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HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Wednesday 9 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.

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House of Commons

Wednesday 9 September 2026

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker *in the Chair*]

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: Before we begin, I note that a greater than usual number of questions to the Minister for Women and Equalities have been transferred to other Departments. Transfers are, of course, a matter for the Minister, but I gently urge her to clarify any changes in cross-departmental responsibilities and to always ensure that Members affected by any transfers are properly notified.

Oral Answers to Questions

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

The Minister for Women and Equalities was asked—

Smart Glasses

1. **Dame Meg Hillier** (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): What discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on the potential impact of camera-enabled smart glasses on women's privacy. [901252]

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Bridget Phillipson): Covert filming using smart glasses can raise serious privacy concerns, and it is important that we spread awareness that criminal offences such as voyeurism already cover their most harmful uses. Platforms that host images or videos captured by smart glasses may also have duties to remove them under online safety or data protection legislation, and they should take those responsibilities extremely seriously.

Dame Meg Hillier: I am pleased by my right hon. Friend's answer, but she is in a unique position across Government to ensure that we are protecting not only women, but those who are blind or have visual impairments, who really value this technology. If regulation is being talked about across Government, will she ensure that it is about the person misusing it rather than the adaptive technology itself, which can be of so much use to so many people?

Bridget Phillipson: My hon. Friend is right to raise the issue of the potential benefits in this area, as well as the risks and potential misuse that we sadly have seen. I would be more than happy to ensure that she has a meeting with the Minister at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to discuss this further, but I would of course be happy to discuss it with her myself as well.

Shivani Raja (Leicester East) (Con): The privacy of a woman is non-negotiable, and I hope the Minister will agree that we need to carefully monitor technological advancements to ensure that appropriate safeguards are in place, in particular with regard to AI tools being used to undress women and children without consent. What steps is the Minister taking to ensure the continued protection of women and children?

Bridget Phillipson: I agree with the hon. Lady, and she will know that we have already taken action in this area to ensure that the law is strong and firm, but of course, there is always the question of enforcement running alongside it. As technology adapts and changes rapidly, it is of course the responsibility of this Government to ensure that the law keeps pace with that change and that women are protected from the potential misuse of technology, which can be an amazing force for good, but in the wrong hands can cause serious harm.

Social Cohesion

2. **Ashley Dalton** (West Lancashire) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to improve social cohesion. [901253]

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Bridget Phillipson): This Government will ensure that we protect and promote our values and build more confident, cohesive and resilient communities. I am working with colleagues across Government to deliver our initial plan, "Protecting What Matters" to uphold the UK's social fabric and to give communities the tools they need to shape their own future. This Government will always seek to bring people together, not to divide our communities.

Ashley Dalton: Will my right hon. Friend join me in welcoming Lancashire county councillor Nigel Swales from my constituency to the Labour party? Councillor Swales has defected to Labour from Reform because he knows Reform will not deliver, and we saw at its party conference last week men literally beating young women on the conference floor and spokespeople stirring up hatred. Does the Minister agree that Reform cannot be trusted to protect social cohesion?

Bridget Phillipson: I welcome the growing number of people who are recognising that Reform simply does not have the answers to the challenges facing our country and are inspired by this Labour Government's message of hope and optimism. There can be no place for violence or intimidation of women, whether on the Reform conference floor or anywhere else. I say to the House that this is not a laughing matter, and those in Reform who have sought in recent days to make light of such serious scenes should reflect very seriously on why they think it is appropriate, at one level, to say that violence against women is unacceptable—I agree—but then to allow it to take place at their own conference.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): In June, an individual went on an anti-Muslim rampage at sites in Edinburgh, and since then we have seen a surge in incidents, such as individuals using Nazi salutes at protests. When I spoke to the representatives of one of the mosques affected by the incidents, they said they

fear there has been a catastrophic collapse in community cohesion in parts of the country. What are the Government doing on community cohesion? Does she agree that this is not a local problem just for local authorities or regional authorities to deal with, and that we must deal with it on a national scale?

Bridget Phillipson: The hon. Lady is right: we must tackle prejudice, racism and intolerance in all its forms. I know that many of our Muslim communities have experienced unacceptable hatred and intimidation simply because they wish to go about their lives practising their religion and belief, as is at the cornerstone of everything that we as a nation should believe—the ability to worship, to practice your religion and to express those views peacefully. Whatever form that racism takes, we will challenge it. It is why we as a Government have been very clear that tackling anti-Muslim hostility is essential, alongside tackling the appalling antisemitism we have also seen, and ensuring that all our communities are vibrant, cohesive places in keeping with the best of our traditions.

Contacting Departments: Accessibility

3. **Clive Jones** (Wokingham) (LD): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to make it easier for people with accessibility needs to contact Government Departments. [901254]

The Minister for Equalities (Sir Stephen Timms): The Equality Act 2010 places a duty on public bodies to make reasonable adjustments, so that disabled people are not put at a disadvantage by accessibility challenges. Public service providers have to test provision regularly against the service standards, and Departments have to publish accessibility standards and provide feedback routes for users.

Clive Jones: I have a constituent whose agreed adjustments have been removed and who has had appointments arranged by telephone despite a hearing impediment, and some assessment sites lack disabled parking. Does the Minister agree that adjustments must be applied consistently by Departments and contractors? What action will be taken when they are not?

Sir Stephen Timms: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. If he would like to send me details of that particular case, I will happily look into it. On the subject of people with hearing impairments, my right hon. Friend the Minister for Women and Equalities and I will be meeting the British Sign Language Advisory Board this afternoon. On broader accessibility challenges, it is important that we meet and deliver on the communication needs and the reasonable adjustments that people have. When people apply to the Department for Work and Pensions, they can notify the Department of those adjustments at any stage of the claim and they will be noted on the claimant's record, so they should be consistently addressed when that individual gets in touch.

Conversion Therapy

4. **Tom Gordon** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): What steps she is taking to ban conversion therapy. [901255]

The Minister for Equalities (Simon Lightwood): On 25 June, the Government published their draft conversion practices Bill for pre-legislative scrutiny. Parliament is in the process of appointing the Joint Committee that will review the draft provisions. I understand that the Committee aims to report by 22 January, and I look forward to working with all its members on this important legislation to ensure that a ban is effective in targeting these abusive and harmful practices.

Tom Gordon: I welcome the steps that the Minister has outlined. Under the Conservative Government, we saw multiple attempts to bring forward a Bill but one never made it through the successive Government cycles, so I hope that the Minister will learn from those lessons and bring forward a Bill that is properly trans-inclusive too. The Bill talks about "abusive" conversion practices, but that risks implying that non-abusive forms exist, leading to a potential loophole. Will the Minister outline what steps and conversations he is having to ensure people cannot be pushed through those other alternative loopholes?

Simon Lightwood: Let me be clear: this Government are committed to protecting the dignity and safety of trans people. That is why we are introducing a full trans-inclusive ban on conversion practices, per our manifesto. I would be delighted to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss his further queries in person.

Removing Children from Poverty

5. **Chris Vince** (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help remove children from poverty. [901257]

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Bridget Phillipson): I continue to work with Cabinet colleagues to drive forward ambitious actions to tackle child poverty. I am proud that the decisions that this Labour Government have taken will see over half a million children lifted out of poverty—the biggest reduction in any Parliament. We know, however, that our work is not done, and we will continue to drive action to cut the cost of living and raise families' incomes.

Chris Vince: Across my constituency, 18% of children live in poverty, which rises to 30% in areas such as Mark Hall and Netteswell. Around 12% of children in Harlow will benefit from Labour's lifting of the two-child cap, which parents and I welcome. However, child poverty remains deeply uneven across Harlow and the UK, and too often, children's chances in life are shaped by where they grow up. What further steps is the Minister taking to tackle those regional and local disparities and to ensure that children growing up in our most deprived communities benefit from the Government's drive to reduce poverty?

Bridget Phillipson: I know my hon. Friend will always stand up for children and families across Harlow. He is right to say that we must go further to bear down on many of the drivers of child poverty, such as housing costs and parental employment, that require long-term structural change across society and Government. I am proud that, alongside removing the two-child limit, we have delivered a huge expansion in free school meals and new breakfast clubs opening from this term.

Alex Easton (North Down) (Ind): Is it not a critical step for Government to guarantee access in every region of the UK to affordable, high-quality childcare by expanding funding for childcare provision and reducing costs for younger children, so that parents can work more hours without losing most of their additional income to childcare fees?

Bridget Phillipson: Access to childcare right across our communities is absolutely essential. That is why this Labour Government in England have massively expanded access to childcare. While recognising the differences that exist in Northern Ireland, I am sure that Ministers would be happy to discuss further any ideas that the hon. Gentleman has.

Tackling Violence against Women and Girls

6. **Mr Lee Dillon** (Newbury) (LD): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help tackle violence against women and girls. [901259]

7. **Sureena Brackenridge** (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to halve levels of violence against women and girls. [901260]

9. **Jerome Mayhew** (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help tackle violence against women and girls. [901263]

10. **Steve Witherden** (Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to halve levels of violence against women and girls. [901265]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Davies-Jones): We are driving action across Government to deliver our landmark commitment to halve violence against women and girls in a decade. That includes the national roll-out of our life-changing domestic abuse protection orders across England and Wales, setting up pilots in schools to tackle harmful behaviours and delivering a flagship GP referral programme in England to better support victims.

Mr Dillon: Tomorrow is World Suicide Prevention Day. Given the well-established links between domestic abuse, coercive control and suicide, does the Minister agree that organisations such as Project Salama in my constituency, which provides joined-up support to victims of DA, are important? How will the Government ensure that domestic abuse services, mental health services and the suicide prevention strategy work together?

Alex Davies-Jones: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this vital point, and my thoughts are with everyone tomorrow recognising the day tomorrow. The Law Commission is looking at the links between suicide and domestic abuse, we are working with the Office of the Chief Coroner to formally establish a pathway, and we are also working with brilliant organisations, such as the one from the hon. Gentleman's constituency, that support bereaved families and individuals.

Sureena Brackenridge: I welcome the Government's accelerated roll-out of specialist police rape and sexual offence teams. Will the Minister consider what more help can be given upstream through relationships and sex education so that young people know where to seek help after sexual assault? Willow Tree sexual assault referral centre, which is in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Pat McFadden), provides specialist support and enables young people in Wolverhampton and Willenhall to self-refer. Will the Minister work with police, schools and sexual assault referral centres to ensure that young people know support is available?

Alex Davies-Jones: Absolutely. Prevention is at the heart of our flagship strategy to tackle violence against women and girls. That is why we are working on healthy relationship guidance so that all children can understand where to get help and what is an important relationship in their lives. Secondary pupils will be given information on where to report abuse and seek medical attention when required. Just yesterday, I got to witness that in person in Colchester at the Centre for Action on Rape and Abuse—a fantastic organisation that helps young people to rebuild their lives following sexual violence.

Jerome Mayhew: More than 100 organisations have warned the Government that their early release scheme will put women and girls at increased risk. Can the Minister explain to the House and to those organisations how the scheme will help her to halve violence against women and girls?

Alex Davies-Jones: We have had to put the early release scheme in place to ensure that our criminal justice system is able to function and help all victims, regardless of the type of crime. I regularly meet with all the organisations mentioned in that letter to discuss what protections we can best put in place. He will know that we have increased funding to support victim support services, and there will be a presumption on tagging on release. We are introducing world-first restriction zones to ensure that victims no longer have to constantly look over their shoulder, wondering where their perpetrator is. We are also working on timely communication to ensure that we keep victims and survivors informed, and they can feed in directly to licensing conditions. I will happily discuss this matter with him further if he wishes.

Steve Witherden: On 30 June, the then Secretary of State for Justice made a very welcome and vital commitment in this Chamber to close the 10-year sentencing gap, ensuring that domestic homicides are treated with the same severity as other murders. Does the Minister agree that we must hear the same commitment from the current Secretary of State and see a clear timetable for implementation so that we can achieve our goal of halving violence against women and girls?

Alex Davies-Jones: I am happy to reiterate that commitment at the Dispatch Box today. I pay tribute to the Killed Women campaign, which has fought long and hard to secure this change. We will introduce a new 25-year starting point for domestic murders applying to anyone who murders their current or former intimate partner, and we will bring forward the change as soon as parliamentary time allows.

Mr Speaker: I call the new shadow Minister.

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): To tackle violence against women and girls, does the hon. Lady agree that men entering this country illegally from countries such as Eritrea, Afghanistan and Sudan pose a direct threat to the safety of British women and girls?

Alex Davies-Jones: I welcome the hon. Lady to her place, and I look forward to working with her on tackling violence against women and girls. This issue should not be party political or involve any borders, and the answer to tackling it includes us all. Our flagship strategy on tackling violence against women and girls is to tackle all forms of violence against women and girls, wherever it occurs and by whomever.

Joy Morrissey: I know that the Minister is a wonderful champion for women, but does she agree that men who enter Britain illegally and need a leaflet to ask them not to rape women and girls should instead be deported immediately?

Alex Davies-Jones: Deportations of those who commit crimes in this country are up significantly under this Government—we are taking that direct action. I would say to the hon. Lady that anyone who commits crimes against women and girls should expect the full force of the law, and they will face it. We are seeking to educate everyone on what is acceptable in our country, because those are our British values.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD): Last month, BBC news reported on a woman who discovered only by fluke that the man she was in a relationship with was a registered sex offender, after he was summoned to court over an assault charge under a different name. While the law allows police to block a sex offender's request to change their name, it does not require them to. Women, campaigners and safeguarding groups all say that this is not good enough. Will the Minister work with Home Office colleagues to close this loophole, so that sex offenders are prevented by default from changing their name and police are required to individually approve each request?

Alex Davies-Jones: I thank the Liberal Democrat spokesperson for raising this issue. She will know that great strides have been made in this campaign, including by my hon. Friend—my good friend—the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion). I will happily meet with the hon. Lady to discuss this further to see what more we need to do to protect women and girls, and all children, from these heinous crimes.

Neurodivergent Women and Girls

8. **Juliet Campbell** (Broxtowe) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help improve outcomes for neurodivergent women and girls. [901261]

The Minister for Equalities (Sir Stephen Timms): Autistic people and people with ADHD have been struggling to get the right support at the right time. Recommendations from Professor Karen Guldberg's neurodivergence task and finish group directly informed the SEND reforms that were published earlier this year. We want schools and others to support young people to understand neurodivergent behaviours clearly, including how they differ between boys and girls, so that needs can be identified early and properly met.

Juliet Campbell: I thank the Minister for his reply. However, people in Broxtowe, and across the country more widely, are concerned that dyslexia in women and girls is identified later than in boys. Too often, there is a lack of understanding of how dyslexia presents in girls, meaning that they are three times more likely to miss out on diagnosis, which creates barriers to supporting education and later life. What action is the Minister taking across Government to close the gap of diagnosis and improve the outcomes for dyslexic women and girls in education, health, employment and the criminal justice system?

Sir Stephen Timms: Better outcomes require early identification and support for girls and young women with special educational needs, including dyslexia. That is the aim of the SEND reforms and the development of national inclusion standards. We will be supporting education providers to identify and respond to needs earlier and more consistently, drawing on a broad range of evidence and expertise, so that girls and young women can receive the support they need in good time to achieve and to thrive.

Topical Questions

T1. [901266] **Perran Moon** (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Bridget Phillipson): I am proud to be standing here as the first ever stand-alone Cabinet Minister for Women and Equalities.

The heart of this Government's ambition is to bring hope back to communities. It is the promise that whatever someone's background, and wherever they are from, ours is a country where they will be able to get on, follow their dreams and succeed in life. Therefore, I am announcing today a new class unit in Government to deliver on that promise. We have been squeamish about class for too long, yet we know that it is a deep barrier to opportunity. The work of the Social Mobility Commission will be brought into the heart of Government, as we get Britain believing once again.

Perran Moon: Conversion practices are a form of abuse, and this Government were elected on a manifesto commitment to ban them. While I welcome the publication of the draft Bill in June and the commitment by the Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield and Rothwell (Simon Lightwood), that there will be a Committee by the end of January, can the Secretary of State appreciate the frustration of many that the process of banning this abuse is taking so long?

Bridget Phillipson: As my hon. Friend the Minister set out earlier, this Government published our draft Conversion Practices Bill for pre-legislative scrutiny in June, and we will shortly confirm the members of the Joint Committee. It is an incredibly important piece of legislation and a safeguard for LGBT people. I look

forward to working with all Members of this House on this important legislation to ensure that a ban is effective in targeting these abusive and harmful practices that have no place in modern Britain.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): Following last night's vote on puberty blockers, will the right hon. Lady set out exactly what her red lines are when it comes to experimenting on children, and at what age she thinks children are able to make life-changing decisions about their gender?

Bridget Phillipson: I welcome the hon. Lady to her place, and wish her predecessor, the right hon. Member for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho), all the very best—as I am sure we all do—as she heads off to welcome her new baby into the world.

On this important issue, it is essential that healthcare available to children and young people is safe, evidence-based and clinically appropriate, which is why Dr Hilary Cass has looked at the issue seriously and in detail. She concluded that not enough was known about the safety and efficacy of puberty-suppressing hormones; that is why a trial is taking place, and it is why we accepted her recommendations. We will always put the safety and wellbeing of children first, in line with her recommendations.

T2. [901267] **Ashley Dalton** (West Lancashire) (Lab): People from ethnic minority backgrounds, disabled people and old people are more at risk of being coerced into an assisted death, feeling a burden, or feeling pressured to end their life. These are the findings of the Government's own equality impact assessment on the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill, which comes to this House on Friday. In the event that the Bill is passed, what steps will the Secretary of State take to ensure that those risks to people with protected characteristics will be mitigated?

Bridget Phillipson: My hon. Friend will know that the Government are neutral on the matter of assisted dying and the passage of the Bill. We have therefore not developed a detailed implementation plan; if the Bill were to pass, we would engage with all relevant people and partners to ensure safe and effective implementation. My hon. Friend has referenced the equality impact assessment. Members are able to read that for themselves, and I am sure my hon. Friend will seek to make the points she has made today again as we discuss these matters further on Friday.

T3. [901268] **Olly Glover** (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): I thank the Secretary of State for her earlier answer about Meta smart glasses. She is right to acknowledge that this technology can provide benefits to people with disabilities, but that it is also being used for the covert recording of women—so can I push her a bit further? What discussions with other Departments can she commit to in order to ensure that tech company products advance equalities and human rights, rather than undermine them?

Bridget Phillipson: There are potential benefits that come from the use of this kind of technology, but we know that there are also significant risks. That is why we will continue to keep the law in this area under review to make sure it is effective and fit for use. Alongside that, tech companies also have a responsibility to make sure they are taking down inappropriate material and that prosecutions follow in cases such as those of voyeurism, for which we are clear that glasses should not be used.

Alison Hume (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): Ahead of World Suicide Prevention Day, it is important that we recognise the heightened risk of suicide among autistic women and girls, who are too often overlooked and diagnosed too late. Autistic people are three times more likely to attempt, or die by, suicide than non-autistic people. Will the Secretary of State set out what action the Government are taking to reduce suicide among women and girls with autism?

Bridget Phillipson: My hon. Friend raises an extremely important point ahead of World Suicide Prevention Day. One life lost to suicide is one life too many, and all of us across this House have a responsibility to make sure people know that there is always support available, there is always someone to talk to, and there is always help there. My hon. Friend has raised the issue of neurodiversity and autism, and I would be happy to discuss that further with her as we bring forward an updated suicide prevention plan.

Mr Speaker: I welcome the President and the Secretary General of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, who are in the Gallery today.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [901275] **Lillian Jones** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 9 September.

The Prime Minister (Andy Burnham): On Friday, we will mark the 25th anniversary of 9/11—a moment to remember the nearly 3,000 people who died, including 67 British citizens. There will be a ceremonial changing of the guard, and events across the country. Our thoughts will remain, on Friday, with the loved ones of all those we lost.

I also want to send our sympathies to the hundreds of people who will gather today at the funeral of PC Matthew Blades, including many serving police officers. We send our thanks to them all for their service and their work to keep our communities safe.

As we can see from looking around the Chamber, today is Back British Farming Day, and I know that the whole House will join me in paying tribute to everyone working around the clock to feed our country. Food security is national security, and we will continue to back British farming as a Government.

This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Lillian Jones: May I associate myself with the Prime Minister's comments about 9/11, and about our brave police officer who lost his life?

My home town of Kilmarnock was once the industrial powerhouse of Ayrshire, but after decades of decline and deindustrialisation, it has never fully recovered. I welcome the Prime Minister's determination to revive our high streets and his focus on doing so, and I extend a warm invitation to him to visit the town at any time.

Hope has been rekindled in Kilmarnock thanks to the Government's £20 million Pride in Place investment. We are seeing the creation of the first Kilmarnock town centre masterplan for over 50 years, led by the community, setting an achievable vision for a successful future, and we want to build on that momentum. Will the Prime Minister champion a new partnership between Kilmarnock, my home town, Manchester and—

Mr Speaker: Order. I think the Prime Minister has a grip on the first three questions.

The Prime Minister: It does my heart good to hear my hon. Friend talk about rising hope in Kilmarnock and the masterplan for the town, backed by the Government with the Pride in Place funding—and yes, I can assure her that No. 10 North is as much at the service of her constituency as it is at the service of any constituency in the House. We will turn what is happening in Kilmarnock into real momentum for the town.

Mr Speaker: I call the Leader of the Opposition.

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (North West Essex) (Con): After last week's session, the country was thrown into confusion over whether the Prime Minister was or was not going to fund 3% for defence by 2030. After today he will have another five weeks off PMQs, but there are some serious threats to national security that cannot wait. His Chancellor resigned as Defence Secretary because the Labour Government would not increase defence spending to 3% by 2030. Does the Prime Minister think that he was right to quit?

The Prime Minister: As I said last week, I appointed this Chancellor because of his strong commitment to the defence of this nation—that was the reason—and we will honour our NATO commitments: 3.5% by 2035, and a target date for 3%. That will all be set out in the spending review. I do not feel, though, that the right hon. Lady gets the right to come to this House and claim the moral high ground and point fingers wherever possible, when defence spending was 2.3% of GDP and fell during 14 years of a Conservative Government. On this issue, I think we should do more problem solving than point scoring, and I say to the right hon. Lady that we would do our armed forces well if we could agree more on this crucial issue across the House.

Mrs Badenoch: The Prime Minister wants to talk about the past on defence spending, so let me refresh his memory and that of the House. I remember when he was the shadow Home Secretary, when the then Labour leader wanted us to leave NATO, disarm our nuclear deterrent and defund the Army, so I will not be taking any lectures from him.

The Prime Minister says the target is 2035. That is a decade away. If he cannot get to 3% by 2030, why should we believe he will get to 3.5% by 2035? The spending review is next year. Last week, I set out how we would get to 3% by 2030. The threats are now. Argentina is threatening the Falklands—now. Russia is threatening us in the North sea—now.

The Prime Minister did not answer my question. I asked him if the Chancellor was right to quit. The Chancellor was right to quit, which is why it is so wrong that he is not sticking to his principles. The Chancellor used to say that not hitting 3% by 2030 would put our troops at risk. He also said that Keir Starmer was "unable", and the Treasury "unwilling", to provide that funding. So is the Prime Minister unable, or is he just unwilling, to get that money by 2030?

The Prime Minister: This Chancellor, of all Chancellors, will be willing to provide that funding to our armed forces and back our defence investment plan. This Government's commitment to the defence of this country is absolute. We have taken the strongest possible stance in supporting President Zelensky and Ukraine. We are playing our role around the world, and we will continue to do so.

The right hon. Lady mentions the plan that she has set out, and this is why I say that we should have an honest conversation across the Dispatch Box; I looked at it, and I do not think that taking £4 billion out of housing benefit is going to get the right consensus around this issue. That would create levels of homelessness in this country that we would not have seen before, with hundreds of thousands of children in temporary accommodation.

I say to the right hon. Lady that, yes, we do everything to support our national security, but it cannot come at the expense of social security. Having strong national security also depends on resilience in our communities. We on the Labour Benches will not be forced to choose between the two, and we will set out a plan to get to 3.5% by 2035 at the spending review.

Mrs Badenoch: It is unbelievable that the Prime Minister would say that. He is clearly unwilling. We need to fund our defence, not spend all our money on welfare. I cannot believe that he would actually say that. He is clearly unwilling, but there are ways to do this—he is not unable.

On Monday, Chris Rokos, Britain's third biggest taxpayer, announced that he was leaving the country. That is £330 million of taxes walking out the door because of this Labour Government—every year, £330 million. His taxes could be going on defence. The Prime Minister is talking about spending more on welfare. The benefits bill is set to rise by £32 billion under him—that is not all of it; that is the rise. That money could be going on defence. The Prime Minister will not approve the Rosebank oilfield—£1.4 billion of tax revenue that could be going on defence. So, will the Prime Minister tell the country: where is he going to find the money to fund our defence?

The Prime Minister: I cannot comment today on quasi-judicial decisions, but we will take a pragmatic approach to oil and gas, as I have said before at the Dispatch Box.

Let us get to the heart of this question, as the right hon. Lady invites me to do. What is the right way to fund defence and, yes, bring the welfare budget down? She would make crude cuts to housing benefit. As I have said, if £4 billion is taken out in the next few years, families will be made homeless and rough sleeping on our streets will increase. So here is the Labour way—the way that we do it on this side of the House. We have set out plans for the biggest council house building programme this country has seen in a generation. If the right hon. Lady looks at research from the National Housing Federation, she will see that that is the route to save billions from housing benefit.

We will shortly respond to the final report of Alan Milburn, who is looking at the issue of young people not in education, employment or training—again, something left behind by the last Government. We will take the Labour way: change education, support our young people, and provide more mental health support. That is the Labour way to get the welfare bill down, and I say to the right hon. Lady that that is the right way to fund defence.

Mrs Badenoch: No, it is not. The truth is the Prime Minister does not know where he is going to find the money. He is talking about anything except defence, including council housing. He will not fund the military. I will tell you what he is funding though, Mr Speaker—Keir Starmer's £35 billion surrender of the Chagos islands and its crucial military base. That is British sovereign territory. That is a weak decision, and it is no wonder that Argentina is now threatening the Falklands. We need to project strength. We need to show that British sovereign territory is non-negotiable. So why, just like Keir Starmer, is he planning to surrender the Chagos islands?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Lady has to do better than that. They are the worst kind of points to be scoring when the country is watching. We will not surrender our base at Diego Garcia—we are in discussions with the United States about that—and we will always respect the rights of the Falkland Islanders to choose to be British. That will never change under this Government, and we will be relentless in defending that.

Mrs Badenoch: We are talking about paying £35 billion to give away British territory, and all of that is happening while the Prime Minister's Government are cancelling £30 million of vital training for British soldiers. He may be new to the job, so let me tell him what may not be in his briefing paper. Last year, defence funding fell in real terms—that is on this Government. To govern is to choose, so why is he choosing to send £35 billion to Mauritius when they cut the money to train our troops?

The Prime Minister: I do not think the right hon. Lady is on strong ground when it comes to defence spending. It was 2.5% of GDP when the last Labour Government left office. It was 2.3% of GDP when the Government she was in left office. It is now set to be 2.7% in the next year. That is the reality of the situation—a Government who are strong on the defence of this country. That is what we are doing. It is why we have set out a defence investment plan that will be fully funded. I say to her again: it would be better to work across the House to get a fully and securely funded path to 3.5% of GDP by 2035 that will not change under any Government. That would send the strongest possible message to our armed forces. This is an area for problem solving rather than point scoring. I invite her to work with us on that, so that we can set out that clear path.

Mrs Badenoch: The Prime Minister seems to think that the last Government were a Conservative Government. The last Government were a Labour Government and they failed, which is why Keir Starmer resigned. He keeps talking about their record as if it was fantastic. If it was, then why is Keir Starmer not sitting there? Where Britain needs leadership, what we have at the moment is just vibes. He said he appointed the Chancellor because he cares about defence, but he will not fund it. Other countries are making claims over our sovereign territory. They smell weakness. He is pretending that he is the change candidate, but the fact is he is still failing to cut welfare, he is still paying to hand over a sovereign territory, and he is still not funding defence. On the issues that really matter, is he not just continuity Keir?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Lady mentions leadership. Let me tell her and the whole House where Britain is showing leadership. There have been Conservative politicians at this Dispatch Box—Labour politicians, too—for decades who have talked about the importance of the two-state solution between Israel and Palestine. Words from any politician about a two-state solution will be only words if they are not backed with action. Leadership is about taking action where there is injustice, where we need to correct unfairness: people being driven out of their homes, losing their homes, being intimidated in their daily lives. I credit the Father of the House, the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), who yesterday applauded the action that this Government are taking.

In this difficult and dangerous world, Britain has to stand for something. Britain has to show leadership. Britain has to stand for fairness against injustice. *[Interruption.]* Where people are being bullied out of their homes and intimidated, we will always stand with the underdog and take what action we can to support them. That is leadership on the world stage; Britain being true to what it has always been about. That is what the British people expect of us and that is what this Government will do.

Mr Speaker: Mr Bacon, I do not need advice from you. I am not responsible for the answers. The Prime Minister answers the questions. Do not look to me, please.

Q2. [901276] **Sarah Hall** (Warrington South) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister grew up in Warrington so he will know that our town has changed enormously, but too much of the infrastructure that people depend on has not changed with it. Much of Warrington hospital was built in a different century for a much smaller population, while Broomfields leisure centre is at the end of its life and its pool is now closed on safety grounds. Will the Prime Minister come home to Warrington, meet me and set out how the Government will deliver the infrastructure that my constituents deserve?

The Prime Minister: I am a more regular visitor to my hon. Friend's constituency than she might realise, constantly nipping in and out for various reasons, so I know Warrington well. I believe it is a success story, actually; something of a jewel in the north-west crown. It is a growing town—almost a city, given how successful it has been in recent times—but it does need new infrastructure. I would like to see a remodelled Warrington Bank Quay, with high-quality east-west, north-south connectivity running through it. When it comes to leisure—Mr Speaker, you know this as much as anyone in the House and perhaps more than anyone—this is a Prime Minister who will back grassroots sport to the hilt. I assure my hon. Friend that I am happy to talk to her about the leisure centre she mentioned.

Mr Speaker: And watching Warrington Wolves, I hope. I call the leader of the Liberal Democrats.

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I associate myself with the Prime Minister's opening remarks, not least about the 25th anniversary of the horrific terror attacks of 9/11. I welcome the Government finally banning imports from illegal Israeli settlements, something Keir Starmer should have done a long time ago. On Back British Farming Day, can I also celebrate British farmers? I hope the Prime Minister will do more than that and end the family farm tax.

Last week I asked about North Devon's maternity unit, which is still closed. This week I have to raise Musgrove Park hospital, where the Prime Minister's Labour colleague Baroness Amos found the "most challenging" maternity estate in the whole country. She described "leaking roofs", a ceiling propped up by poles and room temperatures that put newborn babies at risk. No mother should have to give birth in such circumstances. Does the Prime Minister agree that Musgrove Park cannot wait until 2033 for work to start on a new maternity unit? Will he offer a meeting to local MPs, so we can move it forward? And will he make fixing the maternity scandal across our country a top priority of his Government?

The Prime Minister: That is a fair question. Let me first thank the right hon. Gentleman for his support for the statement made yesterday by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs. It is important that there is support across the House for what was announced. We have all stood together for the two-state solution. The reason my right hon. Friend decided to announce what he did when he did is obviously that the E1 settlement tender concludes before the Israeli general election. It was important to make a clear statement on where Britain stands, for Britain to show leadership. That is what we have done, but we appreciate the cross-party support.

On British farming, I hear what the right hon. Gentleman says and I will set out more measures later.

I looked into the issues with North Devon's maternity unit, and the right hon. Gentleman will soon receive an update from me. He mentions Musgrove Park hospital in Taunton—a hospital I know. It points to a systemic challenge facing maternity services across the country, as various reviews have said. That is why my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary will next week chair a meeting of the maternity taskforce in the Department of Health and Social Care. We will ensure that all the issues raised, including at the hospitals mentioned, are looked at in detail.

Ed Davey: I thank the Prime Minister for that answer. Britain should be the safest country in the world to have a baby. We will keep raising this issue until it is the safest.

The best legacy of the previous Conservative Prime Minister is our world-leading AI Security Institute, which is now essential to our national security, and to global security, in the age of artificial intelligence. But today, the *Financial Times* reports that Anthropic did not submit its latest model to the institute for testing, apparently due to pressure from the Trump Administration. Does the Prime Minister think it is acceptable for President Trump to undermine Britain's efforts to keep the world safe from dangerous AI?

The Prime Minister: On the specific issue, the institute that the right hon. Gentleman mentioned is indeed a world leader, and is in daily conversation with industry partners, including Anthropic. Those conversations will continue. On the broader issue, the right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that AI poses risks to our national security, but it could also be the source of solutions for keeping us safer, and that was a discussion that we had yesterday. That is why I appointed a Minister for Artificial Intelligence to the Cabinet. We have lifted the level of conversation about artificial intelligence within Government, and the offer is open to colleagues on all sides of the House who want to be a part of that crucial discussion.

Q3. [901277] **Connor Naismith** (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): It is clear to me and many across this House that despite the hard work and dedication of all postal workers, Royal Mail's management is failing in its obligation to provide a basic and reliable postal service. The people of Crewe and Nantwich are paying the price through missed appointments, late fees and, in some cases, even county court judgments. I have full confidence in this Prime Minister to deliver for our country. Will he join me in calling on Royal Mail's management to do the same, including by working with the Communication Workers Union and through the implementation of the recommendations of the Select Committee report published earlier this year?

The Prime Minister: It is good for me to be able to credit the Communication Workers Union, because I know it has done a huge amount of work over the years to raise some of the issues within Royal Mail. It is because of that work that there has now been a commitment from the business to invest £500 million in frontline resourcing. Everyone in this House will know that standards have not been good enough, and people have been facing an unreliable service. We are committed, as a Government, to a comprehensive universal service obligation. That is what will safeguard Royal Mail's future, but the company now needs to listen to what my hon. Friend is saying and get on and deliver it.

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): In the coming weeks, energy bills will rise again for households across the United Kingdom; within the last few days, five major mortgage lenders have pushed up mortgage prices for households across the United Kingdom; and within the last few hours, the cost of a barrel of oil

has gone to over $100, pushing up prices at the pumps for motorists across the United Kingdom. Despite that, the Prime Minister still seems fairly well liked. I will let you into a wee secret, Mr Speaker: I quite like the new Prime Minister. But popularity will not pay the bills during this winter's looming cost of living emergency, so will the Prime Minister stand up now and tell people what he is going to do to help?

The Prime Minister: I will, Mr Speaker. I will remove VAT from electricity bills next month. It is not going to solve everything for people, but it will take a little bit of pressure off, and the hon. Gentleman should look out for further measures as we go through the year. I appreciate that it does not apply in Scotland, but we will impose a £2 cap on bus fares across England for the whole of 2027. We are doing this because this is a cost of living Government, and we want to give people hope that some help is coming. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his faint praise—it will get him everywhere.

Q5. [901279] **Dame Siobhain McDonagh** (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): In a capital city still scarred by the loss of 72 lives in the Grenfell fire, we have a second equally flammable and deadly risk. In bedrooms and corridors across London, low-paid deliverers for Deliveroo, Just Eat and Uber Eats are charging the tools of their trade: lethal lithium e-bike batteries. Every other day, the London Fire Brigade is called out to an e-bike battery fire, with a record 206 in 2025 alone. Will the Prime Minister commit the Government to banning the import of substandard e-bikes and converter kits, and will his Ministers attend my roundtable in October with regulators, delivery companies and insurers to find a way forward?

The Prime Minister: We recently consulted on the conversion kits that my hon. Friend mentions and will set out a response shortly. As somebody who formerly had responsibility for the Greater Manchester fire and rescue service, I fully understand the issue that she is raising, and she can expect a robust response on all the issues raised. I am not sure that I will be able to attend her roundtable, but I will ensure that a Minister does so.

Q4. [901278] **Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): Community energy is a fantastic way of empowering communities and helping with both energy security and the cost of living. The Energy Security and Net Zero Committee recently published a report in which we identified that people living around a community energy project still cannot buy that electricity because of complex market regulations. Beechen Cliff school in Bath has solar panels on its roof that produce lots of excess electricity during the summer months, but the many households living around it cannot buy and use it. Will the Prime Minister support the acceleration of change to market reform to ensure that we unleash the full potential of community energy?

The Prime Minister: We can absolutely give the hon. Lady that assurance. Our local power plan, backed by £1 billion from Great British Energy, is ensuring that every community in the country, including her constituents in Bath, can benefit from clean, affordable and locally generated energy. If she wishes to have a meeting with Great British Energy, I will facilitate that so that she can see how the plan can benefit her constituency more.

Q6. [901280] **Dr Lauren Sullivan** (Gravesham) (Lab): The Prime Minister will remember his first visit as Labour leader to Gravesend, proving that he loves the south as much as the north. On that day, I spoke to him about the long campaign by me and my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft) for the return and sustainable funding of the Gravesend-Tilbury ferry. Will the Prime Minister give his support again and help us to unlock barriers to back this ferry route, as connectivity matters for supporting high streets?

The Prime Minister: I am glad to correct at the Dispatch Box something of a myth, Mr Speaker. Like you, I do love the south of England, so I thank my hon. Friend for giving me that opportunity—*[Laughter.]* Okay, I love the south of England; on this issue, I will not speak for you, Mr Speaker.

On the day that I became Labour leader, I visited my hon. Friend's constituency and saw where the ferry link used to go across the head of the river, providing critical connectivity for her constituents. I do not think it is acceptable that a link once there can just be abandoned and go. I will work with my hon. Friend to find ways of bringing that service back, supported by No. 10 North. She has my word on that.

Q7. [901281] **Alberto Costa** (South Leicestershire) (Con): I hope that the Prime Minister likes South Leicestershire as much as he likes the southern parts of England. Blaby, Enderby, Huncote, Cosby and Countesthorpe, to name but a few, are rural or semi-rural villages that have little in common with the urban area of the city of Leicester. The Government are going against the wishes of the residents of those villages, who have responded to the Government's consultation and said that they do not want to be part of the city of Leicester. This has nothing to do with devolution; it is local government reform changing the boundaries. I have a very easy ask of the Prime Minister. He said that he is in listening mode; will he therefore meet me, the villagers of the areas that I have mentioned, and other stakeholders to discuss the issue of local government reform?

The Prime Minister: On this issue, I will agree to the hon. Gentleman's request for a meeting. As announcements this week have shown, I believe that political reform always benefits from the highest degree of consensus, so I give him that assurance here and now.

Mr Speaker: Kim Johnson.

Q8. [901282] **Kim Johnson** (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. *[Interruption.]* Mr Speaker—I apologise. BT Openreach identified Liverpool as one of its 30 national hubs. However, in July this year, it decided to pull out of Liverpool, leading to the loss of 600 well-paid and skilled jobs. Will the Prime Minister join me in calling on BT Openreach to reverse its decision, and will he and the Government join me, the Communication Workers Union and the political leadership in Liverpool in doing everything that we can to ensure that these jobs and BT stay in Liverpool?

The Prime Minister: I think there are many people watching Prime Minister's questions across the south of England who would now like Mr Speaker to be demoted

in the way that my hon. Friend suggests. *[Interruption.]* This is very thin ice for a Leigh Leopards supporter to be on.

I am aware of the potential office closure in Liverpool by BT, and the number of job losses—up to 600, I believe. Steve Rotheram, the Mayor of the Liverpool City Region, and MPs have been in meetings, including with No. 10 North yesterday, discussing this and other issues. We will continue to work to support those jobs. Can I also congratulate the Mayor of the Liverpool City Region on bringing buses across the city region back under public control at the weekend, after 40 years of deregulation? That is change in action, protecting services for local communities.

Q9. [901283] **Liz Saville Roberts** (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Yr Heliwr in Nefyn is a community-owned pub, and it is buzzing with events fuelled by local beers and food. I have to declare an interest; I have shares in Yr Heliwr, and it makes my husband very happy indeed. Supporting businesses like Yr Heliwr is key for economic growth in coastal areas, but they are held back by a 20% VAT rate; in France, Spain and Italy, hospitality pays just 10%. Will the Prime Minister have a word with the Chancellor before the autumn Budget and cut VAT for hospitality to prove that postcodes furthest from London and Manchester will not be forgotten in his drive for growth?

The Prime Minister: As the right hon. Lady might know, I am something of a pub person myself. In my first week in office, I made the decision to cut business rates for pubs. We need to go further to support hospitality. I cannot commit, from this Dispatch Box today, to what she is asking, but she should wait for the Budget. We are keen to support high streets and hospitality up and down the country—in England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and, indeed, Wales.

Q10. [901284] **Ian Lavery** (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): With tech billionaires driving the deployment of artificial intelligence, many of my constituents are concerned about job losses, misinformation and the infrastructure needed to support the technology. In Sleekburn and Cambois, three vast—I mean vast—data centres are proposed on scarce industrial land that could be used for other industries that create far more local jobs. Communities are being asked to give up valuable land and suffer local disruption. Will the Prime Minister support a moratorium on future data centres until regulation catches up, and will he introduce a critical national infrastructure levy, so that host communities can share in the rewards? Will he also visit my constituency to hear local people's concerns for himself?

The Prime Minister: I understand the concern that my hon. Friend is raising about data centres. I have to say to him that at this point, I will not go as far as a moratorium, but I agree that it is important that communities see the benefits of AI and data centre investment. I can say from experience that the data centre can be the magnet that clusters in other investment over time; that needs to be remembered. This Government have a policy that AI growth zones will allow local authorities to retain 100% of business rate growth, so that they can benefit communities.

Q11. [901285] **Chris Law** (Dundee Central) (SNP): In response to my question last week, the Prime Minister stated that he was

"very aware of every word in the Good Friday agreement, and I will stick to it 100% as Prime Minister."—[*Official Report*, 1 September 2026; Vol. 790, c. 50.]

He will therefore know that the Northern Ireland Act 1998 contains a provision for a referendum on leaving the United Kingdom, but no equivalent provision exists in the law for Scotland. Does he recognise that the people of Scotland have an equal right to choose their own future, and that the conditions for a second independence referendum should be set out in law?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Member mentions the Good Friday agreement, and I will stick to it 100%. I remind him, on the question of a border poll, that that is to be considered by the Northern Ireland Secretary when there is clear consensus in the country—when public opinion has changed to the point at which the call has to be considered. I would say that it is exactly the same situation in Scotland. I am not aware that there is majority public support for another referendum, and until that changes, there will not be one.

Q13. [901287] **Laura Kyrke-Smith** (Aylesbury) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for his commitment to mental health and to building a country that acts sooner when people need help. Five years ago, I lost one of my best friends, Sophie, to suicide after the birth of her third child; her little girl was just 10 weeks old at the time. Having a new baby can be a time of great excitement and joy, but for one in four women, it is a time of mental health challenges, from anxiety and depression to obsessive compulsive disorder and serious conditions like post-partum psychosis. I have introduced a Bill—Sophie's law—to ensure that every pregnant woman gets a mental health check-in. Will the Prime Minister work with me to ensure that no one else struggles in the way that Sophie did?

The Prime Minister: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the incredible work she is doing in memory of her friend; I know that her dad Nigel has also campaigned so strongly on this. I have always believed in whole-person care—in physical, mental and social care being delivered together. We are investing more in perinatal mental health and parent-infant relationships—more funding is going in—but I accept, as she is saying, that more needs to be done. I will look at her Bill. I understand the call for Sophie's law and will make sure that a Health Minister meets her to discuss it.

Q12. [901286] **Daisy Cooper** (St Albans) (LD): Hertfordshire has one of the lowest numbers of mental health in-patient beds per head in England. When patients, including some young people, are in crisis, they can be sent hundreds of miles away, which undermines their recovery. The cost of private beds comes in at millions of pounds. Will the Prime Minister commit personally to looking at my three-year campaign to fund a mental health facility in Hertfordshire? It is shovel-ready, would improve health outcomes for patients, and would pay for itself within just a few years.

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Lady for that very direct and good question. She is right to point to wasted spending in the mental health system when people are sent hundreds of miles in search of a bed; those placements can be very costly indeed. We need to move to a more preventive mental health service, and I will look at the specifics in her constituency. This will all be considered as part of a mental health strategy that will come before this House before Christmas.

Q14. [901288] **Cat Eccles** (Stourbridge) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for visiting my constituency during the recent wildfires in Stourbridge, and for meeting affected residents, emergency workers, volunteers and council staff. Will he join me in thanking the brave firefighters for giving their all in the most challenging conditions? On the hottest day of the year, the fire spread over 600 acres, destroying 19 homes and damaging many more. With extreme heat becoming the norm in a changing climate, what are the Government doing to ensure that our fire services are properly resourced for future wildfires?

The Prime Minister: I remember well my visit to Stourbridge; it will not leave me, actually, because of the devastation, and the loss of everything in a moment for so many families. My hon. Friend's support for them was really visible on the day, and the community is clearly very strong; that was evident. I am going to be chairing a wildfire summit, and she is welcome to be part of that, if she wishes. Our fire services are not set up for the future. I mentioned community resilience before; we need a fire service that has a statutory responsibility to deal with flooding, that is equipped to deal with wildfires, and with back-up national aerial support, so that there is better support next time we see these issues. I give my hon. Friend my word that we will learn every possible lesson from what she and her community went through.

Mr Speaker: The final question is from Sir Bernard Jenkin.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Despite long and historic disagreements between successive UK Governments and Israel, it has remained a steadfast ally in counter-terrorist efforts to keep our people safe in this country. We are now embarked, it seems, on a full diplomatic dispute with Israel and tit-for-tat expulsions of diplomats. What advice was the Foreign Office giving Ministers on this matter, and what advice were the security services giving about our national security interest before this decision was taken?

The Prime Minister: We gave the most careful consideration to all of the issues involved, and indeed all of the risks. The Foreign Secretary and I took close advice from the security services and, of course, officials in the Foreign Office and in our embassies. The risk of the collapse of the two-state solution and the effect that would have on the middle east should concern us all. The risk is that it is dying before our eyes, and that requires us to have the courage to act. In the world that we are in, if Britain loses the confidence to lead on the world stage, where will we be? Where will this country be? It is right that we have taken this action. The Father of the House said yesterday that he "absolutely and fully" supports what my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary is doing,

"standing up for freedom, for morality and for justice for all people in this world." —[*Official Report*, 8 September 2026; Vol. 790, c. 891.]

Those were his words, and we take great heart from them.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Speaker: I hope that when we return after the conference recess, we will be able to speed up questions and answers, in order to get more Members in.

Summer Health and Resilience

12.44 pm

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Yvette Cooper): With permission, I would like to provide the House with a brief update on the additional pressures on health this summer as a result of the heat, the action our NHS has taken in response, and some of the next steps the Department is taking on investment and reform to help our NHS improve its resilience and performance in the face of new health challenges.

Before I do that, let me say, as I did last night, what a pleasure and honour it is to be back at this Dispatch Box as Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, 27 years after I first became a Health Minister under the last Labour Government. While there have been many changes in health and healthcare in the last quarter century, the values that underpin our NHS—care and compassion for all of us, based on need and not the ability to pay—are the best of British values, and they have endured through generations.

What has also endured is the incredible dedication of NHS and social care staff. As a result of their work and with the support of this Government, and despite record health demand, we have seen millions of additional appointments; record numbers of patients receiving treatment; waiting lists down by 350,000 in two years; ambulance and A&E waiting times down in the winter; thousands of extra doctors, nurses and mental health workers in place; and patient satisfaction with access to GP services up to 75% from 61% two years ago.

Alongside recognising the dedication of NHS staff, I want to recognise the impact that covid had on staff across our NHS and social care and the pressures they faced. They were there for us then and we should not forget that now. That is one reason why it makes me incredibly angry that the figures show that one in seven NHS workers have faced violence and abuse while doing their job, and the figure is much higher in emergency care. That is a disgrace, and I hope I speak for the whole House when I say to those staff: we are on your side and we will always stand up for you.

Let me pay tribute to my immediate predecessors in this role, my right hon. Friends the Members for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) and for Ealing North (James Murray). I also pay tribute to the work of other Health Ministers over the last two years who together have commissioned the Darzi report, drawn up the NHS 10-year plan and the cancer plan—for which I pay particular tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Ashley Dalton)—and driven the additional investment, reforms and improvements in performance we have seen in the last two years.

I want to focus on the immediate pressures on health that our NHS has faced, exacerbated by the summer heat. We have experienced what has officially been registered as the hottest summer on record, with five heatwaves, 40 days of temperatures above 30° and extremes that we now expect to be the new normal because of the impact of climate change. During May and June of this year, it is estimated that there were more than 2,800 excess deaths. To put that in perspective, it is almost twice as many as the 1,500 heat-related deaths during the entire summer of last year. Once the analysis of July and August is complete, it will be clear that the extreme heat we have seen this year has had an unprecedented impact on the health of the nation and represents a new significant threat to the very oldest, the very youngest and the most vulnerable in our society.

Extreme temperatures also pose additional challenges to the normal functioning of the NHS. This July saw the highest number of attendances at A&E of any month in any year in the history of the NHS. Ambulance teams handled over 800,000 incidents that month—the second highest for a month outside winter. This is against a backdrop of continued pressure in A&E. Today's National Audit Office report recognises that the NHS is beginning to see improvements in A&E performance, but not yet at the scale that we need to see.

The heat has highlighted some of the weaknesses in the NHS estate, including overheated wards and operating theatres. This comes against a backdrop of the damaging under-investment in NHS estates that we inherited. This was highlighted in the Darzi report, which said that the NHS was "starved of capital" after 2009, impacting on productivity and performance as well as letting patients and staff down.

Let me set out the action we are now taking to boost the resilience and performance of our NHS in the face of these new summer and other pressures. First, in the spending review, we allocated for the first time a multi-year £6.75 billion estate safety fund. I can announce the first wave of investment from this fund today, covering 950 hospital projects across England, which will receive a share of a £1.5 billion investment to fix urgent problems with ageing buildings and facilities. The schemes will tackle issues including failing fire safety systems, outdated ventilation and ageing electrical equipment that could put patients and staff at risk. More than £32 million will be spent specifically on projects that include improving cooling and ventilation, and helping hospitals cope with extreme heat as well as winter pressures.

As part of that funding, I can announce 10 major schemes worth £200 million for Wycombe hospital in High Wycombe; the Royal Free hospital in north London; the Linden centre in Essex; the John Howard centre in London; Lister hospital in Hertfordshire; Southend hospital in Essex; the Stepping Hill hospital in Stockport; St George's hospital in Stafford; the Bristol royal infirmary; and the Queen Elizabeth hospital in Gateshead. I have also asked the NHS to look in particular at extreme weather resilience as part of future waves of capital plans.

The second action is about resilience and planning. For many years, the NHS has run a detailed planning process to ensure that it is prepared for the pressures of the winter months; however, this summer has shown us that seasonal resilience is just as important at other times of year. That is why we have established a new heat taskforce that includes the chief medical officer, NHS England leaders and several NHS chief executives from services that have been most affected. I have requested that the taskforce should examine the impact on vulnerable groups, including the frail, expectant mothers and those with mental health conditions. I will chair its first meeting in the coming weeks.

The taskforce will help to ensure that our summer planning is on the same footing as our winter planning—looking at staffing, expert teams, patient flow, corridor care, links to social care and, crucially, prevention and public health. That comes against a backdrop of a

£450 million investment to improve urgent and emergency care, expanding urgent care centres and mental health A&Es, and shifting more care into the community.

The third area is social care. Many of those who are most vulnerable to extreme heat are in social care, so the work that our care system does is vital for people's health. We also know that the persistent lack of join-up between health and social care continues to be a problem, with frail elderly people who would be better cared for at home being sent to hospital and patients being held in hospital for far too long because care support is not in place.

This feels like groundhog day: we were having the same discussions about co-ordination between health and social care when I was last a Health Minister 25 years ago. The Government are taking action, including through the better care fund, neighbourhood health and an additional £4 billion investment into adult social care by 2028-29, as well as through the planning process to improve co-ordination. However, the problems are structural and will need much more substantial reform. That is why the Prime Minister announced this summer that we are bringing forward Baroness Casey's commission to report next year and, alongside that, taking forward cross-party talks to see what consensus can be built.

The legislation to create our NHS went through this House 80 years ago this autumn. At its heart was the idea that, as Nye Bevan said on Second Reading, it would

"lift the shadow from millions of homes."—[*Official Report*, 30 April 1946; Vol. 422, c. 63.]

It was to ensure that there was a health service to care for all of us whenever we needed it, improving the health of our nation. Ensuring that that shadow stays far from our doors for the next 80 years means not just the modernisation of the NHS, the 10-year plan and the improvements we will debate many times in the House; it means building the level of resilience, be it to changing weather and climate or for a changing world that impacts on our health and healthcare. We will do that only by working together and with the dedicated staff, patients and communities across the country. I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: I welcome the new shadow Secretary of State.

12.53 pm

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): I am grateful, Mr Speaker. I thank the Secretary of State for her statement and for advance sight of it. To date, preparedness statements have tended to focus on winter, as she said, but she is right that we now need such an approach for summer.

I welcome the statement today, but we must also ask about this year—the summer just gone. Yes, the intensity and length of high temperatures was new, along with the spikes that it brought in emergency admissions and all the cancelled appointments, but it was also predictable: high temperatures were forecast. What lessons has the Department learned from the UK Health Security Agency reports on adverse weather and health? What preparations had it made in advance of the summer? What guidance was given? Were trusts left to develop protocols themselves? Specifically, what guidance was given to care and nursing homes?

Of course, the high temperatures this summer were not unique to the United Kingdom—nor indeed is the UK, by quite some way, the hottest country in Europe. What conversations have the Secretary of State and her Ministers been having with counterparts in other countries to make sure that each learns from the other?

Right now, the NHS is amid a massive top-down reorganisation. What assessment has the Secretary of State made of the effect of the uncertainty and upheaval that always comes with a major reorganisation on the NHS's ability to put in place changes at short notice? Given the extreme heat that staff were enduring, what steps is she taking not only on building and ambient temperature, but to ensure that the design of personal protective equipment, for example, reflects the changed needs? What specific consideration is being given to the ambulance service?

There is a connected issue: the cost of energy, for summer as well as winter. What is the right hon. Lady doing across Government to make heating and cooling more affordable for households and individuals? That would bring down admissions. Will the Government now adopt the cheap power plan that we have set out?

Finally, although we are talking about the summer, it is September already; it is reasonable and timely to ask also about winter. We understand that supply of the RSV vaccine is in place, but what guarantees can she give about wider preparedness? When will the Secretary of State come to the House to set out those plans? The number of people waiting more than 12 hours in A&E for admission is up significantly since the change of Government. What is she doing to grip that well ahead of the coming winter pressures?

Yvette Cooper: I thank the shadow Secretary of State for his response. As I did not reply to him yesterday, I did not have the opportunity to welcome him to his post. He referred to my personal links to East Hampshire. I should say that I remember going to see the GP at the health centre on Anstey Road in Alton, because of an earache—not that I am associating the right hon. Gentleman with earache.

The shadow Secretary of State raised the issue of this summer. Despite the record demand on the health service in July, there were actually improvements in performance on waiting lists, waiting times and emergency care as a result of the huge amount of planning and work that had been done on performance, particularly for A&E, emergency care and electives. That is a tribute to the work across the national health service and all the planning work that had been done nationally, including to improve performance.

The right hon. Gentleman rightly raised the issue of preparedness for the coming winter. Health Ministers have meetings about the winter in the summer and we are now increasingly going to have to have meetings about summer in the winter as well, but that planning is already well under way right across the NHS and across NHS England. We will provide updates for the House in due course.

The right hon. Gentleman raised some particular issues to do with heat. The NHS approach should be about seasonal resilience to be ready for what might be extremes of flooding, extremes of hot weather and different kinds of conditions that will impact on the

[Yvette Cooper]

country, so that it is able to respond to changing patterns of health need. That is why things such as capital investment are so important in building that greater resilience, which we do not have at the moment because of what we inherited. It is also why we now have a specific heat taskforce to look through the journey on both prevention and how we modernise, and to ensure that the right response is in place right across the NHS.

I am happy to discuss those details further with the shadow Secretary of State as that work progresses. I hope that he will recognise the investment that has gone in over the last two years, in contrast to what we inherited, and the improvements and reforms that are taking place as a result of the changes we have made. I look forward to discussing those with him further.

Jen Craft (Thurrock) (Lab): I very much welcome this statement on our preparedness for future extreme heat events. As the Secretary of State mentioned, there were record A&E attendances this summer, and in my constituency, as in many others, this led to ambulances having to queue outside for upwards of eight hours. I have called on my local hospital's trust—Mid and South Essex NHS foundation trust—to make a room available for paramedics and ambulance crews to rest and recuperate when this happens, because otherwise they have to sit in their ambulance, often with a very sick person, for upwards of eight hours, with nowhere to go for even a cup of tea and a sandwich. I have been unsuccessful thus far, so will she back my call for hospital trusts, and particularly Mid and South Essex, to make a space available so that ambulance crews can take a break when they have to sit outside A&E for prolonged periods of time?

Yvette Cooper: I thank my hon. Friend for recognising the crucial role that ambulance staff and paramedics play in our emergency care, and the importance of the NHS supporting its staff—our NHS is the staff; it is the people who make up the service. I do not know the details of the individual case she raises, but I will ensure that it is passed on to NHS England. I certainly agree that we need to ensure that staff have the support they need.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): I welcome the Secretary of State and the shadow Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds), to their places—I have to say that I was not expecting to be the continuity figure in the health portfolio.

We need to be honest: the NHS is now in permacrisis, as outlined by the National Audit Office report. The hallmarks of peak winter pressure in the past—overcrowded A&Es, queuing ambulances and soaring 999 calls—are now a feature year round. This summer was particularly difficult due to record temperatures across the UK, with over 33 NHS trusts reporting temperatures well above the 28° limit set by NHS England, and we can all agree that is not acceptable. It is inhumane not just for patients but for staff—42° is unbearable. A constituent of mine suffered in his final days in a desperately hot setting in Royal Shrewsbury hospital until managers worked with my team to ensure that he was made more comfortable. We do not want to be dealing with cases like that every year. We need hospitals that can withstand the heat, and the Lib Dems have been calling for a new NHS rapid adaptation unit to urgently heatproof the most heat-affected hospitals and care homes.

Turning to corridor care, the percentage of people waiting 12 hours or more in A&E has tripled since before the covid-19 pandemic. Analysis suggests that people waiting this long are twice as likely to die within 30 days of leaving A&E, compared with those who wait just two hours. It is abundantly clear that policies to deal with A&E are not working. Spend is increasing, as outlined in the report, while outcomes are decreasing. We are pumping money into emergency departments with no proportionate improvement.

The Lib Dems have outlined our plan to end 12-hour waits in a year by investing more in step-down care and support for people to leave hospital and go into social care. The Health Bill will reduce co-operation between local authorities and integrated care boards, risking those improvements in social care. Although we welcome the cross-party talks on social care, I hope that the Secretary of State will look at this issue as the Health Bill makes its way through the Lords. Will she listen to our plans, change her approach and commit to ending the ongoing A&E scandal?

Yvette Cooper: I thank the hon. Member for her questions, and for drawing on her expertise and interest in this area. On capital funding, that is exactly why we are allocating £32 million as part of the capital fund that we have set out specifically to deal with repairs and safety issues that have become acute across the NHS estate as a result of more than a decade of capital underfunding of the NHS. Ara Darzi made it clear in his report that this has had a huge impact on patients and staff, but also on the NHS's productivity, because we have facilities that cannot be used because of that capital underfunding.

That £32 million will be targeted at measures to improve cooling systems, but I have asked the NHS to look further, as part of the second wave of funding, at other areas across the country where there will be particular needs as a result of buildings needing to deal with extreme heat, which they were never designed for. As a result of the announcements I have made today, £1.5 billion is now going into improvements to existing facilities, to upgrade them and ensure that they reach the right quality and standards.

On the hon. Member's point about corridor care, nobody should have to be seen or treated in a corridor, or have to wait for a long time at one of the most distressing times of all, when they need emergency care and support. I have seen some phenomenal examples and have discussed the work that hospitals such as Watford have done to eliminate their corridor care challenges. We have introduced reporting and publication of those statistics for the first time, exactly to ensure that we have that priority. But I pay tribute to the work done by A&E teams to improve performance, despite the huge increase in demand that they saw in July—they are doing a really important job.

Danny Beales (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Lab): I welcome the new Secretary of State to her place and look forward to working with her. Over the summer

I visited a number of GP practices, and they reported frequent instances of racism, abuse and even violence against staff. This summer we also saw a horrific stabbing of a doctor at Hillingdon hospital. I therefore welcome the Secretary of State's comments about the unacceptable levels of abuse that we are seeing in our health system. The practices think that more could be done, with panic alarms, cameras, increased security staff and speeding up some of the regulatory processes. NHS Property Services can take a long time to make even the simplest improvements, such as a security door or additional CCTV. Will the Secretary of State join me in condemning in no uncertain terms the abuse faced by NHS staff in Hillingdon and across the country, and outline what more action could be taken on this issue?

Yvette Cooper: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this. He is right to stand up for the staff at Hillingdon but also right across the country. These people are doing the most important jobs in the country: caring for all of us at the time when we need them most, at the time when things go wrong in our lives—when we are sick and we need help and support. It is a total disgrace that, while doing that job, they should face abuse, violence, discrimination or racism. It is totally appalling and unacceptable. I am keen to work with staff groups, trade unions and NHS organisations right across the country to uphold strong standards, stand up for our staff and ensure that they have the support they need, and I look forward to working with him on this.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): We are talking about resilience, and one of the things that has made resilience worse is Labour's policy on mandatory advice and guidance, and single point of access. We know that secondary care doctors and GPs are struggling but, more importantly, it is causing actual harm to patients. Those are not my words, but those of the Health Services Safety Investigations Body, the health watchdog, which has asked for a review to be commissioned to look into this specifically. Has the Secretary of State read that report, will she commission that review and, if so, who will do it and by when will it be done?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend the Minister for Secondary Care has been looking in detail at that report. We obviously take all reports immensely seriously. The advice and guidance have been in place for some time and rightly provide huge amounts of support, advice and, actually, improvements in healthcare right across the country. Where there are cases where things go wrong or where cases are raised with us, we will always investigate them and take them immensely seriously. We will also always ensure that the whole regulatory framework is there to ensure that the highest standards are upheld.

Deirdre Costigan (Ealing Southall) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement. Ealing hospital has already had £5.9 million of investment from this Labour Government to install 222 solar panels and a new heating system that stops patients and staff getting too hot or cold. Does she agree that her announcement today will not just help the NHS to beat the heat, but help us to save money that we can spend on patient care?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is exactly right. What she describes in Ealing is a hugely important example of the way that modernising our basic estate and facilities can ensure that they are fit for different kinds of conditions and circumstances in the future, and that we are able to reduce the energy bills that put other pressures on our NHS, meaning we can get that money back into frontline care. I pay tribute to the work of the NHS in her constituency.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): I must confess that I am a little frustrated, because I think this is the third time that the ventilation system at Stepping Hill hospital has been announced by a Minister—and it is not new money. There is a £138 million repairs backlog, so may I invite the Secretary of State to join me on a tour to see the remarkable work done by some of the remarkable people working at Stepping Hill, as well as the state of repair of buildings that in many cases are older than the NHS itself?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Member talks about Stepping Hill hospital in Stockport, so I hope that she welcomes the fact that the hospital is one of 10 major schemes included in funding worth £200 million, which is part of the £1.5 billion investment that we are putting into improving our NHS estate. I gently remind her that some of the problems in the capital estate go back to austerity and what happened in the reduction in capital funding after 2010.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome today's statement and I welcome the Secretary of State to her place. York hospital was heralded as a cheap build, but we are paying a heavy price today. We know that heat in that hospital will have an impact on clinical outcomes as well as on staffing. Will she look at York's desire to have a new hospital, co-located with the university, that is fit for modern healthcare? Will she recognise the work being done in York to prevent frail and elderly people from entering hospital through the incredible primary care work that is leading the way?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is exactly right about the importance of preventing people who do not need to go to hospital from having to go there. Frankly, it would be better for those people to be treated and supported either in their own homes or in care homes. The overall approach to improving our health through the service and care that is supported needs to include primary care, acute care and social care. The integrated care board needs to work with York hospital on the improvements to the facilities that are needed. I look forward to hearing more from her about what professionals working in the health system in York want to see, to ensure that they have the facilities they need.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): May I welcome the Secretary of State to her place? I look forward to working with her as I have done with her predecessors. May I draw her attention to our Committee's work on corridor care, and the correspondence between the Committee and the Minister for Secondary Care, who is in her place? I thought it was a constructive session. In our correspondence with the Department,

[Layla Moran]

we raised the issue of staff fatigue. Staff will understandably have questions, such as whether summer is the new winter, what now happens to the leave they were planning to take and the training they must attend, which they often cannot attend during the winter, so can she be clear with staff about that? In the letter responding to the Committee, the Department said that there are new NHS staff standards and new occupational health and wellbeing support, which is all fine, but it then says that there will be

"a continued focus on workforce sustainability through the upcoming NHS Workforce Plan."

Where is that workforce plan?

Yvette Cooper: I thank the hon. Lady for her work and that of her Committee. The Committee, as a result of its extensive work, has highlighted many of the issues that the Government have needed to look at and have then responded to, so I welcome its work. I look forward to giving evidence to the Committee and responding to the inquiries it has under way. One of the issues that I have asked the taskforce looking at summer pressures to consider is staffing resilience. While there were all sorts of extremely good preparations in place for summer, meaning that many areas responded well, including in July, she is right to raise the issue of staff resilience and the impact of the pattern of staff holidays—all our holidays—on planning. I take that immensely seriously.

The hon. Lady is right to raise the workforce plan. We are continuing to work to complete the workforce plan, because it is needed. We are looking at how we ensure that we have a proper workforce plan around social care and what the links should be. One key area that we want to prioritise in response to Baroness Casey's work is to develop a proper workforce strategy for social care, alongside the work being done for the NHS.

Lewis Atkinson (Sunderland Central) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State to her place and look forward to engaging regularly with her and the ministerial team. International evidence makes the link between extreme heat and poorer mental health across the population increasingly clear. The Office for National Statistics estimates that one in every 32 suicides in recent years in the UK has been attributable to extreme heat. Will the Secretary of State give her assessment of the impact of extreme heat on mental health? As she goes about her role, will she ensure that she pays as much attention to NHS mental health waiting lists as she does to physical health waiting lists?

Yvette Cooper: I thank my hon. Friend not only for his question but for his considerable work in this field, both before he came to this place and through the issues he has been raising here. Our intention is to bring forward a new mental health strategy before Christmas, and I completely agree with him that we need to look at waiting times and where we can make early interventions around mental health. Earlier this summer, we announced new mental health A&E provision. As part of the work led by the chief medical officer, we have asked for work to be done looking at the impact of extreme heat, including on mental health and the most vulnerable populations. My hon. Friend is right to raise the health inequalities here.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State to her place and thank her for her statement. The Government's reorganisation of the NHS will see the abolition of Healthwatch England and all the other local watchdogs, including Healthwatch Somerset. At a time when NHS services in Somerset are in great need of improvement, how confident is the Secretary of State that she will be aware of patients' views without Healthwatch Somerset?

Yvette Cooper: I take very seriously the importance of patient voice in local health services, and in ensuring that that local patient voice can be heard. That is why I have said that we will look further at the provisions around Healthwatch and what happens in local areas to ensure that there is proper accountability and strong patient voice. We will do that before those issues are discussed in the House of Lords, because I take them seriously. On the overall reforms, we know that the current system has not been working, that there has been too much duplication and that there is a legacy from the damaging 2012 reforms. What we want to see now is a much more streamlined and effective system that gets support to the frontline.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I put on record my thanks to NHS and care staff across Harlow for their work during a very difficult summer, particularly those at the Princess Alexandra hospital. The Secretary of State will know from talking to my right hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) how much I lobby on behalf of the Princess Alexandra. I am delighted that it is in wave 2 of the new hospital programme, but may I emphasise the hospital's ageing estate and the need for emergency funding moving forward, before we complete the new hospital project?

Yvette Cooper: I welcome my hon. Friend's determination and enthusiasm. While he managed to refer to the hospital twice, I think he only managed to refer to Harlow once, so he may be slipping. I am delighted that the hospital is included in wave 2 of the new hospital programme. Obviously, there is considerable work under way to ensure that the project stays on track and that the planning is in place. This is part of our commitment to upgrade, to increase the capital investment in our NHS and to ensure that there are facilities for the staff who work in the NHS and, most of all, for patients in Harlow. I thank, through him, the NHS staff who work in his constituency,

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): The Secretary of State mentioned the 10-year plan, and central to that plan is the shift from hospital to community. One of the things she will have no doubt noticed in the quarter of a century since she was last a Minister in the Department of Health and Social Care is the dramatic cut in acute hospital beds, and the resulting pressure that that is putting on frontline services. As summer pressures become winter pressures—in Cornwall, at least, the pressures are all year round, with 98% bed occupancy most of the time—the result is dysfunctionality and crisis on the frontline. Will she look again at this issue and ensure that hospitals are stabilised before that shift? Otherwise, further dysfunctionality and crisis will occur. I recommend that she comes to Cornwall and sees what it is like on the frontline in order to understand what I am talking about.

Yvette Cooper: I too take very seriously the pressures on acute hospitals across the country, including the pressures around beds and services. It is really important that we have the right kinds of facilities. I believe that the prevention work for people who do not need to be in hospital and who would be better cared for in the community has to start straight away, because that is the right thing to do.

We want to take further measures around neighbourhood health, and we are building plans right across the country that we want to see more of, but none of that is an alternative to having good acute care and strong hospitals that perform well; we all need those to be there whenever we need them. However, we are not serving patients and communities in the best possible way if we are not also doing more to prevent people needing to go into hospital—certainly for long stays—in the first place.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): I warmly welcome the Secretary of State to her place. She rightly said that the NHS is its staff, so I pay tribute to the NHS staff in my constituency. Obviously, there are the doctors and nurses, but there are some people who do not always get mentioned, such as the allied health professionals, the caterers, the cleaners, the administrators, the managers and, may I say, the porters, since I was one in my 20s. They all do a fantastic job, and we owe them a debt of gratitude. I use those services in my constituency, and they are improving thanks to the work of this Government since July 2024. However, there is obviously much further to go, particularly in urgent care services.

In my constituency of Rugby, like in many towns, there are urgent treatment centres that do a very good job, and I am very grateful to the Government for their investment in those. May I make a plea for some of the £450 million that the Secretary of State mentioned in her statement? Will she take a look at the urgent care centre in Rugby, where my constituents feel that more could be provided? I fully agree with them, so I hope that she can at least take a look at that.

Yvette Cooper: I join my hon. Friend in thanking the NHS and social care staff in Rugby. He is absolutely right to refer to the allied health professionals, support staff, catering staff and, crucially, the porters. He has raised that last point with me before; as some of the staff who spend the most time in direct contact with patients, they are hugely important. We must never underestimate the importance of every role in our health service, so I welcome his point. We have provided £450 million to transform urgent and emergency care, and we are already seeing improvements taking place, despite the very strong pressures on emergency care. I pay tribute to all those involved.

Adam Dance (Yeovil) (LD): I have been contacted by families in Yeovil with disabled relatives who are unable to leave their flat and rely on carers. During the recent heatwaves, one family reported indoor temperatures of over 49°C, with no air con. Public transport and lots of other public spaces do not have air con either. What steps will the Secretary of State take to protect housebound individuals and their carers from the public health risk of heatwaves?

Yvette Cooper: That is exactly one of the issues I have asked the chief medical officer to look at. If we are going to face more extreme heat conditions, what is the impact on those who are the most vulnerable? That includes those who are housebound and those who are the most disabled. Those are issues for local authorities to look at in local areas, but I have asked the chief medical officer to look at them nationally.

Alison Hume (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State to her place, and I welcome her statement. Last year, a wildfire raged across the North Yorkshire moors near Whitby, releasing 25,000 tonnes of carbon into the atmosphere. Wildfire smoke is a health risk and exacerbates symptoms for those with pre-existing health conditions. With the frequency and severity of wildfires increasing, may I ask what assessment my right hon. Friend has made of the health risks posed by wildfire smoke? How is her Department preparing for these growing public health challenges?

Yvette Cooper: I thank my hon. Friend for the work that I know she is doing in her constituency and for recognising the impact that this issue has. The chief medical officer attended a meeting chaired by the Prime Minister to look at the wildfires over the summer. We are already looking at how we ensure rapid advice is given to people who suffer from asthma or other conditions that might be exacerbated by wildfire smoke so that public health messages can go out and reach them in those areas. We can do that prevention work, but that is part of ensuring that our NHS is resilient enough to respond to whatever healthcare issues are raised by different extreme events.

Adrian Ramsay (Waveney Valley) (Green): During one of the summer heatwaves, a hospital serving my constituency—the Norfolk and Norwich university hospital—had to switch off its MRI scanners, resulting in hundreds of people losing their appointments. Does the Secretary of State agree that that shows the range of challenges facing the NHS? Will the Government's investment plans look at how to keep equipment working and how to keep patients and NHS staff safe in extreme heat?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Member makes an important point. There are two issues here. The first issue is that there is a legacy of a lack of capital investment in the resilience of our NHS estates, and that includes capital investment around equipment. That goes back over many years and was highlighted in the Darzi report. That is why we are turning that around with the safety fund, which can start to respond to and put money into looking at exactly these issues, including £32 million dedicated around heating issues as part of this wave of funding. The second issue is that, if we are honest with ourselves, many of our NHS buildings were not designed with climate change in mind or to anticipate weather that we do not expect to see in this country. That means that we all have to start rethinking ways of working to ensure that we respond to that challenge.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): I welcome the Government's approach. The Secretary of State is right to highlight how the NHS has been starved of capital over many years, and that is nowhere more obvious in my constituency than at East Leake health centre—a poorly ventilated 1960s class building, which currently has holes in the roof of one of the treatment rooms. Will she commit today to ensuring that older, rural areas are prioritised and that her team look at East Leake health centre?

Yvette Cooper: I welcome my hon. Friend standing up for healthcare in his constituency. We are asking ICBs to look at the priority needs at different locations in each area, and it is vital that they look at pressures around rural areas and for every community in each area to ensure that all areas have the services they need.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): On social care, the Secretary of State pointed to the better care fund in her statement. I am glad that she recognises its importance, but why is she weakening provisions for pooled budgets, including the better care fund, in the Health Bill? Will she reconsider that?

Yvette Cooper: The better care fund is hugely important—I think it has £9 billion that is being jointly allocated. It is for the NHS and local authorities to work together on ensuring that we help to prevent people from entering hospital when they do not need to and that we have the proper services and co-ordination in place. We are also looking at the neighbourhood health programme, as that is another area in which we should look place by place at better co-ordination and ways of working. Those things are really important and will continue. As part of the response to Louise Casey's review, we also want to look at how we can better bring together all these different approaches, because there is the same fundamental, core issue: whatever we have tried at different times, we are still not effectively co-ordinating health and social care, and we have to do that.

Rosie Wrighting (Kettering) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State to her place. I also thank all staff across the NHS, particularly those at Kettering general hospital, who worked throughout the summer in very tough conditions. Under this Government, we have seen investment in Kettering general hospital, with new solar panels and construction starting on a new energy centre, but we still await construction on the main building, particularly the maternity ward. One local midwife told me:

"The building is deteriorating badly, we are worried about the safety of everyone who relies on this service. As midwives we come to work every day to provide safe, compassionate care but it is becoming difficult to do so in a building falling into disrepair."

Will the Secretary of State meet me and my constituent to discuss the building's urgent challenges?

Yvette Cooper: I am very happy to talk to my hon. Friend further about this issue, as I know other Health Ministers will be. She is rightly standing up for the patients—particularly new mums—and staff in her constituency who are affected by the facilities. It is hugely welcome that we managed to include Kettering hospital in wave 2 of the new hospital programme, given the new facilities it needs. Obviously, there is a lot of work to be done, and there will need to be discussions about prioritisation locally—about what can be done and when. I also welcome my hon. Friend prioritising maternity issues, which are an important personal priority for me; I think we have not taken them seriously enough, across the health service, for too long.

Mr Adnan Hussain (Blackburn) (Ind): When I bumped into the Secretary of State yesterday, I made clear the urgent need for investment in the Royal Blackburn hospital. I have seen shocking and undignified scenes in the corridors throughout the year. Having spoken to the hospital's executive team, it is abundantly clear that the hospital is serving a population far, far beyond the capacity for which it was originally built. I welcome the building of new homes across east Lancashire, but does the Secretary of State accept that, unless we extend the hospital's estate and workforce, this crisis will get worse? Health inequalities across Blackburn are already among the worst in England—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. I am sure the Secretary of State has the gist of the hon. Gentleman's question.

Yvette Cooper: I thank the hon. Member for raising this issue. We have invested an additional £29 billion in the national health service this year, and we have also recruited thousands more doctors, nurses, midwives and mental health workers. It is important that investment goes in. Alongside that, we also now have the major new hospitals programme. In addition, the £1.5 billion I announced today is part of a £6.75 billion fund to improve existing facilities where there are safety issues, in order to ensure that the NHS has the facilities it needs.

Dr Lauren Sullivan (Gravesham) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State to her place. I know she will share my concern about the ongoing water supply issues at Darent Valley hospital. An internal heating system fault was identified on 28 April, leading to the contamination of the hot and cold water network, which resulted in bottled water being used on many wards in the hospital. Will she outline the capital funding support available to help modernise the hospital in North Kent and for the renewal of outdated buildings, such as the Gravesend hospital known as "M Block", so that local patients and staff have a good, fit place to work?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right to raise this issue. It is an example of the way in which the under-investment over more than a decade—since 2009—has had an impact on both safety and performance, because it has meant that facilities cannot be effectively used. That is why we have the estate safety fund in place, and why we encourage local areas to prioritise what further capital improvements and other improvements they can make. I look forward to discussing this further with my hon. Friend.

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): The Secretary of State's mention of prevention was welcome: that means keeping people cool in their own homes. For those who live in a conservation area or a listed building, however, that is extremely difficult. So many people in my Cheltenham constituency and many other places like it have experienced temperatures way in excess of 35°C on their upper floors this summer, which is a particular problem for older people and for parents with young babies. Is it not time for the Secretary of State to get involved with Historic England and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, and to lead a big conversation about sensible reform of conservation and listing rules so that the planning system does not stop people cooling their own homes?

Yvette Cooper: I can assure the hon. Member that the chief medical officer looks very seriously at all the broader issues around prevention. We deal with health inequalities, and we know that issues around housing, buildings and communities have a big impact on our health. Some areas have traditionally provided community centres for cold weather, so that there is somewhere for people to go—somewhere they can stay warm and see other people in the community—when the weather gets cold, if they are worried about heating their homes. Some areas have now started to do the same thing to ensure that there are cooler places for people to go. That is an example of communities coming together to respond to challenges, so it is actually local communities that we need to empower.

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): Analysis from Ordnance Survey has highlighted that my great city of Leicester is now projected to show the biggest rise in Britain's heat vulnerability ranking, climbing from 10th to fourth. This is deeply concerning, considering the record-setting heatwave we have just had. In the absence of a full and speedy green transition, what reassurance can the Secretary of State give my Leicester South constituents that their health facilities will be able to cope with the inevitable increase in heat?

Yvette Cooper: I draw the hon. Member's attention to the work we have set out, including the new planning processes for summer pressures. As part of the heat taskforce's work, we are setting out the framework for local areas to do their resilience planning. Local NHS managers need to ensure that their systems are resilient to extreme heat, just as they do for winter pressures. Our NHS needs to be resilient at all times of year, and it is important that also happens in Leicester.

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): I welcome the Secretary of State to her place. I heard from many patients and staff that Winchester hospital was horrendously hot this summer, and I pay tribute to all the staff who are delivering care in those conditions. When we are looking at how we can address the repairs backlog and ensure that the entire NHS estate is fit for the hotter summers we are expecting, can we ensure that clinical staff and infection control experts are also consulted? For example, installing air conditioning is also a way of improving ventilation, air filtration and infection control, as well as reducing the antimicrobial resistance in hospital-acquired infections.

Yvette Cooper: I welcome the hon. Member's point. The £1.5 billion that I announced today covers 950 projects across England, right across the NHS, to deal with some of the safety issues and to improve facilities. Each area needs to ensure that it has looked at issues around infection control and building repairs so that they are making best use of the funding they will get.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): I welcome the announcement of £32 million for cooling and ventilation in hospitals. I received letters from seven children over the summer about the closure of Littletown primary school for two days in June, because it acted like a greenhouse and was deemed unsafe. Likewise, Ottery St Mary primary school is fundraising for air conditioning. Will the Secretary of State talk to her counterparts at the Department for Education about adapting the school estate to climate change, so that children do not end up with heatstroke?

Yvette Cooper: I know this is an issue that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education already takes very seriously. She recognises the importance of keeping children in school. Just as we are ensuring that the NHS is sufficiently resilient, public buildings across the country need to take seriously how we deal with the changing weather and climate that we face.

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): The tower block at Torbay hospital was like an oven this summer; it is no longer fit for purpose, and it is even seen to be a fire risk for staff and patients alike. On 5 February, myself and my hon. Friends the Members for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) and for Newton Abbot (Martin Wrigley) wrote to the Government backing the foundation hospital's bid for funding for a new ward tower block. Secretary of State, is the cheque in the post?

Yvette Cooper: As the hon. Member knows, we have different waves of work as part of the new hospital programme—which depends on prioritisation being done within ICBs and regions—and for the first time, this Government have set up a dedicated fund for safety improvements, the estates safety fund, which is worth £6.75 billion. The first wave of £1.5 billion in funding will deal with the 950 projects I have announced. We are turning around the substantial under-investment we inherited from the previous Government, but I would again gently point out to the hon. Member that Ara Darzi's report identified that the big drop in capital investment in our national health service that has led to many of these problems started after 2009, as part of austerity under the coalition Government.

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement and welcome the additional funding, which will help the infrastructure of our hospitals up and down the country. I also thank our NHS staff for their valiant efforts throughout challenging times. My question is about the numerous complaints I receive because the bodies of patients who were treated in hospital and unfortunately passed away there are not being released rapidly in order for burial to take place. Will the Secretary of State meet me, or get a relevant Minister to meet me, to see how we can improve the release of bodies from hospitals?

Yvette Cooper: I take the point that the hon. Member has made very seriously, and will ensure that one of the Health Ministers talks to him further about the details. It is immensely important that families who have lost a loved one have the respect and support they need to be able to bid farewell to their loved one, and it is also immensely important that we treat those who are deceased with the utmost respect. That has not always happened, which is why we are proposing the regulation of services in this area, but it is also why we need to make sure that existing facilities work properly.

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): The Secretary of State mentioned social care. There have been a number of distressing reports in the media about care home deaths from heatstroke, and I have written to her about a case where a resident was left in direct sun for a

[Claire Young]

period of time. Does the Secretary of State have plans to improve knowledge and understanding of heatstroke among the care home workforce, and how will the CQC assess whether they are taking appropriate steps?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Member is absolutely right to raise this issue. It is one of the first issues I raised with the Department of Health and Social Care teams during some of the first meetings I had after being appointed; at the height of some of the heatwaves, we were looking at what could be done to ensure that the right advice and requirements were going out to social care across the country. Many care homes did a phenomenal job, sometimes in difficult circumstances because of old buildings, but the hon. Member is absolutely right to point out areas where things did not happen in the way they needed to. We are looking further at this issue as part of the heat taskforce.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State very much for her statement, and welcome the commitment she has made. Strangford's ageing population rely heavily on robust community care and swift access to their GPs, so can the Secretary of State outline what specific discussions she is having with her counterparts in the devolved Administrations—particularly in Northern Ireland—to ensure a UK-wide co-ordinated approach to summer resilience? What targeted support has been made available for community pharmacy networks, which so often act as the frontline of defence when GPs' surgeries are stretched to capacity, as we prepare for the cold and flu season?

Yvette Cooper: I can reassure the hon. Member that regular meetings and discussions take place, involving not just Ministers but chief medical officers across the devolved Administrations, to ensure there is co-ordination. There are areas where we can learn from each other, but there are also areas where we need proper co-ordination, particularly on some of the public health and information issues and—as the hon. Member rightly says—some of the issues that link into our economic supply chains, including community pharmacies.

Education and Skills Reform

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Before I call the Secretary of State, I remind Members that statements are an opportunity for the Secretary of State to make a statement and for Members to ask questions, not make statements of their own.

1.44 pm

The Secretary of State for Education (Lucy Powell): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will make a statement to update the House on the Government's education and skills reforms.

It is a real privilege to address Members for the first time as Education Secretary—without question, the best job in Government. I got a reminder of why this is such a special job when I went to GCSE results day in Harper Green school in Bolton. While I was with Micah as he opened his exceptional results, his mum beamed and gave him a massive hug. She then gave me one, too—she was thanking me for his success. That is the power of education: a source of pride and hope, and a sense of achievement and confidence. I was a proud mum myself on GCSE results day this year, and I know how much hard work goes in and how committed our teachers and staff are.

However, results day is not like that for every child. Too many are locked out of opportunity and left behind, which is why we are leading an education revolution. We have real strengths to build on; as yesterday's programme for international student assessment results showed, a 30-year consensus begun by the last Labour Government and continued by successive Governments, particularly focusing on literacy and numeracy, has raised standards and performance. Generations of children have benefited from world-leading practice in fundamentals such as phonics—introduced by Labour and built on by the Conservatives—and today, more pupils are getting the top grades in GCSE maths and are going on to do A-level. As someone who loves maths and did an A-level in it myself, that brings me huge joy. The whole House should celebrate and thank our fantastic teaching workforce for the latest PISA data, which shows strong international rankings in maths, reading and science.

I will always keep pushing for ever higher standards, but continued improvement is about challenging ourselves about what is going wrong, not just what is going right. An honest appraisal of the evidence shows that our current system works well for some, but is leaving too many behind. The disadvantage gap remains stubbornly wide; the gap between regions is widening; the special educational needs and disabilities crisis is growing; 1.5 million children were persistently absent from school at the last general election; the number of young people educated at home has doubled since 2019; and now a million young people, all educated during the past 16 years, are not in education, employment or training. Anyone who cares about the futures of these young people can see the need for change. Alan Milburn has warned of a lost generation, labelling education "the faltering foundation". The co-chairs of the white working class inquiry said that

> "Doing more of the same is unlikely to solve the problem",

and even Andreas Schleicher, who oversees PISA, said when commenting on our results that

"A big share of young people think school is a waste of time. That's not really good news".

That is the other side of the coin of a one-size-fits-all system.

Nothing symbolises how we have lost perspective more than the treadmill of failure young people are on with the endless cycle of maths and English resits. Of those retaking their maths GCSE this summer, under 14% got the standard pass they needed—that is nearly nine in 10 experiencing failure again and again. Maths and English are essential, but everything we know about how to build confidence in young people tells us that this approach does not work, yet we carry on. Researchers from University College London have called it a "wellbeing penalty". I call it wrong, which is why I am changing it.

We are in the middle of a huge technological revolution, and the world is changing at a faster rate than anyone can keep up with. My children—all our children—will be doing jobs that my generation could not have conceived of. In this world of change, we have a duty to change too, but in a way that builds on, rather than abandons, what we know to be true about learning. Let us be clear: in the Al and social media age, the human ability to understand and interpret the world around us becomes more important, not less.

Literacy and numeracy become more important, not less. We must equip our young people to master technology, not be mastered by it, and there is value in human endeavour that Al can never replace. While pen-and-paper exams have their place, we need to rebalance towards the applied skills of the modern world and include practical learning in practical subjects such as computing, drama and physical education, as well as ensuring that human skills such as speaking and presenting are developed. We need both knowledge and skills, not one or the other.

We are talking about a broader, more inclusive education, built on strong foundations and with pathways for all. We are talking about education as a passport to work, to life and to success, regardless of people's needs, ambitions or postcode. We are talking about supporting all children on every step of the way, from their first days of life to their first days of work and beyond. We are talking about early intervention, smoothing transitions, boosting enrichment, creating clear pathways, raising standards, keeping young people engaged, and closing the gap between classroom and workplace. We are talking about excellence for all, not just for some. This will be less an exam factory and more a talent factory.

I can also confirm that we will see through the vital SEND reforms, built in partnership with parents and professionals. We are investing now in a new system of early intervention and the right support close to home so that families can get the help that they need first. We will introduce legislation and set out our response to the consultation in due course.

Our commitment to opportunity does not stop there. We will make this country a technical education superpower, creating new pathways of equal esteem and equal ambition. We will connect our young people to the careers not of some dusty past, but of an exciting future. Over the summer, the Prime Minister and I announced our plans to transform technical education and work experience for young people from the age of 14, building on the revolution that is already happening post-16. Combining this with high-level academic subjects, we will develop top-quality technical qualifications that will lead to clearer pathways into T-Levels, A-Levels and the new V-Levels, as well as apprenticeships, universities and beyond. We will provide a clear line of sight into work, tailored to local opportunities, by working with mayors and local leaders.

Some claim that improving technical education is somehow anti-academic, but such lazy falsehoods are stuck in the past. Technical education can also give new purpose to academic subjects, and countries that boast low levels of NEETs combine the two. Our curriculum and assessment reform will go hand in hand with that ambition, and we will soon publish proposals building on the Becky Francis review. We will have fewer barriers to progression and new emphasis on the skills that enable young people to succeed, including critical literacy, as well as more foundation and stepping-stone qualifications. More space will be available, including room for creative subjects, PE, and the development of deeper understanding. However, this will not be a system of separation. Instead, there will be choices, options, chances, and a curriculum that will be broad enough for long enough to capture the imagination of every child. That means changing the way in which schools are measured to incentivise a broader offer and reward inclusion—a system underpinned, now and always, by progress in English, maths and science. I will set out those proposals in due course.

I know that many worry about change, although they agree that change is needed. Let me reassure education leaders, teachers and the workforce that they will be part of this process on every step of the way. Perhaps even more important than these new reforms is a new way of working. We will design change in partnership with the people who deliver it—change based on the very best evidence and practice, not reform beamed into the classroom directly from Whitehall. Mayoral and strategic authorities, for example, will help to deliver real work experience opportunities. For the first time, mayors will have control of the 16-19 education budget, and I know that, in respect of early years and early intervention, we can transform outcomes through the power of place.

This is just the beginning. Big reform is on the way. We are moving quickly because this cannot wait. The eyes of those young people locked out of opportunity who do not see education working for them are on us, and it is our duty to show them that we get it. Some have called this "bringing back stupid". Not a bit of it; as the Prime Minister said last week, we are bringing back hope.

I commend this statement to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the shadow Secretary of State.

1.55 pm

Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con): Let me begin by welcoming the new Secretary of State to her place.

Just yesterday, new statistics from the programme for international student assessment showed that English pupils are now in the top 10 in the world for reading, for maths and for science. That is a huge achievement, and a real English success story. We are punching well above our weight, while other countries are falling behind.

[Laura Trott]

That did not happen by accident. It happened because of hard-won, evidence-led reforms and brilliant teachers. We raised expectations, we strengthened the curriculum, and we learnt from the highest-performing education systems in the world. My right hon. and noble Friend Lord Gove and Sir Nick Gibb built on Labour reforms to create an evidence-led school system that has catapulted us up international league tables. So why, when the Education Secretary herself has said that we should celebrate the PISA results and when the rest of the world is trying to learn from England, have the Government decided that now is the moment to change course?

The Secretary of State said in her statement that everyone

"can see the need for change."

I think that the opposite is true. The Secretary of State has also argued that there has been

"an over-focus on academic outcomes".

I profoundly disagree. High academic standards do not hold children back; they lift them up. Instead of acknowledging that our schools are the one part of the state that is not just working well but is world-leading, the Government seem determined to point the finger at schools for problems that they have failed to solve elsewhere.

Over the summer recess, while schools were closed and teachers were on holiday, our new Prime Minister used his so-called grand tour of the country to announce fundamental changes to our education system. Extraordinarily, this Government now seem to be blaming the NEETs crisis on schools—not those on their own Benches who, in government, failed to get a grip on the spiralling welfare bill, not their own "genius" plan to impose red tape on businesses and make it harder to hire young people, and not, critically, their huge rise in business taxes, which have made employing young people far more expensive. It is basic economics: if you make it more expensive for businesses to hire young people, fewer young people will be hired.

Instead of addressing the problems that they have created, the Government are laying the NEETs crisis at the door of schools, and in response—as has been confirmed today—are tearing up the education system once again and returning to a policy that has failed before: introducing a vocational pathway for those aged 14. This is not about being against technical qualifications; quite the opposite. Conservative Members have championed technical education and apprenticeships. However, 14 is far too young to start closing down academic options. We have tried this before, and it failed. Labour's reforms of GCSEs in 2005 were intended to strengthen vocational education options, but what happened was that children from poorer backgrounds were channelled away from the rigorous academic subjects.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Josh MacAlister): That is not what happened.

Laura Trott: It is what happened. Instead of raising aspirations, the system lowered expectations.

The danger in what the Government are proposing is obvious. History will repeat itself. Highly academic schools will continue to push their pupils towards academic qualifications while schools serving more disadvantaged communities will come under pressure to steer children towards technical routes far earlier, because that is what happened before. Can the Secretary of State tell the House what evidence she has that her reforms will produce a different result, and can she guarantee that choosing a technical pathway at 14 will not close down a young person's opportunity to go on to complete academic GCSEs? Can she explain exactly how this approach differs from the failed approach in Scotland and in Wales? From where I am sitting, it sounds very similar.

There are also serious practical questions about how any of this will work. The Government say that the new pathways will begin in 2028, but what qualifications will schools be expected to offer? What standards will those qualifications have to meet, and do schools have the specialist teachers, facilities and employer partnerships required to meet them? What assessment has the Department made of the additional burden that this will place on schools? What funding will be provided? This is not happening in isolation. Schools are already being asked to implement major SEND reforms, and—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. The right hon. Lady has had over five minutes. If I am going to be tough on Back Benchers for asking long questions, I should also be tough on Front Benchers.

Lucy Powell: I look forward to having many of these exchanges across the Dispatch Box. I would have hoped, though, that the right hon. Lady might have been a little more generous in building on the sense that there has been consensus on these issues for over 30 years. That began with a Labour Prime Minister talking about "education, education, education", introducing the literacy hour and numeracy hour, introducing phonics, bringing in Sure Start for early intervention, and developing an evidence-based cycle of continued improvement. It was built on by the right hon. Lady's Government—there is no question about that. There used to be consensus on technical education as well. Her Government should be proud of introducing T-levels, which are now coming on stream. They also introduced university technical colleges, which offered a completely separate pathway, in separate institutions, for young people at 14. She might want to look at her own record before she starts having a go.

I am absolutely clear that this is not about creating a two-tier system; it is about creating multiple pathways, which, for some, might lead to the same destination. Some will take different pathways to a career in engineering; some might do A-levels and go to university, whereas others might go down a different route and arrive at the same destination. We have to address the underlying problems with our system and its outcomes; we cannot just take credit for all the good without taking responsibility for what has not worked.

A few people whom the right hon. Lady once lauded agree with us on this issue. Sir Hamid Patel has said:

"our education system is not working for every child."

The Education Endowment Foundation has said that

"inequality of outcomes…has blighted our education system for far too long."

Lord Agnew—I remember him—the well-known Conservative Education Minister, has said that our reforms are a "laudable ambition" and a "good signal".

I agree with the right hon. Lady that things will be challenging, and there is a lot that we have to get right, but Harper Green school, where I was on GCSE results day, has brought in a new construction centre, and its courses for those who are 14 to 16 are massively oversubscribed. A couple of the young lads I met said to me, "I don't really get on with English and maths, but I come to school every day because I get a great sense of achievement from building a brick wall." It is those kinds of kids I am thinking about.

I end by saying that I agree with a previous Education Secretary, who said:

> "For many years our education system has failed properly to value practical education, choosing to give far greater emphasis to purely academic achievements."

Well, I agree with Michael Gove. I think it is the first time I have said that.

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

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement, and welcome her to her place. I also warmly welcome the Government's focus on boosting technical and vocational education, and giving them parity of esteem with academic routes.

The Children's Commissioner has today highlighted the unacceptably high number of young people who are registered at college but attend less than 50% of the time. Colleges need the resources to address this problem by monitoring attendance more effectively and intervening to provide targeted support to students who need it, but despite being part of our state education system, colleges are on an uneven financial playing field, because, unlike schools, they are unable to claim back VAT. They have told my Committee again and again that they could do far more if this unfair and unjustifiable tax anomaly was corrected. May I therefore ask the Secretary of State to make representations to the Chancellor, ahead of the Budget, about colleges being allowed to claim back VAT in the same way that schools can?

Lucy Powell: I put on record my huge respect for my hon. Friend for chairing the Education Committee; I look forward to working closely with her and her Committee over the coming months. She has done fantastic work in this space. She is absolutely right: further education really is transformative, especially for some of the children who have been left behind by our broader education system. We have a number of reforms coming in that will help, and we have additional funding going in. I am particularly alive to issues with the transition from school to college and attendance at further education colleges. Those issues, and funding, are key focuses of the Alan Milburn review, which I am following closely. I hope to update the House once the report is published.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): May I welcome the Secretary of State to her new role? It is good to finally have the chance to question her on this announcement.

Despite some of the rhetoric, academic and vocational education are not enemies; a successful economy needs both. However, creating technical pathways without ensuring that they have parity of esteem and funding has led to children from more disadvantaged backgrounds being disproportionately funnelled into technical pathways earlier, and having their options narrowed too soon. Successive Governments have rightly moved us away from that. Academic excellence matters, and remains a powerful engine for social mobility. We should never apologise for wanting children, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, to have access to the same intellectual opportunities as the most privileged.

Yesterday's PISA scores show that, here in England, we have some of the best results in the world. That is a testament to the dedication of brilliant teachers and the work of all parties to drive up standards across our schools in recent years—and yes, I am proud that the Liberal Democrats have played our part through the introduction of the pupil premium and Progress 8 scores.

Although the Prime Minister has put a heavy emphasis on parity of esteem, how will the Secretary of State ensure that technical qualifications will be as rigorous as academic qualifications? Will a child be able to move easily between technical and academic pathways after the age of 14? Crucially, parity of esteem needs parity of funding. Budgets have already been cut to the bone, and on top of that, there are the upcoming SEND reforms, unfunded enrichment activities, and underfunded pay rises and school meals, so will there be new funding attached to the reforms?

Despite Labour's promises, teacher numbers are down. Where will schools find new specialist teachers? Will the Secretary of State be reversing the mandatory qualified teacher status?

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Lady for her response. From the many exchanges that we had when I was the Leader of the House, I know what a doughty campaigner she is, and I am really looking forward to working with her in this role.

The hon. Lady is absolutely right to say that we need parity of esteem between technical and academic subjects. I do not want there to be such a delineation between the two, because technical subjects can give new life to academic standards and vice versa. My vision, which we are now embarking on, is to have new high-quality technical and vocational qualifications available at 16. Students would look at a suite of those; they would not have to choose entirely academic or entirely technical subjects. Everyone will obviously have to do English, maths and science alongside that. My highly academic son, who is about to choose his options, would really like to get some applied qualifications as well. I want all our children to have these options open to them, and to have access to pathways that lead to similar destinations, but via different routes.

Sureena Brackenridge (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for her commitment to addressing the "what's the point?" question asked by so many disengaged young people, who are struggling

[Sureena Brackenridge]

in a one-size-fits-all school system. However, all this must be underpinned by good careers advice and guidance, delivered not just at the end of key stage 4, but much earlier in their school life. Will she champion properly funded, good careers advice and guidance, which includes place-based employer partnerships, so that young people know what is available on their doorstep in places like Wolverhampton North East?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There is just too big a jump between the classroom and the workplace at the moment, as employers tell us time and again. Tomorrow, I have a summit in No. 10 North, bringing together all our mayors, including the Mayor of the West Midlands, with business, school and college leaders, so that we can design real experiences of work and better careers advice, and close that gap between schools and the workplace.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): The Secretary of State referred to the Government's SEND reforms as having been "built in partnership with parents". I can assure her that many parents of SEND children in Mid Buckinghamshire are deeply concerned about the shape of those reforms and their one-size-fits-all nature. Before she brings forward any legislation or response to the consultation, can I urge her to look very carefully at what all campaigners on this subject are saying? As she is new in post, will she look again at the Government's axing of a new SEND school for Buckinghamshire, and build it?

Lucy Powell: I really hope that, on something as sensitive and important as special educational needs reform, we can come together across this House and recognise that reforms are necessary. They have been ducked, I would say, for too long. We have increasing amounts of money going in, but outcomes that are not good at all, and a very adversarial system that does not really work for anybody. That is why we are proceeding very carefully, in full consultation with parents. My good friend the Minister for School Standards and others have been right around the country doing hundreds of events. We are going through all the responses to the consultation with a fine-toothed comb, and I assure the hon. Member that the proposals we come forward with will take account of all the responses we have received.

Mark Sewards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): The Education Committee's report on further education and skills, published last year, found that technical and vocational pathways were not presented with the "same prominence" as academic routes in schools and colleges. In fact, we had evidence from eight Yorkshire colleges highlighting the "extremely limited" opportunities for under-16s to pursue any creative subjects. How will the reforms correct this, and give parity of esteem to academic and technical routes?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend, as a former teacher, understands these issues well. There is a range of things we need to do. We are introducing new, high-quality, rigorous vocational and technical qualifications, which I think will be attractive to young people and their parents. We are looking at the incentives for schools; the changes to Progress 8 measures will encourage schools to offer a broad curriculum—not an increasingly narrow one—that they will be judged on. This is about supporting and working with teachers, so that they are excited about delivering these new options and courses. As we have seen, where these are embedded in schools, people vote with their feet and really take them up in high numbers.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): I welcome the announcement about technical education, which I think is really valuable, but approximately 40% of colleges have had to cancel or scale back trade and vocational courses because of a lack of staff, and around three quarters of colleges in England are unable to recruit the necessary staff to teach technical subjects. Could the Education Secretary tell the House where the workforce will come from to teach technical subjects in every school in the country?

Lucy Powell: Can I just say that I admire greatly our teaching profession? Teaching is not a job; it is a calling, and every day we should all thank our teachers for the amazing work they do. I want teachers to feel respected and valued, and to be attracted to the workforce. I feel that is my first priority.

Yes, we will look at making sure that we have the teaching staff, but also at the preparation and the training that teachers need to adapt to these new courses, which we will bring in in a way that takes the workforce with us. However, I think there are real opportunities for teachers who are already teaching certain subjects to transfer those skills and combine them with technical education. This is also about teaching more practical skills for some current qualifications—drama, music, PE or even computing—in which there is very little practical assessment at the moment.

Dave Robertson (Lichfield) (Lab): I beg your indulgence, Madam Deputy Speaker, to start with a couple of thank yous. First, I thank the Secretary of State and the Government for the massive investment in South Staffordshire college, right across the southern part of Staffordshire, to make sure we are turbocharging opportunities for young people. Secondly, I say a massive thank you to every teacher, teaching assistant and member of school support staff who delivers great results across my constituency and further afield.

As important as the comments and discussions are about the PISA data that has come out today—and those international comparisons are important—I know that if I go out on the doorsteps in Lichfield, Burntwood or elsewhere in my constituency this weekend and talk to them about PISA statistics, I am going to get short shrift. What people really want is opportunities for young people, and I hear time and again from young people who want to work with their hands. They want to be chippies, they want to be brickies and they want to be sparkies. Can the Secretary of State confirm that these reforms will make it easier for those kids to get the future they deserve?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. PISA measures are important, but they are not the whole picture. This is about improving outcomes and opportunities. Our announcements on technical pathways

and qualifications are incredibly popular with students and parents. There is huge evidence for that. In a world of AI, which is transforming jobs and careers across the world, there are jobs that AI cannot replace: building a brick wall, or building a house; frankly, cutting my hair; looking after our parents or grandparents in a care home; or providing high-quality childcare support to our kids. Those jobs will never be taken over by AI, and that is why we need to support young people to access them.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State to her new role, and I agree that we need to reform education for children with SEND. Somerset council is failing children across the county. While neighbouring North Somerset council manages to assess 85% of children for their education, health and care plans within 20 weeks, Somerset council assesses fewer than 2% within that time limit. How confident is she that the incompetent Liberal Democrats who run Somerset council will be capable of improving outcomes for our children?

Lucy Powell: There are discrepancies—these things can be very postcode-specific—which we will be addressing. The hon. Member will know that at the moment, we are going through quite a robust process with local authorities about their special educational needs plans and about their budgets and deficits. He can be assured that we are taking a very rigorous approach to that to make sure that local authorities really are delivering what people expect.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): When you have been working 12-hour days, and you come home, turn on the television and are told by the former Education Secretary that you are lazy, you are letting down the children you teach and you are not aspirational enough, it is pretty easy to become quite angry and despondent very quickly, so I am glad that the new Education Secretary has a very different approach. I am absolutely delighted that she is talking about the need for a broader curriculum, which will benefit young people in my constituency of Harlow.

On Harlow, does the Education Secretary agree with the former MP for Harlow, Robert Halfon, who said that a "false hierarchy" undermines vocational and technical skills compared with academic education? It is a shame the current Tories do not seem to think the same.

Lucy Powell: I do want to pay tribute to teachers and school leaders right across the country. Almost my entire family are teachers and headteachers, so if I ever said anything like what my hon. Friend describes, I would never be able to go home again! Rest assured, I will not be doing that.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I served on the Education Committee when Robert Halfon was its fantastic Chair. It was he who really taught me something about the value of technical education. He pioneered that and pushed it through. He was also very determined to make sure that we addressed the gap for white working-class boys that exists in our education system. If he were here today, I know that he would support what I am announcing.

Suella Braverman (Fareham and Waterlooville) (Reform): There are aspects of the Secretary of State's statement that I welcome. I was going to say that no one had yet mentioned white working-class boys, but she mentioned them just a minute ago. She will know that the data is compelling. White working-class children, in particular boys, have one of the lowest participation rates in GCSEs, are more likely to flag as persistently absent from school and have the worst educational outcomes. Does she agree that that failure reflects the profound challenges with the curriculum, teacher training, discipline in the classroom, parental engagement and vocational training, and that we need targeted measures rather than generic approaches?

Lucy Powell: I actually agree with the right hon. and learned Lady. I did not just mention them a minute ago; I mentioned in my opening statement the white working class commission, which has done valuable work. One of its findings was that white working-class boys in particular just could not see the purpose of school. It did not relate to their lives and they did not understand where it was going to take them. That is why offering technical and vocational pathways or qualifications is part of the answer. She is absolutely right that this is also about how we engage, how we have a more interesting curriculum right from when children start school to when they leave school, and how we give them the opportunities to express themselves in perhaps a different way to other students.

Oliver Ryan (Burnley) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement and welcome her to her role. She is such a powerful advocate and leader when it comes to our students and brilliant teachers in Burnley, Padiham and Brierfield. Does she agree that we should not be complacent with the PISA results and that we should robustly act to address England's weaknesses, particularly in reading and maths, and the fact that too many children do not see school as valuable?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for those very kind words; I am sure I will get up to Burnley very soon to visit a school with him—I would be happy to do so. He is absolutely right that there is a huge amount to celebrate in the PISA results. There has been a real consensus over a long period of time about what works and what needs to be done, but we do need to address the fact that outcomes are very poor for some and recognise that our current education system, which is a bit one-size-fits-all, has left too many behind. That is why I am taking the steps that I need to take. I know that some people do not agree with me, but I think it has to be done and that is why we are going to get on with it.

Adam Dance (Yeovil) (LD): I would like to welcome what I hope is the end to post-16 resits. That is something I have been calling for, because the current situation punishes neurodiverse people. I would also like the Secretary of State to explain what early identification means. Does it mean universal screening for neurodiversity? Will she commit to ensuring that access to assistive technology through lending libraries is expanded to Somerset? I am really keen that Somerset does not miss out on anything just because we do not have a mayor.

Lucy Powell: First, I thank the hon. Member for what he said about the approach we are taking on the endless cycle of resits. To be absolutely clear, every child has the right to resit an exam should they want to do so, but putting them on a treadmill of repeated resits that just brands them a failure and knocks their confidence for life is no way to help give a child a sense of achievement. Actually, the former Prime Minister Rishi Sunak welcomed my remarks on that, so it is not everybody who disagrees with me. We are developing national inclusion standards, which we will publish alongside any legislation or further steps we take on SEND. Of course, devolution does not just stop with mayors. We have great local authorities and great local leaders, and they are at the frontline of delivering a lot of our SEND support.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. I am sure the Secretary of State meant to say the right hon. Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak).

Lucy Powell: Oh, is he still a Member?

Madam Deputy Speaker: He is still here, yes.

Dame Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): I welcome my right hon. Friend to her exciting new role and I welcome her emphasis on the importance of technical and technological education. I am always struck by the energy, intelligence and ambition of the young people I meet across Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West, but after 14 years of Tory neglect they have been let down. The attainment gap between young people in the north-east and London is at its highest since records began. Will my right hon. Friend meet me to see how we can address that and ensure that young people in the north-east have the opportunities and the education they deserve?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I was really concerned when I saw some of the growing gaps between regions in this year's results, particularly the gap between the north-east and London, which has grown wider and wider this year. That is why we have the Mission North East programme, working alongside our RISE—regional improvement for standards and excellence—programme in the north-east. That is bringing together school leaders with the local authorities and all those involved to make sure there is real focus, to share best practice and to work together to drive up standards. I would be really happy to meet my hon. Friend and other colleagues from the region to discuss that further.

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): In my constituency, many families have been moved from pillar to post in temporary accommodation, which is often many miles away from the school the children attend. Those families are unable to take their children to school because they cannot afford the transport costs. Will the Secretary of State see what can be done to support Birmingham city council with additional resources so that those children can get to school?

Lucy Powell: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Some groan every time the Prime Minister mentions it, but I have seen the transformation that has come from giving young people free bus passes in Greater Manchester; not just so that they can attend school and college, but so that they can gain independence, have the confidence to go out and about, and tackle some of those mental health issues. We have announced some of those measures. Expect to see more on bus passes for young people.

Adam Thompson (Erewash) (Lab): In my previous career teaching—first, secondary physics, and later, degree-level apprentice engineering—I saw over and over and over how powerful apprenticeships are in enabling both excellence in our brilliant engineering sector and personal social mobility for the apprentices themselves. May I therefore thank the Secretary of State for her statement today and her renewed commitment to technical education generally? Will she elaborate on the role of degree-level apprenticeships specifically in her ongoing vision for our world-class education system?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for all the teaching he did in his former career. He is absolutely right. Degree apprenticeships and apprenticeships are becoming increasingly popular. As with T-levels, when we have good vocational and technical qualifications that combine those things, they become really in demand as people can see the value of them. I do want to see an expansion of degree apprenticeships across higher education. I also want to see more level 4 and 5 apprenticeships being offered, so we have clear pathways and lines of sight that help young people get confidence and get into the world of work.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): Will the Secretary of State commend the staff at specialist schools such as Summerwood in Dorset, where my son George goes, who pick children up after they have been failed by mainstream education, give them the confidence to sit exams such as GCSEs that they never believed they would sit and, when they do not actually make it, give them the resilience to have another go? It is so important to give these children hope. Will the Secretary of State explain how parents, young people and the teaching staff themselves can influence which qualifications children will take, because so often it is based on "the funding says no" and the children then cannot take the qualifications that suit them best?

Lucy Powell: The hon. Lady raises a really good point and I am happy to join her in praising the staff of Summerwood school, which her son attends. This is about ensuring that the mainstream offer is also more inclusive. If I had a pound for every parent or child who said to me that school just had not worked for them and that they had had to leave the school system because it was not designed for them, I would be very rich indeed. Sitting alongside our important SEN reforms are the curriculum and inclusion reforms that we will be bringing in. Of course, people will be able to help design those and she should not, hopefully, worry too much about some of the issues.

Dr Lauren Sullivan (Gravesham) (Lab): I absolutely welcome the Secretary of State's statement and welcome her to her place. She has laid out exactly what needs to be done: it is about knowledge and skills, a love of learning, and choice. When I was a science teacher, it was about the practical skills, and it was practical experience and application that brought science to life.

Will she visit Gravesham so that we can discuss how we can ensure that no young person is left behind without opportunities?

Lucy Powell: Especially after my hon. Friend's excellent question about Gravesham at Prime Minister's questions today, I am really keen to visit. I thank her for her previous work as a science teacher. As someone with a science degree myself, I love science, and my hon. Friend is right that the core of science is about experimenting, getting things wrong and working out how things work in a practical, not just theoretical, way. I look forward to discussing that further with her.

Ian Sollom (St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire) (LD): The Department previously had to delay the plans for defunding BTECs, and although there has been progress on T-levels, there are still shortages of placements and teachers. Can the Secretary of State guarantee that the transition to V-levels will not have the same uncertainty? Previously delayed transitions have been damaging by not providing certainty to young people.

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for asking about that. It was one of the first things I asked when taking office, because, as I represent a number of further education and sixth-form colleges in Manchester, I am well aware of the issues. I assure him that there will be no gaps in that transition. I have asked the Department to bring forward some of the work on the specification of qualifications and the teacher training that is needed, so that with open days coming up next month for many colleges, teachers feel confident offering V-levels as well. I will let the hon. Gentleman know more in due course.

Sam Rushworth (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): About 14 months ago, I stood here and led a debate on working-class boys in the north-east. I called for many of the things that are in today's statement, so I absolutely welcome it. I am surprised that those on the Conservative Benches do not, because the reforms create pathways to take the T-levels that the Conservatives created—and they should be proud of doing so—and broaden access to the sort of university technical college education for which they have advocated. It is a great intervention but it does require work placements, which can be a challenge. I am working with Bishop Aukland College to try to increase the number of work placements. I do not expect the Secretary of State to have all the answers today, but will she work with me to ensure that, as we roll out the measures, we have adequate work placements available?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The work placement requirement in the T-levels has been challenging, but that is now coming on stream and many more students are taking T-levels. We know the value of work experience or experience of work while young people are at school, yet it is something that can be challenging to deliver. That is why we want employers, alongside mayors, to give those experiences of work and work placements to our young people.

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): I welcome much of the Secretary of State's statement, especially how it acknowledges that one size does not fit all and highlights that 1 million of our young people are not in education, employment or training. One way out of that is through apprenticeship schemes, but apprenticeship providers are really struggling. That is especially true of my constituent Amanda, who runs an independent hairdressing business and is now playing £204,000 a year in employment taxes and VAT before she even pays her wages. We need entrepreneurs like Amanda, but current policies mean that she cannot afford to take on apprentices. What steps is the Minister taking to address that issue?

Lucy Powell: I hear what the hon. Gentleman is saying. I know my own hairdresser and her team really well—they do a great job on my hair. *[Interruption.]* Thank you. Indeed, the hairdressers here in the Commons do a great job for me and for the Deputy Speakers. Hairdressing is a job that AI is never going to do—AI is not going to be colouring or cutting my hair any time soon. These are good careers for young people, so we need to look at the barriers to entry. An apprenticeship in a hair salon was once a clear pathway into work, but for many reasons those numbers are falling, and that is something we need to look at.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): Thank you for allowing me to take part in this statement, Madam Deputy Speaker, given that I was not here at the beginning—I was carrying out my duties elsewhere in the House. I welcome the Secretary of State's statement. What is she likely to do in my part of south-east London for technical and vocational places? I remind her that there is a former education college site in my constituency that is in the ownership of the Education Department, which could be readymade for creating such places. Will she meet me to discuss the future of that site?

Lucy Powell: The Minister with responsibly for school estates, my hon. Friend the Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister), who is sitting next to me on the Front Bench, will be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss that. We are going to have to look at the school estate, as pupil rolls in the early years are diminishing, yet requirements on further education, apprenticeships and technical education are expanding. Those are some of the issues that we have to address. The Minister will meet with my hon. Friend soon.

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): The Secretary of State mentioned persistent absence. Parents of children with unmet SEND needs continue to be unfairly prosecuted for their children's absence. Before recess I met the Minister for School Standards, along with a number of charities, including Square Peg and Define Fine. We are working together to try to end that injustice. As a first step, we are seeking to ensure that the issue is properly recorded, because it is not at the moment. Will the Secretary of State commit to a review of the issue ahead of the education for all Bill, with the aim of ending this scandal?

Lucy Powell: I pay tribute to the hon. Lady for all her work, engagement and leadership on these issues, which I know it has been much appreciated by the Schools Minister, who has been leading many of those conversations. I absolutely agree that issues around absenteeism, exclusion, off-rolling, and home schooling—which is often not what parents in those circumstances want, but they feel

[Lucy Powell]

that the mainstream system is not working for their children—are of paramount importance. We will we be tackling those issues in the reforms that we are making.

Rosie Wrighting (Kettering) (Lab): I was at my old school, Montsaye academy, on GSCE results day, and it was heartwarming to see the students receive their results after going through a journey of improvement at the school. I received my results there not that long ago and then went on to study creative subjects. The number of students studying creative arts is now down 47% since 2010. Will the Secretary of State say what more her Department can do to develop the skills of the UK's next generation of creatives?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for all the championing she has done on those issues in the time that she has been here—I am sure that her results day was not as long ago as mine was. She is right that there are huge job opportunities in the creative subjects, the creative industries, fashion—of which she is a particular champion—and textiles. Frankly, our curriculum and the system as it has been designed recently have not allowed those sectors to flourish as much as they could. My hon. Friend can rest assured that that is top of my mind when looking at our reforms.

Connor Naismith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): The Secretary of State is already well aware of the excellent work being undertaken by providers, such as Crewe Engineering and Design UTC and Cheshire College South and West, in equipping young people with the technical skills that local employers need. But what steps is she taking to build on successful examples of colleges and UTCs with proven industry partnerships, and will she visit Crewe and Nantwich to see that work in action?

Lucy Powell: I recently met and made a video with a student at Alstom who had attended Crewe UTC. UTCs have provided a pathway for some young people to start apprenticeships, to go on to other studies, or to have great opportunities such as those that that student had had at Alstom. But it has not been at the scale that we need, which is why we need more technical and vocational pathways and qualifications available to all children, not just those who can get into one of the UTCs.

Alison Hume (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): I welcome the Education Secretary's statement and welcome her to place. Scarborough is one of the pilot areas for Mission Coastal, which aims to improve educational outcomes in our coastal communities. Could my right hon. Friend provide an update on the progress of Mission Coastal and the steps the Government are taking to tackle regional inequalities in GCSE attainment?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that the challenges faced in many of our coastal communities are particularly deep, and that is why Mission Coastal is such an important initiative. The Schools Minister is working tirelessly with school and local leaders on this matter, and I am sure that she would be happy to meet my hon. Friend and other coastal MPs to give an update on it. We really do need to press on with this kind of support so that we can see real improvements in opportunity and outcomes for young people in our coastal communities.

Jen Craft (Thurrock) (Lab): I strongly welcome the Secretary of State's statement, in which she set out how children can achieve, regardless of their skillset and passion, and how we will support them to do so. Far too many children are traumatised by a system that basically tells them that they are not good enough and that they are good for nothing, and that must change. My plea to the Secretary of State today is for any upcoming changes, particularly through the SEND reform, to take account of what disabled children are able to do, and for her to meet the charity Teach Me Too, which campaigns for all children, regardless of their disability, to have access to literacy from an early age and throughout their school career.

Lucy Powell: First, I thank my hon. Friend for all her leadership and contributions to this very important debate, which I know means a lot to her personally. I look forward to meeting her and discussing it all further. Rest assured that we will absolutely develop our plans in concert with Members of this House, including my hon. Friend. I would be happy to meet Teach Me Too in one of those meetings in order to really focus on supporting all our young people, no matter their needs, to develop their passions and core skills in a way that gives them a sense of achievement and progress in their lives.

Jaguar Land Rover: Redundancies

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I remind Members that the Minister has 10 minutes, the shadow Minister has five and the Liberal Democrat spokesperson has two, and that statements are an opportunity for Members to question the Minister, not to make statements of their own.

2.43 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Innovation, Science and Trade (Blair McDougall): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I wish to make a statement on the Government's support for Jaguar Land Rover and our wider automotive sector. I offer my apologies on behalf of the Secretary of State, who is on his way to France to talk to our trading partners there.

As the House will be aware, Jaguar Land Rover recently announced approximately 4,000 redundancies as part of a £1.7 billion cost saving effort, and the company now intends to consult on the job losses that are planned over the next two years. Although Jaguar Land Rover has stated that these losses will not impact production staff, the news will undoubtedly come as a terrible shock to all of the company's employees.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I have been in regular contact with the company and the relevant unions since the Government became aware. We have made it clear that we want to see the company reducing the impact on workers through the consultation period and that all employees deserve maximum clarity on the extent and focus of its plans for non-production workers, which the Business Secretary and I encouraged the company to do earlier today in a meeting with the company and the Unite general secretary.

We recognise, too, the impact that those redundancies will have on local skills. There is a deep advanced manufacturing skills base in the west midlands, and this Government are working together with employers and the combined authority to retain that skills base within the regional economy, including by backing Mayor Richard Parker's £500,000 support package for JLR workers taking voluntary redundancy. The Department for Work and Pensions also stands ready to support anyone affected through its rapid response service, which provides support and advice to employers and employees facing redundancy, including help with finding new work and training.

Hon. Members will know that, over recent years, Jaguar Land Rover has been forced to confront a series of challenges, many of which have been shared by vehicle producers all over the world, which I will say more about shortly. One of the unique challenges the company faced last year, however, was a significant cyber-attack that temporarily halted production for several weeks. However, with help and support from this Government, including a £1.5 billion loan guarantee, it resumed operations and reopened assembly lines. Make no mistake: when British industry is attacked, we will step in to defend it, and defend it strongly, in our national interest.

In this case, however, Jaguar Land Rover has cited global market conditions as one of the principal reasons for job reductions. Indeed, similar announcements from manufacturers such as Volkswagen and BMW underscore the challenging global headwinds that nearly all automotive manufacturers are facing right now: tariffs, high energy costs, the transition to electric vehicles, and stiff competition from overseas producers.

We recognise those challenges, and are using our modern industrial strategy to help our car industry to rise to them. Through our DRIVE35 programme—driving research and investment in vehicle electrification—we are ploughing more than £4 billion into our automotive sector to support the electrification of vehicle plants alongside batteries, electric motors, hydrogen fuel cells and power electronics. It is the biggest investment in our car industry of the post-war era. Jaguar Land Rover has benefited from that funding, with £40 million of public and private investment going into advanced software-defined vehicles, supply chain resilience and lightweighting. Alongside that funding for innovation and next-generation technologies, hon. Members will know that the Government have made a considerable grant investment into Agratas's gigafactory in Somerset, which is strengthening not only the UK's battery production capability but the automotive industry and companies like Jaguar Land Rover, which will benefit from a secure domestic supply.

When it comes to energy costs, our British industrial competitiveness scheme will save more than 10,000 manufacturers up to 25% of their electricity bills. This will almost certainly include some of the biggest companies in the automotive sector, including Jaguar Land Rover. The successful applicants for that scheme will be announced soon.

On global market conditions and tariffs, this Government have acted decisively to secure trade agreements that support our nation's car manufacturers. Our economic prosperity deal, for example, includes a preferential rate of 10% on the first 100,000 UK-made cars exported to the USA each year. The US is obviously a major export market for Jaguar Land Rover—the biggest, in fact—as it is for so many other high-value manufacturers in the UK, which is why we worked so hard to secure that deal. We remain the only country in the world subject to a 10% tariff for automotive exports, with other nations facing a much higher rate.

We have placed just as much importance on vehicle exports in the other trade deals we have negotiated since taking office, including the landmark agreement we secured with India—an agreement that reduces tariffs on British-made vehicles from roughly 110% to 10%. This is a significant win for Jaguar Land Rover and other manufacturers, as India is already a huge market, with consumers set to grow by millions in the coming decades as the country's economy fast expands.

I should also touch on the zero emission vehicle mandate, which provides a clear pathway to phase out new petrol and diesel cars and vans. We always said we would keep it under review. We always said that we needed a pragmatic and balanced approach. That is the right thing to do, because discouraging the production of electric vehicles does not make good business sense for anyone. The fact is that consumers want them, with recent stats showing that for the first time in the UK, electric vehicles have outsold petrol cars over a 12-month window. Europe reached a similar milestone recently.

Electric is the future. As part of our ambition to reindustrialise our country, we absolutely want those electrical vehicles to be designed and built in Britain. A

[Blair McDougall]

mandate to steer the industry into that electric future is needed, but, equally, if we accept that zero emissions is the destination, we have to partner with industry to get there. I know that Jaguar Land Rover is of that view too. We are consulting with the company and other manufacturers to ensure that the ZEV mandate works for our automotive industry—that it strikes the right balance, with targets that are ambitious yet realistic. The consultation on the ZEV mandate review closes on 23 October.

Jaguar Land Rover remains our largest car manufacturer. It is a linchpin of the UK automotive sector—a company with a long and proud history. Over many decades, it has become synonymous with the best of British design and engineering. That is true for past models such as the E-Type, the XJS, the F-Type, and it is true for the firm's modern line-up, including the Land Rover Defender and the Discovery. These vehicles endure. Years after production ended, I note that the Jaguar I-PACE is still a vehicle of choice for companies operating driverless cars in the US and those testing them here in the UK.

With last week's launch of the new fully electric Range Rover, I am confident that Jaguar Land Rover will get past this difficult period. It will emerge from it stronger and more competitive, holding its own in the global car market against the best of them from Germany, the United States and China.

For our part, we will use our industrial strategy and DRIVE35 to support JLR and the British automotive sector in this journey. In doing so, we will guarantee Britain's status as a proud, successful car-making nation for many years to come. I commend this statement to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the shadow Secretary of State.

2.51 pm

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): I thank the Minister for his statement. In his final Prime Minister's questions, Keir Starmer spoke emotionally about how he had saved jobs at Jaguar Land Rover. Two months later, we hear news of 4,000 job losses at Britain's biggest car manufacturer and the new Minister for Reindustrialisation is forced to make his first statement to the House on de-industrialisation. JLR workers will have spent another weekend contemplating their future, wondering about the impact on their careers, families and communities, and questioning the sustainability of the British car industry and the countless businesses in JLR's nationwide supply chain—firms whose vital industrial capability, once lost, will be hard to replace.

JLR is still recovering from a crippling cyber-attack, of course, and the Minister has talked about the headwinds facing all car manufacturers. They include massive barriers erected by China to sell into its domestic market, while Chinese cars are aggressively sold into our own. Tech is changing the car industry from an engineering business to a component assembler and software installer. These shifts are huge and undisputed. The Business Secretary has said that JLR must become more competitive, but the question remains: what are he, the Chancellor and the new Prime Minister doing to make our country more competitive—and fast? I am not talking about tortoise-like speeches on triple helixes, sector plans, state-backed loans or union negotiations. I am talking about hard, urgent choices on tax, regulation and energy.

Let's take the ZEV mandate, which dictates that the manufacture of petrol and diesel cars will be banned in this country in just over three years' time, and which is seeing our firms being fined right now for customers not buying electric vehicles that they do not want. Having been manoeuvred into joint ventures and having had their designs copied by Chinese competitors, British manufacturers are now being forced to subsidise the Temu Range Rovers that are gobbling market share. It is crazy economic self-harm. The Conservatives would abolish the ZEV mandate. That is what unions want too. Can the Minister tell us: will the Government act?

Our industrial base is crippled by ruinous energy costs. We are being asked to applaud the Government's industrial energy scheme, which does not start until next year, fails to address the underlying problem, and will not bring down prices for the whole economy. How will it position us against the competition? BICS will bring down energy costs by 25%, but given that our industrial electricity costs are four times that of the US, twice as high as France and 46% higher than the global average, our competitive disadvantage remains.

The Conservatives have a cheap power plan to slash energy costs for the entire economy. It involves hard-nosed choices: repealing the Climate Change Act 2008, axing the emissions trading scheme, scrapping wind and solar subsidies, investing in nuclear and getting the North sea drilling again. Will this Government be similarly tough, or will they continue to pretend that British industry is not having its legs cut off by net zero?

The Chancellor talked ploddingly this week about reducing the burdens on business, but the truth is that, through regulation and tax, the unemployment Act and the national insurance hike, Labour has made it riskier and more expensive to employ people. That is bad for business, because it adds another cost pressure, and it is bad for sales; 20% of JLR's vehicles are for the domestic market, and right now too many Brits are too worried about tax bills, inflation and jobs to buy premium cars. How does this new iteration of Labour intend to untangle the mess of these past two years?

JLR sells nearly a third of its cars to America. US tariffs on them are four times higher than when Labour came in, but it is because we are outside the EU that we at least got a better tariff deal than member states—and it is the same with the India deal. As this new Prime Minister ingratiates himself with Brussels, can we be assured that he will not negotiate away our competitive advantages?

We know, too, that tariff and quota deals can change. The Foreign Secretary's performative pronouncements on Israel and the Prime Minister's ongoing failure to set out a defence plan risk antagonising the Americans and throwing us into another round of tariff negotiations that could cripple our car and life science industries. What will the Minister do to make sure that his colleagues are not jeopardising JLR jobs with dubious diplomacy, and are any trade measures being considered when it comes to China?

Britain is de-industrialising before our eyes. In the west midlands and beyond, there will be pain in every postcode. More Whitehall schemes and an army of

mayors are not going to stop the rot. The Government cannot solve all of JLR's problems, but it is the job of Ministers to create conditions in which it and countless other businesses can manufacture competitively in Britain. Are Ministers going to accept that this involves tough choices and then act with the urgency that this crisis demands?

Blair McDougall: This is a day to talk about the workers, who are deeply worried and are being communicated to by Jaguar Land Rover about the future of their employment, so I do not wish to be too political in my response. I will say, however, that I understand that it is the job of the Opposition to take fire at the Government, but we have to be careful in this House to make sure that industry is not collateral damage.

The hon. Lady talks about the supply chain. JLR has been very clear, publicly and in private to us and to the unions, that the production staff are not going to be impacted. This is not Jaguar Land Rover retreating from investment, lowering its ambitions and withdrawing from markets. The organisation is as ambitious as it has been, and it has as good a product—a world-beating product—as it ever had.

The hon. Lady asks what we are doing to tackle the headwinds that Jaguar Land Rover has cited when talking about this decision. There is a little bit of a habit developing in this House of the Conservatives asking why we are not fixing the damage that they did quickly enough. The British industrial competitiveness scheme that is coming in never existed under the previous Government. It will save an enormous amount for automotive manufacturers and their supply chain.

The hon. Lady rightly mentioned trade deals and recognised our trade deal with the United States, which no other country enjoys. We can all understand why she did not mention the relationship with Europe and the impact of trade deals that we inherited there, which Ministers across the Government are working incredibly hard to deal with at the moment—for example, with "Made in Europe" and rules of origin.

Finally, we inherited the ZEV mandate from the hon. Lady's party—*[Interruption.]* The right hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Holden) says from a sedentary position, "Well, change it." We did change it. We changed it last year, in part to help plug-in hybrids, which was of enormous importance to Jaguar Land Rover.

As I said in my statement, we have recognised the scale of the challenges that the automotive sector faces worldwide. The hon. Lady makes a lot of criticisms, but I say to her that Volkswagen, which is letting 100,000 staff go, is not governed by a Labour Government. We have recognised the global headwinds. It is why we are putting into the automotive sector the biggest investment of the post-war period. Rather than criticising the industrial strategy, she should get in the car and travel that journey with us.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Chair of the Business and Trade Committee

Liam Byrne (Birmingham Hodge Hill and Solihull North) (Lab): The loss of 4,000 jobs at Jaguar Land Rover is a body blow for workers, families and communities across the west midlands, so I commend Richard Parker, the Mayor of the West Midlands, for moving quickly on Monday to put £500,000 on the table to help ensure that everybody gets back to work. Will the Minister pledge that if more is needed he will act to back the mayor in getting everybody back to work?

More broadly, will the Minister reiterate the pledges he made yesterday in front of the Select Committee to bring down costs—especially energy costs—and leave his mind open to the necessity of implementing tariffs on China, which is exporting cars that are over-subsidised? At the end of the day, everybody in the House believes in competition, but it needs to be fair competition.

Blair McDougall: I thank the Select Committee Chair for that series of questions. I know that for him this is not just a Committee interest but a local interest. I will take his points in reverse order.

As I said to my right hon. Friend yesterday in the Select Committee, we have to be very careful about Chinese imports. Our automotive industry is very export-focused, and the industry wants us to be very careful not to do anything in protecting our domestic manufacturers that might hurt them by closing down markets elsewhere. As I said to him yesterday, we are looking carefully at that, but we must be very careful.

On energy, we would love to go further than the British industrial competitiveness scheme. It is worth noting that when we initially introduced the proposal for BICS, it was for fewer businesses than will be eligible and will start to apply for it in a matter of days. We will continue to see how far we can go on that, because we are aware of how much of a problem there is for so many parts of industry.

Finally, we are working incredibly closely with the mayor. The main request from those involved in the situation at Jaguar Land Rover is that we continue to focus on the support we are giving to them in innovation, for the supply chain and in standing behind them, so that they come out strong and resilient on the other side of these global challenges.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): On the same day that the Chancellor stood up and claimed that his growth mission was working, it was reported that 4,000 more manufacturing jobs were being cut in the west midlands. This news will have been devastating for the thousands of workers and their families affected by the redundancies at Jaguar Land Rover as well as for the companies in the supply-chain industries that are affected. When Starmer's Government announced that they would underwrite a rescue loan for JLR last year, the Liberal Democrats asked that the Prime Minister assure workers that the deal would be enough to protect their jobs; it was not. This development lays bare the fact that the Government's growth mission is falling far short. We need to see bold action from the Chancellor on growing the economy across the UK.

Earlier this year, we called for the Government to review their tariffs on the steel sector due to the impact they would have on our manufacturing and defence industries, yet Ministers will not even negotiate a new growth and defence partnership with the EU that would

[Sarah Olney]

unleash our auto industry by removing crippling rules-of-origin trade barriers. Is the Chancellor's growth mission serious ambition or just words? What will the Government do to ensure that those highly specialised skills are not lost but fully utilised in our manufacturing sector?

Blair McDougall: I thank the hon. Member for those questions. She mentioned the cyber-attack and the £1.5 billion guarantee we gave to stand behind Jaguar Land Rover. That guarantee is still in place; it is there as a form of market reassurance for the company. JLR has not drawn on it yet, but it has served its purpose in reassuring the market.

The company is clear that that is only one of the factors; it is as much about challenges in the Chinese market and global trade challenges. The hon. Member rightly asked about the relationship with Europe. I reassure her that at posts in capitals across Europe, Ministers, like me, are constantly engaging with member states and their representatives both on rules-of-origin issues and on the "made in Europe" agenda. One of the encouraging things we see in that process is those arguments being made not only by our industry but by the deeply interconnected other side of the supply chain across the channel with member states. I reassure her that we are working hard on that.

Maria Eagle (Liverpool Garston) (Lab): There is concern about this news among my constituents who work at JLR Halewood and those who work in the supply chain in the whole of the north-west of England. The five-week suspension of manufacturing last year as a consequence of the cyber-attack has left a legacy of concern about the future and about financial resilience issues for some companies. What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that the full impact of this announcement on the supply chain is mitigated as much as possible and that resilience in our automotive supply chain is boosted for the future?

Blair McDougall: I know how important Jaguar Land Rover is for my right hon. Friend's constituents; she voices their concern constantly on their behalf. Jaguar Land Rover has been clear that the job losses are focused largely on back-end and management staff and that the productive staff will not be impacted. That should be a source of encouragement and reassurance to the wider supply chain.

We are investing a huge amount into that wider supply chain. A moment ago I mentioned Agratas, where the £380 million investment leverages in £5 billion of investment. I could just as easily talk about the supply-chain pilots through DRIVE35 to ensure that the competitive edge and excellence we have in automotive engineering survives this global challenge period and we come out of it still as a productive and proud car-making nation.

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): In my constituency we have Jaguar Land Rover Solihull. The Minister will know that Jaguar Land Rover and the automotive sector are in the DNA of my constituents in the west midlands. I agree with him about the global headwinds, but there is a massive issue with the high levels of red tape owing to the Employment Rights Act 2025 and the national insurance rises, which will inevitably destroy consumer demand and make our automotive sector less competitive. Will he at least acknowledge that that has had an impact?

Blair McDougall: Absolutely, I recognise that it is our job to lower costs on the industry. That is why, for example, we are taking action on energy costs to make them more competitive. That should take us roughly to the European average so that we can compete with our nearest neighbours.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member's constituents who are staff at Jaguar Land Rover in Solihull. Just a few days ago, I was at Jaguar Land Rover in Coventry, seeing the extraordinary, almost sci-fi level of work done there. It is right that we express concern and worry for our constituents, but we should also celebrate the incredible manufacturing being done now, which will continue for generations to come.

Paulette Hamilton (Birmingham Erdington) (Lab): I was particularly disappointed by this announcement on Saturday. Over the last two years, we have worked hard in Birmingham Erdington to protect jobs at Jaguar Land Rover's Castle Bromwich site. Given the announcement of 4,000 job losses across JLR, my constituents are deeply concerned about what that means for their livelihoods following thousands of job losses in previous rounds of reorganisation. Will the Minister assure me today about the future of the Castle Bromwich site? If JLR plans future job losses, what steps are the Government taking with it to work with others to protect jobs not just now, but in the future? We want to ensure that there are no future job losses.

Blair McDougall: I thank my hon. Friend for the question. I know how important JLR is to her constituents: she makes that clear constantly to me and other Ministers. The key thing we can do is to invest in the company's future productive capacity. I mentioned the investment in Agratas a moment ago, and recently we made substantial investment through DRIVE35 into software-defined vehicle research in the company. The conversation that we are having with JLR right now is about how to protect not just high-value jobs directly in JLR but the high-value jobs in the wider supply chain that so many of our constituents rely on.

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Your Party): JLR's plan to cut 4,000 jobs is devastating for workers, families and communities in Coventry and across the west midlands. JLR is based in my constituency and its highly skilled workforce is vital to our region's economy and industrial future. The trade union Unite is right to demand urgent answers and for every alternative to job losses to be explored. The Business Secretary has now met JLR and Unite, so can the Minister tell the House what has actually been secured from JLR, a company that has already been granted £1.5 billion of public money? Will the Department publish the company's plans in full, rule out compulsory redundancies and make it clear that not a penny more of taxpayers' money will support a company that is throwing thousands of workers on to the scrap heap?

Blair McDougall: Well, I agreed with the hon. Lady right up until the end there: we have to keep investing in JLR to secure those jobs. I met some of her constituents last week and felt their sense of pride. This is not just about jobs or economic production; it is part of the sense of local pride in her area. When we and the Secretary of State met the union and management earlier on, we pressed them on exactly those issues. The conversation was about the phasing of those changes, how they interact with the roll-out of the new models and when those job losses would kick in. The union and the business will continue to work on that, and we will continue that conversation as well.

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): Today's announcement from Jaguar Land Rover is devastating for its workforce, for the automotive industry and for the wider supply chain. A manufacturing supplier to JLR in my constituency has lost more than 150 jobs. What access to finance will the Government provide to help west midlands firms diversify, enter new markets and protect skilled jobs?

Blair McDougall: My hon. Friend rightly says that Jaguar Land Rover and the other big automotive names do not exist in isolation; they are part of much wider supply chains. On the issue of access to finance and funding, obviously a lot of the DRIVE35 programme goes to those larger companies, but it goes right across that supply chain, investing in so many of the strengths that we have, particularly electric propulsion and software-defined vehicles. In addition, £50 million has been devolved to the mayor in the west midlands to work on those supply-chain resiliences, and we will continue to work with the mayor to agree what needs to be done to secure those supply chains for the future as we go through this pretty challenging period for automotive.

David Reed (Exmouth and Exeter East) (Con): The Jaguar Land Rover hack started over a year ago: manufacturing ground to a halt and the Government stepped in and made the UK taxpayer the insurer of last resort to the tune of £1.5 billion. Yet the Government have still not said who did this to our country. It has been widely reported that the attack was state-sponsored. At a time when we should be having a national conversation about the threats we face, will the Government use this opportunity to tell us which country did this to us, and, more importantly, have there been repercussions?

Blair McDougall: I may look suave and debonaire, but I am not James Bond, so I will resist commenting on the attribution of that. It would be for the Minister for Security and the Home Secretary to do that; these are serious matters. What I will say is that we were right to put that £1.5 billion in place. It has not been drawn on, but it did give a vote of confidence to one of our most important manufacturers at a moment of genuine crisis.

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement. I represent Redditch, which has a proud automotive history and is home to thousands of the 100,000-plus jobs that are part of the supply chain that supports JLR, and we are all deeply concerned about the statement from JLR. This Government did everything they could with the £1.5 billion loan—not bail-out—to support JLR, so will the Minister assure me that, if worse is to come, the Government will not falter in any way in giving support to protect these jobs? If the jobs are lost further down the road, they will never come back, as other areas in Birmingham can attest. Will the Minister assure me that this Labour Government will make sure that, whatever the headwinds facing JLR and the pressures from China, we will not lose this crucial industry in our country?

Blair McDougall: I can reassure my hon. Friend on that. I should say that in our conversations, Jaguar Land Rover has been at pains to talk about this. It was described earlier as bitter medicine, but JLR is not in any way rowing back from its investment. It is investing really significantly in the future of the company. We will be alongside it as it makes those strategic investments, and as it makes sure, as my hon. Friend says, that it continues to flourish for a long time to come.

Manuela Perteghella (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD): This announcement is a devastating blow for my constituents who are employed by JLR, and they will be incredibly worried for their future and their families, so what discussions have the Government had with JLR and the affected authorities—not just the West Midlands combined authority, because JLR is present in Warwickshire as well—regarding support for employees at risk of redundancy, and what measures will the Government put in place to help affected workers secure alternative employment?

Blair McDougall: We are working very closely on behalf of the hon. Lady's constituents, who I know will be troubled at the moment, and with the local mayors and local authorities. Most of the conversations and the asks made of us are about ensuring that the wider automotive supply chain and advanced manufacturing sector in the region continues to thrive, so that those highly skilled workers—they come from a company with an incredible pedigree—can more easily move into other jobs in the sector, and the skills can be maintained in the hon. Lady's part of the world.

Mary Creagh (Coventry East) (Lab): The actions taken by this Government stand in stark contrast to the actions of previous Conservative Governments, who were happy to watch the closure of the Massey Ferguson factory, the Alvis tank factory and Peugeot in Coventry in the '80s, which led to 20% unemployment in the city where I grew up. After those closures, we saw the financial services industry target workers, some of whom were in defined benefit pension schemes and considering voluntary redundancy, and persuade them to transfer to a less beneficial pension. After firms had gone bust, people realised that they had been mis-sold their pension. Will the Minister take every possible step to protect the pension prosperity of those who will face voluntary or compulsory redundancy at the global headquarters of JLR at Whitley in Coventry?

Blair McDougall: My hon. Friend raises a really important point—one that I confess has not come across my desk yet. After this statement, I will make sure that we are raising this point with the relevant regulators, and will perhaps talk to friends in the Treasury about it, because it would be awful if really skilled workers who have a redundancy payment that they have earned through years of hard work have it snatched away by disreputable finance companies.

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): Learning of these potential job losses was deeply concerning for me as a Member of Parliament for Birmingham, because job losses impact not just individuals and their immediate family, but local economies. The regional mayor has set aside half a million pounds, but that is not new money; it is money that he had for other projects. Will the Minister specifically state what funding this Government will provide to the local mayor and the local councils—and I am not talking about the £1.5 billion loan?

Blair McDougall: As I said to other hon. Members, throughout the conversations that we have been having with people in the region, including the mayor and the company, the ask has been that we stand behind the wider sector and supply chain and make sure that things are available in the future. The hon. Gentleman mentioned skills; he will be aware that the changes that we have made—such as the move to shorter, more flexible apprenticeships—are very focused on the automotive industry, so we are already putting significant amounts of funding into advanced manufacturing in the hon. Gentleman's part of the world and will continue to do so. We stand ready to work with people in the region to maintain skills and manufacturing there, whatever it takes.

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): My next-door neighbour works at JLR, and people in my constituency have worked there their whole life. They and others in the wider manufacturing supply chain will be rightly concerned about their future, and I share their concern. I welcome the package of measures put in place by Labour Mayor Richard Parker, but what more will the Minister do to support motor manufacturing in the west midlands and protect our industrial future?

Blair McDougall: My hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point, as she always does, on behalf of her constituents who work in automotive. Many of those workers, because they are very highly skilled and because Jaguar Land Rover is such a prestigious organisation to have worked in, will find themselves in work again very quickly, but that is almost not the point. This will be like mourning for them, because they will be leaving a company with which they are deeply connected emotionally. We are investing £4 billion in the automotive industry—it is the biggest investment in the automotive sector in post-war Britain, as I said earlier—precisely to ensure that the high-quality jobs that her constituents rely on, not just in the big automotive primes but all across the supply chain, are there for her constituents for generations to come. I will continue to work with her on that.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): Jaguar Land Rover is Britain's largest car manufacturer, so it is deeply concerning for workers and the whole supply chain, including Agratas in my constituency, to learn of 4,000 job losses there. JLR is at a competitive disadvantage, given the excessive energy costs in Britain. Does the Minister agree that the key to protecting Britain's manufacturing is to provide lower electricity costs to all businesses in Britain?

Blair McDougall: I would absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman, which is precisely why we are taking action, not just through the British industrial competitiveness scheme, but through the supercharger. This is an incredibly important issue, not only for automotive and advanced manufacturing, but for the entire economy, given the impact on our growth, and that is precisely why we are acting on it. In addition to tackling energy costs, investing in innovation is incredibly important, because that is what we will compete on in this global market—not on low costs, but on better ideas and products.

Al Carns (Birmingham Selly Oak) (Lab): Four thousand job losses will have a massive impact on the west midlands, and particularly on Birmingham Selly Oak, where hundreds of jobs will be affected and people's economic futures will be cut short. I welcome Richard Parker's half a million pounds of support, but I worry that JLR's "global market conditions" boils down to three key things: Chinese domination of the electrical vehicle market, not just in the UK, but across the entirety of Europe; tariffs from America; and perhaps the first salvo in what we would call advanced or artificial intelligence taking over administrative and managerial roles in major manufacturing companies across the entirety of Europe. What are the Government doing to prepare themselves for AI replacing a lot of these jobs, and what are we doing to help?

Blair McDougall: My hon. Friend nails so many of the challenges. He mentions Chinese exports. The flip side of that is our manufacturers' ability to access the Chinese market, and particularly the incredible difficulty of competing in China against highly subsidised Chinese-made cars. On technology, part of the reason why we are investing so heavily in, for example, software-defined vehicles and autonomous vehicles is that we want to be ahead of the curve. We want to be the country that leads on this. Just a few days ago, we saw the beginning of autonomous vehicles on the road in this city. I was in the midlands a few days ago with Aurrigo, an incredible company making autonomous vehicles that take freight and luggage around airports. We have so many companies who have the ability to turn what he rightly identifies as a potential threat into a competitive advantage for us in the world, and that is why we are investing so heavily in this.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): This House needs to wake up urgently, because the truth is that these 4,000 JLR jobs are being sacrificed on the altar of net stupid zero, which was introduced in 2019, since when JLR production has collapsed from almost 400,000 vehicles to under 200,000. Energy prices have doubled, and the previous Conservative Government introduced the ridiculous zero emission vehicle mandate. Meanwhile, Chinese imports have increased from a few thousand vehicles to almost 300,000—some 15% of the market. The whole of the UK market will be destroyed in the next five to seven years unless this Government take urgent action. Will the Government do the right thing, scrap the ZEV mandate, and do what the US has done: introduce 100% tariffs on all Chinese EV imports?

Blair McDougall: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's question. He knows that we are reviewing the ZEV mandate. The destination of electric remains, but the question of how quickly we go there is under review. He stands there as the supposed defender of Jaguar Land

Rover, but I simply remind him that when we stepped in with £1.5 billion to protect Jaguar Land Rover, his party leader said:

"I predict Jaguar will now go bust. And you know what? They deserve to".

The hon. Gentleman should apologise for that.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call Sureena Brackenridge.

Sureena Brackenridge (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. *[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Richard Tice) will allow the hon. Lady to ask her question undisturbed.

Sureena Brackenridge: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I have had reassurance that my constituents who work at the i54 Wolverhampton site will be largely unaffected. However, for those across the west midlands who are affected, this is deeply concerning, so I thank Mayor Richard Parker for the £500,000 support package. Will the Minister take heed of the concern expressed by JLR and the wider automotive sector about imports flooding the UK market, and act to ensure that the industry remains competitive and to safeguard future jobs?

Blair McDougall: I am glad that my hon. Friend has had that reassurance for her constituents, but she will know that they will be affected by this, in the sense that they feel that they are part of the JLR family; it has such a strong identity as a company. As I said, we are working carefully with representatives of the industry on the issue of Chinese imports. It is worth saying that the industry is nervous about the issue. It is worried about the impact of the increased number of Chinese EVs coming into our market, but it also wants to be able to access the Chinese market, and does not want to get into a retaliatory situation, so we do not rule anything out, but we are being very careful as we work with the industry on that issue.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement, and for keeping Members of this House informed on the situation in JLR. Although we have had reassurances that production jobs will not be affected, when the cyber-attack happened, a lot of the supply chain companies and their employees were adversely affected. Can the Minister give some reassurance that they will not be affected by this latest round of redundancies? Can he also please give the reassurance that he will continue to work with the trade unions and other partners?

Blair McDougall: I can certainly give that reassurance. The Prime Minister, the Secretary of State and I have been in contact with the unions in recent days about this issue.

On a day when so many people are worried about job losses, it is difficult to strike a positive note, but in everything that JLR has been saying, including about protecting blue-collar production workers—it recognises that it does not want to eat into its future as a company—is a reassurance that the investment pipeline will continue. Beyond this difficult period, the company and the supply chain will have a really bright future in this country.

Connor Naismith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): The Minister will appreciate the concern that announcements of redundancies at major manufacturers such as JLR will create for employees, families and businesses across not just those manufacturers but the wider supply chain and industry. In my constituency, Bentley Motors has invested hundreds of millions of pounds over the past decade, but what more can the Government do to support the UK automotive sector? Will the Minister join me in welcoming the forthcoming launch of Bentley's first electric vehicle, the Torcal, on 23 September?

Blair McDougall: When my hon. Friend mentioned the Torcal, I thought he might have been referring to my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Torcuil Crichton).

The other day, I was with Bentley representatives at a roundtable at the HORIBA MIRA testing facility in the midlands to talk about exactly those issues. We are working closely with the company on plans for the next stage of its activity, particularly with regard to making the most of the Indian trade deal.

I warmly congratulate Bentley on the Torcal. How high-end that vehicle is—1,000 layers of walnut veneer within the interior! This is a seriously impressive product from a company with an incredible heritage.

Sean Woodcock (Banbury) (Lab): The automotive sector is hugely important to Banbury, with numerous companies supporting hundreds of jobs, including in the supply chain for Jaguar Land Rover. People there will be nervous about the news over recent days. Can the Minister provide them and me with reassurance about the support that the Government will provide the company and others in the supply chain?

Blair McDougall: As I said a moment ago, yes, the focus is rightly on Jaguar Land Rover and the individual workers, but we know that other people will be worried, particularly given the recent memory of the impact of the cyber-attack on supply chains. We are absolutely committed to investing in those supply chains to learn the lessons of that attack and invest in their resilience. That is why we are putting particular pots of money into those areas—generally, and through DRIVE35 and the CAM pathfinders—to ensure that we are investing in supply chain resilience. That is important for automotive, defence and all sorts of other areas of advanced manufacturing.

BILL PRESENTED

Utilities and Services

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

John McDonnell, supported by Rachael Maskell, Richard Burgon, Dr Simon Opher, Apsana Begum, Cat Eccles, Kim Johnson, Rebecca Long Bailey, Jon Trickett, Imran Hussain, Ian Byrne and Neil Duncan-Jordan, presented a Bill to make provision about the public ownership and delivery of certain services and utilities by public or not-for-profit enterprises; to establish a body corporate to be known as the Office for Public Value; to confer functions on that body; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 4 December, and to be printed (Bill 143).

Personal Data (Digital Twins)

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

3.32 pm

Dame Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision about the regulation of software or algorithms which use or hold personal data for the purpose of modelling the preferences or behaviours of a person; to make provision about the rights of individuals in respect of the holding and use of their personal data by such software or algorithms; and for connected purposes.

We know that tech companies collect data on everything that we do—every click we make, every photo we share, every sandwich we buy and every post we like. But now that data is being combined with AI to turn an individual—you, for example, Madam Deputy Speaker—into an algorithm to predict your behaviour, to target advertising at you and to persuade you to watch a particular video or believe a dodgy news report. Think about it: who is best able to persuade someone to do or say something, if not an automated version of themselves? When tech platforms have processed every action that we make and applied AI to it, that is what they have. It is called a digital twin and this Bill will require explicit consent before digital twins of individuals can be made. In recognition of both the speed of technological change and the inventiveness of lawyers, the Bill will use a technology-agnostic definition to capture a range of technologies that may be used to create digital twins.

I may on occasion have mentioned that I am an engineer. I also want to put on the record that I am a tech evangelist—I believe tech can and should make life better for everyone. But this stealth digital twinning violates the integrity, uniqueness and very personhood of our constituents and of all of us.

Digital twins can take many forms, from content creation algorithms and deepfakes to chatbots that reflect aspects of our personalities back at us. It is particularly worrying when children are the target. These days, kids are exposed to tech literally from the cradle—an AI camera in their cot, a smart toy on their pillow, chatbots that listen to what they say, smartphones teeming with apps to track their every move. Imagine if your child had a stranger who wanted to make money out of them, following them around continuously from birth with a clipboard noting everything they say and do, what they smile at, what they frown at, what makes them angry, because that is what is happening. The automated version of our kids will grow with them, using the power of AI to target advertising and products at them, and worse.

The Science, Innovation and Technology Committee has heard about some of the tragic consequences of online grooming by algorithms and chatbots—a vulnerable boy persuaded to kill himself; a vulnerable girl fed more and more extreme dieting advice; children hooked and reeled into extreme behaviours and views. My Bill would expressly protect children from digital twinning. It is not possible for a child to meaningfully consent to the creation or use of a digital twin of themselves, and parental consent cannot provide a substitute for this.

His Holiness Pope Francis was the subject of one of the very first deepfake memes when a fake photo of him in a puffer jacket went viral. Since then, deepfakes have proliferated. The hon. Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman) was shown crossing the Floor in Parliament to join Reform, to his constituents' consternation and his own—it was a fake. Then there were the horrendous photos of naked women and girls that Elon Musk's AI created on demand. I want to place on the record my thanks to the Government for taking action on that so quickly, but deepfakes in general are not illegal. My Bill would ensure that malicious deepfakes are tackled by protecting each of us from someone digitally replicating and altering our likeness without our consent. I want to be clear that this Bill does not ban digital twins; it simply requires that the actual human being who is being copied has to consent.

In the arts, entertainment and tech industries, many performers are agreeing to the creation and use of digital replicas as part of their work—think of ABBA Voyage. But performers increasingly encounter unauthorised digital replicas of themselves, which pose a threat to their career, livelihood and reputation. There is no clear and reliable means of controlling and licensing likeness. Instead, performers must piece together a degree of protection from existing frameworks, all of which are uncertain and ill-suited. For those in the arts industry, the trade union Equity would like to see a contractual requirement. My Bill does not go that far, but it would establish the principle that someone cannot be impersonated.

The current regulatory framework also does not address deepfake misinformation. My social media feed was absolutely full of adverts showing Andrew Bailey and the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) fighting on "Question Time". There may be good reasons why they disagree, but the fact is that this kind of deepfake harms public trust in media, undermines democratic institutions and can be used by state and non-state actors to foment unrest. Last year, my Select Committee's report on social media harms and algorithms called for the right to reset algorithms. We also recommended addressing the digital advertising that drives misinformation and for which so much data is collected. This year, my Committee has heard from experts in child development about the impact of digital devices and from the young people themselves.

I place on the record my thanks to the organisations and individuals from across academia and civil society who have contributed to ensuring that the Bill would protect as many people as possible. I am delighted to have the support of Equity, the Center for Countering Digital Hate, 5rights, the Online Safety Network, Professor Ghislaine Boddington from the University of Greenwich and Professor Luke McDonagh from the London School of Economics law school, among many others.

I was also influenced by His Holiness Pope Leo's recent encyclical, "Magnifica Humanitas". He chose protecting the uniqueness of real people from AI impersonation as the subject of his first letter to Catholics around the world. The Pope also highlighted how the billions of online digital twins constitute an unprecedented concentration of power in the hands of a small number of men.

Among the many consequences of the 40 years of neoliberalism repeatedly called out by the Prime Minister is a libertarian attitude to technology. We are told that Governments are too slow and too stupid to shape tech, and that the market knows best—the market will ensure

the best, most innovative products and services are delivered to the people who need them and keep them safe in the process. I hope that we can all agree now that neolibertarian complacency has not worked.

The tech giants are hubs of amazing innovation but, as my Committee has heard, they are controlled by a small number of extremely wealthy men without the usual corporate governance or competitive constraints. We need to limit their power with our democratic power to protect our citizens. What better way to do that than by giving people the power to control whether we are being copied by companies looking to make money out of us? There is only one you, Madam Deputy Speaker—we need to keep it that way.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Dame Chi Onwurah, Jess Asato, Rachel Gilmour, Neil Duncan-Jordan, Graeme Downie, Gareth Thomas, Adam Jogee, Sir Roger Gale, Wera Hobhouse, Ayoub Khan, Dame Caroline Dinenage and Siân Berry present the Bill.

Dame Chi Onwurah accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 13 November, and to be printed (Bill 144).

Point of Order

3.42 pm

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. This afternoon, the Metropolitan police confirmed that a criminal investigation is under way into allegations of foreign money reaching Reform UK. The allegations are being investigated under the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000. The party denies any wrongdoing and it is right that the police continue their investigation without any interference from this House. However, just a week ago we finished considering the Representation of the People Bill and it is now in the other place, where it can be strengthened. Will you, Madam Deputy Speaker, or the Speaker's Office indicate whether a Minister intends to come to the House to update Members on whether the Government think that the measures in the Bill are still sufficient? The public should not have to rely on an undercover reporter to reveal where their politics is being funded from.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The point of order and its content are not a matter for the Chair. I have not been notified of any Minister coming forward at this point, but I have only just come into the Chair. If the hon. Gentleman needs to seek further advice, there is no doubt that the Speaker's Office can let him know where he needs to go to further his point of order.

Civil Aviation (Consumer Protection and Regulatory Reform) Bill [*Lords*]

Second Reading

3.44 pm

The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Today is an important day, as this Bill starts its Commons journey, but it is a hard day on which to talk about the criticality of our civil aviation sector, given the disruption endured by so many over the past 24 hours. With your permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will take a few moments to address this issue. A four-hour air traffic outage yesterday left hundreds of thousands of passengers facing cancellations, diversions and delays. I apologise wholeheartedly to passengers for that disruption. We often take for granted the way in which our aviation system just works, but yesterday that was not the case. Safety must remain the overriding priority for air traffic controllers.

This morning I spoke to the chief executive of the National Air Traffic Services, Martin Rolfe, who informed me that this outage was due to a technical issue at their Swanwick site. While my understanding from that is that we can rule out a cyber-attack on this occasion, I do not believe this issue was unavoidable. We also spoke this morning about how NATS responded to resolve and minimise the disruption as quickly as possible. I am grateful to the airports and airlines that responded straightaway, but I am clear that passengers should not have to face this disruption. I have therefore asked the Civil Aviation Authority to conduct an independent review, to establish cause and ensure that our air traffic control systems can get passengers where they need to be. The review will report to me within six months.

Robust systems that support our national infrastructure are the bedrock of the measures contained in this Bill, from better rights for disabled passengers and modernised airspace to slot reform and quicker enforcement of passenger rights. While passengers undeniably experienced a bad day yesterday, it is still true to say that few industries match the ability of aviation to adapt, evolve and innovate. For generations it has pushed the boundaries of what is possible, from faster aircraft and new destinations to safer technology and cleaner fuels. Bad days, like yesterday, just serve to underscore how central aviation is to Britain's success, not only making our summer holidays and family reunions possible, but connecting businesses to the global marketplace and supporting thousands of skilled jobs across our island nation.

Right now, fresh challenges and opportunities are emerging. Drones are beginning to transform our airspace and flight numbers are climbing year after year, all while global headwinds continue to put enormous pressure on the sector and those who depend on it.

Tim Roca (Macclesfield) (Lab): I am really grateful to the Secretary of State for updating the House on the NATS outage and what she and colleagues are doing to ensure that it is sorted out speedily. Does she anticipate that the review she has ordered will be the way in which we ensure this never happens again? So many of us have constituents who have been very badly and unacceptably impacted by these delays.

Heidi Alexander: My hon. Friend is right to raise the impact on people who were caught up in this disruption. I have read reports of people having to sleep overnight in airports and people who have potentially missed weddings, so we cannot say enough about how important it is that we address this problem. I have learned in politics that absolute guarantees when it comes to managing the operation of a vast and complex transport system can be unwise, but what I can say is that I will leave no stone unturned in seeking to understand what has happened here and what can be done to drastically reduce the likelihood of something like this ever happening again. We need to ask tough questions about the resilience of NATS's systems and progress with planned upgrades, and we need to think about consumer redress issues.

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I thank the right hon. Lady for her comments and for recognising the NATS issue. However, given its importance to the House, will she make a statement tomorrow so that questions can be asked then, rather than during a Second Reading debate? Members across House have lots of questions about this serious matter.

Heidi Alexander: I am keen to address these significant issues today. The public would rightly expect the Transport Secretary, while standing at the Dispatch Box, to answer questions here and now, so I am happy to take any interventions.

As many colleagues will know, most civil aviation legislation is assimilated EU law, and the Government's power to update it has now expired. The Bill will restore that power, giving the Government the flexibility to regulate at a pace that will enable us to keep up with the world around us. I should say that I am very grateful to my noble Friend the Minister for Rail for his excellent stewardship of the Bill through the other place.

I will now outline the main elements of the Bill and what we hope it will achieve. Aviation serves millions of us well each year, but when things go wrong, passengers must have confidence that they will be protected. The Bill will allow passenger rights to be bolstered through secondary legislation, helping us to tackle the issues that matter most.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): Other jurisdictions and countries around the world have taken steps to look at the issue of fume events in aircraft cabins. When such events happen, there is no requirement to engage with passengers and let them know, and there is a lack of regulation and scrutiny. Will the Minister meet me and the other members of the all-party parliamentary group on cabin air quality to look at the issue?

Heidi Alexander: The Minister with responsibility for aviation, my hon. Friend the Member for Selby (Keir Mather), has kindly just said that he will be very happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss that in more detail, and I know it is something that my officials are looking at.

The Bill provides extra consumer protection on the things that matter most, whether that is delays, cancellations, baggage and, crucially, accessibility. The Government listened carefully to concerns raised in the House of Lords about the experience of disabled passengers and

those with reduced mobility. That is why we are committing to consult on a range of accessibility issues. We want to hear directly from passengers about the problems they face and what we can do to ensure that everyone feels safe and is able to fly.

We have also acted immediately to scrap the unfair compensation cap for damaged wheelchairs and mobility equipment on domestic flights. Those items are essential to the lives and livelihoods of many disabled people, and lifting the cap reflects that reality. I hope the whole House agrees that this was absolutely the right thing to do.

Turning to enforcement, the Civil Aviation Authority currently relies on slow and resource-intensive court action to secure redress for consumer protection issues. The Bill will grant the CAA direct enforcement powers for consumer protection, bringing it in line with other regulators such as the Competition and Markets Authority. That means faster action when rules are broken and less burden on consumers to fight for what they are owed. Taken together, these measures will ensure that all passengers have meaningful, enforceable rights that help them to travel with ease and confidence.

The Bill will also help to unlock the full potential of our aviation infrastructure, driving economic growth across the country. The UK has some of the world's busiest and most complex airspace, yet much of it is still based on designs from the 1950s. An aviation industry fit for the 21st century simply cannot rely on infrastructure that was built for the last.

Alison Taylor (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (Lab): The UK aviation sector is one of the best in the world. Glasgow international airport, in my constituency, has recently been very successful in attracting new routes. Can the Secretary of State confirm that further such expansion will not be hindered by slow regulatory frameworks?

Heidi Alexander: We want to move swiftly on these issues, and the provisions in the Bill are designed to do just that. I recognise that Glasgow airport is an important economic hub for my hon. Friend's constituency, and I look forward to discussing with her what more we can do to support it.

I was talking about how our airspace is still based on designs from the 1950s. That is why this Government believe that we must move quickly to modernise that airspace, for reasons of safety, reliability and capacity, and for the communities who deserve cleaner and quieter skies.

Deirdre Costigan (Ealing Southall) (Lab): Many people in my constituency work at the nearby Heathrow airport, so it is extremely important for jobs, but for many other constituents the noise of the airport can be annoying and they worry about emissions. Does the Secretary of State agree that airspace modernisation offers an opportunity to stop that stacking of aircraft over west London and to have quieter and cleaner aircraft, which would reduce noise and emissions? Will she also confirm that this Bill will still allow local people to have a say on any decisions on airspace modernisation?

Heidi Alexander: I can guarantee my hon. Friend that there will be meaningful consultation with local communities about airspace changes—this Bill does not change the processes around that. I also appreciate the impact that noise has on local communities, and nothing in the Bill changes the process that will take place, for example, in the case of expansion at Heathrow. My hon. Friend will be aware that the draft Heathrow expansion national policy statement, which we have consulted on, includes a proposal for a night-time ban for 6.5 hours, between the hours of 11 pm and 7 am. I guarantee that I will continue to work with her and other London colleagues on these important and sensitive issues.

Airspace modernisation is important, both to tackle noise issues and to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from aircraft—if we can have planes pursuing simpler, more direct flight paths, that will reduce the amount of time that those planes are in the air. However, the truth is that if we do not act on airspace modernisation, it will be passengers and businesses that end up paying the price, with up to one in five flights estimated to face significant disruption by 2040 unless we act. That is why we have wasted no time in setting up the UK Airspace Design Service, which is already getting on with the job. This Bill strengthens the Government's ability to ensure that airspace changes that have been properly consulted on and approved are delivered. We are also updating the rules on who can be charged for air traffic and air navigation services, so that costs can continue to be recovered fairly as new airspace users emerge. Finally, we are making it easier for the Government to respond quickly and proportionately to pressure on the aviation sector.

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): With regard to noise specifically, the Government recently reduced the height at which noise is considered an important factor, from 7,000 to 5,000 feet. Noise between 5,000 and 7,000 feet now has less impact on decision making. That change was not meaningfully consulted on; it was just made and enforced on everybody. It has an impact in my constituency, and perhaps in many others. Will the Secretary of State comment on how that decision was reached and whether it is changeable?

Heidi Alexander: It is not the case that noise above 5,000 feet will not be considered in airspace design changes. This is about the relative balance between noise considerations and greenhouse gas emissions. We need to find a simpler way of making these changes, because the previous mechanism was too cumbersome, and I believe that this is a sensible and proportionate change.

I was talking about some of the changes that this Bill will enable the Government to make in future, so that we can be more responsive and flexible as a Government. As Members will know, there has been significant uncertainty for the aviation sector, given the conflict and crisis in the middle east and the impact of that on jet fuel. A few months ago, my Department introduced temporary changes to relax slot usage requirements and reduce disruption to passengers. However, some of those measures relied on powers that were introduced after we left the European Union, and the power that I had to act in that way expired in June, which was why we made our decision before that point. The Bill will introduce permanent powers, and will therefore support a more agile and resilient approach to the regulation of airport

[Heidi Alexander]

slots. That means that the UK can continue to act decisively when appropriate, safeguarding passengers and maintaining airport capacity.

Alison Taylor: Airspace modernisation has been consulted on in Scotland. Will the Secretary of State do everything she can to ensure that the Scottish airspace modernisation programme remains a priority for NATS?

Heidi Alexander: We have sought to prioritise work on airspace changes in the London region, given the benefits that it could bring to London and the south-east. I am aware that there has been agreement over the summer to resume work on airspace modernisation in Scotland, which will be important to my hon. Friend's constituents. We have to get the balance right by bringing benefit quickly to the communities that are currently seeking changes, which will improve the quality of my hon. Friend's life and those of her constituents.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I apologise to my right hon. Friend; I should have checked this before the debate. The proposed new section 61G refers to priorities and objectives of the Secretary of State, which include a requirement for the Secretary of State to issue a document setting out those priorities and objectives for the CAA. That is to be the guiding light from the Government to the CAA. The provision specifies, for instance, how the Government and the CAA are to consult and how it will take on board environmental principles. Is that new document to be published after the passing of the legislation, or have I missed something and a document has already been produced? If so, I apologise, but this seems quite fundamental to me. If there is to be a revised document, can my right hon. Friend give us a timetable for its publication?

Heidi Alexander: I regularly produce a letter for the CAA setting out my priorities, and I would be happy to write to my right hon. Friend in detail about the timeline, as he requests.

The Bill is also about improving safety. The Government are determined that UK airspace should remain among the safest in the world. Our current safety framework is fragmented, and updating it is cumbersome. It holds back innovation, and it puts the UK at risk of falling behind on its international obligations. To fix that, the Bill will hand over responsibility for technical aviation safety and operational rule-making to the CAA. This is not a blank cheque; it follows a well-established model in which trusted regulators make rules within boundaries set by Parliament. Indeed, ministerial and parliamentary oversight was strengthened during scrutiny in the other place. The Bill also reinstates the Government's ability to update or create aviation safety-related criminal offences in assimilated legislation, which was lost after our exit from the EU. That will allow safety rules to keep up with international standards while ensuring that they are enforced consistently, now and in the future. These steps will create a clearer, more workable system that maintains the UK's strong safety record and sustains public confidence in air travel.

I know that some Members will be interested in what the Bill means for airport expansions. I should make clear that it does not determine whether any airport should expand, and neither does it change the processes involved in that. These measures are sector-wide reforms that will support a safe, efficient and resilient aviation industry. Questions about airport expansion will continue to be considered separately, outside the Bill process.

Despite a bad day yesterday, aviation has refused to stand still for over 100 years. The industry remains at the forefront of innovation and progress, taking every challenge and every opportunity in its stride. Quite simply, the type of country that we want to be—aspirational, outward-looking and full of opportunity—depends on giving the industry the tools that it needs to go from strength to strength. This Bill will do just that by bringing passenger protections into the 21st century, unlocking sustainable growth that works for our communities, and maintaining the UK's safety record in an ever-changing world.

I hope that hon. and right hon. Members will agree that this is not a Government who drag their feet. We have moved swiftly to address the concerns raised by the Lords, particularly on accessibility, accountability and passenger protections. The Government have not just listened but acted, and I believe that provides a strong foundation for the Bill to continue its passage. I commend this Bill to the House.

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

4.5 pm

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): Before I turn to the Bill, let me comment on the events of the last 24 hours, which have shown just how important effective oversight of our aviation sector is. The shocking failure at NATS has left hundreds of thousands of passengers in the lurch, and serious questions have been raised about the resilience of our air traffic control system and aviation infrastructure. As we consider legislation that gives further functions to the CAA, we must ensure that proper parliamentary scrutiny and ministerial accountability are not lost. When something goes wrong this badly, the House must be able to demand answers.

Having spoken to Mr Speaker earlier today, it was my understanding that urgent questions requested by my party and by the Liberal Democrats were not accepted because the Government gave assurances that a statement will be made in the House tomorrow. The Government could have chosen to make a statement today, but they chose to prioritise other matters. If the Secretary of State would like to intervene to say that tomorrow there will be a statement in which all Members can ask proper questions about what has happened, I would welcome that. A Second Reading debate is not the right place for questions and answers, and only one hon. Member from the Labour Benches intervened on her. This is not an appropriate moment to have that discussion, so perhaps the Secretary of State would like to confirm that there will be a statement tomorrow. If not, I am afraid it looks like there has been a serious miscommunication between the Speaker's Office and those on the Government Front Bench. *[Interruption.]* Sorry, does the Minister want to speak from a sedentary position, or does he want to come to the Dispatch Box and speak?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Keir Mather) *indicated dissent.*

Mr Holden: Okay. If he does not want to answer the questions, we will have to drag him to the House tomorrow.

Keir Mather: I am in the House right now!

Mr Holden: If the Minister would like to speak, he can stand at the Dispatch Box. No, he does not want to do that—fine. We will have him here tomorrow, then, as we were told today that our urgent question would not be accepted because the Minister would be making a statement. We will have to see whether that actually happens.

Having said all that, I welcome the engagement from the Secretary of State and Ministers in the other House on this Bill, and the engagement that has taken place on this matter. I would like to see that engagement continue, and I hope that it can.

The Conservatives agree with the stated aims of the Bill—namely, to promote economic growth and infrastructure development, to strengthen consumer rights and protections, and to enhance aviation security. For that reason, we will not divide on Second Reading. I also agree with the Secretary of State's observation in her letter to colleagues on 1 September, in which she said that the contributions of the Lords have helped strengthen the legislation before the House today. At its core, this is broadly an administrative Bill. We on the Conservative Benches recognise that certain measures must be taken following our exit from the European Union to ensure that regulatory gaps are filled and continuity is maintained in a way that ultimately keeps Britain's aviation industry working safely, as the Secretary of State highlighted.

The Bill pays much attention to consumer rights and associated protections, and the Conservatives welcome parts of that agenda. Indeed, I appreciate the Department showing some flexibility on these issues, particularly with regard to safeguarding disabled passengers. However, given the violent agreement between the Secretary of State and me on these matters—I confess that it is not always this way across the Dispatch Box—I am slightly puzzled by one item. Why on earth did her party whip Members in the other place to vote against a review of airport drop-off charges? Why are passengers paying such exorbitant drop-off charges? It would appear that the Government do not want us to know that. Why is it, as *The Times* has reported, that charges at Gatwick have now reached £10 for 10 minutes, while Luton's, under Labour-run Luton council, have increased from £2 to £7?

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): In Bournemouth, the charges have now gone up to £8, yet there are no buses to the airport. Two buses, which go at 6 o'clock in the morning and come back at 6 o'clock in the evening, serve the industrial estate, but they do not serve the airport staff or passengers, and it is impossible for people to get there any other way. Does the shadow Secretary of State agree with me that these charges should be restricted or banned until such time as the airport provides alternatives for all passengers?

Mr Holden: The hon. Lady makes a very clear case for why such a review of airport parking charges is necessary. One has not happened for a decade. It was great to get the support of the Liberal Democrats in the other place in backing Lord Moylan and the Conservative proposals in that space. Now that the provision is in the Bill, I hope the Government will not seek to remove it. There are obviously concerns about the impact that surface access targets have had on some airport parking charges, especially when, as the hon. Member has made clear, genuine alternatives often do not exist properly or are incredibly expensive. I genuinely find it difficult to believe that the Secretary of State does not herself believe that there is a simple link between Gatwick having a minimum target of more than half of passengers getting to and from the airport by public transport and the soaring drop-off charges. I hope that this perfectly reasonable provision for a review that puts passengers first will not be removed from this Bill. It would be great to hear from the Minister winding up whether the Government intend to stick with that important review, which was inserted against the Labour party's wishes in the House of Lords.

Another point worth mentioning is that the Bill, for all the powers it rearranges and the regulations it enables, offers remarkably little vision for where British aviation should be heading. The Government have talked a lot about growth, yet have refused to set tangible targets to deliver it—whether in this aviation Bill, or indeed for passenger growth in the Railways Bill.

The Opposition understand that economic growth and the competition that fuels it are essential not merely to the success of individual airports and airlines, but to maintaining Britain's global reputation as one of the world's outstanding aviation nations. Yet too often this Government appear to regard the aviation industry less as an engine of growth and more as an ATM. Indeed, Labour Members seem to be beset with Tigger-like pleasure at finding new costs to impose on businesses, while growing the welfare bill rather more successfully than they are growing the economy.

Ministers must understand that every additional burden and every tax—air passenger duty or business rates—is having huge impacts on aviation. I was with Manchester Airport Group recently, which is now facing an effective tax rate of 77%, when corporation tax and business rates are combined, after facing a more than 100% increase in its business rates. Manchester is not alone; airports up and down the country are facing huge increases in tax. It will be really important for Ministers to address that as part of the broader concerns about growth.

Every charge deters investment and makes new jobs, new routes and greater passenger choice that little bit harder to deliver. That principle must also apply to the new powers given to the CAA. Can the Minister assure the House that significant new regulatory, safety and airspace decisions will be evidence-based, proportionate and subject to the proper assessment of their costs and benefits?

Mr Andrew Snowden (Fylde) (Con): My right hon. Friend rightly points out the tax increases that airports are facing combined with business rates and increased regulations. We are trying to build a business case for commercial flights from Blackpool airport again, and such things make it really hard for airports that are trying to reopen routes and start new ones. Does he agree that that should be looked at?

Mr Holden: I thank my hon. Friend for that. Obviously, the air space does not exist within the Bill alone. The tax changes will have huge implications, whether at Blackpool airport or at Humberside airport, which I visited recently. They face life-and-death pressures that will decide whether they continue to be going concerns. This is not just about airports and the jobs that they create directly, but the connectivity that they provide for entire regions. He makes an incredibly important point.

As has been the case with too much legislation of late, the Bill leaves plenty of questions up in the air. Where are the measures to secure the future of the workforce—our mechanics, engineers and next generation of skilled workers? Where are the measures to ease the burdens surrounding apprenticeships, an issue raised with me directly by the apprentices I met at Heathrow recently? Why is there no indication of how to champion our excellent aviation colleges at airports, such as the one at Stansted that I had the pleasure of visiting recently? Where is the plan to tackle pilot shortages? Has the Secretary of State not received representations calling for the Government to assist with pilot recruitment, or is she turning a deaf ear to them? Where is the vision for Britain being a world leader in single-aisle aircraft manufacturing, something for which the industry, as she knows, is clamouring to the rafters?

I know that the Secretary of State is incredibly busy selling out taxpayers in her latest meetings with union barons who have her over a barrel; she was apparently too busy to join me and many of the shadow ministerial team at the Farnborough air show. My understanding is that not a single Minister from the Department for Transport went to Farnborough this year. Perhaps she could correct me if I am wrong. It is Europe's largest airshow, a symbol to the world of Britain's openness and our leading edge in aviation, so it does seem quite bizarre that, while they were all sat there waiting for the reshuffle, none of them popped down. Maybe that shows the Government's general view of aviation—they are just not interested. *[Interruption.]* It seems shocking that the ministerial team did not get there. *[Interruption.]* If they do not want to do the job, then rather than shouting at me from a sedentary position, we could just swap sides of the House.

Too often, it seems, the Department is in the business of delaying Bills. It leaves drafting to the last moment, and then tables reams of amendments to its own legislation, before expressing surprise that the Opposition might wish to scrutinise what has happened. We will not oppose sensible measures simply for the sake of it. Of course, we welcome stronger passenger protections where they are needed, and of course we want the highest possible standards of safety and security, but we also want a Bill that backs Britain's aviation sector—a Bill that is backed by a ministerial team who also back Britain's aviation sector.

We want a Bill that gives the sector the space and the economic environment in which to succeed, and that creates the conditions in which competition, innovation and enterprise can thrive. I look forward to the opportunity to table amendments in Committee. Hopefully, we can work together to improve the Bill, as Opposition Members in the other place did, to ensure that British aviation remains safe, is more competitive and remains world leading.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Before I ask any other Members to contribute, I need to set the record straight. Government statements are within the gift of the Government. Urgent questions are the result of private and confidential conversations between Members and the Speaker, and whether one will be granted should not be speculated on, inside or outside the Chamber.

4.18 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I would like to say that it is a pleasure to follow the shadow Secretary of State for Transport. I think most people here will want to address yesterday's incident, its implications for passengers and the aviation sector, and more importantly—the reason we are here—the Bill. Most of my remarks, unlike those of the previous speaker, will focus primarily on that.

It is an unfortunate coincidence that this debate on the Civil Aviation (Consumer Protection and Regulatory Reform) Bill takes place the day after hundreds of thousands of passengers travelling to and from the UK had their journeys seriously disrupted by another outage at the National Air Traffic Services. So many passengers will be frustrated and angry about what has happened. Their plans are in tatters. What happened affected not only passengers, but their friends, families and, if they were on work journeys, colleagues and business associates. I must put in a word of praise and thanks to all those working in aviation, who are having to support and advise frustrated passengers and make alternative arrangements for them. Many staff, especially aircrew, could not get home last night. Our thanks and gratitude to them.

This is the third major outage of our air traffic control system in the last three years, and there is clearly widespread frustration in the sector with the system's lack of resilience. The Civil Aviation Authority's report on the 2023 outage eventually reported the following year. It had 34 recommendations, but as of last year's interim update by the CAA, only 18 had been completed. I thank the Secretary of State for saying that she will report to the House on this, and will ask NATS to carry out a rapid review of the incident and bring forward preliminary findings by next week.

Although NATS says that the two incidents are unrelated, I hope that the Secretary of State updates the House on progress on learning the right lessons from 2023 and the recent outage. We can then start addressing the issues that many Members, as well as the aviation sector, have with the lack of resilience of this key part of our national infrastructure. I hope that the Secretary of State will also come before the Committee in due course.

Let me link yesterday's incident to the Bill. Passengers, freight handlers and airlines have many questions about their rights when flights are delayed or cancelled, whatever the reason. Tens of thousands of people slept on airport floors once again last night, so I ask: are passenger rights fit for purpose, and will the Bill and the regulations that follow look at that—and hopefully address and improve the situation? We know that airlines are responsible for providing refunds or re-routing passengers after cancelled flights, and for providing care and assistance, such as refreshments and hotel accommodation while passengers are waiting for their flight.

Vikki Slade: Would the hon. Member like to reflect on what happened to me over the summer when I was flying back from a family holiday? Our flight was continually delayed, and we kept getting told that there were "extraordinary circumstances", which we know is code for, "You won't get compensation." That was the message throughout the wait, but when we got on the plane, the pilot told us the truth. He listed all the things that had happened, and I believe he did that so that we knew that it was not extraordinary circumstances. Does she agree that removal of that phrase is key to changing passenger rights?

Ruth Cadbury: The hon. Member describes a holiday experience that so many of our constituents have had. There are two issues here. The first is getting information and updates regularly. Yesterday, one pilot had the decency to say, "Look, I don't know what's happening," every 20 minutes; at least that gave some assurance to the passengers waiting on that plane. Secondly, whatever the cause of the problem, and whoever ultimately pays the cost of what needs doing, passengers have needs. They need toilets, refreshments, and a bed for the night—or at least somewhere comfortable to sleep. Should airports, for instance, be ready for these incidents, and have supplies of camp beds, emergency drinks, snacks, and baby food, and allocated trained staff who can come in at short notice to support passengers? Our local authorities have contingency plans and stores in case of incidents causing homes to be evacuated, and many of us have had to deal with such experiences. Maybe airports could learn something from our local authorities. Local authorities do not start by asking who will pay, or tell one resident that they are eligible and another that they are not. Instead, there is a set contingency plan. They open up community centres and so on. It is not rocket science.

Turning back to the Bill, I will cover first what is in it, and then—in an ideal world—what I would like to see in it. On passenger rights and protections for disabled passengers, I particularly welcome the fact that passengers with wheelchairs and other expensive mobility aids will now benefit from the removal of the limit on compensation. I regret the fact that, at this point, that can apply only to domestic UK flights, but I hope that this is an example of the UK leading the way, and that this basic right can be extended to travellers to and from other countries. Isb particularly want to mention my hon. Friend the Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Daniel Francis), the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for wheelchair users, who sadly could not be present this afternoon, and the work that he has been doing, both as the parent of a wheelchair user, and on behalf of all wheelchair users trying to have a normal family holiday while being treated with respect, as we all expect to be when we travel through airports.

I would like to say that that is all great, and that the problem is solved, but it is not. Disabled people still face a patchy experience when they travel through our airports. Our report, "Access denied", published earlier last year, came across a number of issues for disabled passengers at our airports, one of which was the variable quality of contractors at airports. There is a huge gulf between the best and worst experiences that disabled passengers face—there is no single standard. I ask the Government whether some kind of single standard of treatment could be hardwired in, and whether airports and airlines could be made accountable. Too often, airports and airlines pass the buck when a disabled passenger is stuck on a plane or trying to get on a plane. Some airports, such as Gatwick, have put disabled passengers on their forums to ensure that their passenger experience is fed in. That is an example of good practice that should be the norm.

Also on accessibility, airports also need to consider how accessible their public transport links are. In my experience, airports too often feel that their responsibility stops at the perimeter fence, and that public transport issues are someone else's problem.

On wider passenger issues, I welcome the strengthened powers for the CAA on consumer rights and safety in the Bill, and look forward to the Transport Secretary's drafting of the secondary legislation on these matters. It will cover issues that all our constituents raise: flight disruption; lost or damaged luggage; accessibility, which I have mentioned; price transparency; and airline liability for passenger injury or death.

Mr Alex Barros-Curtis (Cardiff West) (Lab): I commend the Government on bringing forward this Bill. My hon. Friend is giving an excellent speech. I have been reflecting on what she has said, and on the Government's focus on taking away barriers to consumers—our constituents—asserting their rights, especially given the cost of living challenges we face. Does she agree that there may be a lesson for the Secretary of State from the automated delay repay system that we have for rail? If there are delays of a certain length, there is an automated system of compensation for passengers. Like the hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Vikki Slade), I have been reflecting on my experience. My husband and I travelled with Iberia, and are to this day owed hundreds and hundreds of pounds, which was not automatically transferred to us; we had to put a long time into making compensation claims. Why are these rights, which extend to all our constituents, not automatically fulfilled by the airline companies? Does my hon. Friend agree that the Secretary of State could reflect on that when she is drafting the secondary legislation?

Ruth Cadbury: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. The delay repay system, which we now take for granted on our rail system, except on the Eurostar, is a good model. I agree that the airlines could look at that, and I hope that the Minister will consider it as well.

On airport drop-off charges, I welcome the review but I would like it to be wider. Why do so many of our constituents feel that the only way to get to most of our airports reliably is to get a lift? How useful, reliable and accessible is public transport to many airports? In theory, Heathrow airport has lots of public transport access—far more than any other airport in this country—but it only goes between Heathrow and London, not to the south-west or the north, unless people get a coach from Reading.

Alison Taylor: On the issue of connectivity to airports, my hon. Friend and I have discussed in the past the fact that there is no rail link to Glasgow International airport. In fact, it is possible to get a train from Glasgow Central station to Manchester airport but not from Glasgow Central station to Glasgow airport. Does she have any comment to make on that matter?

Ruth Cadbury: I think I am right in saying that people also have to walk quite some way to get the bus to the airport. Talk about a lack of joined-up thinking in our public transport—and in this instance I include flying.

I fear that in this respect the UK is an embarrassment. When we travel on holiday or for other reasons, we can compare our airports with those that we travel to, and often the comparison is not very complimentary to the UK.

Danny Beales (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Lab): My hon. Friend is giving an excellent and thorough speech based on her and her Committee's work. I agree with everything she has said, with one caveat, which is that even for those living a stone's throw from the airport there often are not public transport links. In my constituency and my neighbour's, many people who work at the airport cannot get there directly on one bus, so they are forced to drive and pay drop-off charges or park in questionable places, causing disruption to communities. Does my hon. Friend agree airports need to do much more on public transport?

Ruth Cadbury: Absolutely. For almost 40 years, I have dealt with Heathrow's lack of interest in transport. My hon. Friend is to the north of Heathrow, and I know full well what he is saying. In fact, one of the section 106 conditions in the terminal 5 planning decision was that there be a direct bus between Feltham station and the central terminal area, without stopping. That would then create a fast link from Waterloo to Heathrow—this was long before the Elizabeth line. However, nobody marketed it or told anybody about it, so funnily enough when the funding gave out, there had not been enough passengers to make it viable, so it did not survive. I can think of many more examples.

Sometimes I come in to work on the Piccadilly and District lines, so I know that many people use those lines to travel to and from Heathrow, but they might go to, say, South Kensington to stay in a hotel. I have had to help an elderly couple who have come from Heathrow up and down the stairs that passengers have to take at South Kensington station. It is not a welcoming environment for visitors to this country. Obviously, the Elizabeth line has transformed that; it was long overdue.

Deirdre Costigan: My hon. Friend and neighbour mentions the Elizabeth line—we cannot miss that out when talking about connectivity to Heathrow—which has transformed my constituents' lives. However, in line with another neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Danny Beales)—his constituents appear to be throwing stones at the airport; mine are not—may I raise overcrowding on the Elizabeth line? I know that that is being looked at and there is the potential to run further trains, but in the rush hour in particular, and when lots of people have cases, it can be a nightmare for my constituents.

Ruth Cadbury: If anything, the Elizabeth line has been a victim of its own success—that is why it was right to fight for Crossrail all those years ago. I will come back to the link between what airports should provide and the actuality.

Compared to our international competitors, our public transport to and from airports is woeful: it is non-existent at night or in the early morning, and too often what there is proves impossible for those with heavy luggage. I find it frustrating that the current airport expansion proposals—Gatwick has got all its approvals; Heathrow is in front of our Committee with its national policy statement—can proceed without the rail access that everyone agrees is needed. Those desperately needed train services are just not there. I also find that, compared with most other countries, access to taxis, private hire vehicles, buses and coaches is generally an afterthought or an inconvenience. Unless we address those wider issues, reviewing drop-off charges is just scratching the surface and passengers—rather, the person who is giving them the lift—will continue to feel that they are being fleeced.

Airspace modernisation is long overdue. It will cut carbon emissions and time in the air, which will be good for passengers and good for the climate. I was concerned about the potential for the creation of so-called noise sewers—corridors of noise across parts of the country. However, if the paths are sufficiently wide—NATS told me that they are 10 miles wide—the noise implications will be much less than was feared. The Transport Committee has not yet had a chance to look at that issue.

I want to cover what is not in the Bill but should be. One thing is staff safety. Unite, GMB and the other unions across our civil airports are calling for a clear, national, worker-led approach and response to the increase in abusive and disruptive passenger behaviour that staff face. A recent survey by Unite the union found that 90% of workers in one airport had faced abuse at work.

Amanda Hack (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): A member of GMB, the union that operates at East Midlands airport, told me that it was unusual if she had not received her first abusive customer by 5 am. There is real merit in seeing how we can ensure that the workers in our airports are treated appropriately.

Ruth Cadbury: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. We have railway behaviour notices, so I wonder whether the Government could work with airlines, airports and the trade unions to consider a similar standard and process for the aviation sector.

On EU and UK standards, the UK risks being left behind by the failure to reach an agreement with the EU on a number of issues. For instance, a faulty emergency services helicopter that needed a spare part was unable to use the one stored at a local airport as it was from the EU; there are probably other examples.

On recruitment and retention, the UK has long been an attractive place for pilots and engineers to come and work. We want to continue that growth, but the industry is in need of a mutual recognition agreement with the EU, the lack of which is having an impact on training, the mobility of the workforce and recruitment.

I will move on to the question of noise. Those of my constituents who have lived locally around Heathrow for some time know the noise patterns. Two thirds of my constituents are under one or other of the approach paths used 70% of the time when the airport is operating on westerly operation and the flightpaths are from central London towards Heathrow. Planes are overhead every 60 to 90 seconds for half the day, because we have

daily alternation, so to some extent residents can plan when to be in the garden or have friends around and so on, but newcomers to the area can struggle to find the information they need about where and when there will be aircraft noise. Of course, tens of thousands more residents in parts of Hillingdon, Ealing and Hounslow will be underneath the new approach path if the expansion goes ahead, and they do not even know it at the moment.

There is a noise insulation scheme at most airports, but as a constituency MP I find it difficult to know which of my constituents are eligible, how much spend on works they can get and by when. Due to the timing of schemes being approved for different airports as a condition of their planning permission, there is a lack of uniformity across the country in what these schemes include in terms of sound insulation, ventilation and so on. Constituents—and MPs, too—are very unsure about who or what is the appropriate body to regulate noise.

Noise insulation is only one example of the various mitigation measures that airports are required to implement, but for us MPs and our councils and councillors, there is not a body with teeth that can ensure that any mitigation measures are enforced, let alone determine whether or not they are adequate, particularly when it comes to expansion. Mitigation measures can include public transport, which I have touched on, various community benefit schemes, and environmental recovery and enhancement. This lack of teeth—this lack of ability to be clear on the delivery of the mitigation—has come up again and again in evidence to the Transport Committee in our current inquiry on Heathrow expansion. I ask the Transport Secretary and the Minister with responsibility for aviation, my hon. Friend the Member for Selby (Keir Mather), to examine whether the UK Civil Aviation Authority or another body can be given the powers and the teeth that I know are not there at the moment.

In conclusion, I hope that the Bill can be further improved beyond its safety and passenger rights measures.

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

4.42 pm

Olly Glover (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): I start by joining the Secretary of State in thanking the House of Lords for its work in developing the Bill, and I pay particular thanks to the Liberal Democrat peer team led by the noble Baroness Grender. I also note at the start that it has been a season of reshuffles, and I congratulate the Secretary of State, the Minister with responsibility for aviation, the hon. Member for Selby (Keir Mather), and indeed the shadow Secretary of State on their reconfirmed appointments in recent reshuffles. It remains to be seen whether I survive the next Liberal Democrat one.

There is much to be encouraged by in the Bill. It necessarily fills in some gaps in our aviation regulation resulting from our leaving the European Union, it brings potential for improving passenger rights, and it enables modernisation of our airspace, which has not been done for decades, including air traffic control, landing slots and optimising main routes to and from airports.

Of course, the point about air traffic control is timely following yesterday's NATS Holdings air traffic control disruption, which is a fresh reminder of the need for reliability. Perhaps the one thing I would agree with in the shadow Secretary of State's speech is that a Second Reading debate on new legislation is a somewhat unorthodox way for the Government to be held accountable, and it is a matter of regret that the Government have not decided to make a statement to the House on that important disruption yesterday.

However, we do have some concerns about the Bill. As drafted, it relies far too heavily on delegated powers and secondary legislation. By leaving critical details to future ministerial regulation, the Government are bypassing meaningful parliamentary oversight and leaving passengers and local communities without robust statutory safeguards. The Bill, as it stands, also grants sweeping powers to the Civil Aviation Authority. Consequently, the Bill could be used to support more flights at any cost. We will be looking to the Government to engage positively with amendments that would make all changes to airspace utilisation subject to strict caps on noise, carbon emissions and night operations, and to accompanying improved transport services to and from airports to reduce their road congestion impact.

I note the assurances given by the Secretary of State that airport expansion is not connected to this Bill, but we will fight to ensure that the new powers in the Bill cannot be used to facilitate airport expansion through the back door, and that Parliament is properly involved in any future proposals that impact our environment.

The Liberal Democrats will also be calling for the Bill to go much further by adopting a genuinely passenger-first approach, with a focus on passengers with disabilities, who are so often let down by their experience of aviation travel. Critically, we want to see a statutory air passengers charter written on to the face of the Bill to enshrine these rights in law, tackling issues such as inconsistent luggage rules, airport drop-off charges, and disruption and compensation arrangements.

At this stage, we support the premise of the Bill, as modernisation is clearly needed. However, our support at further stages will be conditional on positive engagement with our proposals for putting passengers first and for environmental safeguards. Specifically, modernisation must be used to make the most of what we have, rather than increase the noise, carbon emissions, night-time and ground road congestion impacts of aviation. Only if the Government give assurances in subsequent stages that the Bill will do this, and that they will properly commit to advancing passenger rights and protections, will it retain our support.

4.46 pm

Andrew Cooper (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): I am pleased to speak in support of this Bill this afternoon. The UK has been, and continues to be, a proud, open and outward-looking nation: a nation of traders, travellers, adventurers and explorers—and, increasingly, a nation of people wondering why it costs quite so much to drop somebody off at an airport. The 302 million passengers who passed through UK airports last year, whether for work or for a week in the sun, relied on an aviation sector that is safe and efficient and that treats passengers fairly. For everyone else who may not be regular aviators, it is important that we are in the best possible position to support economic growth, hand in hand with efforts to decarbonise the sector.

[Andrew Cooper]

For my constituents in Northwich, Winsford and Middlewich, the aviation sector is a key source of employment. We are home to Jet2's retail operations centre and close to two major international airports, the Airbus manufacturing site in Broughton and aviation fuel production facilities in Ellesmere Port.

We once again find ourselves in the unenviable position of having to legislate to mitigate the haphazard and chaotic manner in which we left the EU. Aviation is one of the clearest examples of an industry where co-operation across borders is not an optional extra but an absolute necessity. Rules governing safety, consumer rights and the operation of our airspace cannot sensibly be considered in isolation. Regardless of individual views on Brexit, I hope there is an agreement across the House that Parliament has a duty to make the system work effectively, and that protecting the rights of travellers must be at the heart of that effort.

One area where the Bill is especially welcome is its focus on disabled passengers. The principle it establishes is an important one: that disabled people should be able to access air travel on an equal basis with everyone else. But this is not simply a question of physical disability; it also concerns neurodiversity, mental health conditions and passengers whose needs may not always be immediately visible. As the parent of a neurodivergent child, I know that for many neurodivergent travellers, airports can be overwhelming environments.

That is why facilities such as the Sunflower room at the now-closed terminal 1 at Manchester airport were so valuable. Having used that space myself, and spaces like it at other airports, I know at first hand that they provide a quiet space for passengers who find the main airport environment overstimulating. It is quite a good example of what thoughtful accessibility can look like. It is a relatively cheap and simple intervention, but for someone who might otherwise find the experience of travelling through an airport to be so overstimulating that it becomes a barrier to flying at all, it can make an enormous difference. Manchester airport did genuinely good work on this issue in terminal 1, which I hope will be replicated in due course in terminal 2.

Many airports also recognise the sunflower lanyard, which helps passengers with non-visible disabilities to avoid some of the busiest and most overwhelming parts of the terminal. I would certainly like a similar approach to be adopted across the aviation sector and for such innovations to become the norm. As the Government undertake their consultation on this area, I hope that Ministers will study examples of best practice and consider whether such facilities could provide a blueprint for airports across the country.

I am also pleased that the Bill addresses practical issues that disabled people face all too often. Everyone in the House will have heard distressing stories of disabled travellers being left on aircraft long after other passengers have disembarked because assistance was unavailable, or because wheelchairs and mobility aids were lost, damaged or mishandled. Those are not minor inconveniences; they can severely affect a person's independence and, frankly, their dignity. For that reason, I particularly welcome the removal of the liability limit when wheelchairs, mobility aids and other medical devices are lost or damaged on domestic flights. That sensible and necessary reform recognises the essential nature of such devices and the impact that such occurrences can have on passengers who rely on them.

The Bill also provides an opportunity to reflect on the wider passenger experience, including drop-off charges and getting to the airport. For those living in my constituency, the Manchester airport western link, first proposed by British Rail in the 1990s, would represent an important opportunity to improve connectivity and make everyday journeys easier. Better access to the airport would not only improve the experience of individual passengers and airport employees, but support local businesses, attract investment and strengthen links between Mid Cheshire and international markets.

As Members may know, Manchester airport currently charges between £5.50 for five minutes and £25 for half an hour for someone to be dropped off directly outside the terminal. I accept that airports need to manage congestion and that we want people to use public transport where they can, but any charges must be fair and proportionate, particularly where passengers do not have a realistic alternative—and for my constituents there is no alternative, despite the airport being less than 10 miles away.

If a review is to take place, I ask the Minister to ensure that it considers whether passengers—particularly disabled passengers and those with additional access needs—genuinely have a realistic alternative to paying the charge. Drop-off charges are one of the issues on which constituents have some of the strongest views, and it is important that any review should reflect their experiences.

I also welcome the provisions in the Bill relating to airspace modernisation and the potential benefits of increased capacity, reduced delays and more efficient flight routes. However, technology and redesigning airspace can only take us so far if there are not enough trained air traffic controllers to operate the system. There have been shortages of air traffic controllers across Europe, and because the aviation system is so interconnected, problems in one country can quickly cause disruption elsewhere, as we have unfortunately seen this week.

From a passenger perspective, it makes little difference whether a delay is caused by an airline, an airport or air traffic control—if they are still sitting in the departure lounge three hours later, the impact on their journey is exactly the same. I would be grateful if the Minister set out what the Government are doing to address the talent pipeline for air traffic controllers and whether there is sufficient workforce capacity to support the growth in aviation that the Government wish to see.

Overall, I welcome the Bill because it seeks to create a more effective and responsive regulatory framework, while strengthening protections for disabled travellers represents a significant step forward in ensuring that air travel is more accessible, dignified and inclusive. I look forward to seeing the consultation process develop and to working constructively to ensure that the legislation delivers real improvements for passengers across the country.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I will now announce the result of today's deferred Division on the draft Plant Health, Seeds, Seed Potatoes

and Plant Propagating Material (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2026. The Ayes were 371 and the Noes were 100, so the Ayes have it.

[The Division list is published at the end of today's debates.]

I call Luke Taylor.

4.54 pm

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker—I hope to continue the excitement of that result in the Chamber.

As an engineer, former aviation consultant and now chair of the all-party parliamentary group for the future of aviation, travel and aerospace, I know that hon. Members will have become accustomed to me calling for stronger growth in the aviation space, and to my belief that technology and innovation can enable us to do that while achieving our obligations to reach net zero and stop the climate crisis.

Aviation is the bedrock of our trade agreements. It enables high-value cargo to move along supply chains in a way that no other form of transport can. It makes it feasible for businesses to operate across borders and make connections with other businesses that drive economic growth forward. It has meant that the last three generations of Brits have been able to take advantage of affordable foreign holidays, with massive benefits for them, their mental health and their ability to expand their horizons and make enriching memories in unfamiliar settings. It has been so transformational for Governments, businesses and individuals that it can be safely hailed as one of the most influential technologies in history.

But aviation has come at a cost. Consumer and commercial aviation has, without a doubt, contributed to the climate crisis we face. Estimates suggest that annually aviation accounts for 2.5% of global CO_2 emissions. However, it has contributed around 4% to global warming to date.

As the MP for a constituency halfway between Heathrow and Gatwick, and given my former life in the aviation industry, I know that the politics of airports is fraught with complications. The impact on communities, if not handled properly, can be deeply challenging. It is my hope that the Government will listen and engage with the points I make about how we upgrade and improve civil aviation in this country for consumers, communities and the planet, and that they will have understood that events like those we saw yesterday serve only to underline how crucial this mission is, and how, following the third major failure of our airspace management in the past three years, it is imperative that this Bill is amended to include measures to stop that happening again. NATS is quite clearly not fit for purpose. We cannot suffer a major air traffic outage once a year. Following the outage yesterday, I am told by industry contacts that, again, communications with airlines were poor. I gently suggest to the Minister that whoever briefed the media that the disruption was akin to

"a day with bad weather"

should be found another position far away from the media team rather sharply.

In the Lords, amendment 65—submitted by Lord Young—would have required NATS to hold responsibility for compensation for disruption caused by its failure, rather than airlines that were not at fault for these delays. The Government declined to accept the amendment, and Lord Hendy responded in a letter to Lord Young in July that he was satisfied that, following the 2023 outage,

"the Government was able to place considerable pressure on"

NATS

"and appointed the person who led the review into the outage. This helped ensure that NATS took the necessary steps to prevent a recurrence of those particular circumstances."

For the benefit of *Hansard*, I raise my eyebrow and glance at the Minister knowingly. I invite him to address this issue directly in his response and seriously consider the merits of that amendment—a change supported by the International Air Transport Association and airlines.

That specific challenge aside, the Bill needs to address three broader challenges, and I hope to work with the Government to ensure that it does. The first challenge is the generational risk of decarbonising aviation, which will require short, medium and long-term solutions as we work with researchers and companies to develop the breakthrough fuels that could reshape the industry. That is how we enable sustainable growth to drive our economy. The second challenge is the more procedural, but equally important, task of updating and upgrading our aerospace infrastructure to keep it competitive, while keeping communities impacted by these changes informed, engaged and fundamentally in control over what happens to them. Here we must secure our infrastructure at the same time as empowering communities. The third challenge is rebalancing the power mismatch between airlines and passengers, giving power to people and not the big airlines, so that the passenger experience can be as positive as possible, and not continue to allow airlines on some occasions to scam passengers like cheap fairground hucksters.

We need serious measures that will allow the airline industry to decarbonise. That will require the same collaborative work across the public and private sectors that informed the passage of the Sustainable Aviation Fuel Act 2026, on which I was grateful for the chance to work with the Government in passing. Such enormous industrial transitions take a very long time, and moving existing fleets and fuel infrastructure to green alternatives while they are still in use is outrageously difficult. Contrary to what some would like us to believe, however, it is not impossible. The interchangeability of sustainable aviation fuels and fossil-based aviation fuels, mixed and fed into the same pipelines and engines, makes this a transition that is unusually straightforward compared with other decarbonisation challenges.

However, the sheer scale of the challenge and the existing infrastructure is the real difficulty. That, as well as the laws of physics and Breguet's range equations, which I have mentioned in the Chamber before, mean that by sheer necessity the industry may be among the last to transition away from fossil fuels fully. We should not be afraid of that—it is the reality of achieving the growth we need—but we cannot ground aerospace or regulate it into submission, because to do so would have a catastrophic impact on our economy.

We hear from neo-Luddites that we should effectively do that anyway—that we must constrain our horizons, put up with constraints and self-enforced recession, and tell families and businesses that they must put up with

[Luke Taylor]

penalties and restrictions that their peers and competitors around the world do not put up with. The intention of protecting our world from catastrophic climate change is absolutely right, but these solutions are utterly wrong. Aviation is a Pandora's box technology—once invented and tasted, it cannot be put back into the box. Like the internet or artificial intelligence, the only valid pessimistic question ought to be about how we transform it to regulate the externalities and make sure it continues to serve people, communities and the planet.

The positive question concerns how we grasp the opportunities it offers to keep pushing progress forward. That means backing decarbonisation technology, which is the only way to achieve the future we need. There are great examples of this being done in practice: I spoke about Operation Blue Skies as merely a concept in the SAF Bill debate almost a year ago, but it is now funded and ready to be trialled this winter. That is concrete proof of the progress being made. However, there are things that we are failing to do as a state to remove roadblocks to this progress and there is a need for real leadership from the Government to continue to drive these opportunities forward.

Yesterday, I chaired a roundtable discussion about sustainable aviation fuel to allow MPs to hear from the industry about the progress being made and what roadblocks remain. We heard how the pipeline of SAF production is not progressing at the rate needed to achieve the SAF mandate targets over the next few years, and that further Government action is needed to ensure that we do not plateau and then fall behind the target of 10% SAF by 2030 and of 22% by 2040.

At the Farnborough international airshow earlier this summer, I was fortunate to witness the first flying demonstration by a fully electric aircraft, and the exhibition halls showed the huge progress on hydrogen and electric aviation that will be the future of travel. Last week, the Hydrogen in Aviation Alliance released its report, "Hydrogen-powered aviation: a pathway to delivery and growth", which set out a clear set of steps towards harnessing that exciting new technology. Particularly interesting was news of trials led by the Cryogenic Hydrogen Optimised Systems for Aviation—CHOSAN—consortium to be based at Bristol airport, which hopes for the first hydrogen-powered flight from a UK commercial airport by 2028. That is hugely ambitious and gives hope that solutions are available, but it also reminds us that the Government need to play their part in speeding up development and roll-out even more.

Whether aviation decarbonisation ends up being achieved by SAF, hydrogen, electricity, methane or some other pathway not yet discovered, it is a huge opportunity for us to grasp in order to continue our great British global leadership in aviation technology. The Bill does not bring forward specific measures on these decarbonisation goals, other than through improvements in efficiencies delivered by airspace modernisation. I see that as a huge missed opportunity, and I will look for chances to bring forward such measures in Committee.

Turning to the second task on infrastructure, I greatly welcome the elements of the Bill that will help to deliver the airspace modernisation that will improve the efficiency of the UK's airspace, reduce nuisance noise pollution around airports and facilitate the decarbonisation I have just spoken about. Far from being change for change's sake, airspace modernisation is a vital step forward in upgrading our essential infrastructure, which has not been maintained and developed to keep up with changing and growing demands, and is at risk of periodic and then more consistent failure, as we all witnessed yesterday. Airspace modernisation should be done as part of a wider project of renewal across our transport and otherwise critical infrastructure. The lack of modernisation is visible in the chronic and consistent mismanagement of our roads and bridges, in certain aspects of public services and even in the political infrastructure that sits beneath everything else in this country. That is why, to unlock safe and sustainable growth and drag our infrastructure not just into the 2020s, but into a state of readiness for the future, airspace modernisation is utterly essential.

However, my support for this Bill is not without reservations. In particular, I am disappointed that, in its current form, it does not guarantee communities a meaningful say over the impact of these changes on them. Progress and improvements in route efficiency will inevitably have negative impacts on many, with new flight paths and concentrations of disturbance taking shape over communities previously not impacted by noise. Those impacts must be considered carefully, and the communities impacted must have a genuine and meaningful say in the changes that will be delivered.

As I have said before, my approach is a desire to get to yes on delivering these changes, but doing so requires buy-in from the communities that will live with the decisions for decades, so my response to this Bill has to be yes, if: yes, if we build meaningful community involvement that actually changes options; yes, if we can ensure that the scheme is able to benefit from public scrutiny; and yes, if it can be done in a way that is sustainable and not likely to be unpicked years later because it did not achieve some level of consensus. While the moving parts in aviation are aluminium, steel and carbon, these are ultimately human systems. It cannot be that changes are made that deliver what might look good on a spreadsheet or on the maps that I used to draw in the aviation industry; this must be about how the human situation is impacted by those changes.

On Monday, I attended a meeting of the APPG on airport communities. We heard how the airport night noise effects study has shown the huge impact of aviation noise on families living near airports. While aircraft types have become considerably quieter over the years, the more we learn of the health and psychological impacts of noise disruption, the more it is clear that the science is consistent and the impact is real. As such, we must demand that programmes to mitigate those impacts are made available to all those affected. It is also true that as airline traffic approaches capacity and demand continues to grow, airlines are likely to upgauge their aircraft fleets, which typically leads to higher noise signatures from larger, heavier aircraft. We should also remember that the very constraints we put on air traffic are creating an increase in those disruptions.

The parts of this Bill that will make airspace modernisation easy to deliver must not be allowed to cut scrutiny of the impact of that modernisation on residents or limit their voices over the options considered and how final flight routes are designed. I am particularly

concerned about the impact on communities in my neck of the woods in south-west London, at Heathrow and further afield at Gatwick, which have already been sounding the alarm about the impact of night flights, particularly on their wellbeing. I know that my hon. Friends the Members for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) and for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) have worked on this issue for many years on behalf of their constituents, and this Bill needs to do more to protect the interest of their residents. I expect to hear shortly from my hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (John Milne) on a similar issue.

The Civil Aviation Authority and *The BMJ* have both demonstrated that living under night flights not just harms mental health, but will inevitably damage a person's productivity the next day. In extreme cases, it can increase the risk of stroke. If it is done properly, airspace modernisation can improve many of these issues, but, where it cannot, we must insist on mitigations through soundproofing programmes or respite periods. Airspace modernisation has the potential to shift flight paths to less densely populated areas and lower the noise impact on take-off and landing with more efficient, steeper approach and departure paths that balance emissions with noise reduction, but there is no guarantee that it will do any of those things if those living in the communities affected are denied a seat at the table, either through badly designed consultations or top-down diktat.

Let me turn to my third and final challenge—I am sure Members will be glad to hear that. It is important to remember that the first two challenges will affect the planet and communities near airports, but the third challenge—passenger rights—is the one that will hit passengers most directly. In the Lords, the Liberal Democrats tabled amendment 36 to implement a passengers' charter for air travel, with various targets for minimum service levels that an airline can deliver. Lords amendments 10 and 11 would have prohibited airlines from separating passengers on the same booking to force them to pay for assigned seating, or from forcing other passengers to sit next to an unaccompanied minor. Lords amendments 2 and 20 would have stopped the UK from implementing lower standards and diverging away from existing international standards. All of those are good things, and I hope to convince the Government of their wisdom in Committee.

However, my favourite amendment, which I hope to push for and convince the Government of the merits of in Committee, is Lords amendment 13, which would have required airlines to standardise the maximum dimensions for permitted cabin baggage across all air carriers in alignment with recognised industry standards. Who here has a Ryanair bag, 55 cm by 40 cm by 20 cm; a Wizz Air bag, 55 cm by 40 cm by 23 cm; an EasyJet and British Airways bag, 56 cm by 45 cm by 25 cm; and an Aer Lingus bag, 55 cm by 40 cm by 24 cm? Each one is subtly different in size, and each one is liable to set someone back a hefty penalty if the check-in agent does not like the look of them. No, I did not think so; we do not have that number of bags—or we do not have all four.

It is absolute madness. This is 2026; we have universal phone chargers and universal electric car chargers, and we have had standardised shipping containers for nearly half a century. There are also universally sized overhead lockers on aircraft, so Lord Hendy was not correct when he asserted:

> "Aircraft have different overhead and under-seat storage capacities. Setting a standard size would necessitate using the smallest aircraft capacity, resulting in many passengers needing to use a smaller case or bag."—[*Official Report, House of Lords,* 16 June 2026; Vol. 857, c. GC71.]

That is incorrect and frankly insulting to the intelligence of the passenger who has just been stung for £75 by an over-zealous Ryanair boarding agent due to having an oversized bag, because they picked up the wrong one that morning, and that 5 cm difference cannot possibly fit into the overhead bin of a Boeing 737 but could slip smoothly into that of an A320. Passengers need protection from predatory practices; we need the BSS—the British standard suitcase. That is the well-regulated market that the Liberal Democrats believe in, and I hope I am able to make the Government see the benefit of that during the Bill Committee.

In summary, the Bill really is a huge opportunity to take meaningful action to improve our airspace infrastructure to reduce emissions, to improve safety and reduce noise and to improve passenger experience and make flying less expensive and stressful. Those are good aims, but they can only be achieved with careful and clear leadership that listens to the voices of industry, communities and those of us who believe that they must be delivered in the context of a wider rethink about how we maintain and upgrade our systems in this country. I thank the Minister for bringing forward the Bill, and I congratulate him on making a strong, if incomplete, start. I look forward to helping him fix the Bill in Committee.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): As we now all reflect on the size of our baggage, I call Amanda Hack.

5.11 pm

Amanda Hack (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker; you will be pleased to know that I have a wide variety of bags for my air travel.

I receive a lot of correspondence on airport-related issues, as East Midlands airport is right at the top of my constituency, so the improvement of customer rights and protections will be key. Having an airport in my constituency also means that I have an intimate understanding of the issues created by having an airport for a neighbour. East Midlands airport has been good at engaging with me on complaints that arise from constituents, but there is always more to be done with the local community. While I appreciate that we are unable to legislate for all in this space, I strongly welcome the Bill's measures on consultation. Airports should be encouraged to ensure that they are as friendly a neighbour as possible.

Economically, we cannot ignore the fact that East Midlands airport employs 8,000 people, or that 375,000 tonnes of small airport freight passes through it every year. It is the largest small-parcel freight operation in the UK, with DHL, UPS, FedEx and Royal Mail all choosing to operate out of East Midlands airport. As a result, how we modernise airspace will be just as key for freight as it is for passenger aircraft.

[Amanda Hack]

Some 91% of travellers get to East Midlands airport by car, leaving just 9% travelling by public transport, which is actually the lowest percentage in the country. Why? There is not a single train station in my constituency and the one closest to the airport, East Midlands Parkway, does not even offer a regular bus service. People have to rely on demand-responsive transport from the closest train station to the airport.

Understandably, airport parking is one of the top subjects of correspondence I receive from my constituents, and even people outside my constituency have emailed because of the work my office has been doing on this issue. Drop-off charges, in particular, are a regular feature of my casework. Parking at East Midlands airport has recently been made barrierless—a lot of other Members have referred to that today—meaning that people can pay only online, or by using an automated phone line by midnight the following day. It can be really easy to forget to pay.

Alison Taylor: Does my hon. Friend agree that excessive drop-off charges can lead to dangerous behaviour around airports? The other day, I observed a taxi dropping off passengers in one of the lanes on the one-way system around Glasgow international airport, and I know that passengers are being dropped off further afield; they then have to walk along the side of the one-way system. Has my hon. Friend experienced difficulties like that in her constituency?

Amanda Hack: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that important point. We have a double red line zone around East Midlands airport, which makes things incredibly dangerous, particularly for those who work at the airport, and whose family cannot afford the drop-off charges. They struggle to get their loved ones to work safely. Of course, most airports allow people to set up an automatic payment account, but that is simply not accessible for all. Some people use drop-off services only once or twice a year. Airports are essentially operating a system in which it is impossible to pay at the point of sale. I have repeatedly asked East Midlands airport to install a pay terminal inside the airport building, but that request has been repeatedly refused.

The drop-off parking system is unfair, and I wrote to the parking management company, APCOA, to request data about the number of parking charge notices issued prior to the installation of the barrierless system at East Midlands airport and following the installation of that system. APCOA did not want to share that data, which I think answers my question. We need to look at the infrastructure around airports. On consumer protection, making sure that people can get to and from the airport safely has to be part of the conversation, because travellers and those who work at the airport feel that they have no choice other than to drive there, or to get a family member to drop them off, which adds costs to a holiday, or to travelling for work. I have raised this point with the Department before, and I would welcome an update on it from the Minister in his closing speech.

It has to be said, though, that East Midlands airport has been doing some really valuable work on supporting and encouraging travel for people with disabilities. Last year, its assisted travel service won a national award for its initiatives to make travel more accessible and easier; the Minister experienced that at first hand when he visited my airport last week. It has also introduced the first UK WhatsApp-based live chat system for assisted travel customers, and has invested about £1.5 million in specialist vehicles, mobility aids and terminal accessibility features. I have travelled on one of those; as somebody who is frightened of heights, it did not really fill me with confidence, but not because it was not safe. East Midlands airport has also installed improved signage, refurbished toilets and provided quiet rooms, as well as a Changing Places toilet.

Accessibility should not be the subject of a big, long conversation; it just needs to be embedded, and I think it is shameful that we are still having this conversation nationally. I greatly welcome the Government's commitment to strengthening the rights of passengers, particularly in the accessibility space, and to removing compensation limits for wheelchairs, mobility aids and other assistive devices that are lost, damaged or destroyed by UK domestic flights. One interesting thing that arises when dealing with casework is that although wheelchairs are incredibly expensive, the time away from the wheelchair is just as important to consider. Replacing something specially adapted for a person is not an overnight job. They cannot order it from Amazon; it takes weeks to be delivered. Of course, there is more to be done on this, and I ask the Minister to set out in his response the timetable for consultation on accessibility issues.

As a parent of a child who is multiple allergic, the conversation about how we treat those with allergies on flights is a really pressing issue for me. I am greatly pleased that the Government have committed to consulting on a range of accessibility issues, including allergies. With 3 million people in the UK alone affected by food allergies, it is essential that these concerns be addressed. Natasha's Foundation, the UK food allergy charity, has put together a detailed briefing on the issues that people with food allergies face on planes, including some real-life stories. I do not think we can overestimate the dedicated work of Natasha's family, and the personal impact on them of the tragic loss of Natasha on a plane. I encourage the Minister to read that report. It includes the fact that about 10% of travellers with food allergies report having had an allergic reaction during a flight. Allergies account for between 2% and 4% of all medical issues that arise on board commercial airlines. I can genuinely say, as the parent of a child with multiple allergies, that sending her on a plane is absolutely terrifying. She travelled alone for the first time earlier this year, for about five hours, and was not offered food on the flight because the crew could not manage her allergies. We need to consider those matters extremely seriously.

In the light of the overnight air traffic control issue, I think it is also pertinent to talk about passenger, pilot and crew wellbeing in the event of a delay on our runways, and how it could be better managed through legislation. In February last year, I attended a roundtable discussion organised by the all-party parliamentary group on occupational safety and health, which was hosting a group of pilots representing the British Airline Pilots' Association. We heard from the delegation about the ongoing challenges facing pilots, from regulatory failures to significant welfare concerns, particularly when boarding has already taken place. One of the situations described was pilots' access to toilets. Delegates told us that pilots

were frequently unable to use the toilet, and that sanitary items were often not provided for pilots, crew or passengers in the event of a delay. A key factor in the lack of access to such facilities is the fact that rest breaks have been driven down to legal minimums, and that too is something that we need to consider.

I welcome the Bill's commitment to strengthening passenger protection and ensuring that the industry maintains the highest standards of safety, but I hope that when the Minister responds to the debate, he will tell us what actions will be taken to support pilots and aeroplane staff during delays such as the one that occurred overnight.

5.22 pm

Graham Leadbitter (Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey) (SNP): The Secretary of State commented on the extensive and continued disruption of passenger and air freight services that has occurred as a consequence of the collapse of the NATS system yesterday. That disruption will not be fully resolved before the weekend. For people and businesses in Scotland and across the UK, this is deeply concerning. It results in lost work time, affecting productivity, and it disrupts time-critical services, including medical flights and cold-chain delivery mechanisms. For example, about £1 million-worth of Scottish salmon is exported through Heathrow alone every single day, and that is just one sector in one of the home nations. That level of disruption, affecting all the home nations and, indeed, many other countries, cannot be allowed to happen again.

There is a serious question to be asked about the clear lack of back-up systems, given that this incident lasted for several hours, with an estimated quarter of a million passengers disrupted. I welcome the actions that the Secretary of State set out, but I urge the Department to publish an assessment of the cost of this episode to individuals and businesses as soon as practicable. I am certain that Ministers will have cross-party backing in holding hold NATS to account and ensuring that it has far more robust back-up systems in future.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I am sorry that my voice still has not come back, but I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising these issues. As he will know, Stansted airport is right next to my constituency of Harlow, so this has had an impact on many people in the constituency, not just those who are travelling. Does he agree that it has also had an impact on those working in the airport, because of the huge disruption that it has caused?

Graham Leadbitter: Yes, absolutely. People in airports up and down the country are having to manage the delayed flights at their end. Pulling in people from around the airport adds cost. Some regional airports are operating on much smaller margins, and the expense of bringing in additional staff has a significant impact on them. This incident will have been not just frustrating for many people, but quite distressing and very costly.

The measures in this Bill are predominantly welcome, and the SNP here and in government in Scotland is broadly supportive. However, I draw attention to amendment 33, tabled in the Lords, which introduced a review of airport parking charges, which was not in the Bill originally. I am not against that in principle, but the original text would not have required a legislative consent motion. It looks like consent will now be required, following the introduction of amendment 33 in the Lords, and I ask the Minister to address that point. If a legislative consent motion is required from the Scottish Parliament, it is essential that appropriate time is built in for proper scrutiny of this element of the Bill by MSPs, prior to Report.

I want to raise the issues facing people with e-visas. Many have not been allowed to board aircraft coming to the UK, even though they have a legitimate right to travel and gain entry, because ground staff are not sufficiently trained or aware of how to check and scrutinise e-visa documentation. In these circumstances, passengers who are incorrectly refused boarding may not have a right to be compensated. That can be hugely costly and is inherently unfair. The legislation provides protection for adequately documented passengers who are denied boarding, but it does not define what constitutes being "adequately documented". The Prime Minister has talked about giving people agency, but many people in such circumstances clearly do not have agency.

For digital documentation, it seems obvious that the onus should be on the carrier to check it. A passenger in another country, with potential language barriers and limited digital access, is clearly disadvantaged if the onus is on them. The campaign group the3million has proposed a well-considered amendment to the Bill, which I am sure the Minister will be aware of. Will he give consideration to tackling that issue through an amendment to the Bill? It is a significant consumer issue for people who are entitled to travel and have a visa, but are refused boarding. It is a very costly experience if they do not get compensation for being incorrectly refused boarding.

I have two significant airports in my constituency: a civilian airport in Inverness, and an airbase at RAF Lossiemouth. Clearly, military aircraft movements do not come under civilian aircraft legislation, but people who live in the vicinity of a military base experience noise and environmental issues. I am not suggesting for a minute that there should be constraints that would make operational flying difficult for the military. However, in the case of regular training exercises and regular training flights, which is predominantly what most flights out of our military bases are, more work could be done to improve how the military communicates with local communities. The expectations should be a bit closer to our expectations for a normal domestic airport. Has the Minister considered that, and will the Department have conversations with the Ministry of Defence to see how much room there is for manoeuvre?

We do not necessarily need hard legislation that says the MOD must do x, y and z, because it would be wrong to constrain its ability to do its core work. However, we could explore how to minimise the environmental impact of routine flights on people who live close to what can be very noisy bases. They accept the noise, because the bases produce a huge amount of employment. People recognise their importance to the defence of the country, so they are very accepting, but that does not mean that this issue should not be addressed in the best possible way to try to improve things. We should always be looking for improvement.

Finally, I commute to this place 40 weeks a year, give or take, so I take 80 flights a year. I spend about seven hours a week either in airports or on aircraft. Like other

[Graham Leadbitter]

Members, I emphasise that it is a predominantly positive experience, and is largely without significant delay, but when significant delays do occur and people miss connections, often to long-haul flights, it can be really distressing, so the consumer element and protecting people are absolutely critical.

I have regularly seen passengers who have been distressed about the circumstances they are in. Sometimes, they are flying for deeply personal reasons—bereavements and such like—and it is a more stressful form of transport than getting on and off a bus. Unlike people taking a single bus for a few miles and getting off at the other end, they have to plan for security, plan for their baggage and all those things. It requires a lot more thinking before someone gets on a plane, and for those who are there in difficult circumstances, it is all the more important that we ensure the experience is as good as it possibly can be for the people using it.

5.30 pm

Tim Roca (Macclesfield) (Lab): I thank my right hon. and hon. Friends in the ministerial team for their assiduous work in preparing and bringing forward this Bill. He is no longer in his seat, but I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane) for all the work he did as a Minister in government and a shadow Minister in opposition. I also thank the Members of the other place for their work in scrutinising the Bill ahead of its coming to us here.

The Bill represents another example of how the Government are on the side of consumers. On taking office, the new Prime Minister launched a series of very practical, everyday fixes to improve consumer rights in a number of areas, including lowering costs and empowering consumers to take action when they have been inconvenienced. I see this Bill in that tradition, as another step on the path of improving consumer rights in aviation. By giving the Civil Aviation Authority direct enforcement powers and increasing transparency to ensure that passengers are always told who is operating their flight and how they can find redress, the Bill is another example of the Government rebalancing power back in favour of the consumer, and I applaud it.

My constituency of Macclesfield is well served by Manchester airport. More than 500 jobs in my constituency are dependent on the airport, which is the third busiest in the UK. I understand that it is the busiest airport outside London, and it is certainly the global gateway to the north of England. Like many people, I fly out of Manchester myself. It is a great airport, and a great part of the economy of the north-west. Perhaps not uniquely—I may be proved wrong—its major shareholders are mainly the councils of Greater Manchester, which is a great example of sharing prosperity from an important economic asset. I thank all the staff at the airport for helping 30 million people to get through check-in, security and the departure lounge, and to fly to where they need to be mostly hassle-free, and I think we should acknowledge that.

However, as I am sure is common across all airports, sometimes things go wrong, whether it is a bag that does not make it or a flight that is significantly delayed. Disruption can occur at any moment, and we have certainly seen that with the NATS events in the last 24 hours. Clauses 1 to 3 of the Bill will give me and other passengers much greater confidence that, when things do go wrong, they can be put right. Given the changing nature of air travel and global trends, it is right that the Bill empowers the Secretary of State to act on behalf of passengers without having to pass further primary legislation, such as on baggage damage, liability for passenger insurance, ensuring price transparency and ensuring flights are accessible to all passengers, especially those who are disabled, about which my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Cheshire (Andrew Cooper) made a powerful case.

These new powers ensure that the Secretary of State can be a true advocate for passengers and quickly update the rules to ensure that there is appropriate compensation when things go wrong. I was much taken by the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Mr Barros-Curtis) about exploring an automated delay repay system, which I think has great merit. I certainly want to see the new British standard-sized bag when it finally emerges. For a moment, it sounded as though the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Luke Taylor) had a particularly traumatic summer because of at least one airline. I look forward to the consultation that Ministers will bring forward within 12 months, and I will certainly urge my constituents who have written to me about their own experiences to respond to that consultation so that Ministers can act on their behalf.

I particularly welcome the change in clause 4 to provide greater compensation for damaged or lost accessibility equipment on domestic flights. As has been said, a wheelchair is a precious and crucial asset for disabled people. They sometimes—too often—have to fight to get a mobility aid in the first place, and it can often be specialist and extremely expensive. It is therefore right that if an airline is careless enough to lose or damage an aid, the compensation owed to the person it has left inconvenienced in an incredible way is made properly and is appropriate for someone who is unable to navigate with the freedom they once had. I cannot imagine the level of inconvenience caused to people in those circumstances, so I am glad the consumer rights in this area are being strengthened. With the Bill giving the CAA the same consumer protection enforcement powers as the Competition and Markets Authority, passengers will now have a powerful new ally in the fight for compensation that is owed but is not as forthcoming as it should be.

Beyond the consumer protections, I welcome the reforms the Bill introduces to the antiquated airspace management system of airport slots, schedules and allocations. It is particularly positive that the airspace changes will hopefully lead to reduced noise around airports for residents and decreased emissions through more efficient flying. These are sensible, long overdue reforms that help to make aviation more sustainable. Anyone who has been held in a stack while waiting for a landing spot can attest to the fact that a more efficient use of airspace to decrease the need for holding patterns is very welcome. It is good that the Government are reforming slots and schedules. We saw during covid that the current system is not flexible enough. Giving Ministers the power to adjust the rules, either in an emergency such as covid or to encourage competition between airlines, which is so important, it is a welcome step that will improve things for passengers.

I will finish on the issue of airport drop-off charges, which has been raised by Members on both sides of the House. I ask that Ministers think carefully about it in view of the scrutiny in the other place. A number of residents in Macclesfield have raised it with me. Manchester airport operates a barrierless drop-off. That is great for efficiency, but constituents have complained to me that the signage is inadequate, the prices are too steep and the period to pay is not long enough. Certainly, the fines for those who do not pay within that short period are punishing. Manchester airport, through APCOA, levies a £100 fine if the charge is not paid within 24 hours of drop-off or pick-up.

I simply do not believe that 24 hours is a long enough period for many people, including my constituents who have written to me on this issue. Many did not realise that they had to pay, not having seen the signage, which is inadequate. Some struggled with the online payment system, or the payment system rejected their car registration number. In one particularly egregious case, a constituent of mine was fined because their bank did not process the payment over a Sunday. There seems to be no reason why the payment period could not be increased and I do not see any reason why the third-party provider could not issue a written notice of the requirement to pay before a fine is levied. One gets the impression in these cases that the policy is designed to cause people to incur fines to increase revenue, rather than to encourage people to pay for parking in an orderly and appropriate way.

Chris Vince: The idea of drop-off fines is to try to convince people to travel to airports via other means. My airport, Stansted, is very accessible by train and new bus routes have been put on, but in the example given by my hon. Friend the Member for North West Leicestershire (Amanda Hack)—we have discussed this before—that option is not available. It seems unfair, if there are not good transport links to an airport, that such charges exist. As I say, in my case it is not such an issue, but in my hon. Friend's case I can see why it is a problem.

Tim Roca: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. Earlier in the debate, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Cheshire (Andrew Cooper) made the powerful point that his constituents live within 10 miles of the airport but do not have decent public transport links to it. That certainly has to be a part of the conversation as well.

Alison Taylor: Does my hon. Friend agree that if there are to be drop-off charges, then at the very least they should be increased only in line with inflation? At Glasgow airport, the increases since 2019 have way outstripped the cost of living and the normal rate of increases in line with inflation.

Tim Roca: I totally agree with my hon. Friend. Every day is a school day in this place and I was not aware that Glasgow airport did not have a direct rail link to the centre of Glasgow, one of the UK's most important cities. One might think, after however many aeons the SNP has been in charge in Scotland, that it might have seen that as a priority, but that is not for me say.

In conclusion, this is a very practical and pragmatic Bill, which I thoroughly welcome. I thank Ministers for all their hard work and I hope it progresses smoothly through its further stages.

5.39 pm

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): In my constituency, people understand the importance of Gatwick to the local economy—not least because many of them have a job there. However, the way that public consultation has been handled over the last decade has created deep anxiety about what changes to airports and airspace will mean for them, their families and the communities they live in. It is on their behalf that I am asking for the introduction of a dedicated aviation ombudsman, especially in the context of the need to lay out new flightpaths.

I am wholly supportive of the need for airspace modernisation, which is being carried out across the whole of Europe. It will bring welcome improvements in both emissions and safety. As part of that process, Gatwick Airport Ltd is looking for a change to a particular currently agreed flightpath, such that planes leaving west and turning south to Europe will be able to do so almost immediately after take-off, instead of building up height first. In doing so, Gatwick will inflict major noise pollution over north Horsham and three rural villages that are not currently overflown to a great extent.

When the same route, known as ADNID, was trialled 10 years ago, it provoked an explosion of public distress. The then CEO swiftly withdrew it and promised never to introduce it again. However, lo and behold, in the last round of public consultation—subsequently cancelled—Gatwick gave Horsham people a choice of three airspace plans, all three of which contained that identical route. It was less Gatwick's choice, more Hobson's choice. Why did Gatwick do that: simply because it would enable it to increase the number of take-off slots, which are potentially worth millions. That is a clear conflict of interest, and I have great difficulty believing that the financial incentive had no influence whatsoever on Gatwick's thinking. Either way, at the very least it risks the perception of bias.

What is particularly aggrieving is that the route is not necessary. Given all the other changes going on at the same time, it would make a negligible contribution to efficiency, emissions reduction or even capacity, seeing as Gatwick is heading for a huge increase in capacity owing to a second runway and other measures.

Unfortunately, the voice of the consumer plays such a small part in the process that no one is able to add up the pros and cons. It is all on the side of industry. I therefore asked the then aviation Minister to include an independent member as standard on airspace review panels. He declined, and now the whole process has been restarted anyway, but we still have a situation where the citizen has no power to challenge major changes that will affect their lives.

Another CAA reform further illustrates my point. The Department's new air navigation guidance, published last month, lowers the altitude up to which noise must be prioritised over efficiency from 7,000 feet to 5,000 feet—I referred to that in a previous question to the Secretary of State. That means that fewer people will be able to argue against such a route on noise grounds.

[John Milne]

That happened in the same year that the CAA's own new research—the aviation noise attitudes survey and the aviation night noise effects study—found that the noise level at which people become highly annoyed is 43 dB, rather than 54 dB, as previously advised.

Communities are more sensitive to noise than the Department's own evidence said a decade ago, yet the response has been to shrink, not extend, the altitude band where noise takes priority. Where is the voice of the resident in that? It will have a material impact on decisions in my area, as well as at other airports. Why is the CAA allowed to mark its own homework when no one else is? There already is an alternative dispute resolution available for consumer complaints—such as a refund for a delayed bag or cancelled flight—but it is not a usable tool for regulatory decisions, such as where a flightpath goes, how the noise is distributed or which homes end up underneath it.

The Government's written answers confirm that dissatisfaction with a CAA regulatory decision cannot be pursued through the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman; it can only go to internal or judicial review. For the great majority of residents, neither of those is a realistic option.

We have been here before. Water is another industry that touches growth, employment, the environment and people's daily lives, and where trust has been totally destroyed. The Government's answer to that issue was that there should be a new legally binding water ombudsman. Like campaigners the length and breadth of the country, I believe that aviation deserves the same treatment.

The Minister has written to me arguing that there is already a consultation process, but most residents will be left completely unaware of major changes, and, even if they were aware, they would be unable to do anything significant about it. As proposed, the process is so completely dominated by the industry voice that even a modest request, such as not repeating the same mistake on flight paths around Horsham, can never get any kind of hearing.

I think that the Minister is wrong to assume that the industry always knows what is best in all circumstances. Fairness and objectivity should be offered on CAA regulatory decisions and on consumer and passenger rights alike. I therefore ask the Government to look again and to shore up this Bill with an independent ombudsman for aviation.

5.45 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): First, I want to mention the events of yesterday. I will usually get letters from constituents all over the country about such experiences, because Heathrow is located in my constituency and they therefore think I am responsible for it—I usually send apologetic replies back. Behind the suffering that people went through will be a large number of staff who were working incredibly hard at all levels of the organisation to put it right. This happens on every occasion.

Nevertheless, NATS management needs to be held to account. The Secretary of State has said that she will expect a report within six months, so it would be helpful to have statements during that period to reassure people about exactly what did happen, as well as covering the actions that need to be taken.

Luke Taylor: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that particular reference should be given to the previous failures and to the 37 actions, I believe, that should have been completed to resolve the previous incident, as well as explaining quite how this was allowed to occur again? As he says, it is critical that we get to the bottom of what happened, but also that we are able to hold it to account.

John McDonnell: I think that goes to the heart of the debate that we are having, which is about levels of accountability within our structures themselves. NATS is accountable to the CAA, but who is the CAA accountable to?

I have raised with the Secretary of State proposed new section 61G of the Civil Aviation Act 1982, on the priorities and objectives of the Secretary of State in relation to aviation, which sets out that they must issue a document that is a directive to the CAA. The reason I asked about the proposed new clause is that, given the way it is drafted, I thought we were eventually going to move towards a more expansive document that would set out in detail some of the issues, particularly on the environment, for my interest, but also service delivery and so on. In fact, the document is currently simply a letter, a couple of pages long, that will be sent on a regular basis, usually annually, and laid before Parliament.

I thought that this legislation would be useful in giving us something more substantial; something that would be consulted on in more detail; and something that would set out a more detailed direction to the CAA as to how it should implement its responsibilities and role, as a result of which the CAA would then become more accountable to the Secretary of State and therefore to this House. The point is that when things go wrong, actions are agreed, but we never really get the substance of the follow-up on those actions. That is the problem.

I will just raise another example that people might remember taking place at Heathrow, which is when the substation went up in flames, and we then discovered that the fall-back operations were not working effectively either. There is a real vulnerability for the future. I think we need a bit more of an authoritative role for this House, in terms of how the Secretary of State can influence the CAA and make it more accountable. That is the main point I wanted to make.

I do not think that people realise the massive power that the CAA has and the implications that has for the lives and health of literally millions of people when it determines flight paths and standards of performance. The legislation needs further debate on other aspects as well, but I do not think we have got much further in establishing an effective structure for airspace decision making. There is very little independent monitoring in the decision making, and it becomes impossible to challenge, as the hon. Member for Horsham (John Milne) said, because local communities do not have the resources for judicial review—they are just on their own.

There does not seem to be the basic accountability mechanism that we would expect of other bodies performing similar public duties.

Noah Law (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): I understand what my right hon. Friend and other colleagues across the House are saying about the need for independent oversight, particularly on the aviation side, but on the consumer side, does he agree that when the CAA works, it really does work, as in the case of the constituent of the hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Vikki Slade)? Therefore, does he agree that is absolutely right for the Government to bring forward those powers for consumer protection?

John McDonnell: I fully agree, and let me also say that wheelchair compensation is significant in this legislation. Most of us have dealt with cases like that.

Going back to accountability in the process, a number of different organisations have provided us with notes on the legislation. The Heathrow Association for the Control of Aircraft Noise, which I have worked with for over 20 years now, provided us with a helpful note. HACAN reminds us that when the CAA sets out airspace changes, the CAA oversees the progress of the stages and approves whether the consultation—its own consultation—has been adequate or not. In addition, it decides whether the proposals may proceed. It operates its own complaints route, and complaints on issues around airspace are almost impenetrable. The CAA has immense power, and it seems to be a law unto itself in many instances. It has been said in the House today that the lack of consultation is one of its main vulnerabilities.

New flight paths are already being prepared, discussed and considered. In the Heathrow expansion, when Heathrow puts forward its plan for a third runway, it will not be Heathrow that says what the flight paths will be. It cannot be; it is now the airport service that has been set up under NATS. In all my experience with Heathrow, I have never known a thorough and adequate consultation process to take place with regard to the development of airport routes.

I was hoping that we might get more detail in the legislation. That is why I come back to the issue of the Secretary of State's document, which could be a really powerful mechanism. We could determine, through debates here—therefore, instructions to the Secretary of State—how the CAA will operate in the future.

On the environment, I feel that there is a real lack of firm duties and responsibilities set out in the legislation and guidance procedure that takes into account the health and wellbeing of people and communities. Reference has been made to noise. I cannot believe that we are still in the same situation where we have different noise criteria used in different mechanisms when it comes to decisions being taken. The Gatwick and Luton developments are using two different criteria—two different levels—from which they place the restrictions.

I have gone through the debates and discussions we have had over time and, as some hon. Members will know, we have gone from 57 dB to 53 dB, and then to 43 dB, which is the World Health Organisation's figure—for the life of me, I do not understand why we do not respect its expertise in all this—and we apply different measures for different decisions, which are driven largely by factors other than the health consequences for people and the impact of noise.

The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Luke Taylor) mentioned the all-party parliamentary group meeting we had on Monday, when we received the latest research. May I put on record my thanks to Dr Charlotte Clark, professor of environmental epidemiology and population health? She has done research on all of this over the years and is the expert. She looked at some of the health implications at the lowest levels of noise that we have been debating, and there was an element of shock for some of us: we knew about the cardiovascular impact, but we now know much more about the impact on mental health in particular.

One of the issues that has come out of our discussions—this includes the Heathrow expansion consultation—is that the latest research on noise and health impacts has not been sufficiently monetised in the discussions and consultations that have taken place. So decision making—particularly on the latest Heathrow expansion proposals—could be on the basis of health impact monetisation as a result of increased noise whose level should be perhaps four times what the Government have put forward so far.

Our constituents are becoming increasingly aware of the health impacts of noise in particular and are demanding greater protections However, from the legislation we are debating, I cannot see how those greater protections will be translated unless we have a stronger capacity in this House to determine the guidance given to the CAA and the parameters set for it in the decision-making process.

I will give hon. Members this example of the debates that have taken place. For the aviation policy framework, we dealt with 57 dB. For the survey of noise attitudes, we looked at 54 dB. We then went to 51 dB and, as I said, 43 dB in the aviation noise attitudes survey and the aviation night-time noise effects study analyses, which relate to the World Health Organisation. We cannot keep going on without a proper noise standard applicable across our whole decision-making process that reflects the latest research on health impacts. I do not think we are there at the moment.

I am pleased with the legislation, because there are some meritorious proposals that will no doubt improve the passenger experience, but it really does not take into account the community experience and the impact it will have. That is why the running theme is that somehow—I will table amendments with others—we have got to get a greater level of accountability, a greater level of transparency and a greater level of empowerment of those communities who are impacted. The proposal by the hon. Member for Horsham for an ombudsman is one mechanism that could be used and could be helpful as a longstop. At the moment, when people in my constituency are faced with these problems, they do not know where to go; it is as simple as that.

Finally, the debate that we will have on Heathrow expansion and the new policy statement will be interesting, given that we do not know what the flight paths will be. If I was a constituent of my hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Danny Beales), I would be extremely worried.

In my constituency, because the flights are largely east-west and west-east, we have the bizarre situation that they affect Longford where, when the aircraft fly over you feel like throwing yourself to the floor, and they affect a number of the Heathrow villages, but they do not as yet impact on the centre of my constituency. We now have the risk that the flight paths might well do that. So, again, we are talking about maybe another

[John McDonnell]

1 million or so people being impacted by the development of Heathrow, yet in our debate in this House about the policy statement we will not have certainty about those flight paths. That cannot be right when making such a major decision. That is why I am hoping that when the Committee meets and when we come back on Report we can have a sensible debate about the sort of amendments that can be brought forward on that theme of accountability, because if we can increase accountability, we can increase confidence in Government decision making on this issue in the long term.

I agree with hon. Members who have raised the importance of aviation to our economy. Of course it is important; it employs a large number of my constituents, and we are trying to make sure that we create aviation capacity that is economically beneficial to the country while protecting our constituents' health and wellbeing overall.

6 pm

Noah Law (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): I declare an interest as the newly elected chair of the all-party group on aviation.

I welcome the steps taken by our Labour Government today to improve accessibility and protections for disabled airline passengers, to bolster consumer protections, and to simplify the legislative framework, and in doing so to boost our economy and the aviation sector more broadly. We have heard a lot today about the potential benefits of that. There are benefits as much as there are increased obligations for carriers, but I would be keen to hear more from the Minister in his winding up about some of the benefits that we can unlock on the airport and infrastructure side as well, because we have heard today from colleagues representing other small regional airports about the compliance costs associated with that. I would be interested to hear from Ministers how this Bill could address that, and what other support the Department could put in place to help small regional airports, such as Cornwall Airport Newquay in my constituency and a neighbouring constituency.

We know in the case of Cornwall Airport Newquay that the Cornwall Council approach has chopped and changed. As Ministers have heard before, that is deeply unhelpful, but only by improving the passenger experience, as this Bill doubtless does, will we be able to encourage improved passenger footfall and boost revenues to support the sustainability of airports such as Cornwall Airport Newquay.

I thank the Minister for the steps that Cornish MPs have already heard about in relation to the public service obligation. I appreciate that Ministers have left the door open to Cornwall council to continue or restart those conversations, should it be able to bring eligible bids forward in the future. That is really important, because as much as we can all work to promote commercial conversations with various airlines—and new routes have been introduced on the back of that—it is only through support for regional airports and by improving the passenger experience, as I know this Bill will do, will we boost the use of those airports.

We have also heard of the importance of transport connectivity—integrated transport. I know that this Government's devolution programme and the extension of bus franchising, such as the work we are doing with Cornwall council, should prove fertile ground for improving links where councils choose to take up those powers and use them constructively. I use this opportunity, perhaps shamelessly so, to be an advocate for regional airports and the connectivity they provide to basket-case situations, as we see in Cornwall's current transport links. I call on the Minister to go beyond these great steps that he is taking today to support regional airports such as mine in Newquay.

6.4 pm

Samantha Dixon (Chester North and Neston) (Lab): The UK's aviation sector continues to grow, breaking passenger records year after year as people travel in their millions. This growth is undoubtedly good for the economy, for trade and for growth, and also for the everyday British air passenger, giving us more opportunities to travel for work, leisure and beyond. We are well served in Chester North and Neston by Manchester airport, Liverpool John Lennon and, to a lesser extent, Hawarden airport. Additionally, many constituents are employed in the sector, at the airports or at Airbus over the border in north Wales. The company Exolum keeps aviation fuel flowing through my constituency.

We must, however, make sure that as the expansion of the sector continues, we keep pace. Over recent days, we have seen what can happen when things go wrong; hundreds of flights have been cancelled or delayed across the country since last night. I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for her update earlier this afternoon on the NATS outage. We have a responsibility to improve the protections of air passengers, to give them the confidence that they need to continue supporting British aviation, and I believe that the Bill is the best way to do that.

My constituents have previously written to me to express their concerns about delays and disruptions to flights. In particular, one resident from Upton was deeply concerned about the cancellation of many flights worldwide earlier in March, triggered by rising oil prices. In recent years, major disruptions seem to have become more commonplace. From conflicts in Ukraine and the middle east disrupting flight paths and the cost of jet fuel to global pandemics shutting down almost all air traffic globally, these extraordinary events have had huge repercussions for the air passenger and highlighted the need for a more modern system that can adapt to a changing world.

On a smaller level, we are all keenly aware of the many ways that the cost of living crisis has had an impact on us all. People up and down the country work hard to save for holidays abroad. The increasingly common choice of short-haul, low-fare flights benefits us all, putting more money into a sector that employs tens of thousands of highly skilled workers, growing our economy up and down the country. But we must make sure that, as we look to modernise and secure the aviation industry, we protect the consumer and ensure that their custom is not taken for granted.

It is right that we work to strengthen consumer rights for air passengers, including over flight delays and cancellations, and to ensure price transparency for baggage and other costs that are often hidden through drip pricing. I also welcome the attention to disabled passengers'

rights, ensuring that future regulation keeps all passengers in mind and keeps access to the skies equitable. In our increasingly global world, securing our aviation sector is a vital aspect of our wider economic growth, but beyond that, the security for air passengers that the Bill proposes will work to ensure that this economic strength is delivered hand in hand with consumers' confidence that they will be protected when things go wrong.

6.8 pm

Danny Beales (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for her opening remarks and for the measures in this Bill, which are broadly very welcome for passengers and for many in airport communities such as mine. To share the Secretary of State's comments, my thoughts are also with those individuals and families who face significant disruption this week through the failure of NATS. It shows just how vital air travel is to people right across this country for business and for leisure, and the impact when it goes wrong. Although it is not directly related to the Bill, there has been lots of discussion in this debate about the incident and about the lessons that we can and should learn.

At Heathrow, the major airport in my borough, we have now unfortunately got somewhat used to quite significant incidents. There was recently a grid power outage, which caused significant disruption, and there have been a number of other incidents. We clearly need to look at the resilience of our air travel system and at planning for such incidents, which are increasingly common and can cause significant and harmful disruption to businesses and individuals. I hope that there will be a thorough consideration of the issue, as the Secretary of State said there would be. The sector could learn lessons more broadly than from this instance and better resilience planning could be put into place.

The Bill is welcome news for my constituents and the travellers who come through my home borough of Hillingdon. The borough has not just one airport but two: we are home to Heathrow and RAF Northolt, which has a significant and increasing civilian operation involving private flights that come under civil aviation. We are not shy of or ignorant of issues arising from civil aviation—flights, disruption and balancing some of the trade-offs and challenges that come with air travel.

My constituency neighbour and right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), who is no longer in his place, has already talked about some of the concerns about potential Heathrow expansion and the third runway; I am sure that the House will rightly turn its attention to those very soon. Those of us who believe in a better but not necessarily bigger Heathrow need to see measures to address the current challenges that Heathrow presents, regardless of expansion. That is why the Bill is particularly welcome.

There will be much better consumer protections when things go wrong, as they sometimes inevitably will. The Bill also takes action to tackle some of the wild west behaviours and differences between the approaches of airlines and contractors; that has been mentioned when it comes to hand luggage, but there are also different, hard-to-navigate approaches when it comes to compensation and delay payments. Those who have experienced disruption will often remember having to hunt down air staff at 10 or 11 at night when the desk is closed. They have tried to find anyone who works for the airline concerned to find out what is going on and what compensation they may be able to get—only to get a £5 paper voucher for refreshments, which will buy about half a sandwich in an airport concession.

I support comments from Members about looking at best practice and upping and standardising the quality of provision, as well as learning from other sectors such as rail; the automatic "delay repay" system has been mentioned. For my sins, I have recently travelled on Avanti and have had to use that quite frequently. It is a helpful tool, and there is a quick compensation turnaround. Notably, the compensation is a payment for the cash that the customer paid for the travel that they did not get. Unfortunately, far too often the disruption payments from airlines are an invitation to travel on the airline again. A voucher to travel again on easyJet when someone has not been able to travel the first time seems perverse.

Luke Taylor: To add grist to the mill of all our travel experiences, I had a case in which a customer chose to pay for a seat allocation so that they could sit with their children. They got on the flight and were then moved, and had to claim compensation on the extra service they had paid for—otherwise they would not have got a refund. Does the hon. Member agree that these sorts of things need to be automated and quickened up to improve passenger experience and customer protection?

Danny Beales: I wholeheartedly agree, and this Bill is a fantastic opportunity to address some of the issues that have lingered for too long in the sector. Boosting enforcement powers at the Civil Aviation Authority would enable faster enforcement when those rights are not applied. That is also welcome.

Members have rightly mentioned the need for a much tighter definition of "extraordinary events", and the need to ensure that it is properly applied. It cannot be a catch-all opt-out for airlines, allowing them to get around the requirements. I strongly welcome the removal of the cap on baggage, specialist equipment and wheelchairs. In the Health and Social Care Committee, and in other debates, we talk a lot about the challenge of getting specialist adaptive equipment. It can take a long time to get bespoke equipment. It is incredibly damaging and destructive if it is lost or damaged when a person travels, and they are not able to reclaim the full cost, so I strongly welcome that provision. I encourage the Minister to ensure that when the cap is removed and the provision is applied, there are no unintended consequences—that airlines do not become unwilling to allow such equipment to be stowed and boarded, and do not refuse to fly individuals because of the insurance risk around their equipment. I hope that we will ensure that there are no unintended consequences of applying the right policy.

I strongly support the provisions around modernising our airspace. We have to modernise outdated routes, now that we have modern flights, and now that technology is emerging that has a much lesser noise impact. There are options and flexibilities that remove the significant impact on heavily trafficked flight paths. How we do this is just as important as if we do it; it must be done with proper assessment and consultation of residents.

[Danny Beales]

It cannot be right to have just a few heavily trafficked routes, leading to the piling up and circling of flights and an unnecessary additional burden on communities.

I support the comments made about the value of the Bill looking at abusive travellers and their impact on staff, both at the airport and cabin-side. Air workers face unacceptable amounts of abuse in all forms, physical and verbal, and it is increasing. The stats from a recent Unite survey of just 300 workers in Scottish airports showed that 90% had experienced verbal abuse on a regular basis, 75% had experienced intimidation and aggression, and almost a third had experienced some form of physical assault. We are becoming a bit numb to the abuse and regular intimidation that public sector workers and those in customer-facing roles experience; it happens to hospital, rail and shop workers. We have to take action; we have done, for shop workers. I hope that we can explore the issue and use clause 13, which gives a power to create offences to properly deal with airline and airport abuse. Crucially—Unite the union is right about this—this has to apply not just to abuse in the cabin; it has to apply to the whole journey, from entering the airport to sitting on the plane. Any abuse and intimidation has to be dealt with properly. We need a comprehensive system that ensures that when a person is banned from one airline, that carries across the whole airport system; the ban cannot put the staff at other providers at risk.

Finally, I turn to drop-off charges, which have been much discussed. We had a significantly busy Westminster Hall debate on this, which the Minister attended and responded to. This is an issue of great concern to my constituents. Charges have gone up significantly at Heathrow and at the other airports we have heard of today. Frustratingly for people locally, airports do not disclose what the revenue is used for. It is not clear whether it goes towards improving the situation, or is invested in community transport so that people can avoid having to drive to the airport. There are no direct public transport routes to Heathrow for staff and airport visitors from the north or Ruislip parts of my borough. It is incredibly difficult, particularly for evening and night workers, to get there on public transport.

I hope that the provisions added to the Bill will increase the transparency of information about drop-off charges, ensuring that they are adequately advertised, there are easy ways to pay them, and they are fairly implemented, and will ensure that the revenue they generate genuinely goes towards improving community transport. As has been said, the charges mean that people do not drive to the airport, but instead drive to the area around the drop-off zone. Local councils are made to pick up the enforcement costs relating to that parking, and to the illegal commercial car parks opened without permission. Through the review, I hope that we can properly address those issues, which are of significant concern to many of my constituents and my communities. Overall, I strongly welcome the provisions of the Bill, and I hope that it makes swift progress through this place.

6.20 pm

Alistair Strathern (Hitchin) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in support of the important measures that the Government are bringing forward in the Bill. I thank the Secretary of State for the way in which she set them out at the start of the debate, and for the updates and assurances that she was able to give about the further work that will be done after the disruption to air travel over the past 48 hours. I know that my constituents who have been affected, as well as the constituents of colleagues from across the House, will welcome those assurances.

Something that is deeply important to me—and, I know from correspondence, to many of my constituents—is finally tackling the accessibility issues that have affected far too many airline users with additional needs, because those needs are not being met appropriately. Since I was elected, it has been heartbreaking to hear about the ways in which the dignity of some of my constituents has been failed, from start to finish, by the aviation sector, when it has not been able to meet those needs appropriately. The removal of the compensation cap is an important way of tackling some of the most egregious issues that have affected my constituents.

There is nothing more undignified than losing your means of getting around, on which you rely. The loss of wheelchairs and other mobility equipment by airlines is an issue that needs far greater focus, and greater compensation is a useful tool for driving that. The indignity that my constituents, and those of other Members, have suffered as a result has not been capped, so the compensation that they receive should not be capped either. As my hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Danny Beales) pointed out, when we implement these measures, we must ensure that we do not allow them to become an excuse for airlines standing back from serving our constituents. In his summing up, will the Minister clarify how we can ensure that after the important and long-overdue removal of the compensation cap, airlines cannot step back from providing services, and must finally honour their commitment to step up and deliver for those with accessibility needs?

People's accessibility needs do not stop at the need to ensure that their equipment is transported safely and securely. From getting through airports to boarding planes to disembarking, my constituents with additional needs continue to face many challenges at airports, so I welcome the commitment from the Minister and the Government to thinking about how we can to go further to tackle those issues. In this day and age, when so many of these issues are resolvable, it simply cannot be right that so many people suffer indignity, and an impact on their wellbeing and their willingness to fly, as a result of a failure to meet these needs appropriately, be it in the airport or the fault of the carrier. I look forward to hearing more from the Minister about how the Government will consult on important measures to put that right. I am sure that many colleagues will intervene on him to hear at greater length about those considerations.

As the MP of a constituency that neighbours Luton airport, it would be remiss of me not to touch on the important things that could be unlocked by the Government's focus on modernising flight paths. There are well-rehearsed arguments about the number of planes that should be flying in and out of airports, but there can be no excuse for using flight paths that do not minimise the disruption and impact on the communities around them, as well as the environmental impact.

It beggars belief that for decades, many flight paths across the country have not been updated. I am glad that this Government are determined to put that right,

and are getting a grip on the issue. They are taking the powers needed to drive this forward, and to capitalise on new flight technology, so that we can hopefully significantly reduce the impact of airline disruption at take-off and landing—both in terms of noise and environmental impact. My constituents near the airport deserve to know that everything is being done to reduce the impact of flight trajectories on their day-to-day lives. A robust approach to modernising flight paths can play an important part in delivering that. The Minister and I have spoken about that at great length, and I look forward to him sharing a bit more detail about how we can use these new powers at Luton airport to improve the lives of my constituents in neighbouring villages.

We have had quite a bit of discussion today about how we can support people to get to our airports more easily. Luton airport and the pathways to it often run through my constituency, so a lot of my constituents—both those who use the airport and those who have to put up with the traffic from people travelling to it—have a really strong interest in it.

It was really encouraging to see the airport operator introduce a pilot scheme over August in which it refunded the bus travel of anyone travelling to the airport for their holidays. That seems like a great initiative to me; it supports public transport, improves the viability of our vital bus networks at a time when they have never been more important to so many in my community, and cuts the emissions of those who are able to use public transport. Crucially, the scheme also reduces some of the impact of travel to the airport on my constituents, because it takes traffic off the roads and puts it on the buses. At this stage, though, the scheme is only a pilot. I would welcome the Government's consideration, through both national legislation and direct engagement with the airport, of how we can continue to encourage the operator to incentivise this type of active travel.

Strong active travel requirements have been put in place for Luton airport through recent consent orders, but the airport is not currently meeting those requirements. I urge the Minister and the Government, in their conversations with the airport, to ensure that it is meeting those requirements, to consider how the pilot could be extended, and to ensure that my constituents travelling to the airport can continue to benefit from free bus travel. I also ask them to ensure that everything that can be done is done to minimise the number of cars travelling to the airport. That will reduce pollution and, crucially, reduce some of the congestion for my communities. That sounds like a win and, with the co-operation of the Minister and the airports, I am sure we can deliver that big, bold win for my community.

A number of other issues have been brought up in the debate that are not addressed by the Bill, but I am sure that the Minister will want to come back to them, and we will want to echo the points made today. I want to touch on the impact on those who work in the airline industry of the real rise in abuse and misbehaviour on planes. My constituency is near the airport, and a number of my constituents are very proud to work for airlines. They take great joy in the work that they do, and feel it is a great privilege to do it; they feel lucky to have the opportunity to do so on their doorstep. However, year after year, we have seen a worrying trend of increasing abusive behaviour from passengers. It has, on occasion, turned that dream to a daily nightmare.

Unite the Union's survey shows some pretty damning statistics about the increasing incidence of abuse of airline staff, and it is behoves all of us in this House to ensure that we take note and act accordingly. It simply cannot be right that 75% of airline staff surveyed were subject to verbal abuse recently, or that a third of them have been subject to physical intimidation or assault. It is in our power to start to put that right. Others have alluded to the fact that we see this worrying trend across public-facing services, but it behoves all of us in this House not to accept that worrying trend and instead to act on it. We must step up and protect our aviation workers and their right to work in a safe and secure workplace. We must ensure that they know that we, not just their employer, have their backs when they are subject to abuse.

I thank the Minister and the Government for everything that they have already done in this Bill, particularly to get a grip on modernising flight paths. I truly hope that can improve the wellbeing of my community and reduce the polluting impact of flights taking off and landing at Luton airport. I look forward to further discussion, in this debate and beyond, about how we can continue to improve the Bill in order to protect workers and ensure that we are doing everything we can to improve accessibility for passengers at airports.

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

6.28 pm

Alison Griffiths (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton) (Con): This has been a positive debate. I reiterate the call of the shadow Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Holden), and the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover), for the Government to make a statement on the third catastrophic systems failure of NATS. It is simply not good enough that the Secretary of State has come to the House only for Second Reading, and not to take questions from hon. Members. I am also deeply concerned to hear that she thinks six months is an acceptable time to take to report on this subject.

The Opposition's ambition is to foster the conditions for a safe, competitive and world-leading aviation industry, which appears to be an uncontroversial aim. However, as was highlighted by the shadow Secretary of State, while this is an important administrative Bill, the soaring ambition the sector deserves is sadly missing.

I thank right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions today. The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Luke Taylor) provided significant support for Lord Young's amendment in the Lords, but I particularly enjoyed hearing about his British standard suitcase. The wider consensus has related to airport drop-off charges, and we have heard Members from right across the House endorse a review and keeping clause 7 in the Bill. The Chairman of the Transport Committee, the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), and the hon. Members for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover), for Mid Cheshire (Andrew Cooper), for Hitchin (Alistair Strathern), for Macclesfield (Tim Roca), for North West Leicestershire (Amanda Hack) and for

[Alison Griffiths]

St Austell and Newquay (Noah Law) all mentioned that subject—and spoke at length, in some cases. I endorse their thoughts on the issue.

The Opposition believe in the world-leading potential of our aviation sector. We want to encourage the enterprise, innovation and competition that will help it to thrive. However, on the searing cost to consumers of drop-off charges at airports, we urge the Government to keep clause 7 in the Bill. The Government's surface access strategies and targets incentivise such charges while penalising drivers. Airports openly use them to discourage people from travelling to the airport by car. At Gatwick, an airport heavily used by my constituents in Bognor Regis and Littlehampton, it now costs £10 for 10 minutes—that is £1 a minute to drop off a loved one.

This cost is felt disproportionately by disabled and elderly passengers and others with limited mobility. For them, using public transport to get to the airport may not be an option. The Opposition welcome the fact that the Bill will provide greater protections for disabled passengers at the airport, yet it must not make it more expensive for them to get there. The Government must address that contradiction, and they should accept clause 7.

Yesterday we saw the limits of the consumer protections put in place by the Bill: a national air traffic control systems failure that has resulted in 900 flights—so far—being disrupted. The knock-on disruptions are likely to last for days. In the Lords, the Government voted down Lord Young's amendment, which would have mandated a scheme to reimburse airlines and passengers for failures outside their control. The Government assured peers that a reimbursement scheme was unnecessary, yet now airlines and passengers will be forced to pick up the tab for cancellations over which they have no control. Is that fair?

I want to close by expressing my thanks to Conservative and Lib Dem colleagues in the other place, led by Lord Moylan. After their hard work, the Bill now delivers the necessary continuity of regulation that keeps our aviation industry safe, following our departure from the European Union, and it enhances the safeguards around travel arrangements for disabled passengers. Despite the concerns that we have outlined, His Majesty's loyal Opposition will support the Bill's progress through the House, together with its aims of driving economic growth, strengthening aviation security and enhancing consumer protections.

6.34 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Keir Mather): It is great to be back at the Dispatch Box, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I thank all Members for their participation in today's debate. Before I begin, I too would like to acknowledge the significant disruption caused by yesterday's air traffic control fault, and apologise to all passengers whose travel plans were affected. As those events have shown, civil aviation is a cornerstone of our national prosperity, supporting jobs, investment and connectivity across the United Kingdom. This Bill is an important piece of legislation, and one that is rightly regarded as an opportunity to strengthen a critical sector for the United Kingdom.

The aviation sector has evolved significantly in recent years as a result of rapid technological developments, new aircraft capabilities and the emergence of new airspace users, including drones. The regulatory framework requires modernisation to adapt to these developments. At the same time, the UK's departure from the European Union has limited our ability to update certain areas of aviation regulation. The sector has also had to respond to major external shocks, from the unprecedented disruption caused by covid-19 to, more recently, instability in the middle east. To meet these challenges, we need a framework that is flexible enough to adapt to change, support innovation and keep passengers at its heart. The Bill will help deliver that framework.

The Government have listened carefully to the scrutiny that the Bill received in the House of Lords. We made a number of significant changes during its passage through the other place, particularly to strengthen accessibility provisions, passenger protections, accountability and parliamentary oversight. I thank peers from across the political parties and the Minister, the noble Lord Hendy, for their efforts in achieving this. As a result, the Bill that is before the House today is stronger than the one first produced.

I have paid close attention to the points raised by Members across the House this evening, and I would like to address them in turn. I will start with the remarks of the shadow Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Holden), and the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Alison Griffiths), who I warmly welcome to her place—it is great to be working alongside her. They have made an impassioned defence of the aviation sector and aviation businesses; I only wish there were more Conservative Back Benchers in the Chamber to listen to their impassioned pleas. I will make two points, the first of which is on the shadow Secretary of State's point about making a statement. From my experience as a Government Whip, it is never wise to question Mr Speaker's decisions about what is allocated or not allocated in this House.

Mr Holden: Will the Minister give way?

Keir Mather: I will just finish my point. I am, however, more than happy to come and answer any questions the Secretary of State may have in this place.

The shadow Minister made an important point about the fact that the Secretary of State has asked the CAA to report within six months. When we had the major outage in 2023, it took two years for the CAA to make a similar report. In that report, it made 34 recommendations, of which 32 have been implemented, so a six-month timeframe is a much shorter, sharper window in which to get definitive answers to these questions. NATS is also required to provide a report to the CAA within a week of the incident taking place, to fully explain the implications of what has happened.

I will now give way to the shadow Secretary of State.

Mr Holden: I just wanted to make it very clear that I was in no way questioning what Mr Speaker decided. When he spoke to me, he made it very clear that his understanding was that the Government were going to

make a statement. *[Interruption.]* Government Front Benchers may shake their heads, but that is what I was told by Mr Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. I understand the points that are being raised, but the right hon. Gentleman would be well advised to not relate private conversations with Mr Speaker to the Chamber.

Mr Holden: Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker. The point I was making was that I was basically being accused by the Minister of saying something that I had not said. I just wanted to make clear what was said, because the real question here is one of parliamentary scrutiny.

Keir Mather: If the shadow Secretary of State is of the opinion that I have mischaracterised what he said, I will of course withdraw that statement, but I suppose we should let the usual channels take their course in figuring that out. I should add that I was slightly remiss in what I said earlier: not 32 but all 34 of the recommendations have been implemented.

Let me now turn to a serious point raised by the shadow Secretary of State about drop-off charges and the amendment that was made in the House of Lords. I can confirm that the Government have no objection to conducting a review of this matter, although we need to think carefully about the terms of such a review and about the time that it will take to ensure that we can engage with the range of issues that Back Benchers have raised today about transparency, charging, ability to pay and free drop-off points.

I understand people's frustrations when public transport challenges prevent them from accessing airports. My hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Tim Roca) made that point very powerfully. I should also acknowledge, however, that airport drop-off charges operate as part of a wider framework. They are often used to manage congestion—a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Chris Vince)—to meet mode share targets, and to fund infrastructure improvements. However, all that could be part of the conversation that takes place through a review, and our approach will, of course, always be to protect passengers while supporting our airports as businesses.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Keir Mather: I am being spoilt! I give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin (Alistair Strathern).

Alistair Strathern: My hon. Friend will probably have heard me speak at great length today—for purely good reasons—about the importance of the subsidised bus travel that Luton airport offered over the summer holidays, not just to my constituents but to anyone intending to travel from the airport in August. Might not such subsidies, as opposed to just increasing the cost of drop-offs, be a positive way to encourage people to make that modal shift and travel sustainably, and to take people out of cars and on to buses when they travel to Luton airport in the future?

Keir Mather: That is an intriguing idea, and I should be very glad to meet my hon. Friend to discuss it further. Of course we want to promote the use of public transport to reach our airports by as many people as possible. Let me now give way to my hon. Friend from the Transport Committee.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): Of course, none of us wants to see the roads approaching our airports become more congested than they already are, but I checked Gatwick airport's website—we heard about Gatwick earlier—and it seems that for blue badge holders it is free to use the drop-off service. Irrespective of when the review takes place, or even if it takes place, I am sure the Minister agrees that no airport in the UK should apply drop-off charges to blue badge holders, and that it should be easy for those people to access airports.

Keir Mather: My hon. Friend has made a powerful point. He is, of course, right: people with disabilities are disproportionately more likely to use drop-off services at airports than other customers, so it is for airports to facilitate that whenever possible. I am pleased to say that, more often than not, robust procedures are in place to ensure that passengers with disabilities have free drop-offs at airports, but that needs to be adopted widely throughout the sector.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): I am grateful to the Minister for giving way—he has been very generous. May I pursue the point about enabling more people to travel to airports on public transport? I have raised with him my fear that the draft Heathrow expansion national policy statement is not strong enough to ensure that, if we are to have a third runway at Heathrow, we will also have improved rail links, including a southern rail link, which could well benefit my constituents. May I urge him, as the Government look at the responses to that consultation, to think again and strengthen the policy to ensure that we get not only the third runway, but the infrastructure that would be needed to support it?

Keir Mather: My hon. Friend is right to say that that should be our focus. All four of the tests that we have set out on which a development consent order for Heathrow expansion would be granted are dependent on ensuring that we have adequate surface access to the airport, both for his constituents and people across the country and for the people who work at the airport. That relates to air quality and to carbon impacts. It must be a focus, and it will be considered, now that the consultation has closed.

I share the anger and frustration expressed by the Chair of the Transport Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), on behalf of the passengers who have been affected over the past two days, but I also thank the staff and the aircrew aboard planes for the difficult work that they have undertaken to ensure that people are ultimately safe and their welfare is protected. I understand that many of the constituents of my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) will be doing that important work.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth asked whether passenger rights are fit for purpose at present. The Bill gives us the power to update passenger rights when we feel that they do not go far enough. Doing that through secondary legislation will ensure

[Keir Mather]

that all Members can feed their experiences into the process. Clause 3 also means that the Secretary of State must have particular regard to those who are most adversely affected when things go wrong and disruption occurs.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth spoke powerfully about the need to have proper resilience and contingency planning for airports in relation to people with disabilities, but also to parents with baby food. All these considerations need to be part of the process, and I thank her for championing the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Daniel Francis), who speaks incredibly powerfully about his family's experience of using a wheelchair to travel and fly. I hope he is reassured that the measure in the Bill that lifts the compensation cap for damage to wheelchairs on domestic flights goes far enough.

The Chair of the Transport Committee also made the point that there needs to be a single standard of treatment for everybody who uses our airports, building on the commitments in her Committee's fantastic report, "Access Denied". I can confirm that the Department is looking at this issue very closely through an accessible travel charter, spearheaded by my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield and Rothwell (Simon Lightwood). It will have key expectations, pledges and commitments, and it will make sure that treatment is consistent for passengers with disabilities from the train that they board to get to the airport to the aeroplane door. That is incredibly important.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth made a broader point about public transport access in relation to airport drop-off charges, and her point about taxi access is something that I would be glad to discuss with her further. I know that it can cause unintended consequences and community disruption, particularly around unlicensed taxis, and I know that is also an issue for my hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Danny Beales).

My hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth and other Members are right to point to the issue of staff safety. We should all be clear in this House that any form of abuse or intimidation of those who work at our airports is totally unacceptable. The Government will work with airports and airlines to stamp it out wherever we can, and work on this issue should be forthcoming shortly. I am very pleased to be meeting Unite the union to discuss this matter tomorrow, and I thank it for its consistent campaigning on this work.

The hon. Member for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover) made a really important point about scrutiny and delegated powers being part of this Bill, and asked whether there has been overreach. I believe that the provisions in the Bill that relate to CAA rule making and the need to have safety rule-making powers within the CAA are necessary, because aviation safety rule making is highly technical. It is fast-moving, yet the current system forces every change through a process that is very duplicative and resource intensive. There are strong safeguards for that process, and Ministers will be able to set the CAA's priorities through a published framework. During the Bill's passage in the Lords, the Government introduced amendments to strengthen parliamentary scrutiny of the new aviation rule-making framework and implemented all the associated recommendations from the Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee, which the hon. Member knows is assiduous in its efforts to ensure that Parliament is robustly consulted on these issues. More broadly, I am glad that he and his colleagues are supporting the Bill at Second Reading, and I look forward to engaging constructively with him on his amendments.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Cheshire (Andrew Cooper) spoke powerfully about his experiences at Manchester airport with regard to both the use of sunflower lanyards and the airport's Sunflower room. This Bill is about giving the CAA the ability to ensure that consumer standards are upheld and to strengthen people's rights, but we cannot omit the excellent work that is already happening at airports up and down the country. The staff make those places positive areas from which to travel for people across our country, and I think that needs to be recognised as part of this debate.

My hon. Friends the Members for Hitchin and for Uxbridge and South Ruislip both expressed concern that when the compensation cap is lifted for damage to wheelchairs on domestic flights, airports and airlines might withdraw their willingness to take wheelchairs on to planes. I can assure my hon. Friends that I think airports and airlines will work hard to comply with these measures, but the Bill contains provisions for the CAA to enforce consumer rights, and I am sure that will be part of any process that takes place in this space. More broadly, although the Bill extends to domestic flights—there is an issue with extending it any further due to the Montreal convention—I was pleased to speak to the United Kingdom's permanent representative to the International Civil Aviation Organisation this morning about this very issue and how we might raise it more robustly in international fora.

The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Luke Taylor) raised our common obligation to think about all questions affecting aviation with a simultaneous consideration of their effects on the planet. I am glad that he thinks that we are engaging adequately on some of these questions, and I am always happy for him to push me further when he thinks we are not. We are developing a world-leading SAF mandate and revenue certainty mechanism. Changes to airspace modernisation can mean that flights are more efficient and burn less fuel. The jet zero strategy is pushing us much further in this direction.

More broadly, through the future of flight industry group, the Department for Transport is undertaking pioneering work on aviation sustainability, electric and hydrogen as forms of propulsion in aviation, and promoting higher standards through CORSIA—the carbon offsetting and reduction scheme for international aviation—at ICAO. So I hope that the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam feels that we are moving in the right direction, although I am always happy for him to push me further.

The hon. Gentleman asked me a valid question about oversight of the CAA and NATS, and this was also asked by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington. The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam shares my view that we need to do everything possible to minimise the chance of what happened yesterday happening again. He will know that the CAA,

as a regulator, can put mechanisms on NATS for delay-related targets, alongside penalties that reduce airline charges when targets are missed, but we know that we need to go further. We know that more needs to be done, and as the Secretary of State said, the CAA will undertake an independent investigation to understand what happened. By asking the CAA to review immediately, we as Ministers can ensure that there is strong oversight for passengers. If the hon. Gentleman believes that this should lead to further enhancements for air passenger rights, it is clause 1 of the Bill that will allow us to do so. His point was very well made.

Turning to my hon. Friend the Member for North West Leicestershire (Amanda Hack), it was a pleasure to visit East Midlands airport the other week. She raised an opportunity, which presents itself in this Bill through its measures on slot regulation, to think about how we can help our air freight sector to perform in a more agile way, to move more goods through our airports and to boost growth for UK plc. She also raised questions about allergies and how we can protect passengers with allergies when they are travelling. That is incredibly important, which is why it is in the Bill and will form part of the consultation formed under clause 2. She asked me when the consultation on these issues will take place, and it will be within 12 months of the passage of the Bill. I thank her and my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Noah Law) for making powerful arguments in defence of our regional airports.

I thank the hon. Member for Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey (Graham Leadbitter) for his offer to work on a cross-party basis to ensure that we learn the lessons from what happened yesterday and ensure effective oversight of NATS. I say to him that we are in the early stages of understanding what the impact is on consumers and the aviation sector, but I will of course do my very best to keep the House informed as we get more information. I will pass on to the Ministry of Defence the issues he raised to do with the MOD and RAF Lossiemouth about the regular training exercises, their noise impacts and how that intersects with civil aviation, and then I will write to him on the issue.

Chris Vince: The Minister is making an excellent speech—the take-off was fantastic and I am looking forward to seeing the landing. I want to ask him about the recent fire at an electricity substation at Heathrow airport—the point raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell). I am very aware that we are seeing increasingly extreme weather—we had the heat over the summer and I suspect we will have extreme cold during the winter—so has the Minister considered the challenges that our aviation sector will face and what does he think the Government can do to mitigate those issues?

Keir Mather: I thank my hon. Friend for saying my speech is fantastic, and it is certainly detailed. I know that we have been cruising at altitude for some time, so I will do my best to get on with it. He raises a broader point about climate resilience at our airports, and I can assure him that the DFT takes this matter incredibly seriously and is progressing work across the Government to think about how we can become more adaptive, in partnership with the private sector, to deal with these issues.

Turning to the matter of the legislative consent motion in relation to clause 7, I confirm to the hon. Member for Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey that it does engage the legislative consent process for both Scotland and Northern Ireland. My officials are engaging with their counterparts on this matter, and I will be sure to keep him informed.

The hon. Member for Horsham (John Milne) asked me about the subject of his private Member's Bill on creating an ombudsman for the CAA. My view is that the costs of setting up a potential ombudsman outweigh the benefits it would bring. Complex CAA decisions, such as changes to flight paths, are already subject to extensive consultation. I am of the view that the CAA has robust remedies for people dissatisfied with customer service issues, including consideration by the independent complaints assessor, while the work of the CAA is also subject to oversight by the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman, and that is before we get into a broader conversation about the CAP 1616 process. However, I am happy to discuss this with him after today's debate and ahead of Committee consideration to think about what more we can do to address his concerns.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington also raised a concern about the CAA reporting within six months and us not dealing with the situation with the immediacy it requires. I can assure him that a report will be coming through from NATS to the CAA within a week. That will provide its initial assessment of what has taken place. We will shortly have more to say on what the impacts are and I will endeavour to keep the House informed. He raised a point about whether there will be sufficient follow-up actions. That is a fair challenge, but I would just say that when the outage occurred in 2023, 34 recommendations were proposed to mitigate reoccurrences by the CAA, all of which were implemented.

On CAA oversight, I agree with my right hon. Friend that that is massively important. I would just say that we currently have a robust system for CAA oversight, although we can of course debate whether to take it further. There is an independent complaints assessor, the CAA's work is subject to oversight by the PHSO, economic regulation decisions can be appealed to the CMA and there is of course the CAP 1616 process for airspace modernisation, but I would be glad to engage with him on where we can take those matters further.

I will draw my remarks to a close. The Bill is about modernising the UK's aviation framework so that it remains fit for the future: supporting growth; strengthening passenger protections, particularly for those who find travelling through our airports most challenging; and maintaining the highest standards of aviation safety and the UK's formidable reputation in this space. Our ambition is to build a competitive aviation system that delivers for passengers and keeps pace with technological and operational change. Today's debate has been wide ranging and a useful opportunity to discuss important issues with hon. Members. I thank all those who have contributed and I look forward to continuing our discussions in Committee.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

CIVIL AVIATION (CONSUMER PROTECTION AND REGULATORY REFORM) BILL [*LORDS*]: PROGRAMME

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)),

That the following provisions shall apply to the Civil Aviation (Consumer Protection and Regulatory Reform) Bill [*Lords*]:

Committal

(1) The Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

(2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Thursday 22 October 2026.

(3) The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

Consideration and Third Reading

(4) Proceedings on Consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which those proceedings are commenced.

(5) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

(6) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading.

Other proceedings

(7) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—*(Shaun Davies.)*

Question agreed to.

CIVIL AVIATION (CONSUMER PROTECTION AND REGULATORY REFORM) BILL [*LORDS*]: MONEY

King's recommendation signified.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Civil Aviation (Consumer Protection and Regulatory Reform) Bill [*Lords*], it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under or by virtue of any other Act out of money so provided.—*(Shaun Davies.)*

Question agreed to.

CIVIL AVIATION (CONSUMER PROTECTION AND REGULATORY REFORM) BILL [*LORDS*]: WAYS AND MEANS

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Civil Aviation (Consumer Protection and Regulatory Reform) Bill [*Lords*], it is expedient to authorise the imposition of charges for the exercise of functions under or by virtue of the Act.—*(Shaun Davies.)*

Question agreed to.

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Members have not had the chance today to properly raise the NATS blackout, which has affected over 100,000 passengers and cost UK aviation tens of millions of pounds. The Secretary of State has not indicated that the Government will provide a statement today in the Chamber. Madam Deputy Speaker, can you tell me what those of us on the Opposition Benches, and all Members interested in raising issues that affect their constituents, can do to get answers from the Government?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): That is not a matter for the Chair, but those on the Treasury Bench will have heard the right hon. Gentleman's remarks, and he will be aware of other parliamentary mechanisms open to him for raising the matter further.

Ticket Price Regulation: Live Events

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*(Shaun Davies.)*

6.58 pm

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): I want to flashback to the summer of 2024: Labour back in power, and echoes of '90s Britpop with an Oasis reunion. Alas, the latter is only remembered now for the ticket price rip-off that happened, with endless online queues and ever-inflating ticket prices during the transaction process. And then there was our pioneering manifesto commitment to stamp it out. But two years on, legislation has not yet hit the statute book. One top manager has told me:

"I was really encouraged by the Government's public commitment to stop profiteering on the resale market, though my optimism has definitely taken a hit over the stalling and prevarication."

I am just pointing this out to the Minister today.

We know that our Prime Minister is a music fan, and that he is unafraid to act where needed—for example, yesterday, on Palestine—so I say to the Minister, let us get rid of this issue once and for all. I have my Sale of Tickets (Sporting and Cultural Events) Bill readymade to do the job.

Our live music industry is part of a sector that is worth £8 billion to the national coffers every year. We are the second biggest exporter of recorded music, which is soft power, but touts are costing the UK—

7 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*(Shaun Davies.)*

Dr Huq: We know that the UK music industry is a major player in our national economy, but £145 million a year is being lost to touts in a cost of living crisis. These touts are not the old-fashioned man in a flasher mac with tickets in his pockets, saying, "Oi, do you want a ticket?" Online bots are now touting in a sophisticated way. As Lord Brennan—the artist formerly known as Kevin—says so wisely in his fan-led review:

"everyone's life is enriched when they gather with others to enjoy live music."

It should not be unobtainable or out of reach because of profiteering by the opportunistic.

There are two issues here: rip-off resale and dynamic pricing. With rip-off resale, minutes after gigs sell out, resale tickets appear on sale online for thousands of pounds. All arts ought to be accessible to everyone, so that real fans can get tickets—tickets should not be being hoovered up by these bots.

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree that community-owned venues are better protected against that kind of touting? If live music belonged to the people who watched it and used it, that would be the way to protect it most—through community and co-operative ownership.

Dr Huq: My hon. Friend makes a brilliant point: the mutualisation of our venues is an important thing. We now have a Prime Minister who is a Labour and Co-op MP, so we hope to see that in practice. I will come to the example of the Co-op Live arena, but I think we will not have certainty until we have proper legislation to get rid of this issue once and for all.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate; I am always encouraged by her energy and enthusiasm for the subject matters that she brings forward. Is she aware of action taken against the company Starhub in 2024, following concerns that customers were initially shown artificially low headline prices, only for mandatory fees to be added later in the purchasing process? That meant that 50,000 UK customers were eligible for refunds. However, delaying the disclosure of unavoidable fees can exploit customers' inattention. Given that transparency is key—and I think that is what she is seeking—does the hon. Lady agree that current protections should be made sufficient to ensure that customers are shown the full and accurate price of a ticket before committing themselves to a purchase?

Dr Huq: I certainly agree with that, and one of the provisions in my excellent Bill is on transparency. People should know what they are getting into.

Touting does not just apply to music. Football, theatre, and all sorts of other things are becoming subject to these processes. In July, Which? found that tickets for Lewis Capaldi's current run at the O2 in London were on resale sites for £1,400, when they were originally priced between £32 and £111. A ticket for the All Points East festival with Raye was even on sale for £114,666 on viagogo—the original price was only meant to be £80.

We are used to such surge, gouge and dynamic pricing—where there is variability and prices fluctuate—with planes, trains, Uber and Amazon, but it is creeping into all our lives. It is made easier with data mining, because that algorithmic calculation can factor in demand, willingness to pay and availability. Oasis clam that it was not surge pricing with them, but tiered pricing: there were different levels of ticket, which is why, by the time people were at the front of the queue, the £100 tickets had gone, and the tickets remaining cost £300. The array of different ticket types—premium; standing—can be a bit confusing.

Jeff Smith (Manchester Withington) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a typically entertaining and informative speech. I wonder whether she would agree that, from the customer's point of view, there does not appear to be that much difference between tiered pricing and dynamic pricing—it is just that when the cheap seats have gone, they have to pay the premium. There is something unedifying, at best, about the whole concept of tiered pricing. Is that something that she thinks the Government should be looking at when they bring forward the Bill?

Dr Huq: If there were transparency—if people were getting a sort of fan package and their dinner was involved as well, and there were other extras on top—we could perhaps understand why, but this mysterious tiered pricing, when there is no difference between the two, other than one is called premium and one is not, is quite baffling. My Bill would ensure real-time information on the ticketing site all the way through the process,

[Dr Huq]

setting out the amount of tickets at each price, so that fans do not get a nasty surprise when they get to the front of the queue.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is touching on something really important, because the other part of the issue is the length of time that people have to sit in front of a screen in order to get to the front of the queue. That is fine for people who can afford to take a day off work or who are flexible in their work, meaning they can sit and do that, but it is not fine for those who work shifts or who work a job that takes them out of their home. There is a structural barrier to lower-paid people, mainly from working-class communities, accessing the theatre, the arts and sports—the kind of enrichment we are all saying they should have. I wonder whether my hon. Friend might look at remedying that as part of her Bill.

Dr Huq: My hon. Friend is so right. We have seen that happening with venues such as the Royal Opera House and the ballet, which are perceived as elitist, correctly or incorrectly, and we do not want to make an elitist system more elitist. The systems benefit people who have the luxury of spending time refreshing their screen all day.

My hon. Friend's remark reminded me that I found an article in *The Times* from January 2025, which says that touts are

"loathed as parasitic…but…they provide a valuable service",

sorting

"the hassle and risk of finding new buyers"

and reselling tickets. What?! I think that there is an important bit missing from that sentence—"at a vastly inflated mark-up price". My hon. Friend is absolutely right.

These practices do have their defenders. When I was trying to get signatures for my Bill, there was resistance from some Tories, with some saying—"Some Might Say"—that this is the free market and that we cannot have interference in all parts of our lives, yet our constituents want this change. They deserve transparency. They should not be at the mercy of predatory touts who exploit fan loyalty to sell off tickets secondarily at an astronomical mark-up, shutting out the masses, as everyone has said, from accessing cultural events that enrich us all.

I have also said in my Bill that there should be a maximum price cap and that tickets should have the price printed on them as early as possible. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) said, after the adrenalin rush of the virtual queue, there is pressure when reaching the front to snap up what is left, if someone has had the time to get there, which leaves some fans with buyer's remorse afterwards—"How much? How many thousands did I just pay?" But by then it is too late.

In a different article in *The Times*, the same writer says:

"While I might struggle to justify paying thousands to watch England play"

—this article was about the world cup—

"the truth is that others are willing to pay."

It is the "harsh reality" of the market, but it does not need to be like that. I found an interview with Robert Smith where he said that his longevity is due to the fact that he prices things affordably. He wants people to come back; he wants people to wear the T-shirt. He still makes a profit, but it does not have to be at the maximum price point that the market allows.

With Viagogo and StubHub, however, "There's no limit" in terms of multiples. Children were left in tears recently at the Co-op Live arena in Manchester. They wanted to see the girl group KATSEYE, but, when the real tickets sold out within seconds, their parents were forced on to another one of those horrible sites, Hellotickets, paying £568 for four tickets, only for their kids to get to the venue and find out it was for over-16s only. There was notification of that, and no recourse. It is awful.

Not all resellers are baddies. Twickets is an ethical resale site. The Royal Albert Hall, the Roundhouse, LW Theatres, Ed Sheeran and Adele all use it as a partner. It allows tickets to be sold only at or below the original face-value price; it actually prohibits any increase. Every listing is checked manually to ensure that there is a real ticket behind it. It might not necessarily be a case of doing that. A maximum multiple or percentage could be put in, because there might be a genuine reason—not being able to make the date, for example—for having to resell the ticket.

The other one that caught my eye was the Tickets For Good app from Sheffield, which has distributed 1.4 million surplus unsold music, theatre, comedy and sport tickets. It donates or heavily discounts the tickets for key workers and individuals on low incomes. As all hon. Members have said, things like that open up live arts and opportunities, because let us not forget that for many even the face-value price is a stretch.

Music is so important for wellbeing, social connection and all those things. I have to say, I remember when tickets were not so expensive. The first ones I bought were for Blur at the time of "Modern Life Is Rubbish". I bought a pair of them for £8 each from the Kentish Town Forum. I went to a window and a lady—I think the cleaner—said, "I'll have to get the right person". When they came along, I handed over the cash and got the change.

I have not done a calculation factoring in current inflation for those tickets, but I have done for some tickets bought by my constituent Ros Cowan. In 1984 she saw The Smiths at the Hammersmith Palais in my borough—I have actually seen Rick Astley and Bros in the same venue—and the price was £3.50. She said that in those days a student like her could go and have a few drinks at the bar and afford to get home. Factoring in the Bank of England's multiple of inflation, that makes £12 in today's money, so these things have gone up. My hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Withington (Jeff Smith) and I are the same age—or the same bracket, anyway—and remember when these things were not so expensive. The elasticity of demand, Madam Deputy Speaker—don't you love it!

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): One thing that has changed over time is the fact that there is now so much emphasis on live performance for musicians to be able to make an income. Perhaps my hon. Friend agrees that we need to look closely at streaming services, because the market has become distorted so that there is such a great emphasis on making money through touring.

Dr Huq: My hon. Friend is correct. The most accessed site is YouTube, and it gets not a penny from that. I am guilty of listening to music on YouTube as well, watching old Top of the Pops episodes from the '80s, and Runaround—that was a good show—and Swap Shop and so on. Anyway, my hon. Friend is right; we need to remunerate. In fact, Scotland has just introduced a universal basic income for musicians, or they are talking about it at least, but anyway, we do not like that Scottish Government—boo! They are not even here today. Where are they? That's them for you.

Viagogo actually welcomed the delay of the legislation, and it is notorious for selling tickets that people buy only to find when they turn up to the venue that the tickets are fake. Viagogo did a briefing for MPs where it said that it is stopping piracy. That is just nonsense. Very sinisterly, the CEO Eric Baker at an on-stage event at JP Morgan boasted about how he has the Government's ear. I hope that my good friend the Minister can put a dampener on that. He said that he has been five times to the Department for Business and Trade and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport between November and May and has the Government in the palm of his hand. He said that they are listening to him, that he is "educating" them on the complexities of the drawbacks. I ask the Government please not to listen to these people; we should listen to our constituents.

Before the last election, *The Guardian* obtained footage of a secret meeting of touts somewhere near London Bridge. They were establishing a lobbying group and saying that they would "sabotage" the proposals. One of them is even seen from the stage saying, "Look we can all chip in and get a good lobbyist, because if this change happens we are f***ed."

Surely that is the point—we want to do those people over, because they have been screwing the public something chronic for ages. The power needs to be rebalanced towards the fans so that we can have arts for all, but these guys are continuing unperturbed and undisturbed. I urge my right hon. Friend the Minister to be bold and stand up to the StubHubs, the Viagogos and all these nasty people.

Zohran Mamdani had a campaign at the world cup called "Game over Greed", because the tickets there were sky-high and dynamically priced. As a result, 1,000 $50 tickets were ringfenced for residents of New York's boroughs. He even managed to negotiate free bus travel; in the Brennan review it says that transport is prohibited.

I worry that we risk falling behind other advanced economies on this. The US Justice Department sued Live Nation—Ticketmaster's parent company—which, after a lawsuit, had to pay up to $280 million in damages for a scandal a bit like the Oasis one, but for Taylor Swift's Eras tour. Ireland has all but banned secondary ticketing since 2021. Australia has done so this year, and its ban covers resale, dynamic pricing and drip pricing, and there are fines of 100 million Australian dollars for offenders. Please scare them with something stiff like that, Minister!

Those hidden fees—what are they for? It should not be the case that "If you go down to the web tonight, you're sure of a nasty surprise," but that is what is happening. As we speak, in Wembley, Bon Jovi are taking the stage. Yesterday, tickets were £80, but then there was this service charge fee of £17.06, making the whole thing £97.06. That 21.3% charge is a huge mark-up. It is not just Bon Jovi; for Niall Horan, Pulp and Jay-Z, the fee for processing, handling and administration is at around that 20% mark. Also, why are those fees per ticket, and not per transaction? We have just got rid of the hated two-child limit in recognition of families. These per-person things can add up. Sadly, this is happening with the Royal Opera House; and the National Theatre—it is publicly funded; it is not a charity—is now introducing an element of those fees and dynamic pricing. I long for the days when we could see the queue, and who was in front of us. There was some predictability there.

I am not against dynamic or surge pricing per se. It is seen as exploitative, but it could mean that pricing goes down. I once saw Elvis Costello at Hyde Park for free; the headliner was meant to be Elton John, but he cancelled, which was good for me as I am not an Elton fan. People can understand demand factors—for example, the price at the pumps in Acton being affected by the strait of Hormuz—but when we do not know why these things are being done, it annoys us.

In conclusion, we need to bear in mind ethical considerations; we need transparency; and we need certainty. I welcome the draft Bill in the King's speech. I love the Minister's article in the *Daily Record,* which says, "Time is up for touts", but the Government seem to be taking their time introducing a Bill in Parliament. I say: hurry up and do it today. The Government have already fixed many things in the cost of living crisis.

Will the Minister please confirm when this will happen? We have been told, "When parliamentary time allows", but this would be an easy win. As I said, I have a ready-made Bill here that would do it; we could just make that law. Where there is a will, there is a way—we have acted on driving tests—and the Prime Minister is a music fan. We have had four Prime Ministers since the start of the Ukraine war, which is a tragic war, and he is the only one who has strummed a guitar with the troops. Let us do this. Let us not look back in anger; let us make it happen, Minister.

7.17 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Ian Murray): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) for a very dramatic speech. She went through places where she has seen concerts; I do not know if she, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Withington (Jeff Smith), is hankering for her youth, and wishing she could go back there, but it was a tremendous speech, and I think we would agree with every word she said.

My hon. Friend mentioned Bon Jovi. I would have been at that concert this evening as they took the stage, had I not been here answering her debate. It had particular relevance for me, because I am not new to this industry; I had my own business when I left university, and the very first thing that I organised was a Scotland-wide tour for a tribute band. Hon. Members will never guess which artist they were a tribute to; they were called Non Jovi. Those tickets were dynamically priced—the price would only ever go down, because nobody ever came to see them. Never mind; that is my hankering after the good old days.

[Ian Murray]

The UK live events sector is, as my hon. Friend said, a jewel in our national crown. From world-class sporting matches to unforgettable concerts—tonight we have heard about many that have not been forgotten—and plays, those events enrich our lives, strengthen community bonds and inspire future generations. Crucially, they provide us with stories that we can tell for years and years. They greatly benefit our economy, generating billions annually, and support a dynamic creative and sporting ecosystem. This Government understand that, and we have put the creative industries front and centre of our modern industrial strategy; we are committing to boosting investment in the sector from £17 billion to £31 billion by 2035.

For too long, however, as highlighted by Lord Brennan of Canton's report following the independent fan-led music review, the joy of attending live events has been marred by unfair practices in the ticketing market, most notably the systematic activities of ticket touts, which we heard about from my hon. Friend. They crowd out fans from the primary market and resell at extortionate prices. Ticket touts—this is a remarkable figure—take £400,000 a day from fans' pockets; that is nearly £150 million a year. That is money that should be going into the industry.

The Government are committed to tackling industrial-scale touting once and for all, improving transparency around pricing practices, and putting money in fans' pockets. As my hon. Friend has demonstrated, far too often, fans are crowded out of the primary market by touts, who are only interested in making a quick and exorbitant profit at fans' expense. The Government have been clear: this has to stop. My hon. Friend is correct: as I said in the *Daily Record*, the touts' time is up.

We want to improve transparency, consumer protection and fans' access to live events. We also want to make sure that they have a safe and secure means of selling, reselling or transferring their tickets, and to ensure that money flows back into the live events sector and fans' pockets. That is why we committed in our manifesto and our recently published plan for music to introducing new consumer protections for live event ticket resale, and it is why my Department, alongside the Department for Business, Innovation, Science and Trade, undertook a consultation last year on the best ways of tackling this, as well as issuing a call for evidence on pricing practices across the wider sector.

We received over 500 responses from right across the live events sector. There were some clear themes for us to address, and those themes have been highlighted this evening. First, genuine fans should be able to recoup the costs of their ticket when no longer able to attend. Enforcement needs to be effective if our measures are to have impact. Secondary platforms need to play their part in ensuring that new rules are implemented and complied with, and that primary and secondary platforms are part of the same ticketing ecosystem. The former could do more to protect their sales and, where appropriate, share information more seamlessly with resale platforms.

As a result, we are taking action. Last November, we announced a robust package of measures to tackle exploitative touting, including a resale price cap, a separate service fee cap, limits on the number of tickets that can be resold, and obligations on platforms, all reinforced by the Competition and Markets Authority's new powers under the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Act 2024.

In the King's Speech briefing earlier this year, we announced that the Government will publish a draft ticket tout ban Bill in this Session for pre-legislative scrutiny by the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, of which my hon. Friend is a member. I look forward to working with my hon. Friend and the Committee through that process. Following pre-legislative scrutiny, the Government will introduce the Bill when parliamentary time allows and, as the Secretary of State said in Parliament last week—*[Interruption.]* We are coming to it. As the Secretary of State said last week, the Prime Minister is particularly passionate about this issue, and we will give the legislation the priority that it deserves and needs. We all want to see this on the statute book as soon as possible.

Dr Huq: I am sorry that the Minister missed Bon Jovi because of me. I wonder whether there is any indication of when this will happen, because with all the things that a draft Bill brings—all the hoops of more consultation—it will take until 2028 now. I just feel that every day people are being ripped off. We have just missed another summer festival season. Can the Minister give us a time?

Ian Murray: As I replied to my hon. Friend at the Select Committee meeting I attended last week, there were 39 Bills in the first Session of this new Government—39 very important Bills—that took us nearly two years to get through. In this Session, through the King's Speech, we have of course introduced a number of Bills, and this one is a draft Bill. I can only reassure my hon. Friend and the House that we want to get this done as quickly as possible. That means we need to find the parliamentary time, once the draft Bill has been prepared and is ready, which should be imminently—not too many sleeps left; it depends on how many days we want to sleep for. We will then have a draft Bill that we can take forward, but there is a commitment from my Department and the Department for Business, Innovation, Science and Trade to getting this done as quickly as possible.

My hon. Friend had her private Member's Bill, which she is waving around, on this topic in the last parliamentary Session. I share her concern for fans. It is worth noting that her Bill was drafted before the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Act 2024, which imposes new requirements around price transparency, came into effect in April last year.

Our legislation will be focused on ending the scourge of touting, thereby improving access to live events. Tackling touting, and ensuring that fans are at the heart of live events, cannot be done by Government alone, of course; industry needs to play its part. It is industry-led action, innovation and best practice, alongside the Government's new measures, that will truly transform the fan experience. The Government recognise that many ticketing platforms, event organisers and venues have devoted a lot of time, energy and resources to this issue in recent years. We know that significant money has been spent combating ticket fraud, touts and bot

use, as well as educating fans on what to look out for when they are buying tickets online, all to ensure that buying tickets is as safe and seamless for fans as possible.

Nevertheless, the strength of feeling from respondents to our consultation and the call for evidence was clear. In fact, they share our strength of feeling about the touting issue. Industry must build on existing guidance to do more to tackle exploitative practices. This is why we strongly welcome the commitment by the Society of Ticket Agents and Retailers—STAR for short—to convene the sector. It will establish new best practice that ensures that pricing information is clear and up front, and that fans are empowered to make informed purchasing decisions, free from undue pressure. This work is already under way; I attended the inaugural meeting in March this year. The work is organised under four headings, to address some of the key issues in the ticketing sector. First, it will look at pricing transparency. Secondly, the industry will look at how the primary market can continue to be healthy. Thirdly, another workstream will look at accessibility issues. Finally, the industry will look at consumer education.

Let us have a look at dynamic pricing. We know this is a subject that many people are concerned about. Businesses should feel free to use whatever pricing strategy meets their needs, but they must comply with the law. Where it appears that this is not happening, the CMA has the powers to enforce that and act upon it, and when businesses fall short of what is expected of them under the law, the CMA has powerful enforcement tools to ensure that businesses can be penalised and brought into line.

Drip pricing is another one that my hon. Friend mentioned. It is not right when fans are shown a price for a product, only to find that it has increased by mandatory charges that are added as the transaction proceeds, particularly if they have been waiting all day on a screen to get to the front of the queue to buy tickets. I do not know if my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) has sat in his parliamentary office doing that at any point, but it is a real problem. In June this year, the Competition and Markets Authority fined StubHub International close to £900,000 and ordered it to issue refunds exceeding £590,000 to 50,000 fans for using this illegal practice. The CMA is also investigating Viagogo for similar practices.

Lastly, on a related point, I continue to encourage the industry to adopt the voluntary £1 ticket levy for live events to support our grassroots music and grassroots music venues. The industry is doing the levy, but is it doing enough? Is a big question mark, and we just keep encouraging it to do as much as it possibly can.

I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate on such an important issue, which affects the dedicated fans who sustain our live events sector. I would like to reassure the House that this Government are tackling industrial-scale ticket touting with urgency and will bring forth the legislation to ensure that fans are not priced out of major cultural and sporting events. That is a priority for this Government, and we will do that. I look forward to returning to this House with the draft Bill for pre-legislative scrutiny, and I welcome further engagement with my hon. Friend, and many other hon. Friends who have a deep interest in this issue, to help tackle ticket touting once and for all.

Question put and agreed to.

7.27 pm

House adjourned.

Deferred Division

PLANT HEALTH

That the draft Plant Health, Seeds, Seed Potatoes and Plant Propagating Material (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2026, which were laid before this House on 22 June, be approved.

The House divided: Ayes 371, Noes 100.

Division No. 72]

AYES

Abbott, Jack
Abrahams, Debbie
Ahmed, Dr Zubir
Akehurst, Luke
Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
Alexander, rh Heidi
Al-Hassan, Sadik
Ali, Rushanara
Amos, Gideon
Anderson, Callum
Anderson, Fleur
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Arthur, Dr Scott
Asato, Jess
Asser, James
Athwal, Jas
Atkinson, Catherine
Babarinde, Josh
Bailey, Olivia
Baines, David
Baker, Richard
Ballinger, Alex
Bance, Antonia
Barron, Lee
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
Baxter, Johanna
Beales, Danny
Beavers, Lorraine
Begum, Apsana
Benn, rh Hilary
Bennett, Alison
Berry, Siân
Betts, Mr Clive
Billington, Ms Polly
Blake, Olivia
Blake, Rachel
Bloore, Chris
Blundell, Mrs Elsie
Bonavia, Kevin
Botterill, Jade
Brackenridge, Sureena
Brewer, Alex
Brown-Fuller, Jess
Buckley, Julia
Burgon, Richard
Burke, Maureen
Burnham, rh Andy
Burton-Sampson, David
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, Ian
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Campbell, Juliet
Campbell-Savours, Markus
Cane, Charlotte
Carden, Dan
Carling, Sam
Carns, Al
Chamberlain, Wendy
Chambers, Dr Danny
Champion, Sarah
Charalambous, Bambos
Charters, Mr Luke
Chowns, Dr Ellie
Clark, Feryal
Coleman, Ben
Collier, Jacob
Collins, Tom
Coombes, Sarah
Cooper, Andrew
Cooper, Dr Beccy
Cooper, Daisy
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Costigan, Deirdre
Cox, Pam
Coyle, Neil
Craft, Jen
Creagh, Mary
Crichton, Torcuil
Curtis, Chris
Daby, Janet
Dakin, Sir Nicholas
Dalton, Ashley
Dance, Adam
Darling, Steve
Darlington, Emily
Davey, rh Ed
Davies, Ann
Davies, Jonathan
Davies, Paul
Davies, Shaun
Davies-Jones, Alex
De Cordova, Marsha
Dean, Bobby
Dean, Josh
Dearden, Kate
Denyer, Carla *(Proxy vote cast by Siân Berry)*
Dickson, Jim
Dixon, Anna
Dixon, Samantha
Dodds, rh Anneliese
Dollimore, Helena
Doughty, Stephen
Downie, Graeme
Duncan-Jordan, Neil
Eagle, rh Dame Angela
Eagle, rh Maria
Eastwood, Colum
Eccles, Cat
Edwards, Lauren
Edwards, Sarah
Efford, Clive
Egan, Damien
Entwistle, Kirith
Eshalomi, Florence
Evans, Chris
Fahnbulleh, rh Miatta
Falconer, rh Mr Hamish
Farnsworth, Linsey
Fenton-Glynn, Josh
Ferguson, Mark
Ferguson, Patricia
Foody, Emma
Fookes, Catherine
Foord, Richard
Forster, Mr Will
Foster, Mr Paul
Foxcroft, Vicky
Foy, Mary Kelly
Francis, Daniel
Franklin, Zöe
Gardiner, Barry
Gardner, Dr Allison
Gelderd, Anna
George, Andrew
German, Gill
Gibson, Sarah
Gilbert, Tracy
Gill, Preet Kaur
Gilmour, Rachel
Glindon, Mary
Glover, Olly
Goldman, Marie
Gordon, Tom
Gould, Georgia
Grady, John
Green, Sarah
Greenwood, Lilian
Hack, Amanda
Haigh, rh Louise
Hall, Sarah
Hamilton, Paulette
Harding, Monica
Hardy, Emma
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayes, Tom
Hazelgrove, Claire
Healey, rh John
Hillier, Dame Meg
Hinchliff, Chris
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hopkins, Rachel
Hughes, Claire
Hume, Alison
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hurley, Patrick
Hussain, Imran
Ingham, Leigh
Jameson, Sally
Jarvis, Liz
Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Johnson, Kim
Jones, Clive
Jones, rh Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Lillian
Jones, Ruth
Josan, Gurinder Singh
Joseph, Sojan
Juss, Warinder
Kane, Chris
Kane, Mike
Kendall, rh Liz
Khan, Afzal
Khan, Ayoub
Khan, Naushabah
Kinnock, rh Stephen
Kitchen, Gen
Kumar, Sonia
Kyle, rh Peter
Kyrke-Smith, Laura
Lamb, Peter
Lavery, Ian
Law, Noah
Leadbeater, Kim
Leishman, Brian
Lightwood, Simon
Long Bailey, Rebecca
MacAlister, Josh
MacCleary, James
MacNae, Andy
Mahmood, rh Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Maskell, Rachael
Mather, Keir
Mathew, Brian
Mayer, Alex
McAllister, Douglas
McCluskey, Martin
McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
McDonnell, rh John
McEvoy, Lola
McFadden, rh Pat
McGovern, Alison
McIntyre, Alex
McKee, Gordon
McKenna, Kevin
McKinnell, Catherine
McMorrin, Anna
McNally, Frank
McNeill, Kirsty
Medi, Llinos
Midgley, rh Anneliese
Miliband, rh Ed
Miller, Calum
Milne, John
Minns, Ms Julie
Mishra, Navendu
Moon, Perran
Moran, Layla
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Morris, Joe
Morrison, Mr Tom
Mullane, Margaret
Murray, rh Ian
Murray, rh James
Murray, Katrina
Myer, Luke
Naish, James
Naismith, Connor
Nandy, rh Lisa
Narayan, rh Kanishka
Nash, Pamela
Newbury, Josh
Niblett, Samantha
Nichols, Charlotte
Norris, rh Alex
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Dame Chi
Opher, Dr Simon
Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
Osamor, Kate
Osborne, Kate
Osborne, Tristan
Paffey, Darren
Pakes, Andrew
Patrick, Matthew
Payne, Michael

Peacock, Stephanie
Pearce, Jon
Perteghella, Manuela
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, rh Bridget
Pinto-Duschinsky, David
Pitcher, Lee
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Powell, Joe
Powell, rh Lucy
Poynton, Gregor
Quigley, Richard
Qureshi, Yasmin
Race, Steve
Ramsay, Adrian
Rand, Mr Connor
Ranger, Andrew
Rayner, rh Angela
Reader, Mike
Reeves, rh Ellie
Reynolds, rh Emma
Reynolds, Mr Joshua
Rhodes, Martin
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
Rigby, rh Lucy
Rimmer, Ms Marie *(Proxy vote cast by Rachael Maskell)*
Robertson, Dave
Roca, Tim
Rodda, Matt
Rushworth, Sam
Russell, Sarah
Rutland, Tom
Ryan, Oliver
Sandher, Dr Jeevun
Sandher-Jones, Louise
Savage, Dr Roz
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Sewards, Mark
Shah, Naz
Shanker, Baggy
Shanks, Michael
Slade, Vikki
Slaughter, Andy
Slinger, John
Smart, Lisa
Smith, Cat
Smith, David
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Smith, Sarah
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Sollom, Ian
Spencer, Hannah
Stainbank, Euan
Stevens, rh Jo
Stevenson, Kenneth
Stewart, Elaine
Stone, Will
Strathern, Alistair
Streeting, rh Wes
Stringer, Graham
Sullivan, Kirsteen
Sullivan, Dr Lauren
Swallow, Peter
Tami, rh Sir Mark
Tapp, Mike
Taylor, Alison
Taylor, David
Taylor, Rachel
Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
Thompson, Adam
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Sir Stephen
Toale, Jessica
Tomlinson, Dan
Trickett, Jon
Turmaine, Matt
Turner, Laurence
Twist, Liz
Uppal, Harpreet
Vince, Chris
Voaden, Caroline
Wakeford, Christian
Walker, Imogen
Ward, Chris
Ward, Melanie
Welsh, Michelle
West, Catherine
Western, Andrew
Wheeler, Michael
Whitby, John
White, Jo
White, Katie
Whittome, Nadia
Wilkinson, Max
Williams, David
Witherden, Steve
Woodcock, Sean
Wrighting, Rosie
Wrigley, Martin
Yang, Yuan
Yasin, Mohammad
Young, Claire
Zeichner, Daniel

NOES

Allister, Jim
Anderson, Lee
Andrew, rh Stuart
Bacon, Gareth
Badenoch, rh Mrs Kemi
Baldwin, Dame Harriett
Barclay, rh Steve
Bedford, Mr Peter
Bhatti, Saqib
Blackman, Bob
Bowie, Andrew
Brandreth, Aphra
Braverman, rh Suella
Burghart, Alex
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartlidge, James
Chope, Sir Christopher
Cleverly, rh Sir James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Cocking, Lewis
Cooper, John
Costa, Alberto
Coutinho, rh Claire *(Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra)*
Cross, Harriet
Davies, Mims
Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Easton, Alex
Evans, Dr Luke
Fortune, Peter
Fox, Sir Ashley
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Freeman, George *(Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra)*
Fuller, Richard
Garnier, Mark
Glen, rh John
Griffith, Andrew
Griffiths, Alison
Harris, Rebecca
Hayes, rh Sir John
Hinds, rh Damian
Holden, rh Mr Richard
Holmes, Paul
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Kearns, Alicia
Kruger, Danny
Lamont, John
Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Lockhart, Carla
Lopez, Julia
Lowe, Rupert
Lumsden, Douglas
Mak, Alan
Mayhew, Jerome
McVey, rh Esther
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Morrissey, Joy
Morton, rh Wendy
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Obese-Jecty, Ben
O'Brien, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Paul, Rebecca
Philp, rh Chris
Pochin, Sarah
Raja, Shivani
Rankin, Jack
Reed, David
Robertson, Joe
Robinson, rh Gavin
Shannon, Jim
Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
Simmonds, David
Smith, Greg
Smith, rh Sir Julian
Smith, Rebecca
Snowden, Mr Andrew
Spencer, Dr Ben
Spencer, Patrick
Stafford, Gregory
Stephenson, Blake
Stride, rh Sir Mel
Stuart, rh Graham
Swann, Robin
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Thomas, Bradley
Tice, Richard
Timothy, Nick
Trott, rh Laura
Tugendhat, rh Tom
Whately, Helen
Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Wood, Mike
Wright, rh Sir Jeremy

Question accordingly agreed to.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 9 September 2026

[Sir Alec Shelbrooke *in the Chair*]

Public Confidence in the Police

9.30 am

Jonathan Hinder (Pendle and Clitheroe) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government support for public confidence in the police.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Alec. I start by noting that the Minister for Policing and Crime, my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon West (Sarah Jones), cannot be with us today because she is attending the funeral of PC Matthew Blades, who so tragically died in Cleveland in the collision that we are all sadly familiar with. I pay tribute to the two officers who died in the line of duty, to all the Cleveland officers who continue to serve in spite of what has happened, and to the whole community who have rallied round both families and the officers they now, more than ever, appreciate and want to show that appreciation. I thank the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw (Jo White), for attending the debate in the Policing Minister's place.

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for paying tribute to our incredibly brave police officers in Cleveland, who have had an extraordinarily difficult couple of weeks but have dealt with the situation with extreme professionalism. One of their challenges is that since 2010 Cleveland has 220 fewer officers—it is at the bottom of the table for police cuts—so it is extraordinary how the force has approached the situation with such professionalism, bravery and courage despite that situation. Does my hon. Friend agree that the funding formula needs to be urgently reviewed so that we are not penalising areas of high deprivation?

Jonathan Hinder: My hon. Friend raises a really important point. The police funding formula is long overdue for reform, and that incident can accelerate our move towards that. Middlesbrough is a high-crime area and a very deprived area, and that needs to be reflected in the formula. I look forward to working with my hon. Friend to push forward reform there and across the country.

I secured this debate on public confidence in the police because, over the last decade and a half, public confidence in the police has been heading in the wrong direction. Whether we look at crime surveys, victim satisfaction surveys or polling trackers from companies such as YouGov, the trend has been downward, which is worrying. If a significant proportion of the public were no longer to see the police as legitimate, we would be headed down a very dark path.

I do not want to spend my whole speech lamenting the then governing Conservative party's handling of policing—cutting 20,000 officers and then hurriedly returning officer numbers to the same level when they realised what a serious error they had made; constantly shifting their stance on stop and search, tightening and then loosening it; the full circle performed on police recruitment routes; and so on—but the recent history is critical to understanding the position that policing finds itself in today. I know what a disastrous impact it had on neighbourhood policing because I was there, serving as a police constable, sergeant and inspector during those years.

Just at the time that policing was being—let us say—deprioritised by the Government, policing demand changed significantly. High-harm offences committed behind closed doors, as opposed to in the street, were reported in much higher numbers, thanks to changing societal attitudes, improved police culture and high-profile historical cases increasing awareness. Domestic abuse reports to the police doubled in 10 years, reports of sexual offences rocketed, and child abuse became much more commonly reported.

It is good that people now feel able to report those offences and that the police are taking them seriously, but it was a perfect storm. Just at the time when policing was losing not just thousands of officers but thousands of experienced officers, a huge wave of high-harm demand emerged while policing was—and in some cases still is—equipped with data systems from the 1970s. It is absolutely right that investigating high-harm offences is now core policing business, but we must acknowledge that the huge change to policing demand has reduced police visibility on the streets, which is a key determinant of public confidence.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): I recognise the hon. Member's police service; I myself served for 12 years in Lothian and Borders police. One of the challenges we now have is that there is a continual churn in police roles, which means that communities do not know their police officers and their police officers do not know them. Does the hon. Member agree that, culturally, that is something the police service needs to tackle?

Jonathan Hinder: I wholeheartedly agree with the hon. Member, and it is something I impress on my local officers. There is nothing more annoying as an MP, but also as a resident, to find that our local inspector or borough commander has changed for the third time in a year. It is so frustrating, and that is something that policing can control, so I wholeheartedly agree with that.

Police funding is not my focus today, but I will leave colleagues with one thought about it. Given that the police are now receiving so many reports of high-harm crime, which is complex and time-consuming to investigate compared with what they did 20 years ago, how could they possibly still be as visible in communities as they used to be, and as focused on street crime, without a significant increase in funding?

What else can the Government do to improve the public's confidence in policing? Put simply, they can provide political leadership which sets very clear priorities that match those of the public and give our officers the backing they need to deliver on them. Policing is not just about crime, and it never has been, no matter what some people might tell us about a so-called golden age

[Jonathan Hinder]

in the past. It is about policing protests, finding missing people, intervening to stop mentally ill people harming themselves. There always needs to be clear prioritisation from the Government and police leaders. If everything is a priority, nothing is.

But it is true that the policing mission has become increasingly blurred, and we have seen the police repeatedly overstep into cases where they should not be. When the public view those cases alongside a lack of police visibility in their area, or instances where basic investigations are not done for offences like theft, they lose confidence that policing has its priorities right.

It is right that the Government have scrapped non-crime hate incidents; now we need a new Public Order Act. This legislation, which underpins free speech and its limits in this country, is 40 years old this year. It is not fit for this online, more polarised era. While I do not absolve police leaders of their responsibilities to apply the law sensibly, politicians should be providing clear direction. We need to clarify what is legitimate debate and what is simply someone being unpleasant. What is actual crime that we want the police to intervene in? The Government commissioned a review of public order legislation, which I understand was submitted to the Home Office in May this year, but it has not been published, as far as I am aware. I would be grateful if the Government, either today or shortly afterwards, could update Members on when we should expect that, as a new settlement on the issue is badly needed.

A series of high-profile, horrific misconduct scandals in recent years have shaken public confidence, not least because they could have been stopped much earlier. The existing misconduct system is too slow to weed out those who should not be police officers or, indeed, never should have been, yet the system is often over-zealous when it comes to much lower-level allegations of misconduct, ruining the lives of officers who in many cases are fundamentally good and have sought to do the right thing. That is a terrible combination, so I was pleased that over the summer the Government announced an end-to-end review of police misconduct processes. Again, that is much needed, and I sincerely hope the review reports quickly, so that tangible improvements can be made quickly on the back of it to strike a much better balance.

The system should prioritise getting the really bad officers out without delay, support officers who have made honest mistakes, and not incentivise a grievance culture that makes officers feel like they are treading on eggshells whenever they open their mouths. If we get this right, we can kick out those officers who are not fit to wear the uniform. Meanwhile, we will have fewer brilliant officers making the active choice to leave because they do not feel supported to do what is an extraordinary job. This is critical to improving the culture and performance of police forces, and therefore to improving public confidence.

To sum up, the Government must provide strong political leadership if we want to rebuild public confidence in policing, and that means policing being relentlessly focused on doing the basics well. Do not look for a silver bullet to improve public confidence, because there isn't one. An extra engagement team, more attendance at community events, a new force slogan on the side of the patrol cars focusing on recruits' identity more than on their policing ability—these activities at the margins will not improve public confidence, no matter how well meaning. Let us be clear about what is a priority and what is not, and then back our officers to do the basics well, day in, day out. That is how we can improve public confidence in policing.

9.40 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you, Sir Alec, for calling me to speak. I also thank the hon. Member for Pendle and Clitheroe (Jonathan Hinder) for his introduction. The debates he brings to the House, and to Westminster Hall in particular, are usually on policing matters. He and I resonate in our comments, support and the thrust of where we are from. Interventions from others have also indicated that. I thank the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) for her 12 years of service, which is appreciated by all. I have no doubt that the hon. Lady made a positive and constructive mark in her 12 years.

I want to start by paying tribute to the wonderful work of local policing in my Strangford constituency and across Northern Ireland by the Police Service of Northern Ireland. I commend Superintendent Johnston McDowell, who is responsible for policing the area I represent, along with his dedicated team in Ards and North Down. I also commend Chief Superintendent Haslett, who covers the Newry and Down side of the constituency. They work tirelessly, day in, day out, with incredibly limited resources, to keep our communities safe. We sleep easy in our beds because of the commitment of police officers across the borough.

The PSNI has been active in responding to rural crime, which is an issue. Alongside the Ulster Farmers' Union, of which I am a member, they mark trailers, tractors and machinery. Sometimes, stolen machinery, cattle and other livestock are moved to the Republic of Ireland. Dear knows where they end up; it could be over here or even further afield.

The PSNI is stretched to the limit, yet its commitment to public duty never wavers. I have seen the policing of events, such as the 12 July parades, at which the police are vigilant yet certainly in high spirits. We thank them for the balanced way they police those parades. I have seen difficult situations where cool heads were needed, and they did not fail to meet expectations.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Does my hon. Friend agree that confidence in policing is often undermined by the public's use of finite clips on social media, which do not take account of what happened immediately before whatever incident is broadcast? Senior police officers and Government Ministers need to respond quickly in respect of the entire environment around the clip. We all remember the attacks in Manchester where, initially, videos seemed to show police officers overreacting, but a few weeks later the reality of what actually happened came to light. More account needs to be taken of the environment in which clips that undermine confidence are used.

Jim Shannon: I thank my hon. Friend and colleague for highlighting that matter. A two, three or five-second clip sometimes gives an impression of what is happening, but a wee bit more discretion and sight of what happened beforehand would be useful.

Commitment alone cannot fill the gaps left by a lack of funding. I welcome the Minister to her place and thank her for coming. I know she is not the Minister responsible, but I wonder whether she or the Minister for Policing and Crime has spoken to the PSNI or met the Minister responsible for policing and justice in Northern Ireland, Naomi Long, to ascertain the problems there. Superintendent Johnston McDowell and his team want to be more proactive, and I always think we should focus on preventive work, and more community policing.

I am old enough to remember when—the hon. Member for North East Fife referred to this—everybody knew every officer in the area where they lived. Different times mean different pressures and different needs, but I have always supported community policing in all my years as an elected representative, throughout my time on the council and in the Northern Ireland Assembly before coming here. We should, for example, encourage police officers—this is something I want to do and have tried to push—to be more involved in visiting schools. That is a chance to interact and engage with young people, to build lasting relationships and to foster trust from an early age. If those relationships can be built, the confidence and trust can be built upon.

In Northern Ireland, the PSNI is considering introducing police cadets, which I am very supportive of and which I asked the PSNI to look at. I have spoken about it to the Justice Minister, Naomi Long, who has responsibility for policing, because I think there is an opportunity for us in Northern Ireland to build on police cadets in the way that we perhaps did in the past but have lost over the last number of years. The PSNI is keen to pursue this in a pilot scheme, and I have suggested that that scheme should be in my constituency of Strangford and perhaps the neighbouring constituency of North Down. The police cadets could be an organisation that gives young people the opportunity of a job that they might be interested in and that is also about building social engagement and interacting with people.

Grassroots community policing is how we stop crime before it starts and how we build relationships in communities, but the police urgently need the funding and resources to make that happen. Without the cash, these vital community links simply cannot be sustained. I am sorry to say that, although crime is falling marginally across the rest of the Province, Ards and North Down, parts of which are in my constituency, is one of the few areas where crime has increased.

In particular, there has been a problem with antisocial behaviour. I know that the police are trying to address it in conjunction with the chambers of trade and with shopkeepers in the high street. Local shopkeepers in Newtownards and families in Downpatrick are dealing with rising antisocial behaviour, yet the thin green line is stretched thinner than ever.

With, for instance, CCTV in the centre of town and in the shops, we can ascertain what is happening and catch those involved in antisocial behaviour and theft, which is rising for shopkeepers in the constituency that I represent. At the end of the day, if someone comes into a shop and they have a knife or otherwise threaten the person behind the counter, nobody needs to be a hero in this world. The wise thing to do is to stand back and let the CCTV and the police handle the issue when it comes to following it up and trying to catch those involved.

However, we must be honest about why general public confidence is being undermined. There is a growing and deeply concerning perception about police resources. I will say this to the Minister: although policing is a devolved matter for us back home, I want to make some comments, if I may, about the focus of the police, which means they sometimes do what is unnecessary. I will give an example. When a person makes a comment on social media that is not threatening or whatever, and the next thing they know the police are at their door to ask them why they did that and what their intentions are, while real crime on the streets is not being followed up, that causes a growing and deeply concerning perception that police resources are being misdirected towards policing offence rather than preventing actual crime.

We live in a nation built on Christian heritage and values, yet we see—I say this with great respect—street preachers simply declaring the word of God being arrested on our streets. Why? Because somebody objected. Yet real crime—burglaries, car thefts, muggings and other attacks—seems to be set aside while a squad of officers descend on someone preaching the gospel to arrest him or her on the streets. That causes, I have to say, immense distress to the public. People look on in utter astonishment when someone sharing the gospel is handcuffed and hauled away while at the same time no one is available, it seems, to investigate the muggings, car thefts and house burglaries.

I will give another example. When a grandmother's home is broken into and she is told, "A police officer can't attend for a few days, but they will be there," yet there is a street preacher down the road who just happens to be preaching the gospel and a squad of officers arrive and arrest that person for causing offence, public confidence does not just falter—it shatters. The public want to see the police focusing on thugs, thieves and burglars, not on policing speech or theological debate, which seems illogical and unnecessary.

I am ever mindful that back in Northern Ireland we have had a sustained IRA campaign that my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) and I have lived through physically, both as elected representatives and as citizens of Northern Ireland. The emphasis on paramilitary activity has decreased greatly, but there is still a constant threat from that small portion of militant republicans who seem to want to take us back to the bad old days. The police seem to have got the better of them at this stage and have been able to catch them before they do most things, but a bomb was found in south Armagh over the last weekend and we have also had attacks in Belfast and Lisburn where the IRA militant group seemed to be intent. The issue for us in Northern Ireland is that we still have a terrorist campaign that, while greatly reduced, still has the ability to bring chaos.

To conclude, we must give our local teams—that is Superintendent Johnston McDowell, Chief Superintendent Haslett and Chief Constable Jon Boutcher—the funding they need to embed themselves in our communities while also ensuring that policing priorities return to common-sense core law enforcement. We need to police crime, not offence. That message must come from this place and resonate throughout every policing district within this United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and I believe that it must begin today.

9.52 am

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle and Clitheroe (Jonathan Hinder) on securing the debate and on the way in which he approached the subject. I join him and my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Luke Myer) in paying tribute to the police officers from the Cleveland force who lost their lives so tragically just recently.

I want to raise two or three points on the question of confidence in the police and the role of Government. Too often, the police get criticised for the failings of other agencies and I want to talk about that issue in the particular context of my constituency in Harrow. As other Members have already alluded to, I also think that we need to keep the funding—in the case of Harrow, that is for the Metropolitan police—under very close scrutiny. I also want to suggest that the Metropolitan police does not get recognition across the whole of the UK for its hugely important work in tackling national and international crime, and that perhaps more recognition of that is required in the funding formula. Lastly, I want to dwell on the issue of online crime and the hatred that gets stirred up online, which can make the job of the police much more difficult.

I am struck by the criticism that I have heard in my constituency about the police. So often when one gets into the issues that people are concerned about, they are actually the responsibility of other agencies locally and it is the police having to respond to the other agencies' failure to take action that has led to the criticism of the police. In particular, in Harrow, we recently saw enforcement teams contracted out to an organisation called Kingdom. The responsibility for that contract was with Harrow council.

There was widespread criticism of the way some of the staff employed by Kingdom tried to levy fines on a number of young people in south Harrow, in my constituency. The council could have taken much tougher action against Kingdom. It could have used some of the funding from the contract to pay for additional police officers, instead of contracting the work out to people who are far less well trained than the police. Even at this late stage, I hope that Harrow council will use some of the funding it is spending on the Kingdom contract to fund additional police officers.

Local councils such as Harrow need to invest more in youth facilities that divert young people away from crime. Some of the CCTV projects in my constituency that Harrow council has turned down—in Wealdstone, south Harrow and central Harrow—should get funding. It is not clear to me that the council is investing in drug addiction services, tackling street homelessness or tackling poor performance by the owners of large blocks of flats to prevent antisocial behaviour. More Government scrutiny of the performance of local authorities in tackling antisocial behaviour at a local level would be timely, certainly in the case of Harrow council.

The Metropolitan police saw a £1 billion real-terms funding cut between 2010 and 2014. That led to a marked drop in policing in my constituency and across London more widely. Mayor of London Sadiq Khan has done a huge amount to try to redirect funding from other parts of his budget to minimise the impact of that cut. I also welcome the fact that the Government have delivered on their manifesto commitment to boost police funding more generally, so that an extra 3,000 police officers can be recruited across the country. We are seeing the benefit in Harrow, where there has been an increase in police numbers, but we are certainly not back to the level of policing that we had when the last Labour Government left office in 2010. I seek assurance from the Minister that we will never again see the scale of real-terms cuts to the Metropolitan police that my constituents had to endure between 2010 and 2014.

One way we can further support the Metropolitan police is by allowing it to keep more of the proceeds from successful operations, such as recovering stolen funds hidden in bitcoin assets. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Minister on her elevation to the Front Bench, and urge her to go into battle with the Treasury to help the Metropolitan police use more of the funds it recovers for investment in local policing, police stations and so on.

We also need to do more about what goes on online, which feeds criminal activity in our constituencies. Will the Minister update the House on the effectiveness, as she sees it, of the Online Safety Act 2023, and on what other work crime agencies are doing with Ofcom to crack down on online hatred?

9.58 am

Adam Dance (Yeovil) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for Pendle and Clitheroe (Jonathan Hinder) for securing the debate. I was just going to intervene, but after hearing this important debate, I want to take part.

One big way that confidence in the police has been damaged in Yeovil constituency is under-investment. For years, we have had fewer officers and less funding. The result is a force that is not visible enough for my constituents, who then feel that the police cannot help them. That is a damaging place to be as a society. In Yeovil, we do not have the money or staff to run a custody suite, even though the police station is being revamped and is going to reopen. Officers are therefore away for hours after an arrest, and I found it so frustrating when I was out with the police on a ride-around that we spent as much time driving to the nearest custody suite, in Bridgwater, as we did in our community. That is just ridiculous. The result is that antisocial behaviour, drug misuse and shoplifting have got so bad that businesses are considering their futures. I have heard recently from a series of business owners—even of toy shops such as The Entertainer—who are at their wits' end, and I have heard similar stories from residents. Whether at work or out and about, locals feel unsafe.

I recently held a drop-in event between 3 pm and 6 pm with the police in Chard in my constituency. When I got to the event, eight police officers were there and police vans were outside, but a police van was stolen right in front of our eyes—just outside the event. That was the first crime. Secondly, a guy came to speak to us who had just come from Snowdon Park in Chard, where his bike had been stolen. Thirdly, the hairdressing salon opposite, which had only opened the day before, had its windows smashed. Fourthly, a considerably drunk guy walked past and fell over right in front of our eyes. That all happened in the middle of the day on a Thursday when I was holding that event. I even asked the police, "Have you put this on?" because it was mind-blowing that this was happening in our communities.

I have been meeting regularly with the police and our fantastic police and crime commissioner. Ultimately, we need investment to expand officer numbers and build a custody suite in Yeovil. The cost of a lack of officers is huge. It is unsafe for communities, businesses are closing and people are leaving our area.

Our police community support officers do amazing work in south Somerset, but one issue for them is that they are not allowed handcuffs. Some forces do allow PCSOs to have them, but our force does not. The PCSOs sometimes tell me they do not feel safe. At other times they say, "We want to do the job well, and we could detain someone, but we physically cannot because we do not have the tools for the job." That is one of the pressures on our local police force that I am trying to address. If the Minister would back me on that issue, it would be very helpful.

I hope the Minister will commit to meeting not just me but residents, the police force, the council and businesses in my constituency. The missing piece of the puzzle is Government, because it is ultimately down to them: we need more investment. I hope the Minister will meet me to discuss these issues.

10.2 am

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Alec. I congratulate the hon. Member for Pendle and Clitheroe (Jonathan Hinder) on securing the debate.

Something odd has happened recently that has turned the debate about crime and policing in this country on its head. The hard right have always presented themselves as the defenders of law and order, but a problem has arisen because people on the hard right, in Reform and parties such as Restore, have started to argue about two-tier policing. That is a daft suggestion—there is nothing of the sort—but such accusations are a real problem in this country, because all sorts of issues have arisen and trust in the police has diminished specifically as a result.

According to the Office for National Statistics, confidence in the police has decreased in the past decade, even if crimes against people and property have mostly decreased. Tackling that will require proper resourcing. The hon. Member for Pendle and Clitheroe mentioned the 20,000 police yo-yo: there were 20,000 police fewer, and then the previous Government restored them. There is still a question about whether the Government have fulfilled, or are on track to fulfil, their pledges on police numbers.

Jim Shannon: At the same time as the number of officers remains the same, the population has increased dramatically. Surely the right way of doing this would be to ensure that if the population increases, the number of officers does too. Does the hon. Member agree that the 28,000 would not be enough, and that it should be more?

Max Wilkinson: I have an awful lot of sympathy with what the hon. Member says. We could get into a debate purely about police numbers—I know that the hon. Member for Pendle and Clitheroe was not keen to—but we should focus on not just the numbers but the visibility of police officers. We need police counters in our local communities and police officers on our streets.

In contrast with Members who have suggested there is two-tier policing, I would like to place on record my party's thanks and admiration for hard-working police officers and their public service—I believe there are at least two former officers here today. I would also like to thank the police team in Cheltenham, ably led by Inspector Steve Benbow and Superintendent James Glansfield, who I visited recently. This debate is not about parochial local issues, but it is important when we have experience of joining our police officers on the streets that we reflect that in this Chamber.

During my visit, I learned that police officers in Cheltenham work very hard in increasingly difficult circumstances. I joined Inspector Benbow and Superintendent Glansfield as part of Operation Shield, which followed a summer in which we suffered very visible antisocial behaviour and crime in our town centre, and I know that that has been reflected in towns and cities across the country. One of the most arresting things I learned was that even in Cheltenham, which most people think of as a well-heeled place, there are several, mostly independent, shops where large groups of teenagers are making the lives of the shop workers and owners a misery. We were shown a video captured on a mobile phone by a shop owner of what looked like dozens of teenagers. They apparently go into that shop several times a week, steal stuff and abuse staff. That is not acceptable.

Wendy Chamberlain: When we talk about confidence in policing, it is important that we acknowledge that we have a role to play in that as elected representatives. Youth antisocial behaviour has been a problem in my North East Fife constituency over the summer, in places such as Crail and Elie, but when I engaged with local officers, I found they had good intelligence and had dealt with the events pretty robustly afterwards. The fact of the matter is that the community were not aware of that. Does my hon. Friend agree that we have a responsibility to tell the public about the work our local officers are doing?

Max Wilkinson: Absolutely. As it happens, I was invited along by my local police force because I was talking about crime and antisocial behaviour in the town centre. The more we talk about the issue and raise it in our constituencies, the more likely it is that the police will be able to get their messages out about extra resourcing and making tweaks to legislation that will help them do their jobs better. I will come later to some of those points, which were raised by the hon. Member for Pendle and Clitheroe.

Another thing that is clear from Cheltenham town centre and across the country is the concerning and increasing aggressive and misogynistic behaviour targeted at women. I have been hugely disturbed to hear reports of women being catcalled and abused with increasingly frequency in my constituency, most notably early in the morning when they are commuting to or from work or the gym. Clearly, a visible policing presence disturbs those who might cause problems and, crucially, gives reassurance to women in our town and city centres.

Will the Minister provide an update on tackling the growing problems with violence against women and girls, much of which is encouraged by the online world? One in four women have experienced domestic abuse.

[Max Wilkinson]

Perhaps more shockingly, fewer than one in six victims of rape or attempted rape report the assault to the police. The reasons they cite include the belief that the police simply will not be able to help, or the concern that they will not be believed.

Wendy Chamberlain: I am one of the co-chairs of the all-party parliamentary group for the survivors of Fayed and Harrods. In recent weeks, the APPG has met the Metropolitan police and the Independent Office for Police Conduct. There is absolutely no doubt that historical failures in investigations have damaged the survivor cohort's trust in the police and the criminal justice sector more widely. My hon. Friend is talking about violence against women and girls now, but does he agree that historical legacies also play a part?

Max Wilkinson: Absolutely. The more we learn about the al-Fayed case, the more shocking it becomes. I commend the work of the APPG, of which my hon. Friend is a leading member, alongside the hon. Member for Lichfield (Dave Robertson). It is uncovering what seems to be a bigger and bigger scandal every time we hear more about it. We need Harrods to be open and transparent, to start co-operating and perhaps to give more resource to aid the investigation.

The issue of violence against women and girls needs to be tackled now, with taskforces that work in partnership with frontline women's services. That also requires a very visible presence to reassure women that their safety is a priority. To do that, it is clear that police resource must be more focused on the community, rather than just having officers behind desks—although we of course need desk resource too in these complex investigations. The Liberal Democrats are calling for a police counter in every community to increase visibility across the country. That will allow people to share information and intelligence with the police in a convenient and accessible location. Simply emailing a local police officer does not always bring the desired result for local residents who are trying to work out what is going on or share intelligence. We say that we need extra police counters, in contrast to the huge decline in police counters seen under the previous Government and the specific issues in Labour's London.

On a more structural note, will the Minister provide an update on the Hogan-Howe review and the Government's response to it? Can she also update us on whether police force boundaries are now due to match the boundaries of regional mayors? It is important that we hold to account the people responsible for policing. That is of particular interest to rural areas. In recent years we have seen rural crime become seriously organised and persistent, yet it is often overlooked. Rural crime networks can also be harder to detect and prosecute. Will the Minister commit to giving rural police forces the necessary resources to clamp down on organised crime operating in the countryside?

The hon. Member for Pendle and Clitheroe mentioned public order and free speech, which is a really important point. Big Brother Watch revealed this weekend that more than 60,000 people have been arrested in the last five years for communication offences. There are some high-profile cases, such those of Lucy Connolly and others, who are held up by the hard right as martyrs of free speech, but they are nothing of the sort. They have rightly been prosecuted, even if some people have valid questions about the severity of the punishment.

Despite that, the facts seem clear: too many people are arrested not for committing crimes but for making tasteless online jokes, offering controversial opinions on social media or non-violent protest. It is a result of legislative failure that the police are not able to do their job properly on these issues. That undermines trust in the police and the work of officers, whose job it is to keep us safe, not to intervene in online arguments that would not trouble us if they happened in verbal form in the Dog and Duck. That is a threat to faith in policing, and to the very fabric of our liberal democracy. It gives space for people such as Reform's James Orr to make bizarre comparisons between free speech in the UK and Russia and to peddle daft conspiracy theories, undermining British democracy in the process. We must all stand up against that in this place. In the light of the Big Brother Watch report, can the Minister confirm what the Government are doing to work with police and crime commissioners and chief constables to clarify the legal position, give officers greater clarity in their frontline work and protect British free speech rights?

Earlier I mentioned the issue with the right, who were previously the big defenders of policing and order. They have traditionally told us that they stand up for those ideas, but the corrosive narrative of two-tier policing has crept into that side of politics. Where they once backed the police, they now use that daft "two-tier" phrase and tell us the police are part of the problem. That places the police alongside those who would do us harm; it is a dangerous narrative, and one that we at the moderate centre of politics must address.

Support must be given to and extended for those working in the police, who put their lives and wellbeing on the line every day. Mind has reported that 91% of police officers report mental ill health. That is a shocking statistic, and it undermines the work they are able to do. Let us ensure that, as part of efforts to boost trust in policing, we are able to support police officers too. Improving their working conditions and the support available is vital to ensuring that we have the police force we need, staffed by brilliant police officers, and that they are able to fulfil their vital role to keep us safe.

10.15 am

Blake Stephenson (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): Thank you, Sir Alec, for chairing the debate so very well. I welcome the Minister her to her place. I know that she is standing in for the Policing Minister today, but I congratulate on her elevation none the less.

I commend the hon. Member for Pendle and Clitheroe (Jonathan Hinder) for his service and for securing this important debate. I am aware that he is exceptionally active on this subject, both as a friend of the police who argues for the importance of supporting our officers—rightly—and as a constructive critic, which I am sure is less appreciated among certain forces.

The title of the debate is instructive. Debates centred around the police can all too often focus on their actions. That is undoubtedly something that we must consider, but we must also consider the actions of Government. The policies we debate and vote on in this place can directly impact how the public feel about the

police. I am afraid that can cause support to be undermined in some cases, as the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson) so eloquently outlined.

Achieving the combination of effective and just operations, in the interests of the country, is one of the critical foundations of policing. As the second of the nine principles of policing sets out, we must

"recognise always that the power of the police to fulfil their functions and duties is dependent on public approval of their existence, actions and behaviour, and on their ability to secure and maintain public respect."

When that principle is not properly thought about, public confidence is inevitably lost and the quality of our policing is diminished. There is a reciprocal relationship between the police and the public. That is necessary, but we need to appreciate that the best way to achieve success is by having effective forces preventing crime and delivering justice for the victims of crime.

In this Labour Government's two years, many issues have challenged public confidence in policing. I will be cautious about delving into some of the details given the ongoing investigations into the conduct of forces, but incidents such as the Henry Nowak murder, the decisions pertaining to the banning of Maccabi Tel Aviv fans, and the inappropriate use of non-crime hate incidents, have all raised concerns. Only recently, the families of the victims of Valdo Calocane's attacks in Nottingham said that the police did not tell them that a man who had taken an interest in them had a history of violence when he attempted to visit, leading to an IOPC complaint.

Furthermore, the heinous death of Sarah Everard exposed the very worst of the Metropolitan police, and rightly made it clear that changes were required. In July, a report on the force by His Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary and fire and rescue services pointed to progress but still noted the substantial work needed to improve vetting, professional standards and anti-corruption arrangements.

The list of incidents fails to fully scratch the surface of the extent of complaints and problems experienced among forces. However, we know only too well how local and national failures can undermine them. If we combine that with the feeling many have that the crimes they experience are not followed up on, it is little surprise that trust is being eroded across many parts of our society. We must work to improve that trust by improving our police forces.

Although the last few years have demonstrated stability in the IOPC public perceptions survey, and more people feel positively rather than negatively towards the police by a rate of two to one, a rate of 49% in 2024-25 should still be a cause for concern. The country needs much higher levels of confidence in the police. Worryingly, the positive percentage falls further when individuals are asked about their local force, and further still when they are asked about the Metropolitan police. That is unsurprising given the decline demonstrated in the public attitude survey produced by the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime. Those numbers are less surprising when we consider that just 8.5% of crimes were solved in the year to March 2026, leaving an extraordinary 92% of reported crimes unresolved and many people wondering what to do when they face criminal activity. That problem is compounded by crime increasing 10% and antisocial behaviour 15% in the past year alone.

To combat this, the police obviously need to get better at solving crime. They are using new technologies such as facial recognition, which I know a little about, having spent time with my own Bedfordshire police, who have been trialling and using that technology effectively. Its benefits were showcased recently at the Notting Hill carnival. However, that is not enough; we need more officers. Members have mentioned the hokey-cokey of police numbers. The Conservative party has set out a funded plan to deploy 10,000 extra police officers, to introduce hotspot patrolling of 2,000 crime hotspot areas to prevent an estimated 35,000 crimes and deter antisocial behaviour, public drug consumption, shoplifting and knife crime, and to triple stop and search to take knives and drugs off the streets.

Those are clear targets to hold any future Conservative Government to account, which is a different approach to this Government's abstract promises on neighbourhood policing. From my conversations with police officers and the police and crime commissioner in my constituency, it is yet to be determined how we will effectively monitor the promises on neighbourhood policing. Will the Minister provide clarity on how can we hold the Government to account on their commitments to neighbourhood policing?

Furthermore, we must be tougher on dealing with crime. That requires more policing, but also stronger enforcement throughout the justice system. Nothing quite illustrates this Labour Government's failure to achieve that than their rushed and ill-conceived early-release schemes. Those policies have inevitably placed enormous strain on police forces across the country, burdening officers with poor decisions made here in Whitehall. In August, His Majesty's chief inspector of probation said that he was ultimately

"not fully confident that the probation system will be able to cope with this massive work and there's a risk that things will go wrong".

Although I appreciate that there have since been a number of iterations of the policy, his statement seems as true now as it did then. Quite simply, these policies are a Government failure that will put all our constituents at risk.

I appreciate that improving forces is not a simple task. Improvement will always be accompanied by challenges as well as successes, but with the right attitudes in leadership and the right resources directed effectively, we can enhance confidence in our police forces. Where the Government make sensible improvements to issues that improve accountability, such as vetting, they will always have the support of the Opposition. The tragic deaths of officers Matthew Blades and Tom Clough demonstrate the sacrifice of our officers and the danger that they place themselves in. I echo the comments of hon. Members from across the Chamber in commending them for their service.

Subsequent events have demonstrated why our police officers are so important, and why the shadow Home Secretary was right to say in the main Chamber last week that

"only zero tolerance of crime and disorder will ensure that criminals are the ones who are afraid, and not the law-abiding public."—[*Official Report*, 1 September 2026; Vol. 790, c. 103.]

It is that culture of zero tolerance among politicians and police leaders that will improve public confidence in the police.

10.23 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Jo White): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Alec. I congratulate the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Blake Stephenson), on his recent promotion, and look forward to working with him in the weeks, months and years ahead. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle and Clitheroe (Jonathan Hinder) for securing the debate, and to all who have spoken.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle and Clitheroe said at the outset, I am not the Policing Minister. The Minister for Policing and Crime, my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon West (Sarah Jones), needs to be elsewhere at this difficult time. It is very much my aim to prove a capable stand-in, but I hope Members will forgive me for any gaps in policy knowledge. Although I cannot match the Minister for Policing and Crime in that regard, I can certainly acknowledge the unique and critical role played by the police in the life of our country.

Thousands of men and women go to work day in, day out with a single aim: to keep us, their fellow citizens, safe. Theirs is public service of the very highest form, and it can be performed only by those who possess exceptional courage and are willing to face risks that the rest of us could barely imagine. We had a terrible illustration of that recently in Cleveland, as we have heard, when two officers lost their lives in an awful crash on the A66.

My thoughts remain with the families, colleagues and friends of PC Blades and PC Clough, who served with courage and commitment to the last. Their service and sacrifice remind us that policing is not merely a profession; it is, as the Home Secretary said in the House last week, a calling. Those who answer it deserve our support, respect and gratitude. To perform their duties effectively, the police require our confidence and our trust. That brings me to the focus of the debate, in which the range of themes and topics covered speaks to the breadth of the subject matter. There are so many different aspects of policing for which public confidence is a live issue. Let me deal with the issues that Members have highlighted.

Speak to any frontline officer and they will say that our current policing system is no longer fit for purpose. The current policing model is neither national nor local enough to respond to the public's concerns about theft and antisocial behaviour. This Government are determined to change that, which is why, in the police reform White Paper, we have set out the most significant changes to policing in nearly 200 years, to create a system that is better equipped to tackle modern threats while remaining responsive to local communities.

Our reforms will rebuild public confidence by delivering a new model for policing with a clear focus on cutting and preventing crime, strengthening local policing, raising standards and ensuring that national and specialist police services can be accessed by all communities. A new national police service will strengthen our ability to tackle serious and organised crime threats to national security. The national police service will give policing the tools, technology and capability needed to tackle crime wherever it occurs.

Adam Dance: Thank you for being here today. Will you commit to asking the Policing Minister to meet my local police force and me to discuss the custody unit, which is a huge issue in my constituency? The decision was made well before my time, but it is affecting the community throughout south Somerset.

Jo White: Thank you for your question. You made that request in your earlier contribution—

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (in the Chair): Order. I regret to interrupt the Minister, but Members should not use the word "you" to refer to each other. They should speak through the Chair, who is here to adjudicate, so that the debate does not become too fractious.

Jo White: Thank you for correcting me, Sir Alec. The hon. Member for Yeovil (Adam Dance) asked earlier about meeting the Policing Minister, and I am happy to pass that request on to her.

We will introduce stronger national standards through the national police service, ensuring that the service the public receives is more consistent. To respond to the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Luke Myer), the reform programme will enable a new funding formula that will include policing areas such as Cleveland.

In 2010, the number of officers in full-time employment was 143,734. During the period of austerity under the previous Government, officer numbers dropped by over 20,000 to a low of 122,405 in 2018. From 2019, the previous Government funded forces to hastily increase officer numbers, but that has led to officers being hired—and, in some cases, put in desk jobs—to meet arbitrary headcounts. The rush to recruit also led to a situation in which over 35% of officers had less than five years' experience, placing a further strain on forces.

The Government are focused on what the police are doing, not just on officer numbers. That is why we have scrapped the officer maintenance grant and focused on rebuilding neighbourhood policing, with over 3,800 more police and PCSOs now where the public want to see them—out in neighbourhoods, proactively preventing crime and dealing with antisocial behaviour.

Blake Stephenson: I met with my force in Bedfordshire over the summer and spent a couple of days with the neighbourhood policing teams. One of the challenges they have is that their officers often get dragged off neighbourhood policing to deal with more complicated policing operations because there is a higher risk and they need to prioritise their work. What assurance can the Minister give my constituents, and all Members' constituents, that under the neighbourhood policing guarantee, the new neighbourhood policing officers will not be hired and then re-tasked with other work in their police forces?

Jo White: The commitment is to deliver 13,000 additional neighbourhood policing personnel by the end of this Parliament, which will give us the capacity to ensure that they can be focused on the role they are employed to do.

Since the election, the Government have increased funding to forces by close to £2 billion. This year funding to police forces has increased to its highest cash level of up to £18.5 billion—a 4.5% cash increase compared with the previous year. That means that all forces will

receive a real-terms uplift in their funding. In response to my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas), since March 2025 the Met has grown by 607 neighbourhood officers. We recognise the unique challenges faced by the Met. In 2026-27 the Met will receive up to £4 billion in funding, which is an increase of £175 million.

In addition, we are supporting policing to deliver £354 million of efficiency savings by the end of this Parliament through the police efficiency and collaboration programme, but we cannot stop there. The police funding system we inherited was complex, outdated and the product of legacy decisions rather than strategic design. Many PCCs, MPs and policing partners have complained that the police funding formula is out of date and not fit for purpose. Changes to police governance, force mergers and the creation of the national police service require a new way of allocating funding between forces aligned with those new structures.

Max Wilkinson: I asked a specific question about the alignment of boundaries. In my constituency of Cheltenham, we are served by Gloucestershire police. We are apparently due to get a regional mayor with Herefordshire and Worcestershire. We are served by the health board for Bristol and the west, but policing apparently is being sent eastwards. Given the Government's devolution agenda and the need for transparency and accountability in public services, that causes a real issue. There are rumours that the Government are changing course and trying to align boundaries. Is that the case—yes or no?

Jo White: As I am standing in for the Policing Minister, I cannot immediately answer that question, but I am sure that the hon. Member will get an answer as quickly as possible.

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.

Public confidence in policing depends on communities knowing what they can expect from the local police service and on seeing those expectations met. That is why the Government are introducing local policing guarantees, which will provide greater transparency and accountability on the policing services that matter most to the public.

The Government have committed to setting clear expectations on the issues that matter most to the public, including a target for forces to attend 90% of the most serious incidents within 15 minutes in urban areas and 20 minutes in rural areas, alongside measures to improve the speed with which 999 calls are answered. However, public confidence is about more than response times alone. It is also shaped by whether victims receive a good service and whether forces are effective at tackling crime.

HMICFRS's recent "State of Policing" report urged forces to make urgent improvements in how they investigate crime and secure justice for victims. Forces must get the basics of investigation right. The Government are strengthening the way police performance is monitored and improved. Through the policing performance system, inspection findings are brought together with analysis against the police performance framework to provide a comprehensive picture. This enables earlier identification of concerns and targeted support in collaboration with the College of Policing, and intervention where required. A stronger focus on delivering better outcomes for victims and the public will play a key part in rebuilding and maintaining trust and confidence for victims of crime and communities.

Jim Shannon: I understand and respect that this is a devolved matter, but I asked a question on which I hope the Minister can give me the assurance that I seek. Northern Ireland is one part of the United Kingdom where terrorism is still active, although to a lesser extent. To police that correctly and effectively the PSNI needs resources. Will the Minister please have discussions with the relevant Minister to ensure that it has those resources? She has given an assurance on resources elsewhere in the United Kingdom; we in Northern Ireland need equal and effective resources, to ensure that the terrorism threat in Northern Ireland is dissipated and reduced.

Jo White: I will ensure that the hon. Gentleman's request is passed to my colleague the Policing Minister when she returns.

All communities deserve to have trust and confidence in the police. That starts with ensuring that those who enter policing are vetted and assessed thoroughly and remain suitable to work in policing throughout their service. This year we delivered our manifesto commitment to introduce mandatory standards on vetting. As part of those standards, applicants who have a caution or conviction for relevant VAWG offences, including domestic abuse and sexual offences, are disqualified from entering policing. A presumption of withdrawal of vetting clearance applies for serving police officers in these circumstances.

The Home Office has provided HMICFRS with £100,000 for this financial year to expand the scope of its integrity inspections. These will now look at recruitment and selection processes alongside vetting in every force in England and Wales. We have also provided £425,000 to the College of Policing and National Police Chiefs' Council to develop an accredited regime on vetting. This will include the development of standardised training and stronger intervention in forces that are not complying with vetting standards.

The Home Office has to date provided approximately £3.5 million towards the NPCC's continuous integrity screening programme. This is developing a system that will provide automated alerts from the police national database to forces in relation to anyone working in policing, enabling forces to take action earlier. Where police fall short of the standards expected of them, the public rightly expect that they will be held to account. The Independent Office for Police Conduct plays a crucial role in overseeing the police complaints system. It also investigates the most serious and sensitive matters, such as deaths and serious injuries and serious allegations of corruption involving the police. The Government announced plans to reform the governance of the IOPC to strengthen its accountability and resilience.

On 30 July the Home Secretary launched an independent end-to-end review of the police accountability system. It will be chaired by Dame Lynne Owens and Jason Beer KC, and will report in six months. It will establish whether the police accountability system is fit for purpose, whether it is transparent, and how we can minimise avoidable delays for victims, families and officers.

[Jo White]

I agree that public confidence and trust in policing have been damaged by the social media clips referred to by the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell). Trust cannot be built through slogans or by drawing policing into wider debates. It is rebuilt when people see officers on their streets, know that crimes will be investigated, receive a proper service when they need help and have confidence that the highest standards are upheld. I agree with the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson) that we as MPs have a responsibility to develop and give respect to the police officers in our communities, and to signal the way in which we should work with the police in order to build community strength and cohesiveness in the constituencies we represent.

Trust in the police matters because policing in the UK is fundamentally based on consent. When people trust the police, they are more willing to report crime, share information, act as witnesses, comply with the law and work with officers to solve local problems. We recognise that trust and confidence are stronger in some communities than in others, and that confidence has declined over time. That is why the Government are focused on practical action: restoring neighbourhood policing, increasing transparency about police performance, strengthening accountability, modernising police force structures and ensuring that forces have the support they need to tackle the crimes and antisocial behaviour that matter most to local people.

The reforms are about having the right policing in the right place, so that people feel safer, see police where they live and know they will get the help they need when they need it. The programme is needed to improve effectiveness and restore public trust, creating a stronger, more co-ordinated national approach to the capabilities that underpin policing. The public do not want a police service that is distracted from its core mission; they want a police service that prevents crime, protects communities and serves victims. That is exactly what our reforms are designed to deliver.

Let me turn to the matter of people knowing who their local police officer is. Neighbourhood policing is essential to restoring public confidence in the police. Officers who know their communities are better placed to understand local concerns, respond to issues that matter to residents and provide visible reassurance when needed. Every community deserves to have visible, proactive and accessible neighbourhood police officers. Through the neighbourhood policing guarantee, we are strengthening the connection between police and their communities by committing to delivering 13,000 additional neighbourhood policing personnel by the end of this Parliament.

The Government recognise the profound and lasting impact that sexual violence can have on victims. We know that victims do not always receive the response or support they deserve, and that that has contributed to these crimes being under-reported. I am listening to the points raised by the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain). That is why we are committed to improving the police response to sexual violence to ensure that all victims are heard, taken seriously and treated with dignity.

To ensure consistency, we established the national centre for VAWG and public protection in April 2025. The centre provides co-ordinated national leadership in policing to tackle violence against women and girls. In addition, the centre is supporting all forces to implement the learnings of Operation Soteria, an academic-informed programme that has transformed the investigation of rape and sexual offences. As part of this, forces must maintain a commitment to continuous improvement—an acknowledgment that ongoing learning is essential to improving outcomes and experiences for victims. We want every force to have the right specialist capability to address sexual offences. That is why we have asked all forces in England and Wales to implement specialist rape and sexual offence teams by December 2027.

Hate crime is a priority offence under the Online Safety Act, which places clear legal duties on platforms to take proactive action against illegal hate content online. The Government also fund the national online hate crime hub, the national policing capability dedicated to online hate crime.

Let me say in response to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) that police and justice are devolved to Northern Ireland, and the Police Service of Northern Ireland's main budget is allocated by the Northern Ireland Department of Justice. The Northern Ireland Executive's programme for government recognises that PSNI officer numbers are low, and I welcome the Executive's commitment to grow police officer numbers in line with the 2020 New Decade, New Approach agreement.

In closing, I again thank my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle and Clitheroe for securing the debate, and I thank everyone who has contributed. We have covered a lot of ground, and yet the nature of the topic means that inevitably, there is much more that could be said. I know that the Policing Minister will take great interest in the discussion that we have had today, not least because the question of how we drive up confidence in policing is one that concerns us all and has an impact on the lives of everyone across this country. As I have set out, the Government are taking action across multiple fronts, and we will continue working closely with the police to ensure that they have everything they need to maintain public trust and deliver for the communities that depend on them.

10.45 am

Jonathan Hinder: I thank all Members who have spoken and intervened during the debate. So many important points have been made, and I think we have found quite a lot of agreement. I hope that we can push forward together, across the parties, because policing and crime is such an important issue for all our constituents across the country, yet it often receives far less attention in Parliament than many other issues. I am pleased to be able to make my small contribution to putting that right and am grateful to Members for joining me in that effort. I thank them all for attending.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Government support for public confidence in the police.

10.46 am

Sitting suspended.

Bus Stops

11 am

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (in the Chair): I will call Alex Mayer to move the motion and then the Minister to respond. I remind other Members that they may make a speech only with the prior permission of the Member in charge of the debate and the Minister. As is the convention for for 30-minute debates, there will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up.

Alex Mayer (Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered standards for bus stops.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Alec. This is my first time leading a Westminster Hall debate, and there was a degree of excitement in my office last week when the email arrived, alongside another email about a coach debate that I will lead in November. You wait ages for a Westminster Hall debate to turn up and then two come along at once.

Many people in the House know that I bang on about buses, because I think they are brilliant. There are 3.7 billion bus journeys made a year. As is often said, they are the most used form of public transport. I assume that means that bus stops are the most used places for people to hang around waiting for public transport. That is why I believe we should lavish some attention on them, not least because they are all around us. About 86% of people live within a 10-minute walk of a bus stop. The Bus Services Act 2025 gives the Secretary of State brand new powers to look at the location, design and construction of stopping places—bus stops.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the location of bus stops. I am so frustrated when I have taken the train to Cambridge, arrive at the station, see the bus, but have to walk 200 yards around the platform, come out of the station and walk 200 yards back to the bus stop, to find the bus has gone. Why are bus stops such a low priority?

Alex Mayer: My hon. Friend has a very snazzy station these days. Cambridge station has much improved over the period he has been the Member of Parliament. Having integrated transport matters. The Government's strategy, Better Connected, talks to the fact that people use more than one form of public transport, so getting from the train to the bus matters greatly, which I will slightly address later.

The Bus Services Act and accompanying guidance tend to focus on accessibility, which is very important.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for securing the debate. It might be her first Westminster Hall debate but it will certainly not be her last—there is another on 2 November and more to come. I congratulate her on addressing the importance of improving the accessibility of bus stops. We need to ensure that older people continue to feel confident in using public transport, with adequate resources to encourage usage, because loneliness is increasingly recognised as a public health issue for older people. Does the hon. Lady agree that more must be done to ensure that older people remain independent and continue to access public transport, with the provision of suitable seating and without the barrier of having to stand for prolonged periods?

Alex Mayer: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. I want to encourage as many people as possible to use our bus stops and buses. Seating is important because waiting in comfort makes it more likely that people will choose to use a bus. I am concerned about accessibility, but I also want to ask another question. I want to move beyond, "Can I use the bus stop?" to "Would I like to or choose to use the bus stop?"

I said in my maiden speech that bus stops were the window to the soul of buses—*[Laughter.]* I know: I am strange like that. But at least I keep to a theme. Each bus stop should give a promise of the journey ahead. I believe, therefore, that we should have national standards for bus stops. Whenever I suggest anything like national standards, Ministers tell me that local people are best placed to decide. I absolutely agree that Ministers should not be deciding whether one's bus stop is here on the road or 25 yards further along, but national standards do reduce duplication. That is one of the issues that many local councils and transport authorities talk to me about.

Portsmouth is often mentioned as an example of a place with very good bus stops. They have 579 bus stops, and they decided to do a 72-point audit of them. They checked them all and decided that they were going to improve them in four different ways. Interestingly, their transport lead says that they would have welcomed national standards, because they spent a quarter of their time and budget on developing their own local standards. They would much rather have ploughed that into actually making bus stops better. So even they believe that we should have national standards.

I am not saying that one size fits all. It is obvious that a different kind of bus stop will be needed for a small rural area as opposed to a large hospital. Again, people have already done some of this work. Portsmouth has come up with six different varieties of bus stop. The Campaign for Better Transport has four. Norfolk county council has split its bus stops into bronze, silver, gold and platinum. A lot of that work has been done and could be implemented into some national standards.

What do I think should be in those standards? The very first thing is: "Can I find the bus?" That is the first question passengers ask. The modern bus stop really came into being in London in the 1820s. The first buses were in Manchester, but the first bus stops that we would understand were in London with a pole and a flag. Yet over a century later, it is sometimes still quite difficult to find the bus stop, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) said.

Daniel Zeichner: I recall, as a shadow Minister, visiting a major institution in the country and sending the management into panic when I asked them where the bus stop was to get back to the station. They had to go and ask the cleaner, and the cleaner told me, "You won't find it because it's not marked." I said, "How does anyone know where the bus comes?" The cleaner said, "The people who use the bus know." Is that not, I am afraid, an indication of the low priority given in some places to the bus as a mode of transport?

Alex Mayer: That is an anecdote that my hon. Friend tells often, and I absolutely agree with him. At completely the other end of the spectrum, I got the train to Stockport recently to make an onward journey to Manchester, for reasons I am sure most Members can understand. When I got to the train station at Stockport, I decided that I would get the bus to a campaign centre in Manchester. I went on a particularly circuitous route to get there, despite the fact that the bus station was actually rather near. That is because the signpost that I could have spotted said it was for Stockport Interchange, Viaduct Park. There was no mention of the word bus and no picture of a bus. As a visitor, I did not have the faintest idea that it meant bus, so I went on a long walk to find the buses. We need to make it simple for people, whether in a rural area or in a larger city.

Sometimes we make public transport too complicated. I am also reminded of a time when a transport officer was trying to explain this snazzy new concept of a transport hub to me. He went round and round in circles until eventually I said, "So it is a bus stop with a bicycle pump." He reluctantly agreed, but he really did not want to call it a bus stop. We need to talk in a language that passengers understand, so national standards should absolutely start with the basics: a recognisable stop, name and clear signage.

We have found the bus stop, so what next? My second question is: "Does it smell?" It is really slightly broader than that: "Is it clean? Is it well lit?" As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned, is there somewhere I can sit? The Campaign for Better Transport ran a survey called "Bus Stop Stories", and a man called Paul was quoted as saying:

> "The bus stop I use has a shelter, which is positive. However, the so-called seat is far too narrow for someone to actually sit down."

If the bus stop is just a pole, how does it look—dilapidated or delightful? At the bigger bus stops, are there other things passengers can do? Can I charge my phone or get wi-fi? Some bus stops allow people to call for help; is there CCTV to make people feel safer?

I really welcome the requirement for all local transport authorities to use Transport Focus's "Your Bus Journey" survey. That is absolutely a push in the right direction, and it will encourage some of the more recalcitrant authorities—perhaps authorities such as Central Bedfordshire council—to collect information on what local passengers actually think. The survey found that, overall, 81% of people were satisfied with their bus stop, but I think there might be a difference between actual passengers who use buses and would-be passengers.

I am really bothered about the would-be passengers, because we will have a growing and thriving network only if we get those people on board. The Campaign for Better Transport says that 23% of people are put off using the bus because of poorly maintained shelters, and that 47% of people say that a clean and comfortable shelter would make them use the bus more often.

My third question is: "Do I know when the bus is coming?" We could have an entire debate on things like real-time information, ghost buses and the like. A timetable really helps people to know whether the bus is coming, but currently only a third of bus stops have up-to-date timetable information, and only around 16% of stops have real-time information—the proportion is growing, which is good.

The research in this area is really rather fascinating. If someone standing at a bus stop with real-time information has been there for 10 minutes, then the bus arrives, and they are surveyed afterwards, they say they have been waiting for 11 minutes. If exactly the same thing happens—someone waits for 10 minutes—but there is no real-time information at the stop, and the passenger is asked how long they have been waiting, they will say they have been waiting for 21 minutes. Obviously, I want all passengers to think they have been there for about 25 seconds, and that it all passes in the blink of an eye because it is so fun waiting at the bus stop. But the key point is that nothing has changed in terms of the clock, only the passenger experience.

There have been positive developments on real-time information. The major bus operators are definitely sending out their pings as to where the bus is far more often than they used to. Non-passenger stops—rest stops or stops when drivers change over—have also been added to the bus open data service, or BODS, which is the national database. That makes it much easier for passengers to know when buses are actually coming.

Challenges remain, though. In some ways we are slightly going backwards: some of the older buses in rural and coastal areas were using 3G, but they are now using 2G because 3G is being turned off. There will always be on-the-day challenges around roadworks and congestion, with bus operators making decisions to try to get their buses back on the timetable; that information also needs to be fed through. Will the Minister please update us on what is happening with the proposed disruption tool that the Department has been working on for some time?

We have many examples of bus operators manually updating their records on the day because a bus is delayed, and then physically ringing up the local transport authority to tell them the same information, so that the authority can manually input it into their systems and it appears at the bus stop for passengers. Is any work going on, perhaps at the Bus Centre of Excellence, to overcome some of those issues, perhaps using AI? All those are issues we would like to see covered in a national standard.

Throughout the country, some places are doing bus stops really well, including the award-winning bus stop outside Asda in Dunstable, which has a green roof, is really wide and spacious, and has seats. There is also a fantastic bus stop in Norwich—I have read about it but not yet visited—that apparently has a swing in it, and which also won a prize. I look forward to visiting.

Given that the latest enhanced partnership manual has in effect recognised that best practice exists throughout the country—for example, on multi-operator ticketing—but that it does not necessarily happen without a bit of a carrot-and-stick approach, would the Minister consider including further national standards on bus stops in a future update of the manual?

Finally, there is the parallel issue of who owns the bus stop. Currently, it is a complete and utter mess—read council websites and weep. This is from West Sussex county council:

> "The different elements that go to make up a bus stop are managed by one of 3 different organisations. Please ensure that you contact the correct one if you have a query or wish to report an issue".

This is from Cambridgeshire county council:

"It should be noted that whilst bus shelters are located on the highway, they do not form part of the highway asset provided and managed by the County Council as the Highway Authority."

Mayoral devolution could make this even worse.

Many unitary authorities are concerned about splitting up transport and highways powers. A strategic authority officer I spoke to yesterday told me that "Devolution by default" should include giving highways powers to the regional authority, not least to make sure that the revenue that some of the bus stops generate is not then diverted to something like adult social services. We brought track and train together; it is not beyond the wit of man to bring bus stop and bus together, too. The local transport authority clearly ought to have that responsibility.

We also need to make sure there are resources on an ongoing basis. I very much welcome the multi-year funding settlements, but it is not always linear. For example, snazzy new real-time information screens were introduced in Lancaster and then turned off because money was not available for their ongoing upkeep. They are back on again now, but this remains an issue. Some in the industry are concerned that, because we have so much investment right now, in five years' time—when the contracts end, when the screens need renewing or the batteries start failing—not everything will be in place to allow us to fix any issues.

Fundamentally, we need national standards for our bus stops, because a really nice bus stop brings in more passengers and grows the network. They also give pride in place. They look different and they look good. I therefore urge the Minister to consider national standards for bus stops so that everyone can have a great British bus stop.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (in the Chair): The hon. Member for Shrewsbury has been given permission to speak by the hon. Member for Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard and the Minister, but I will be calling the Minister to speak at 20 minutes past 11.

11.17 am

Julia Buckley (Shrewsbury) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Alec. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard (Alex Mayer) on the securing the first of two stimulating Westminster Hall debates. On the really important topic of national standards, I want to discuss a new species of bus stop—the famous floating bus stop.

For the uninitiated, floating bus stops are small alighting platforms in between lines of traffic and cycle lanes. Members may already be able to guess the issue I am going to raise. In my constituency of Shrewsbury, we had a new floating bus stop installed outside our railway stations as part of our gyratory road system. Due to an error, the width of the pavement was less than the minimum 1.5 metre standard requirement.

There has been a 12-month campaign, with protest, public outcry and a petition. The council will now be removing the bus stop because we have had congestion chaos in the town centre and it has blocked access to our important railway station. What should have been a transport interchange—the important road between our bus station and our railway station—has in fact become congested by losing a line of traffic and having a floating bus stop that was too complicated and confusing for people to understand, all because we did not have a simple, single standard. In terms of lessons learned, we need to make sure that Shrewsbury's story is fed into the ongoing assessment.

It exposes a wider issue. Floating bus stops improve cyclist safety, but they transfer the interaction from bus and cyclist to pedestrian and cyclist. For blind and partially sighted passengers, it is quite a serious concern. The Department for Transport's guidance recognises the difficulty in detecting a passing cyclist, but the Royal National Institute of Blind People's research found that 59% of users with sight loss had stopped using bus stops and 55% had changed routes to ensure they felt safe on the road.

The case for a single standard is strong, as long as we ensure accessibility, address geometry and are careful about the relationship between pedestrians and cyclists. I hope that, as the DFT looks at the guidance at the start of next year, it will bring forward the lessons learned from Shrewsbury. We need people to access not just our buses, but trains and, of course, our beautiful town centre.

11.20 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Justin Madders): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Sir Alec. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard (Alex Mayer) for securing her first Westminster Hall debate and for her sustained interest in the quality of bus stops and local transport provision.

Hon. Members will notice that I am, in fact, the roads Minister, not the local transport and Equalities Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield and Rothwell (Simon Lightwood). Not only does he have a very long job title, but he is required in the main Chamber for Women and Equalities questions—which is why I am substituting. I assure hon. Members that I will report back to him the excellent quality of the debate and the issues raised. As the roads Minister, I of course recognise the importance of bus stops and the important effect they have on the streetscape.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard made clear that she is passionate and informed about the importance of bus journeys to everyone. Improving bus journeys is a key part of the Government's growth mission, and we have made some important announcements on bus travel already. We are determined to deliver better services, grow passenger numbers and connect people with jobs, education, healthcare and opportunity.

The experience of using a bus does not begin when a passenger gets on board. It begins when they plan their journey, reach a stop and decide whether the service feels convenient, reliable and welcoming, as my hon. Friend graphically described in her opening comments. She is absolutely right that the quality of a bus stop is about more than accessibility, although of course accessibility is vital. Passengers notice whether a stop is easy to find and use, whether it offers shelter or seating where appropriate, whether it is clean, whether the surroundings feel safe and well maintained and, as we have discussed, whether there is information about services

[Justin Madders]

that is clear and current. Those features help to determine not only whether someone can use the bus, but whether they would make an active choice to do so.

I welcome my hon. Friend's support for the Bus Services Act 2025. The Act places passenger needs and local accountability at the heart of bus services, giving local leaders greater freedom and the tools to shape networks around the communities they serve. That approach reflects a simple principle: local transport authorities know their areas and are best placed to plan improvements across the whole local bus network. That is why the Department's vision for buses, within an integrated transport system, puts local transport authorities at the centre of delivery. We have allocated almost £700 million a year through the local authority bus grant for the three years from 2026-27 to 2028-29.

In return for Department for Transport bus funding, authorities are expected to work closely with operators and local communities and to maintain an up-to-date bus service improvement plan. A bus service improvement plan is a public document that should set out an authority's vision and practical plan for improving services and growing patronage. Our guidance encourages authorities to take a strategic approach to stops and interchanges, including keeping an inventory of infrastructure, identifying priorities for investment and setting locally appropriate standards for facilities and maintenance. Bus funding can support capital improvements to stops, stations and real-time information, as well as services and fares.

My hon. Friend argued that local transport authorities should have clear responsibility for bus stops, rather than responsibility being fragmented across different tiers of local government. I understand the force of that point. The Government's approach already places the local transport authority in the lead for planning and improving the bus network through its bus services improvement plan and, where relevant, the enhanced partnership.

Where responsibility for highways or individual assets sits elsewhere, close and effective working between the relevant authorities is essential. We expect local plans to join up services, infrastructure and passenger information, rather than treating them as separate issues. That will no doubt be music to the ears of my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), who explained his frustrations about Cambridge station and bus interchange. I am not sure whether he was complaining that he had to walk 200 metres, or whether that was what caused the disconnect between the bus and rail services, but I hope to see improvement on that. It is a common complaint from many members of the public.

Enhanced partnerships are an important part of that framework for authorities that are not pursuing franchising. Most are performing well, but of course performance is not consistent everywhere. Following the Department's review, we have published updated guidance and a practical manual, including minimum standards for enhanced partnerships to adopt by March of next year. We will continue to share good practice, and the Bus Centre of Excellence will provide targeted support where it is most needed.

I recognise the case made by my hon. Friend the Member for Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard for a national bus stop standard, which echoes that of the Campaign for Better Transport. Greater consistency can give passengers confidence about what they can expect, but we have to acknowledge that there are about 330,000 bus stops in England, ranging from simple bus stop flags attached to a post to stops with shelters, seating, real-time information and other enhanced facilities. It is clear that the needs of a busy urban interchange will differ significantly from those of a lightly used rural stop. Careful consider would therefore need to be given before taking action to prescribe a uniform national standard—not least, to the potential burden on local authorities of the cost and practicality of doing so.

It is worth noting that the Local Government Association's general approach is to avoid national standards that reduce the discretion of local authorities to take decisions about their own networks, although it supports the Government's role in promoting and sharing best practice. The Government's present approach is therefore to set a clear national framework and provide guidance while asking local transport authorities to establish and deliver standards suited to local circumstances through their bus service improvement plans. I think that strikes the correct balance, but we will continue to share good practice through our guidance. The Bus Centre of Excellence, which my hon. Friend the Member for Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard asked about, will consider the points raised in this debate and whether any of them can be put into future updates to guidance.

As was mentioned, good passenger information is central to standards. Real-time information is improving and digital information has transformed many journeys, but passengers must also be able to rely on accurate, understandable information at the stop. Our bus service improvement plan is clear that stops should display up-to-date information about the services calling there, and that authorities should set out what they will do to provide that good-quality information.

Of course, accessibility remains fundamental to the wider picture. A stop cannot be considered good-quality if disabled people cannot reach it, wait safely or board independently. The Bus Services Act 2025 introduced measures including bus network accessibility plans and powers for statutory guidance on the safety and accessibility of stopping places. The Department is developing that further guidance with disabled people, local authorities and the wider sector.

On that point, my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury (Julia Buckley) raised what is undoubtedly one of the hot topics of the bus stop world: floating bus stops. There is a great deal of concern and discussion nationally about their use. We have issued statutory guidance and asked authorities to pause new installations of the design, which requires passengers to alight directly on to a cycle track, while further research is undertaken. I hope that the local authority in my hon. Friend's jurisdiction reports back on its experiences, because the more information we get from local authorities on this, the better. It is important that we look very closely at the everyday quality, information, maintenance and governance of all bus stops, and clearly, getting the balance right on floating bus stops is an important part of that work.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard for bringing this issue to the Chamber. We agree on the central point that bus stops are not a peripheral piece of street furniture; they are an

essential part of the bus network and the passenger experience. Through the Bus Services Act, sustained funding, bus service improvement plans, stronger enhanced partnerships and clearer guidance, we are giving local leaders the tools and responsibility to make bus travel a more attractive choice, and I have no doubt that we will continue to discuss how we improve on that as the years move by.

Question put and agreed to.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended.

Pharmacies: Government Funding

[Mr Clive Betts *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Shivani Raja (Leicester East) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government funding for local pharmacies.

It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I am pleased to have secured this debate, and I thank colleagues from both sides of the House for joining me to discuss this vital pillar of our primary care network.

Community pharmacies are the frontline of healthcare in our constituencies. In Leicester East, they are not just commercial premises but places that serve the very heart of our community. It is estimated that 1.6 million people access pharmacy services in neighbourhoods every day, ranging from elderly residents accessing swift advice to busy families picking up emergency prescriptions and vulnerable constituents using the opportunity to receive healthcare close to home without needing a GP appointment.

Despite that, in Leicester East and across the country this crucial sector is reaching a tipping point. Independent economic analysis of community pharmacy finances for the NHS revealed that community pharmacy is facing a funding gap of around £2.5 billion. As a consequence, England lost roughly 1,000 pharmacies between 2016 and 2026, which is an 8% decline. In Leicester East, we have seen our local provision drop from 32 pharmacies down to 29, which is a net loss of 9% of our local community network.

Behind the numbers is a harsh reality for a vast number of people. We have to consider not only the impact of small business closures on our local high streets, but the everyday consequences for residents who rely on pharmacies for their care. A loss of three pharmacies may sound like a minor shift, but the real implication is deeply concerning. Fewer pharmacies means longer journeys for frail patients, longer queues at the counters that remain open and increased pressure on nearby GP surgeries that are forced to pick up the slack.

We have seen a 19.5% increase in online pharmacies since 2021, and although it is positive that medication and assessments can be accessed in that way, it must be a priority for the Government to protect in-person high street chemists. The closures are obviously not due to a lack of demand. People across my constituency recognise the importance of local pharmacies and use their services constantly. The reason for the closures lies in the structural financial strains that make running an independent pharmacy untenable.

My team and I have had several conversations with the owners and staff of pharmacies across Leicester East, and I recognise and thank them for all their hard work on the frontline of our healthcare provision. They have raised several alarming issues; I hope that, by outlining them today, we can collectively commit to positive and constructive changes to support these independent businesses.

The current reimbursement model for medicines is the first aspect of the system that fails independent providers. As it stands, pharmacies are expected to buy

[Shivani Raja]

medicines up front. They can then wait anywhere from two to three months for the NHS to reimburse those costs. To make matters more severe, the NHS reimbursement calculation works on the assumption that pharmacies receive massive bulk-buy discounts from suppliers. Large national chains may possess the purchasing power to make that assumption work, but such bulk discounts simply do not exist for a small, independent community pharmacy in Leicester East. Small pharmacies routinely pay more to acquire necessary drugs than the NHS repays them.

Although concessionary pricing mechanisms exist to adjust for market spikes, the delay in the adjustments means that independent contractors are constantly left bridging the shortfall. That disparity forces wholesalers to look overseas for cheaper stock, creating supply chain bottlenecks and leaving local pharmacists to face the frustration of patients when vital medicines are backordered for weeks.

The Independent Pharmacies Association recently conducted research that shows that an average pharmacy dispensing 10,000 items a month still faces a shortfall of circa £56,000 compared with what is needed to keep in pace with inflation. Pharmacies cannot be expected to continue to foot this bill. The Government must do more to ensure that pharmacies are properly reimbursed, to prevent further pressure and demand on other areas of our NHS.

On top of the margin pressures, pharmacy owners in my constituency are caught in a constant struggle between rising operating costs and completely fixed incomes. Over recent years, overheads have increased right across the board. The recent decisions to raise employer national insurance contributions and the minimum wage and to escalate business rate liabilities have significantly increased the financial burden on pharmacies up and down the country. Furthermore, unlike other small high street businesses, community pharmacies receive no business rates reliefs on their premises—a major oversight for essential healthcare providers operating right at the heart of our local economies.

When running costs go up for a normal high street business, such as a local shop, café or dry cleaners, it can adjust its prices to cover higher wage bills and energy costs. Independent communities pharmacies cannot do that. Their primary income is fixed directly by the Government tariff. When employment taxes increase or utility bills rise, independent business owners cannot pass those costs on. They must absorb the loss directly until their reserves run dry.

I welcome that our new Prime Minister has introduced business rates relief for the leisure and hospitality sector, but does the Minister agree that we must also introduce further assistance for the pharmacy sector? GP and dental premises benefit from the NHS reimbursement of business rates, while community pharmacies, which also provide vital frontline services, do not. Introducing a form of relief to end the disparity for local pharmacies would make a substantial difference.

In addition to the fixed margins, the current funding framework expects community pharmacies to deliver essential services at a financial loss. For example, home delivery services for housebound or vulnerable residents became vital during the pandemic, and remain a crucial lifeline for many elderly constituents across Leicester East, but local pharmacies receive no core NHS funding to run delivery vehicles or pay driver wages. They fund the operations entirely by themselves, committing their own profit to ensure that vulnerable patients receive their medication on time.

In addition, pharmacy owners have described how, although the Government support preventive clinical services, the rules and restrictions imposed are unnecessarily constraining. It is positive that vaccinations and immunisation are being moved into pharmacies, but the Independent Pharmacies Association suggests that shifting more flu vaccinations into pharmacies could free up around 4.5 million GP appointments each year. As we approach winter and flu season, the Government should seriously consider the benefits of reallocating services, and ensure that proper funding is in place to back up the increased expectations.

Blood pressure screening is another service that is being redirected to pharmacies. It is a simple, cost-effective way to catch cardiovascular issues early and prevent avoidable hospital admissions, yet under the current NHS caps reimbursement is limited to just one check per patient every five years.

No small business can survive indefinitely when its costs are rising, its prices are frozen by the Government and it is expected to deliver services for free. This financial pressure feeds directly into an acute workforce crisis. The pharmacy pressures survey published by Community Pharmacy England revealed stark results: 60% of pharmacy teams reported active staffing shortages, and 54% of owners said they were struggling to recruit permanent staff. Crucially, more than 80% reported longer patient wait times and more than half acknowledged that shortages were reducing their ability to offer direct advice.

We are also seeing a troubling rise in temporary closures, when a pharmacy must shut its doors for hours or days at a time simply because it cannot secure a qualified pharmacist. The freedom of information data collected by Healthwatch across various integrated care boards revealed that, in a single year, there were nearly 14,000 temporary closures across England, resulting in over 46,000 lost hours of care.

Without strategic planning for staffing, the long-term future of our community pharmacies remains deeply uncertain. The Company Chemists' Association estimates that England could face a shortfall of 16,000 community pharmacists by 2036. While it is positive that thousands of pharmacists have been recruited into the GP practices via the additional roles reimbursement scheme, we must be careful not to strip our high street pharmacies of the very talent they need to remain open.

As the long-awaited NHS long-term workforce plan continues to undergo revisions, it is vital that the Government give sufficient priority to the baseline staffing needs of community pharmacy. We know that expanded training targets and the roll-out of independent prescribing qualification upon registration present a real opportunity to expand clinical care on our high streets. Similarly, recent regulatory challenges to allow pharmacy technicians to supply specified medicines and deliver services under the Pharmacy First scheme have the potential to free up valuable pharmacist time. But none of these reforms will succeed if the underlying pharmacy network is allowed to shrink due to unfunded operational mandates.

I want to be entirely fair to the Government and to Ministers and acknowledge that we have seen some positive movement in this policy area. Progress is being made, but we must ensure that the pace of our action matches the urgency of the situation before us. The community pharmacy contractual framework—CPCF—settlement for 2026-27 secured almost £3.7 billion for the sector, which is a £340 million increase on the previous year. That builds on the two-year agreement that saw funding rise in previous settlements. Pharmacy trade bodies have expressed concern, however, that the funding uplift will not be sufficient to support the introduction of independent prescribing. We must ensure that the new expectations placed on pharmacies to share services are matched by funding commitments.

We have also seen practical relief in the write-off of historic pandemic-era medicine margin debt, and in adjustments to the single activity fee. Furthermore, the roll-out of the Pharmacy First scheme has demonstrated the real appetite for community-level care. Across England, more than 10,900 pharmacies are participating, delivering millions of consultations for common conditions like earache, shingles and minor infections. That is a demonstration of real and effective triage that takes pressure off A&E departments and GP surgeries.

However, we must listen to what sector stakeholders are telling us. Community Pharmacy England welcomed the recent funding adjustments as a step away from real-term cuts, but was explicit that this was a "first step" towards stability and not the final destination. The National Pharmacy Association made the same point: structural underfunding means that current settlements will struggle to match the "true cost" of service delivery. The Health and Social Care Committee was blunt in its analysis, describing the current CPCF funding model as "not fit for purpose" and "overly complex".

A major flaw in the scheme is that pharmacies only get paid for many clinical services if local GPs or hospitals actively refer patients to them. In practice, that leaves independent business owners completely dependent on someone else's admin system, meaning many pharmacies are fully staffed and ready to treat people but receive zero referrals simply because a local surgery is not using the system properly.

The current policy framework is simply not delivering for our high streets, and we need an operational model fit for the next decade. If we want pharmacies to continue delivering on the frontline, expanding Pharmacy First, delivering preventive health checks and taking pressure off our local GP surgeries, we must fix the underlying economic model that keeps their doors open.

As a Conservative, I believe in supporting small business owners, encouraging enterprise and removing unnecessary administrative barriers. High street pharmacies are independent businesses delivering frontline public care efficiently, but when Government policy sets fixed tariffs while escalating business rates liabilities and employment taxes, it creates a system that actively undermines independent providers.

I ask the Minister to address four specific, practical areas today. The first is reimbursement reform. We must review the drug reimbursement formula and concessionary pricing mechanisms, so that payment calculations reflect the actual market acquisition prices paid by the independent pharmacies, rather than relying on assumed bulk discount rates that small independent businesses simply cannot access.

The second area is contractual and operational certainty. We need to update the CPCF to ensure that core funding is predictable, transparent and fair, rather than heavily dependent on variable, patchy referral targets managed by NHS bodies over which pharmacy owners have no control.

The third area is business overhead and rates relief. I urge the Minister to work with colleagues in the Treasury to address the cumulative tax and cost burden facing small health providers. That includes reviewing business rates liabilities and the impact of the employer national insurance contribution increases on independent high street providers.

The final area is workforce and capacity support. NHS workforce planning must balance the expansion of primary care roles with the baseline staffing requirements of high street community pharmacies. As policies such as independent prescribing expand, Ministers must ensure that independent pharmacies are provided with the direct resource and funding needed to put clinical roles into practice safely.

Community pharmacies are one of the most cost-effective, high-impact assets that our healthcare system possesses. They keep people well, they prevent avoidable emergency admissions, and they give local high streets across Leicester East and the country vital commercial and civic life. The current approach needs real correction to ensure that independent business owners and patients are properly supported. I look forward to hearing the Minister's response, and I urge the Government to give our local pharmacies the financial certainty and stability that they desperately need and deserve.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): Order. Six Members have indicated that they want to speak, so that means they have about seven minutes each. I would normally advise Members to bob if they want to speak in the debate, but two Members have indicated that they have challenging circumstances, so I will exempt them from that requirement on this occasion.

2.44 pm

Sadik Al-Hassan (North Somerset) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Betts. As Members might know, I am here today wearing two hats, both pharmacy-shaped, as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on pharmacy and as a community pharmacist for nearly 20 years. The brilliant, unrelenting work of my colleagues in pharmacy teams I saw throughout my career is the reason why this debate is so important. Pharmacists know what it is like to be the first port of call for an unwell patient, to deliver vaccinations to an entire community, and to work exhausting, long days.

Ben Coleman (Chelsea and Fulham) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Leicester East (Shivani Raja) on securing the debate. My hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Sadik Al-Hassan) will be aware that measles outbreaks are increasing, not least because of a decline in measles, mumps and rubella vaccinations. The Government told the Health and Social Care Select Committee, on which I serve, that they need to do more

[Ben Coleman]

with schools and GPs. We contend that they need to use pharmacies far more. Does my hon. Friend agree with me that as all families visit pharmacies, the Government should enable pharmacies to give MMR vaccinations and grip this properly, so we can crack the challenge of the measles outbreaks, which seem to be increasing in our country?

Sadik Al-Hassan: I thank my hon. Friend for his work on the Select Committee. I agree with him. Pharmacy is well placed to help offer additional vaccination services as well as help with a suite of other minor ailments with an expanded Pharmacy First.

I greatly welcome the uplift for 2026-27 in the pharmacy contract, but let us be honest about the scale of the problem: funding fell by £800 million in real terms between 2015-16 and 2025-26, even as prescription volumes rose by 20%. Last year's funding settlement was a great amount, but that has been eaten up by a great amount of costs, and the Government's independent analysis found a £2 billion annual funding gap. Nationally we have lost nearly 1,500 pharmacies since 2017—a 15% contraction of the network. In my own constituency of North Somerset, that story is written in bricks and mortar. We have six fewer pharmacies than in 2016.

Rachel Gilmour (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): Last Friday I visited a community pharmacy in Tiverton, and it was announced on Monday that an application for another pharmacy in my constituency had been turned down. Currently I have three pharmacies in Tiverton when I actually need four. Does the hon. Member agree that we really need to grasp this nettle and make sure we have enough pharmacies on our high streets?

Sadik Al-Hassan: I share the hon. Member's commitment to getting the right number of pharmacies for the population they serve. That is an important part of not just our high streets, but our communities. We must ensure we have pharmacy services available to people who need them, which reduces the pressure on the rest of the NHS system. The amazing pharmacies still working and dispensing in my constituency dispense over 109,000 prescriptions a month. They deliver thousands of Pharmacy First consultations and have saved as many as 7,370 GP appointments since January 2024.

I recently released my vision of what primary care should look like in 2040 and how we should integrate our system better. It has to be true integration, not just in words but in digital infrastructure. We need a primary care network that knows what happens in different parts of the provision, but also understands how that provision affects the rest of the NHS system. We need a true single patient record that extends beyond general practice and into pharmacy; that will make the funding decisions for the Department easier because we will be able to see the activity even better than we do today.

My message to the Minister is simple: pharmacies are not asking for charity. With some reports suggesting that only 14% of pharmacies are profitable, I am asking for money not to make the job of pharmacy easy, but to make it possible, because it should not be this hard. Pharmacists are asking to be paid properly for work they already do brilliantly. I urge the Government to set out a road map for a six-year funding settlement of £600 million in today's terms, to invest in the workforce, to allow pharmacies to realise their ambition and finally to close the funding gap, before we lose any more of these vital neighbourhood services.

2.50 pm

Rishi Sunak (Richmond and Northallerton) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. It takes me back to the days when as a junior Minister I had to answer to you as chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee. It is also a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North Somerset (Sadik Al-Hassan), who has spoken repeatedly with enormous authority on these matters. He deserves all our thanks for championing pharmacies.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East (Shivani Raja) on securing the debate and for her detailed compelling speech. I know she does a terrific job representing her constituents locally because my mum is from Leicester and my family are still there, so I get regular reports. I am here today because my mum was a pharmacist and I spent my childhood working in her pharmacy. I saw at first hand the incredible role that independent community pharmacies play in their local area. With flexible opening hours, their location and no need for an appointment, they can be an easy first port of call for families when they need help, care and advice.

I am struck that community pharmacists always want to go above and beyond for their patients. One of my first jobs for my mum was to ride around on my bike in the evenings delivering prescriptions to elderly patients who could not make it in or needed them urgently. That was a sign for me of the role that pharmacists play in their local areas. That is why, extraordinarily, about 80% of those over the age of 65 have visited their local pharmacy over the past three months, which speaks to the role they play.

I see that in my constituency. We have great national pharmacies as well as brilliant independent ones, such as Coopers in Great Ayton, the Village Pharmacy in Catterick, Stokesley pharmacy and Central Dales pharmacy in Hawes, providing vital healthcare in a sparsely populated rural area and reinforcing the lifeline that pharmacies provide. A benefit of knowing pharmacists for the majority of my life is that I have seen the transformation in the role they play. Originally, they just dispensed prescriptions for GPs. My dad was a GP, so I also saw that side of it. They have transformed to being the first port of call for primary healthcare and treatment for minor illnesses.

That evolution had various moments, which the hon. Member for North Somerset will also have experienced. Starting in about 2000, the introduction of hypertension and blood pressure services made a difference. Medicine use reviews were a big statement of trust in what pharmacists could do. The ability to dispense urgent repeat prescriptions made a huge difference to patients. More recently, there has been the introduction of oral contraception and smoking cessation services, as well as flu jabs, catalysed by covid and now accounting for about 30% of those dispensed, which is a huge increase.

That evolution over the past 25 years demonstrates the faith that successive Governments of all stripes have had in pharmacies. Patients and local communities

place faith in their pharmacists because they trust them and value what they do; they know that they can provide healthcare in an accessible way. That is why, when in government, we introduced Pharmacy First, of which I am very proud. Pharmacists were enabled to provide medication for seven common conditions, including sinusitis, sore throats, ear infections and urinary tract infections. Obviously, that got off to a slower start than we would have liked, but it now has almost 100% take-up among pharmacies. When I last checked the stats, something like 7 million consultations had taken place and more than 5 million prescriptions had been supplied. High satisfaction in the service is growing by 30% to 40% year over year. It has continued the evolution of increasing trust in pharmacies and providing care closer to people in their communities.

I have three questions for the Minister about how to continue that journey and re-emphasise support for pharmacies. The first is about raising awareness and trust. In the last debate on pharmacies here, which I think the hon. Member for North Somerset secured, the Minister gave some stats about the high awareness of the Pharmacy First scheme. Anecdotally, that did not quite jibe with my personal experience. Is there something we can do collectively to raise awareness of Pharmacy First and, as was touched on, make sure that the healthcare system is on the same page, so that people get the same message from 111, their GP or the hospital about what is available at the pharmacy, and so they can trust their pharmacist to deliver that service?

Secondly, we should look at expanding Pharmacy First, which, in a welcome fashion, the Government have indicated they are minded to do. There are a couple of options for that: we could consider whether the existing restrictions for the seven services, which are limited in part by gender or age, can be expanded. We could also look across the border to Scotland to see what other conditions the service could be expanded to.

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): I agree that we need expanded services for our pharmacies, but does the right hon. Member agree that should come with adequate remuneration? At the moment, pharmacists are saying they are doing a lot more for a lot less.

Rishi Sunak: Of course. I am sure when the Minister looks at what services can be expanded, she will make sure they are funded properly and will look at where they will relieve strain elsewhere in the healthcare system. If we look at system costs, pharmacies can help save money. Some of the other conditions covered in Scotland include eye issues such as conjunctivitis, dermatological conditions such as acne, and chest infections.

Finally, the hon. Member for North Somerset touched on joined-up care. If we want a truly joined-up primary care service, we need single patient records. Examining whether pharmacies can be integrated into GP Connect is worth exploring.

I thank the Minister for being a champion for pharmacies inside the Government. Obviously, the issue is personal for me, but there is widespread support for pharmacies among colleagues and society. They deserve our gratitude and support, and I urge the Government to continue to back them.

2.57 pm

Mr Lee Dillon (Newbury) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Betts. I thank the hon. Member for Leicester East (Shivani Raja) for securing this important debate. I declare an interest as a vice-chair of the APPG on pharmacy, my colleague on which, the hon. Member for North Somerset (Sadik Al-Hassan), I am happy to follow.

For many residents in rural constituencies such as mine, local pharmacies are the first, and often only, point of contact with the NHS. Longer distances to travel, limited public transport and patchy digital connectivity mean that the trusted and timely in-person service that they provide for our communities is vital. However, access is thin on the ground.

Analysis by the National Pharmacy Association has described west Berkshire as England's "pharmacy desert", with the lowest number of pharmacies per head of any council area. To put that in context, the UK average is about one pharmacy to every 4,600 patients; in my constituency, it is one to every 7,200. Twelve pharmacies still open their doors to residents across Newbury and west Berkshire, and they do essential, extraordinary work. They dispense more than 111,000 prescriptions every month and deliver enough consultations through Pharmacy First to save more than 8,000 GP appointments, all while acting as a specialist and friendly front door to our NHS.

Like many here, I welcome the Government's recent investment in the sector. We have heard the cash figures, but the 10.3% uplift for 2026-27 is the largest increase anywhere in primary care this year, and the move to expand prescribing rights is a vital step in the right direction. However, a positive uplift does not in isolation deliver the sustainable settlements that pharmacies desperately need. Pharmacies cannot plan their workforce or their services throughout the year when settlements are negotiated and have to be fought for year by year. Nationally, we have lost over 1,300 pharmacies since 2016, and this year's uplift will not plug the underlying funding gap, which now stands at over £2 billion. It is no wonder that Community Pharmacy England accepted this year's deal on the condition of further reform, stating clearly:

"Accepting this deal does not mean we think it is enough".

With budgets stretched, that instability is compounded by broken medicine supply chains and a framework that leaves many pharmacies in the impossible position of dispensing medicines at a loss. On visits to Lambourn pharmacy and MedWell chemist in Newbury, staff told me that current funding would quickly be absorbed by rocketing drug prices, with some pharmacies paying 14 to 15 times more for prescription medicine than at the start of the year. In rural areas, where proximity to provision is already paramount, older residents in particular cannot afford to lose access to their prescription because their pharmacy down the road has been priced out of existence. Despite those challenges, pharmacies are doing incredible work, and I know how much residents across Newbury and West Berkshire value their expertise and care.

In September 2024, the Government commissioned the Lord Darzi report, which rightly acknowledged the huge potential of pharmacies within the NHS. Two years on, with a workforce eager to do all it can, that

[Mr Lee Dillon]

potential remains unfulfilled—not for a lack of experience and care, but because of a lack of investment from the centre. The 10-year health plan's ambition to shift care from hospitals into communities is absolutely the right one, and pharmacies are the linchpin of that push. As their responsibilities continue to rise, so must the Government's backing. Pharmacies have spent the last 10 years being squeezed to near breaking point; the next 10 and beyond must be different.

I therefore ask the Minister to launch a strategic review of medicine supply, including reforms needed to build domestic manufacturing capability, and to commit to an above-inflation multi-year funding settlement that allows pharmacies to continue to serve my constituents and millions of patients across the country for decades to come.

3.2 pm

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Betts. I congratulate the hon. Member for Leicester East (Shivani Raja) on securing the debate, which is important and timely, especially considering that we had the remaining stages of the Health Bill this week.

Community pharmacies are a vital part of the NHS, especially in places like West Dorset, where they provide essential medicines, advice and care close to home. At a time when pharmacies are facing severe financial and workforce pressures, we must recognise their contribution and ensure that they receive the funding, support and protection they need. We are asking more and more of community pharmacies, while for too long we have expected them to absorb rising costs with inadequate funding.

In West Dorset, 18 community pharmacies serve a population of around 94,000 people. In a typical month, they dispense around 155,000 prescriptions. Since the introduction of Pharmacy First in January 2024, pharmacies in West Dorset have helped to avoid as many as 8,737 GP appointments. Those figures demonstrate the enormous contribution pharmacies make to our local NHS and why we cannot afford to lose them.

Today, people are more likely to live with multiple long-term conditions, require regular prescriptions and need advice and support close to home. For someone living in a rural village, a pharmacy is the most accessible point of contact with the NHS. That is why the funding model should properly recognise rurality and population age.

Nationally, community pharmacy funding in 2025-26 was around £800 million lower in real terms than in 2015-16, despite a 16% increase in the number of NHS prescription items dispensed over that period. Since 2017, there has been a net loss of 147 bricks-and-mortar pharmacies, which is 15% of the network. I welcome the Government's recent 10.3% funding increase, worth £340 million, but their own independent economic analysis identified a funding gap of around £2 billion, so the increase does not close the gap. Some pharmacies in West Dorset have reported to me six-figure annual shortfalls.

Poor funding leads to fewer staff, and fewer staff leads to shorter opening hours, temporary closures and fewer services being offered. It means that fewer people receive their medicines and fewer patients are able to access care. In NHS Dorset, there were 207 full-time equivalent pharmacists in 2023 and 47 vacancies, which is a vacancy rate of 19%.

In places such as West Dorset, in rural Britain, recruiting a permanent pharmacist can be extremely difficult. Pharmacies have to pay more to attract pharmacists from elsewhere or bring in locums, who have to travel significant distances. Those costs do not exist to the same extent in densely populated urban areas. It is therefore wrong to design a funding system that treats every pharmacy as if it operates in the same circumstances.

The pharmacy access scheme provides some support for isolated pharmacies, but its funding pot is just £20 million, which is nowhere near sufficient to deal with the structural challenges facing rural pharmacy provision in England. We need a funding formula that properly recognises rurality, population age, workforce pressures and the cost of serving sparsely populated communities.

Funding is only one part of the problem. We also need stronger regulation and stronger powers to intervene when large corporate pharmacy operators fail. Jhoots operated 150 branches across England. In West Dorset, its pharmacies in Bridport and Lyme Regis were closed for months, disrupting prescription access for more than 12,000 people who rely on those services. The impact was felt throughout our community. It was felt by the patients who struggled to access their medicines and by other healthcare providers who had to deal with the consequences. It was felt devastatingly by pharmacy staff. Staff across multiple sites reported going months without pay, despite receiving payslips and seeing deductions for tax and pensions. Some were unable to pay their rent or household bills, and some relied on food banks and could not buy their children school uniform.

I pay tribute to the amazing staff in Bridport and Lyme Regis for the resilience they showed during that time. The support shown to them by the local community was outstanding. They did not deserve to be treated that way by the pharmacy owners.

Our regulatory framework was largely developed when pharmacies were mainly independently owned businesses operating one or maybe two pharmacies, and it has not kept pace with the growth of large corporate operators controlling extensive networks. Local integrated care boards, local authorities and national bodies need powers to intervene quickly, protect patients and staff, secure medicines and ensure continuity of service.

When Jhoots's services collapsed, I raised the issue through an urgent question in the House, and there was clear cross-party support for legislative action to ensure that that kind of crisis cannot happen again. I would like to take the opportunity to pay tribute to the hon. Member for North Somerset (Sadik Al-Hassan), who campaigned tirelessly alongside me. His help and advice were invaluable during that period, so I am extremely grateful to him.

We need to strengthen the powers available to intervene when a provider fails to meet contractual patient safety or workforce obligations. We need mechanisms to allow alternative providers to step in quickly. We must hold the corporate bodies—not the pharmacies—accountable, and where necessary take away their rights to control an

essential service. We need to protect pharmacy staff when a provider collapses. Protecting the workforce is inseparable from protecting patient safety.

I say politely to the Minister that when I met her predecessor, he asked for those powers so that he could step in during the Jhoots scandal. We tried to introduce them through amendments to the Health Bill, but they were not accepted. Will the Minister please meet me and other experts, such as the hon. Member for North Somerset, as her predecessor did? Let us get her the powers to prevent this from ever happening again.

3.9 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Betts. I say a big thank you to the hon. Member for Leicester East (Shivani Raja) for bringing this subject to our attention.

As the DUP's health spokesperson, I am particularly concerned about the amount of support available to our local pharmacies. As an indication of that, I used the opportunity of the first statement today, on summer health and resilience—the Minister was there, not to answer the question, but to support the Secretary of State—to ask the Secretary of State what discussions she is having with her counterparts in the devolved Administrations, particularly in Northern Ireland, to assure a UK-wide co-ordinated approach to summer resilience.

I also asked what targeted support has been made available for community pharmacy networks, which so often act as the first line of defence when GP surgeries are stretched to capacity as we prepare for the cold and flu season. To be fair to the Secretary of State, she answered my question very well and assured me that discussions are ongoing with the Minister back home in Northern Ireland, and that reassured me. That example underlines the importance of community pharmacies to me, those in my Strangford constituency and every one of us here.

Just last year, the National Pharmacy Association said that it was left with no choice but to recommend that its 6,000 members take collective action for the first time in its history, citing significant new costs and inadequate funding. About 90% of the work carried out by the average community pharmacy is funded by the NHS. This time last year, the National Pharmacy Association issued the stark warning that up to 63% of pharmacies were likely to close in 2026. We are still in 2026, so that threat hangs over all our heads. In response to a survey, 94% of pharmacies stated that the latest funding settlement did not provide stability to their finances. Those figures demonstrate the effect of persistent financial uncertainty on the sector.

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): The hon. Member mentions the closure of pharmacies, but this is also about the ending of some services. It is sometimes the things that are noticed the least that matter the most once they are gone. For example, people with neurological or mental health conditions rely on Nomads to have the right tablets on the right day, and that really important service is sometimes provided by our pharmacists. Does the hon. Member agree that we do not want the wonderful services that pharmacies provide free of charge to be lost because of financial pressures? They matter too much for the lives of our residents.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving me a chance to get a wee glass of water. His comments are incredibly important, and he is right to say that those services are almost impossible to bring back once they are lost.

Local pharmacies are under ever-increasing pressure. My particular concern is for small, independent pharmacies in rural constituencies such as my own. These businesses are facing rising costs, increasing workloads and the real risk of insolvency, and that is not to mention the personal toll on local pharmacy owners. The impact on those individuals and their health is sometimes forgotten.

Shockat Adam: I thank the hon. Member for making that point about how much stress is put on pharmacists and small business owners. In the last year, there was a 2.3% increase in items reimbursed by the NHS, a 17% increase in service volumes, a 3% increase in inflation, and increases in operating costs such as national insurance and business rates. That all adds to the pressure when pharmacists should be concentrating on providing a vital service to the community.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman is a Leicester City supporter, as I am; we do not have to seek our sorrows at this moment in time, but that is by the way. More importantly, his comments underline the issues for local independent pharmacy owners.

As the hon. Member for West Dorset (Edward Morello) said very clearly, at the heart of this issue are the patients—sometimes we need to remember that. Pharmacy closures are leaving many people, and particularly those in rural areas, with greater difficulty accessing their medication. Those concerns are felt deeply in Northern Ireland. The chief executive of Community Pharmacy Northern Ireland has warned officials that medicine shortages are having a greater impact on Northern Ireland because of systemic funding pressures, with pharmacies being forced to use their own money to bridge the gap in funding. That is the reality for these people, who have consciences, feel compassion and want to care for their patients and customers. The impact is clear, because almost 90% of pharmacies in Northern Ireland were unable to pay their wholesaler bill in January. Think about what that means for a second: that is real pressure. Further demonstrating the pressures is the number of pharmacies operating in Northern Ireland, which at 506 is the lowest ever recorded.

I know that the Minister is a compassionate lady who understands these issues incredibly well, and she will be aware that those figures raise serious concerns about the financial sustainability of our pharmacies and the security of the medicine supply throughout this United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Our pharmacies need certainty about their funding arrangements. They need to know well in advance what support will be available to them, so that they can plan effectively, manage costs and pay their bills, and not be forced to close.

I have often highlighted the fact that pharmacies' ability to provide first-line defence in the fight against minor injuries is not used enough. The right hon. Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak) outlined some of the things that pharmacies do; they are frontline defence. These things are perhaps not seen by everyone, but they are seen by the patients and customers who come in. Every person who gets advice on treatment for

[Jim Shannon]

warts, headlice, thrush or another ailment from the pharmacy rather than the GP is helping to ensure that GPs are not overwhelmed, and that A&Es are not overwhelmed by people who cannot see their GPs. We perhaps do not always see that, but it is very important.

Pharmacies are a vital cog in the health service, and we must fund them to do the job that they are able to do, yet are prevented from doing. I look to the Minister for that funding and for assurance. The Minister always tries to give us the reassurance we need and to answer the questions that we pose. These are hard times financially, but pharmacies are important for everyone. They produce savings for GPs and the NHS. Let us support them.

3.16 pm

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East (Shivani Raja) on securing such an important debate.

Supporting our pharmacies is one of my long-standing commitments; I have spoken about the issue many times in the Chamber. Pharmacies are at the heart of primary care, and I am grateful for the contribution they make to our community—dispensing medicines, delivering vaccinations, offering advice for minor conditions and providing clinical services that would otherwise need to be delivered elsewhere. Pharmacies are accessible and embedded in our high streets. For millions, they are the front door to the NHS.

I have had the pleasure of speaking to pharmacists from across my South West Hertfordshire constituency, visiting Abbey pharmacy in Abbots Langley, Boots in Kings Langley and Esom pharmacy in South Oxhey, and even undertaking work experience at Riverside pharmacy in Rickmansworth. As I have said in Parliament before, my discussions have made it clear that our pharmacies are under unsustainable pressure as a result of the Labour Government's continued attack on retail businesses.

I welcome the commitment in the Government's 10-year health plan to move more healthcare responsibilities from hospitals into our communities, but that is not feasible unless pharmacies receive the necessary financial support. It is important to note that community pharmacies have not been exempted from any of the Government's harmful economic policies against retail businesses. Since the Government's announcements at the autumn 2024 Budget, their employer national insurance contributions and national living wage have increased, and their rate of business rates relief has reduced. Pharmacies now face significantly higher operating costs.

Mr Dillon: Lambourn pharmacy, which I mentioned earlier, worked out that about 90% of its profit came from serving the NHS and only 10% came from shampoo and other things, so it wonders whether the Government could pro rata those NI and other costs, meaning that they are paid only on the 10%. Would the hon. Gentleman welcome that type of approach?

Mr Mohindra: I am very conscious that I have a former Chancellor and Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak), sitting to my left; he might argue for keeping it simple. I would argue that a pharmacy's primary business is healthcare related, and that either we support our healthcare system or we do not. Doing it piecemeal is not in the best interests of what some of my residents regard as the frontline of the NHS system.

In the past 12 months alone, more than 600 neighbourhood pharmacies have closed. That looks set to worsen, because business rates relief for retail businesses has been removed for this financial year—a significant shift from the 75% business rates relief afforded to retail businesses in 2024 under the previous Conservative Government. Although GP practices can have their business rates reimbursed by the NHS, and NHS dental practices can also qualify for reimbursement, community pharmacies receive no equivalent compensation, despite providing NHS services every day, as has been mentioned. How is this fair or reasonable at a time when the Government are shifting more responsibility to the sector?

I have also been in contact with Community Pharmacy Hertfordshire. Although the 2026-27 community pharmacy contract provides additional investment in community pharmacies, it still falls short of what is needed to put the framework on a sustainable financial footing. Research conducted by the Independent Pharmacies Association, which has done a brilliant campaign on this matter, shows that an average pharmacy dispensing 10,000 items a month still faces a shortfall of £56,000 against what would be needed to keep pace with inflation—a very stretched financial situation.

When I met with the previous Minister for Care, the right hon. Member for Aberafan Maesteg (Stephen Kinnock), earlier this year, I was disappointed that he could not outline clear steps as to how that situation could be alleviated. Without a sustainable, longer-term funding settlement, more pharmacies risk closing at the same time as the NHS is asking the sector to do more.

It is also disappointing that the Government have delayed Pharmacy First payments. Under the previous Conservative Government, the Pharmacy First initiative was introduced to allow community pharmacies to support patients with common conditions, reducing the pressure faced by our GPs. Now, many pharmacies I speak to have said they are struggling to deliver this service as a result of the Government's withholding of funding. The impact of pharmacies in delivering primary care should not be underestimated. Shifting more flu vaccinations into pharmacies could free up around 4.5 million GP appointments each year.

In conclusion, pharmacies are accessible and already have the infrastructure and clinical expertise to provide more care closer to home. However, patients will benefit from an expanded role for community pharmacies if their pharmacy stays open. Currently, with unsustainable operating costs and limited Government funding, that has become increasingly difficult. Without the financial support to deliver these services, many pharmacies risk closing. If the Government want to shift care from hospitals into communities, the funding must follow.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): Each Front Bencher has 10 minutes, or a little longer depending on the timing.

3.22 pm

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I sincerely commend the hon. Member for Leicester East (Shivani Raja) for securing this important debate and setting it out in such clear terms. Community pharmacies are

often overlooked as a source of care for those in need, but in constituencies such as mine in Mid Sussex they are vital.

Many of us know what the 8 am rush for a GP appointment can be like, so the fact that there is an alternative trusted high-street healthcare service where people can walk in, speak to a professional and receive advice and treatment is enormously valuable. It is also exactly the kind of shift towards preventive and community-based care that we need to see more of and not less.

Pharmacies take pressure off GP surgeries. They help people get advice earlier, manage conditions locally and, importantly, can keep people out of hospital, but community pharmacies are under immense pressure, as we have heard. Last year, I visited Kamsons pharmacy at the Vale primary care centre in Haywards Heath, where I met Julia from Community Pharmacy Surrey and Sussex, as well as Mark and the wider Kamsons team.

I was struck by just how much local pharmacists do beyond dispensing medicines. A little like the right hon. Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak) when he was much younger, Kamsons provides free home deliveries for prescriptions and help patients organise multiple proscriptions into pill organisers. For vulnerable and elderly residents, these services can literally be a lifeline. They enable people to remain independent and to continue living safely in their own homes, while having the support they need to manage their medication.

The team I met were enthusiastic and deeply committed to helping local people, but they also expressed real disappointment at the level of support currently available to community pharmacies. There is a strong feeling among local branches that the extraordinary contribution pharmacies made during the pandemic has been forgotten. They are struggling to balance the books, as a number of Members have explained.

Community pharmacy funding has fallen substantially in real terms over the past decade. The Government's recent funding settlement is a welcome step in the right direction, with significant increases announced for '24-25 and '25-26 and continued support for services such as Pharmacy First, blood pressure checks and contraception, but we must be honest about the scale of the challenge. That additional funding came after years of financial pressure, while analysis has identified a funding gap of more than £2 billion across community pharmacies.

Rising energy, staffing and medicine costs are placing further strain on businesses that are already operating on tight margins, and patients increasingly experience another pressure directly: medicine shortages. Pharmacists tell me that they can spend hours every day simply trying to source medicines that they have been asked to dispense. That time could be spent with patients, and it means that the pressure does not stop at the pharmacy door. In my constituency, I have heard from patients whose pharmacies have had to reduce opening hours and staffing because of financial pressures. When a pharmacy closes earlier, a prescription issued later that day can potentially be delayed until the following day. For someone waiting for an essential medicine, that can be deeply distressing.

When a pharmacy is struggling to fulfil prescriptions, the consequences ripple through the entire health service: a patient who cannot get their medication may return to their GP; that GP surgery then has another appointment to deal with; a patient whose condition worsens may ultimately require hospital treatment; and another pharmacy, already under pressure, may have to pick up the pieces when a patient desperately seeks an alternative. That is why I ask the Minister to look at community pharmacies not as an optional extra but as a vital piece of the system.

We can see the difference locally. Through Pharmacy First, community pharmacies in my area have reportedly saved almost 2,000 GP appointments—1,937, to be precise. That is 1,937 occasions when people have been able to receive appropriate care closer to home, freeing up GP capacity for those who need it most. That is the model we should be expanding, but we cannot ask pharmacies to keep doing more with less. The Liberal Democrats are calling for a new long-term and sustainable funding model for community pharmacies.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Edward Morello) tabled amendments to the Health Bill about rescuing pharmacies when they have gone bust, which the Liberal Democrats supported; will the Minister seek to add those to the Bill when it goes to the Lords? We want further investment to be directed towards smaller towns and rural areas, as other Members have set out, including parts of Mid Sussex where access can be particularly difficult. We want Pharmacy First to be expanded, giving patients more accessible routine services and freeing up GPs to concentrate on more complex cases, and an exemption for pharmacies from the national insurance contribution increase so that funds are being spent on patients and vital medications.

We also need to tackle the practical problem of medicine shortages. Pharmacists need greater flexibility to substitute medicines where clinically appropriate, rather than spending hours trying to source a particular product that may simply be unavailable. The message I heard in Haywards Heath was very clear: pharmacists want to help. They want to provide more services, support their patients and take pressure off GPs and hospitals, but they need a system that recognises the value of what they do.

Community pharmacies are often the first place someone turns to when they need healthcare advice. They are local, accessible and trusted. When they are properly funded and supported, they can keep people healthier for longer, help vulnerable residents remain independent in their own homes and take pressure off the rest of the NHS. The Government have made a start with their recent funding settlement; I welcomed that, but a first step is not enough. I urge the Minister to listen to the pharmacists I have spoken to in Mid Sussex and across the country and put in place a genuinely long-term plan for community pharmacy. Our local pharmacies have been there for our communities; we need to make sure that the Government are there for them.

3.29 pm

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I welcome the Minister for Public Health and Patient Safety, the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North and Cottingham (Dame Diana Johnson), to her new role and congratulate her on her appointment.

[Gregory Stafford]

I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East (Shivani Raja) on securing this most important debate. She spoke very powerfully about the pressures facing community pharmacies and I want to build on her speech by discussing what is happening both in my constituency and nationally.

In Farnham and Bordon, we have access to 15 community pharmacies, which collectively dispense around 142,000 prescriptions every month and deliver around 6,500 flu vaccinations. The Government's 10-year plan wants more healthcare to be delivered in the community, which is an aim that I think we all support. At the same time, however, the Government appear to be making it harder for those very pharmacies to deliver such care and to remain sustainable.

The reality is that community pharmacies are being asked to do more while facing rising costs. We have seen higher national insurance contributions, increases in the national minimum wage, rising business rates and persistent inflationary pressures. At the same time, pharmacies are dealing with medicine shortages, higher procurement costs and disruption to international supply chains. The financial picture is impossible to ignore. Funding for community pharmacies in 2025-26 was actually £800 million less in real terms than it was in 2015-16. In the last year alone, the number of NHS-prescribed items dispensed by pharmacies and the service volumes increased by 2.3% and 17% respectively.

As the hon. Member for North Somerset (Sadik Al-Hassan) has already highlighted—he was echoed by a number of Members around the Chamber today—the Government's own independent economic analysis in March 2025 identified a funding gap for pharmacies of £2 billion a year, and trade bodies that have spoken to me identify a structural funding problem. Of course, we on this side of the House welcome additional funding, but pharmacy is not made sustainable by giving with one hand and taking with the other. We need to ensure the long-term viability of community pharmacy and I am very sceptical that the Government's approach will achieve that.

I turn now to Pharmacy First, which is an excellent example of what can be achieved when we make better use of the skills and expertise available within our NHS. My right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak) is absolutely right to be proud of his Government's record on this matter. Created and implemented by the last Government, Pharmacy First shows what NHS reform should look like—the right professional, with the right responsibility, delivering the right care in the right place. It should be a game changer and I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend for its introduction.

Pharmacy First recognises that patients with seven common conditions can be safely assessed and treated by qualified pharmacists without there always being a requirement for a GP appointment. However, the scheme is currently limited and not as expansive as it is in Scotland, where it covers up to 30 common conditions. I would like the Government to move rapidly to expand Pharmacy First elsewhere. We should be ambitious about the skills and clinical expertise of our pharmacists.

Shockat Adam: Does the hon. Member agree that another opportunity for Pharmacy First—indeed, a generational opportunity—is independent prescribing? That would really unlock the potential of pharmacies and help patients, but it requires both a vision and adequate funding.

Gregory Stafford: I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman. I think that we can use pharmacists and pharmacies much more creatively and in a manner that would in no way put patient safety at risk. In fact, it would allow patients more choice, and free up GPs and other health professionals to do other parts of their job, so he is right.

Community Pharmacy England's 2026 pharmacy pressures survey makes the scale of the challenge facing pharmacies clear. Drawing on responses from nearly 4,000 pharmacy owners and staff members, it found that 75% of pharmacies are currently losing money, while only 14% reported being profitable. There is little value in providing additional funding for services without recognising the wider cost and workforce pressures facing the sector: 30% of pharmacies have reduced their opening hours and 76% report an impact on patient care, including longer waits and delays in accessing medicine.

That brings me—briefly—to the issue of business rates and the wider cumulative costs facing pharmacies. A pharmacy might occupy a storefront on a high street, but it is not simply another retailer; it is part of the national health service and is an essential provision in our community. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) outlined, pharmacies are also part of our national resilience. The Government want pharmacies to take on more responsibility, but they face rising costs that have been caused by the Government.

Pharmacies need to be properly considered within the system and not treated simply as another high street retailer. The same issue applies when we consider national insurance increases, and indeed the national living wage. These cumulative increases are having a real impact. Unlike a high street retailer, a pharmacy has contractual obligations to the NHS and a moral responsibility to its patients, so it cannot just increase prices or stop providing a service like other businesses could. As my hon. Friend the Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Mohindra) rightly put it, the Government have to recognise the cumulative impact of these terrible decisions when considering future policy.

Jim Shannon: I want to underline a point I made in my speech: some of my community pharmacists back home are using their own money to subsidise their pharmacy and keep the business going—because of their compassion, their understanding and their concern for their customers and patients.

Gregory Stafford: The hon. Gentleman is entirely right, and his point goes to the heart of the debate. Pharmacies are businesses that must make a profit, and pharmacists must pay their staff and make sure that they can feed their own families, but they are also public servants. They are people who have decided to work in our national health service to provide for our patients, and the Government should recognise that.

The hon. Member for Leicester South (Shockat Adam) mentioned independent prescribing. If properly supported, it will give patients quicker access to treatment, but it brings greater clinical responsibility, greater governance

requirements and greater pressure on pharmacists' time. Given the limited capacity that we have already talked about, I want to ask the Minister three questions on independent prescribing. Does she believe the sector is ready? Does it have the workforce and the capacity to do it? What additional funding and support will be provided? We also need clarity on the timetable. Pharmacists have trained to prescribe, and they should be able to use that skill.

That brings me to the pharmacy workforce, because none of these reforms—independent prescribing, Pharmacy First or any other idea—will work without a sufficiently large and properly supported workforce. We have heard from right hon. and hon. Members about recruitment and retention pressures, including concerns about the number of full-time equivalent pharmacists. At the same time, the demands placed on existing staff are increasing. We cannot continue to add responsibilities to community pharmacy without considering whether there are enough people to deliver them safely and effectively.

The previous Conservative Government's NHS long-term workforce plan included an ambition to increase pharmacist training places by 29%, taking them to around 4,300 by '28-29. That ambition will clearly not be met under this Government, and we are still waiting for the long-promised NHS workforce plan. Despite my asking the then Secretary of State for Health, the right hon. Member for Ealing North (James Murray), in July when the plan was coming out, we still have no answer.

Finally, I will move on to medicines supply. Pharmacies are facing global supply chain disruption and rising medicine costs, with repeated price concessions adding further pressures. They cannot absorb these pressures indefinitely, so what are the Government doing to mitigate the impact of geopolitical disruption on medicine supply and prices, and what assessment has the Department made of the financial burden that these pressures are putting on community pharmacies? They are being felt by pharmacies across my constituency, including Vaughan James and Lalys in Farnham, Chase and Headley pharmacies and Day Lewis in Haslemere, and Grayshott pharmacy, all of which have contacted me about the issues that I have raised.

In conclusion, community pharmacy has a crucial role to play in the future of our NHS. We all want to see care delivered closer to people's homes. Pharmacy First has shown what can happen when we give pharmacists greater responsibility and trust them to use their expertise, but ambition needs to be matched by capacity. The Government cannot say that community pharmacies are central to the future of neighbourhood healthcare while making it harder for those pharmacies to remain financially sustainable. I urge the Government to recognise the cumulative impacts of their policies on businesses, to look again at the treatment of business rates for community pharmacies, to ensure independent prescribing is properly supported, to protect the supply of medicines, and to provide clarity on when the NHS workforce plan will be published.

The fact is, we cannot ask pharmacies to take on more responsibility and deliver more NHS care while simultaneously making it harder for them to survive. The Conservative party believes that community pharmacy is absolutely central to the future of the NHS. If the Government agree, they must make sure that pharmacies have a future, too.

3.39 pm

The Minister for Public Health and Patient Safety (Dame Diana Johnson): As ever, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I congratulate the hon. Member for Leicester East (Shivani Raja) on securing this important debate and on her opening statement, which set out thoroughly the current situation of pharmacies and the challenges that they face.

We all agree that community pharmacies are at the heart of the NHS and of their local communities. We absolutely recognise the important role that pharmacies play in delivering health services in neighbourhoods across the country, and the opportunity for that role to keep growing. We also recognise that many community pharmacies face financial pressures and that ensuring financial sustainability for community pharmacies is essential to improve patients' access to medicines and services.

That is why, since coming into office, the Government have delivered successive uplifts to pharmacy funding, following years of cuts or flat funding, and have invested in pharmacies to roll out NHS prescribing and to improve patient access to care in their communities. Of course, none of that would be possible without the dedication and professionalism of pharmacy teams supporting patients across the country. Over the years, like other Members, I have visited many pharmacies in my constituency to listen to what the teams have to say, and I have met with my local organisation Community Pharmacy Humber and its chief executive Paul McGorry.

The contributions to the debate have been excellent and very well-informed. My hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Sadik Al-Hassan) is the chair of the APPG on pharmacy and a community pharmacist. He talked about his vision of the integration of primary care by 2040, and how important pharmacy is in that. I very much look forward to discussing that with him outside of this debate.

We then heard from the right hon. Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak). I think his mum would be very proud that he is banging the drum for pharmacy. He talked about pharmacies in his rural constituency and the important role that they play in rural areas, which was a common theme in the debate.

The hon. Member for Newbury (Mr Dillon), a vice-chair of the APPG on pharmacy, gave a very thoughtful speech outlining the challenges facing pharmacy. The hon. Member for West Dorset (Edward Morello) referenced the closure of the Jhoots stores and highlighted the potential weaknesses in the current regulatory frameworks around closures, which are the reason the Department has been reviewing whether changes are needed to strengthen the oversight of pharmacy businesses. We are actively considering a range of options, including whether legislative changes are required. My officials have been working closely with the General Pharmaceutical Council, NHS England and others to identify any gaps in the current framework. I am of course very happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss that further.

We of course heard from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). He talked about pharmacies in Northern Ireland and the effect on pharmacists and their staff of

[Dame Diana Johnson]

the stress they are under. He also made the economic case for the use of pharmacies.

I was very impressed that the hon. Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Mohindra) did work experience in a pharmacy, but I was a little concerned that he seems to have forgotten all the cuts that occurred to pharmacy under previous Conservative Governments. I think it is fair to say that they made pharmacy payments practically a fixed contract. In essence, with inflation, that meant there were year-on-year cuts to pharmacy funding.

The Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Alison Bennett), spoke about the role of pharmacies and the particular role that they played during covid. We must all remember how important pharmacy staff and pharmacists were during that period; I assure her that I have not forgotten that, and I do not think that the Government have either.

The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Farnham and Bordon (Gregory Stafford), seems to be suffering from amnesia, which is a common problem among Opposition Members when it comes to the funding situation under the Conservative Government.

Gregory Stafford: You're in charge now.

Dame Diana Johnson: Absolutely, we are. I will set out what we are doing about pharmacy, but I thought it would be useful to reflect on the comments and contributions.

First, I want to address the issue of funding. As I said at the outset, the Government recognise the challenges facing community pharmacies following years of underfunding and the difficult fiscal environment. That is why, last year, we took the necessary decisions to give the sector a record 19% funding uplift across '24-25 and '25-26. I stress that, at the time, it was the NHS's largest uplift. However, we know many pharmacies continue to face financial pressures, which is why we have followed last year's settlement with a further significant uplift of 10% for '26-27, worth an additional £340 million for the sector.

That funding will help to ensure that patients can continue to access medicines and important clinical support from community pharmacists. The uplift will also support the national roll-out of NHS pharmacist prescribing. From autumn '26, those services will enable pharmacists to prescribe within the existing Pharmacy First and contraception service pathways, and for up to five new pathways. This will deliver increased access to NHS care, relieve pressures on other parts of the NHS and strengthen support in communities across England, delivering on the commitment made in our manifesto.

This year's uplift is almost three times the rate of growth in the overall NHS budget and it demonstrates the priority the Government place on community pharmacy, but I do not pretend that the challenges will disappear overnight. Many pharmacies continue to face financial pressures, but the settlements represent a clear change in direction and provide the foundations for longer-term reform. Numerous Members raised pharmacy closures, and I can tell them that, according to recent data, there were 19 net closures in '25-26 compared with 112 in '24-25. There has been some progress, but I recognise that there is a lot more to do.

The long-term sustainability of community pharmacy depends on making better use of pharmacists' clinical skills, reducing unnecessary administrative burdens and enabling pharmacists to deliver more care closer to people's homes. We will deliver this through the three shifts set out in our 10-year health plan: sickness to prevention, analogue to digital, and hospital to community.

Let me give a clear example of how community pharmacy can support the shift from sickness to prevention. As a new Minister, I have already been struck by the vital role community pharmacists play in bringing vaccination services closer to the communities they serve. The NHS vaccination strategy and our 10-year health plan set out a clear ambition to increase vaccine uptake through primary care. That means complementing the core offer from general practice with accessible vaccination services in settings including maternity and sexual health services, schools, health visiting teams and, crucially, community pharmacy. During the '25-26 flu programme, community pharmacists vaccinated approximately 4.7 million people, around 600,000 more than in the previous year. This demonstrates the growing contribution that pharmacists can make to prevention as a central part of the NHS-commissioned vaccine programme.

The shift from analogue to digital is very important. I am well aware that outdated technologies prevent skilled staff across the health and care sector, including pharmacy teams, from working to their full potential, stifling innovation and efficiency. Of course, digital transformation is not just about technology for its own sake; it is about giving pharmacists the tools they need to spend less time on admin and more time on caring for patients, and about giving patients more control over the care and support they receive.

Last year, a new prescription tracking service was introduced on the NHS app across nearly 1,500 community pharmacies in England. It allows patients to receive real-time updates and to check when their prescriptions are ready. This year, we will go further by strengthening the digital links between pharmacies and general practice as we build neighbourhood health teams in every community. Digital technology also has an important role to play in strengthening medicine supply chains, which is another issue raised today.

We also want prescribers to have better information about medicine shortages. At present, GPs cannot routinely see live national shortage information when prescribing. We intend to make that information available in real time to help GPs to prescribe suitable alternatives where necessary, saving time for patients and neighbourhood health teams. That will mean fewer patients going from pharmacy to pharmacy in search of medicines.

Thirdly, if we are serious about shifting care out of hospitals and into communities, community pharmacies must be part of the answer. They are trusted, accessible and highly valuable to the communities they serve. They have enormous potential.

Lee Pitcher: Will the Minister give way?

Dame Diana Johnson: I am very conscious of time—I might get a dirty look from the Chair.

Lee Pitcher: I am glad the Minister did not get a dirty look. On moving from hospital to the community, pharmacists often tell me that people do not always

know about the services they provide, and residents tell me that too. Does the Minister agree that every one of us has a part to play in promoting and raising awareness of the great services that pharmacies already provide, as well as those they will provide in the future?

Dame Diana Johnson: I absolutely agree.

I was going to say a few words about Pharmacy First, the importance of which has been recognised this afternoon. Recent data shows growing public awareness of the service, with the proportion of people who know that pharmacies can treat Pharmacy First conditions increasing from 71% to 79%. There is more we can do, however, so I acknowledge the point made by right hon. and hon. Members.

Pharmacy First has also demonstrated what pharmacists can achieve when empowered to deliver more care. The introduction of NHS pharmacist prescribing will take that a significant step further. Evidence from the independent prescribing pathfinder programme is really encouraging. Across 200 sites, pharmacists delivered more than 34,000 consultations. Around 60% resulted in a prescribing decision, and 97% were completed without a referral to a GP. That demonstrates the real-world potential of pharmacist prescribing to improve access to care and relieve pressures.

The '26-27 community pharmacy contractual framework builds on these lessons, as NHS pharmacist prescribing is rolled out nationally from autumn this year. That delivers on our pledges in the 10-year plan. We want to unlock the full potential of community pharmacy. It is not just about pharmacists; we are also enabling pharmacy technicians to take greater responsibility within dispensing processes, including allowing checked and bagged medicines to be handed out when the pharmacist is not present.

Edward Morello: I thank the Minister for being willing to meet me and the hon. Member for North Somerset (Sadik Al-Hassan) to discuss some of the issues raised today. She mentioned that officials are looking at whether legislation is necessary; will she ask them to consider whether the amendments I tabled to the Health Bill would deliver the powers she needs? If so, will the Government support them in the Lords?

Dame Diana Johnson: I am very happy to have a look at the amendments tabled by the hon. Gentleman and to meet him and my hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset. I cannot promise anything else, but I am happy to have a look.

Community pharmacists are a vital part of the NHS and of the communities they serve. They already dispense hundreds of millions of prescriptions every year, but their role is growing: preventing illness, treating common conditions, prescribing where appropriate and improving access to care. Our investment, reforms and 10-year health plan all point in the same direction—a stronger, sustainable community pharmacy sector. This Government are committed to working with the sector to deliver that vision.

3.54 pm

Shivani Raja: Thank you for your chairmanship of the debate, Mr Betts. I express my sincere thanks to colleagues from across the House who have contributed today. It is a reflection of how valued our local pharmacies are in communities throughout the country, and it highlights the importance of our commitment to improving Government support for these invaluable frontline small businesses.

I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak) for his contribution. He is a long-standing advocate for pharmacies and has witnessed at first hand the value that high street pharmacies bring to our communities and their potential to improve primary care provision. I thank him for his commitment to serving the community, which started at a very young age, as we heard.

I am also grateful to the hon. Member for North Somerset (Sadik Al-Hassan) for bringing his experience to the debate and raising the important issue of integration across primary care. I thank him and the hon. Member for Newbury (Mr Dillon) for all their hard work on the APPG. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Mohindra) for his continued efforts and campaigning for community pharmacies. The breadth and range of the contributions reflect how deeply this issue resonates in every constituency in the country.

I am grateful to the Minister for her detailed response and for taking the time to address the concerns raised. These initial measures, welcome as they are, must be the starting point for further structural reform. Our local high street pharmacies are independent businesses delivering essential public care right on the frontline, but, as we have heard throughout the debate, they cannot continue to absorb squeezed margins, rising wage bills and uncompensated business rates liabilities while their income remains tightly capped by fixed Government tariffs.

To ensure that our primary care network remains resilient, I urge the Minister and her team to take away the four core priorities raised today: reforming the medicine reimbursement model and concessionary pricing mechanisms; updating the community pharmacy contractual framework; collaborating with Treasury colleagues to address the rising overheads; and ensuring that the NHS long-term workforce plan safeguards high street community pharmacy capacity.

Community pharmacies keep our constituents well, relieve acute pressures on our GP surgeries and A&E departments, and bring vital commercial life to our local high streets across Leicester East and the entire nation. They are one of the most cost-effective assets in our primary care system, but they require a stable economic foundation to survive. I urge the Government to give our independent local pharmacies the financial certainty, fair treatment and long-term backing they so urgently need and deserve.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Government funding for local pharmacies.

3.57 pm

Sitting suspended.

Youth Parliament: Government Support

4 pm

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government support for the UK Youth Parliament.

It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I warmly welcome the Minister to her place for what I believe is her first Westminster Hall debate.

Many colleagues have taken their seat in this place after years of serving their community as a local councillor or in a political role, but before my election I was a teacher and an academic. Standing for Parliament was almost the first time that I had run for anything; in fact, my only prior experience was running to be a Member of the Youth Parliament when I was about 14. I am sorry to say that I came third, although the confidence that I gained from putting myself forward stayed with me and, I have no doubt, helped me to reach this place.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman may have come third that time, but he came first in the last election—well done. The National Youth Agency does magnificent work in delivering the programme. These brilliant young minds need certainty and sustainable funding, not just allocations handed out year by year. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that equitable funding across the whole United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, including Strangford, would ensure that young voices are heard on the national stage with proper financial support to enable full participation, just as he himself achieved when he had the opportunity?

Peter Swallow: I thank the hon. Gentleman for making that point, to which I will return at the end of my speech. As we look to deliver better youth services and participation for all our young people, we certainly need to think about how to fund it properly.

The UK Youth Parliament is an institution in which we can take great pride. It develops skills, provides opportunities to young people right across the country and helps them to have a voice in our democracy. I have had the privilege of meeting Erin and Kingsley, the last two MYPs for Bracknell. I believe that Kingsley has joined us in the Gallery today, alongside other MYPs; we briefly lost them to the right hon. Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak), but I am glad to see that he has let them go so they can join us for this debate. I have heard at first hand from MYPs in Bracknell and across the country about the benefits of the scheme for them personally, as well as for the young people they represent.

I should declare an interest as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for schools, learning and assessment. Just before the summer, the APPG concluded its inquiry into votes at 16 with a report that I encourage all Members, especially the Minister, to read. The inquiry's aim was to explore and make recommendations on how the Government can prepare young people to feel educated and empowered to use their vote at the age of 16. We heard from a wide range of young people, education professionals and youth and civil society organisations on how votes at 16 can be not just implemented, but made a success. Contributors to the report highlighted the importance of engagement with democracy and the democratic process, not just in the classroom but through wider enrichment opportunities. The UK Youth Parliament is a perfect example.

Votes at 16 has been a long-standing campaign of the UK Youth Parliament. Its imminent introduction is a direct example of the power of the UK Youth Parliament to give young people a platform to make change at the highest levels. I firmly believe that the Government would not be making this historic change were it not for the campaigning zeal of successive generations of MYPs. I pay tribute to them all.

Sureena Brackenridge (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): I put on the record my sincere thanks to Wolverhampton's youth council, which has done a tremendous job of bringing a strong voice to represent young people across our city. They truly care about our communities and our city. Do my hon. Friend and the Minister agree that investing in our young people now makes good economic sense for our future?

Peter Swallow: Absolutely, and that is a theme to which I will return. Investing in young people is so important, not only for empowering them but for the skills and experience we need in the economy, so that young people can go on to get good jobs and support their local communities. That is exactly why I have always championed everything we can do to empower young people at the earliest age.

Maya Ellis (Ribble Valley) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an extremely important speech about young people's participation in politics. I recently got to meet Freddie Burnett-Cherry, the MYP for Preston and South Ribble in my constituency. I was particularly impressed by how much work he has already done to better his community, such as youth surveys on antisocial behaviour and work on water safety. Does my hon. Friend agree that greater investment in the UK Youth Parliament is not just a nice thing for young people, but a brilliant investment in improving our communities right now?

Peter Swallow: I quite agree. Many young people have used their time as MYPs to make a real difference, including Sienna, a former MYP for Wolverhampton whose campaign against knife crime delivered bleed control kits across the west midlands, and Caitlin, a former MYP for Durham who worked on setting up the Big Debate in her local area. I am proud that I will be working with Kingsley, the MYP for Bracknell Forest, on his priorities for our community, including young people's mental health and local transport.

Sureena Brackenridge: I must thank Sienna, too: Sienna completed a week of work experience in my constituency office and in Parliament. I truly think that she is extraordinary. I just wanted to place that on the record.

Peter Swallow: What a lovely thing to have on the record. Sienna sounds like an incredible young woman.

MYPs, like MPs, are elected to represent their local area. They engage in debate at a local, regional and national level on a huge range of issues. In 2009, the

Youth Parliament became the first body ever, aside from Members of Parliament, to use the Commons Chamber.

Mr Lee Dillon (Newbury) (LD): We have some alumni of the Youth Parliament in this Chamber today. As a young person, I was on the steering committee that set it up. It is great to see so many former MYPs taking a seat in this Chamber, although sadly not so many on my side of the aisle. Does the hon. Member agree that the UK Youth Parliament plays a crucial role, but that young people who are less confident and more disadvantaged or who simply feel that politics has nothing to do with them might not engage through it? This is an opportunity for the Government to encourage more engagement across youth politics, not just among those who want to take elected roles.

Peter Swallow: I quite agree. That is a theme to which I will return. I think that there are sometimes some miscomprehensions about how diverse the YP scheme really is, but as the Government look to its future, we should absolutely be talking about making it even better and more inclusive; that is all to the good. In the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport's own words:

"The UK Youth Parliament is DCMS' key mechanism for engaging with young people and ensuring their voices are heard in policy and decision making."

If we are serious about protecting and nurturing our democracy, we must also protect and nurture the opportunities that we give our young people to properly engage with it, understand it and feel a part of it.

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that with Pride in Place we have a great opportunity to get our local youth voices heard in shaping the future of their local community?

Peter Swallow: I completely agree. Sadly, I have not yet secured Pride in Place funding for Bracknell Forest, but I encourage all right hon. and hon. Members to think about including their local MYPs and other youth representatives as part of that programme. It can only be for the better.

With the welcome enfranchisement of 16 and 17-year-olds, all this has never been more crucial. The UK Youth Parliament has a vital role to play in seizing the opportunity presented by votes at 16 to make the next generation the most informed and engaged ever.

Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab): My hon. Friend makes a good point about young people being informed and engaged but, more than that, it gives their brilliant ideas the chance to be heard and have an impact. I pay tribute to the young people who joined my "Your Voice, Your Future" campaigns programme this summer and in previous summers. They raised with me things like the social media ban, which has come into force, and I have been able to ensure that their voices are heard in my contributions in Parliament. With the Youth Parliament, however, they can do that directly. Does my hon. Friend agree that what is important is the impact that young people can have through those ideas?

Peter Swallow: Absolutely. I passionately believe, as do the Government, that it would be very wrong to form policies that will directly shape young people's lives without actually engaging with young people. We might not always agree with their conclusions—on the social media ban, many of the young people I spoke to in Bracknell Forest came to a different conclusion from mine—but I hope they feel that I have listened to their concerns. Their views have very much shaped my thinking on that issue and many others.

In 2023, DCMS commissioned IFF Research to evaluate the UK Youth Parliament. The evaluation found that the programme is delivering on its intended goals: to engage young people across the country in the democratic process and give them a route to express their voices on the issues that matter most to them. MYPs reported improved confidence, resilience, communication, problem solving, teamwork and critical thinking skills, to name but a few—the very skills that employers are crying out for from young people, and the very skills that the Government have committed to placing at the heart of our education system.

I emphasise that MYPs consistently reported that meeting and making connections with other young people from across the country was a highlight of the programme. I share the concern raised by parents and teachers across the country that an increasingly online world is an increasingly atomised, isolated one for young people. Programmes such as the UK Youth Parliament, which inspire and excite young people and give them the opportunity to connect and learn from their peers away from the online world, are crucial.

The Government's national youth strategy was the first in two decades. It sets out our commitment to building a country that works not just for but with young people. The UK Youth Parliament has a clear role to play in helping the Department to achieve the strategy, especially its key aim that our society must be one in which young people are meaningfully seen and heard.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a brilliant speech on an important topic. On ensuring that young people's voices are heard at the very heart of Government, does he agree that the Government should consider appointing a Minister for the younger and future generations, with a team of staff whose sole job is to listen to those voices, bring them to the Cabinet table and assess all policy, legislation and proposed legislation through the lens of whether it gives a voice to young people and takes their interests into account?

Peter Swallow: I welcome the point. I will do my hon. Friend one better: I think that that should be the job of every single Minister. The Government's role is to deliver for people up and down this country, and we have a particular duty to deliver for our young people. Sometimes it is their voices that are the most forgotten.

I recognise that the UK Youth Parliament scheme always has room for improvement. It is certainly disappointing that not every area is represented in the Youth Parliament and that not all local areas engage evenly with the scheme. To coin a phrase, I want to see youth opportunity and youth engagement in every postcode.

I have also heard concerns that it is not diverse enough and that it engages only those most likely to participate already. In fact, on that measure the Youth Parliament is far outperforming this Parliament, its older sibling. It is a far more representative body than

[Peter Swallow]

we are. About 52% of the previous UKYP intake were women, compared with 41% of MPs; 40% had an ethnic minority background, compared with 14% of us; and 9% came from the most disadvantaged 10% of areas, according to the index of multiple deprivation, with roughly 51% coming from postcodes ranked in the most deprived half of IMD deciles. There is always more work to be done, but we would do well to take note of the UK Youth Parliament's success in electing a rich and diverse group of representatives.

I also think it is important to stress that although the programme's most visible success might be the annual debate in the House, where young people stand up and debate so eloquently, there are many local successes that we should remember as well. We have already spoken about many of those here today. All those successes, both locally and nationally, come at a cost, but in departmental terms—certainly in Government terms—they are extremely small and extremely good value. The last full two-year funding commitment given by DCMS came to only £750,000.

I hope colleagues will appreciate that I have tried to avoid too many clichés about young people. From a man of my age they are, in the words of young people, "cringe". But I do want to indulge a little bit now with some final thoughts, not from myself but from Kingsley, our current MYP for Bracknell Forest. He put it so much better than I ever could hope to, saying that

"investing in UKYP is investing in young people, our communities and the future of our democracy".

4.16 pm

David Taylor (Hemel Hempstead) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Peter Swallow) for securing the debate and for his excellent speech.

As the Member for Hemel Hempstead, I am proud to support, and want to see continued support for, a nationally elected UK Youth Parliament. That comes from personal experience, from having been elected as a Member of the UK Youth Parliament way back in 2001, then proceeding to be part of the procedures group, as it was, until 2003, and subsequently serving as a trustee of the UK Youth Parliament for a brief period later in that decade.

I want to pay particular tribute to Kate Parish and Peter Clarke, two people who were central to the creation of the UK Youth Parliament and certainly provided me with a great deal of support. I really do attribute the UK Youth Parliament, and my experience in it, to my standing here today as a Member of Parliament; it was the start of my journey towards dedicating my life to public service. As we have heard, there are many others who have now followed that path too.

When I was first elected to Parliament to represent Hertfordshire—well, for the first time since representing Hertfordshire as a Member of the UK Youth Parliament—I was sad to discover that Hertfordshire, at that point, was not participating any longer in the scheme. Along with other Labour MPs in Hertfordshire, I worked very closely with both Liberal Democrat and Labour councillors on Hertfordshire county council to try to bring it back. I am delighted that Hertfordshire now participates in the UK Youth Parliament again. I had the pleasure of meeting this year's new representatives, including a gentleman who represents Hemel Hempstead, a few weeks back. I pay tribute to Katie Fineman and Karen Haswell for the brilliant work they do as youth workers in Hertfordshire.

The best part of the UK Youth Parliament, as the hon. Member for Newbury (Mr Dillon) and my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell have touched on, is when it reaches people from diverse backgrounds, particularly working-class backgrounds. I recognise that there is sometimes some criticism around whether it does that, but my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell eloquently laid out the ways in which it is actually doing a terrific job.

The UK Youth Parliament certainly helped me, as someone who had not participated in anything like it before, and it really built my skills and confidence. It is often the first experience many people have of speaking in public, networking and meeting other people. We have to ensure that we do not lose that.

Dr Lauren Sullivan (Gravesham) (Lab): My hon. Friend's point about youth services—with young people being supported to find their voice, and to understand and navigate the relationships and adult structures within the UK Youth Parliament in order to feed in their ideas, ambitions and thoughts—is incredibly important. The youth service has been decimated, but it is the youth service and those supporting youth workers who are required to really back this work up.

David Taylor: I could not agree more. If we are looking at the future of the UK Youth Parliament, perhaps the solution to the postcode problem my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell alluded to is to mandate that local authorities go further and faster in making sure that the UK Youth Parliament is inclusive and reaches people from working-class backgrounds. It would be a shame if we lost that. It is really important that working-class kids get a chance to have their voices heard, as they do at the moment.

Particularly with votes at 16 on the horizon, it is important that there continue to be elections to the UK Youth Parliament, with participation from as many young people as possible in schools in each county. It is also important to remember that the UK Youth Parliament is not just about the few who are lucky enough to be elected; over the years, millions of young people have participated in one way or another, through the elections and the campaigns in local areas. As my hon. Friend said, it is about not just the national conference, but the activities that go on around the country throughout the year, and we should not lose sight of that.

I join others in asking that the Government, Parliament and the Speaker's Office work together to find a truly sustainable funding mechanism for the future. In 20 years' time, we will perhaps not be standing here ourselves, but we want to see people who are sitting in the Public Gallery today standing where we are now, giving speeches about the importance of the UK Youth Parliament.

4.21 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Vicky Foxcroft): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Betts. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Peter Swallow) on securing this incredibly important debate and on the

success of the campaign for votes at 16, as highlighted in the recent inquiry by the all-party parliamentary group on schools, learning and assessment, which he chairs. I am sorry to hear that he came third in his national Youth Parliament ambitions, but I am delighted that he is with us in Parliament now.

The experience of my hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (David Taylor) as a Member of the Youth Parliament between 2001 and 2003 highlights the lasting impact of youth participation. I want to express my deepest thanks for his tireless advocacy for young people in his constituency and across the nation. I know how passionately he cares about ensuring that the next generation is not merely listened to, but genuinely heard and empowered.

That goes for all Members who contributed. My hon. Friends the Members for Wolverhampton North East (Sureena Brackenridge), for Aylesbury (Laura Kyrke-Smith) and for Gravesham (Dr Sullivan), the hon. Member for Newbury (Mr Dillon) and my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (John Slinger) all spoke about the powerful young advocates in their constituencies, and it was fantastic to hear them being celebrated.

I also pay tribute to the incredible partner organisations, the youth workers and, above all, the inspiring young people who deliver the UK Youth Parliament day in, day out. It is genuinely great to see so many of them in the Public Gallery.

Throughout my time as an MP and previously—particularly in my work leading the Youth Violence Commission—my purpose has been rooted in supporting and standing with young people. I have seen at first hand the transformational impact of timely intervention, and how a trusted adult, a safe space or a creative outlet can offer a vital lifeline and a transformed future. That work showed me that young people have the solutions; they just need space, support and opportunities. That insight drives my decisions as Minister for youth and underpins our commitment to ensuring that every young person gets the opportunities they deserve.

Our young people are not merely the leaders of tomorrow; they are the active, vibrant and thoughtful citizens of today. They deserve to be heard and valued, and they should be in the driving seat when decisions that affect their lives are made. Since 1999, the UK Youth Parliament has given thousands of young people a platform to champion key issues, hold decision makers to account and drive positive social change in their communities. We are currently working closely with young people and partners, including Members of the Youth Parliament, to co-design the Government's work to increase young people's involvement in democracy and decision making, with a particular focus on under-represented groups. We will share the outcomes of that work later in the autumn.

We are also keeping our promise to give 16 and 17-year-olds the right to vote through votes at 16. We are working closely across Government to implement that commitment, ensuring that the necessary legislative and operational preparations are in place to successfully embed early democratic participation, so that young people have a formal stake in shaping the future of our country.

I am personally passionate about ensuring inclusivity in everything we do. It is not enough simply to open the door; we must actively break down the structural and socioeconomic barriers that prevent young people from under-represented backgrounds from stepping through it. Every young person, regardless of their ethnicity, geography or background, deserves an equal voice. It is imperative that more young people across the country gain direct and meaningful access to influence decisions, locally in their communities and nationally. By embedding young people in decision-making processes, we ensure that our policy solutions are richer, fairer and genuinely reflective of the nation we serve.

We are taking proactive, transformative steps across our wider youth empowerment initiatives through our "Be Seen & Heard" pillar of Youth Matters, to ensure that young people are directly in the driving seat. As part of that work, we will recruit a dedicated new youth policy network to co-design national Government policy, and we will shortly be refreshing our youth advisory group, which will oversee the delivery of Youth Matters. We are also backing youth social action by continuing to support the #iWill movement.

Through the Youth Matters fund, we are assembling youth decision making directly into local investment. This will include a range of tools and support to ensure minimum standards and meaningful engagement with young people, so that provision is targeted where young people need it most.

All those democratic and participation initiatives align directly with our overarching Youth Matters national youth strategy, which was published in 2025 and was, as has been said, the first in more than 15 years. Youth Matters represents a fundamental shift in how we support young people across our Government. For too long, youth services were subjected to short-term, fragmented funding that left provision patchy and unsustainable. We are moving away from those temporary fixes towards sustainable, long-term support that gives youth workers and local organisations the stability they need to build lasting relationships with young people.

Youth Matters provides the foundations for our ongoing work with young people to co-design our fresh approach to youth empowerment, ensuring that national opportunities are better connected to local infrastructure. I invite hon. Members to share experiences of what is working in their constituencies with the Department, and to continue to create opportunities for young people to engage with them and, where appropriate, with Parliament.

I hope this debate will be the beginning of an ongoing conversation. I genuinely thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell once again for introducing this important debate. Our wider youth strategy is about giving every young person someone who cares, somewhere to go and something to do. Together, we will build a society where every single young person feels valued, safe, supported, seen and truly heard.

Question put and agreed to.

Pica Eating Disorder: SEND

4.30 pm

Margaret Mullane (Dagenham and Rainham) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Pica training within SEND provision.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Betts. Before I go any further, I want to make an admission. Until last year, I had not encountered pica, either in a personal capacity or through my work in Parliament. I had never heard of the condition. My first awareness of it was at a special educational needs and disabilities roundtable event that I organised last year, the purpose of which was to hear the experiences of parents and professionals across my Dagenham and Rainham constituency so I could feed their voices into the Government's consultation on SEND reform.

At the event, I heard a brave story from a young woman and her family living with the realities of pica. There are many moments in a MP's life that really move them, and despite the thousands of cases that we deal with on behalf of our constituents, there are ones that truly stick with us. The brave young woman at that SEND roundtable was Suzy Read, and she is here today. I can honestly say that her story, her journey, her perpetual struggle and the fight she has had to get her daughter the care she needs and deserves hushed the room.

Suzy told us about her life, where she constantly risk-assessed every room, setting and experience, and how the lack of help, combined with the failures of the system, took a toll on her mental health and the physical wellbeing of her child. We heard how the failure to provide access to a safe educational setting for her child resulted in daily anxieties, daily struggles and, because of the lack of pica recognition, understanding and training, daily explanations of why her child required bespoke care. The room was moved to tears.

Something Suzy said has stuck with me ever since:

"Pica is not rare. It is just rarely spoken about."

That is why I am here today, to make the case for pica training to be a statutory requirement across educational settings under SEND provision.

What is pica? It is an overwhelming compulsion to eat non-food and non-nutritional items such as glass, soil, clay, lead, ice and much more. It can include items that poison, puncture organs, choke, and end a child's life. It is important to note that while the debate will focus on training in schools and other educational settings, pica also affects adults who have lived with it from an early age or whose condition has presented late.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for bringing this issue forward; she is right that the ailment is not well recognised. Like her, I did some research on the issue and found out that it is a UK-wide problem. Last year in Northern Ireland, there was a tragic incident involving a care home resident with a cognitive impairment who exhibited some pica behaviours. Sadly, he died after choking on a non-food substance. Does the hon. Lady agree it is not just schools where training is needed; it is also essential for staff in care homes and residential settings, and it could prevent potentially dangerous behaviours, which often go unnoticed?

Margaret Mullane: The hon. Gentleman is right, and I thank him for raising that matter. While this debate will focus on training in schools and other educational settings, it is important to note that there is a desperate need for pica recognition and training across the NHS, local authorities, care providers and even housing providers. However, that is not the focus today.

Sadly, pica is still not fully understood, which often results in people being dismissed or the condition being treated as a behavioural issue. While there is a growing consensus that pica must be treated as the serious medical and safeguarding issue that it is, the lack of awareness means the condition is overshadowed. As such, it is not considered by policymakers. That has to change.

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for her work to champion this cause. I was also at that roundtable and she is quite right; every single one of us was brought to tears. Does she agree that, given the potentially serious health risks associated with pica—she mentioned the compulsion to eat glass or coal—we should not have a postcode lottery on whether teachers and SEND staff recognise the seriousness of the condition, and that there is a case for national guidance and training so there is awareness and we can help people at their most vulnerable times?

Margaret Mullane: My hon. Friend is quite right. That is ultimately what we seek in the long term. We do not want anyone to have to go through what some families have already gone through. Only if we adopt national training will that actually stop.

Earlier this year, I held a pica awareness parliamentary drop-in session with Suzy and the National Pica Advisory Service, representatives of which are in the Public Gallery. I met Tolu, Belinda and the team, who do amazing advocacy work to support parents of children with pica. Speaking to advocates and parents, the consistent theme was a lack of professional knowledge across sectors, whether at schools or—this is another important point—when people present at hospital. Parents are fed up of hearing, "The item will pass through; don't worry about it."

At my event, the National Pica Advisory Service told the story of a parent of a child with pica. Had that parent not persisted in pushing that their child did not just have an upset tummy, one of the child's organs would have failed and they would have died. There was a screw lodged in the child's intestines that was discovered only when the parent demanded an X-ray. That should have been the first port of call when the parent explained that their child had pica, not something that, once again, a parent had to fight for.

I heard another story of a child in a private-rented property who would lick paint. Sadly, due to the age of the property the paint had high lead content. In such circumstances, had the child continued and—again—had the parent not persisted, it would have led to the child's death. Early diagnosis and early intervention are key, but so too is ensuring that adaptions are made, environments

are made safe and that caregivers and educators are equipped with the knowledge and training to monitor those with pica.

In 2023, pica came to prominence in the media due to the tragic case of Owen Garnett, a student at Welcombe Hills, a specialist SEND provision school in Stratford-upon-Avon. Owen had pica and was in an educational environment that understood that, yet after choking on a paper towel unsupervised, Owen sadly died, aged 19. The coroner's report highlighted that

"the school's risk assessments…recorded that Owen should 'Never be left alone when out' and…in bold 'NB due to Pica, a named person must watch Owen at all times'".

The report concluded that

"Owen's carer specifically raised concerns surrounding blue paper towels at a meeting…On 4 January 2023 Owen was discovered to have blue paper towel in his mouth and a message was sent to his carers saying this had occurred… On 9 January 2023, contrary to the…risk assessment, Owen was outside of the classroom and was unsupervised. When Owen was located, it was discovered that he had crammed a significant amount of blue paper towel into his mouth and throat and was choking."

He was transported to Warwick hospital. He suffered a hypoxic brain injury. A decision was taken to remove life support and, sadly, he died on 11 January.

The Health and Safety Executive said that the school had failed to ensure that all risks associated with pica were identified and had failed to respond to family concerns. The multi-academy trust was fined £300,000 and told to learn from its mistakes but, let us be honest, people at the trust can move on with their lives; a family has lost a son and their lives will never be the same again. It was an exceptional case and not a common occurrence but it serves to highlight what can happen if pica is not taken seriously in an educational setting. All children deserve a safe, secure and happy educational journey, whether in mainstream education, a specialist school or other educational settings, but at present that is not being delivered for children with pica.

Parents with children who have pica live their lives in a state of constant vigilance, and they need the assurance that their child is being cared for with the same vigilance at school. That is why, alongside parents in my constituency and across the country, and the National Pica Advisory Service, I believe that educators who are responsible for a child with pica must receive mandatory pica training. This will support teachers to grow their knowledge of the condition and how to support anyone who has pica.

Training must be about planning for pica. Classrooms are full of potentially life-threatening dangers to children with pica. Risk assessments should take account of all harmful and hazardous substances, including staples, batteries, glassware, sharp or poisonous items and magnets. They should be replaced with safer items where possible, such as non-toxic Play-Doh, paints and crayons.

It is crucial that all educators who are responsible for a child with pica must have knowledge about that individual and have read their plan. That is to help them to develop a good understanding of the child's pica behaviours, how to keep them safe and how to redirect them. It should include completing a pica monitoring form regularly. Through this process, if an individual has particular pica items, those can be identified and removed from the space as part of an ongoing risk assessment.

Finally, all educators must learn to understand the signs of choking, poisoning and possible blockages in individuals with pica, so they can seek medical assistance as soon as possible if something goes wrong. Herein lies one of my main worries about the Government's proposal to reform SEND provision. I have heard many stories of pica oversight in specialist schools—places that have very good, well-trained professionals who should be able to risk-assess and keep children safe. However, because of the lack of specific pica training and the significant pressures in any SEND environment, there are justified parental concerns that pica is treated as an afterthought. As many local authorities are pushed to deliver SEND provision in mainstream settings, there is every possibility—given larger class sizes and more general training—that the new model will not build in specialist training on pica or other specific disorders.

I will end as I started, by requesting that pica training is considered for inclusion in any SEND reform, making it a statutory requirement across educational settings and under SEND provision.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): As no Back Benchers wish to speak, I will move straight to the Lib Dem spokesperson.

4.42 pm

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair today, Mr Betts, and I thank the hon. Member for Dagenham and Rainham (Margaret Mullane) for bringing this important topic to the House and for raising awareness of it in this place.

As the hon. Member set out, pica is a condition most commonly associated with autism, learning disabilities and some mental health conditions, whereby a person compulsively eats non-food items such as soil, paper, hair, small objects or chemicals. This, of course, carries serious health risks, including choking, poisoning and internal injury, and in the most severe cases, it can be a cause of death. The specific causes of pica are not clear, but the bottom line is that people with pica, especially children, need support and management to help keep them safe.

Pica is disproportionately prevalent among children and young people with autism and severe learning disabilities. Research estimates that between 20% and 23% of young autistic children engage in eating non-food items. We know that the more severe a child or adult's learning disability is, the greater the chance they will display pica behaviour. School staff working in SEND settings, including mainstream schools with SEND pupils, special schools and early years settings, are therefore considerably more likely to encounter pica than the population at large. The Government's SEND reforms, with their focus on inclusion, will undoubtedly be a cause of concern for parents of children with pica, who need to be reassured that their child will receive the support they need if they are going to be taught in mainstream education.

When it comes to SEND, we can probably all agree that the status quo is not working. The SEND system is failing children every single day. After years of neglect under the Conservatives, it is failing to deliver the outcomes that children deserve and is driving local authorities to the brink, so we welcome the Government's

[Caroline Voaden]

commitment to improve outcomes. Their reforms are an important step in the right direction, but many questions remain about funding, staffing and early intervention—all questions that parents of children with pica need to know the answers to.

The Liberal Democrats will continue to press the Government to ensure that vulnerable children, including those with pica, get the support they need. One Liberal Democrat who has done just that is my hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire). Unfortunately, she is unable to attend the debate, but her work to support one of her constituents whose child has pica illustrates how the system is currently failing such children. Her constituent lives in constant fear that as soon as she leaves the room, her child will eat something dangerous, such as carpet underlay, which could have fatal consequences.

The National Pica Advisory Service—which I believe is represented in the Public Gallery—has been a vital resource for my hon. Friend's constituent, for which I offer thanks, but it should not have to be. I repeat: children in the UK have died and will continue to die as a direct result of pica, yet no one is taking my hon. Friend's constituent or pica as a whole seriously. Many medical professionals do not understand the condition, there is a fundamental lack of awareness and it is regularly dismissed as autism, even though it is a separate diagnosis. Importantly, there is a lack of formal support pathways and an absence of national guidelines, which is unacceptable. Children and young people living with pica and their families deserve so much better.

Effective management of pica could include staff recognising the behaviour, understanding its triggers and applying consistent, safe strategies, such as de-picaing the environment, teaching children to discriminate between edible and non-edible items, and offering safe sensory or textual substitutes. If we are to have an inclusive SEND system that works for all children, including those with pica, schools and teachers must be equipped with the training they need to support these children.

That is one reason why the Liberal Democrats would improve teacher training and continuing professional development, with a focus on identifying and supporting children with SEND, including those with autism, dyslexia or other neurodiverse conditions, such as pica. Being aware of this condition is the first step to keeping children safe. We have also consistently campaigned for putting early identification at the heart of any SEND interventions and reducing diagnostic delays by streamlining NHS processes and increasing funding for assessments.

Awareness of behaviours such as pica is an important part of keeping pupils safe. Teachers and support staff need to be able to recognise pica when they see it. As a result, advice on recognising pica should be included in the new SEND training offer for teachers and support staff at a general level.

However, although there needs to be a greater emphasis on teachers and support staff being able to identify conditions such as pica and other general barriers to learning as part of the SEND reforms, it should not be their responsibility to diagnose or offer detailed support. Knowing how to safely manage and support a child who is showing pica behaviour is a specialist skill, and more detailed advice and support must be available to teachers who have a child with pica in their class.

That is why it is so important that the health element of an education, health and care plan actually means something. Currently, there is no legal footing for ensuring children, including those who have conditions such as pica or avoidant/restrictive food intake disorder, can access the healthcare they need as part of their education, health and care plan. We Liberal Democrats were disappointed that earlier this week the Health and Social Care Committee's amendment was not added to the Health Bill. It would have given statutory footing to the "H" in EHCP, and helped children with pica and ARFID get the health support they so desperately need.

It is also why we need to ensure that teachers have the help they need in the classroom, with more specialist staff in schools to meet neurodiverse children's needs. We welcome the Experts at Hand service, but we cannot create these people out of thin air. Given the lack of such specialists, the Liberal Democrats are calling on the Government to publish a credible workforce plan to recruit and train the staff needed and to encourage trained specialists back into the profession. Pushing the emphasis on to individual teachers to spot and manage learning needs without new specialist capacity is a cost-saving measure, rather than a genuine improvement in support for our children.

Teachers cannot be expected to have every form of SEND training required to meet the specific needs of every child, while also having all the skills necessary to teach the class. We cannot shove the burden of SEND on overworked, burnt-out teachers and expect good results for all children with special educational needs, as well as all the other children in the class.

It is important to note that inclusion-focused SEND reforms will be deliverable only if we reduce wider pressures, such as workload, on educators. I recently ran a survey of teachers and got just under 1,000 responses. Nearly half of those teachers said they were planning to quit the classroom in the next five years, citing high workload as a key reason. That is why the Liberal Democrats are calling for proper enforcement of teachers' legally mandated working hours, the introduction of reasonable limits on overtime and for all schools to be required to introduce flexible working policies.

Returning to the topic of the debate, the Liberal Democrats are clear that children with pica must be kept safe if they are to be taught in mainstream school, and their parents deserve that guarantee, which I hope the Minister can provide. Every child with autism, dyslexia or another neurodiverse condition, such as pica, deserves the chance to thrive in school and move confidently on with their life and into work. With earlier assessment, better training for teachers, inclusive education and more specialist support, we can unlock the talents of neurodivergent young people and help them to thrive in life.

4.50 pm

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I thank the hon. Member for Dagenham and Rainham (Margaret Mullane) for her eloquent and important speech, for securing the debate and for her work

campaigning for a better SEN system for her constituents. I commend her for bringing as many local voices into the debate as possible, because if we are to deliver the system that children, young people and parents deserve, we must ensure that we listen to a wide range of voices.

I was pleased to be reappointed as shadow Minister, not least because I can continue to stand up for SEND families, but I was also pleased that the Minister was reappointed to her position—I genuinely mean that. I will work with her on any reforms around pica, given the nature of the condition, and around SEND reforms more broadly.

As has been said, pica is a condition where people, usually children, routinely ingest non-edible items. It is often associated with autism spectrum disorder, and reportedly affects between 9% and 25% of children with developmental difficulties, including autism. Although children with pica may eat non-food items that are relatively harmless, others ingest much more potentially harmful substances, including soil, sand, hair, toothpaste and faeces. Non-food items can, on occasion, pass through the child harmlessly, but there are significant health risks—risks that no parent is ever willing to take. The items can cause blockages in the gut, infections, choking and dental problems, to name but a few of the risks.

Parents of children with pica can understandably find their behaviour distressing, and often have to go to great lengths to prevent harm to their children—locking cupboards, removing potentially harmful items, and auditing their home and garden to ensure that the child can play safely. That will inevitably lead to a sense of isolation for not only the parents but their child. Parents may not know what kind of support is available or be unsure about how to support their child, and it is often said that children with pica feel marginalised and excluded at school and in social settings.

There are indications that, with the right support and treatment, many children overcome pica behaviours, but not all do. That is why training is incredibly important. Getting to the root of the underlying cause is important, and in some cases can be transformative. For some children, pica behaviours may arise from certain nutritional deficiencies, so identifying those factors can be important. For many, it is not always clear what has happened. That is why parents and teachers need more awareness and clear, signposted support.

Parents and carers can benefit from a range of online resources, including the National Pica Advisory Service, which was established in 2023. I pay tribute to the work of the organisations, including those in attendance, that provide essential resources and a support network to parents and families, helping them to navigate their child's condition. I understand that the National Pica Advisory Service is aiming to expand its services so that there is a support hub in every NHS trust. What discussions has the Minister had, or will she be having, to help to improve awareness and support for families affected by pica?

It is important to get the right support not only at home but at school. Successfully implemented support plans can help to safeguard children and support them to move away from pica behaviours. That is why teacher training is incredibly important. What conversations has the Minister had with officials about the practical steps that the Government can take, as they do their SEND reforms, to enhance teacher training in this space?

Teachers who are trained in pica are not only better equipped to put in place safety interventions in the classroom, but better placed to identify pica behaviours in the first instance. Teachers and school staff are uniquely positioned to notice unusual eating behaviours during school meal times, missing non-food items in the classroom, or physical symptoms such as choking and stomach pains.

Given the significant safety risks involved in this condition, including choking and poisoning, it is right that we look at the current training offer for educational staff. There are a number of training certificates that teachers and early years practitioners can obtain, but their discretionary nature means that there are bound to be discrepancies and regional variations, which is particularly important at a time when our schools are being put under significant financial pressure. What is the Minister's assessment of the adequacy of pica training for teachers, teaching assistants, special educational needs co-ordinators and school safeguarding leads?

Pica can lead to incredibly heartbreaking situations, such as the case of 19-year-old Owen Garnett in a school in Stratford-upon-Avon, which the hon. Member for Dagenham and Rainham mentioned. Owen's tragic death came days after a near-identical miss that should have provided a wake-up call to staff and that the Health and Safety Executive inspector said should have triggered remedial action. Although the school was fined, at the heart of the tragedy was a lack of specialised training for staff and a failure to reassess and reinforce preventive strategies. Has the Minister taken a look at that incident? What lessons will she learn from that as the Department undertakes its reforms?

Although I understand that personalised treatment is often at the heart of successfully helping children with this condition, what consideration has been given to the potential merits of nationally recognised training? What discussions has had the Minister had with the Department of Health concerning pica, especially with the SEND reforms? I have asked about that before, as it is important that the gap between health and education is overcome.

As the Government implement their plans for SEND mainstreaming, gaps in the quality of pica awareness training are bound to become more apparent and pressing. How will the Government ensure that pica is taken into account when SEND is brought into mainstream settings? How is the Minister's Department working to support a joined-up approach between parents, health professionals, schools and specialist organisations to ensure that pupils with pica have an updated risk management strategy that evolves with them? Will training on pica form part of the Government's support for mainstream teachers as their schools take in more SEND pupils? How will funding for pupils diagnosed with pica follow them throughout their education journey? Will that be adaptable in those SEND reforms?

To conclude, today's important debate has highlighted the need to raise awareness and improve support for families affected by pica. When talking to people before the debate, I had to explain what pica was and how it affects so many different aspects of society—in this case, children with special educational needs. There is a real need to reassess the training and safeguarding

[Saqib Bhatti]

procedures currently developed within schools. Our focus must be on keeping children safe and ensuring that they have the best chance to thrive both within the current system and as the Government implement their mainstreaming reforms. Parents, carers, pupils and teachers will be listening, and they deserve clear answers. I hope the Minister can provide some.

4.57 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Georgia Gould): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Betts. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dagenham and Rainham (Margaret Mullane) for bringing this deeply important discussion to Westminster Hall. The story she told shows her effectiveness as a local MP. I know that she has listened to parents, professionals and school leaders at a number of different events in her local community. Bringing their voices directly to us is much appreciated.

I am grateful to the parents and professionals in the Public Gallery for making the time to be here today and for their leadership in campaigning on this issue. I would be keen to sit down with the hon. Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden), my hon. Friend the Member for Dagenham and Rainham and campaigners to discuss it in more detail. We have heard powerfully the profound impact that pica can have and the huge stress it can bring to parents who are desperately monitoring their child's circumstances and safety.

As I have been going around the country talking to parents and visiting schools, I have seen schools with brilliant and extraordinary provision, and young people with pica who are really thriving. I have also spoken to parents who present stories similar to those we have heard today and who feel that support is not in place, leaving them in fear. Sometimes they have had to give up work to support their children.

The tragic cases we have heard today show how important this issue is: it goes to the heart of the relationship between special educational needs and health. All Members, I think, mentioned the importance of us working in partnership and having clarity on the role of teachers in supporting and safeguarding pupils, and the role of health professionals in diagnosing and giving advice and guidance. My hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme (Lee Pitcher) talked about the importance of that guidance and of roles and responsibilities of health and schools.

Earlier this year, we consulted on revised statutory guidance on supporting children and young people with medical conditions. That reflects our commitment to ensuring that every child or young person can participate effectively in education, notwithstanding their medical conditions. Schools, colleges and early years settings should understand the risks that a medical condition poses and manage them proactively. That includes ensuring that staff understand the relevant medical conditions and their impact and can recognise and respond to an emergency.

We had a really positive response to the consultation and are still working through the responses. We had a lot of detailed feedback, including on specific medical conditions. The draft guidance did not make reference to pica. Given the conversations we have had, the responses to the consultation and today's discussion, I can confirm that we will rectify that when we finally publish the guidance, to provide clear information and guidance around pica for schools.

As part of the SEND reforms, we are looking at developing national inclusion standards that will provide a baseline of ordinarily available provision that we expect of all schools. We have an expert panel working on those standards and on specialist provision packages, which will determine the support needed in an area for a range of different special educational needs and disabilities. Currently, our independent panel, which sits across health and education, is leading that work. I commit today to ask the panel to take a specific look at the issues that my hon. Friend the Member for Dagenham and Rainham raised in relation to pica, specifically those that relate to research and identifying gaps in support.

More broadly, a number of questions were asked about the SEND reforms, including about how we will support early intervention and ensure that the right training is in place and that we have the right professionals in schools. As part of the SEND reforms, we are investing £4 billion in early intervention. That includes £1.6 billion going directly into mainstream schools, and all schools are being asked to develop inclusion strategies. We are putting £1.8 billion into an experts at hand service, which includes occupational therapists, educational psychologists and specialist teachers. I had a brief conversation, just outside this Chamber, with an occupational therapist who specialises in pica. We talked about their critical role, and it is important to reflect on that as part of the experts at hand service.

We are also developing a new package of teacher training, into which we are putting £200 million. The purpose of that training is to support all schools to be inclusive, including by identifying needs and adapting classroom practice to support children. It will not be detailed training on specific conditions, but it will include how to provide wider support and adaptions for pupils. We should also give teachers the tools and strategies to find the relevant information about specific issues as they occur in the classroom. We are currently working with parents, disabled children's organisations and teaching organisations to develop that training, and I welcome Members' thoughts about the process.

Many Members mentioned the importance of engaging with parents. One of the components of the training will be ensuring that teachers are listening to the voices of parents and having strong relationships with them, so that schools can pick up on what is happening at home and put that into their plans.

Lee Pitcher: I thank the Minister for all the work behind the scenes prior to the debate to allow some commitments to be given today; it is absolutely phenomenal. We can see the impact that is having on people in the Public Gallery and how much it is welcomed.

On sustainability and thinking about the future, I am a very "head and heart" person, and I talk a lot from the heart, but in terms of the head, if we are to continue to provide funding, support and resources for things like pica, we first need awareness, so that we can start to understand the numbers, and for that we need a record. I realise that the Minister cannot answer this right now,

but can some thought be given to recording the number of people with pica so that we can use that in future business cases and when funding is considered?

Georgia Gould: I will absolutely take away the issue of reporting.

Members spoke about the need to invest in inclusive spaces. We are continuing to invest £3.7 billion in the creation of new specialist places. That money can go into new special schools, inclusion bases or adaptions in mainstream schools. I have visited really high-quality inclusion bases, and I know that part of that investment has been about creating safe spaces for children with pica. We have also issued new guidance about how to create estates that are inclusive by design, which includes guidance to schools about how to work with children and understand their experience of the school. That will make sure that schools are genuinely inclusive for those young people. That is another area that is relevant to the conversation.

The hon. Member for South Devon made a really important point about accountability across our systems and about working in partnership. We are working closely with Health Ministers on this issue, as we recognise how critical that is. The hon. Lady also spoke about experts at hand and the workforce. We are investing £40 million in training up new ed psychs and speech and language therapists, and a lot of work is going on with Health colleagues about workforce planning to ensure we have a sufficient workforce to support experts at hand and specialist settings. It is critical that we have that specialist resource to deliver early intervention.

I was asked about how the funding will work in the new system. It is envisioned that for children with individual support plans, schools will get dedicated funding that is ringfenced for pupils with SEND, so that the necessary staff can be employed and the right support can be put in place. At the moment, the funding often comes quite late in the day after a huge battle for support, and it leaves with the child. The idea is to give schools sustained budgets so that they can build the necessary provision. For pupils accessing a specialist provision package, the funding will come with the package and the child into the school. Depending on where the child sits in the system, the funding will flow differently.

I welcome the tone of the debate—there has been cross-party recognition of the scale of the issue—and the way that Members throughout the House are working together to address these really difficult questions. I have heard so many stories of families who have been badly let down. We all acknowledge that things need to change and that we need to get it right. I am committed to continuing to work in partnership with all Members, and really appreciate their bringing stories like the ones we have heard today to me, so that we can continue these really important conversations. Critically, we must talk to young people and families. I really hope this is just the start of the conversation, and that we will have a longer conversation soon so that we can look at the issues raised today.

5.9 pm

Margaret Mullane: I thank the Minister and agree with her that this has been a very good cross-party discussion, with thoughtful input from everybody. I know that her door is always open and that she is always there if there is anything we need. What she has committed to today is good news for my constituents.

This debate, under your chairmanship, Mr Betts, has been Parliament at its best. An issue that is very important to many constituents across the country has been debated and highlighted. The work goes on.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Pica training within SEND provision.

5.10 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 9 September 2026

CABINET OFFICE

Civil Service Pension Scheme

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Sally Jameson): I am providing the House with an update on the administration of the civil service pension scheme. Following Capita's failure to meet its commitment to fully restore the scheme to contractual levels by the end of June, Capita's executive leadership set itself two targets: clearing stock cases by 1 September 2026, and processing cases within key performance indicators from 30 September 2026.

Capita has reported meeting its self-imposed 1 September target across five priority areas: bereavement, death in service, ill health retirement, retirement payments, and retirement quotes, for cases it categorises as workable stock. Although this step is noted, meeting a milestone on workable stock alone is not sufficient progress and does not constitute full service recovery. Overall performance remains unacceptable, and far too many scheme members continue to face uncertainty while waiting for their cases to be resolved. The Government continue to hold Capita firmly to account using all commercial levers available to it. I will also continue work on actively shaping a long-term strategy to bring this pension scheme back in-house.

I intend to provide the House with a substantive update in October following the conclusion of the technical audit and report from the remedial adviser.

[HCWS324]

DEFENCE

Whistleblowing in Defence

The Minister for Veterans and People (Mr Calvin Bailey): During passage of the Armed Forces Commissioner Act 2025, the Government committed to a review into whistleblowing in defence. I am pleased to confirm that this work is now complete, and I am placing a copy of the final report in the Library of the House.

This ministerial-led review considered the effectiveness of existing policies and procedures for raising concerns, with a focus on the armed forces. It examined the current policy landscape, how effectively it is communicated, and whether service personnel understand the protections that may be available to them when they raise concerns, including those relating to serious wrongdoing.

The review evaluated the consistency and accessibility of whistleblowing procedures across the armed forces and compared these with civilian frameworks, recognising that service personnel currently fall outside the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998 in terms of legislation, but its provisions are extended to service personnel in policy.

The review concluded that the evidence does not point to a structural or legal deficit in the current framework. The issues identified are about how the system operates in practice and that implementation of the recommendations will focus on practical improvements to deliver the required clarity, accessibility, and trust.

Engagement with service personnel was at the heart of this work. The review adopted a best practice approach and drew on a range of consultation mechanisms to ensure the voices of those working in defence were heard clearly.

This review represents an important opportunity to strengthen protections for those who work in at all levels in the organisation, and to ensure that defence continues to foster a culture of accountability, transparency and trust.

The attachment "Whistleblowing in Defence Review (20260715-WBR Final Report-for external release.pdf)" can be viewed online at: http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2026-09-09/HCWS321/

[HCWS321]

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Energy Prices Act 2022: Energy Scheme Expenditure

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Ms Polly Billington): I am making this statement to update hon. Members, in line with the requirement for quarterly reporting to Parliament under the Energy Prices Act 2022, on expenditure incurred under section 13 of that Act.

This quarterly report on energy scheme expenditure is required under section 14 of the Act and covers the period from 1 April to 30 June 2026.

The renewables obligation to Exchequer measure was announced at autumn Budget 2025 as part of the Government's package to reduce energy bills. The scheme came into effect on 1 April 2026 and will run for three years. It removes 75% of renewables obligation costs from domestic electricity bills, with these costs instead funded by the Exchequer.

The expenditure reported below relates to the operation of this existing scheme.

Expenditure incurred	*Expenditure incurred between 1 April to 30 June 2026*
RO to Exchequer Scheme (GB)	*£520,709,288.19*

Note: The expenditure figures above reflect spend in Great Britain only, given that the territorial extent of the RO to Exchequer scheme is England, Scotland and Wales.

This statement also sets out the final cumulative expenditure incurred under former energy affordability schemes. These figures are reported alongside current expenditure to provide hon. Members with a complete picture of expenditure incurred by successive Governments using these powers.

All former energy affordability schemes have now closed, and their expenditure positions have been fully reconciled. The cumulative figure for the energy bills discount scheme includes a late claim, which has since

been settled. Previous cumulative figures reflected the best information available while reconciliation and closure activity remained ongoing.

The figures in the table do not include administrative or running costs.

Energy Affordability Schemes	*Actual Spend* *Actual Cumulative Expenditure incurred up to and including 30th June 2026 (£m)*	*Status*
Energy Bills Support Scheme GB & NI	11,874.00	Closed
Energy Bills Support Scheme Alternative Funding	59.47	Closed
Energy Price Guarantee GB & NI	24,075.00	Closed
Domestic Alternative Fuel Payment	401.20	Closed
Energy Bills Relief Scheme GB & NI	7,533.37	Closed
Energy Bills Discount Scheme GB & NI	481.79	Closed
Energy Bills Discount Scheme Heat Networks GB & NI	113.38	Closed
Non-Domestic Alternative Fuel Payment	62.30	Closed
RO to Exchequer (GB)	520.71	Open
Total (£ billion)	£45.1 billion	

Future costs

The Budget 2025 costings confirm the expected future cost of the policy as: Exchequer impact (£m).

	2025-26	*2026-27*	*2027-28*	*2028-29*	*2029-30*	*2030-31*
Exchequer Impact	+0m	-2,580m	-2,100m	-2,195m	+0m	+0m

[HCWS323]

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

Tackling Inequality

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Bridget Phillipson): I wish to update the House that today I am announcing structural changes to how this Government tackle entrenched inequality, bringing the drive to reduce socioeconomic and class disadvantage into the very heart of Government while streamlining our public bodies.

Following the recent cross-Government review of arm's length bodies, which aimed to streamline operations and enhance ministerial accountability, I have decided to move the focus on social mobility in-house, and close the Social Mobility Commission as part of this wider programme of reform.

This decision marks a pivotal step in embedding a focus on socioeconomic inequality into the heart of Government. By winding up the SMC and opening a new class unit in Government, we will redirect vital resources and expertise to focus on tackling class and socioeconomic disadvantage. Sitting alongside existing units in the Office for Equality and Opportunity, this new unit will focus on improving the lives of low-income families and supporting disadvantaged communities, alongside our Government's wider work on rooting out child poverty and supporting social cohesion.

Crucially, the unit will lead the enactment of the socioeconomic duty, a new power in the Equality Act that will legally require public bodies to consider how to improve the lives of lower-income families as part of decisions around issues such as transport, services and budgets. Officials will work closely with social cohesion, place and regional inequalities teams in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and as part of the Government's devolution agenda.

Formal closure of the SMC will be achieved through primary legislation, when parliamentary time and consideration allows. In the interim period, the SMC will focus solely on delivering its statutory duties, including its annual "State of the nation" report, while we begin a staged transition of resources to new priorities.

The Government recognise the importance of external scrutiny of such an important agenda and will explore options to make sure that continues.

Officials are currently working through implementation to ensure a smooth, staged transition, and all changes will be carried out with appropriate consultation and full support for affected staff.

This reform ensures that we put the fight against disadvantage right where it belongs: at the heart of Government. By shifting energy and resources from oversight to direct delivery, we are breaking down the barriers to opportunity, returning power to local communities, and ensuring that a person's background no longer determines what they can achieve.

[HCWS322]

Petition

Wednesday 9 September 2026

OBSERVATIONS

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Support for rural areas, farming, country sports and the equestrian sector

The petition of residents of Arundel and the South Downs,

Declares that the UK's rural traditions and heritage are of great importance in preserving our natural landscapes and the wider economy.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to bring forward measures to actively support rural areas, farming, traditional country sports (including trail hunting and shooting) and the equestrian sector.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—*[Presented by Andrew Griffith, Official Report,* 24 June 2026; Vol. 788, c. 465*.]*

[P003212]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Jenny Riddell-Carpenter):

This Government are committed to supporting rural areas.

On 16 July, we published the "Future of Rural England" report. The report was drafted by a DEFRA-led rural taskforce, which was established to work with external partners and Departments across Whitehall to better understand how the Government can support rural businesses and communities, tackle rural disadvantage, and unlock the potential of the rural economy. It identified six themes critical to thriving, inclusive and sustainable rural communities: economic growth and productivity; infrastructure and housing; skills and education; health and wellbeing; safety and community resilience; and connectivity.

A new cross-Government board will put rural needs at the heart of major policies to help unlock rural potential, with annual public reporting on progress, marking a decisive shift to proactive, joined-up working across Government.

Previous Governments have been criticised for only considering rural communities' needs at the end of the policymaking process. We are committed to a more proactive approach, where rural communities' needs are considered at every juncture. Underpinning this new approach, DEFRA is conducting wide-ranging policy research, to deepen the Government's understanding of the policy interventions that can help rural communities to thrive.

We are supporting farm businesses to be profitable, productive, sustainable, and resilient for the long term. DEFRA's farming road map, published in June 2026, will give farmers clearer long-term direction to plan, invest, reduce input costs, adapt to climate and market volatility, and secure a sustainable future for British agriculture.

We have allocated a record £11.8 billion to support sustainable farming and food production. This includes sustainable farming incentive 2026, which has been made simpler, fairer and more accessible. Window 1 of the scheme, giving priority access to small farms and farms so far without an environmental land management revenue agreement, opened for applications on 30 June, and window 2—for all farms—will open in September.

We are partnering with farmers to strengthen sector growth, ensure markets work fairly, and support productivity and innovation. The Farming and Food Partnership Board will bring Government and industry together to strengthen supply chains and open clearer routes to market. Sector growth plans for horticulture and poultry are already in development.

Furthermore, in 2026-27, DEFRA is providing targeted funding to support rural communities and businesses. This includes £2.3 million through the rural housing enabler programme and £1.7 million through the local action grant.

Wider Government funding addresses the key blockers to growth in rural areas including over £1.9 billion over four years for broadband and 4G connectivity, £2.3 billion of local transport grant funding for smaller cities, towns and rural areas, and £39 billion for the social and affordable homes programme, which includes flexibility in grant rates to help ensure that rural developments receive the support they require.

The Government's small and medium-sized enterprise plan has outlined the steps we are taking to make thriving small and medium-sized businesses a reality across the UK. The plan includes a range of measures to support the over 500,000 small and medium-sized businesses in rural areas.

Through the clean power action plan, we have made it clear that where communities host clean energy infrastructure, we will ensure they benefit from it. We have already announced bill discounts for communities living nearest to new electricity transmission infrastructure. The Government are exploring options to ensure that communities directly benefit from the low-carbon energy infrastructure they host.

The Bus Services Act 2025 empowers local leaders to deliver services that meet the needs of their communities, including in rural areas. The spending review confirmed over £3 billion to maintain and improve bus services, including nearly £700 million a year for local authorities with consideration to the proportion of rural communities.

We recognise the importance of tackling crime in rural areas. That is why we have worked with the National Police Chiefs' Council to deliver a renewed rural and wildlife crime strategy, which was published in November 2025.

On digital connectivity, the Government are committed to ensuring that 99% of premises receive gigabit coverage by 2032. Delivered by Building Digital UK, part of the Department for Science, Information and Technology, Project Gigabit is delivering gigabit-capable broadband to UK premises, predominantly in rural areas, that are not included in suppliers' commercial plans. As of the end of September 2025, over 1.3 million premises in hard-to-reach communities across the UK had been upgraded to gigabit-capable broadband through Government-funded programmes.

We are working with the UK's main mobile network operators to improve poor mobile signal in rural areas via the shared rural network, which is delivering 4G coverage to places where there is either limited 4G coverage or no 4G coverage at all.

This Government are committed to enacting an effective, enforceable ban on trail hunting that protects our countryside, wildlife and rural communities. On 18 June 2026, DEFRA closed its 12-week consultation that sought views on how to deliver a ban in England and Wales. All responses to the consultation will be considered carefully in developing proposals for a ban. A summary of responses to the consultation will be published in due course.

We have no plans to ban the breeding, release or shooting of gamebirds. However, gamebird shooting can have trade-offs with environmental, economic, and animal health and welfare outcomes, and we want to ensure that the highest standards of practice are consistently applied. To achieve this, DEFRA will work with stakeholders to explore wider measures, and this will begin with evidence gathering. Any proposed changes will be subject to public consultation.

We are committed to not leaving rural England behind and we have a clear goal of well-connected communities that feel supported to reach their full potential, with access to opportunities and public services they can rely on, and the confidence to plan and invest for the future.

Written Correction

Wednesday 9 September 2026

Ministerial Correction

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Online Safety

The following is an extract from the statement on Online Safety on 8 September 2026.

Lisa Nandy:…Children are facing unacceptable levels of sexual harm online. They are being groomed, coerced and manipulated into creating and sharing intimate images across online services. The Internet Watch Foundation believes that 91% of these images are self-generated by children. They are used for blackmail and sexual extortion.

[*Official Report*, 8 September 2026; Vol. 790, c. 917.]

Written correction submitted by the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, the right hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy):

Lisa Nandy:…Children are facing unacceptable levels of sexual harm online. They are being groomed, coerced and manipulated into creating and sharing intimate images across online services. **In 2024, 91% of reports of child sexual abuse imagery assessed by the Internet Watch Foundation contained at least one instance of self-generated images.** They are used for blackmail and sexual extortion.

ORAL ANSWERS

Wednesday 9 September 2026

	Col. No.
PRIME MINISTER	1034
Engagements	1034
WOMEN AND EQUALITIES	1025
Contacting Departments: Accessibility	1027
Conversion Therapy	1027
Neurodivergent Women and Girls	1031
WOMEN AND EQUALITIES—*continued*	
Removing Children from Poverty	1028
Smart Glasses	1025
Social Cohesion	1026
Tackling Violence against Women and Girls	1029
Topical Questions	1032

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Wednesday 9 September 2026

	Col. No.
CABINET OFFICE	45WS
Civil Service Pension Scheme	45WS
DEFENCE	45WS
Whistleblowing in Defence	45WS
ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO	46WS
Energy Prices Act 2022: Energy Scheme Expenditure	46WS
WOMEN AND EQUALITIES	47WS
Tackling Inequality	47WS

PETITION

Wednesday 9 September 2026

	Col. No.
ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS	7P
Support for rural areas, farming, country sports and the equestrian sector	7P

WRITTEN CORRECTIONS

Wednesday 9 September 2026

	Col. No.
DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT	7WC
Online Safety	7WC

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not later than
Wednesday 16 September 2026

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Volume 790
No. 41

Wednesday
9 September 2026

CONTENTS

Wednesday 9 September 2026

Oral Answers to Questions [see index inside back page] [Col. 1025]
Minister for Women and Equalities
Prime Minister

Summer Health and Resilience [Col. 1047]
Statement—(Yvette Cooper)

Education and Skills Reform [Col. 1064]
Statement—(Lucy Powell)

Jaguar Land Rover: Redundancies [Col. 1081]
Statement—(Blair McDougall)

Utilities and Services [Col. 1094]
Bill presented, and read the First time

Personal Data (Digital Twins) [Col. 1095]
Motion for leave to bring in Bill—(Dame Chi Onwurah)—agreed to
Bill presented, and read the First time

Civil Aviation (Consumer Protection and Regulatory Reform) Bill [Lords] [Col. 1099]
Motion for Second Reading—(Heidi Alexander)—agreed to
Read a Second time
Programme motion—(Shaun Davies)—agreed to

Ticket Price Regulation: Live Events [Col. 1153]
Debate on motion for Adjournment

Plant Health [Col. 1163]
Motion, on a deferred Division, agreed to

Westminster Hall
Public Confidence in the Police [Col. 339WH]
Bus Stops [Col. 359WH]
Pharmacies: Government Funding [Col. 368WH]
Youth Parliament: Government Support [Col. 393WH]
Pica Eating Disorder: SEND [Col. 401WH]
General Debates

Written Statements [Col. 45WS]

Petition [Col. 7P]
Observations

Written Corrections [Col. 7WC]
Ministerial correction