the risks presented by investment banking—does not seem like addressing an over-correction. It seems like a revolution back to the 2008 regulatory regime. Can the hon. Gentleman defend that Conservative party proposal in that context?

Mark Garnier: Yes, I can, from having been on the Treasury Committee from 2010 to 2016, when we looked at creating the Financial Conduct Authority and the Prudential Regulatory Authority, and, more relevantly, on the parliamentary commission on banking standards. Our report recommended that we introduce the measures in the Davies review, which was bringing ringfencing in. The hon. Member may remember that, at the time, the Liikanen review in the European Union looked at ringfences. The subtle difference between our ringfencing and theirs is that it was described as caging the tigers in Europe and as putting a fence around the deer park in the UK. Our retail banks were ringfenced. The problem we have found is that it has become increasingly complex to operate the regime, and the Europeans did not bring it in; as a result the resolution regime on banks—the recent Bank Resolution (Recapitalisation) Act 2025 looked at this—actually means that we now have an awful lot of other stuff in place and do not necessarily need the ringfencing.

The problem with ringfencing is that banks end up with a cliff edge, where their customers are traversing from the ringfenced bank to the commercial and investment banks, and it becomes very difficult. Only one bank has managed to satisfy itself that it is okay, and it has set that ringfence limit at £100 million worth of turnover; all other banks have been at the lower end, which is close to £5 million or £10 million in turnover.

It is costing us more and becoming less internationally competitive to have a ringfencing regime that other countries did not adopt. When we adopted it we were the first mover, but we were not followed. International competitiveness is the key point, as well as the bank

resolution. There are MREs, bullion bonds and a lot of stuff out there that makes up for that, brought in since the financial crisis. It just looks like we have too much. I hope that answers the question from the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Bobby Dean).

Analysis shows that the annual cost to the UK's banking sector of ringfencing alone is £1.5 billion. At the same time, reports from industry are clear that ringfencing is duplicated and is not responsible for post-crisis improvements. In 2022, the independent review of ringfencing and proprietary trading said that

“the reduction in the implicit government guarantee and progress in ending too-big-to-fail was not found to be attributable to ring-fencing.”

We understand that the Government are looking at this, and at reforming the ringfencing regime through the Financial Services and Markets Bill. The Economic Secretary to the Treasury and I will be spending a lot of time in the coming months going through the minutiae of banks' balance sheets—frankly, I find it fascinating; I hope she does too. However, like most of the Bill, while welcome, we feel that the Government are not fully utilising the opportunities that the Bill will provide, and that they could go much further. As I say, I will not delve into too much of the detail because we have a long time to go through all this, but I hope that the hon. Member for Buckingham and Bletchley will throw his weight behind the Financial Services and Markets Bill when it comes to the House of Commons.

I have a second point on taxation. If we are to unlock the future of UK financial services, the other area we have to look at is the level of taxation. In a world where capital, talent and business activity are highly mobile, the UK needs to remain an attractive place to do business. That is especially important given the international nature of the UK's markets. While our competitors such as the US have a high domestic focus, the UK is the exact opposite: the London Stock Exchange Group found that more than four fifths of the revenues of FTSE 100 constituents now stem from outside the UK. Despite that, data from across the industry shows that the UK is an outlier when it comes to the level of taxation on our financial services sector.

Taking the banks as an example, data from UK Finance and PwC in 2025 suggests that the total tax rate on banks in London is 46.5%, which is significantly higher than in other financial centres such as Amsterdam, Frankfurt, Dublin and New York, as we have already heard. In fact, compared with the US, our banks are paying 60% higher tax than theirs are. Another example is the insurance sector. Data from the Association of British Insurers shows that their membership's total tax contribution increased by 77% between 2014 and 2024. Analysis suggests that that has mainly been driven by increases in the insurance premium tax.

Derek Twigg (in the Chair): Order. I am conscious of time. I assume that the shadow Minister is coming towards the ends of his comments, but I want to make sure that the Minister and Member in charge have plenty of time to respond. I will call the Minister in about a minute's time.

Mark Garnier: I will draw my remarks to a close, Mr Twigg—I have been rambling on a bit. I thank the hon. Member for Buckingham and Bletchley again for

his words. This has been a very intelligent and thoughtful debate. As I say, the most important point is that we have to be incredibly mindful of our international competitiveness, which is so vital for our country. It is so important that we get this right. If we fail, we may find our descendants sitting in this Chamber in 20 or 30 years' time, wondering what on earth happened to the UK's financial services sector. We must get it right.

5.44 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Lucy Rigby):

It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Twigg. I am not sure either of my descendants wants to serve in this Chamber yet—to the point made by the shadow Economic Secretary to the Treasury, the hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier)—but there we are.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham and Bletchley (Callum Anderson) for securing this debate and for his consistent advocacy for the importance of financial services to the United Kingdom. While I am not sure I needed any convincing, even in the short time since returning to this brief I have seen that importance at first hand: in Leeds, home to an incredibly vibrant financial services cluster; in conversations that I have had with debt advice organisations about the difference that timely support can make to those in difficulty; and in Bournemouth, where I met degree apprentices and those at the beginning of their careers who are building the sector's future.

Those few engagements have reinforced for me just how much a thriving financial services sector matters to communities right across this country. I wholly appreciate the contributions of all hon. Members to this debate, whether they wear their financial services experience on their sleeve or seek to hide it—whatever experience they have, it has been a very informed debate.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West and Pudsey (Rachel Reeves), to whom I pay tribute, put financial services at the heart of this Government's growth agenda and launched our 10-year strategy for the sector. The new Chancellor has been equally clear about its importance. Within days of taking office, he went to Bloomberg, reiterating his support for the central importance of our financial services sector. I think that that answers, at least in large part, one of the questions put to me by the right hon. Member for Godalming and Ash (Sir Jeremy Hunt); the remainder of his questions I shall seek to answer as well. I look forward to supporting the Chancellor as we continue to deliver on the Government's financial services strategy.

In doing so, I recognise the challenges, but also the opportunities, in the five areas that my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham and Bletchley has identified as central to the future of financial services. I will take each of those themes in turn. I thank him for his continued advocacy for strengthening UK capital markets and ensuring that those long-standing strengths support long-term investment in the British economy. He is right to recognise the progress that has already been made.

Through the financial services strategy, the Government have taken decisive action to increase investment, to improve outcomes for savers and to support growing British businesses. We have delivered the Pension Schemes Act 2026, established a framework to monitor delivery of the Mansion House accord, enabled targeted support for

consumers and launched measures to help to build a stronger retail investment culture, a point I will come back to.

Mobilising more domestic capital must go hand in hand with ensuring that firms can access the right finance at the right time. Innovative businesses need clear funding pathways, from start-up right the way through to scale-up and into public markets, if they are to invest, expand, create jobs and, of course, remain headquartered in the UK. That is exactly why we are strengthening funding pathways at every stage of business growth. The expanded British Business Bank is helping to address market gaps and crowd in investment, while the National Wealth Fund is mobilising investment into the sectors and infrastructure that will drive long-term economic growth.

We also recognise the particular challenge of later-stage funding. Our reforms are intended to support a more diverse range of funding sources and connect high-growth firms with the capital that they need to scale domestically and internationally. Strong capital markets are central to that objective. The UK has deep markets, global expertise and a position as Europe's leading investment hub. There is no complacency, to answer my hon. Friend's point, in my saying that we must ensure that our markets consistently deliver what companies need and make the UK the best place for firms to start, scale, list and stay.

PISCES—the private intermittent securities and capital exchange system—provides a stepping stone from private to public markets. Hon. Members may have recently taken note of its first major auctions, which saw Wayve and Moneybox sell more than £100 million of shares between them. We have removed barriers to secondary fundraisings, improved market liquidity and eased accounting and reporting requirements for the smallest companies, because listing must be the beginning of a company's growth story, not the end.

Alongside these reforms, we are encouraging pension funds to diversify—I acknowledge the passionate case made by the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Bobby Dean)—supporting investment in private markets and helping savers to access better information and guidance. Trustees and fund managers must, of course, remain responsible for decisions made in the best interests of their members and customers. Sustainable success will come from making UK assets an attractive investment proposition.

On retail investment, I share the view of my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham and Bletchley that too much capital remains in low-yield savings when it could be working harder for individuals and the wider economy. We are therefore helping people to understand the opportunities and risks of investing, and giving them access to appropriate guidance and support. We have also been working closely with the Bank of England's Financial Policy Committee to increase the financial system's ability to support economic growth, which relates to another of the questions put to me by the right hon. Member for Godalming and Ash on financing for SMEs.

Taken together, those measures join up the full investment chain: mobilising more domestic savings, directing capital towards productive assets, widening access to finance for growing businesses and ensuring that UK capital markets help business to build and grow global companies here.

[Lucy Rigby]

Secondly, I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham and Bletchley for pointing out the opportunities presented by the digitalisation of financial markets. That is something I am particularly passionate about. The shadow EST, the hon. Member for Wyre Forest, talked about the importance of innovation to financial services—something that I talk about almost on an hourly basis in this job. The UK is a global leader in financial services because we have consistently embraced innovation; I will not go through the coffee houses that were set up on the banks of the Thames decade by decade. I should say at this point that it is fantastic to have leaders in the insurance industry listening to this debate from the Public Gallery. Innovation is important. We must consistently innovate, because it is key to our global competitiveness and the future of our financial services industry.

Our ambition is to digitalise the UK's financial markets and make the UK a world leader in tokenised finance. It is reassuring and encouraging to hear the right hon. Member for Godalming and Ash indicate that he thinks that is a sensible ambition. We are moving from experimentation to adoption at scale, as set out in our wholesale financial market digital strategy. We appointed Chris Woolard as the Government's wholesale digital markets champion, and he published his first report in July. We are enabling firms to adopt tokenised securities through the digital securities sandbox, where the first firm recently received permission to conduct live activity. The regulators have committed to publishing a full cross-authority road map on tokenisation of wholesale markets later in 2026.

We have committed to issuing DIGIT, a digital sovereign debt instrument, no later than quarter 1 2027. Alongside that, we are modernising and optimising the foundations of our markets, moving to a T+1 settlement cycle from quarter 4 2027 to reduce risk and improve efficiency. The hon. Member for Witney (Charlie Maynard) talked about the importance of stablecoins, and I think he welcomed the innovation objective that we are giving to the Bank of England. Stablecoins are important because they can enable faster and more efficient transactions, which means that money that would otherwise be held up can be spent by businesses on other things—they free up capital by being an efficient means of payment. The Government want to see Great British pound denominated systemic stablecoins and, as he is aware, we have established the regulatory regime. There really is no shortage of ambition from the Government when it comes to stablecoins—[*Interruption.*] The hon. Gentleman is gesturing as if I have forgotten something; I think that means he wants me to address the matter of a central digital bank currency. Work in that regard is ongoing among the Government, the Treasury and the Bank, and we will set out the next steps very shortly.

Many Members mentioned AI, which is already delivering benefits across financial services, from improved customer services to tackling fraud, enhancing productivity and supporting decision making. We now have an AI adoption plan; I will not rehearse that, but I want to pick up on the hon. Gentleman's points, since he rightly highlighted the extreme importance of resilience in our financial system—as he pointed out, the Governor has been speaking about that recently. Work is going on

across Government, including with the regulators and in international fora. I hope I can reassure him that the Government are taking the issue about as seriously as it is possible to take it.

The third area that my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham and Bletchley mentioned was clean energy. The UK is playing a leading role in supporting and financing the global net zero transition, which my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) has spoken passionately about in this place on many occasions. As my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham and Bletchley will be aware, the UK is already one of the world's leading sustainable finance centres, and the Government's focus is on how we can evolve and expand that leadership. We are delivering a number of targeted initiatives and prioritising changes that will have the greatest impact, such as UK sustainability reporting standards. We are also focused on making the UK a global hub for transition finance, which is not only essential to meeting our global net zero goals, but a major opportunity for UK growth and investment.

I will speed up, but I want to mention financial inclusion as another aspect of my brief that I am particularly passionate about. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his recognition of the financial inclusion strategy; I intend to make it a step change in how easily all our constituents can access the financial services they need. He rightly recognised that the ability to open a bank account, to build a modest savings buffer, to access safe and affordable credit, to secure insurance and to protect against life's shocks is fundamental to participation in our economy and, therefore, to participation in our society. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) spoke passionately about the importance of ensuring that financial services are available to all who need them. For all those reasons, those areas are the focus of our financial inclusion strategy, with actions ranging from supporting those without a fixed address to open a bank account, to supporting our credit union sector through a £30 million transformation fund.

You are indicating, Mr Twigg, that I should draw my speech to a close. Before I do so, let me again thank my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham and Bletchley for securing the debate and all Members for their contributions.

5.59 pm

Callum Anderson: I will keep it short, so that we do not overexcite ourselves on the first day back after summer recess. I can only thank right hon. and hon. Members from all parties for their contributions and for adding extra dimensions to the debate. I thank the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Witney (Charlie Maynard), the shadow Economic Secretary to the Treasury, the hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier), and my right hon. and learned Friend the Economic Secretary to the Treasury for their constructive contributions. It is clear that we have a united front and a shared collective recognition, not only of the value of UK financial services in their own right, but of their importance for all our constituents.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the future of UK financial services.

Local Government Reorganisation: Cambridgeshire

6 pm

Derek Twigg (in the Chair): I will call Ben Obese-Jecty to move the motion and then call the Minister to respond. I remind other Members that they may make a speech only with prior permission from the Member in charge of the debate and the Minister. As is the convention for 30-minute debates, there will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up.

6.1 pm

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the impact of local government reorganisation on Cambridgeshire.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Twigg. Last week I wrote to the Secretary of State outlining my concerns regarding the delayed decision on the future of local government reorganisation in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough. Thus far we have heard little of her position regarding the criteria under which a decision will be made and how it may differ from that of her predecessor, who decided to delay the decision in the first place. I outlined how the pregnant pause preceding this interregnum is creating uncertainty and instability and affecting the retention of experienced council personnel, investment decisions for local businesses and questions about the viability of local plans crucial to the success of Huntingdonshire.

In Huntingdonshire, we fear a local government reorganisation stitch-up. In January, I asked the then Prime Minister whether he could

“offer assurances to my constituents and people across Huntingdonshire that the decision is not already a done deal, and that the democratic will of Huntingdonshire district council will not be overridden to satisfy an unelected Labour regional office”.—[*Official Report*, 14 January 2026; Vol. 778, c. 928.]

He said:

“There are no done deals here; we are going through the proper process.”—[*Official Report*, 14 January 2026; Vol. 778, c. 928.]

In March, I asked the previous Minister for Local Government whether she could

“reassure me that Huntingdonshire will not be split in two”.—[*Official Report*, 26 March 2026; Vol. 783, c. 411.]

She did not offer any reassurance, so here we are in September with no decision having yet been made as we await the announcement of what we fear will be a stitched-up local government reorganisation in favour of a gerrymandered pork barrel option that even Labour councillors in Huntingdonshire despise.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): Cambridge city council has long punched above its weight and has carried much of the rest of the county, but it is a second-tier authority. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that a globally recognised city like Cambridge is long overdue unitary status?

Ben Obese-Jecty: Given that Peterborough has unitary status, I agree that it makes sense for a city the size of Cambridge to have that unitary basis. However, I stress that I do not believe that should come at the expense of other regions across the county.

The Government splitting Huntingdonshire in two and using the wealthier half to try to prop up their two MPs in the north of the county is going to go down badly. The hon. Members for Peterborough (Andrew Pakes) and for North West Cambridgeshire (Sam Carling) proposed option D after it was concocted by the Labour East regional office. Nobody in Huntingdonshire was asked or consulted about the proposal, but as soon as it was put forward by those two MPs, it was clear that it would be the one likely chosen by the Government.

Sam Carling (North West Cambridgeshire) (Lab): I am troubled by the unpleasant allegations the hon. Gentleman is making. It would have been pleasant if he had come to talk to me about his concerns at any point over the last few months rather than he and a member of his staff attacking me on social media about this. It is not great.

The hon. Gentleman is raising process concerns. I am sure we all want to see a proper process. Why was it that he went on to social media and made quite a large number of claims about Labour MPs being pre-briefed of an apparent announcement that never happened—claims that therefore cannot possibly have been true, and were not?

Ben Obese-Jecty: I would bounce that back at the hon. Member and ask him why he never came to me or any of the other Huntingdonshire MPs to ask about proposing an option that would split Huntingdonshire in two. The hon. Member told the BBC last summer:

“A Mid Cambridgeshire council would allow rural areas across East Cambridgeshire, Fenland and parts of Huntingdonshire to form an authority that can deliver effectively on residents’ priorities, while a Greater Peterborough council encompassing the most high-growth areas of northern and western Cambridgeshire could better regulate and plan that growth.”

Nonsense. I am fascinated to know how an almost entirely rural Mid Cambridgeshire county council is supposed to thrive when it has no basis for economic growth. The Greater Peterborough council would encompass

“the most high-growth areas of northern and western Cambridgeshire”.

I wonder which authority the hon. Member’s constituency is within.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): In Northern Ireland some 10 years ago, we had local government reorganisation that promised significant savings and more efficiency. Unfortunately, on neither of those two occasions were they delivered. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that when looking at what others have done, as he has outlined, perhaps it is time to see where things went wrong and learn lessons from what we did and did not do right?

Ben Obese-Jecty: I concur with the hon. Gentleman. There is absolutely an opportunity here to learn from previous mistakes and make sure that they are not repeated when we drive this forward in the new year.

In early July, news began to leak out from the Local Government Association’s annual conference that Peterborough city council suddenly seemed to be aware that option D was going to get the nod. Word spread quickly among Cambridgeshire senior executives that option D was going to be selected. Who was leaking that information, and why was I left to announce it on

[*Ben Obese-Jecty*]

ITV News Anglia so that people could see for themselves that the process under this Government was on the cusp of selecting the Labour-proposed option, as has happened in local authority areas across the country? Strangely enough, the response received on Friday to a freedom of information request to Peterborough city council was not able to be answered. I eagerly await the response to my own subject access request in a few days' time.

It is simply a disgrace that the Government would treat Cambridgeshire residents with this level of contempt by leaking the outcome of a decision that appears to have been almost certainly predetermined to a privileged few, allowing those who have been given the information to achieve a head start and for favoured businesses to gain a competitive advantage, and affecting decisions on employment and education opportunities and future investment decisions.

Sam Carling: Might the hon. Gentleman give way again?

Ben Obese-Jecty: No, I will carry on.

The announcement by the former Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government on 16 July therefore makes little sense. He said:

"On Cambridgeshire and Peterborough and West Sussex, I am not making announcements today, because further time is required to get the decisions right."—[*Official Report*, 16 July 2026; Vol. 789, c. 1097.]

Could the Minister outline precisely what was meant when the former Secretary of State stated that further time was required to get the decisions right? Can he state definitively how much time is required, and can he articulate what specifically is in danger of being got wrong?

Alison Griffiths (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton) (Con): My hon. Friend just mentioned West Sussex, which has also seen the deferral of any decision and a request for a third option despite the fact that the democratically elected councils had offered up two of their own proposals. We are still waiting for a decision and the way forward is still unclear. Does he agree that in both Cambridgeshire and West Sussex, this Government's inaction and indecision are causing real harm to our constituents because all our council officers are taking so long to deliver this?

Ben Obese-Jecty: I agree with my hon. Friend. It is absolutely key that we get clarity on the timeline for this decision process—when it will be taken and when we can expect to hear—because there are local elections to prepare for next year and people need to know exactly what is going on.

Pippa Heylings (South Cambridgeshire) (LD): Local authorities and council leaders were asked to produce evidence-based proposals according to the criteria laid out by the Government, and they did so, but since then, as we have just heard, all we have seen is uncertainty and a vacuum of decision making at a time when councils should be gearing up for the local elections for the new unitary authorities next May. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we would like to hear two things from the Minister? First, in terms of the criteria, will it

be the original criteria laid out by the Government that will be used to determine what the new unitary authorities will look like, and secondly, what timeline—

Derek Twigg (in the Chair): Order.

Ben Obese-Jecty: I agree with the hon. Member. We urgently need clarity. On the statement that was made before recess, we saw a huge amount of discontent across both sides of the House with the decisions that had been taken previously, and it is essential that we get real clarity on exactly what the process is going to be. I appreciate that the Minister has come back into his role having had some time away and may be having to catch up, but I assure him that the strength of feeling is high.

Charlotte Cane (Ely and East Cambridgeshire) (LD): Will the hon. Member give way?

Ben Obese-Jecty: I will make a little progress.

Further to this, in his letter of 16 July, somewhat contradictorily, the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Streatham and Croydon North (Steve Reed), stated:

"I have decided that more time is needed to consider which option, if any, to implement at this time in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough."

We now have a new—old—Secretary of State. Can the Minister clarify whether the Secretary of State also requires more time in order to make a decision? Whether she does or does not, can the Minister clarify when the Secretary of State plans to have made her decision by? Her Department has held no further discussions with Huntingdonshire district council, so what precisely is in need of further discussion that warrants a delay of two months? Can the Minister outline why there has been a delay? Can he also clarify when Labour MPs were informed of the delay to a decision in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough in the first place?

I ask the Minister to clarify, on the record, whether his departmental colleague, Baroness Taylor, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, participated in a meeting with Labour MPs and councillors on Wednesday 15 July 2026, during which local government reorganisation in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough was discussed. I ask him to choose his "yes/no" answer to that question very carefully, lest he might later be accused of misleading the House.

My position remains extant: I back a Huntingdonshire unitary authority, which is known locally as option E. It is the option that was overwhelmingly backed by councillors from all parties across Huntingdonshire district council. Disappointingly, the only people not to have backed this option are Huntingdonshire's two other Members of Parliament. I maintain that a united front in this respect would have sent a stronger message to the Government.

I have led two debates in Parliament about local government reorganisation, both of which highlighted the potential issues that arise from getting the decision wrong. The more recent of those debates was last November and during it I provided an in-depth assessment of why option D specifically was unworkable. It is almost as if I expected the Government to stitch up the decision. I will reiterate the points that I made then for the benefit of the Minister who is here today.

Option D rips Huntingdonshire in half, creating east and west Huntingdonshire. There is a significant risk in attempting to disaggregate Huntingdonshire district council. There is a lack of precedent and an absence of lessons being learned, not to mention the destruction of local identity in Huntingdonshire, which is already stronger than local identities elsewhere in Cambridgeshire, particularly in separating Huntingdon from Godmanchester and St Ives. Disaggregating Huntingdonshire district council would also come with greater transition costs and affect service delivery.

Peterborough is a basket case. It is estimated that 11% of Peterborough's budget is needed simply to service its own debts, with 80% needed to fulfil its statutory adult and children's social care obligations. How on earth does it plan to run all the other existing county and district functions on a 9% budget?

Peterborough council's debt gearing is 91%, against a national benchmark of just 50%. Under the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy's local authority financial resilience index analysis, Peterborough is rated as high-risk for its overall level of reserves, its unallocated reserves, its earmarked reserves, its interest payable or net revenue expenditure, its gross external debt, its fees and charges to service expenditure ratio, its council tax requirement or net revenue expenditure, and its growth above baseline. Huntingdonshire is not deemed to be high-risk in a single one of those categories.

Sam Carling: Will the hon. Gentleman give way again?

Ben Obese-Jecty: No, I am going to carry on.

The option D business case itself states:

"As Peterborough has historically required exceptional financial support and comes from the most financially challenged position, increasing the scale does not necessarily provide the desired resilience. Reserves still remain low. The cost of servicing debt continues to eat into a significant proportion of the net budget and the funding headroom is tight. This could be mitigated by resizing services in line with available funding."

Option D provides a significantly lower level of reserves, leaving it more vulnerable to shocks. The reserves of Greater Peterborough are comfortably the lowest in Cambridgeshire at just 16%, which is again deemed high-risk. By comparison, Huntingdonshire would be 42%.

On employment, we need look no further than the percentage of universal credit claimants in the local authority; in Huntingdonshire, it is 2.8%, while in Peterborough it is 8%, which is far and away the highest rate locally; Peterborough has the highest unemployment rate in Cambridgeshire. Greater Peterborough is also projected to have the highest prevalence of education, health and care plans, and the greatest risk of special educational needs and disabilities escalation. At present, Huntingdonshire has the second lowest rate of EHCP prevalence in Cambridgeshire.

This analysis strongly suggests that the system would all but immediately collapse. Greater Peterborough will have the highest spend per resident for adult social care and for children's social care, more than double that of the other two unitaries, as well as the highest SEND spend per resident and the highest percentage of homeless households, at nearly double that of Greater Cambridge.

It is akin to the Berlin Wall being put up overnight, condemning one half of Huntingdonshire to eking out an existence in the bleak Peterborough Democratic Republic while the eastern half enjoys the trappings of a slightly better existence in the Federal Republic of Mid Cambridgeshire. But will we? Is Mid Cambridgeshire any more viable than Greater Peterborough? No, it is not. A unitary authority for Mid Cambridgeshire would be centred upon St Neots as the biggest town, compared with Cambridge or Peterborough in the neighbouring unitaries.

The option D business case barely even attempts to sell the viability of Mid Cambridgeshire, stating:

"It encourages reflection on ensuring the resilience of all unitaries, especially Mid Cambridgeshire".

It goes on to outline that

"targeted action can be taken to sustain its market, towns and rural communities"

and that this model safeguards the rapid growth trajectories of the two city regions. It makes no effort to address the challenges that this would leave Mid Cambridgeshire to face.

Charlotte Cane: I draw Members' attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests as a district councillor on East Cambridgeshire district council. One of the other big problems for this proposed Mid Cambridgeshire unitary is that it will have most of the soil-affected roads in Cambridgeshire, which are really expensive to maintain, and most of the internal drainage boards, which need significant funding to keep our market towns and villages dry so that people can live in them. It will be a very challenging unitary to run financially.

Ben Obese-Jecty: I agree. The numbers that I saw were terrifying. I think somewhere in the region of 80% to 90% of Cambridgeshire's peat roads would be based in the Mid Cambridgeshire authority; the roads budget itself simply would not be able to cope with that. I did not know the point about the internal drainage board and the mid-level commissioners, but having seen some of that infrastructure I can well imagine that the bill for replacing that will be terrifying if it falls solely on Mid Cambridgeshire.

The business case also states that Mid Cambridgeshire's "proposed lower levels of funding may result in difficulty in being able to deliver services to residents within its budget envelope. A significant transformation programme will be required to ensure services are resized accordingly".

We can read that to mean "reduced". The business case later adds that

"Mid Cambridgeshire may face particular challenges in both capacity and funding for high-cost statutory services", and that Mid Cambridgeshire

"in particular, may require additional support to ensure it can participate fully and equitably in regional initiatives".

That is very reflective of the sentiment expressed by the hon. Member for North West Cambridgeshire about the land grab for high-growth areas that Greater Peterborough is attempting. Mid Cambridgeshire will be set up to fail.

Daniel Zeichner: The hon. Member may remember the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough independent economic review, which was commissioned during the

[Daniel Zeichner]

time of Mayor James Palmer. That identified three discrete economies within the area. Is that significant to this debate?

Ben Obese-Jecty: I am not aware of that; I have not seen the detail of the report so it would be remiss of me to opine on it, but I have read the business cases in detail. While splitting the county into those three distinct regions may look like it makes sense, the travel regions for those areas are very distinct and do not necessarily reflect the make-up of the option D business case.

It is worth highlighting that in the option D proposal the travel-to-work patterns and commercial activity data clearly illustrate that the movement of people within Mid Cambridgeshire is limited to within each of the three component areas of Huntingdonshire, Fenland and East Cambridgeshire. There is little in the way of movement between them, which begs the question of why three distinct areas would then form a viable unitary authority. The evidence clearly shows that Huntingdonshire would benefit from being its own unitary authority, rather than its being split in two, given that there is little in the way of movement from the northern part of Huntingdonshire into Peterborough, and vice versa.

When we look at option D further, we see that it does Mid Cambridgeshire no favours when it comes to gross value added per capita. The two councils with the highest GVA per capita are Cambridge and South Cambridgeshire, which are to be combined to form Greater Cambridge. The next two highest are Peterborough and Huntingdonshire, with the wealthier half of the latter to be merged into Greater Peterborough. That leaves the two councils with the lowest GVA per capita to be combined, along with half of the next lowest, resulting in a Mid Cambridgeshire authority with a GVA per capita that is roughly 50% of neighbouring Greater Cambridge. The lack of potential for growth in Mid Cambridgeshire is baked in by design. If that option is selected by the Government, I would like to understand how Mid Cambridgeshire is supposed to wash its own face.

“Splitting Huntingdonshire could weaken this cohesion and reduce its prominence relative to neighbouring authorities.”

That is a direct quote from the option D business case, which identifies the threat to Huntingdonshire alongside the lack of viability of either Greater Peterborough or Mid Cambridgeshire. We are now in the crucial final phase prior to the final decision on the outcome of LGR in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, and what that decision will mean for the historic county of Huntingdonshire. Will it continue or will it be consigned to history? Mr Speaker marked Huntingdonshire Day this year, posing with the Huntingdonshire flag. That may never happen again.

I have outlined the concerns about the proposed changes, the manner in which those changes have been discussed in secret between Labour party politicians and members, and the concerns regarding their feasibility. I have outlined why option D—the option we believe the Government are most likely to select based on conversations among officials within Cambridgeshire—or a variant thereof would not work and would leave Huntingdonshire in a far more perilous state than it is anywhere near today. I have outlined how the business

case for option D itself repeatedly raises concerns about the viability of a Mid Cambridgeshire unitary authority—something that those within Huntingdonshire widely believe will fail within a few years.

From a scheduling perspective, every day that goes by without a formal decision being taken on the future of local government reorganisation in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough further jeopardises the likelihood of implementing it successfully. It is vital that a swift and uncontroversial decision is made in order to give officers the best opportunity to facilitate the transition if we are to realistically meet the May 2027 election timetable currently in place.

It is evident that I could have spoken about this issue for a good while longer. That is before discussing the effect it will have on both the local plan, which will now likely be voted on before a decision has been taken, and on Project Fairfax, the defence technology cluster at RAF Wyton for which a memorandum of understanding is already in place with the Ministry of Defence. That project is crucial for fuelling growth in Huntingdonshire and facilitating the growth in every postcode that the new Prime Minister has pitched. Can the Minister confirm what discussions his Department has held with the MOD regarding the impact of LGR on the feasibility of delivering Project Fairfax?

Option E—a Huntingdonshire unitary authority—would allow Project Fairfax to flourish. It is the option that Huntingdonshire voted for. Centred around the existing boundaries and an established regional identity, it would create the institutional stability required for long-term investment and growth, and would ensure consistency in leadership, existing teams, partnerships, development pipelines and investor relationships.

This is the third time I have made the case for Huntingdonshire to the Minister, so he knows the arguments well by now. He knows that there is no strong argument for pursuing option D at this late stage. I hope that the Secretary of State heeds the details in this speech. Option D simply will not work, and nobody wants it. It would weaken the direct relationship between a defined region and local government, divide the community and destroy an identity. If nothing else, pursuing it would make his party unelectable in Huntingdonshire for a generation.

“The public deserves better—better policies that support better outcomes and are better connected to the places people live. Putting place over political party demands collaboration and long-term decision-making within a stable governance structure”.

Those are not my words; they are from the Cabinet statement on rewiring the state on 31 July. The Prime Minister should stay true to his word and apply his aspiration to Huntingdonshire.

6.20 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jim McMahon): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I congratulate the hon. Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty) on securing this debate on local government reorganisation in Cambridgeshire. I am grateful for the opportunity to set out the Government’s approach, the progress made so far and the opportunities presented by this once-in-a-generation reform.

Before I get to the main points, let me say that it is clear from the contributions of the hon. Member for Huntingdon and my hon. Friends the Members for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) and for North West Cambridgeshire (Sam Carling) that they are passionate about local communities—that is what makes our Parliament great—but that there are sometimes quite different views about how to achieve what they want. Life would be wonderful for central Government if at a local level there was a single answer to the question and our job was merely to say, “Thank you very much for the submission. Everyone agrees on that, and it makes complete sense.” Of course, that is not the position that the Government find ourselves in. We have to arbitrate over many competing views. We receive the proposals without predetermination, on the basis on which they were submitted, and we have to act in good faith. I assure the hon. Member for Huntingdon and others that, as a Minister, I will do that with diligence and in good faith.

I will come to the hon. Gentleman’s exact points later, but let me say that it is not helpful to make accusations in this place or on social media that seem to cast aspersions on the process. I know how passionate people are about their places, their identity and the future of their local authorities, but it is important that we set the record straight. I will attempt to do that and to answer some of the hon. Gentleman’s questions.

Sam Carling: Will the Minister join me in congratulating all Cambridgeshire and Peterborough councils on the collaborative way in which they have worked together on this process? Despite coming up with different options that they may or may not back, they have remained in a position where they have been talking to each other throughout. Those dialogues have been ongoing and I think that is something to be commended.

Jim McMahon: We have seen that across England in the two-tier areas. In many cases, people have come together across party lines because it is far better to agree a comprehensive proposal locally and submit it to Government than to have it done to them in another way. If there is more local organisation and agreement at that level, it is far better for local people and for the decision made later in the process.

Even where there is difference in nuance—there will be differences in some elements—the core fact remains that the two-tier system just is not working. For too long, too many areas have been served by complex two-tier structures that divide responsibilities, duplicate costs and blur accountability. Residents often struggle to know which council is responsible for which services; decisions to build homes or grow our towns and cities take longer than they ought to; and resources can be spread too thinly.

The Government’s aim is simple: to have clearer structures, stronger councils, quicker decisions, more homes and better services for local people. As the Prime Minister said, ending the two-tier system of local government

“is a nettle...that’s got to be grasped.”

If we want to devolve more powers out of Westminster, we need a structure for local government in England that is equal across the board. Reorganisations are the building blocks for devolution, and I am really pleased

with the progress made so far. Decisions have been taken in 19 of the 21 areas, and we are now working with councils to get on with the job of implementation.

I turn to the constituency of the hon. Member for Huntingdon. I understand his wish for further clarity about the previous Secretary of State’s decision and the next steps for reorganisation in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough. On the decision itself, the former Secretary of State decided that more time was needed to consider which option, if any, to implement in that area. The decision was not taken lightly, and I say to the hon. Member for Huntingdon now that we will consider decisions on local government reorganisation closely. They represent a fundamental change that will affect residents for generations to come, so it is important that we make the right decisions in the right way.

We will aim to make decisions on which option, if any, to implement on or before October this year. That will still allow for elections to new councils in May 2027 before they go live in April 2028. I am grateful to the hon. Member, and to other MPs and councils in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, for their efforts to date. I assure him and them that we remain absolutely committed to delivering reorganisation across the area, and we will provide further updates shortly.

On reorganisation more broadly, we recognise that it is a demanding process, and we would not have made the progress we have without the hard work and dedication of local councils and officials. The Government have announced that £63 million will be made available to support the transition across the 21 reorganised areas. As well as the unprecedented £900,000-worth of transition support to each new unitary, areas will receive up to a further £150,000 per each new unitary council to support leadership capacity and continuity in children’s services, adult social care and public health. That will bring the total transition funding for LGR areas to more than £1 million per new unitary created. In addition, up to £1 million of funding in total will be available to support the small number of areas with complex fire and rescue authority transitions, building on the funding already given to Surrey.

Ben Obese-Jecty: Should the Government choose an option that sees the Huntingdonshire area split in two between two unitary authorities, what additional support will be given to fully disaggregate the district council’s responsibilities, given the complexity involved? Could the Minister also offer any clarity on local services? For example, the boundary would go in between Huntingdon and Godmanchester, which are separated only by a small bridge—

Derek Twigg (in the Chair): Order. I call the Minister.

Jim McMahon: I am keen not to predetermine what decision we may or may not take. It may well be that a decision leads to disaggregation, but equally it may not, and until we get to the point of reviewing the proposals put forward, we are not in that position. However, as a matter of principle, I accept that having a new unitary authority made up of districts in their entirety, where assets, liabilities and workforces are transferred en bloc, is different from having to disaggregate because it is being split in a number of different directions. I will certainly take that away for consideration; it is a fair point.

[*Jim McMahon*]

Hopefully the hon. Gentleman acknowledges that this is a comprehensive financial support package, which is about supporting local authorities. We should not lose sight of the fact that reorganisation is a real opportunity not just for more efficient services and a clear line of sight on responsibility, but for devolution and our communities. It is an opportunity to give local leaders the funding, powers and capacity to drive growth, to build the homes their communities need, to deliver better public services and to improve the lives of the people we serve.

I hope that, whatever differences of opinion there are, there is the same collaboration at a parliamentary level as I have seen at a local level. I see that local authorities, councillors and officials are working hard and recognising the direction that the Government have set, with many realising the advantages that will come with a unitary authority with a single mandate for their area. Importantly—and hopefully all Members have heard this—the new Prime Minister is coming from being mayor of a major city region, hungry for more devolution and recognising that this country, for far too long, has held power, resources and decision making in this place when it should be out across the country instead.

Question put and agreed to.

Local Authorities: Aluminium Recycling

6.30 pm

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered aluminium recycling and local authorities.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Twigg. I am grateful to have secured this debate, as I believe that what I am about to set out is one of the most significant and least understood failures in our country's local authority waste and recycling policy. It concerns aluminium, the most valuable material in every household recycling bin in Britain.

We should ask ourselves, what happens to the aluminium cans that residents put out for the council to collect? What do councils do with that aluminium? Is it managed in the best possible way? And how does the disposal of aluminium impact the Government's critical minerals strategy, aluminium recycling targets and circular economy objectives?

For many years, I have collected used aluminium from businesses in my constituency. Once I have collected enough, it goes to our local scrap merchant, and I donate the money to local charities. Recycled aluminium has roughly 10 times the value of mixed plastic waste and several times the value of paper or cardboard. As aluminium can be recycled indefinitely, it is the most valuable material that councils collect from households by a very wide margin.

I knew that a number of councils in my region, including my own council, had an efficient kerbside collection scheme and return much of the collected aluminium's commodity value to the council's coffers, but I wondered about the rest of the country. How much aluminium is recycled each year? What happens to it once councils have collected it? Are councils getting a fair income from its commodity value? Is it recycled in the UK or sent abroad? And what, if any, are the Government's regulations regarding the export of aluminium? Those are some of the questions to which I wanted answers.

Earlier this year, I submitted a freedom of information request to more than 300 councils across the UK. I asked them what happens to the aluminium collected from their residents' kerbside recycling. While I waited for replies, I did some further research on the subject. I discovered from the House of Commons Library that about £1 billion-worth of scrap aluminium is sold abroad each year by waste management companies. Industry groups told me that manufacturers are spending about £5 billion importing reprocessed aluminium.

According to the Aluminium Packaging Recycling Organisation, which I would like to thank for being here today, we use around 12 billion aluminium cans every year.

Aphra Brandreth (Chester South and Eddisbury) (Con): The hon. Member is making an important point about the value of the aluminium we throw away. This is not just about drinks cans; blister packs also contain valuable aluminium but are not routinely recycled at the kerbside by many councils. My constituent, Yvonne, has done

amazing work in one of our local villages trying to gather together these blister packs for recycling. Does the hon. Member agree that we should be speaking with councils and encouraging them to recycle things like blister packs at the kerbside?

Tessa Munt: Yes, of course I agree. The more we can do to recycle everything that we potentially throw away, the better.

Around 60% of the 12 billion aluminium cans used each year are exported for recycling, with only 40% recycled in the UK. I also learned that, although we currently have a high recycling capacity, next year we will have the capacity to recycle every aluminium can used in the UK. By this time next year, there should be no need whatsoever for any council in this country to send its aluminium cans abroad. I shall return to that point.

Environmental groups revealed that every tonne of aluminium recycled in the UK saves 95% of the energy needed to produce primary aluminium. Of equal importance, recycling in the UK avoids the carbon emissions of shipping material to smelters in China, India, the USA, Thailand and Greece. I mention those countries because, according to the manufacturers' trade body, Make UK, and aluminium industry analysts AL Circle, that is where 84% of our aluminium scrap ends up. Exports of aluminium to the USA are particularly worrying, because they have surged by almost 1,200% from 2,000 tonnes to 24,000 tonnes in just 12 months. Aluminium scrap is exempt from President Trump's tariffs on primary aluminium, so the waste management companies are profiteering by sending as much scrap aluminium there as they can.

In April, answers to my FOI requests began to arrive. The results were revealing. Far too many councils could not say where their aluminium ended up. Too many have no policy requiring their aluminium to be recycled in the UK and, I have since discovered, too many councils that do have a UK recycling requirement are blissfully unaware that their aluminium is being exported abroad by private waste management companies. The most shocking thing my research revealed, however, was the number of councils that do not know the value of their aluminium waste and the number receiving little or no income from the sale of this valuable commodity. Equally alarming was the number of council leaders who refused to answer my question about income, quoting commercial sensitivity.

I found that those councils that understand the value of their aluminium and manage their recycling well are retaining significant amounts of money each year. However, councils of similar sizes and demographics, sometimes using the very same waste management company, are losing money for reasons that simply make no commercial sense. I will give a few examples: Cambridgeshire county council made about £1.6 million from aluminium recycling last year; West Sussex county council made about £1 million; Surrey county council made £2,000; Warwickshire county council made £500; and Lancashire and Kent county councils made nothing.

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): As a Kent MP, I am consistently amazed at how rubbish the Reform leadership of Kent county council is, but of particular note is the fact that when Reform came in, Kent was

going to be the flagship for its DOGE, which is about saving loads of money. Does my hon. Friend know whether the council got on to that and renegotiated the contract? Are there any other options? Did it look into this? Can she tell me more about her interactions with Kent county council?

Tessa Munt: No, Kent county council has probably done absolutely nothing. In a moment, I will give my hon. Friend an example of where a council has changed hands—control changed hands and the council did a really brilliant job. There is money to be had and, when councils are up against it trying to provide for adult social care, children's social care and, frankly, every flipping pothole, it is amazing that they do not get on and tune into this.

County councils are not alone in that income discrepancy. It happens in unitary authorities, too: South Gloucestershire council made £500,000 and one of my own councils, North Somerset, made £400,000, but North Lincolnshire made absolutely nothing. Doncaster city council made £300,000, but Coventry city council and Leicester city council made nothing. Another interesting example is that the Labour-led Nottingham city council made an impressive £300,000 from the sale of its aluminium, but the Reform-led Nottinghamshire county council, which serves three times the population of the city itself, made absolutely nothing. Something went awry there.

According to the Local Government Association, aluminium cans are worth some £54 million per year to English councils. If the responses I have received to my FOI questions are anything to go by, that seems to be a sizeable underestimate. I therefore want to return to this question of commercial sensitivity. I understand that contracts between councils and waste management companies can contain some commercially sensitive terms and information; however, surely how much income a council earns from the sale of recyclable materials collected from its residents is a matter of public interest and should not be hidden behind exemptions. Residents who sort their recycling every week are entitled to know where it is going, if for no other reason than it encourages them to keep recycling and to recycle more. Secrecy does not help anyone in this arena. The Freedom of Information Act 2000 rightly provides exemptions for genuinely commercially sensitive information, but I trust that the Minister will agree that income from aluminium recycling is hardly a trade secret. It should be a matter of public record.

Both councils in the Minister's constituency replied to my freedom of information requests by stating that they could not identify income from aluminium. However, Hull city council informed its own scrutiny committee that aluminium cans are worth £900 to £1,000 a tonne and that it takes 80% of that value, and East Riding of Yorkshire council told its committee that revenue was £1.6 million. Does the Minister accept that councils that publish this information for a council committee meeting should be more transparent with their residents and the public? Can she assure me that she will offer guidance to ensure that councils always release such information? The Local Government Association's "wealth from waste" review says that councils across the country receive only around 28% of the total financial value of the materials that they recycle. Waste management companies retain the remaining 72%. That disparity cannot be right.

[Tessa Munt]

Some councils have refused to accept that financial imbalance and have resorted to going to the courts to receive a fair income for their waste materials, as my hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mike Martin) referred to in relation to Kent. To give an example, in June 2024, Buckinghamshire council took its waste management company, FCC Environment, to the High Court. The council claimed that the 75%/25% revenue share in favour of the waste management company did not reflect the council's entitlement. The High Court agreed, and the council was awarded substantial funds for underpayments going back as far as 2016. As the Minister knows, FCC Environment now controls waste management for the councils in her constituency, both of which have extended their contract to 2030.

South Ribble borough council is a clear example of action being taken after political change, as was referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells. When Labour took control of South Ribble, the new administration immediately terminated the contract with the waste management company, brought services in-house and saved £178,000 in the first year. Where there is political will, injustices can be corrected. When local government finances are so tight, I find it puzzling that so many councils let this source of extra income slip through their fingers. I wonder how much children's and adults' care could be delivered and, as I said earlier, how many potholes could be filled with the extra income highlighted in those examples.

The issue is becoming increasingly important to our councils because aluminium is fast replacing plastic and glass across a wide range of drinks and consumer goods. Industries are turning to aluminium more and more. It is lightweight, substantially more recyclable and its quality is not time-sensitive, unlike that of plastic and glass. Many brands also see it as increasing their sustainability credentials, especially among younger consumers. In the last few years, the use of aluminium cans has expanded from a few soft drinks and craft beers into spirits, wine, coffee and water. Last year, Diageo sold more than 80 million cans of Baileys alone, and Marks and Spencer sold 35 million aluminium cans containing a variety of drinks—an increase of about 1 million on the number sold in the two previous years. Even the whisky industry is looking to aluminium to replace its traditional glass, although I am not sure what some hon. Members will think of that.

I am sure that the Minister sees my point. Year on year, right across the country, our councils' residents are purchasing increasing numbers of aluminium cans, our councils are collecting an increasing number for recycling and, at the moment, waste management companies are allowed to sell increasing quantities of that precious resource abroad to the highest bidder.

I anticipate that when she replies the Minister will offer the packaging recovery notes system and the coming deposit return scheme as possible solutions. I plan to seek debates on both topics later in the year, and my research tells me that the packaging recovery note system has been plagued by fraudulent scams that open the doors to even more aluminium exports. The Minister will know that the Local Government Association claims that the system does not channel revenue to councils and has called for changes. As for the deposit return

scheme, despite the benefits that it may bring the Government are allowing the drinks companies and the supermarkets to manage it, with no regulations whatsoever to restrict them from exporting as many aluminium cans as they want.

When my constituents put their cans in their recycling bag or bin they consider that recycling, and in one sense they are correct. It has become very clear from my research that when councils hand over their waste to a private material recovery facility most consider that to be recycling, but that is not the case. All a recovery facility does is divide the waste into different components. Consequently, when the aluminium comes out of such private facilities it has not been recycled; it is nothing more than crushed and broken bits of aluminium. I raise that point because the definition of "recycling" is important. The current confusing definition allows councils to be persuaded, whether honestly or otherwise, that their aluminium is recycled, and recycled in the UK, when too often, after it leaves the recovery facility, waste management companies sell it to the highest bidder abroad.

It is important that the Minister and her Government establish some clarity on this issue, so I would like to know the Government's definition of recycling and its main characteristics, and at what point in the process the Government consider items such as aluminium to be actually recycled. To try to answer those questions for myself I took some of my aluminium to the largest aluminium can recycling centre in the UK: the Novelis reprocessing plant in Warrington. I thank the amazing Allan Sweeney and his team at Novelis for showing me around the plant. I saw how crushed and broken aluminium cans are cleaned, melted down and cast into brand-new 27-tonne ingots—they are huge.

I also saw the almost-completed £75 million expansion of Novelis's facilities, which is jointly funded by the Government. Once operational it will allow all the UK's used cans to be recycled in the UK. Each year in Warrington 8 billion cans are reprocessed, ready to be rolled into new aluminium cans and bottles. For me the question was answered right there in Warrington: aluminium is not recycled until it is reprocessed ready to be made into a new product; up to that point it is just scrap metal. That definition would resonate with my constituents and with all those who take the time to recycle their aluminium.

I will return to how that all impacts the Government's critical minerals strategy and their circular economy objectives. I believe that there is no question but that it does impact them, and in a manner that makes a mockery of the Government's intentions. I will give the Minister three very clear examples.

First, the critical minerals strategy categorises aluminium as a national strategic asset, central to our defence, infrastructure, manufacturing base, circular economy and net-zero targets. It says that the UK must secure access to such critical minerals; the amount of scrap aluminium exported abroad each year seriously undermines that.

Secondly, one of the critical minerals strategy's primary pillars is reducing exposure to volatile global markets, yet waste management companies are given free rein by the Government to export unlimited quantities of aluminium scrap into the very volatile markets that the critical minerals strategy says must be avoided.

Thirdly, circularity is central to the critical minerals strategy. As I have already pointed out, aluminium is infinitely recyclable and reprocessing uses 95% less energy than primary production. Exporting scrap aluminium breaks the circular loop that the critical minerals strategy says is essential for resilience.

All the research that my team and I have conducted so far this year has led me to conclude that many of our councils have a good understanding of the commodity value of the aluminium that they collect from the public. They manage it well through prudent procurement agreements and secure real value for money for their residents, but far too many fail to take the management of their waste seriously. They sign contracts that simply hand everything over to waste management companies, which then profit massively from aluminium and other materials' value. Far too many believe that UK recycling policies are being adhered to, when in reality, the truth is shrouded from them and their aluminium is being sold abroad to the highest bidder, lining the pockets of the waste management companies.

I am well aware that the responsibility for this issue lies not with central Government but with the leadership at local government level. Might the Prime Minister's devolution initiative help here? I urge the Minister and her Government to act now to stop scrap aluminium from councils all over the UK being exported by waste management companies. What those companies are doing undermines all the Government's initiatives around the critical minerals strategy and circular economy initiatives.

Aluminium, that vital commodity to our country, should not be sent for recycling or reprocessing abroad while there is capacity to do so here in the UK. In conclusion, I ask the Minister to give me some reassurance that the Government will act on this matter before our national interests are further harmed.

6.51 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for Wells and Mendip Hills (Tessa Munt) for setting the scene. The hon. Lady has done the House a favour in highlighting an issue that maybe not many of us were totally aware of—I know that I was not, until I did some research in Northern Ireland.

I will have a specific request for the Minister, as I always do. The hon. Member for Wells and Mendip Hills spoke directly about our environmental responsibilities, our industrial potential and the unique challenges faced by local authorities, and I wish to speak about the situation in Northern Ireland. I thank the hon. Lady for securing this debate, because when we talk about a circular economy, as she did, we must ensure that no part of this United Kingdom is left spinning its wheels in isolation.

I must remind the House of a fundamental structural difference. The 11 councils in Northern Ireland, including my own superb Ards and North Down council, are different animals compared with local authorities across Great Britain. They do not control schools or roads; their responsibilities are different. Instead, waste management and environmental health sits at the absolute pinnacle of their frontline responsibilities. It is one of the largest items on their balance sheets. When waste policy fluctuates, our local councils feel the shockwaves immediately.

Our councils have worked hard. According to the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs in Northern Ireland, our municipal recycling rates sit proudly at some 50%, but they are hitting a brick wall—a wall that is built out of unique geographical and market restrictions that I want to ask the Minister about. The Minister is always helpful in answering my questions. I appreciate that very much, and I know that she will come back to me with some indication of a way forward.

Unlike a council in the English midlands, which can simply chuck its baled aluminium on to a lorry and drive it down a motorway to a domestic smelting plant, a council in Northern Ireland faces severe market isolation. We have a smaller domestic market, fewer local reproducers and a distinct lack of heavy infrastructure for secondary metal refining. The hon. Member for Wells and Mendip Hills referred to Novelis, and the indication was that it would be able to recycle all aluminium here in the United Kingdom. Northern Ireland needs a methodology for getting into that process. We do not have that at the moment.

To get our high-value aluminium to the main UK or European markets, our authorities must contend with the tyranny—I use this word on purpose—of distance and the shipping costs. Every single tonne of recycled metal must cross the Irish sea. That means that our local authorities are at the mercy of volatile sea freight charges, supply chain disruptions and—let us not mince words—the lingering regulatory frictions of the Windsor framework.

If a local council faces bloated logistical costs just to export its aluminium scrap to a mainland smelter, the economic incentive to invest in advanced sorting facilities begins to collapse. For us in Northern Ireland, this is chaos. It just does not work at all. I thank the hon. Member for Wells and Mendip Hills again for highlighting this issue. We cannot expect Northern Ireland's ratepayers to foot the bill for structural market disadvantages. Respectfully, I say to the Minister that if the Government are serious about a UK-wide green transition, there also has to be targeted support. We need the Government to work with the Northern Ireland Executive to invest in local reprocessing infrastructure. It is time to focus on this issue.

Let us be clear: the people of my constituency of Strangford and across Northern Ireland want to do their bit for the planet, and our local government stands ready to deliver, but they cannot do it if they are economically stranded by a lack of market access. Let us give Northern Ireland's councils the tools, freight backing and infrastructure support to ensure that a can thrown into a recycling bin in Newtownards in my constituency has the exact same value and future as a can thrown away in London, the midlands or across this great United Kingdom.

6.55 pm

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): It is an honour to serve with you in the Chair today, Mr Twigg. I congratulate my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Wells and Mendip Hills (Tessa Munt), on securing this important debate, her excellent speech and her continued advocacy on the issue.

[Sarah Dyke]

The Liberal Democrats are committed to delivering a circular economy where value is kept in the system, not thrown away—one that maximises the recovery, reuse, recycling and remanufacturing of products and that cuts costs for consumers and businesses, reducing exposure to volatile commodity prices, protecting the environment and creating new economic opportunities. Aluminium is one of the success stories of the circular economy and has an important role to play in this cycle. Aluminium can be recycled indefinitely without quality loss. Cans can be recycled and back on supermarket shelves within 60 days. Some 75% of all the aluminium ever produced is still in use today. Reprocessing aluminium uses 95% less energy and 90% less carbon than primary manufacturing.

Aluminium is a critical mineral and recognised as such by both the UK Government and NATO. Reprocessing it domestically protects the broader UK supply chain, supporting defence, construction and green energy infrastructure. However, the supply chain is increasingly vulnerable, with scrap aluminium being exported to Asia and the US, while our domestic reprocessing capacity has fallen. UK and EU reprocessing of UK scrap packaging fell from 83% in 2021 to 68% in 2024. Alupro's projections show a further decline without policy intervention amid the impact of UK tariffs and instability in the middle east. That is despite UK capacity for reprocessing this material having increased in recent years following multimillion-pound investments.

Somerset's focus on improving recycling rates has been a success. Nearly 150,000 tonnes of waste was collected, with 87,500 tonnes reprocessed here in the UK—over half of it within the county itself. Somerset Waste sends its scrap steel and aluminium to reprocessing facilities within the UK. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Wells and Mendip Hills stated in opening this debate, the disparity in local authorities' recycling arrangements varies widely.

Aluminium can be hugely profitable for local authorities. Somerset gains considerable income from its recycled aluminium, while others receive nothing at all. In addition, despite some councils specifically requiring their aluminium to be reprocessed in the UK, it is subsequently discovered that it has been exported to China. With the deposit return scheme due to launch in October 2027, councils stand to lose used aluminium cans, the most valuable material in recycling bins, from kerbside collection altogether. We are going to lose that most important and valuable recycling material, which generates an income for councils when sold as recycling—it is really important.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Wells and Mendip Hills outlined, transparency is really important here and it is much required. A recent poll found that the single factor most damaging public confidence in recycling is the lack of information on what happens to materials after collection. That indicates that greater traceability is not just supported by the public; it could drive higher recycling rates through greater public participation. Local authorities play a vital role in managing waste and reducing pollution, yet too many are being asked to deliver world-class recycling services on a shoestring budget. They must be properly funded and supported to deliver high-quality, consistent recycling services that maximise the value recovered from these materials, not left to patch together a postcode lottery of provision.

The Liberal Democrats have been keen to see changes to the waste management system that encourage more recycling. However, with extended producer responsibility live since October 2025 and simpler recycling live since April 2026, local authorities are already having to adapt to a changed landscape. The next major shift will be the deposit return scheme from October 2027. Once most aluminium is no longer collected at the kerbside, local authorities could lose a valuable revenue stream. Furthermore, despite these changes, some residents will inevitably continue to place their aluminium in kerbside bins, so can the Minister confirm whether local authorities will be able to claim that deposit for the aluminium items they continue to collect?

Aluminium recycling sits at the intersection of our climate ambitions, our industrial strategy and our local government funding crisis. To conclude, I want to ask the Minister to address three things. Can she confirm how the deposit will be treated for aluminium cans left in kerbside recycling after DRS launches, and will it contribute to the local authority collection costs? Will the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs ensure that local authorities are properly funded to sustain high-quality recycling services through the transition, given the revenue that it stands to lose? What steps are the Government taking to close the loophole that allows UK-collected aluminium, including aluminium collected from councils with UK-only reprocessing requirements, to end up being processed overseas? I hope the Minister will give me some answers on that today.

7.1 pm

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I congratulate the hon. Member for Wells and Mendip Hills (Tessa Munt) on securing this important debate, and I thank her for the considerable work that she has done to examine how aluminium is collected, recycled and ultimately reprocessed across the country.

We know that this is a significant issue. In 2024, 287,000 tonnes of aluminium waste was generated in the UK, of which only 54.7% was recycled. Across its different uses, the aluminium industry contributes an estimated £9.4 billion to the UK economy, supporting sectors all the way from packaging to car manufacturing, energy infrastructure and defence. Of course, the Government have rightly recognised aluminium as a critical material.

Aluminium, as has been referenced, is one of the most valuable materials in the household recycling stream, and it is therefore vital that councils have a clear understanding of what they are collecting, what the material is worth and what happens to it when it leaves their possession. If neighbouring local authorities are receiving dramatically different returns from comparable aluminium material, as has been rightly pointed out by the hon. Member and others, why is that the case? It would be very interesting to know whether DEFRA and the Minister are looking at the scale of those differences nationally, as such disparities have been raised throughout the debate.

This is also a matter of public confidence. Residents are repeatedly encouraged to recycle—and rightly so—but they believe that what they are doing is having a positive impact on the environment. Surely they are also entitled to know what happens in the recycling process itself.

If a council cannot say confidently where the aluminium ultimately goes, how can residents do so? How can elected councillors scrutinise what taxpayers are receiving and whether it is value for money? I hope the Minister agrees that greater transparency is needed throughout the whole system, and I would like to understand what steps the Government are taking to ensure that councils have the information and expertise they need to properly scrutinise the process and ultimately make the right decisions.

That leads me on to the second major issue that has been raised in the debate, which is the sheer amount of valuable aluminium scrap that is leaving the United Kingdom. The figures are striking: the UK currently exports almost half the aluminium scrap that it produces, and at the same time, the UK spends around £5 billion importing aluminium. Make UK has warned that the rate of export risks affecting future industrial resilience, and estimates that the domestic aluminium scrap sector may need to grow by around 25% every year to meet the anticipated demand from British industry.

To be clear, the Conservatives strongly believe in free trade. Aluminium scrap is traded internationally, and it would be wrong to suggest that every ton of exported scrap represents a policy failure. However, the Government should not ignore the wider strategic consequences when increasingly large quantities of a material that they have designated as critical are leaving the country when demand from British industry is expected to rise. The Government have designated aluminium as critical because it is essential to defence, energy, car manufacturing and other key industries, so it is surely reasonable to ask whether we are retaining enough of our own secondary aluminium to meet our growing requirements.

We have British businesses investing in recycling infrastructure right here. British industries are demanding more aluminium, but councils are exporting large quantities of that material abroad. That cannot be right, so I ask the Minister what proportion of exported aluminium could be processed in this country. What assessment have the Government made of the implications of scrap aluminium exports for British industry and manufacturing, and what conversations is DEFRA having with the Department for Business, Innovation, Science and Trade to ensure our recycling policy and our industrial strategy are pulling in the same direction?

That brings me to the extended producer responsibility and packaging. There is huge concern that the sheer cost of Labour's implementation of these measures is having a detrimental impact. The Office for Budget Responsibility has estimated that EPR will raise around £1.6 billion a year on average over the first five years, but it also recognises DEFRA's estimation, based on its own information, that EPR is not likely to have a material impact on recycling rates or packaging waste volumes over that period. If businesses are being charged that much, and the cost of those measures is ultimately being passed on to consumers through higher prices, Ministers must be able to show how they are ultimately improving recycling rates in this country. I therefore ask the Minister how much more recycling of aluminium EPR will actually deliver, and how much of that funding will result in better local authority recycling services and decision making. We cannot end up with a system where businesses, consumers and families pay more, but

recycling rates ultimately do not move at all. It is vital for the success of EPR that these measures are open and transparent.

In aluminium, Britain has an extraordinarily valuable and useful material. It can be recycled time and time again and supports industries that are worth billions of pounds to our economy. The Government themselves have designated it as critical, yet we are still exporting almost half of the aluminium scrap we generate. Local authorities do not always know where the material they collect goes, or where it ultimately ends up. Some appear to be securing dramatically better returns for their aluminium than others, while at the same time, British recycling businesses are investing in capacity and British manufacturers are increasingly needing the very aluminium that those local authorities are allowing to leave this country. That should concern Ministers.

The previous Government implemented much of the framework that is in place; the challenge for the current Government is to ensure that that framework works effectively. If businesses are being asked to meet enormous costs through EPR, they must see better recycling rates as a result. If councils are collecting valuable material, taxpayers deserve to know where it goes and whether they are receiving proper value for it, and if aluminium is genuinely a critical resource, Government policy should reflect that reality. We need a system that recycles more; uses that recycled material at home, not necessarily abroad; gives councils better value for money; protects businesses and consumers alike from unnecessary costs; and strengthens British industry. Ministers now need to show that they are capable of meeting that challenge.

7.9 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I welcome all hon. Members back to Westminster Hall; it is good to start with a debate where there is much agreement.

I thank the hon. Member for Wells and Mendip Hills (Tessa Munt) for securing the debate, and I would like to take a moment to pay tribute to the previous Minister for Nature at the Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry East (Mary Creagh). She did so much to progress the reforms I will go on to mention, including the deposit return scheme, which is of clear relevance to today's debate—it will play a vital role in increasing the capture of drinks containers, improve the quality of material collected for recycling, and reduce litter. I am a huge supporter of the deposit return scheme, and I will continue that work and her legacy.

I recognise the long-standing interest of the hon. Member for Wells and Mendip Hills in this issue. I was reading about how she has been collecting aluminium cans herself and using that for local charity, which is a brilliant idea and such a nice way to reduce litter in the local area and raise money for charity. We should think about the principle of such materials being viewed as valuable resources; I wholeheartedly agree with that.

I also agree with the comments the hon. Lady made about fraud in the system. She will be aware that, only a couple of weeks ago, the Prime Minister made a big announcement about cracking down more on waste crime. I went to visit Kidlington, which looks a heck of a lot better than it did previously and is nicely cleared up.

[Emma Hardy]

The hon. Lady is therefore right to talk about fraud and how we can increase transparency in the system by looking at registration. There was a consultation on reforming the packaging waste recycling note system earlier in the year, which is looking at changes to address the issues she mentions.

It seems to me that there are two issues when it comes to recycling. One is how we collect more of the things we should recycle, rather than putting them into landfill. The other, which I am particularly passionate about, is how we recycle more of those things here in the United Kingdom. We still have a throwaway culture in the UK, and we throw away so much stuff that can be reused and recycled. As has been highlighted, we should think about the huge value of what we put into our bins and send to our councils. The hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mike Martin) mentioned the problems he has with his council not recognising the value of what it is throwing away. There are many reforms that we can make in government, but there is not much we can do about incompetence.

Our recycling rate has stalled between 42% and 44% for years, apart from in Hull city council, where we recycle 51% of everything we collect. Considering the area, the demographic and the challenges we have—I could spend the whole debate talking about flats and recycling, but I will not—that is hugely important. I completely agree with the comments from hon. Members that every tonne of aluminium we do not recycle needs to be dug out of the ground somewhere and sent across the world somehow. It makes complete and utter sense to recycle more of what we have here in the UK. It is good not only for the environment but for industry; it is good for the Prime Minister's ambition to reindustrialise our country, create jobs in different areas, bring back manufacturing and expand our manufacturing base. What is not to love about doing all those things? It is why I am quite passionate about this and so delighted to have it within my brief.

The hon. Member for Wells and Mendip Hills asked about councils losing out through aluminium recycling. As she knows from all her in-depth research, they have different contracts and agreements. I can raise her point directly with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government Minister to see what more can be done on transparency. From DEFRA's point of view, we publish a monthly market overview so that councils can see what the market price of aluminium is, which is information that DEFRA has. I will have to speak to the MHCLG Minister about how they can encourage councils to share their information. From my point of view, they would surely want to do so to ensure that a neighbouring council is not getting a better deal.

Tessa Munt: Half the problem is that councils often think they are doing the right thing, and they have put something in their contract that says everything needs to be recycled in the UK. It goes back to my point of how to define recycling. There are problems all the way along the chain. If a waste management company can say, "Yes, we have recycled everything," because it has put everything into a facility, separated it and sorted it, and the council is happy to accept that, then something has to change.

Emma Hardy: Absolutely. We need to keep building on the reforms we have introduced and make things simpler and more transparent for everyone. I completely take the point that local people need faith. If someone is living near an aluminium recycling factory, they will be really incentivised to recycle all their aluminium. I will raise the point with the MHCLG Minister about how we can encourage councils to be more transparent.

Before I move on to the next point, I want to address the points from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who raises a serious issue. It is great that recycling rates in his area are at 50%, which is really impressive, but I recognise the point he makes about how easily aluminium can be recycled and, if that material is collected, how quickly it can be recycled. DEFRA officials will meet and work with officials in Northern Ireland on the implementation of the deposit return scheme and see how we can support them to be as successful, if not more successful, than here on the mainland.

Lots of Members raised concerns about exports and what we are doing about them. Legitimate exports of waste for recovery are permitted when they comply with domestic and international controls. Reprocessors and exporters must be accredited by the relevant regulator. Hon. Members have heard me mention the packaging waste recovery note reforms as well. Where the UK cannot recycle materials economically, exports help those materials to be recycled rather than sent to landfill or incineration, which is the worst of all worlds. The new fit and proper person test for operators, together with monthly reporting requirements, further strengthens oversight of that part of the market. However, I will say again that my personal feeling is that I would love to see more of it recycled here in the UK.

Tessa Munt: As I explained, one place I went to was Warrington. It is clear that next year that plant, Novelis, will be able to take all our cans, for example—we do not need to think about the other bits of aluminium that there are around the place. That is a Government-funded expansion, and it is brilliant. Can we not do something that stops this stuff going abroad on the basis that it is a critical mineral?

Emma Hardy: Absolutely. Our aim is for 65% of municipal waste to be recycled, and 67% of aluminium packaging. The hon. Lady mentions Novelis, which is the leading aluminium producer and recycler, and it has committed, as I think she was alluding to, £66.5 million to upgrading its aluminium recycling plant. One of the things we are hearing is that the changes we are making through the deposit return scheme—the higher-quality collection of aluminium because of the way the scheme works—mean that recyclers are looking to expand and do a lot more, which is fantastic because that is creating highly skilled jobs in those areas.

I have already mentioned some of the other reforms: extended producer responsibility, simpler recycling and the deposit return scheme. Industry estimates that those three different reforms will underpin £10 billion of investment in recycling, with new sorting and processing facilities, and will create 25,000 jobs. Those are jobs here in the UK—UK jobs for people in this area—creating and supporting growth in every postcode, which is exactly what the Prime Minister is talking about. That is really quite exciting, and it is because of those three reforms introduced by this Government.

Aluminium demonstrates exactly why the transition to a circular economy is not some academic theory, but something that matters to us all. Capturing that valuable resource gives us the opportunity to reduce waste, lower emissions and strengthen industrial supply chains. That is good for local authorities, manufacturers, economic growth and the reindustrialisation of this country. Bringing together stakeholders from the steel, aluminium and critical minerals sectors, the Government have created, under my predecessors, the metals circularity group to look at how we can create high-quality scrap, because that matters a lot as well.

I thank the hon. Member for Wells and Mendip Hills. It is great to kick the year off with something that we all agree on and that we are all pushing in the same direction on: how can we recycle more here in the UK? Our existing circular industry already delivers tens of billions of pounds in economic value and hundreds of thousands of jobs, but I know there is more potential that we can unlock. If we get it right, we can build something durable: a circular economy that turns yesterday's rubbish into tomorrow's raw material and delivers growth, resilience and jobs in every corner of this country—in fact, “growth in every postcode”, to borrow a phrase

from the new Prime Minister. That is the outcome I am focusing on delivering for every council and corner of this country.

7.19 pm

Tessa Munt: I thank the Minister for her summary and her wind-up speech. I will give her a copy of my questions—I think she may have them already—and ask her to consider writing to me with the detail, because this is so important and so good for the UK that we cannot miss the opportunity. I would be hugely in favour of us getting to the point—next year, the year after or any time in the future—where we are not sending our aluminium by any means whatsoever to places such as China and the US, because it is not good for the UK. We can do it here. We should keep it here and use it again here.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered aluminium recycling and local authorities.

7.20 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 1 September 2026

BUSINESS, INNOVATION, SCIENCE AND TRADE

CPTPP: Canada

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Innovation, Science and Trade (Blair McDougall): From 1 September 2026, the UK's accession to the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership (CPTPP) enters into force with Canada. Following Canada's ratification, UK companies can trade with Canada under CPTPP terms for the first time.

This means that the UK's accession to CPTPP is now in force with all other member countries. British businesses can now access the full benefits of the agreement across all 11 CPTPP parties.

Canada is a close UK partner and fellow G7 member. It was the UK's largest CPTPP trading partner in the four quarters to the end of Q1 2026, accounting for 23% of all UK trade with CPTPP. Canada was also the world's 10th largest economy in 2025, with a market of 42 million people and GDP of \$2.3 trillion.

Benefits for UK traders and consumers

Entry into force of the UK's CPTPP accession with Canada means that we have secured access to Canadian tariff rate quotas covering a wide variety of dairy products, including cheese, cream and ice cream. This provides UK farmers and dairy producers with additional tariff-free market access to Canada and opens further opportunities to increase exports.

The agreement will also make short-term business travel to Canada more flexible. UK business visitors will be able to stay for up to six months, with the option to extend.

Alongside this, new digital trade commitments will further support UK businesses by permitting them to store data entirely digitally, rather than having to establish physical facilities in Canada. These commitments will be particularly useful for small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs) looking to expand into Canada and across CPTPP economies.

By improving access to information, reducing barriers to trade and increasing transparency, CPTPP will also help SMEs take advantage of new opportunities across the bloc.

Additionally, there will be access to new public procurement opportunities by giving businesses in both countries enhanced access to markets not covered under previous agreements. For UK suppliers, this includes opportunities in sectors such as air transport, accounting and financial services.

The UK will continue working with Canada and the other CPTPP members to build on the opportunities it creates for businesses, consumers and economic growth.

I will keep the House updated on future CPTPP developments.

[HCWS296]

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Creative Freelance Champions

The Minister of State, Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Ian Murray): The DCMS Secretary of State (Lisa Nandy) has appointed Leila D'Aronville and Lizzie Crump to the role of creative freelance champion, to ensure that the voice of this vital workforce is heard at the heart of policymaking.

Freelancers form the backbone of the UK's creative economy—providing a significant workforce across sectors from performing arts and film production to design and crafts. They provide the agility and specialised skills that make our creative industries a global success story. However, creative freelancers face unique challenges regarding job security, skill development, and working conditions.

Lizzie Crump and Leila D'Aronville have been appointed, in a job-share working pattern, for a period of 18 months as direct ministerial appointments. Over the first six months, they will identify their priority areas of work, and define a number of set deliverables for their appointment term. They have also joined the Creative Industries Council.

The champions will act as a strategic bridge between the Department, wider Government, industry bodies, and the creative freelance community. Their terms of reference have been published online, with a remit focused on advocacy, representation and building understanding of the freelance workforce. This will mean:

Representation: Working closely with the sector to coherently represent the experiences of creative freelancers within Government, and improve the application of policy initiatives to this group.

Building understanding: Working with relevant Government Departments, arm's length bodies, and the sector to improve understanding of this section of the workforce, and build awareness of key rights, responsibilities and resources amongst freelancers and their contractors.

The champions will be supported by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, Arts Council England and the British Film Institute, and will work in partnership with a wide range of organisations from the sector, including unions and sector bodies.

[HCWS294]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Funeral Industry Regulation

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Yvette Cooper): I wish to update the House on the Government's proposals for formal regulation of the funeral sector, announced this summer following the sentencing of criminal funeral director Robert Bush. These proposals will seek to crack down on rogue operators in the funeral sector and ensure better protection for bereaved families.

On 31 July, Bush, of Legacy Independent Funeral Directors in Hull, was sentenced to 20 years in prison for a total of 67 charges, including the prevention of a lawful and decent burial, fraud, fraudulent trading and theft.

His actions were utterly abhorrent, and my thoughts remain with all the bereaved families in Hull who were so badly let down. Every person in every situation deserves dignity in death, and every bereaved family deserves certainty that their loved ones are being treated with care and respect.

For those families, there can be few things more painful than knowing a loved one was not treated properly after they died. The deceased cannot speak for themselves, which is why clear safeguards, stronger oversight and consistent standards are needed to protect their dignity and give families the reassurance they deserve.

Sadly, this case was just the latest horrendous example in our country of the deceased not being treated with the care and respect they deserved.

Sir Jonathan Michael's independent inquiry into the horrific crimes of David Fuller in the mortuary of Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells NHS Trust showed the need to ensure better standards across all settings that look after our loved ones after they die, including those where some level of regulation is already in place.

Building on the progress already made in responding to the Fuller inquiry—see HCWS26, 15 July 2026—and in the wake of the Robert Bush case, the Government will bring forward comprehensive proposals to ensure respect and dignity for the deceased in every setting, to drive rogue operators out of the funeral industry, and to protect other families from suffering this same heartache.

The Department of Health and Social Care is leading this work alongside the Ministry of Justice and other Government Departments, and will draw up detailed proposals to drive up standards, including proper regulation of the funeral sector. As part of this work, the Law Commission will also undertake a review of the criminal law in relation to the deceased, consider any gaps in existing legal protections and make recommendations on the creation of new offences, if they are needed.

The Government will work closely with bereaved families, funeral providers, faith groups, local authorities and other stakeholders to ensure that future policy in this area is proportionate, effective and informed by those with relevant experience. This will ensure families can have confidence that funeral providers are meeting clear, consistent standards, no matter where they live or which provider they choose.

These changes will also reinforce the profound responsibility placed on anyone entrusted with caring for someone after death. The majority of funeral providers live up to that responsibility, and offer compassionate and professional care every day. Nevertheless, stronger oversight, including proper regulation of the sector, will protect families from rogue operators, support good providers and restore confidence in a sector that people must be able to trust in moments of profound grief and loss.

We will keep the House updated as this work progresses, and set out our detailed plans and timetables for the implementation of these new proposals in due course.

[HCWS295]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Ending Rough Sleeping

The Minister for Homelessness, Democracy, Communities and Faith (Florence Eshalomi): On 19 August, the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government announced the next steps in his national drive to end rough sleeping, backed by £442 million of funding through a new rough sleeping programme.

This will ensure that everyone sleeping rough is offered a route off the streets before Christmas this year, while providing longer-term accommodation and support for people with the most complex and long-term experiences of rough sleeping.

No one should have to sleep rough. Yet too many people remain without the safety and stability of a secure home. This Government are determined to change that, combining urgent action this winter with longer-term investment to tackle rough sleeping and help people rebuild their lives.

Ahead of Christmas, we are funding local areas to expand accommodation provision for people sleeping rough, alongside tailored support to address the issues that contribute to rough sleeping. This may include accommodation, support to access mental health or substance use services, help to access employment or training, help to access or maintain accommodation, or other support tailored to individual circumstances. At the same time, we are investing in settled accommodation and intensive support for people experiencing long-term rough sleeping, helping those with the most complex needs to leave rough sleeping behind permanently. This investment will help deliver more than 1,000 settled homes for people experiencing rough sleeping, alongside the support needed to sustain them.

Funding has been targeted towards areas with the greatest rough sleeping pressures, while giving mayoral strategic authorities and local authorities the flexibility to shape services around local need. This reflects the Government's commitment to devolving power and resources to local leaders, who are best placed to understand local challenges and shape the responses needed in their communities, and mayoral strategic authorities are expected to manage funding across their area, in partnership with local authorities.

Alongside funding allocations, we have published guidance to help local areas mobilise quickly and deliver a consistent "route off the street" offer this winter. The guidance makes clear the need to ensure adequate and accessible provision for women experiencing rough sleeping, recognising that women are often underrepresented in official statistics and may be at greater risk of violence, abuse and exploitation.

We are also increasing investment in the ending homelessness in communities fund, taking the total funding to £47 million, with £8.1 million additional funding, supporting voluntary, faith and community organisations, which are often the first point of contact for people furthest from mainstream support.

This investment builds on the Government's wider national plan to end homelessness and sits alongside action to prevent homelessness before it occurs. The

£442 million package takes total investment in homelessness and rough sleeping services over the next three years to more than £4 billion. By combining immediate action this winter with long-term investment in accommodation and intensive support, we are taking a significant step towards ending rough sleeping and helping people build stable lives away from the streets.

[HCWS300]

Restoring Pride in High Streets

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jim McMahon):

The condition of high streets, and the health of district, town and city centres, is a litmus test for national renewal. High streets bring people together to eat and drink, shop, access services, explore culture and heritage, or spend time with friends and family. They root a community and when thriving offer pride and quality of life for local people. The high street has a vital role anchoring communities in shared experience and physical togetherness, as well as supporting jobs and local economic growth.

For too long, though, communities have watched their high streets decline around them, with boarded-up shops, vape shops, and rogue businesses replacing the local services people rely on, and gambling businesses disproportionately found in the most deprived areas. This makes high streets unattractive to visit and undesirable to invest in, fuelling a spiral of decline.

This decline is not inevitable, nor is fixing these problems outside our control. Better living standards, mixed-use adaptation, raising the bar on quality, and businesses having breathing space are fundamental to reviving high streets. But giving local people a say over the composition and care of their high street, and clamping down on exploitation, can make a vital contribution now and in the future.

This Government are determined to restore pride in our high streets, support legitimate businesses, and give local people a stronger say over what happens in their town centres. That is why we have announced a package of measures to put power back in the hands of local communities, so that they can shape the future of their own high streets.

First, the Government intend to consult on changes to the planning system to account specifically for the rise in vape shops and adult gaming centres, and provide more control at a local level over the number of these opening on our high streets. At present, vape shops sit within the same broad planning use class as shops, cafés and financial services (class E). Changes of use within this use class do not require a planning application. Adult gaming centres are also not clearly defined in the use classes order. This can leave local communities feeling powerless when new premises open in inappropriate locations, including near schools, or where there is already a concentration of similar premises.

Subject to consultation, the Government intend to make vape shops and adult gaming centres standalone planning categories, or what is known as *sui generis* uses, in planning terms. This would mean a planning application would be required when the use of the land or building changed to that of either a vape shop or an

adult gaming centre, where the change amounts to a material change of use. This would give local planning authorities and communities a proper opportunity to consider whether they are appropriate in that location. The consultation will also test how a vape shop should be defined to ensure a wide definition that does not incentivise businesses to try to avoid the rules by presenting themselves as convenience stores, and captures various uses of shops, where the main aim is to sell vaping products.

The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport will also consult on removing the aim to permit rule in the Gambling Act 2005. This rule currently requires licensing authorities to approach gambling premises applications on the basis that they should generally be permitted where the relevant requirements are met. The Government recognise that regulated, responsible gambling businesses make an economic contribution and offer spaces for people to socialise and have fun. However, many councils, MPs and residents have raised concerns about the clustering of gambling premises, particularly adult gaming centres, on high streets, especially in areas already facing economic and social challenges, and too often local authorities seeking to prevent new openings have found their decisions overturned after a costly legal challenge.

Removing the aim to permit rule will build upon the introduction of gambling impact assessments earlier this year, empowering councils to take local concerns into account when considering applications for new gambling premises. This is not about a blanket ban. It is about giving communities and their locally elected representatives a fairer say over whether additional gambling premises are right for their area.

The Government will also take action to strengthen enforcement against rogue businesses linked to organised crime or serious nuisance. Following a targeted consultation earlier this year, we intend to double the maximum length of closure orders from six months to 12 months. This will give police and local authorities more time to investigate premises, pursue prosecutions, and prevent criminal operators from reopening before investigations are complete. Tackling high-street dodgy shops remains a priority for the Government, and this effort is underpinned by £30 million over three years. The new cross-departmental high street organised crime unit in the Home Office is working at pace with national and local partners to ensure a more robust, co-ordinated response to the problem.

Finally, we will work with councils to improve the appearance and design of high streets. Poor-quality shopfronts, oversized signage and unsympathetic alterations can undermine the character and attractiveness of town centres. Over the next six months, the Planning Advisory Service will identify good practice and provide practical support to councils on improving shopfronts, signs and the overall look and feel of local high streets.

These measures form part of the Government's wider commitment to restore high streets and shift power out of Westminster and back into the hands of local communities. We will set out further detail on our long-term comprehensive approach through the high streets strategy later this year.

[HCWS302]

Revised National Planning Policy Framework: Further Planning Reform

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): This Government have acted with ambition and urgency to tackle the acute and entrenched housing crisis in England, including by means of a bold overhaul of the planning system. In December 2024, we revised the national planning policy framework, reversing the previous Government's anti-supply changes; implementing a new standard method aligned to our more ambitious national housing target; and releasing more land into the system through a modernised, strategic approach to green-belt land designation and release.

In December 2025, our landmark Planning and Infrastructure Act received Royal Assent, enabling us to speed up and streamline the delivery of new homes and critical infrastructure. Once we have switched on the Act in its entirety, we estimate that this single piece of legislation could boost GDP by up to £7.5 billion over the next decade.

In the same month the Act received Royal Assent, the Government launched a consultation on a fuller and more definitive overhaul of the NPPF. The wholly restructured framework that was proposed maintained and built upon the initial revisions we made in December 2024, included a range of new measures to support key economic sectors, and incorporated new clear and rules-based national policies for the making of both plans and decisions.

Under the leadership of the new Prime Minister, the Government are more focused than ever on building the homes our country needs and delivering good growth in every postcode. Following extensive engagement with a wide range of stakeholders and detailed analysis of the large number of responses to the consultation undertaken between 16 December 2025 and 10 March 2026, we published a new NPPF and the Government response to that consultation on 17 August. Alongside the publication of the new framework, we also took the opportunity to progress complementary reforms to further improve the functioning of the planning system.

National Planning Policy Framework 2026

The new framework published on 17 August sets out national planning policy in a clearer and more comprehensive manner and incorporates a number of substantive reforms designed to boost housing supply and unlock economic growth in the years ahead.

The new decision-making policies in the framework, which have been separated from those relating to plan-making, will make development management more certain, consistent and streamlined; standardise policies that apply across the whole of England; and reduce duplication and avoid unjustified local deviation from national policy in local plans. To ensure that the decision-making policies in the framework had an immediate impact, they took effect on the day of publication—17 August 2026.

Many of the reforms contained in the new NPPF reflect the proposals set out in December last year, but a number of key changes have been made in light of feedback received through the consultation. These include:

Clarifying policies throughout the framework: including setting out more clearly the respective roles of different types of plans and what needs to be considered in decision making—for

example, how transport impacts, pollution, heritage, protected landscapes and safety for women and girls should be reflected in planning decisions.

Increasing the ambition of the “default yes” for development around well-connected stations: expanding the scope of the policy to the top 80 travel to work areas by gross value added, as opposed to the top 60 TTWAs proposed in the consultation.

Updating policies to support increased densities: supporting more types of development within the curtilage of residential properties and ensuring that extra floorspace rather than just extra units are supported—giving more flexibility to expand accommodation of all types.

Tailoring minimum densities to maximise overall supply: by adjusting our approach to minimum densities around rail stations and ensuring local areas maximise densities where they can be supported, we have maintained an ambitious approach, while avoiding unviable requirements in areas that cannot support them.

Requiring flexibility when applying parking standards to large retail and similar redevelopment schemes: making it easier to regenerate sites.

Recognising the role of strategic sites: by creating a consistent and distinct category of sites comprising around 1,500 units or more, with policies tailored to support them where relevant.

Revising policy on local standards: by maintaining that quantitative standards in development plans should be limited to matters where local variation is justified and setting out clearly the circumstances in which local standards for energy efficiency and internal layout may be justified.

Providing clearer support for telecommunications development: ensuring schemes can come forward in appropriate locations, including where this can improve connectivity for rail users.

Updating policies which safeguard against the loss of facilities: ensuring that key facilities such as public houses are not lost where that can reasonably be avoided.

Strengthening policy on protected landscapes: reinserting text to make clear that major development should be refused other than in exceptional cases. Landscape and scenic beauty in protected landscapes will also remain protected by statute.

The Government remain committed to tackling childhood obesity, as set out in our “10 Year Health Plan for England”. In response to feedback about its operability, we have removed a reference to “fast food outlets” from the framework, but will explore whether other land use planning approaches, including changes to the use classes order, could be made to address the issues raised by the consultation.

Statutory consultee reforms

Statutory consultees play an important role in the planning process by providing expert advice on matters ranging from transport and heritage to the environment and sport. However, where referrals are unnecessary or advice is delayed, the system can slow decision making and hold back the delivery of homes and growth.

That is why, in November 2025, we launched a consultation on reforms designed to ensure that statutory consultees provide timely, proportionate and relevant advice on planning applications. Following careful consideration of more than 1,600 consultation responses, on 17 August we published a Government response¹ and set out a package of reforms that will streamline consultation requirements while maintaining important safeguards.

The response to the consultation confirms that Sport England will be retained as a statutory consultee, but the range of planning applications on which it must be consulted will be narrowed to ensure its advice is focused on the cases where it adds most value, ensuring it continues to be consulted on development that leads to the loss of playing fields for housing or commercial development, and substantial sports or school development on playing fields.

The statutory consultee status of the Gardens Trust and Theatres Trust is being removed, but a new notification requirement is being introduced to ensure these bodies can continue their important role in the planning process. We are proceeding with the proposals on which we consulted to reform four of the national statutory consultees that receive the highest volume of planning applications: Active Travel England, National Highways, Historic England, and the Mining Remediation Authority.

We are also maintaining the moratorium on new statutory consultees, ensuring that the planning system remains targeted, proportionate and focused on supporting growth. Together, these reforms will reduce unnecessary bureaucracy, help local planning authorities reach decisions more quickly, and ensure statutory consultees can focus their expertise on the proposals that matter most. Regulations will follow in due course to enable implementation of these reforms.

Housing delivery test

To return to a regular publication timetable and ensure that scores reflect the most up-to-date information on housing delivery, the Government published housing delivery test results for 2024 and 2025 on 17 August.² Alongside these results, the Government also published an updated housing delivery test rule book.³

Mayoral planning powers

The “Rewiring the State” Cabinet statement⁴ published on 31 July 2026 commits the Government to delivering good growth in every part of the United Kingdom, with places able to set their own ambitions and integrate services to meet people’s needs.

In England, this requires a fundamental rewiring of the way our country works, surrendering power that for too long has been held in Westminster and Whitehall, and returning it to people and the places where they live, work and invest. Local leaders know what it will take to drive growth in their areas, creating jobs and attracting investment that speak to the strengths of their region.

An effective planning system is integral to meeting housing need, speeding up infrastructure delivery and enabling our towns and cities to realise their full economic potential. While the Government have an essential role to play in setting the framework of national planning policy, standards and regulation, it is local leaders, including mayors, who should be overseeing the strategic direction of development in their areas.

For over two decades, London has set the long-term frameworks for its housing delivery, infrastructure provision, growth and environmental resilience through a statutory spatial strategy, yet to its detriment most of the rest of England is not covered by a strategic plan. That is why our landmark Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025 included provision for spatial development strategies—high-level spatial frameworks, aligned with devolution

geographies, that identify broad locations for growth and development, and the necessary infrastructure needed to support it.

To ensure mayors have the tools they need to effectively deliver SDSs and drive forward housing and regeneration in their areas, the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act 2026 gives them new powers over development management. These include powers to call in planning applications of potential strategic importance; to proactively grant planning permission through mayoral development orders; and to raise funds for infrastructure through the introduction of a mayoral community infrastructure levy.

We are determined to activate these mayoral planning powers as quickly as possible and on 24 August we published a consultation on the regulations needed to bring them into force. By early next year, we want the powers that will enable mayors to call in applications of potential strategic importance and to make mayoral development orders to be in place. In using these powers, we expect mayors to work in close partnership with local planning authorities in their areas to deliver the housing, infrastructure and good growth that local communities need and deserve.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/reforms-to-the-statutory-consultee-system/outcome/reforms-to-the-statutory-consultee-system-government-response>

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/housing-delivery-test-2025-measurement>

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/housing-delivery-test-measurement-rule-book/housing-delivery-test-measurement-rule-book>

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/rewiring-the-state-cabinet-statement>

[HCWS298]

Social and Affordable Homes Programme: Council House Building

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): Everyone deserves to live in a decent, safe, secure and affordable home. Yet far too many families in need of one are languishing on local authority waiting lists and almost 180,000 children are growing up in temporary accommodation, including over 100,000 in London. That is why this Government committed in our manifesto to delivering the biggest increase in social and affordable house building in a generation, and to supporting councils and housing associations to make a greater contribution to affordable housing.

After years of marginalisation, we are once again asserting the necessity and the value of social rented homes. They are a crucial national asset to be proud of, to invest in, to protect and to maintain. Under the leadership of the new Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham), the Government are also determined not only to build upon the steps that we have already taken to reinvigorate council house building, but to decisively raise our ambition to ensure that we build council houses on a scale not seen in decades.

To kickstart social and affordable house building across the country, we have delivered the biggest boost to grant funding in recent memory through our new

10-year £39 billion social and affordable homes programme. The core strategic objective of the programme is to maximise supply, particularly of social rent homes, with a target to deliver at least 60% of the homes under the programme as social rent, in line with our manifesto commitment to prioritise this tenure.

Taken together with the steps that we have taken to rebuild the sector's capacity to borrow and invest in new and existing homes and to establish an effective and stable regulatory regime, this unprecedented funding will enable councils, housing associations and other social and affordable housing providers to step up and deliver at scale and pace.

On 25 August we announced initial allocations of funding from the social and affordable homes programme so that we can start to deliver the significant increase in supply that it will facilitate. We also took the opportunity to set out how the programme will evolve over its 10-year lifetime, reflecting the emphasis that the new Prime Minister has placed on increasing council housing delivery and deepening devolution through a major transfer of powers, resources and functions from central Government to elected mayors and local authorities in regions across England.

As a Government, we remain committed to a renewed partnership with the sector. We call on providers of all kinds, developers and local leaders to help us successfully deliver the programme.

Reinvigorating council house building

Direct council delivery of social rent homes has a range of benefits, including democratic accountability, the ability to tailor provision to meet local housing need, and the creation of public assets that generate rental income that is reinvested in local housing to sustain and support communities.

It is also the case that the last time we built social housing on the scale that is now required, councils were the driving force, delivering tens of thousands of social homes each year until building rates fell off dramatically from the early 1980s onwards as a result of the constraints and restrictions created by the introduction of the right-to-buy scheme.

Housing associations and other providers will continue to play a key role in the delivery of social and affordable homes, and we want to encourage greater partnership working between councils and housing associations, but we are also determined to enable councils themselves to once again build at scale. We know that hundreds of councils share our ambition to secure the future of council housing.

The Government have taken a number of steps over the past two years to reinvigorate council house building. These include fundamental reform of the right-to-buy scheme; enabling councils to retain 100% of receipts from right-to-buy sales; a 10-year social housing rent settlement at CPI+1%; social rent convergence; the extension of the preferential Public Works Loan Board borrowing rates until the end of March 2027; an increase to the threshold for when a council must open an HRA from 200 to 1,000 homes; and funding to increase skills and capacity within councils to build. These changes are already bearing fruit with councils in 2024-25, delivering the highest number of social homes since the current reporting period began in 1991-92.

However, we need to go much further. As a first step, we will make sure that councils are able to access more of the funding available through the social and affordable homes programme. As we do so, we are urging councils to make timely and effective use of right-to-buy receipts, which can now be combined with grant secured through the programme, and unspent section 106 affordable housing contributions. Every pound that can be used for council house building is a step closer to more safe, secure and affordable homes for families across the country.

As a Government, we will continue to explore further ways we might support councils to expand their stock of social homes, including low-cost borrowing options, and to make use of existing powers such as those that enable the removal of "hope value" from the assessment of compensation in compulsory purchase cases where the public interest justifies this. We will be engaging intensively with councils over the coming months to explore these and any other constraints to building at scale.

Investment to strategic partners

As part of the initial social and affordable homes programme funding allocations announced on 25 August, we confirmed the first strategic partnerships designed to support providers who have asked for greater certainty of funding for the duration of the programme and are in a position to quickly begin delivering large numbers of new social and affordable homes.

In response to the opening of bidding, we saw an extremely large number of applications and unprecedented appetite for support on the part of providers. We thank everyone who applied for responding to our call to arms and submitting ambitious bids.

From an extremely competitive field, funding has been awarded to the highest quality bids as assessed by Homes England. This means that across England—excluding London—33 providers will receive funding totalling £9.58 billion to invest in new social and affordable housing. Nearly two thirds of the homes built by strategic partners through the programme will be for social rent.

For the first time ever, three councils will also be awarded strategic partnership status with Homes England—Cambridge city council, Eastleigh borough council and Newcastle city council—demonstrating how councils are stepping up to meet our bold ambitions.

The total funding of £9.58 billion includes an estimated £2.45 billion for delivery in six established mayoral strategic authority areas outside London, supporting the individual priorities of mayors who set the strategic direction of the programme in their areas.

Investment through continuous market engagement

The £9.58 billion of funding allocated through strategic partnerships will deliver tens of thousands of social and affordable homes across the country in the coming years, but with £39 billion of funding available over the lifetime of the programme there is over £16 billion of funding outside London and around £5 billion in London still yet to allocate. This includes funding in each year of this spending review period—2026 to 2030—and significant sums in the second half of the programme.

In allocating this funding, the Government intend to prioritise social rent homes, and in particular council homes so that we can achieve the Prime Minister's

ambition to deliver the biggest council house building programme since the post-war boom ended in the early 1980s. That said, funding will also be available for other providers, and we call on partners to come forward with strong bids in respect of specific sites.

In calling on councils to come forward with bids for new council homes, we will look to raise the cap on funding for acquisitions so that councils can buy more homes while they increase their capacity and capability to deliver homes directly. We are also reinvigorating our existing skills and capacity programme, re-branding it “Capacity to Build” and providing it with an extra £46 million to be invested over the next three years to give councils access to the skills and support they need to deliver ambitious house building plans. In the later years of the social and affordable homes programme, marked by a deepening of devolution and significantly more unallocated funding, we will look to ramp up rates of council house building even further.

London

In the early years of the programme, London will receive 30% of the funding, and up to £11.7 billion overall across the lifetime of the programme. As such, we have confirmed that the Greater London Authority intends to offer allocations of at least £6 billion to providers of social and affordable housing operating in the capital to support house building efforts there and address the city’s acute need for new social rented homes.

London is already showing what can be achieved through fuller devolution when it comes to council house building. With half of all council homes built in 2024-25 coming forward in London, we expect over half of all the delivery in London through this funding to come from councils.

Devolution

We have seen in London what can be achieved when local leaders have the powers, capability and long-term certainty to shape housing investment. We want more mayors to have the opportunity to reach that position.

We therefore intend to ensure that as the programme progresses more funding will flow directly to established mayoral strategic authority areas outside London, building on the strategic direction they have set to ensure that decisions about social and affordable housing investment are made locally. As mayors are given more power over grant-funded delivery, the Government will work closely with them to maximise council housing delivery.

To pave the way for this future transfer, we want to support and empower mayors to quickly increase the capacity and capability of their authorities to deliver housing and regeneration schemes. As such, dedicated delivery expertise will be made available to individual established mayoral strategic authority areas as part of the Government’s commitment to establish joint delivery units between mayors and Homes England.

The approach we take to the programme will be consistent with the commitments made in the Cabinet statement on rewiring the state, including in respect of funding mayors through retained taxation rather than grant.

Supporting job creation through investment in social housing delivery

Alongside its social and wider benefits, the programme supports economic growth via job creation. Every home built through grant funding provided through the programme will support jobs directly and indirectly through construction and supply chains.

We want to maximise the impact of the programme on the employment market and wider economy. For partners delivering through the programme, we ask all providers to consider what more you can do to support young people into employment, creating clear opportunities through the investment being provided.

The Government have been driving innovative training programmes, including directly in the house building sector, through skills development in modern methods of construction. We will continue to explore how we can build on the progress made to date to support young people into employment, focused on addressing skills shortages and training.

Facilitating the delivery of section 106 homes

Section 106 agreements are, and will remain, an essential mechanism for delivering social and affordable housing. They account not only for a significant proportion of affordable home completions, but for a significant share of total new home delivery. Without them, the development pipeline as a whole is at risk of contracting sharply.

In addition to delivering grant funded homes, we need all partners to maximise homes built through section 106. To speed up the process of drafting and concluding new section 106 agreements, we have launched a consultation on a standard section 106 template for medium sites which would be expected to become the default for applications in the future.

We also published the national section 106 affordable housing engagement guidance. This guidance has been developed jointly by the National Housing Federation, the Home Builders Federation, the Chartered Institute of Housing and the Local Government Association, with their members, and we thank all those who have contributed to its development. The guidance establishes a shared framework for section 106 delivery and sets out the principles of effective engagement between developers, registered providers and local planning authorities. The Government strongly encourage partners across the sector to make full use of it.

[HCWS299]

JUSTICE

Criminal Justice Reform

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Norris): This Government inherited a prison system on the brink of collapse. In July 2024, men’s prisons were operating at 99% capacity. At one point, there were fewer than 100 places available across the male estate. Without intervention, we risked running out of prison places, leaving courts unable to sentence offenders and police unable to make arrests.

This Government have acted to increase capacity and to reform sentencing. We have committed to delivering 14,000 prison places by 2031 and have already delivered 3,200. The last Government added just circa 500 net places in their time in office. We have also accelerated the removal of foreign national offenders, returning

around 11,700 to their countries of origin. However, the adult male prison estate is once again operating at more than 98% capacity.

It is within this context that we launched the independent sentencing review in October 2024 and subsequently passed the Sentencing Act 2026, to place the prison system on a more sustainable footing and ensure that there is always space available for the most dangerous offenders. The Act also aimed to avoid the chaotic emergency release schemes carried out with little scrutiny or warning by the Conservatives.

The Government have listened to the concerns raised, paused implementation of the progression model and conducted an urgent review. I can now confirm that, in addition to the dangerous offenders already ineligible for the progression model, this Government will exclude rape and serious child sex offences from eligibility for changes to release dates under the Sentencing Act. Unlawful killings including manslaughter, causing or allowing the death of a child, and death by dangerous driving will also be excluded, as well as indecent assault, ensuring that more historical child sex offences prosecuted under older laws are treated consistently with equivalent offences today. This means hundreds more dangerous criminals staying behind bars for longer, including those who killed PC Andrew Harper in the line of duty.

We recognise the significant effect that changes to release dates can have on victims. We will ensure those in the victim contact scheme who are affected by these new exclusions are informed if there are any changes to the release date of the offender in their case. I have also instructed my officials to attempt to contact victims not in that scheme to provide information should they wish this. We are also boosting support to victims with a £18.9 million funding package for local emotional and practical support.

The Government have a duty to ensure that sufficient prison places remain available. We have therefore fast-tracked plans to create additional headroom in the custodial estate, including creating new cells in existing prisons, accelerating current prison build programmes, and investing in new land for prisons. The largest prison building programme since the Victorian era will be accelerated through a £110 million investment. Under this Government, we're spending more than three times as much on building new prisons as was spent over the previous seven years.

We must also continue to free up prison space wherever it is safe and appropriate to do so. The Government have increased removals of foreign national offenders in our first two years by 41% compared with the last two years of the previous Government. In September 2025 we expanded the early removal scheme, and early next year we will go further, implementing the power in the Sentencing Act allowing eligible foreign national offenders serving determinate sentences to be removed immediately following sentencing. As with the progression model, the most dangerous offenders will be required to serve their sentence in line with current arrangements and all offenders removed under the scheme will be barred from returning to the United Kingdom for life.

Alongside these measures, this Government are acting on inequities in the justice system and plans to bring a definitive end to indeterminate imprisonment for public protection sentences, or IPPs, for those still serving them. Although IPP sentences were abolished in 2012,

a number of prisoners sentenced under the previous framework remain in custody. Of those who have never been released, 99% are beyond the tariff imposed by the court, and 80% have served 10 years or more beyond it. Tragically, with no end of their sentence in sight, some IPP prisoners have taken their own lives.

The numbers of IPP offenders have been reducing, but the Prime Minister and I want to go further. We will soon bring forward legislation to end the IPP sentence once and for all, by the end of this Parliament. These are complex cases, and some IPP offenders have committed serious crimes. Public safety will always be the top priority, and we must balance that with fairness. It will take time to get this right, but work will begin immediately and will be on a cross-party basis.

This Government will also consider how to improve outcomes for women and young offenders, recognising that these groups often have specific and complex needs. We want to reduce the number of women in prison where it is safe and appropriate to do so. We are exploring options to reduce the number of pregnant women and mothers of young children in custody, alongside a cross-Government agenda of reform to address the drivers of women's offending.

In the long term, we will continue efforts to also reduce the number of children in custody, prioritising public protection throughout. In the shorter term, to help relieve some of the adult prison capacity challenges, we have made the decision to hold 18-year-olds for longer—on a careful case-by-case basis—in the youth estate. This will be an interim arrangement, subject to regular reviews, that we will look to end as soon as possible. For youth offenders, I am announcing £4.5 million of investment for robust community alternatives to locking children up.

We recognise that criminal justice reform cannot be delivered through prisons or sentencing policy alone. This is a system-wide challenge and requires action across policing, the Crown Prosecution Service, courts, probation and prisons, and support across Whitehall and beyond.

These measures strike a balance between maintaining sustainable prison capacity, protecting the public and doing right by victims. We will continue to build capacity and reform the system for the long term, while making sure it commands the confidence of the British people.

[HCWS301]

TRANSPORT

Bus Fare Cap

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood): My noble Friend the Minister of State for Transport (Lord Henty of Richmond Hill) made the following ministerial statement on 22 July 2026:

I wish to inform the House that the Government are today announcing single bus tickets will be capped at £2 in England outside London from 1 January until 31 December 2027. This measure will mean millions of passengers could save up to a third off a single journey, helping with the cost of everyday travel and supporting access to work, education, healthcare and leisure.

The new £2 cap is backed by £400 million of extra Government funding. This action to ease the cost of living is being funded by savings from reprioritising the Department

for Energy Security and Net Zero's budget, including by switching funding for international climate from grants to loans.

The scheme will replace the existing £3 fare cap and ensure that eligible single bus fares on participating services cost no more than £2. It will particularly benefit passengers making longer-distance journeys, including those in rural and coastal communities, where fares can often be significantly higher.

Today's announcement sits alongside the Government's wider investment in buses. Earlier this year, we announced over £100 million of additional support for the bus sector, including free bus travel for children aged five to 15 on participating services in August as part of the Great British summer savings scheme. This investment also includes funding for local transport authorities and bus operators to address

rising costs in the sector, helping to maintain services and keep fares affordable. We have today confirmed the individual allocations local transport authorities will receive.

The Government recognise that affordable fares are only one part of delivering better bus services. We have already committed more than £3 billion for buses over the next three years, alongside significant reforms through the Bus Services Act 2025. These reforms give local transport authorities greater powers and flexibility to shape bus services around the needs of their communities, whether through franchising, enhanced partnerships or other locally led approaches.

This Government are committed to ensuring that buses remain affordable, reliable and accessible. By reducing fares, supporting local transport authorities and providing long-term funding certainty, we are helping people stay connected to opportunities, supporting local economies and laying the foundations for stronger bus networks across the country.

[HCWS297]

Petitions

Tuesday 1 September 2026

OBSERVATIONS

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Longridge Community Hospital

The petition of residents of the constituency of Ribble Valley,

Declares that Longridge Community Hospital serves patients in a wide geographical rural and semi-rural area, many of whom need health services within easy reach of their homes, but its inpatient services were temporarily closed in November 2025, with beds relocated to Chorley Hospital in December; and further declares that this temporary relocation has placed strain on many residents and left people fearful of the future of health services in the Longridge area.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to direct NHS Lancashire and South Cumbria Integrated Care Board to commit to a full reopening of the hospital to provide health services to benefit the community, and to promptly address fire safety concerns, providing a timeline to reassure residents of when to expect a resolution to their concerns.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Maya Ellis, *Official Report*, 7 July 2026; Vol. 789, c. 281.]

[P003217]

Observations from the Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth):

The Government are aware of the temporary relocation of in-patient beds from Longridge community hospital to Chorley hospital due to fire safety concerns.

The responsibility for the delivery, implementation and funding decisions for NHS services rests with the appropriate NHS commissioning body, which in this case is Lancashire and South Cumbria integrated care board. This is because decisions about local NHS services are best taken as locally as possible, with the aim of securing high-quality, accessible healthcare services and delivering best value for the public from the local NHS budget.

The Government expect local NHS systems to develop clear plans for reverting temporary service changes or to develop plans for the permanent reconfiguration of the service, following the appropriate process.

Any substantial planned service change should be subject to appropriate engagement—in many cases, through public consultation—and meet the Government and NHS England's tests to ensure good decision making. There must be clear and early confidence that a proposal satisfies the Government's four tests, which include strong public and patient engagement, consistency with current and prospective need for patient choice, clear clinical evidence base, and support for proposals from clinical commissioners.

The Government understand that Lancashire and South Cumbria ICB is working closely with Lancashire and South Cumbria NHS foundation trust and NHS Property Services to consider the options for these

services. The Government expect the ICB to engage with the local community, patients, and staff as part of any future decisions on these services.

Repairs and refurbishment at Doncaster Royal Infirmary

The petition of residents of the constituency of Doncaster Central,

Declares that Doncaster Royal Infirmary is in need of repair and refurbishment; and notes that Doncaster and Bassetlaw Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust's bid for a new hospital under the New Hospitals Programme was unsuccessful.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to take into account the concerns of the petitioners and work with Doncaster and Bassetlaw Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust to prioritise the delivery of repairs and refurbishment at Doncaster Royal Infirmary.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Sally Jameson, *Official Report*, 16 July 2026; Vol. 789, c. 1179.]

[P003228]

Observations from the Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth):

The Government are clear that Doncaster royal infirmary's patients, staff and visitors deserve better than ageing, deteriorating facilities. At a local level, NHS trusts are responsible for managing their estates and maintaining their facilities within agreed capital and revenue budgets.

We are pleased to have funded the delivery of a new critical care unit at Doncaster royal infirmary as a first step towards addressing critical infrastructure risks and backlog maintenance.

In our recently published 10-year capital plan, we set out unprecedented long-term funding certainty for the NHS estate, backed by the largest ever health capital budget in NHS history. The NHS North East and Yorkshire region will receive £1.16 billion from the estates safety fund over the next nine years—2026-27 to 2034-35—to fund critical repairs and refurbishments. NHS regional teams are currently prioritising this funding between sites, following the submission of planning returns. Regional proposals will be subject to national approval by NHS England and the Department of Health and Social Care for assurance. At all stages, the needs of Doncaster royal infirmary will be considered as part of this process.

TRANSPORT

Railway station in Long Ashton

The petition of residents of Long Ashton, North Somerset and the surrounding areas,

Declares that the community of Long Ashton in North Somerset is significantly underserved by public transport infrastructure; further declares that the area is set to become home to a £1.25 billion healthtech campus which will bring substantial employment, economic growth, and inward investment to the region; further declares that the absence of a railway station serving this community places an unacceptable burden on residents

who currently have no viable rail connection to Bristol and beyond; further declares that the provision of a new station in Long Ashton would reduce car dependency, ease congestion on local roads, support the region's net zero ambitions, and ensure that the economic benefits of the incoming healthtech campus are accessible to a wide range of workers and residents; and further declares that failure to invest in this infrastructure risks undermining the full economic potential of one of the most significant development projects in the West of England.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to undertake a feasibility study for the construction of a new railway station at Long Ashton, North Somerset, in order to serve the existing community and support the sustainable development of the forthcoming healthtech campus.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by *Sadik Al-Hassan*, *Official Report*, 8 July 2026; Vol. 789, c. 422.]

[P003220]

Observations from the Minister for Rail (Lord Hendy of Richmond Hill):

The Department is aware of stakeholder aspirations for a new station to be provided at Long Ashton in North Somerset, aligned to committed and anticipated development in the area, and to provide better connectivity to Bristol airport.

New stations can support housing delivery and sustainable development by improving transport links to areas identified for growth and encouraging the use of public transport. They can also improve economic and social connectivity by providing communities with better access to employment, education, other public services and the wider rail network.

Successful new stations require more than the construction of infrastructure. They require alignment between station design, train services, timetable planning and operator resources to ensure a viable passenger offer from the day the station opens. A key consideration for any new station proposal is whether a suitable train service can be provided.

The benefits of a station depend on trains being able to call in a way that meets passenger needs while maintaining the performance and reliability of the wider network. Proposals for new rail services and infrastructure investments also need to demonstrate that they generate revenues and do not make the national railway more expensive to operate. These will all be essential considerations for any proposal at Long Ashton.

The Government believe that local or combined authorities are best placed to decide on, and take forward, transport schemes that will most benefit their local areas, including new stations. The ultimate aim is to encourage strong business cases that effectively identify the transport problem or opportunity and optimal solution.

Investment in new transport infrastructure and services should support the Government's priorities of economic growth, more homes and increased job opportunities. Local or combined authorities and other interested stakeholders should engage with the rail industry to work together to bring forward a coherent case for developing the proposal for a new station at Long Ashton.

The Government plan is that Great British Railways will be in place by the end of 2027. GBR will own and operate the national railway, advise on its future needs and take a holistic view on the strategic investment recommendations that it makes to Ministers.

Written Correction

Tuesday 1 September 2026

IAN LAVERY

Regional Accents and Social Mobility

The following extract is from the debate on Regional Accents and Social Mobility on 15 July 2026.

Ian Lavery: Professor Rob Drummond says that people across England have expressed positive views about regional accents, but still rated northern-accented speakers as less intelligent and less “correct” when hearing identical speech. Earlier research found that lower-working-class speakers were judged to be 14% less intelligent, 4% less

friendly and 5% less trustworthy than upper-middle-class speakers. There is huge prejudice about people with accents like mine.

[*Official Report*, 15 July 2026; Vol. 789, c. 367WH.]

Written correction submitted by the hon. Member for Blyth and Ashington (Ian Lavery):

Ian Lavery: Dr Amanda Cole and Professor Rob Drummond say that people across England have expressed positive views about regional accents, but still rated northern-accented speakers as less intelligent and less “correct” when hearing identical speech. Earlier research found that lower-working-class speakers were judged to be 14% less intelligent, 4% less friendly and 5% less trustworthy than upper-middle-class speakers. There is huge prejudice about people with accents like mine.

ORAL ANSWERS

Tuesday 1 September 2026

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE	2	FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE—continued	
Arms Export Licensing: Israel.....	2	Strait of Hormuz.....	12
China: Threat to UK Interests	13	Topical Questions	19
Climate Change: International Partners	16	UK-Mauritius Chagos Treaty: Future Spending ...	3
Climate Change: National Security	7	Ukraine.....	10
Detention of UK Nationals Abroad	15	West Bank: Illegal Settlements.....	5
EU Foreign and Security Co-operation.....	18		

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Tuesday 1 September 2026

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
BUSINESS, INNOVATION, SCIENCE AND TRADE	1WS	HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT—continued	
CPTPP: Canada	1WS	Restoring Pride in High Streets	5WS
DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT	2WS	Revised National Planning Policy Framework:	
Creative Freelance Champions	2WS	Further Planning Reform	7WS
HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE	2WS	Social and Affordable Homes Programme:	
Funeral Industry Regulation	2WS	Council House Building	10WS
HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT	4WS	JUSTICE	14WS
Ending Rough Sleeping	4WS	Criminal Justice Reform	14WS
		TRANSPORT	16WS
		Bus Fare Cap	16WS

PETITIONS

Tuesday 1 September 2026

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE	1P	TRANSPORT	2P
Longridge Community Hospital.....	1P	Railway station in Long Ashton	2P
Repairs and refurbishment at Doncaster			
Royal Infirmary	2P		

WRITTEN CORRECTIONS

Tuesday 1 September 2026

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
OTHER CORRECTIONS	1WC	OTHER CORRECTIONS—continued	
Ian Lavery.....	1WC	Regional Accents and Social Mobility.....	1WC

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons*,

**not later than
Tuesday 8 September 2026**

STRICT ADHERENCE TO THIS ARRANGEMENT GREATLY FACILITATES THE
PROMPT PUBLICATION OF BOUND VOLUMES

Members may obtain excerpts of their speeches from the Official Report (within one month from the date of publication), by applying to the Editor of the Official Report, House of Commons.

CONTENTS

Tuesday 1 September 2026

List of Government and Principal Officers of the House

New Member [Col. 1]

Oral Answers to Questions [see index inside back page] [Col. 2] *Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs*

Direction of Government [Col. 25] *Statement—(Prime Minister)*

Criminal Justice Reform [Col. 81] *Statement—(Alex Norris)*

Policing in Cleveland [Col. 100] *Statement—(Shabana Mahmood)*

Vehicle Emissions Trading Schemes Order 2023 (Revocation) [Col. 110] *Bill presented, and read the First time*

Greyhound Racing [Col. 110] *Bill presented, and read the First time*

Road Safety Plans [Col. 111] *Motion for leave to bring in a Bill—(Adam Jogee)—agreed to Bill presented, and read the First time*

Sovereign Grant [Col. 115] *Motion—(Dan Tomlinson)—agreed to*

Backbench Business

Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation [Col. 123] *Motion—(Alex Sobel)—agreed to*

Sudden Cardiac Death: Young People [Col.] *Debate on motion for Adjournment*

Westminster Hall

Face-to-Face Banking: Rural Areas [Col. 1WH]
Science Facilities and Laboratories [Col. 28WH]
UK Financial Services [Col. 37WH]
Local Government Reorganisation: Cambridgeshire [Col. 61WH]
Local Authorities: Aluminium Recycling [Col. 72WH]
General debates

Written Statements [Col. 1WS]

Petitions [Col. 1P] *Observations*

Written Correction [Col. 1WC] *Other correction*
