Tuesday
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HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Tuesday 15 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

Tuesday 15 September 2026

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

JUSTICE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Trial by Jury

1. **Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst** (Solihull West and Shirley) (Con): Whether he plans to proceed with the legislative proposals in the Courts and Tribunals Bill to restrict trial by jury. [901359]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Norris): Last week, the Leader of the House announced that the Courts and Tribunals Bill will return to this House on 13 October. I have been clear that my priority is to reduce the Crown court waiting list and enable victims to have their day in court more quickly. I look forward to working with experts in this House and beyond to deliver that.

Dr Shastri-Hurst: There are reports that the Government are considering tabling an amendment to the Courts and Tribunals Bill so that, in either-way offences, a judge will decide whether a defendant faces a jury or is heard by a single judge sitting alone. The legal profession has quite properly highlighted that this will lead to satellite litigation, with repeated appeals, and slow down the legal process. Will the Government finally listen to the legal profession, or will they plough on regardless?

Alex Norris: I would always caution the hon. Gentleman about believing reports. When there are things to be said, they will be said from the Dispatch Box. I think he would expect that I, as the new Lord Chancellor, and my right hon. Friend the new Prime Minister will look at every aspect of business in the Ministry of Justice to ensure that it is delivering for victims and for the public at large. The hon. Gentleman knows the legislation is coming back, and I look forward to discussing it in its fullness when it does.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Justice Secretary.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): Upon taking office, the Prime Minister promised to

"find ways of not reducing access to jury trial."

He said that jury trials are a

"linchpin of a fair society."

Now that we know the Courts and Tribunals Bill will return to the House on 13 October, immediately after the recess, can the Justice Secretary guarantee that the Bill will not reduce access to jury trials at all?

Alex Norris: The shadow Secretary of State seeks to run ahead of the process that is going on at the moment. It is very important that Parliament has the opportunity to consider this really important legislation in the spirit that he talks about, and we have now reached Second Reading. I have been in this place for nine years, and legislation very rarely looks the same at the beginning of the process as it does at the end. My offer to him, and indeed to colleagues from across the House, is to engage in the conversation. If they have concerns and wish to see things changed, let us have that conversation.

Nick Timothy: I asked the Justice Secretary to rule out reducing access to jury trials, and the House will have noticed that he did not do that. We are not talking about something insignificant; we are talking about an ancient English right dating back to Magna Carta. As with Labour's early release disaster, the new Prime Minister told everybody he did not like it and would not do it, but he never got round to working out what to do instead. Once again, the Justice Secretary has made much of his desire to work together constructively—although I have not seen much of it in our correspondence—so will he publish the full details of the new plan now, or does he still not know what it is?

Alex Norris: This is interesting: the Opposition do not know how to deal with either the new Prime Minister or the new Government. When we talk about wanting to improve things in the collective interest of the country, we mean it. The hon. Gentleman offers to be my correspondence secretary, but I do not think that is quite the answer.

Nick Timothy: You've ignored letters all summer!

Mr Speaker: Order. That is quite serious, and I am getting a little bit fed up of this carrying on at the Dispatch Box. Ask a question and respect the answer, because I expect Ministers to listen to the questions—it works both ways. This is becoming a habit, and I do not want it to continue.

Alex Norris: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I reiterate my commitment to the hon. Gentleman and to the House: if people have an interest in the legislation and want to discuss it, our door is open.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): The Lord Chancellor mentioned working with experts in his previous answer. Amnesty International has recently questioned the Government's human rights assessment of the Courts and Tribunals Bill, describing the proposals as a

"dilution of the quality of justice",

particularly in relation to

"efforts to combat racial discrimination".

These issues were raised at earlier stages of the Bill, but the Government batted away our concerns. The time is right to change course, prior to the return of the Bill in October. Can the Secretary of State confirm that those concerns are being heard by the Prime Minister while he considers the future of the Bill, and can he guarantee that hon. Members from across the House and experts in the sector will have adequate time to scrutinise the Government's amendments before we are asked to debate it on the second day back after recess?

Alex Norris: I assure the hon. Lady that we will consider all evidence that is submitted, and certainly evidence submitted by those experts who I talked about in my opening answer. I am afraid that we cannot quite accept the hon. Lady's characterisation. We will look at these things very closely and have that interaction through ordinary parliamentary processes and beyond, because I think we have a shared interest in this. I would caution the House about defending the status quo when we all know—because it is in our constituency mailbags—that our constituents are waiting until 2029 for trials, and soon it will be 2030. That is not justice, either. Yes, it behoves us to make important changes to the system to help address immediate capacity challenges—as my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Sarah Sackman) has done—but it also behoves us to look at longer-term structural changes. As I say, I look forward to working with colleagues on that.

Criminal Justice System: Royal Commission

2. **Brian Leishman** (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the potential merits of establishing a royal commission on the criminal justice system. [901360]

The Minister for Courts and Legal Services (Sarah Sackman): We inherited a criminal justice system in crisis, with challenges in prisons and criminal courts at risk of collapse. That is why as an early priority, we launched two wide-ranging reviews—one led by David Gauke, the other led by Sir Brian Leveson—to tackle that crisis holistically. This is a system-wide challenge and requires urgent action from across the whole criminal justice system.

Brian Leishman: Just a fortnight ago, the Justice Secretary said that

"we have to build a new criminal justice system."—[*Official Report*, 1 September 2026; Vol. 790, c. 86.]

After the damage done by a decade and a half of austerity, I wholeheartedly agree. Nobody knows how far our justice system has fallen better than the hard-working frontline workers who are desperately trying to hold it all together, and who have watched and warned about this dangerous situation coming down the track for years. Will the Department listen to the leaders of the six national justice trade unions, who are calling for a royal commission on prisons and the wider criminal justice system?

Sarah Sackman: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that whether they are powering our prisons, our Probation Service or our Courts Service, our workforce are the backbone of delivering for citizens in this country. My colleagues and I routinely engage with our trade unions, who are vital stakeholders in this matter, but we are not waiting for a royal commission. The state of our justice system requires action now, which is why the Government are making record investment in sitting days in courts, in building new prisons, and in the workforce itself.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I speak as the chair of the new justice unions all-party parliamentary group, which hears from six trade unions representing workers across prisons, probation, policing and the courts. Our first action last week was to write to the Prime Minister and the Justice Secretary to highlight a joint statement by six justice trade unions calling for a royal commission. Workers on the frontline see that the current piecemeal approach of narrow, stand-alone reviews can at best only tackle individual symptoms, while the disease and its causes remain untreated. Surely the Minister agrees that end-to-end reform is now essential, and that a royal commission is key to enabling this.

Sarah Sackman: As the right hon. Member has just heard me say, what we need is action and investment in our workforce now. That is about fair pay; it is also about ensuring that our workforce, whether in prisons or in courts, have the tools to do the job that they were trained to do and want to do properly. That is why we are empowering them with digital tools, and it is why we provided the sitting days to hear the cases that need to be processed through our courts. We do not need a royal commission to tell us what is needed—what we need is action right now.

Onley Park Estate: Water Main

3. **Stuart Andrew** (Daventry) (Con): What progress his Department has made on replacing the water main serving the Onley Park estate. [901361]

Mr Speaker: I welcome the Minister to her new role—congratulations.

The Minister for Prisons, Probation and Reducing Reoffending (Catherine McKinnell): Thank you, Mr Speaker. The right hon. Gentleman, himself a former Prisons Minister and a highly regarded former shadow Secretary of State, has raised this issue assiduously on behalf of his constituents. The project to replace a water main serving the Onley Park estate is progressing through design and development, with a projected programme expected in November.

Stuart Andrew: The Minister will know that Onley Park is still owned by the Ministry of Justice. Although I welcome the funding, these residents have been waiting years, and frankly they are really worried—we have still not got a start date or clarity around backdated bills, and the situation is affecting house sales now. Will the Minister meet me and representatives of the parish council, so that we can provide some clarity and a resolution for the residents of Onley Park?

Catherine McKinnell: I absolutely recognise the right hon. Gentleman's concerns. As I have said, the projected programme should be with him by November. He will appreciate that there are important value for money considerations, and we also need to ensure we get the project right. It is expected to be a year long once it commences—by January 2027—but if he still requires a meeting, I would of course be happy to facilitate one.

Foreign National Offenders: Deportation

4. **Dr Andrew Murrison** (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Whether he has set a target for the number of foreign national offenders in prison who will be deported. [901362]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Norris): The Government have increased foreign national offender returns by 41%, with more than 3,000 foreign national offenders removed directly from prison last year through the early removal scheme. From next year, new powers will enable most determinate sentence foreign national offenders to be deported immediately after sentencing, and I have established a cross-Government taskforce with the Home Office and the Foreign Office to maximise removals.

Dr Murrison: In July, the then Mayor of Manchester, the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham), said that

"nothing is off the table"

and that he would "explore all possible options" to deport child rapist Shabir Ahmed to Pakistan. Where is the necessary draft legislation to amend the Immigration Act 1971? Where is the credible threat to Pakistan to turn off visas, and where is the credible threat to Pakistan to stop money and other assistance to that country if it does not co-operate?

Alex Norris: The right hon. Gentleman may well have seen that I set out the Government's approach in this regard from this Dispatch Box in July. He will know, and it is important to reiterate this, that the challenges in the Immigration Act 1971 are not merely technical, and setting them aside is not merely a technical answer. It is right that we do that properly. He will also know that we have ongoing negotiations and discussions with lots of countries around the world about foreign offenders, and we do not provide running commentaries on them.

Mr Speaker: I welcome the new Chair of the Justice Committee.

Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. The Government's progress on deporting foreign national offenders is welcome, but how will the Minister work with the Home Office to ensure that receiving countries are informed of the convictions of offenders, particularly those involving violence, sexual offending or exploitation, so that countries have the information they need to keep their public safe?

Alex Norris: I congratulate my hon. Friend on her new position. I have a double degree of anxiety: as a former Justice Minister, she will know very well of what she speaks, but she is also a Derby MP, which will create a Derby-Nottingham rivalry across the Select Committee room. I have a degree of trepidation about that, but I know how excellently she will do in her new job. I know her well and she is brilliant.

My hon. Friend asks an important question. We have made significant strides in the removal of foreign offenders from this country, for which we make no apology. We want to go further, and again we make no apology for that. To do that well, and in a way that endures over the years, we need to work as well as possible with receiving countries. We want them to have the best information as early as possible. We are working with the Home Office and the Foreign Office in that venture, so that we can safely and securely remove people in a way that we can keep doing over the years ahead.

Probation Service: Recruitment and Retention

5. **Perran Moon** (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): What steps his Department has taken to increase the size of the probation workforce. [901363]

The Minister for Prisons, Probation and Reducing Reoffending (Catherine McKinnell): The recruitment and retention of probation staff is a high priority for me and for the Government. We are absolutely committed to recruiting and retaining our brilliant and dedicated probation workforce so that they can supervise and manage offenders in the community and keep the public safe.

Perran Moon: The Probation Service is suffering from thousands of vacancies and a pretty appalling retention rate. The extra £700 million announced for the Probation Service from this Government is welcome, but does the Minister accept that some of that needs to support Probation Service salaries, which have been massively eroded after a decade and a half of pay freezes and real-term cuts?

Catherine McKinnell: My hon. Friend should be reassured to know that the retention rate of the Probation Service has improved significantly since this Government came to office. The south-west Probation Service has reported some of the best retention rates in the country, but we are investing £700 million into probation and the community. We are committed to supporting them, and discussions around pay are ongoing.

Mr Will Forster (Woking) (LD): After releasing a man with a history of domestic violence from prison, the Probation Service told his former partner that he had made threats against both her and her child as he was being released. Unsurprisingly, she now lives in fear. The Probation Service even told my local authority, Woking borough council, that it needs to rehouse her for her own safety. Will the Minister urgently look at this case and agree to increase the probation workforce to ensure that this incident never happens again?

Catherine McKinnell: I am concerned to hear what the hon. Gentleman says, and I will look further into that case. We are committed to ensuring that we have the probation workforce so that people are safe and can feel confident that they are safe.

Mr Speaker: I welcome the shadow Minister to her position.

Sarah Bool (South Northamptonshire) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. The Minister knows that there has been a decrease in probation officers in the past year, yet at the same time the Government have released thousands of dangerous criminals on to our streets. The Government's answer is electronic tagging, but the National Audit Office has highlighted problems. First, staff have to review tag alerts. Only 10% to 50% of alerts result in breach notifications, and where outcomes are even recorded, nearly half result in no further action. Can she guarantee that in the next year, every tagging breach will come with consequences?

Catherine McKinnell: We are giving probation the widest and toughest range of tools ever to restrict offenders and their movements and to help protect victims. We are continuing to invest in strengthening the Probation Service via recruitment and digital improvements. We are building capacity, after years of the service being run down under the previous Government.

Violence against Women and Girls: AI-based Crime

6. **Sadik Al-Hassan** (North Somerset) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help tackle AI-based violence against women and girls crime in online spaces. [901364]

8. **Imogen Walker** (Hamilton and Clyde Valley) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help tackle AI-based violence against women and girls crime in online spaces. [901366]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Davies-Jones): We have proudly delivered a world-leading package of intimate image abuse offences, which criminalise taking or creating intimate images without consent, including AI-generated deepfakes. Through the Crime and Policing Act 2026, we have introduced new powers for courts to order the deletion of these images to better protect victims, but we are not stopping there, and we know that there is more to do.

Sadik Al-Hassan: In January I stopped using X as a communication channel because the platform facilitated the creation of illegal and deeply harmful images by its AI tool, Grok. This platform is, unfortunately, just one instance of AI-based violence against women and girls, an issue about which I know North Somerset residents care deeply. Can the Minister tell me whether the current law is keeping pace with AI-generated intimate image abuse, and what assessment she has made of whether sentencing powers are adequate to reflect the harm that such images cause to women and girls?

Alex Davies-Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for asking that question, because it is important to recognise the abuse that this is causing. The law alone is not enough, but we are strengthening the criminal law through world-leading packages. We are also strengthening the sentencing response to intimate image abuse, and have introduced new court powers to order the deletion and destruction of such images. However, more action is needed. We need to ensure that there is a stronger understanding of, policing of and response to these crimes, and that includes a whole-of-society response. The Government are determined to tackle this through the violence against women strategy.

Imogen Walker: Violence against women and girls is hardly new, but perverts and abusers now have the ability to generate huge amounts of appalling content at lightning speed, and we are not able to respond quickly enough. What can the Government do to give Ofcom the power and ability to crack down on disgusting online content more quickly, so that we can keep women and girls safer?

Alex Davies-Jones: My hon. Friend is right: perpetrators are able to generate and share harmful content at unprecedented speed and scale, and we need to be able to respond quickly. Ofcom does have robust enforcement powers under the Online Safety Act 2023, including the power to impose substantial fines and other sanctions. The new Crime and Policing Act 2026 also requires platforms to remove the images within 48 hours, and to prevent the re-uploading of new hash-matching technology. The Government recognise the impact of harmful pornography, and we are determined to initiate work on this imminently.

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): As the Minister knows, technology is being used in many different forms to threaten women. A Gosport domestic abuse survivor, Harmony Hayman, is still living in fear of a former partner eight years after leaving the relationship, and he has used an illicit mobile phone from prison to contact her. She is now living in terror of the Government's decision to release domestic abusers early from prison. Will the Minister look at Harmony's petition, in which she calls on the Government to look into how domestic abusers are able to perpetuate their abusive behaviour from within prison, and also to review their eligibility for early release?

Alex Davies-Jones: I will, of course, look at Harmony's petition to see what more we can do, and look into the issues that the hon. Lady has raised. I recently met a group of victims and survivors who discussed the impact that technological abuse is having on them. Let me put on record my thanks to Refuge, an incredible organisation with a dedicated tech abuse team who help victims and survivors who are in this position.

The Government know that more needs to be done. We are working directly with organisations such as Apple and Samsung on stalking technology and verification tools to ensure they cannot be used to harm victims further.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The surge in so-called nightlife videos, in which women are covertly filmed on a night out, is despicable. The videos are shared online and are accompanied by vile and misogynistic abuse, which drives engagement and generates profit for the creators. The Government have committed themselves to making misogyny an aggravated offence, but will the Minister go further and commit herself to making misogyny a hate crime?

Alex Davies-Jones: Hopefully, last week the hon. Lady will have seen the Minister for Women and Equalities, my right hon. Friend the Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson), outlining the Government's response to tackling some of the covert filming that is causing such anxiety to women in particular, and to other vulnerable people. The material is being uploaded at speed. We know that misogynistic content online needs to be tackled, whether it is pornography or intimate image abuse, and the Government are determined to do that. We will be introducing measures in due course, and I look forward to working with the hon. Lady and other Members to see what else we can do to tackle the problem holistically, as a society.

Rapid Deployment Cells Programme

7. **Mike Reader** (Northampton South) (Lab): What steps he is taking to increase the speed of the delivery of the rapid deployment cells programme. [901365]

The Minister for Prisons, Probation and Reducing Reoffending (Catherine McKinnell): We are committed to delivering 14,000 additional prison places by 2031, the largest expansion of prison capacity since the Victorian era. To date we have delivered 1,000 additional rapid deployment cells across 20 sites, with plans to deliver a further 400 by the end of 2027.

Mike Reader: I thank the Minister for her answer. However, I understand that following the collapse of the contractor ISG, there are a number of stalled projects in the programme that cannot be brought forward, and that contractors are lacking a long-term pipeline. Given the wider societal benefits of the programme—it is delivered through modern methods, in factory conditions—and the reduced operational impact, as the cells are made offsite, will the Minister ask her officials to review affordability criteria, so that we can bring more projects forward?

Catherine McKinnell: My hon. Friend is rightly interested in ensuring the plans are delivered. We are working flat out to deliver them on time—or, where we can, ahead of time. I will certainly look into the issues he raises. These are complex projects, but we are determined to get this right. I am happy that he has raised the issue, and we will look into it further.

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): The Ministry of Justice will be able to deliver its rapid deployment cells building programme more quickly if it completes other programmes. Taunton Crown court has been closed since 2023, and the closure has just been extended. In March, I received a letter saying that the long-promised opening date in July was now cancelled, and that in due course I would receive an update. I have not received any update. Victims and jurors are having to travel extra tens of miles—30 or 40 miles—without public transport, which is a real burden on them. An exacerbating issue is the fact that jury recompense has not been updated since 2010. Will the Minister look into this issue, and also address jury recompense?

Mr Speaker: Order. This is a question about cells. *[Interruption.]* Well, you kind of threw something in, and I do not think it was quite relevant, to be honest. Just because you think so, does not mean that I accept it. We really have to stick to the question. Personally, I would have thought this would have been better in topicals.

I call the shadow Minister.

Sarah Bool (South Northamptonshire) (Con): Rapid deployment cells are one option, but the question remains of why the Government are not making use of fully certified cells. HMP Millsike has an operational capacity of up to 1,500, but it has only 1,100 prisoners, due to staffing issues. Can the Minister guarantee that she will replace the 1,600 prison officers lost under Labour by next year?

Catherine McKinnell: About 80% of Millsike's capacity is in use. Occupancy will continue to increase as and when that is appropriate and safe, and as and when we have the correct culture and processes established on the site. Clearly, this issue is pressing. We are working as hard as we can. We brought forward £110 million in investment to bring onsite any available space that is not currently in use. We will continue to do so, while making up for the staffing shortages that were left by the previous Government.

Coronial System: Delays

9. **Anneliese Dodds** (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): What steps his Department is taking with the coronial system to tackle delays in coroner decisions. [901367]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Davies-Jones): The Government recognise the huge impact that delays have on bereaved families. We are committed to supporting a swift inquest process that puts bereaved families at its heart. The Public Office (Accountability) Bill, the expansion of legal aid and the new duty of candour further strengthen the focus on bereaved families, while helping to ensure the timely establishment of the facts in each case.

Anneliese Dodds: I am very grateful to the Minister. The Government have been pushing for more use of medical examiners and CT scans where they are appropriate, but the reality is that many families are still experiencing delays and disruption at an extraordinarily traumatic time. It is even worse when they live far away from the court that is dealing with their beloved family member's case. What more can the Minister do, working with the chief coroner, to try to get the delays down?

Alex Davies-Jones: I have huge sympathy for anyone who is struggling with this issue, whether that is because they have to travel further owing to the nature of the case, or for religious reasons. This issue is deeply concerning. My right hon. Friend will know that coroners are independent judges. Every single case is different, and coroners make decisions about the release of the body on a case-by-case basis. For that reason, I am unable to comment on individual judicial decisions. However, the law requires coroners to release a body for burial or cremation as soon as is reasonably practicable, once it is no longer needed for their investigation.

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): A constituent of mine died in state custody in July last year. His family was told to expect the prisons and probation ombudsman report within weeks, but it was quietly paused, pending the coroner's post-mortem report, and the family were not told about that for several months. They have now passed the first anniversary of the death, with no answers at all, and with no post-mortem report. Will the Minister meet me to discuss this case and the plight of families who are caught between investigations that wait on one another?

Alex Davies-Jones: If the hon. Gentleman writes to me with the details of the case, I will of course look into it. Delays of that nature are rare, but they can happen because cases are looked at case by case. I will look into the specifics of that case. To reassure the House, we are aware of the issues with coronial delays. The problem has to do with access to pathology medical examiners, as has been said, but we are working across Government with the Department of Health and Social Care to look at what more we can do to establish a better service, to put bereaved families back at the heart of the system.

Prison Improvement: Digital Technology

10. **Chris Murray** (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to use digital technology to improve prisons' processes. [901368]

The Minister for Prisons, Probation and Reducing Reoffending (Catherine McKinnell): The Prison Service absolutely needs to be modernised, which is why we are building new digital prison services that will support the transformation of core prison operations and offender management; developing tactical AI-enabled tools for frontline staff to improve accuracy and efficiency; and exploring the use of biometric technology to improve public safety.

Chris Murray: My city of Edinburgh is a world centre for innovation in digital technology, including in areas with applications in prisons. For example, the company VisionRF produces tech that monitors signs of self-harm in prisons, preventing suicides and deaths on the estate. What role does the Minister expect technology to play in improving long-term performance of prisons, and will officials engage with Edinburgh researchers? Although justice policy is devolved, tech and innovation learnings can be applied to all parts of the UK.

Catherine McKinnell: My hon. Friend raises an interesting case. There is so much work going on with technological development that can support a more efficient Prison Service. We are investing £82 million, following the Dame Lynne Owens review, because there was chronic under-investment by the previous Government in technology, and we want the Prison Service taken into this century and beyond.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I welcome the Minister to her place, and wish her well in her role; I know that she will do exceptionally well. She referred to technological advances on the UK mainland. The hon. Member for Edinburgh East and Musselburgh (Chris Murray) mentioned that the justice system is devolved in Scotland; it is devolved in Northern Ireland as well, but it is important that that technology is shared. Can the Minister assure me that the Justice Minister in Northern Ireland will have access to that technology?

Catherine McKinnell: I appreciate the spirit in which the hon. Gentleman asks his question, and he has my assurance.

Reoffending Reduction Programmes

11. **Monica Harding** (Esher and Walton) (LD): What steps he is taking to improve programmes that reduce reoffending. [901369]

20. **Richard Foord** (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): What steps he is taking to improve programmes that reduce reoffending. [901380]

The Minister for Prisons, Probation and Reducing Reoffending (Catherine McKinnell): This Government are determined to give offenders the tools to move away from crime. To do that, we need to address issues such as housing, employment, and substance misuse, and to help offenders develop personal skills and behaviours. We are continuing to work on strengthening practice in that area.

Monica Harding: My local police force is working hard to get youth crime down, as I witnessed when I went out on an op, but reoffending is a real problem. Probation officers and youth justice workers play an essential role in the rehabilitation of young offenders, but in my area, the service was operating with under two thirds of its roles staffed last year. That is mostly due to the high cost of areas like Esher and Walton. A constituent who came to my surgery had been offered a position as a youth justice worker but had waited over six months for employment checks to be made. The Department's data shows that almost 15,000 candidates are stuck in the vetting pipeline. What is the Minister doing about that?

Catherine McKinnell: The hon. Lady raises an important point, which I am very much working on. I am working with officials in the Department to understand exactly why vetting is taking so long, because we need those people employed, on the frontline and working to reduce reoffending. I reassure her that I am on the case.

Richard Foord: The problems with early release that we saw over the summer are partly an issue with reoffending, as a quarter of prisoners released go on to reoffend. I have a constituent whose sibling has moved into her small house after spending time in prison, to prevent him becoming homeless. I understand that community accommodation service tier 3 is a good scheme for supporting prisoners when they are first released, but what housing schemes support rehabilitation later, to stop that revolving door for some offenders?

Catherine McKinnell: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point, and an issue that I have identified as being a priority if we are to support people in not reoffending and going back into our prison system. Alongside the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, we have committed to halving the proportion of those released homeless from prison. We need to support people into settled accommodation, so that they can get into employment and stay out of crime.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): I am pleased that the Government are extending intensive supervision courts, which combine rehabilitation with close judicial oversight, as I saw once on a visit to Texas. Tackling the causes of crime and interrupting the cycle of reoffending not only reduces crime, but helps people back into sustainable relationships and employment. Will the Minister share whether consideration is being given to extending the scheme to London in a future roll-out?

Catherine McKinnell: Such courts are to be seen not only in Texas, but in Stockton, Teesside; I visited an intensive supervision court there and saw for myself the value of this approach in ensuring that we really tackle the challenge of prolific offending among the relatively small group of people who commit a significant number of crimes. We are operating this approach in four locations in England, and will do so in a further seven by 2029, including in London.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Last week, I visited a prison with the University and College Union to look at the prison

education service. I saw the power of dynamic prison education, but also heard about the cuts to these privatised contracts. Will the Minister will bring those contracts back in-house, and work with the Department for Work and Pensions and the Department for Education to ensure that education has real purpose in people's lives and reduces reoffending?

Catherine McKinnell: My hon. Friend will hopefully not doubt my commitment, as a former Minister for Schools, to education as a life-changing force. Indeed, I want to see it employed to reduce reoffending and protect the public while changing lives.

Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD): Restorative justice has a vital role to play in cutting reoffending and supporting victims. I would not be here today, after a violent attack in my home, were it not for a subsequent RJ session. I am consequently very concerned that the Prison and Probation Service has recently issued a protocol that would have denied access to RJ to my family, as well as the family of James Hodgkinson, on whom the play "Punch" is based. As I understand it, no Minister has yet been formally assigned the RJ role in the Ministry of Justice, but when they are, will they meet me and Jacob Dunne, the RJ campaigner and the perpetrator in "Punch", to help reverse this retrograde step?

Catherine McKinnell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that point. Restorative justice is clearly a vital part of our system, and we need to ensure that it works to the fullest effect. I would be more than happy to have the meeting that he suggests.

Deirdre Costigan (Ealing Southall) (Lab): From 26 October, Labour's new respect orders will mean that those persistently involved in antisocial behaviour in Ealing Southall can be required to attend drug and alcohol rehab to reduce reoffending. What work is the Minister doing with the Home Office to ensure that our courts have the guidance they need in advance of 26 October, so that both the police and the courts can act immediately to make Ealing Southall safer?

Catherine McKinnell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. She has raised some of the practical issues surrounding this matter with me, and she can be assured that I have taken them forward; indeed, I will take forward the request she makes today. We work with other Departments to ensure that these support services are available to reduce reoffending and keep the public safe. I will take on board the suggestions she has made today.

Unregulated Child Contact Centres: Risks

12. **Alison Hume** (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the risks to children and families from the use of unregulated child contact centres. [901370]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Jake Richards): A report commissioned by the Ministry of Justice and published in 2023 found limited evidence of unaccredited child contact centres. Protocols make it clear that as part of family court proceedings, the judiciary and the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service should refer families only to centres accredited by the National Association of Child Contact Centres. There are, however, clearly issues with the sector, in terms of cost and accessibility, and we will always seek to improve it.

Alison Hume: In cases where family court proceedings lead to child removal, parents can be forced to use unregulated contact centres—it can cost hundreds of pounds for just a few hours of contact—because of a lack of accessible, regulated contact centre provision. What assessment has the Minister made of the impact of this situation on the welfare of children and families, and will his Department initiate a review of current arrangements?

Jake Richards: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important issue. Where it is safe to do so, we would always encourage parents to have contact with their children. The courts encourage this; it is always in the child's best interests to have that contact. Where contact centres are necessary, they need to be close to home and, clearly, affordable. This sector is independent of Government, but if it is not working, as we are hearing from my hon. Friend, we will look into it in due course.

Imprisonment for Public Protection Sentences

13. **Laura Kyrke-Smith** (Aylesbury) (Lab): What steps he is taking to review imprisonment for public protection sentences. [901371]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Norris): Our Government will bring forward legislation to end the IPP sentence by the end of this Parliament. We will do so through cross-party engagement. We recognise that these are complex cases, involving important considerations to do with public protection and victims, and it will take us time to get this right. I anticipate making a further announcement later this year.

Laura Kyrke-Smith: In the summer, I met a group of IPP prisoners, most of whom had been serving their sentences since 2006 or 2007. They told me about the extreme toll that the protracted uncertainty of the sentences takes on their mental health, and one showed me where he had been self-harming. The prisoners also spoke about the unfairness of this type of sentence, and particularly of seeing people who had committed much greater offences released much sooner than them. We must always do right by the victims of prisoners' crimes, but these are men who have now served their original sentences several times over, so it is right that the Secretary of State is reviewing this type of sentence. What assessment has he made of the mental health impacts of these sentences, and when we can expect decisions on next steps?

Alex Norris: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her considered question. I have had similar conversations in my constituency surgeries, and I recognise the challenges that those prisoners face. In the immediate term, IPP prisoners have greater access to mental health support, including funding for specialist assessments by psychology services. She will know—I suspect that this is at the root of the conversations she had—that the Phoenix unit opened up at HMP Aylesbury last month to provide dedicated support for IPP prisoners. I know that those prisoners, their families and, indeed, their victims are looking to see what the Government will do next. We

must get any changes that we make right, and ensure a balance with public safety, but these sentences have been discontinued for a very good reason. That is a long-standing cross-party position, and it is time that we move forward.

Patrick Spencer (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): Earlier this month, John Dunne was convicted of trying to meet a 14-year-old boy at a train station in Suffolk. He received a two-year sentence, reduced from three after a guilty plea. This still seems lenient, considering that Mr Dunne has already served a life sentence for rape and murder. Our community and country will never be safe when we release people who are clearly not functioning in society. I have written to the Attorney General about this sentence, but if the Government are considering changes to IPP, what is their plan for keeping children safe in situations like this?

Alex Norris: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for the question, and the spirit in which it was asked. I will not be drawn on that individual case if it is with the Attorney General, because it is right that that process carries on unhindered. The hon. Gentleman will know that there is a tension on this issue. I do not think that he or anybody in this House believes that people who have served their sentence—or, in many cases, a decade or more beyond their sentence—should be held in prison. That is why we have discontinued those sentences, but he makes very important points about support, public safety and public protection. We are doing work on that at the moment, and I look forward to his scrutiny of our plans.

Youth Offending

14. **Steve Witherden** (Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr) (Lab): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help tackle youth offending. [901372]

15. **Alex McIntyre** (Gloucester) (Lab): What steps his Department has taken to reduce youth reoffending. [901373]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Jake Richards): On 1 September, the Lord Chancellor announced from this Dispatch Box a further £4.5 million to better support and supervise children, in order to move them away from criminality. Earlier this year, we published the youth justice White Paper, and we are getting on with the job of delivering that reform across the country.

Steve Witherden: Early intervention is key to tackling youth offending, and our Government's commitment to new youth hubs is essential to support at-risk young people and steer them away from a life of crime. Constituents of mine in Cefn Mawr, Plas Madoc, Acrefair and Ruabon have reported a rise in antisocial behaviour among young people. Would my hon. Friend agree that a new youth hub in Plas Madoc would go a long way to addressing this problem?

Jake Richards: My hon. Friend is right that youth services and support for early intervention is at the heart of tackling reoffending. We know that 80% of adult prolific offenders commit their first offence when they are a child, so early intervention is crucial. Dealing with young offenders is at the heart of what we published in the youth justice White Paper earlier this year and what this Government are doing.

Alex McIntyre: To break the cycle of offending and reoffending in young people, we need to do more to give young people opportunity and something productive to do. What discussions has the Minister had with Alan Milburn about his review, and how can we ensure that young offenders are put on a more productive pathway?

Jake Richards: My hon. Friend is right that tackling reoffending and youth crime needs a cross-Government effort. It is an issue for the Department for Education, the Home Office, the Department for Work and Pensions and indeed the Ministry of Justice. That is why on Thursday I will be in No. 10 North with colleagues from across Government launching our new strategy to devolve youth justice services so that they serve places and localities and the people within them.

Lewis Cocking (Broxbourne) (Con): My constituents are extremely concerned about young people on e-bikes and e-scooters repeatedly committing crimes and antisocial behaviour. There is a feeling that those individuals get away with that behaviour and put other people in danger. Will the Minister assure me that the justice system is robust enough to punish every individual involved in that reckless behaviour?

Jake Richards: The hon. Member is right. It is an issue in my constituency as well: I hear about it a lot from constituents and see it for myself outside my constituency office in Dinnington. How the police enforce the law on our streets is obviously a matter for them, but I have been introducing reforms in the youth justice system to implement more rigorous community punishments for young offenders and, critically, to look at parenting orders. It is not just a job for Government to ensure that young people turn their back on crime; it is also their parents' responsibility, and we want to ensure that that responsibility is felt.

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): Social media is being flooded by videos, often shared by young people, glorifying dangerous driving on roads like Beachy Head Road in Eastbourne, where dangerous driving claimed the life of 17-year-old Oakley Meer. While dangerous driving is a crime, its glorification is not necessarily. What steps is the Ministry of Justice taking to crack down on that, working with Ofcom, to achieve justice for Oakley and his family, who are campaigning to make that road safer?

Jake Richards: The hon. Member is right to raise the issue, as death by dangerous driving is a horrific crime. In fact, straight after questions I will be meeting a victim of that very offence and next week I will meet the chair of the Sentencing Council. We can certainly look into how we can ensure that those who celebrate such offending are treated in the right way.

Croydon Crown Court: Backlogs

16. **Luke Taylor** (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): What steps he is taking to help tackle backlogs at Croydon Crown court. [901375]

The Minister for Courts and Legal Services (Sarah Sackman): In Croydon, as elsewhere, we are taking a three-pronged approach to reducing the Crown court waiting list. That involves increasing Crown court capacity, removing the financial constraint on sitting days, driving efficiency in our courts through schemes such as every Crown court having a case co-ordinator, and of course the structural reforms we will bring forward in the Courts and Tribunals Bill.

Luke Taylor: I visited Croydon Crown court recently and saw at first hand the impact that the delays are having on victims. Backlogs across London have increased by 122% over the last decade, which is having a particular impact on domestic abuse and sexual offence victims. Given that, will the Minister consider listening to Liberal Democrat calls to abandon plans to restrict trial by jury and instead create specialist sexual offence and domestic abuse courts so that those sensitive cases can be dealt with as quickly as possible?

Sarah Sackman: I speak as a fellow London MP and agree that the waiting lists in our London courts are appalling, because behind each and every one of those cases in the backlog there are victims, witnesses and defendants whose lives are entirely put on hold. That is why we have got to run hard at the problem, but getting the backlog down will involve a multifaceted approach. That is why the efficiencies we are making at courts, unlimited sitting days and the blitz courts initiatives we are piloting in London courts are so crucial. As I said, as somebody with a vested interest in seeing London waiting lists come down, I will be glad to work with the hon. Member to see what we can do on that.

Probation Early Release: Residential Properties

17. **Mr Andrew Snowden** (Fylde) (Con): What steps he has taken to ensure the equitable regional distribution of residential properties used by the Probation Service during the early release scheme. [901376]

The Minister for Prisons, Probation and Reducing Reoffending (Catherine McKinnell): The distribution of property used by the Probation Service's accommodation service is regularly reviewed to meet local need, operational requirements and community considerations, as we need to ensure that the properties are allocated appropriately and that there is sufficient capacity.

Mr Snowden: Properties such as rundown B&Bs have long been used as houses in multiple occupation for services such as probation, and councils in large metropolitan areas use them for adult and children's social services, effectively as a dumping ground. This is a cross-Government problem that has been going on over some time. Will the Minister assure me that through the early release scheme they will not add to problems such as those in Blackpool, where the concentration of HMOs used by multiple services creates transient populations?

Catherine McKinnell: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point, and that has to be a consideration. Clearly, the accommodation is demand-led. Ideally, offenders should be resettled back into their communities, where they have community ties and are able to build their life and find stable accommodation so they do not reoffend. That needs to be done on a local and case-by-case basis to make sure that it is appropriate within the setting.

Topical Questions

T1. [901384] **Callum Anderson** (Buckingham and Bletchley) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Norris): As I have mentioned, the Courts and Tribunals Bill will shortly come back to this House. The record and rising Crown court backlog we inherited has more than doubled from around 38,000 cases in 2019 to more than 80,000 today, denying victims justice for months or even years. To fix the system, as the Minister for Courts and Legal Services has said, we have invested in and continued to modernise the courts, and through the returning legislation, we have set in train much-needed structural reform. The Prime Minister has been clear that the answer to justice delayed cannot be justice diminished. We are looking again at the proposals, considering the evidence and listening to experts both inside and outside this House and, of course, to victims. I look forward to improving the Bill as it progresses so that it delivers for victims and continues to command the confidence of the British people.

Callum Anderson: Court backlogs in the south-east have trebled over the last decade, placing extreme pressure on our criminal justice system. A new justice quarter in Milton Keynes could provide extra capacity that would deliver faster access to justice for my constituents in the Buckingham and Bletchley constituency and a modern justice hub in one of the fastest-growing cities in the UK. Will my right hon. Friend grant me a meeting, alongside my Milton Keynes colleagues, to discuss how we can take that proposition forward?

Alex Norris: I recognise the ambition of local partners to develop a justice quarter in Milton Keynes. I know that engagement has gone on—indeed, the Courts Minister is going to meet MPs—and that the Milton Keynes MPs are hunting in a pack on this matter. I think I have already committed to a visit, which I am sure I will make shortly. In the meantime, the Minister looks forward to meeting my hon. Friend.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Justice Secretary.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): This summer, the Government held five different positions on early release in just six weeks. In seeking to exclude killers, rapists and paedophiles—something the Government previously claimed was impossible—the Justice Secretary has used secondary legislation. He says:

> "No further legislation is required in the short term…primary legislation will…be considered when Parliamentary time allows."

Will the Secretary of State guarantee that after relying on secondary legislation to change Labour's early release scheme, no prisoner will successfully challenge their exclusion in the courts?

Alex Norris: Yes, I give the hon. Gentleman the assurance that I have no concerns in that regard. The device we used was the commencement order. We chose to commence the provisions for some offences, but not

for others. The point I was making to him in writing was that for parliamentarians it is discomfiting to have things lying on the statute book that are not intended for use, so it is good practice to remove them. It would not be without precedent for many provisions to be on the statute book without being turned on; nevertheless, that is what I was referring to in respect of further legislation. I am confident in our legal position.

Nick Timothy: The Justice Secretary proposes to let another set of dangerous criminals out of prison as well. Every prisoner serving an imprisonment for public protection sentence has been assessed to be too dangerous for release or returned to prison because of their behaviour—last year, there were 426 of them. The Justice Secretary has reiterated his commitment today to ending IPP sentences by the end of this Parliament. Will he tell the House very clearly if he has decided that it is, indeed, safe to release every single one of them?

Alex Norris: I understand that the hon. Gentleman is a champion of individual liberty, and I understand him to be someone who believes in the equal application of liberty for individuals too. He must, surely, share my discomfort that there are individuals with tariffs of 18 months who have served 18 years on those sentences. This has been a matter of consensus for a long period of time; that is why his colleagues, when in government, discontinued those sentences. That is not to say that it is easy. In exactly the spirit in which he says that it must be done safely, my commitment is to do that with him and with colleagues across the House.

T2. [901385] **Josh Fenton-Glynn** (Calder Valley) (Lab): The Government have promised to halve violence against women and girls. In the context of the charging and conviction of perpetrators falling sharply over the past decade, which has affected the confidence that victims have in the justice system, what measures are the Government taking to ensure that perpetrators are brought to justice?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Davies-Jones): My hon. Friend is a stalwart campaigner on tackling violence against women and girls, and he will know that pursuing and punishing perpetrators is a key pillar of our strategy to halve it. We have a 10-year plan to meet this ambitious goal, and we are carefully monitoring the progress and will publish our one year update in the coming months. I want to reassure him that rape charge volumes have more than doubled since 2019, and that 5,206 rape cases were brought before the courts in 2025, compared with just 1,684 in 2019.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): The Liberal Democrats in the other place have secured an amendment to address the injustice of locked child trust funds for disabled children. The leader of the Liberal Democrats has experience of this issue with his own disabled son, and he has been a passionate campaigner for a change in the law for many years, working with other campaigners such as Andrew Turner. When the amendment comes back to this House, will the Labour Government support it?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Jake Richards): The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise this issue. Some 80,000 disabled people are unable to access funds that are legally theirs, and that is a disgrace. This is a complex issue, because mental capacity is a complex area of law and we must have due regard to the safeguarding mechanisms, but it cannot be beyond the wit of this place, or indeed of the Government, to overcome that obstacle. I met the leader of the Liberal Democrats last week to discuss this issue, and we are going to make progress in the coming weeks.

T3. [901387] **Alison Hume** (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): I recently met a high street law firm that has offices in Whitby, Scarborough and Filey. As a small company, it worries that the Government's proposals to take a proportion of the interest earned on client accounts could lead it to shed jobs and, potentially, premises. Will the Minister outline what assessment she has made of the impact of these proposals on the viability of high street solicitors?

The Minister for Courts and Legal Services (Sarah Sackman): We recognise the vital role that high street law firms play in serving communities such as Scarborough and Whitby, and I greatly valued the meeting that we had, in which my hon. Friend raised a number of concerns in relation to the consultation that is currently being undertaken, in which we are engaging extensively with stakeholders to ensure that the potential impacts of the proposals—which are targeted, by the way, at access to justice—and all views are carefully considered.

T4. [901388] **Dr Andrew Murrison** (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Prison officers do an increasingly tough job that most of us would not want to do or could not do, and the least they should be able to expect is to have their pensions and lump sums paid on time, yet thanks to the incompetence of MyCSP, Equiniti and now Capita, that is not happening. What is the Minister going to do about it?

The Minister for Prisons, Probation and Reducing Reoffending (Catherine McKinnell): I absolutely agree with the right hon. Gentleman, and I am working with Cabinet colleagues to make sure that prison officers who have worked hard all their lives in, as he says, incredibly challenging circumstances get the retirement they deserve.

T5. [901390] **Mrs Sharon Hodgson** (Washington and Gateshead South) (Lab): I visited Newcastle Crown court before the summer recess, where I learned that the backlog of cases had reached an unprecedented high. As we have heard, measures such as the blitz courts in Teesside, which were mentioned earlier, and specialist sexual offences and domestic abuse courts can help with this backlog. Will the Minister ensure that the Crown Prosecution Service and the police take ownership of the backlog with realistic reviews, and will she outline what measures she is taking to reduce the backlog in Newcastle?

Sarah Sackman: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that cross-criminal justice system working between the police, the Crown Prosecution Service, the judiciary and our Courts Service is vital. I know that steps have been taken in Newcastle. Some agility has been shown

on courtroom capacity and case progression, which is starting to bear results, and I encourage more of that right across our Crown court system.

T8. [901393] **Edward Morello** (West Dorset) (LD): Citizens Advice offices in Bridport and Dorchester are reporting huge demand for their services as a result of cuts to legal aid, especially in housing, welfare and immigration law. What steps is the Minister taking to restore sustainable legal aid provision and ensure that rural advice services are properly funded?

Sarah Sackman: Early legal advice is absolutely essential to access to justice, and that is why one of the first actions we took when I became the Minister responsible for legal aid was to give legal aid lawyers delivering immigration and housing advice the first pay lift they had received since 1996—an injection of £20 million. That was precisely because of the issues the hon. Gentleman raises.

T6. [901391] **Danny Beales** (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Lab): Vulnerable victims and witnesses of crime deserve full and proactive support from the Crown Prosecution Service and the police. Yet one of my constituents struggled to get clarity about what protections would be put in place should they give evidence in court, and also whether their victim personal statement was even properly considered during the sentencing stage of the trial. Will the Minister outline what is being done to better support victims, particularly vulnerable witnesses, to ensure they get proper advocacy in the court system?

Alex Davies-Jones: My hon. Friend is right to raise this issue. He is correct that special measures help vulnerable witnesses and victims to give evidence and reduce the stress in attending court. These include the use of screens, live video links and pre-recorded evidence. He will know that the Courts and Tribunals Bill, which is due to come back to this place soon, includes reforms to special measures, including clarifying that vulnerable witnesses and victims may use them when delivering their personal statements. We have also revised the victims code to ensure that this is taken into account.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): Ministry of Justice contractors are acting in a deeply inconsiderate manner, affecting my constituents in Edgcott, Grendon Underwood and the Springhill Road estate in the construction of a new mega-prison adjacent to HMP Grendon. I asked the Minister in writing over the summer if she would come and see with her own eyes those problems. She wrote back to me yesterday to say no. Why will she not, and will she reconsider?

Catherine McKinnell: The hon. Gentleman will know the importance of ensuring that we build the prison capacity that was so lacking under the previous Government. Officials continue to regularly meet the local council, elected councillors and parish councils to agree all traffic management and address challenges around the site. I am visiting as many prisons as I can get to, and I will certainly endeavour to visit HMP Grendon in due course.

T7. [901392] **Alistair Strathern** (Hitchin) (Lab): Failings in the family court system are having a heartbreaking impact on too many in my constituency. In one instance, a mother and her child have been waiting since last November for non-molestation papers to be served. In the meantime, they have had not one, not two, but eight failed court hearings where process failings have meant the papers could not be served, exposing them to risk and continued stress and strain over a very long period. Will the Minister meet them to discuss how we can put this right and fix the broken system?

Jake Richards: I am not just happy to meet them; I am keen to meet them. If we are going to improve the family justice system, we need to hear from those who have experienced it. We are rolling out child-focused courts, which will help, but we have to improve productivity more generally, and we are getting on with that.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Stamford) (Con): It was May when I stood here and asked the Minister to intervene in the situation of a paedophile moved to an open prison two years into his 10-year sentence. I was promised an answer then. I raised the matter again in July and again last week, and yet I have still had no answer. When will Sanders' survivors finally stopped being ignored by this Minister and get an answer on why this man has been put in an open prison?

Jake Richards: I understand the force of the hon. Lady's question. I will look into that immediately the moment this session ends, and I will meet her behind the Speaker's Chair to confirm how we do that.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): The Minister has been absolutely brilliant in helping to identify children with a parent in prison. Will he now agree to join me on 25 November for national Children with a Parent in Prison Day, where we will be able to hear from young people with lived experience about the important next steps, and getting them the support they need?

Jake Richards: Yes. My hon. Friend is a massive champion of this issue. There are over 200,000 children of prisoners across the country. I am working closely with the Department for Education to ensure that we can identify them. It was a manifesto commitment and we are making strides; we now need to go further. In response to her invitation, I would be happy to be there at the end of November.

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): Jimmy, the son of two of my Shipley constituents, was given an IPP sentence with a tariff of two and a half years in 2007. He remains in prison with no set release date, despite having passed his mental health tribunal. I strongly welcome the Prime Minister's recent announcement to review these unjust sentences, but can the Secretary of State assure me that prisoners with autism, like Jimmy, will get the support they need to start a new life?

Alex Norris: I am grateful for that question. It should discomfit colleagues that, in many cases, lots and lots of people across our communities have served long beyond their sentence and have not been permitted their release from prison, or have not been able to sustain a release from prison. Of course, there has been a lot of interest about what legislative approach we may take; we intend to publish legislation in due course. My hon. Friend is entirely right that we also have to ensure that those individuals who do leave have the best possible support that we can give them to ensure they can sustain that exit.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): A few weeks ago, I visited Margaret Green Animal Rescue in Wareham, where I was told that the rescue takes in animals when pet owners are prosecuted for animal welfare offences, but that those animals cannot be rehomed during the delay before prosecution. We should be dealing with the court backlog for many reasons, but for the sake of animal welfare, will the Minister look at how we can ensure those animals are rehomed and not delayed in these facilities?

Sarah Sackman: The hon. Member is right: a backlog is a backlog, irrespective of the offence. The victims in all these cases might be of a different nature— they might be animals, or they might be humans—but local authorities have a responsibility in this, and if she wishes to write to me, I look forward to giving her a full answer about what the Ministry of Justice is doing on this.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): Last week Appeal launched a campaign calling for Trew's law, which would review the cases of all imprisoned police officers, following the actions of a corrupt and racist British Transport police officer, Derek Ridgewell. Will the Minister agree to meet me and the campaigners to discuss this law?

Catherine McKinnell: Yes, I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend.

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): There has long been a proven link between people deliberately harming animals and then committing domestic abuse. The Links Group has researched and highlighted that link for 25 years and is having a special conference later this year to mark this. Will the Minister agree to meet me and the Links Group so that we can draw on its 25 years of expertise to help prevent avoidable harm to women, children and even animals?

Alex Davies-Jones: Absolutely, I would be delighted to meet the hon. Gentleman.

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): Despite the MOJ not collecting figures for the number of people in prison for joint enterprise, we know that there are hundreds, but the Law Commission has sadly confirmed that it will not look at that area of law under the homicide review. Does the Secretary of State intend to look at this most difficult area of law to reform it, and what will happen to those prisoners convicted of joint enterprise crimes under the early release scheme?

Alex Davies-Jones: My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the nature of joint enterprise. She will know that the Government have been looking carefully at this, and I would be happy to meet her and others to discuss it in more detail.

Mr Andrew Snowden (Fylde) (Con): I previously put it to the Prisons Minister in one of these sessions that anyone who fails a drug test on arrival in an open prison like Kirkham does not belong there and should be sent back to a more secure prison. The Minister said they were concerned but could not agree to that. Has the Department had any more thoughts on at least consequences for failing a drug test on arrival at an open prison?

Catherine McKinnell: I absolutely recognise the hon. Gentleman's concerns. We have a review ongoing into these issues within prisons, led by Amber Rudd, and we will continue to ensure that we have the deterrence, to stop drugs getting in, and that the right actions are taken when they do.

Nick Timothy: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In oral questions just now, the Justice Secretary stood there and said again that he wanted to work collaboratively, and he invited the House to scrutinise the Government's proposals on juries, but those are just words. This summer, as the Government constantly changed policy on early release, I wrote to him and the Prime Minister three times in July and twice in August, and received no reply until I got a short, dismissive reply last Thursday, by which point—*[Interruption.]* What are your guidelines? By that point, the policy had changed several times. Just now, the Secretary of State dismissed my question sarcastically, saying that he was not the correspondence secretary. That is not only disrespectful to the House; it is disrespectful to his correspondence secretary and may explain the delays—

Mr Speaker: Order. I think I have got the point. The hon. Gentleman is quite right; let us deal with the issues, and we will judge whether it was said sarcastically. Of course, he has never done such a thing himself—be careful about being in the greenhouse with a stone in hand!

The hon. Gentleman is quite right to raise the issue of correspondence. Whether it is the Prime Minister or anybody else, I expect that there should be a reply ASAP. The point has been made, those on the Front Bench have heard it, and I am sure that in future replies will be forthcoming. I will leave it at that for now.

Tourism: Overnight Visitor Levy

12.39 pm

Rebecca Paul (Reigate) (Con) *(Urgent Question):* To ask the Minister for Housing, Communities and Local Government if he will make a statement on the impact of the Government's proposed overnight visitor levy on the tourism and hospitality sectors in England.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jim McMahon): Last Thursday, the Government published their response to the consultation on the overnight visitor levy. The "rewiring the state" Cabinet announcement committed to

"delivering good growth in every part of the United Kingdom".

The visitor levy supports that ambition by empowering local leaders to deliver transformational investment, building the reputation of areas across England as world-leading destinations. Local leaders will be able to choose to introduce the levy as a way to raise money to support growth in their region, including in the visitor economy.

Visitor levies are common in Europe and the rest of the world. All over the G7, countries already have some form of tourism or overnight accommodation levy in place. The Government have decided that both foundation strategic authorities and mayoral strategic authorities will be empowered to raise a levy to support growth in their areas. This approach means that places without a mayor will also be able to invest in their region, making them better places for residents and businesses, as well as for the people who visit and enjoy those areas. The levy will be set as a percentage of accommodation costs. That means that low-cost stays remain low cost, while those who can afford it will be able to contribute more to the places that they visit.

Strategic authorities will be required to consult before introducing a visitor levy. This will inform their decision on whether to introduce the levy, how much it would cost and how revenues would then be spent. We expect that local leaders will be able to set out plans for how revenues will be invested by early 2028, and to introduce a levy before the end of this Parliament.

The Government have engaged with the tourism and hospitality sectors throughout the consultation, and we will continue to do so as the legislation is developed. The changes that the Labour Government are introducing will mean that more money will be invested in our high streets and public transport systems, and England's tourism hotspots will directly benefit from visitor footfall to improve the area for people living there too.

Rebecca Paul: Let us call this what it is—Labour's holiday tax. Although we knew it was coming, we never expected it to be uncapped. This Government have already hammered hospitality with higher employment costs and business rates. Almost 89,000 hospitality jobs have gone, and now what is Labour's answer? Hit them again. If we tax something, we get less of it, so if we tax tourism, we will get less tourism—it is not complicated. Fewer tourists mean fewer jobs. UKHospitality estimates that up to 33,000 jobs will go, along with over £2 billion wiped from the economy. These job losses will hit young people hardest, when they are already struggling to secure those all-important first roles.

We should not make the mistake of thinking that this is just a tax on foreign visitors. Tax Policy Associates estimates that trips by British tourists will generate 63% of the revenue from this levy. This is a tax on hard-working British families. A weekend away, a family holiday or a few nights by the seaside will all cost more. Every pound taken in this tax is a pound that families do not spend in the local pub, restaurant, café, shop or attraction. It is not just Brits on a staycation who will be impacted—it will be anyone staying overnight for any reason, such as visiting a sick relative, going away on business or travelling for medical treatment. Why on earth should those people be taxed simply for going about their daily lives? It is not fair.

The Prime Minister has repeatedly promised to give breathing space to households struggling with the cost of living, yet this tax does the exact opposite. British hospitality does not need another tax. Hard-working families do not need another tax. Young people looking for work do not need another tax. The Government must scrap the holiday tax.

Jim McMahon: Where do I start? We are not starting from year zero. The idea that the time under the previous Conservative Government was somehow "the good days" for our pubs, our hospitality industry and our tourism economy. Just think about the thousands of pubs that closed on their watch, and the bars, the restaurants and the live music venues that were left standing by themselves because they were ignored by the Government of the day. Well, now they have a Government on their side, which is why we have already introduced measures to give pubs and live music venues a 20% business rates cut, and we have targeted investment at our town centres and our high streets.

At the end of the day, it is not possible to go to a corner of England and not see somewhere that was impacted by all those years of austerity and the lack of investment that went alongside it. The question is: do we just accept that decline is inevitable and that the rot that the Conservatives allowed to set in across large parts of this country is a permanent fixture of our national character? Or do we decide that a different route can be taken, in which we invest in our economy and growth?

Importantly, we must see this measure through the prism of the new spirit of devolution, because there is no mandation—areas are not being made to introduce a levy. It is down to local leaders to make the right call for their area, to consult on those decisions and, importantly, to present back to their community where the investment will go. That will not just benefit people who are visiting. Investment in tourism hotspots in particular—in our great cities and countryside—and our rural economies will benefit the people who live there, because they will have better neighbourhood services provided. In the end, everyone will win.

Emma Lewell (South Shields) (Lab): South Shields tourism is largely made up of families from neighbouring regions who have saved hard all year round to spend a few days at the seaside, and even if the increase from this measure is marginal, they will not come. My constituents, family-run B&Bs, caravan parks, hotels and wider hospitality industry have been unequivocal with me that they do not want this measure. It is the wrong tax at the worst time. The extra burden on their

[Emma Lewell]

business will tip my local industry over. Devolution works only when it reflects what communities want, so will my hon. Friend confirm that MPs, who are voices and local leaders in their communities, will be at the forefront of these proposals?

Jim McMahon: I appreciate the question, and I recognise that my hon. Friend has been a champion over a long period of time for jobs in her community. I do not take her representations at all lightly, but there is not a part of the country where investment is not desperately needed to improve the visitor experience and the experience of people who live there. If we get this right—it will be down to our local mayors and local leaders to implement the investment—the truth is that everyone will benefit from the improved visitor experience.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Zöe Franklin (Guildford) (LD): Liberal Democrats have long championed our high streets, tourism and hospitality sectors. While we strongly support devolving economic powers, businesses are already struggling under mounting costs, a VAT rate higher than that of our international peers and the Government's national insurance contributions hike. Without support, an overnight levy risks looking less like genuine devolution and more like another short-term tax grab. If Ministers hand local mayors and foundation strategic authorities the power to introduce levies, they must bring forward vital sector relief—an emergency 5p VAT cut, relief from NICs and so forth—and must not reduce local government funding as a result. Can the Minister confirm when this House will see full details of the levy? Specifically, will Ministers implement a cap and sector support to protect local tourism and hospitality?

Jim McMahon: There is no expectation that councils will see a cut in the way that the hon. Lady explains—I am not quite sure what the rationale is for that. This is a new levy that local areas can choose to bring in, but it is down to local leaders in both our mayoral strategic authorities and our foundation strategic authorities, working with their local councils, to determine if they want to do that, how they want to approach it, if they want to carry out a proper consultation and to set out where the spending and investment will follow. That is not central Government telling places what to do. It is time that we stop pretending that England is somehow one place and that one size can fit all. Devolution, if it matters, must mean that local leaders can make the right choice for their area.

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): As a Cornish MP, I welcome this measure. It is important that local leaders, particularly those in non-mayoral areas, will get the opportunity to make this decision in consultation with businesses in their areas. Will the Minister confirm that emergency and temporary accommodation, as well as low-cost holiday options such as tents and caravans, could be excluded from the levy?

Jim McMahon: We will certainly set out more detail on the list of exemptions as the legislation is developed. Holiday hotspots such as Cornwall, the Lake district and many other parts of the country benefit hugely from tourism and support a huge range of jobs, but it is true to say that the impact of tourism comes with a cost, and it is right that that cost is met by a fair and proportionate levy on the people who benefit. With that, local areas will see the benefit and the investment that will follow.

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): I must admit that I am really puzzled by the Minister's statement. The visitor levy is not going to be ringfenced for tourism, so how does he know that it will go to its intended destination? The levy will not be capped. We normally tax things to stop people doing them, not to encourage them to do more of them. What evidence can he offer to demonstrate that this measure will bring growth, as he says? What work have the Government actually done to prepare for this measure? How will they know whether hospitality businesses—let us face it, they are already collapsing in their droves following decisions that the Government have already taken—will survive yet another tax being imposed on them?

Jim McMahon: As I have set out, it is for local areas to decide whether this is right for their place. Importantly, on whether this is a new tax, every tax is of course a tax, but the question is: where is the accountability and where does that money go? Our mayors and foundation authorities will be required to set out in consultation how much they want to raise and for that to be proportionate to their local area, and to do an impact assessment of the proposed levy and, importantly, set out where the money will be invested.

In relation to places without a levy, just think about who pays for the impact of tourism, who puts on the events and performances that bring people into the local area, and what is the wider experience? I went away to North Yorkshire in the summer, and my experience was not just the accommodation we stayed in, but visiting the local village and the local town, and driving around the local area. We need to think about the visitor experience, which is wider than just the accommodation where people stay, because it is the place where they go.

Jessica Toale (Bournemouth West) (Lab): I represent a seaside constituency in Bournemouth West, and the vast majority of my hoteliers are supportive of an overnight levy, in part because Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole council has axed its stand-alone tourism department, and because we get 10 million visitors every summer and no increase in resources to deal with that. In his opening remarks, the Minister mentioned that most other G7 and European nations have some sort of overnight levy, and people who have travelled in Europe are really used to that. Can he tell us what lessons the Government have taken from such experiences overseas?

Jim McMahon: I congratulate my hon. Friend on being the champion she is for Bournemouth. I would reflect on how the experience there, with the cuts to local government over many years, has impacted the services on the ground that would have been provided—both the neighbourhood's quality of place and the economic focus on tourism. We need to start rebuilding them, and this may be one way of doing so.

On the lessons learned, places may approach this with a flat rate, so no matter where people go, everyone will pay £5, or whatever. However, we believe that at its

core this has to be fair and proportionate, so we ask ourselves, "Why should somebody visiting a guest house in Blackpool pay a flat fee in the way somebody visiting the Ritz here in London would?" That is not fair or proportionate, but a percentage rate is.

Mr Speaker: Let us try Andrew Snowden, who represents a nearby constituency.

Mr Andrew Snowden (Fylde) (Con): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. First we had a jobs tax that reduced the number of jobs in the economy, then we had a schools tax that reduced the number of children in independent schools, and then we had a farm tax that reduced the number of family farms. Given that correlation, have the Minister and the Government learned anything from this socialist tax-addicted way in which they are governing the country, and will the tourism tax do anything other than reduce tourism?

Jim McMahon: Taxes were high at almost every turn under the previous Government, but people could not see the benefits of where that tax was going. People desperately want the country to turn a corner, with the investment we collectively make through the taxes we pay—at national level, regional level or local level through our councils—ultimately meaning that the places we care about are improved as a result, and this is one way to do that.

Chris Ward (Brighton Kemptown and Peacehaven) (Lab): It is absolutely right that local communities get to decide whether to introduce this levy—that is a key part of devolution—but I am concerned about the pressures already on the hospitality and tourism sector, which is a very important part of my Brighton Kemptown constituency. We have already seen the closure of two iconic LGBTQ bars—the Charles Street Tap and the R-Bar on the seafront—and, frankly, I am worried that more face closure. Will the Minister reassure me about the action the Government are taking to support the sector? Would he also consider taking a trip to the seaside with the Secretary of State to meet local businesses and people in the local hospitality sector and to hear what more this Government can do?

Jim McMahon: This is definitely the benefit of a wider ministerial brief: I do not just get to go to bus councils; I also get invited to seaside towns, which is good news.

On the pressure issues, I do not think anybody underestimates just how difficult it is for those in hospitality and leisure at the moment—these are not good times—but surely the way to grow is to invest in that experience so that more people want to come to our towns, our cities and our seaside communities. We believe that growing that base and creating demand through collectively improving such experiences will create a more sustainable visitor experience.

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): Tourists visiting Torbay already pay double the rate of VAT compared with those visiting Italy, France or Spain. The reality is that a cost of living crisis is just the wrong time to implement a tourism tax. Can the Minister please share what investigations he has made of the impact of the tourism tax, but also assure us that Airbnb operators will also pay their fair share?

Jim McMahon: The hon. Member raises two important points. On the first, the local impact assessment, this will be a devolved power, so it will be down to the mayoral or foundation authorities, as part of the consultation, to undertake an impact assessment at a local level, which will of course weigh up both the concerns and the benefits of this new levy. On the second point about levelling the playing field, which he makes very fairly, we could not have allowed a situation in which our guest houses and hotels are undercut by Airbnbs that are not included in the scheme. So this will apply right across the board, including to temporary or short-term lets, such as Airbnb and others.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): I welcome the visitor levy and the investment it will bring to London's visitor economy. Has the Minister been listening to London Councils, which wants 50% of the money raised in each borough to return to that borough, so that businesses know it is going back to the things that they want, such as cleaning Putney High Street?

Mr Speaker: Order. Can I just help Members who have been here a long time? Looking at the Minister is not how we do it; questions to the Minister must go through the Chair, because that is how we try to keep a balance. Some Members have only been here a few years, I know, but please try to make this work.

Jim McMahon: We have designed the policy to allow as much local flexibility as possible. That recognises that the approach in different places will require flexibility to take into account local circumstances. In practice, that means it will be for local areas, including London, to decide how they invest the money that comes through the system. However, our expectation is that there will be partnership and collaboration between local government and our regional mayors, where they exist, and with councils that are members of foundation authorities in other places.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): If the hoteliers of Bournemouth are gagging to pay this tax, I can assure the Minister that those in hospitality in the New Forest are not. The Minister said that everybody will be a winner, but how can he possibly know when he cannot tell us how much the tax will be or where it will be levied?

Jim McMahon: Because here I am setting out the principle and the framework. Instinctively, the framework is that if we grow and invest in greater footfall, in a better visitor experience and in putting on events and activities that draw people in, accommodation operators benefit from increased footfall and overnight stays. If we stay as we are, some areas will really struggle to see the investment to enable growth to take place, so some places in the country may say they want to go further with the levy, and I think it is right that the Government, as part of our devolution ambitions, allow local places to make that call for their areas.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I recognise the pressure that people in the hospitality sector in York are under, but they are very clear that the levies raised in York must stay in York—not move into wider North Yorkshire. Will the Minister ensure that the levy is hypothecated to the place where it is raised, so it can be

[Rachael Maskell]

invested in the tourism industry and ensure that wider services are there to support hospitality and tourism, as opposed to in other locations?

Jim McMahon: It will entirely depend on how local leaders decide to design the scheme, which will require conversations at a local level and, I would say, give and take. The only reflection I would make—this is a personal view, because another area may approach it very differently—is that when we think about the tourism economy in Greater Manchester, where I am from, everyone thinks about how successful the city centre of Manchester is or about the rolling hills of Saddleworth and our villages and how beautiful the Pennine belt is. A visitor will pass Oldham in going to those two areas, and I think we should ask what we are doing to invest in the whole, so the whole experience right across our region sees the benefits. Again, however, these are local decisions.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): Great news, Mr Speaker: the Reform Mayors of Hull and East Yorkshire and of Greater Lincolnshire have confirmed that there will be no dreadful tourist tax in their respective areas. Therefore, holidaymakers should come to these great areas to save money. Given that many areas will refuse to impose this ludicrous tax, can the Minister guarantee that he and the Government will not be tempted to impose a tourist tax nationally?

Jim McMahon: In a way, the hon. Gentleman embraces devolution. It is for local leaders to make the call for their areas and to present their record to the public, and it works both ways. If mayors and foundation authorities want to introduce the levy, they will need to make the case for it, and the success of that will need to be presented to the public when they come to vote. That is direct accountability. Equally, if authorities decide not to introduce the levy but tourism stagnates and they are unable to improve the visitor experience, they will be accountable. It works both ways.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): Oxford is a great place to visit, and I hope that many Members will enjoy coming to my great city. Many tourists agree with me, and £1 in every £6 spent in the city centre is spent by a visitor. However, many local residents and businesses, while they welcome tourism, do recognise that it causes additional costs. They have told me that they want to see a levy, which would improve the local environment for tourists and local people. Will the Minister move ahead and persuade Oxfordshire county council to back a mayoral strategic authority, so that we can get on with it?

Jim McMahon: Our devolution programme is ambitious, and we want to see devolution do two things: widen across the country—I welcome my right hon. Friend's championing of a mayor for her region—and deepen, to make sure that when mayors are in place, they have the tools and levers to get the job done. We are absolutely up for having local conversations to progress devolution.

Charlie Dewhirst (Bridlington and The Wolds) (Con): As you are well aware, Mr Speaker, 5 million people visit the beautiful East Yorkshire coastline every year, so any tourism tax would have a devastating effect on the local economy. The Minister says that he has developed a framework and that there is more work to do. Where there are larger mayoral areas—for example, my area of Hull and East Yorkshire—can he guarantee that any money raised in towns such as Bridlington or Hornsea will be spent there, rather than in a larger conurbation such as the city of Hull, and will he ensure that is the national framework for any mayor who wishes to introduce a tourist tax?

Jim McMahon: It sounds like there is no intention to introduce an overnight visitor levy in that area for the foreseeable future. *[Interruption.]* Well, who knows? There may well be a change of heart in the future.

In the spirit of devolution, I do not think it is right for a Government to impose terms and conditions in a way that prevents local authorities from doing what they instinctively believe is right for their area. But equally, they will have to present their plans through the consultation, they will have to do the impact assessment, and they will need to get local agreement. Surely the best democratic accountability framework is holding elections, and the thing about mayors is that they are directly elected and accountable to the voting public.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): Meur ras, Mr Speaker. As a Cornish MP, I am incredibly proud that this Government were elected on a platform of devolution. That means trusting the decisions of local authorities to raise an overnight levy or not. I appreciate that the Opposition parties do not trust their local authorities, but no one is forcing local authorities to raise the levy. Does the Minister agree that fiscal devolution is an essential aspect of moving powers and funding out of this place and directly into the hands of local people?

Jim McMahon: I think those are really important points. My hon. Friend is a fantastic champion for Cornwall and its economy, and he also recognises that the local partnerships that are developing are marshalling around devolution in quite an interesting way. Because of the representations that he and others have made, we have included foundation strategic authorities, so a mayor is not needed to introduce the levy. I think the wider growing-out of fiscal devolution is really exciting. We cannot have devolution if local authorities do not have the resources to get things done in their areas. Business rates retention, income tax retention and the overnight visitor levy are the first steps in that package of fiscal devolution that we have been waiting quite a long time for.

Manuela Perteghella (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD): Stratford-upon-Avon is one of the country's most important visitor destinations. It attracts millions of visitors each year, supporting local businesses, theatres, heritage attractions and jobs across my constituency. The all-party parliamentary group for hospitality and tourism, of which I am a member, heard evidence that a 5% visitor levy could reduce tourism spending and employment. Will the Minister commit to ensuring that any future levy is subject to meaningful consultation with the sector and local residents, and to the transparent ringfencing of revenues for investment in our local area?

Jim McMahon: The hon. Member makes a really important point. The APPG has spent time diligently going through the arguments for and against the levy,

and examining what the benefits might be. Many local authorities see the levy as a big prize, because they will be able to invest back into the local economy. I would be pleased to receive any evidence that has been gathered through the APPG.

Alison Hume (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): I welcome this step towards devolution, but York and North Yorkshire is a huge mayoral authority. In order for my constituents to feel the difference, we must ensure that money generated in Scarborough and Whitby is spent locally, not in the city of York. Will the Minister consider what he can do to ensure that locally generated revenue benefits the communities that produce it?

Jim McMahon: Mr Speaker, you know full well that it takes a brave Lancashire soul to interfere in Yorkshire politics, but surely it is in the spirit of devolution that it will be for local areas to decide. As I said, I spent the summer near Richmond, in north Yorkshire, and had a fantastic experience. Thinking about access to public transport and the wider visitor experience, there is no part of the country that would not benefit from more investment.

Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): I think the Government's plans for a tourist tax will be terrible for the visitor economy, terrible for jobs and terrible for spend on the high street. The Minister thinks it will be great. We can clear this up if the Minister will include in his visitor economy growth strategy a full analysis of his plans and publish it before he brings in his detrimental tourist tax.

Jim McMahon: The hon. Gentleman seems to be getting ahead of the review that he has just asked for and predetermining that the levy is somehow not a positive measure. Because this is a framework and is about devolved powers, clearly the impact assessment has to be done in areas where the levy has been introduced. Until we know where it has been introduced, we cannot do a national assessment of the impact.

Chris Murray (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): The Edinburgh festival fringe in my constituency is a world-class tourist attraction—I know that the House understands this, because I bumped into about half of my fellow Members in August. Edinburgh is the third biggest ticketed event in the world after the FIFA world cup and the Olympics. This summer, Edinburgh became the first place in the UK to implement a city-wide visitor levy of 5%, which will raise £50 million to invest in the local economy, benefiting tourists and locals. Despite its implementation, we saw ticket sales increase by 8% this year. It is still a work in progress, but will the Minister meet me and officials from Edinburgh to understand our learning from the visitor levy? We are happy to invite any sceptics as well.

Jim McMahon: I would be pleased to do that. In a sense, what my hon. Friend says stands in stark contrast to what we have heard from the Opposition. In Manchester, where there is a voluntary scheme through the business improvement district, there is agreement that if we have money to invest in the visitor experience and in putting on events that draw in even greater footfall, everyone benefits in the end. I would be very happy to receive the evidence base that he talks about.

Adam Dance (Yeovil) (LD): Those working in hospitality across Yeovil have told me that a tourism tax will impact jobs, growth and our high streets. We want to encourage tourism in our area, not decrease it. What steps is the Minister taking to strengthen support for rural hospitality, and will he meet me and representatives of the sector to talk about how we can boost tourism in rural Somerset? We need a commitment that local residents and businesses will be consulted before any decision is made.

Jim McMahon: The hon. Gentleman says that this measure will impact on jobs, growth and high streets. We believe it will do so in a positive way, because if we create more demand by increasing footfall through better investment and an improved visitor experience, that will create more jobs and more growth. If we have money to invest in our places, particularly our town centres and high streets, that will be better not just for visitors but for the people who live there. This policy cannot be seen in isolation; think about the millions of pounds that has been spent on Pride in Place and our future high streets fund, and there is more investment to come. We are reinvesting back into many parts of the country that have been neglected.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): You are not in your usual place, Chris Vince, but I can still see you.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I was going to start by making a joke about always being picked last, Madam Deputy Speaker, but you have ruined it by picking me early on—thank you for that. I will try it anyway.

I am used to getting picked last in this place, but I was picked first when the new Prime Minister visited Harlow and my local pub. There, he had the opportunity to talk to Mr McMullen, the head of McMullen's breweries, who said that this Government are doing more to support the pub trade than the previous one did. To change the subject, though, may I ask the Minister about how this tourist levy has been put in place in other G7 countries—where it has been very successful—and what he has learned from other countries?

Jim McMahon: As Members will know from their summer holidays in America, Europe or almost anywhere else in the world, some form of local sales tax or visitor overnight accommodation levy is generally accepted as part and parcel of going away. The difference here, I suppose, is that we did not believe that a flat rate would be fair or proportionate, for the reasons I have set out. A visitor levy has to be in line with the overnight rate that people are paying, to ensure low-cost family accommodation remains as such.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. We have two further urgent questions, a statement and lots of business, so let us try to keep questions and answers short.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): If the New Forest and the Waterside were forced into a unitary authority dominated by Southampton and Eastleigh,

[Sir Julian Lewis]

what chance would there be of local authorities looking after the interests of rural areas?

Jim McMahon: In the right hon. Gentleman's case, this will be led by the mayoral strategic authority. It will be for that authority to do the consultations, carry out the impact assessment and, importantly, decide on the investment plan.

Deirdre Costigan (Ealing Southall) (Lab): Southall Broadway attracts wedding shoppers from across the globe, so local businesses welcome the overnight visitor levy as a great opportunity to get investment in the town centre. However, unlike other mayoral areas, London is not a combined authority. What can the Minister do to ensure that is reflected in the design of the levy in London, so that the mayor and London boroughs can jointly shape how it operates, and places such as Southall do not lose out because they are in London?

Jim McMahon: We accept that the London devolution settlement is different from the settlement elsewhere in England, because of the relationship between the mayor with executive powers and the Greater London Authority as a directly elected body. However, there is an expectation that all partners—including local authorities, the GLA and the mayor—will work together in partnership on this and other measures.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): Nine years ago, when I was the tourism Minister, I resisted the English holiday tax. What concerns me now for Salisbury—where people like Brian Currie are investing millions of pounds in the Cathedral hotel—is the impact that tax will have on domestic tourists. People in this country who cannot afford to go abroad will now be burdened with additional costs to have a few days away in England. Has the Minister understood the distribution of the burden of this tax and the impact it will have on people in this country?

Jim McMahon: The right hon. Member is making the case for the importance of the percentage rate approach. It is fair to say that large parts of our tourism economy provide a low-cost but good-quality family experience, and with a percentage rate those businesses will pay proportionately less than hotels in the capital, which is right and proper. It will also be a requirement that all areas carry out an impact assessment to understand the impact on their local economies and present where the investment will go afterwards.

Noah Law (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): Any devolution of powers, investment or fiscal policy down to Cornwall is welcome. That is why I am pleased our Government are progressing to give us the power to raise a visitor levy, whether or not Cornwall council chooses to utilise it. As the Minister might expect, however, from a Member who represents an area with a significant visitor economy, my expectation is that that money should be invested not only well but to support the common goods on which businesses in that sector and the communities they operate in rely. Can the Minister assure me that the manner in which the levy will be raised will be flexible, so that local leaders can use it in a way that is appropriate to the area and the money does not recycle back into Cornwall council's pot?

Jim McMahon: I think that is the key. Some of the tensions in the Chamber are the result of parliamentarians wanting to know the full detail as it will apply across the country, but that is not devolution. Devolution means allowing local flexibility and allowing local leaders to make choices in the way that my hon. Friend has set out.

Freddie van Mierlo (Henley and Thame) (LD): Several times, the Minister has referenced other European countries having a tourist tax, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Steve Darling) highlighted, those countries have much lower tax rates for hospitality overall. Will the Minister commit to reducing VAT on hospitality? Secondly, on the tourist tax, will he clarify whether the levy will be listed separately to the price of the room, so that those who use those facilities have clarity and transparency?

Jim McMahon: We are still working through the detail of the collection and reporting processes. Part of that consideration will be the presentation on bills, although let us not forget the 20% business rates support we are introducing for pubs and live music venues, which is the first step in supporting hospitality in the round.

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): I recently had the pleasure of visiting the Beaudesert outdoor activity centre in Cannock Wood, which welcomes 50,000 young people a year—including scouts, guides and school groups—and gives them memories to last a lifetime. It is a charity; it keeps charges low, and it worries about anything that could make its offer cost-prohibitive to cash-strapped groups. Given this Government's commitment to expanding life chances and experiences for young people, will the Minister consider exempting groups of under-18s, to ensure that those valuable experiences do not become less affordable for them?

Jim McMahon: My hon. Friend raises a fair point, and one that I will take away.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): I am sure that many of my constituents considering a UK break will look to Cambridgeshire, where the always fiscally sound Conservative mayor Paul Bristow has made it clear that now is not the time for such a tax. However, hospitality businesses across the rest of the country will be frightened by this measure—we already have two pubs closing a day, and businesses are struggling to get by under this Government's tax burden. How low does tourism in this country have to dip, or how many businesses have to go bust, before the Treasury tells this Minister that this tourist levy must go?

Jim McMahon: In the spirit of devolution, if a mayor believes that not introducing a visitor levy is the right decision for their area, the Government will support that. To be clear, though, the last Conservative Government was not a good period for our pubs and hospitality businesses—pubs in our communities, town centres and city centres closed at a rate of knots. We are trying to say that that decline is not inevitable, and that Government working in partnership with our regions and councils can begin to turn that around.

Danny Beales (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Lab): Every year, millions of people travel through Hillingdon, to visit the country or the city of London or go to Heathrow, and stay at hotels near the airport. That creates real costs for local communities—policing, street cleaning and transport impacts—and addressing those threats to the tourist economy requires funding. As such, I support this measure, but can the Minister assure me that those issues that are often locally driven and funded will also get support in a mayoral-led system?

Jim McMahon: It will be for local areas to determine how they frame both the levy and the investment. In the case of London, the mayor will be working with the GLA. There is an expectation that councils will be collaborated with and that there will be some agreement on how that might work in practice, but as I say, it is for local areas to work through that detail.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): We now have a Minister for euphemism. Let us be clear: this is not a visitor levy, but a tax on tourism. It is a tax on the staycation, a tax on hospitality, a tax on the family holiday, a tax on hospitality jobs, a tax on mobility, and—the worst sin of all—a tax on Shropshire. Shropshire tourism rejects this tax whenever it might come, directly or indirectly. Is this not another example of this Government being addicted to raising taxes?

Jim McMahon: The only things we are determined to do are to ensure that devolution means something—that local leaders must be given the tools they need to do the job at a local level—and not to accept that the decline of our towns, cities and rural communities is inevitable after our experience under the previous Government. We think there is a different way.

Jonathan Davies (Mid Derbyshire) (Lab): Many people visit Derbyshire because it has beautiful scenery and a fascinating history, but those visitors do place a strain on our infrastructure, which is why I think it is reasonable that we explore whether we continue to ask local people to foot the bill for that. However, I recently visited Drum Hill scout camp in my constituency, which welcomes many thousands of young people from quite far afield to learn fantastic life skills, and I have also engaged with organisations that provide respite holidays for disabled people. I know that local leaders can decide how to implement the legislation locally, but can we put an exception for those kinds of groups on the face of the Bill?

Jim McMahon: As I said in response to a similar question, my hon. Friend makes a fair point about that type of accommodation, and I reflect on the work of Claire Ward as the Mayor of the East Midlands. There is a lot of focus now on creating good jobs, and for that to be in a spirit of devolution, with mayors wanting more control of what happens in their areas. This measure, alongside business rate retention and income tax retention, is beginning to address that balance.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): In Cambridgeshire, the Conservative Mayor Paul Bristow, decided not to implement this tourism tax. That is incredibly important, because we have recently adopted the local visitor economy partnership as we seek to make gains from the creation of Universal Studios just down the road. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Blake Stephenson) is looking to bring in an LVEP in Bedfordshire, too. Why does the Minister think that a tax like this would benefit somewhere like Cambridge, when we clearly do not think that it will? What else is he doing to support communities such as mine in Huntingdon, where we are looking to build a visitor economy to take advantage of the opportunities that Universal Studios can bring?

Jim McMahon: This Government have given support to Universal Studios, because of the economic benefit that will bring. It will also be a nice thing for visitors from across the country to be able to go there and enjoy that. It will have a wider impact on the local economy that will benefit hospitality, leisure and accommodation providers. In response to the point that the hon. Gentleman makes about place-based investment, this Government have an ambition to ensure that every town centre and every high street realises its full potential. That needs investment, too, and he will see that not just in his place, but right across the country.

Mrs Elsie Blundell (Heywood and Middleton North) (Lab): As the proud Member of Parliament for Heywood and Middleton North in Greater Manchester, I, too, want to see the prosperity of the centre flow out into towns like mine, which are just as deserving of economic development and cultural regeneration. Does the Minister agree that extending further revenue-raising powers to our mayors will accelerate the regeneration that we need to see in our constituencies, just as much as in the city centre?

Jim McMahon: My hon. Friend is a fantastic champion for her place, and she also recognises that within our city regions, as much as everywhere else, every community has a role to play. She will know the work done by the fantastic Middleton Arena. With more investment and more footfall, all our places—whether Middleton, Oldham or Greater Manchester more widely—can do even more.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): As vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for hospitality and tourism, I have sat through several evidence sessions on this visitor levy, and I have yet to hear any operator in the sector say that they support it, so I do not understand to whom the Minister has been talking. A caravan park operator said that if numbers go down in the off-season, they will only be able to be open in the high season, which has a knock-on effect on jobs, the local pub and the local café. It has a ripple effect across the local economy. The Minister talks about growth, and we need growth in the sector, because young people primarily are employed in hospitality. Such jobs are vital for young people. Can he tell me in what world he sees the tourism and hospitality industry growing under this visitor levy?

Jim McMahon: For the reasons I have stated many times before, if we invest in and grow our tourism and hospitality economy, that will generate more footfall, people will enjoy their stay more, and that will create more jobs, including for young people.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Stamford) (Con): Whether it is parents requiring a hotel stay while their four-month-old daughter has neurosurgery, or a new mother requiring a hotel stay to recover from a pulmonary embolism, in

[Alicia Kearns]

both those cases a tax would be incurred for a stay they wish they did not have to do. Those are not hypothetical examples; I was both. Will the Minister please mandate from the Dispatch Box that anyone seeking medical treatment for themselves or their children—sometimes that can be months at a time at Great Ormond Street—will not have such a tax imposed on them and their families?

Jim McMahon: I can certainly commit to look into it and to respond to the hon. Member in writing.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): Businesses in Devon have told me of their concern about this proposed visitor levy, including Littlecourt Cottages in Sidmouth. They point out that the tourist footfall might decrease, not just for the cottages, but for the restaurants, the attractions and the shops in the local area. This tax has been dreamed up on the basis of what it will do for cities that see a higher proportion of wealthy overseas visitors, has it not?

Jim McMahon: Of course it has not. First, devolution will be rolled out across the whole country, and significant rural areas are already covered by mayoral strategic authorities. That roll-out will include foundation strategic authorities, which covers places such as Cornwall. As part of the next stage of devolution, we are seeing a grow-out across the south of England and the east of England that will see more coverage. Fundamentally, it is for local leaders and local mayors to get together and work out what is right for their area.

Matt Vickers (Stockton West) (Con): At the weekend, I had the pleasure of joining Cleveland scouts and seeing at first hand the fantastic work that scouting does to give young people confidence, practical skills, friendships and opportunities they might not otherwise have. Can the Minister reassure those young people and their families that this Government are not seriously proposing to tax a scout for pitching a tent? Can he confirm that scout camps and other charitable youth residentials will be exempt from his holiday tax?

Jim McMahon: That question is in line with a number of other questions that have been asked about youth experience accommodation. I have committed to go away and look at that.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Many of my constituents in Strangford and people across Northern Ireland travel to the United Kingdom for a home-based holiday. The weather is almost as good as it is in the Mediterranean. They pay for their flights or they take their vehicles on the ferry, already paying a high fee to support tourism in the United Kingdom. Why should my constituents—British constituents—be penalised twice for supporting and buying into a British holiday? What steps will the Minister take to ensure that those in Northern Ireland are not discouraged from contributing to having a home-based holiday in England?

Jim McMahon: Everybody will pay the levy, and they will benefit from the improved experience, not only in the immediate area, but in the types of events and activities that might draw in people. Where local leaders decide that the levy is right for their places, we believe that people will enjoy the wider benefits.

Saudi East-West Oil Pipeline

1.26 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD) *(Urgent Question)*: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero if she will make a statement on the implications of the closure of the Saudi east-west oil pipeline for UK energy security, fuel prices and global oil supply, and on the steps the Government are taking in response.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Martin McCluskey): First, the United Kingdom strongly condemns the Houthis' decision to resume conflict in Yemen and their recent attacks on Saudi Arabia, including the targeting of civilian and energy infrastructure. We offer our condolences to those injured and affected and stand with Saudi Arabia, the internationally recognised Government of Yemen and our partners in the region.

My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has spoken with his Saudi counterpart, as has the national security adviser. We are closely monitoring the situation as part of our overall response to the situation in the middle east and disruption to the strait of Hormuz. Saudi authorities confirmed over the weekend that the east-west oil pipeline is temporarily closed following an attack on 11 September. The Saudi Government have not yet provided further information on the duration of the closure.

The pipeline enables Saudi crude oil to bypass the strait of Hormuz. Since the start of the middle east conflict, it has been used to reroute a significant share of exports. This temporary pause comes at a time of rising prices, and I know that many in this House and the public will be worried about the potential impacts. Fuel supplies to the UK have remained resilient since the start of the conflict. As people across the country would expect, the Government will mitigate where possible the potential impacts on our economy and our domestic security. We will continue to work closely with industry and the devolved Governments on detailed contingency planning for all events. We are working tirelessly with our international partners to find a permanent solution to the conflict and to minimise the knock-on impact on households. We will keep looking at what more we can do to insulate families from the effect of rising energy bills.

Tim Farron: I thank the Minister for his reply. Saudi's closure of the 1,200 km east-west pipeline is a massive blow. The pipeline allowed Saudi Arabia to export millions of barrels of crude a day, and it has been the key alternative route to the strait of Hormuz since Donald Trump's war led to its regular closure. The closure has predictably led to further increases in already high oil prices, which stand at $106 a barrel just today. We have reports that Saudi Arabia could exhaust crude available for export within days unless that pipeline resumes operation. The consequences are huge for my constituents and everybody else's. We are already paying through the nose for fuel as a result of the war in Iran, and they are now being hit by even higher prices because of this closure. Rural communities relying on heating oil are especially vulnerable to shortages and price hikes. The impact on farmers and food production could do further damage to the UK's food security. The tragic reality is that while the UK will struggle if the pipeline is not reopened, this could mean starvation for millions on the African continent.

The latest crisis puts a further spotlight on our failure as a country to be energy secure. Even those few people who are not yet convinced that climate change is real and needs tackling surely now understand that energy security really matters. Neither Houthi rebels nor Putin nor Iran nor Trump can turn off our waves, wind, sunshine or nuclear industry. It is time for siren voices to stop whining about wokery and start focusing on security. So I ask the Minister, what oil reserves does the United Kingdom have? Will the Government accelerate domestic energy generation? Will they implement a 10p temporary fuel duty cut, and cuts in bus and rail fares, so that people in Cumbria and across the country are not plunged into further hardship as a result of this crisis? What plans does the Minister have to accelerate the warm homes plan, which, sadly, has insulated only 0.3% of the expected homes this year—especially in communities such as mine, where a quarter of the housing stock was built before 1900 and is in need of more bespoke solutions? What will he do to introduce an energy price cap for heating oil, and what extra work is he doing with our allies in the middle east and NATO to ensure that the pipeline reopens as soon as possible?

Martin McCluskey: I will endeavour to answer all the hon. Gentleman's questions, but if there are any that I do not answer, I will follow up on them in writing.

Let me begin with the discussions that the Government have been having with the Saudi authorities. The Foreign Secretary spoke to the Saudi Foreign Minister on Sunday, and we will keep talking to the Saudi Arabian authorities to understand exactly what the impact of this might be and what the Saudi Arabian Government's plans are. As the hon. Gentleman will know, we have a diverse and resilient supply of energy in this country, and we continue to stand by that. We are not, at this moment, concerned about the impact on supply for the UK.

The hon. Gentleman asked about heating oil. I think he will know, because we have had conversations about this, that the Government have already provided £53 million for local authorities to assist the people who were particularly hard hit in March, when the cost of heating oil increased significantly. As we go into autumn and the winter, we will, of course, look at what further support might be necessary, but in some local authority areas, the money is not yet anywhere near exhausted, and I encourage local authorities to use the funding that is available to them to support those using heating oil.

The hon. Gentleman made an important point about our reliance on foreign sources of oil and gas. Opposition Members fail to grasp the fact—although they used to grasp it when they were in government—that we need to move away as quickly as possible from the rollercoaster of fossil fuels, and to produce energy in this country, so that we can control the security and the supply.

The hon. Gentleman will know that we have committed £15 billion to the warm homes plan, and have been pushing for more of that funding to reach communities. We are already delivering that through the warm homes local grant and the warm homes social housing fund,

[Martin McCluskey]

and in the coming weeks we will introducing more schemes, enabling people throughout the country to take advantage of that plan.

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): May I echo the comments of the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) about heating oil, and express my concern for rural communities in my constituency? Does this not demonstrate the urgency of—as the Minister said—moving away from unstable oil from unstable parts of the world, and the need to double down on domestic production of renewables, not just to generate energy, but to increase our renewables production capacity? Will the Minister join me on a visit to Humshaugh Net Zero to see community energy projects in my constituency that already have widespread public support and are doing more to generate energy in Northumberland?

Martin McCluskey: I should be happy to join my hon. Friend on a visit to his constituency in the future. He is right to say that we need to double down on clean power. We need to ensure that we have our own renewable sources of energy, and can control both the price and the supply. This event has shown us once again why that is the right course to pursue for the country's energy security and for our national security.

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

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): The ongoing events in the middle east have rightly brought the state of Britain's energy security back to the forefront. We are witnessing growing geopolitical instability, and it is having, and will continue to have, a direct impact on our energy security, supplies and, of course, bills. The attack on the Saudi east-west pipeline will exacerbate this; 4% of global oil supply flows through that pipeline, which is not insignificant.

Saudi Arabia is a key strategic friend and ally of this country. Our relationship is integral to the security of the region and our national interest. What discussions has the Minister, or the Secretary of State for Energy and Net Zero, had with their Saudi counterparts about security of supply, and have the UK Government offered any support in that regard? We do not know when the pipeline will once again be operational, and as we have already heard, Saudi oil stocks for export could be depleted within days. With the safety of navigation through the strait of Hormuz remaining uncertain, the continued squeeze on energy supplies will only become tighter. Brent crude reached $106 a barrel this morning, and that increase shows no sign of slowing.

It is exactly because of this situation that I cannot understand the Government's actions. Ironically, today should have been the day on which the Government announced that they were finally going to approve the Jackdaw gasfield, but they bottled it and put it on ice, because they are too scared of Zack Polanski and the Green party in the Holborn and St Pancras by-election. We are talking today about national security, and the Government are putting party before country. Great Britain has become increasingly and dangerously over-reliant on supplies of oil from overseas. We could be reducing some of that reliance right now by drilling and making use of our own resources, be it oil from Rosebank or gas from Jackdaw.

This is a moment of great geopolitical uncertainty. It is a moment when all countries around the world are seeking to ensure and shore up their energy supplies. No other Government of any other nation would make such a brazenly craven decision to put chasing votes in a by-election ahead of their duty to defend their national and energy security. Given the seriousness of this moment—given the threats to our energy and, indeed, to our national security—will the Government change course, and change their position on the North sea?

Martin McCluskey: Both the Foreign Secretary and the National Security Adviser have spoken to the Saudi Foreign Minister. The UK Government and the Government in Saudi Arabia will continue to engage on this issue, and officials across Government are collaborating on it. As for Jackdaw and Rosebank, the hon. Member would not expect me to comment on a quasi-judicial process. He stands at that Dispatch Box and throws the responsibility for this to the Government. We will make a decision on those consents in due course, but we are in this mess because the last Government did not conduct the process appropriately in the first instance, and we were then subject to a judicial review. We will not rush this process; we will do things properly in order to ensure the best outcome for people across the country, including workers in the North sea. The hon. Gentleman knows that oil and gas will be part of our energy mix for years to come. I have said this to him before from the Dispatch Box, and I will say it again: stop talking down our North sea oil and gas industry.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): We live in an interconnected world, and the events in Saudi Arabia have a direct impact on my constituents in Harlow, who are concerned about the rising price of their energy bills. What is the Minister doing to ensure that we are not reliant on international fossil fuels? We have to accept that green energy is part of the solution. May I also ask the Minister to do as much as much as he can to help residents in my constituency of Harlow to bring their bills down?

Martin McCluskey: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his continued advocacy for his constituents in Harlow. He will know that we have a clean power mission, and the purpose of that mission is to ensure that we have renewable sources of generation, so that we control the supply and the price of energy. Obviously, we are looking into what support might be on offer to my hon. Friend's constituents to help them with their energy bills over the winter, but the Prime Minister, in his first week, announced the removal of VAT from electricity bills from October. That, I think, will be welcome to my hon. Friend's constituents, along with the £150 reduction in energy costs that was announced in the last Budget.

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

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) is a lovely man, but I just cannot follow his logic. He says that the solution is to pursue green energy, which is fair enough in the long term, and in the same breath—in the very next sentence—he asks what oil reserves we have. Surely it is not a zero sum game. It will be decades before we rely entirely on green energy. I am not asking the Minister to comment on Jackdaw and Rosebank

and all that, but does he accept that we must pursue oil drilling in the North sea to become self-reliant, and to get ourselves out of this crisis?

Martin McCluskey: I thank the Father of the House for his question. We are still extracting oil and gas from the North sea. We have a supply coming from the North sea every day. We have that energy mix, and oil and gas will continue to play a part in our energy mix for years to come. On that point and on the mix, I agree with the Father of the House, but we cannot lose sight of the fact that the North sea is a declining basin and has been for a very long time. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie) is chuntering from a sedentary position. It was under his Government that we saw the number of people working in the North sea decline. We know it is a declining basin, and that we have to prepare for the transition. That is what any responsible Government would do, and that is why we are investing so much in renewables across the country.

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): Given the ongoing risk to our energy security illustrated by this latest incident, should the Government prioritise EN-6 sites, such as Oldbury in my constituency, supplying the grid, rather than private wire arrangements that do not support local industry?

Martin McCluskey: The choice of sites is a national decision, involving the National Energy System Operator and Ofgem, in which we have a limited role. It is important that we have a diverse energy mix across the country, including renewables, so that we in this country have the most secure and resilient supply of energy.

Douglas Lumsden (Aberdeen South) (Con): The parties that are talking down the North sea oil and gas workers are the Labour Government here and the SNP Government in Holyrood. The Conservative party is standing up for the North sea oil and gas workers. When I quizzed the Prime Minister on approving Jackdaw and Rosebank, he said that he would "take a pragmatic approach", and that we would see that in action soon, but we now hear that there are further delays because the Labour party wants to save face in a central London by-election. At a time when our energy security is at risk, will the Government put the national interest above the interests of the Labour party and approve Jackdaw and Rosebank as a matter of urgency?

Martin McCluskey: Let me take that in two parts. First, this is obviously a decision that has to be taken carefully. The Secretary of State has to a make an assessment and a judgment. The hon. Member will know that the evidence has to come to the Secretary of State for her to make that judgment, and that is what she will do in due course. He will also know, as I said in response to an earlier question, that the North sea basin is a declining basin. We have to prepare for the transition. We are still extracting oil and gas from the North sea, and that will continue for decades to come.

Adam Dance (Yeovil) (LD): Residents in rural parts of Yeovil continue to raise concerns with me about the rising cost of domestic heating oil due to conflicts abroad. Prices have sometimes hit as much as £1.10 a litre. As the nights draw in and winter comes around, what steps will the Government take to develop a price cap for heating oil? Just giving money to local authorities is not good enough; it does not support everyone.

Martin McCluskey: The hon. Gentleman will, I am sure, have seen the Competition and Markets Authority report on heating oil, published before the recess, and its recommendations for the actions we should take. We are studying the recommendations and will have a Government response to them in due course. The CMA raised concerns, though, about the impact of a potential price cap. This market does not operate in the same way as the traditional gas and electricity market. We would need to carefully consider the perverse impacts that might result from a straightforward price cap. There are other recommendations in the CMA report that we are, as I said, looking at and closely studying to make sure that people who have been affected by heating oil price increases are protected. The previous Prime Minister was very clear that the heating oil market was not working as it should, and I agree. I look forward to publishing the Government response soon.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): As the Minister seems to have run out of supportive Back Benchers, I shall endeavour to ask him a helpful and easy question. Accepting that it will be some years, to put it mildly, before we can eliminate our dependency on oil and gas, does he accept in principle that we are more secure if we exploit our own domestic oil and gas resources, rather than relying on imports from the middle east, which can so easily be blocked?

Martin McCluskey: As I said in response to previous questions, we are exploiting the resources in the North sea; we are extracting oil and gas from it. We will make a decision on Rosebank and Jackdaw in due course, and we have a robust energy mix in this country. The right hon. Gentleman made the point himself about reliance on overseas sources of energy. We would still require production beyond oil and gas. That is why we are investing in renewables, be it wind or solar, all of which are helping to protect our energy security and our national security.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): We are so lucky in this great country that we have enjoyed decades-worth of oil and gas—energy treasure—but we are so unlucky that we have an utterly clueless bunch of socialists not using this energy treasure. Will the Minister and the Government finally realise that the way to reduce our exposure to overseas fossil fuels is to use our own offshore, onshore and around the Falkland Islands? Let's get some growth, let's get some jobs and let's grow the United Kingdom.

Martin McCluskey: I always enjoy it when Reform use "socialist" like it is a bad word and not a badge of honour. As I have said in response to previous questions, we are using the resources from the North sea and extracting oil and gas on a daily basis. That is part of our energy mix and will be for years to come.

Mr Andrew Snowden (Fylde) (Con): The Minister seems confused about why the word socialism would be used in a negative context. It has something to do with

[Mr Andrew Snowden]

the fact that every country that socialism touches it destroys, and we have a prime example here. Perhaps the Minister will take his head out of the sand and look at my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South (Douglas Lumsden), who is sat on the Conservative Benches off the back of a stunning by-election win that was a referendum on the North sea oil and gas issue. That shows the complete lack of confidence the industry has in the SNP in Scotland and in Labour here. It is time to drill, baby, drill.

Martin McCluskey: I was not expecting to have an ideological debate on a Tuesday afternoon. I have said, and I repeat again, that we are using the resources from North sea oil and gas and we will continue to use them for decades to come. But if the Conservative party wants to put all its eggs in one basket and reject the renewables generation that is coming from this country right now, that is a road to nowhere. This is about energy security and national security.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): Residents in my constituency, such as my constituent Rhys, have contacted me worried about the impact of this situation on their bills. He shopped around, has a renewable-only tariff, insulated his home and bought an electric car. Although he welcomes the VAT cut to electricity, he says that the recently announced increase in the cap and the one he is now expecting in January will more than wipe it out. He says that throwing money at consumers does not deal with the huge profits or change supplier behaviour. Will the Minister accelerate plans to fully and quickly decouple electricity prices from the wholesale price of gas?

Martin McCluskey: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. We took VAT off electricity bills from October and we took £150 out of costs last year. I encourage her and any of her constituents who are struggling with their energy bill to also make sure they are looking at the warm home discount, which is a further £150 off energy bills. We are looking at what more we can do to provide support through autumn and winter. We have already taken steps to start to decouple the price of energy from gas, as part of the previous Administration, and we will continue to look at what more we can do in that area.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): The Houthis are not going away and it is likely that the crisis will get worse rather than better. On 16 March, I asked the current middle east Minister, the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), who was previously in a different role in the Foreign Office, what UK naval assets could be, or were being, deployed to the region, given that it was pretty predictable that at some point Tehran would put pressure on the Houthis to assist it in its reign of terror in the region. I ask again: what naval and other military assets are being put in the region so that we can safeguard British, partner, allied and NATO shipping and ensure that the crisis is minimised as much as possible? Finally, three of our Five Eyes partners have proscribed the Houthis as a terrorist organisation. I do not expect the Minister to declare a proscription on the Floor of the House, but are the Government at least keeping that under review?

Martin McCluskey: I said at the outset that we stand firmly with our friends and allies in Saudi Arabia and the internationally recognised Government of Yemen. I will not be drawn on questions of operational military activity, but we are already providing air defence support to Saudi Arabia through the defence partnership. We have a long and proud history of supporting the defence of our partners and allies. On the question of proscription, I commit to discussing that with Foreign Office officials and writing to the right hon. Gentleman.

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): Diolch, Madam Dirprwy Lefarydd. Rural communities in Wales are being hit hard at the pumps. While the average price of unleaded petrol across Wales is just over 162p per litre, the very cheapest in Caerfyrddin is 165.9p—166p per litre—with most forecourts charging more. Rural households do not have a choice but to drive, yet they are paying a premium simply because of where they live. The Government must surely step up and support those communities. Will the Minister extend the rural fuel duty relief scheme to Wales to support households in rural areas?

Martin McCluskey: We have put in place fuel finder, which I am sure the hon. Lady is aware of, to provide transparency in fuel prices and ensure that people are able to shop around for the cheapest fuel in their area. It is our belief that that will help to drive down the cost of fuel. I also point to some of the other support we have offered to rural households. There is support in place for heating oil, which I am sure many of the hon. Lady's constituents have already taken advantage of. On home heating, to allow people to decarbonise and move away from fossil fuel boilers, we have extended the boiler upgrade scheme in England and Wales, adding an additional £1,500—that is a £9,000 grant for those who want to move to a heat pump.

Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): The Saudi closure of the east-west oil pipeline and the continuing disruption in the strait of Hormuz demonstrate how important it is that the UK Government issue new licences to drill in the North sea—in our own British oil and gas reserves—in order to provide national security and job security, and, most importantly, to reduce energy bills for hard-working families. Surely the Minister can understand that.

Martin McCluskey: More extraction of oil and gas from the North sea will not reduce prices for consumers across the country, and it will keep us hooked on volatile fossil fuels. That is why we are moving to decarbonise our system with more renewables, more solar and more wind. As I have said in response to other Opposition Members, we will continue to have oil and gas as part of our energy mix for decades to come.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): The National Security Adviser, Jonathan Powell, has said that Europe will experience real hardship this winter. We have repeatedly seen the UK exposed to energy shocks linked to volatile fossil fuel prices set on international markets: Russia and Ukraine, the strait of Hormuz, Bab al-Mandeb and now the Saudi east-west oil pipeline. Will the UK step up investment in clean, domestic renewable energy production, as well as in the grid to distribute it?

Martin McCluskey: We have already had about £100 billion of investment into renewable energy in the UK since 2024. That is why it is so important; it is one of the fastest-growing sectors of our economy. The hon. Gentleman is right that we need to continue with that investment to ensure that we move away from foreign sources of energy. The comments from the National Security Adviser are stark, and we in this House will stand with Ukraine now and through the winter.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his answers. The recent hostile attack by the Iranian-backed Houthis on critical Saudi pipeline infrastructure represents a deeply concerning escalation that threatens not only regional stability but global energy policy—it is as serious as that. Will the Minister outline what specific steps the Government are taking with our international partners to bolster the maritime infrastructure of our allies in the Gulf, and say when countermeasures to destroy Iranian-backed Houthi terrorists and murderers will take place? The only thing that they understand is a strong response to stop state-sponsored aggression.

Martin McCluskey: The hon. Gentleman will know that our priority is having free flow through the strait of Hormuz, and that is what we have been working on with our allies and partners globally. We will continue to do that to try to alleviate the situation. As I said in response to an earlier question, we are providing air defence support to the Saudi Government in the current situation. The hon. Gentleman would not expect me to comment on detailed operational military issues, but he can be reassured that we are providing air defence support and that we will continue our discussions with the Saudi Government.

English Whisky: Single Malt Definition

1.55 pm

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD) *(Urgent Question):* To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if he will make a statement on the English whisky geographical indication definition of single malt.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Stephen Morgan): The UK's whisky is a national treasure and is rightly renowned across the world for its quality. Whisky supports jobs, investment and growth across all four nations of the United Kingdom and showcases British expertise to consumers around the world. Scotch whisky is one of the greatest export successes, and Welsh and Irish whiskies also enjoy protected status and strong international reputations. I am pleased that English whisky has now joined that family of protected UK whisky geographical indications, further strengthening the UK's four nations of whisky.

The registration of English whisky as a protected geographical indication recognises it as a distinctive product, with qualities and characteristics linked to its geographical origin. It reflects the growth of a dynamic sector, with more than 70 distilleries now producing or maturing whisky, and exports reaching 30 countries worldwide. That is good news for local growth and British agriculture. Distilleries are supporting skilled jobs and attracting investment in regions across England, while supporting British farmers by using British-grown grain. We want to see that success continue.

The specific decision that is the topic of this urgent question followed the UK statutory geographical indication process. The application was assessed against the requirements set out in legislation and was subject to an opposition process, allowing parties with a legitimate interest the opportunity to object. Those parties whose objections were considered admissible had the opportunity to consult with the applicant regarding their objections. Following careful consideration of the evidence, it was concluded that the application met the relevant legal requirements for registration.

Let me be clear that this recognition does not alter the protected status, reputation or production requirements of Scotch whisky, Welsh whisky or Irish whiskey, nor does it alter the Government's commitment to the whisky industry and its leading global success. Scotch whisky is one of the UK's most important food and drink exports, but it is far more than an export: it is part of the culture, history and identity of Scotland and the United Kingdom. It is enjoyed at Burns night celebrations, family gatherings and special celebrations, at home and across the world. It is one of the great national treasures.

I recently visited Glen Garioch, one of Scotland's oldest distilleries, where I was delighted to enjoy a wee dram and see at first hand the craftmanship and heritage that make Scotch whisky so famous across the world. The Secretary of State spoke to the chief executive of the Scotch Whisky Association only yesterday. This Government will continue to protect and champion the whole whisky industry—Scotch, Irish, Welsh and English—both at home and in key exports around the world.

Wendy Chamberlain: I declare an interest as chair of the Scotch whisky all-party parliamentary group, and I also hold a Chartered Institute of Brewers and Distillers general certificate in distilling. On Friday evening at 5 pm, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs announced that it had approved the English Whisky Guild's application for English whisky to receive geographical indication status, despite objections from the Scotch, Welsh and Irish whisky associations.

Let me be clear that my objection is not to English whisky obtaining geographical indication status. English whisky has a long and legitimate history in its own right. My concern is specifically about the definition of English single malt whisky that DEFRA has now approved. Under that definition, English single malt whisky requires only distillation at a single distillery, rather than for all the stages of production to take place at a single site. The term "single malt whisky" carries a long-established reputation and meaning for consumers. It risks disadvantaging Scotch producers, who have invested heavily to comply with the traditional single-site production model, including distilleries in my own constituency such as Kingsbarns, Eden Mill, Daftmill and Lindores.

Scotch whisky is one of the UK's most important export industries, supporting jobs, investment, tourism and economic growth across rural communities. Weakening an internationally recognised definition risks damaging consumer confidence and diluting brand value at a time when the Scotch whisky industry is not in the rude health that the Government mistakenly think it is. The new definition could also be misleading for consumers who reasonably understand a single malt whisky to be a product produced entirely at one distillery.

I ask the Minister: why was this announcement made after the House had risen on a Friday evening, and why does the appeal period finish before the House returns from recess? I ask the Minister also to explain why a decision that undermines the integrity of the single malt definition—a decision that creates an uneven playing field across the UK and risks disadvantaging distilleries that have invested to uphold long-standing industry standards—was approved. Why did the then Chief Secretary to the Treasury tell the House in March last year that DEFRA would not be watering down the definition of single malt whisky? Because I can assure you, Madam Deputy Speaker, that that is exactly what the Government are doing now. Will the Minister also set out what discussions he has had with the Scotland and Wales Offices and what assessment has been made of the implications of this decision for the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020 and how those implications were considered?

Stephen Morgan: I thank the hon. Member for her continued interest in these matters and for her leadership of the APPG for Scotch whisky. I know how important the Scotch whisky industry is to her constituents and to communities across Scotland. Since taking up this role, I have been keen to engage with the sector; as I mentioned in my opening remarks, I had a valuable visit to Aberdeenshire in August, and look forward to continuing to work with the APPG, the Scotch whisky industry and the wider sector as we continue.

In response to the hon. Member's questions, I must stress that Scotch whisky's protected status, reputation and production requirements are unchanged and that the English definition of single malt has no impact on how single malt is made in Scotland. The Government remain committed to supporting the success of the Scotch whisky industry and the wider UK whisky sector.

The hon. Member asks about the decision-making process, and I must stress again that this is a regulatory decision and a decision made by the Secretary of State. Let me assure her that this Government remain absolutely committed to supporting and championing Scotch whisky at home and abroad. Nothing in this decision changes the protected status, reputation or production requirements of Scotch whisky. I am very happy to meet the hon. Member to discuss any further concerns that she may have.

Alan Gemmell (Central Ayrshire) (Lab): Scotch whisky is one of our great success stories, and I recognise that there are concerns from the Scotch Whisky Association about this proposed change. I am proud to have in my constituency locally a distillery on land that Robert Burns once farmed, and I am pleased to have played a small part in reducing whisky tariffs when I was the trade commissioner in Mumbai and that this Government have continued to put Scotch whisky on the world stage through our very successful trade deals. I am delighted to see the Under-Secretary of State for Scotland, my hon. Friend the Member for Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy (Melanie Ward), in her place on the Front Bench. Will the Minister say that she, he and the Department for Business, Innovation, Science and Trade will do all they can to promote this great Scottish product around the world?

Stephen Morgan: Of course. I thank my hon. Friend for all the work that he does on trade matters. He speaks in this House with real authority on this issue. He will know that this Government back British businesses and that we are keen to champion the Scottish whisky industry not only internally—nationally—but externally—internationally—as well. That has included securing a free trade deal with India and cutting the costs of the US tariffs, boosting export markets.

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

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): Across the country, businesses are under increasing pressure. Competition, the costs of doing business, ever increasing taxation and regulatory burdens are making it as hard as it has ever been for our rural businesses to get on. While I recognise that whisky producers, farmers and the wider supply chain in England will welcome this announcement, those in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are viewing it with concern.

The whisky industry is a crucial sector in Scotland, supporting more than 40,000 jobs, adding billions to our economy and showcasing great Scottish produce abroad. Consistency in regulation is key across the UK. How are the Government going to ensure that the Scotch single malt whisky industry is not undermined by this decision, particularly given that distilleries in England will not have to follow the same single-site production standards as distilleries in Scotland to get single malt status? Has the Minister engaged with the Scottish Government on this issue to ensure that the Scotch whisky industry is not put at a disadvantage because of this announcement?

A new designation for English whisky does not compensate for the hostile business environment being created by Labour. The Government are piling costs and regulation on to food and drink producers, including distilleries across the UK. The ever increasing level of whisky duty, the exclusion of distilleries from the British industrial competitiveness scheme and now the extended producer responsibility—adding £1.4 billion of costs to producers—all mean that the Government are making life ever more difficult for businesses that are struggling to keep their head above water. The huge and growing cost of doing business is making it difficult for businesses to survive, especially in rural areas. What steps will the Government take to ensure that these mounting costs, especially for food and drink producers, will not result in more and more businesses going under?

Stephen Morgan: I welcome the shadow Minister to her place on the Opposition Front Bench and thank her for her contribution and questions, and for her recognition of the vital contribution of Scottish whisky and all whisky to our national identity. It would be remiss of me not to remind the House that the previous Government allowed tariffs on single malt whisky exports to the United States to cost the industry more than £600 million in lost exports, and that they stood by while one of Britain's most iconic sectors paid the price. In contrast, this Government acted, securing an agreement that brings tariffs on Scotch whisky exports to the US down to zero. I do not think that producers will be taking lectures from the Opposition when it comes to standing up for British whisky in its biggest export market—this Government got a deal done both in terms of the India deal and reducing the US tariffs.

As one Member of this House has said,

"Scotch whisky is a national treasure and one of Britain's great exports. Nobody is trying to take anything away from it. There is plenty of room in the market for a growing English sector alongside Scotland's. Consumers, not lawyers, should decide what ends up in their glass."

I think the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) put that very well.

This Government agree that Scotch whisky's reputation and protections must remain robustly defended while recognising that other parts of the UK's whisky sector can also grow and succeed. We will continue to engage with others and with the devolved nations to make that a success.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement. If the Secretary of State made this decision, I am disappointed that she was not able to come along today to answer this question, as I think there are real concerns here. The sector in Scotland is 100 times bigger than the sector in England; if it is going to grow, I wonder what the target market is if it is not people who are currently drinking Scottish whisky. When the Minister visited the distillery in Aberdeenshire, did the people there explain the importance of the malt whisky brand and why it should be protected? It does seem that this decision today will weaken that brand.

Stephen Morgan: My hon. Friend will have heard what I said at the outset about protecting Scotch whisky going forward. A number of issues and concerns were raised on my very enjoyable visit to Aberdeenshire in August, and I can assure him from the Dispatch Box that I will continue to engage with the sector to understand issues and concerns to ensure that the sector continues to flourish.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): English whisky rightly has a growing reputation, and it is right that it should have geographical indication status. I confess to being a single malt enjoyer myself, as well as the owner of a decent collection, including a fine bottle of Lindores. I am also an avid supporter of the annual Kendal whisky festival, where Cumbria whisky distilleries proudly tout their wares alongside whiskies from all parts of the British Isles, and indeed beyond.

So English whisky is good, and English whisky from the lakes is even better. However, DEFRA's proposed criteria for English whisky are not good, nor is the tiny appeal period on that status. To put it bluntly, English whisky is too good to be held to this low a standard. It will damage the English whisky brand and, in turn, impact on the brand and reputation of Scotch whisky, along with whiskies from Wales and Ireland.

It is also quite wrong for this consultation and the appeal period to be open for only two parliamentary sitting days. Without this urgent question from my hon. Friend the Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain), there would have been no parliamentary scrutiny of this at all, and even with this question, the appeal period is far too brief or fair to be adequate. I urge the Minister to think again.

Stephen Morgan: I know that this is an issue that the hon. Member has been trying to address with colleagues in the Department, and I thank him for his correspondence on these matters. I stress that GI status provides a powerful platform for producers to strengthen their brand, attract investment, access new markets and compete internationally on the basis of quality, provenance and authenticity. The decisions that this Government have made will go a long way to supporting the industry in his constituency. I am very alive to the issues that he has described and will take them back to the Department.

Terry Jermy (South West Norfolk) (Lab): I think this is fantastic news for the English whisky industry and will be welcomed by the Roudham distillery in my constituency, which in 2006 was the first distillery in England registered for over 100 years, and this year won world's best single malt at the world whiskies awards, which is great news. Does my hon. Friend agree that as well as being good for the whisky industry, this measure is good for supporting our famers who grow cereals, particularly barley crop in the eastern region, which feeds many of the English distilleries?

Stephen Morgan: My hon. Friend is a real champion on these issues, and I pay tribute to him for the work that he does with the farming community in his constituency. He is absolutely right that this strengthens the links between farming and distilling, and it will ensure that more of the value generated remains within the UK's rural communities. It is a significant vote of confidence in British agriculture and the quality of British-grown cereals, particularly our world-renowned barley growers.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): I visited Witchmark distillery in Fonthill in my constituency a year or so ago. The people at the distillery had gone to considerable

[John Glen]

lengths to match the standards that they saw in Scotland on a single site, and are putting down whisky casks and growing a significant business, as well as providing a significant number of jobs in this rural constituency. I am concerned about the differentiation of standards, which the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) spoke about. Could the Minister reassure the House that the appropriate high standards for this growing class of goods will be protected?

Stephen Morgan: It will have no impact on standards that any other UK whiskies have set for themselves. They all vary across the United Kingdom, but I will certainly take the right hon. Gentleman's points back to the Department.

Chris Kane (Stirling and Strathallan) (Lab): I share the surprise of distillers in my constituency, including Glengoyne, Deanston Tullibardine and the Stirling distillery, about this decision, which seems as though it will cause longer-term problems for distillers in both Scotland and England with regard to consumer confidence, but that should not undermine the fact that this Government are a friend of the Scotch Whisky Association. Could the Minister outlines some of the things he is doing to support the 41,000 jobs in Scotland and the 25,000 jobs across the rest of the country, and to make sure that this continues to be one of our best exports for Brand Scotland and, indeed, Brand UK?

Stephen Morgan: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; Scotch whisky is one of the country's top global exports, and that is not going to change any time soon. We remain committed to backing it and supporting its continued success.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I am really struggling to see what the Government are seeking to achieve by removing the requirement for the whole process to be carried out on a single site. It seems to me that they risk confusing the definition for the Scotch, Welsh and Irish industries, and they undermine the investments that have already been made in the conventional model by other English distilleries. Are the Government trying to create a new market for a different product, and if that is what they are doing, should that not be reflected in its name?

Stephen Morgan: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his long-standing support for the Scotch whisky industry, including as Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee. I know that he recognises the significant contribution that whisky plays to our national identity and as a global export opportunity. I can assure him that nothing has changed in terms of the protected status reputation or production requirements of Scotch whisky. I am looking forward to meeting him later today, when I will be happy to answer any further questions he may have.

Douglas Lumsden (Aberdeen South) (Con): The definition of a Scotch single malt whisky is that it must be mashed, fermented and distilled at a single distillery in Scotland, but for English single malt, some of those steps may happen away from the single site. Does the Minister not feel that it would be better to have a consistent definition of a single malt whisky, and that that would be easier for consumers to understand?

Stephen Morgan: It is worth me saying that the rules and requirements to use the protected name for English whisky and its sub-categories, including the single malt, are determined by product specification. This document is produced by the applicant—in this case, the English Whisky Guild—and reflects traditions and practices of the English whisky sector. The English whisky product specification is compliant with all applicable UK legislation, and I am very happy to write to him on the specific points that the hon. Member raises.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): My constituency produces the finest single malt Scotch whisky. From Isla, Jura, Campbeltown, Oban, Mull and Ardnamurchan, centuries of craft have gone into building that hard-earned reputation. This decision to allow lower production standards for English single malt whisky undermines that. Why have the Government allowed lower standards in England? What safeguards are they putting in place to protect the hard-earned reputation and integrity of Scotch malt whisky?

Stephen Morgan: It is not a binary choice. We can support English whisky and Scotch whisky, and I stress that we are supporting the growth of the whisky industry. It is hugely important for this Government, and that is evident in the recent international work that we have undertaken—the India free trade agreement slashed tariff rates for UK whisky exports from 150% to 75%, and we have worked with the US as well. The Government have invested significantly in the whisky industry. With China, we are agreeing to cut tariffs on Scotch whisky from 10% to 5%, and we will continue to take action to support the Scottish industry.

Susan Murray (Mid Dunbartonshire) (LD): Can the Minister tell distillers in Scotland, like those who invested £12 million in the Port of Leith distillery in Edinburgh to achieve the prize Scottish single malt label, which I visited with the Scottish Affairs Committee earlier this year, why English producers will be able to use the same single malt label without playing by the same rules?

Stephen Morgan: I refer the hon. Lady to my previous answer with regard to the issues around single malt. I am very happy to take away the concerns that she has raised.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): That is the end of the urgent question. I will suspend the sitting to allow proper notice of the statement. The sitting will resume at 2.32 pm; the bells will ring two minutes before.

2.17 pm

Sitting suspended.

Thirlwall Inquiry: Final Report and Recommendations

2.32 pm

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Yvette Cooper): May I apologise for the timing of the statement and thank the Opposition for their understanding? With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I shall make a statement on the report of the three-year public inquiry into events at the Countess of Chester hospital between 2015 and 2018 led by Lady Justice Thirlwall, published today. I am grateful to Lady Justice Thirlwall for her thorough and devastating report.

At the heart of the inquiry have been 13 families who lost their newborn babies or who saw them experience serious collapse or injury at the hospital 10 and 11 years ago. I cannot begin to fathom the grief and pain of the parents and families. The mother of Baby J describes her grief:

"I cannot emphasise enough the impact of this on our whole family. Who we are as people, parents, work life, spouses, children…[it] has cast a shadow of sadness over every part of our lives."

Those parents have had to face the unimaginable. I recognise that they have waited many years for the details set out in this report and that it will continue to add to the distress and the loss that they have endured. They should be in all our thoughts throughout all the discussions of today's report.

The public inquiry was commissioned by the then Health Secretary in September 2023, following the conviction of neonatal nurse Lucy Letby for the murder of seven babies and the attempted murder of a further six babies. Lady Justice Thirlwall has been clear that it was not her role to look at the convictions, the legal process, or the court evidence, and she is explicit about not cutting across the work of the Criminal Cases Review Commission. Instead, her focus was on the experiences of the parents of the babies named in the indictment, the conduct of those working at the Countess of Chester hospital, including whether action should have been taken earlier, and the effectiveness of NHS management, governance, scrutiny and regulation in keeping babies in hospital safe. That is also the focus of this statement.

In the words of Lady Justice Thirlwall,

"The Report sets out a dispiriting and at times shocking account of multiple and repeated mistakes and failings by organisations and individuals."

The inquiry describes the increase in neonatal deaths in 2015 and 2016 at the hospital, the concerns about the possibility of deliberate harm that were raised by clinicians at an early stage, but then the repeated failures of organisations and individuals to act: shocking failures to put the safety of babies first; shocking failures on safeguarding; failures in governance and in regulation; failures in the most basic duty of candour; failures in professional curiosity; and repeated failures to refer concerns to the police, which the inquiry is clear should have been done at a much earlier stage. Lady Justice Thirlwall comes to the devastating conclusion

"that some babies would have been saved…if action was taken earlier."

Central to the findings are what Lady Justice Thirlwall describes as

"complete failure at all levels to invoke safeguarding procedures at any point."

She explains:

"No one seems to have thought that safeguarding action is required when a member of staff is suspected of causing deliberate harm. Suspicion is enough."

The inquiry also identifies failure among external bodies, including the Care Quality Commission, which failed to consider the data and ask the right questions, and the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, which should have known as soon as it was engaged that this was a matter that needed to be referred to the police.

The inquiry finds repeated failures of governance and candour by the trust and by individuals within it. Disturbingly, it refers to an "exercise in spin" to steer away from referral to the police. That is an appalling finding—an exercise in spin instead of putting the safety of babies first. Worst of all, the trust repeatedly failed the parents: it failed to keep their beloved babies safe; it failed repeatedly to provide them with information which they had a right to know; and it failed to ask their consent for sharing information with external experts and other organisations, or to keep them up to date with investigations. For parents to be kept in the dark for years about what was happening is, as Lady Justice Thirlwall has said, "reprehensible".

Let me address the issues for the families and the parents directly. The suffering endured by the babies and their families is impossible to comprehend. On behalf of the Government and the health service, I am profoundly sorry for the failures set out so clearly in the report, for the harm, distress and unthinkable loss for their families, and for the failures to keep their babies safe. Our responsibility now is to act. Let me be clear: the safety and care of babies, the safeguarding of every patient, the respect for families—all those go to the heart of our NHS values. They must be at the heart not just of what we say, but what we do.

Let me turn to the recommendations. Lady Justice Thirlwall has made 17 recommendations on what needs to be done to keep babies safe. The inquiry recognises that in many areas things have changed since the terrible events took place, including welcome improvements at the Countess hospital in services for women and children. However, the inquiry is clear that new action is needed.

I take the recommendations extremely seriously. The Government will, of course, consider the entire report and set out a full response, but let me highlight some key areas today. On the crucial issue of safeguarding, Lady Justice Thirlwall recommends compulsory training, a new protocol and employment requirements. A revised NHS safeguarding framework was published in April 2026, but I have asked the chief nursing officer to urgently review the framework and the training in the light of the report. We need to look urgently at that.

Let me be clear: this goes beyond laws and procedures, many of which are already clear; this is about leadership and responsibility. Safeguarding is everyone's business and safeguarding must be everyone's priority. Concerns must be heard and acted upon. Staff who speak up must be protected and taken seriously. I expect every leader, every board across the NHS, every professional, every manager and every member of staff to uphold their safeguarding responsibilities. I will not hesitate to hold the NHS to account for the highest standards at every level, because at its heart, this is what the NHS stands for: care for patients and, most of all, keeping the most vulnerable patients of all safe.

[Yvette Cooper]

On safety and reassurance for parents, Lady Justice Thirlwall recommends the introduction of video baby monitors for neonatal units. I agree. I have asked my officials to urgently develop plans for cot-cams, which can also help parents feel better connected to their babies when they are unable to be with them in person. The inquiry says that the sudden unexpected death in infancy and childhood guidance must be updated. I agree. That is now under way. It welcomes the introduction of medical examiners but says that this should have happened 10 years earlier. I agree. We will set out further plans to strengthen their neonatal expertise following the inquiry's recommendations when the Government set out their full response.

The inquiry recommends much stronger controls on insulin storage. The NHS has begun that process with new guidance in January this year, but we agree with the recommendation to go further. It recommends new regulation on NHS managers, not just on clinical professionals. The Government have consulted on and confirmed plans to apply a barring scheme to senior leaders and managers, not just to clinicians. We will legislate to introduce the scheme as soon as parliamentary time allows, and we will consider the chair's recommendation to expand it further.

The report also makes recommendations for the regulators, including the CQC, which we will ensure are taken seriously. On technology, we have implemented the maternity outcomes signal system, which provides near-real-time safety alerts, but we agree that we must do more. I agree with the report that when the very worst happens and parents face bereavement, they need to be supported to the best of our ability. The report recommends that the national bereavement care pathway for neonatal death should be rolled out in 2027. I agree, and can confirm that all trusts are signed up to implement it. I will ensure that it is repeated in all versions of the NHS planning framework while I am the Secretary of State.

Lady Justice Thirlwall highlights problems with past inquiry recommendations not being implemented, so my Department is setting up a recommendation hub to properly track our implementation progress internally, not just for this inquiry but for others right across the NHS. But we will work with the Cabinet Office now on improvements in this area, to respond to this inquiry. This afternoon I will discuss with the maternity taskforce our plan to bring forward amendments in the Health Bill to create a new maternity and neonatal commissioner to address the serious concerns around safety and standards that have been raised. Later this week, I will meet Lady Justice Thirlwall to discuss how we take forward the report's conclusions.

I want to highlight a final issue that has struck me while reading through the different volumes of this inquiry. A section of the report refers to the way senior oversight of neonatal care had been downgraded in the reorganisation of the Countess hospital. It includes the fact that the board and the medical director reviewed deaths within the hospital. However, this only covered adult deaths. The report says that

"the Board did not receive any reports about the deaths of babies and children at any stage during the period I am considering. This was a serious failure of governance, which no one on the Board seems to have noticed. This is further evidence of the inadequacy of the structure, which removed the voice of children and babies from the Board, and the lack of profile of paediatrics and neonatology."

I am clear that the safety, safeguarding and wellbeing of babies must never again be treated as a side issue. As I reflect on some of the safety reports on maternity services we have seen in recent years, let me also be clear that maternity and neonatal services cannot operate on the margins. They must be at the forefront—a central priority in what our NHS must do at the vital and precious start of a family's life.

I want to thank the families for the extraordinary courage and dignity they have shown. I also thank Lady Justice Thirlwall and her team for their rigorous work. This must be a turning point for the NHS. When concerns are raised, especially about safety and safeguarding, they must be heard and acted upon, and it is time to put maternity and neonatal care and safety at the top of the NHS agenda, where they belong. I commend this statement to the House.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Because the ministerial statement ran over, the shadow Secretary of State has six minutes.

2.45 pm

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement and for giving me advance sight of it, and we all thank Lady Justice Thirlwall and her team for their incredibly important work. As the Secretary of State said, the report is both thorough and devastating.

These were crimes that shook our whole nation, and no one who has not lost a child in this way could possibly imagine the depth of the parents' suffering. The task now for the NHS, for the state and for us as parliamentarians is to ensure that from their unthinkably terrible loss will at least come reliable guards against such a tragedy happening again, for sadly this is not the first or only time that serial, tragic, avoidable deaths have occurred within our health service.

There are themes that recur: the dismissal or undermining of whistleblowers; concerns about institutional or personal reputation, or about organisational disruption, hampering the primacy of focus on immediate patient safety; and because the idea of a healthcare worker deliberately harming patients is, naturally, so unthinkable to decent people, alternative explanations are sought instead.

Today we are not at the stage where the Secretary of State is able to say that the Government accept all the recommendations in full, and we understand that it is a very substantial piece of work. She said that they will consider the entire report and set out a full response. When does she anticipate that will happen? In the time available, I will just ask a few questions on a subset of the aspects here. We welcome the points on the suspicion of deliberate harms protocol. The Secretary of State is absolutely right that the message has to get out that, in such cases, suspicion is enough. We must change the way that people think about that.

The report notes that the existing "freedom to speak up" system has operated unevenly through the NHS, and that there remains a need for a national oversight body, although the National Guardian's Office is no

more. The report says that many NHS staff still do not feel that it is possible to raise patient safety concerns without risking career detriment. What else can be done to establish independent escalation pathways outside the management hierarchy? I worry that some of what is there is being removed. If an individual exhausts a trust's mechanisms for raising concerns, they could currently go to the council of governors at the trust or to NHS England, but both will be abolished by the Health Bill. So if a consultant reports a concern to the board and does not get a hearing, where do they go? Is the Secretary of State the next stage in that line?

I must also ask about another of the Government's current proposed changes: the abolition of the Health Services Safety Investigations Body. Neither HSSIB nor its predecessor body existed at the time of the murders and, in any event, HSSIB was not set up to investigate individuals, criminal activity or deliberate harm. However, it did create a legally protected safe space for staff to sound alarm bells confidentially outside the normal line manager hierarchy, and that could help to break silences and contribute to the cultural changes that are required. The report states that HSSIB is at present "fulfilling a needed function", so will the Secretary of State reconsider the proposal to end it?

To many people, an obvious question arising from these terrible cases will surely be that someone up the chain must have noticed the sheer numbers and the severe statistical anomaly in fatalities. The report notes that there was an alert signal in the data in 2015, but the analysis was only being reported on with a long lag. Clearly what is required is real-time reporting and automated analysis to identify abnormalities in deteriorations or unexplained deaths that triggers immediate and independent external review. The Secretary of State mentioned that the near real-time process is now in place. Can she say how close that comes to being fully real-time and automated—though not only automated but, of course, complementing human understanding—to trigger independent external review? The inquiry's findings on this also link to its recommendation that NHS systems become interoperable by the end of 2028. Does she think that timetable is achievable?

Recommendation 1, as the Secretary of State mentioned, is on the use of cameras in cots, with remote monitoring for parents, and the Department is to set out a road map by March. Remote monitoring has of course become widespread in people's own homes, and there is cot-side video in use at quite a number of trusts. But this would be rather more than what is typically in place in those hospitals today. Can she outline her initial assessment of how this can be achieved and by when?

One of the most sobering findings is that in Lady Justice Thirlwall's review of recommendations from previous inquiries into NHS bodies over 30 years, although some significant changes have been made, many recommendations have not been implemented. She supports the formation of a Joint Committee of Parliament to ensure that recommendations are pursued, and she recommends that the National Audit Office audits implementation of statutory inquiries into the NHS. I think I heard the Secretary of State say they were going to create an internal hub—really? I ask her to consider whether that is enough. Would it not be better, in the spirit of the duty of candour, if these things were done through the institutions—through the National Audit Office and with this Parliament?

Our thoughts and prayers remain with all those families in the unimaginable pain of their loss. Although nothing now can undo that pain, it is vital that all possible lessons are learned and, more importantly, acted upon with determination and urgency.

Yvette Cooper: I thank the right hon. Member for his response and questions and for the compassion he shows for the families who have been so badly affected by these terrible events—by the failures in the NHS and the crimes that have taken place.

Our intention is to publish the full response within six months and to ensure that we have done so thoroughly. I will discuss this further with Lady Justice Thirlwall later this week. The issue about whistleblowers, which the right hon. Member raised, is incredibly important. The report states:

"The way the grievance and its consequences were handled was deplorable"

and the way in which the trust responded to these concerns was completely wrong. It also went against the guidance and rules that it was supposed to follow. That is why part of this is about ensuring that the right systems are in place; part of it is also about leadership, responsibility and culture, and ensuring that we are holding all those to account at every level in supporting this, particularly in relation to safeguarding. The safeguarding of babies should have been taken the most seriously of all.

The right hon. Member specifically raised the issues with HSSIB. The inquiry is clear about the important role of HSSIB. The intention of our reforms is for that role to continue. As part of the Health Bill, it involves transferring HSSIB into the Care Quality Commission. However, that independent role and investigations will continue. I plan to review the detail of this to ensure that we are meeting the spirit of the inquiry's recommendation, because it is immensely important that we have those arrangements in place.

The right hon. Member also referred to the issues around the systems, interoperability and having the data assessments. Of course, we now have new systems in place, including the maternity outcomes signal system. That, when applied to the data that emerged from the Countess of Chester, does make it clear that real-time safety alerts would have been flagged, but of course, in the hospital, the clinicians already knew that a significant increase had taken place, but also they had unexplained deaths and a series of issues that were raised within the hospital. There was a failure of the board to review this, a failure of oversight, a failure of governance and a failure to take proper action.

The right hon. Member raised the recommendation that we need to look at a series of reports. In this case, we know that a series of recommendations have been made, particularly about patient safety and often including whistleblowing. We need to ensure that these recommendations are actually implemented. We must not keep going around in the same circles.

I am conscious that, shockingly, these events took place in 2015 and 2016, very soon after the Lampard review into the NHS, which had made clear the importance of safeguarding. Safeguarding should have been on everybody's minds at the time, even if the circumstances were very different from what happened here. The issues

[Yvette Cooper]

around safeguarding and patient safety should have been taken incredibly seriously, and they were not. The right hon. Member is right that we need to ensure that systems are in place, but again, even immediately after reports were published, we still had a failure in this case to implement them and to adopt their spirit.

On the recommendations about the NAO, the right hon. Member will know that it is a cross-Government issue. However, I have made it clear that the Department of Health and Social Care will establish a hub for health inquiry recommendations, so that alongside the cross-Government discussion we can ensure that the NHS is doing what it needs to do.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call Samantha Dixon. I appreciate that this is particularly sensitive for you, so please take your time.

Samantha Dixon (Chester North and Neston) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker; I really appreciate that.

This is another very dark day for the families affected by events at the Countess of Chester hospital—those who grieve, who suffer and who continue to live with the terrible fallout. It is crucial for them, as well as every one of my constituents, and those of my right hon. Friend the Member for Alyn and Deeside (Sir Mark Tami) and others, to have absolute confidence that our local hospital—my local hospital—is a safe place.

Lady Justice Thirlwall's inquiry needs the firmest response possible from Government. She shines a light on a truly appalling state of affairs. Too many times in this place, in response to catastrophic events, we say, "Never again." I have served previously as Minister for Building Safety, my work guided by the recommendations of the Grenfell tower inquiry. My right hon. Friend the Member for Streatham and Croydon North (Steve Reed) and I argued consistently inside Government for the establishment of a national oversight mechanism to capture the recommendations from important public inquiries, such as this one, to ensure that they are carried forward and are never forgotten or overlooked. Given Lady Justice Thirlwall's evidence that inquiry recommendations are so often overlooked, will my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State support the calls to broaden her essential recommendation beyond the NHS to all inquiries and set up a national oversight mechanism so that when we say, "Never again," we mean it?

Yvette Cooper: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this and for consistently speaking out for her constituents who have endured the unimaginable and been through the most horrendous experiences within their families—the loss of a baby, or a collapse—and to then have to go through everything that has happened since and still to have shown, as Lady Justice Thirlwall says, such huge dignity in responding to this inquiry. As the inquiry makes clear, those parents and families have given evidence exactly in the hope that this does not happen again to other families in other hospitals, as well as in Chester, and I pay huge tribute to them.

I will take forward the point that my hon. Friend raised about the cross-Government issues, in discussion with the Cabinet Office—she is right to raise that—and I will undertake to draw together the recommendations from NHS inquiries. I also highlight, because I know it will be important for her constituency, that Lady Justice Thirlwall says:

"in 2025, a large modern women and children's unit opened, providing integrated family care for babies and their families. This welcome change represents a huge improvement in neonatal care at the Countess."

That will be hugely important to families in her constituency, but it does not take away from the devastating conclusions of this report and the action that needs to be taken.

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

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): I send my heartfelt sympathies and those of my party to all the families who have been so cruelly harmed. I thank Lady Justice Thirlwall for her inquiry and the Secretary of State for early sight of the report.

Lady Justice Thirlwall's final report is a dispiriting and, at times, shocking account of repeated mistakes and failures by organisations and individuals. The conviction of Lucy Letby for these murders and attempted murders sets this investigation apart from others, but while the situation is incredibly distressing, it is also distressingly familiar—a failure to investigate abnormal levels of death or harm; a failure to act on concerns raised and whistleblowing; a failure to follow established protocols for investigating deaths; and a management instinct to cover up failure, and to put the reputation of the hospital above the safety of the babies in it.

The importance of stronger whistleblowing mechanisms could not be clearer. There should be a duty of candour for management, as well as medical staff. Will the Government accept my amendments to the Health Bill, requiring boards to call in investigators when they receive reports of malpractice, and giving coroners and medical examiners stronger powers to whistleblow? The review makes it explicit that there must be an external body, such as HSSIB, to investigate trusts. Will the Government now drop the measures in the Health Bill that risk patient safety? Surely the Secretary of State will accept the amendments that we and others have put forward to prevent the abolition of HSSIB, protect Healthwatch and put patient safety first, including through the restoration of the National Guardian's Office.

I am beyond angry that once again we are discussing the recommendations for action following an NHS scandal. It is like groundhog day—we are stuck in an endless cycle of expressing horror and doing nothing, with the reports and recommendations from multiple scandals gathering dust on a shelf in the Department of Health and Social Care. The Thirlwall inquiry cites a "lack of political will" as one of the causes of this cycle. We have a new Secretary of State. Will she promise us that she will be the one to find the will to end this? The families who have suffered such unimaginable loss deserve nothing less.

Yvette Cooper: I thank the hon. Member for her comments, her tribute to the families and her recognition of how much they have endured. She is right to highlight the importance of the duty of candour. One of the most shocking findings of the inquiry was that an "exercise in spin" was put above patient safety, including the safety of some of the most vulnerable patients of all, newborn babies, which is truly shocking. Boards are

already responsible for ensuring that they follow the duty of candour. The inquiry found crucial breaches of the board's duty of candour and responsibilities in a series of areas, including the responsibility to provide information to the reviews done, and safeguarding responsibilities that should have been clear. We will look further at the responsibility framework, the regulation of managers and clinicians, and the leadership's responsibilities to ensure that what should happen takes place.

The hon. Lady will know that the local guardians remain; that is extremely important. On HSSIB, I agree with her that that role needs to continue. It is the intention for that role to continue as part of the CQC, but I have undertaken to look again at those arrangements to ensure that they meet the expectations of the inquiry's report.

Fundamentally, the point that the hon. Lady makes is about the anger and sense of deep frustration and injustice about the fact that we are here again, discussing some of the same issues. For me, that is about two things. The first is patient safety, which has been discussed time and again when we have these kinds of recommendations. The second is the sense of the sidelining of maternity and neonatal care, which have been seen as a side issue in too many places, rather than being central. We have to put the cradle back at the heart of the NHS. We have always talked about the NHS being there from cradle to grave. The very start of a child's life, and the very start of a family's life, is one of the most important moments, and we have to make sure that our NHS keeps that at the centre of what it does.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): This report does not make easy reading, and I cannot imagine how the families feel when they even just look at it. I want to pay tribute to the vast majority of NHS staff right across the UK who do a great job every single day, including my fantastic wife.

The families' legal team have been very clear that they expect all the recommendations to be implemented, and they are asking for a timeline for that. I know that cannot be given today, but it would be good to hear the Secretary of State say that her ambition is for all the recommendations to be implemented in full as soon as possible. The timeline is really important.

Chapter 39 is about one of the more difficult problems. It talks about culture, and says that in the past, there has been an overreaction to blame culture, which means that some managers have been unwilling to confront bad behaviours. Will the Secretary of State commit to addressing that most difficult of problems?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right to pay tribute to the staff right across our national health service who work immensely hard every day, including in our neonatal units and maternity units, to provide compassion, support and quality care for people who need it at an important time in their life. That includes the staff across the NHS who were devastated when the police investigation, prosecutions and convictions identified terrible crimes taking place, and who are determined to ensure that the best quality of care is provided.

Interestingly, it is an unwillingness to think the unthinkable that is identified as having held some people back from facing up to what happened. It does feel unthinkable that any staff member should deliberately harm a child, but we have a responsibility to be prepared to think the unthinkable. The report identifies that safeguarding arrangements are not a finding of fact; they are a step to be taken when there is a concern or a suspicion—that is when safeguarding action has to be taken, in order to put safety first, and we have to be clear about that right across not just the NHS but all our services. Safeguarding is about what we do when things are still unknown, to put safety first.

My hon. Friend rightly recognises some of the real challenges around culture, concerns about blame, and people having the confidence and support to speak out. Again, the remarks from Lady Justice Thirlwall are really strong on this. It is a responsibility for everyone to ensure that if there are concerns, they are expressed and investigated. That is an act of good faith, not of bad faith. We must all keep patient safety and, above all, the safety of the most vulnerable patients of all—the little babies—in the forefront of our minds. That is what should guide us as we deal with these sensitive issues.

Student Loans

TREASURY COMMITTEE

Select Committee statement

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): We now come to the Select Committee statement on behalf of the Treasury Committee. The Chair of the Treasury Committee, the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier), will speak for up to 10 minutes, during which time no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of her statement, I will call Members to ask questions on the subject of the statement. These should be brief questions and not full speeches. I emphasise that questions should be directed to the Select Committee Chair and not the relevant Government Minister. Those on the Front Bench may take part in questioning.

3.10 pm

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I am pleased to rise to make a statement on the Government's response to the Treasury Committee's report on the student loans system.

It is worth laying out what our inquiry did. We took evidence from a number of people, including students and graduate representatives at the National Union of Students; Rethink Repayment, which was set up by one of my constituents on behalf of affected graduates; and the union Prospect. We also took evidence from the Institute for Fiscal Studies, Universities UK and Sir Philip Augar, who led the Augar review of post-16 education, and who knows more about higher education finance than most of us in the Chamber.

We hosted an online survey that received 52,000 responses from individuals, mostly those affected by plan 2 student loans. That was the second biggest response to any Select Committee inquiry ever. We made numerous written requests to the Department for Education for all the publicity material that the Department had produced about student loans from the past 15 years. This unearthed over 200 pages of slides and videos of student presentations.

We found in our inquiry that for many years, students were sold an idea that the repayment threshold for student loans would rise with inflation or earnings. This commitment—indeed, a promise—has been repeatedly broken, and graduates are now having to pay back far more over their lifetime as a result. That has happened under Governments of different colours. That promise and the promotional materials created by the DFE downplayed the monthly repayments that most students would have to make once they graduated. In the Committee's view, this amounted to mis-selling, but the Government have exempted themselves from consumer protection law, so students have no avenue for seeking redress. For most graduates, their student loan repayments will now act as a career-long additional income tax of 9% on top of their marginal rate of tax. The knock-on impact of this additional rate of tax is that it is harming the ability of graduates to get on to the housing ladder, and that in turn affects their ability to start a family and save into a pension.

In the run-up to our inquiry, we heard interesting comments from several then Cabinet Ministers, who described the student loan system as "broken" and "unfair". The Secretary of State for Education called the student loan system "endless" and "unfair" as recently as February. The Government's own submission to the inquiry described the student loan system as "broken and unfair".

The Committee have made a number of recommendations. We heard in evidence from Sir Philip Augar that when he reviewed the system, he recommended that the split between student and taxpayer should be around 50%. Universities UK reminded us of the benefits of graduates to our wider society. For example, if we have an accident, we rely on people who have trained in medicine—paramedics, doctors and so on—to help. The Committee concluded that the split between the individual and the state should be 50%, but in their response, the Government said that their contribution is already in the region of 35% to 40% and that is enough. I can tell the Government that it does not feel like that to many of my constituents, and the constituents of my fellow Committee members. They can read the Government's own forecasts of repayments, which that show that starting in 2024-25, the average undergraduate will be paying back their loan for 31 years, and the average amount that they will pay back will be well over £30,000. It is even worse for graduates in the top 30% of earnings: the Government forecast that they will pay back more than they borrowed.

Members of the Committee understand that a national conversation needs to be had about how much society should contribute towards higher education, but our cross-party Committee, made up of representatives from the three main parties of the House, concluded that in the longer term, a 50:50 split should be the ambition, so that we can invest in the young people of today and our country.

One of the most shocking elements of our inquiry was the evidence provided by the Department for Education about the advice given to students when they took out loans. As a result of seeing that, we recommended that much better information be provided to make it clear to students applying for a loan that the terms and conditions of the loan can change, even after it has been taken out. I am pleased about the Government's response on this point.

We said that

"more can be done to support borrowers to understand the student finance system and that all information provided to borrowers should be fair, clear, unambiguous and as easy to understand as possible".

The Government have committed to a "transformation programme" that will

"review the pre-application process to produce clear, relatable and trusted guidance that supports better decision making and financial planning. This will include making it more prominent that student finance is governed by legislation and that regulations may be amended by Government and Parliament."

These changes are well overdue. It is shameful that multiple Governments have not done that when it is very young people, mostly under the age of 18, who have been taking out loans.

The Committee also recommended that student loans promotional materials should be brought in line with the requirements of the Financial Conduct Authority's consumer duty. The Government have declined that in their response to our report, based on the fact that these are not commercial loans. However, the Government

are the monopoly provider of student loans—students cannot go elsewhere for a loan of this sort. It is therefore beholden on the Government to treat student loans fairly, as the competitive forces that might maintain a higher standard of customer service in banking and other areas do not apply to student loans. We would like the Government to explain which elements of the Financial Conduct Authority's consumer duty they feel that they cannot comply with, given they do not want to commit to doing so at this stage.

We are disappointed on another point. In 2018, the predecessor Committee concluded that the use of the retail prices index should end and we should move to the consumer prices index, which is a lower level of inflation. Back in 2018, the Government responded that the flaws in the RPI measure of inflation are well understood, but they did not make a change. Over that time, Governments of different colours have sat passively by, and today the Government say that they will not make that change because it is coming in 2030 anyway. However, that means that students will have been charged at a higher interest rate for a longer period and we are disappointed by that response.

One of the key things that we looked at was the change announced in last year's Budget to freeze the threshold at which payments have to be made by students for two years from April next year. This seems to be changing the rules again when students are already experiencing pain. This is a cohort of students who already face huge pressures on housing costs and paying into pensions. They are the generation who are helping to grow Britain's economy and working to deliver essential jobs in that economy. They are the generation who will pay for the NHS and the ageing population, and they will have the children who will be our future workers. Let us not forget that the birth rate has fallen every year in the past three years, down to 1.41%, so not investing in this generation is a real issue.

It is a breach of trust to change that threshold and make students stick at a frozen level. This has been done by previous Governments, but there is an opportunity here. The Government have not absolutely said that they will not review the threshold, so there is a glimmer of hope. As they talk to Treasury colleagues ahead of the Budget, I urge Ministers to take the opportunity of a change of Prime Minister and a change of Government to show that we want to invest in his generation. It is a matter of intergenerational fairness.

This cohort is squeezed. The Government need to consider the fairness of the student finance system for borrowers, taxpayers and the public finances, but it is important to note that the rules have been changed repeatedly for this cohort, particularly those on the punitive plan 2 system.

We want to honour the promises that the Government made to student loan holders. One of the easiest ways to do that is to not bring in a threshold freeze next April. That is in the hands of the Chancellor of the Exchequer at the Budget. I hope that he and his colleagues are listening to this debate and to the 52,000 people who responded to our inquiry, including the many young people in their 20s and 30s who are suffering the additional burden of the punitive plan 2 loan system, and that they will reconsider freezing the threshold at the Budget in October.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. We have about 10 minutes for questions and answers, so they must be brief.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): I thank the hon. Lady for her clear summation of the Committee's report. I want to press her on the repayment threshold. She says that in the Government's response, they have not ruled out reviewing it, but given the relatively modest amount of money and the significant number of young people who would be positively affected, does she think that this should be one of the top priorities for the new Chancellor on 28 October?

Dame Meg Hillier: I absolutely think it should be a high priority, because this generation is being so severely squeezed. The Government's response to the Committee said:

> "The Government recognises the cost-of-living challenges faced by many graduates, including those with Plan 2 student loans, and understands concerns about the impact of repayment terms on borrowers."

The response says further that the Government

> "keep all aspects of the student finance system under review."

This is one change that is very simple to make and relatively cheap. I recognise that the Chancellor has had many challenges even since we put out our report, but this is an achievable change that could be done quickly and would make a big difference to this cohort.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): One of the themes that comes through quite clearly in the report is the complexity of the student finance system and the difficulty that students have in understanding what they will actually pay—that is mis-selling, as I think my hon. Friend described it. Given that the Government appear to accept that the terms are confusing, is it fair that they continue to penalise borrowers who were potentially misled?

Dame Meg Hillier: One good thing is that the Government have recognised that problem in their response to us. We are dealing with mostly teenagers under the age of 18. Sometimes those going to university for the first time do not have other people around them who can advise them about the impact of a loan, and many have no choice and have to take out a loan. The cohort now paying back under plan 2 is being further penalised by the threshold change, so more and more is being layered on that particular cohort. There needs to be more fairness in the system.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): I speak as the mother of three students, one of whom has just graduated. Two of them have a plan 2 loan, and one has a plan 5 loan. They and I were unaware that they are not allowed to start repaying their debt until they graduate, yet the interest starts from the very first day that they take the loan, which can be a gap of three or four years or, as was suggested earlier, even six or seven years. That adds between £5,000 and £8,000 to their borrowing. Did the Committee look at that? Has it made any recommendations on that specific issue?

Dame Meg Hillier: The Committee certainly received some evidence on that issue. There is a logic to not paying back the loan until that point, because students are mostly not working, so there would be a real challenge

[Dame Meg Hillier]

in paying it back while someone is an undergraduate or graduate student. The hon. Lady rightly highlights that that has caught a lot of people unawares, as they were not aware of how much it ratchets up. There is layer upon layer of complexity, and the fact is that parents do not fully understand the impact.

The hon. Lady says that she has children on plan 2 and plan 5 loans. The bigger picture, which I have looked at over many years, is that Governments of different colours keep changing the student loan package, and each package is more complicated than the last. Plan 5 is paid back over 40 years, but plan 2 is paid back over 30 years. Try keeping up with that! It is very confusing. The Government's commitment to greater transparency is welcome, but it is only a first step.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Friern Barnet) (Lab): On 27 March 2026, the Minister for Skills wrote to my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) confirming that the Department for Education would release an equality impact assessment on student loan lifetime repayments and other borrower impacts for the plan 2 repayment threshold. Does the Chair of the Treasury Committee agree it is high time that the equality impact assessment was published by the Department?

Dame Meg Hillier: In that simple question, my hon. Friend raises a raft of issues. For most students, the only way that they can go to university is by getting a loan. There has been a big drive to get people to go to university who would not have been able to do so before, partly because they may be from poorer backgrounds. This Government have added in extra support through the maintenance grant and so on, but there are still huge costs on young people. It is really important that in making decisions, especially as they have committed to reviewing the student loans system, the Government really understand the impact on different cohorts.

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for her statement. I was glad to be part of the Committee, which looked at ways in which we could start to make the student finance system fairer. On the issue of whether we should reverse the threshold repayment freeze, we looked at a number of ways in which we could change the financing system to make it fairer—for instance, by freezing or even cutting the interest rate cap—and reversing the threshold repayment freeze was the best way to get help to the great majority of those repaying loans, no matter what their income. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Dame Meg Hillier: As my hon. Friend said, we looked at a number of ways of changing things. Once somebody has a plan that has been set up, it is very difficult to unpick different parts of it, but the threshold freeze was added on top of the plan 2 system. That is why it seems particularly invidious. There is an opportunity here—a simple lever that the Government can pull—because the freeze has not yet been implemented. If the Chancellor is looking for a quick win in the Budget, that is one of the easiest things to deliver, without causing more challenging ramifications. If he pulls that lever, it is done, and the biggest number of students would benefit from that.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for her Committee's excellent work on the important issue of student loans and for the good communication that she maintained with my Select Committee during her inquiry. The Education Committee concluded earlier this year that there is a genuine crisis in the financial sustainability of our universities as a result of many different pressures bearing down on them. Does she agree that if the Government do not bring forward additional measures to improve the long-term affordability of student loans, as she recommends, the risk is that more and more young people will decide not to pursue a university education? That would not only mean that they miss out on the potentially transformative impacts of such an education, but serve further to undermine the financial viability of our universities.

Dame Meg Hillier: I thank my hon. Friend for the excellent work that she and her Committee do. We know that there is a crisis in the higher education system, but there is also a huge challenge for the graduates paying off these loans. It is a multifaceted picture, so I am pleased that the Government are looking at reviewing it, but people have just started plan 5 repayments, and a review that might see any changes is still a long way off.

We need to have the national conversation that I mentioned about a 50:50 balance. Society benefits from most graduates. They are not just taking; they are actually giving back, and it is really important that we recognise that in our national conversation. Frankly, universities are really struggling in part because of the way in which fees are structured, meaning that they are not getting enough money, but they are still very expensive for students, so nobody is winning in this situation.

Sarah Russell (Congleton) (Lab): One of my constituents has been in touch. He is a neonatal nutritionist and is paying a marginal tax rate on his loan of 57%. Does the Chair of the Treasury Committee agree that that is not an acceptable outcome socially and that we must have change?

Dame Meg Hillier: When I looked at this issue in previous roles, before I was on the Treasury Committee, I found that one of the challenges is that the loan system is set up with lots of box-ticking and spreadsheets happening in Government Departments in Whitehall—a very long way from a 17-year-old who takes out a loan and starts paying it back after they graduate. We need to have them at the heart of the design. There will always be a discussion in government about where money is best spent and how much things cost in the short, medium and long term, but we need to ensure that the graduates paying back their loans are at the heart of that discussion, alongside the impact on further education institutions.

Chris Kane (Stirling and Strathallan) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for her excellent work and that of her Committee. We want our young people to have confidence that their Government will stick to their promises. Does she agree that the approach to student loans from successive Governments has dented that trust and that Government colleagues should reflect on that?

Dame Meg Hillier: My hon. Friend says it better than I could. There is a trust relationship, and in the case of student loans, students have nowhere else to go for that money. They signed up on certain terms, and those terms have been changed by successive Governments, and the latest threshold freeze is just another one of those breaches of trust between the Government and those who trust them in taking out a loan.

Danny Beales (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Lab): I thank the Committee for its work and for the report. I completely agree with the Chair's presentation of the level of mistrust among graduates and learners when it comes to the broken system. Does she agree with me that this is not simply a communications issue? It is not about telling people more clearly how bad a deal they have. Fundamentally, this is a broken system—a bad deal that is having massive intergenerational impacts. Does she agree that we need a full and thorough review of the student finance and loans system?

Dame Meg Hillier: It is not only my hon. Friend, I and the Committee who agree on that—it is the Government too. The Secretary of State for Education herself has said there are problems and previous Ministers have called it a broken system. There is a long way to move from a broken system to one that is fair, and the focus of our recommendations is on those who are currently paying back a loan. It is difficult to right all the wrongs for those people, but we think pulling back on the threshold freeze would be an important step for them. I absolutely agree that there needs to be proper long-term thinking about how we fund education and how the loans book is structured, and we need to provide information to people. As it is now, the system is not working.

Government Compensation Schemes

Public Accounts Committee

Select Committee statement

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): We now come to the Select Committee statement on behalf of the Public Accounts Committee. The hon. Member for Shipley (Anna Dixon) will speak for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of her statement, I will call Members to put questions on the subject of the statement. These should be brief questions, not speeches. I emphasise that questions should be directed to the Select Committee member, not the Minister. Front Benchers may take part in questioning.

3.30 pm

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): I am pleased to be giving this statement on behalf of the Public Accounts Committee, of which I am a member.

Before I turn to the findings of our report on Government compensation schemes, I want to begin by recognising the individuals and families whose lives have been profoundly affected by the events that gave rise to these compensation schemes. Behind every application, every claim and every payment is a person who has experienced loss, injustice or harm, often through no fault of their own.

No amount of money can ever fully restore what has been taken away. Compensation cannot return lost years, repair damaged health, rebuild broken trust or erase the suffering that many have endured. Nevertheless, where mistakes have been made, public bodies have failed, or citizens have been harmed by the actions or omissions of the state, compensation represents an important acknowledgement of that injustice. It is one of the clearest ways in which the Government can accept responsibility, recognise the experiences of those affected and demonstrate a commitment to making amends.

Properly designed and delivered, compensation is not simply a financial transaction; it is an expression of accountability and, crucially, compassion. It signals that those who have suffered have been heard, that their experiences are believed and that society recognises the wrong that has been done to them. For many people, the true value of a compensation scheme lies not only in the financial support it provides, but in the recognition and dignity it can offer. That is why it is so important that such schemes are fair, accessible, timely and centred on the needs of those they are intended to serve. It is against that backdrop that the National Audit Office conducted a review of the way that compensation schemes have been handled, and the findings of the Public Accounts Committee's inquiry were published last Wednesday.

I want to recognise the sub-postmasters and their families affected by the Horizon scandal; the victims and bereaved families of the infected blood scandal; the Windrush generation denied the right to remain in the UK; and LGBT veterans, including Victoria from my constituency, whose service to her country was repaid with imprisonment and dismissal from the Royal Navy because of her sexuality. All those experiences have informed the Committee's work. I particularly thank

[Anna Dixon]

everyone who responded to our survey and everyone who gave evidence to our inquiry. Many of the testimonies we received were deeply moving, and all were invaluable.

If the Government are to improve how compensation schemes operate in future, they must listen carefully to the experiences of those who have already been through them. Our inquiry found that, too often, people experience lengthy delays, complex processes and uncertainty about what will happen next. The vast majority of respondents to the Public Accounts Committee survey felt the schemes they had experienced were unfair. Three quarters told us that the claims process itself had been distressing or retraumatising.

One respondent told us:

"It has become a lumbering, slow bureaucracy. It is failing in its duty to get payments to people quickly."

Another said:

"After decades of fighting for recognition, we believed we were finally at the finish line—and instead we are being treated with suspicion, as though we are trying to defraud a system rather than seeking acknowledgement of a wrong done to us by the state."

One of my own constituents, the wife of a postmaster, told me that the stress from the Horizon scandal caused alopecia and a blood clot. On applying for compensation, she was told that her suffering was irrelevant, despite being the co-owner of the post office. The compensation was paid to her husband, from whom she is now divorced. These experiences highlight why the quality of scheme design matters so much, and we heard many similar stories. Compensation is not simply about the final payment; it is about the journey that people make to reach that point—a journey that must be fair, transparent and humane.

We heard from Sir Alan Bates, whose work was instrumental in exposing the Horizon scandal. He told us that schemes often end up reinventing the wheel. He argued for the creation of an independent organisation that is capable of carrying expertise and experience from one scheme to the next, which is what our report recommends. Peter Gibson, the chief executive at Fighting With Pride, which represents LGBT veterans, highlighted the importance of making realistic commitments that can actually be delivered. Kate Burt, representing those affected by infected blood, emphasised the importance of meaningful engagement with communities and of ensuring that lessons from previous schemes are genuinely applied.

Victims have lost trust in the bodies administering Government compensation schemes—bodies that they view as responsible for the initial harm caused. The Committee therefore recommends—I am pleased to see the Cabinet Office Minister on the Front Bench—that the body administering compensation should work with individuals and organisations representing victims. Many claimants told us that they found it difficult to trust the processes administered by organisations that they associated with the original harm, which is why witnesses repeatedly argued that independence is essential if schemes are to command confidence. The answer is not to choose between independence and expertise; it is to combine them and establish an independent body that is capable of developing specialist expertise, preserving institutional memory, promoting good practice and earning the trust of those it is there to serve. A key recommendation of the report is that the Government should establish an independent body to design and administer Government compensation schemes.

We should remember that, for many people, the compensation process is not simply an administrative exercise. Making a claim often means revisiting some of the most painful experiences of a person's life. It means being asked to recall events that they have spent years trying to come to terms with, gathering evidence from decades ago, and recounting—often to complete strangers—experiences of injustice, discrimination, illness, loss and trauma. The Committee heard repeatedly that the process itself can reopen old wounds. Witnesses spoke of victims feeling as though they were having to fight the same battle all over again. That is why good scheme design matters so much: it is not simply about how much compensation is awarded; it is about ensuring that the process to get to the outcome is compassionate and designed around the needs of those who have suffered.

I believe that this report highlights the unique role of the Public Accounts Committee. Our role is to look across Government to identify recurring challenges, to bring together evidence from different Departments and to ask what lessons can be learned. One of the clearest conclusions from our report is that the Government require stronger mechanisms for retaining and sharing knowledge across compensation schemes. Every compensation scheme is inevitably different, but the fundamentals of good scheme design are not. The Committee concluded that the Government need a more systematic approach to applying what has been learned. Reverend Clive Foster, the Windrush Commissioner, told us it is critical that impacted groups are involved in designing schemes from the outset, and that design is aligned with trauma-informed principles that consider how the claim process can be traumatising for people.

Compensation schemes exist to provide redress, but they should also provide confidence that people will be treated fairly, confidence that lessons have been learned and confidence that future schemes will be better than those that came before. All those who shared their experiences with our Committee have given the Government a valuable opportunity to improve, and we should not waste it. Our responsibility now is to ensure that the lessons are not lost, stored away in reports or revisited only when the next scandal emerges, but that they are permanently embedded into how the Government approach redress.

The Committee's recommendation is therefore clear: the Government should establish an independent body to design and administer Government compensation schemes—a body that is capable of retaining expertise, carrying lessons forward and delivering redress swiftly, fairly and with the confidence of those it serves. Above all, it must be a body that is capable of restoring trust. The victims whose experiences informed our inquiry deserve nothing less.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): I thank the hon. Lady for her statement. Is she able to outline whether, during the course of its work, the Committee gave any consideration to index-linking compensation payments in line with inflation? Those payments can take a very long time to be made, and

over that time, the value of the award can have reduced. Was that something that the Committee looked at, or would consider?

Anna Dixon: No, that was not something that the Committee specifically looked at, but I totally agree that many victims wait far too long. The length of time it often took to set up compensation schemes, and their complexity—often resulting in cases taking a long time to reach a decision and therefore compensation taking a long time to be awarded—were things that repeatedly came up in the Committee. We urge the Government to make sure that is much more timely in future.

Liz Twist (Blaydon and Consett) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for this report on redress schemes, which certainly reflects the experiences of my constituents who have been involved in some of those campaigns. I particularly welcome the idea of having an independent body looking at schemes—I think here of the Hughes report and those affected by sodium valproate, mesh and Primodos, who are still waiting for a decision. This is life-changing stuff for constituents. Has the Committee thought about how, in those kinds of situations, we might speed up the response to inquiries?

Anna Dixon: As an officer of the all-party parliamentary group on patient safety, I am very well aware that the Hughes report is still in the Government inbox, awaiting a response. I also have constituents who are victims of the pelvic mesh scandal, which obviously particularly impacted women, and I hope that we will soon hear the Government's response to that report. Hopefully, they will be able to bring forward more swiftly a Government compensation scheme that works, co-designed with the victims, as our report recommends.

Rupert Lowe (Great Yarmouth) (Restore Britain): First, can I say how much I enjoy serving on the Public Accounts Committee with the hon. Lady? I think—and I am sure she agrees with me—that the key to correcting this situation is for the Government to make better decisions. It seems that a pattern of bad decision making has resulted in the necessity of these claims, which do take too long to be heard, and I fully support the Committee's report, which suggests that we need an independent body to ensure that the Government are not seen to be marking their own homework and kicking the ball into the long grass for as long as they possibly can.

Anna Dixon: I thank the hon. Gentleman, and I guess I return the compliment—although I am not sure I always enjoy his contributions to the Public Accounts Committee! However, I certainly recognise that on this and other issues, it is also important to get behind the reasons why these scandals happened in the first place. That obviously was not the purpose of our Committee's inquiry—it was to look at compensation schemes—but valuable lessons must also be learned about why these scandals occur, whether in relation to the Post Office, infected blood, or the treatment of LGBT veterans in the armed forces. I do appreciate those points.

Chris Kane (Stirling and Strathallan) (Lab): I thank colleagues on the Public Accounts Committee and at the National Audit Office for their work on this report. Groups representing victims expressed concern to our Committee that the Government do not do enough to advertise and promote schemes, leading to some victims missing out, and the amount and type of evidence required of victims when they submit a claim can make the process difficult and retraumatising. Does my hon. Friend agree that more care needs to be taken when designing schemes in order to ensure that the process is not overly complex and burdensome, and that those schemes need an outreach plan to maximise take-up?

Anna Dixon: I agree with my hon. Friend—another colleague on the Public Accounts Committee. The report is very clear that much more needs to be done to try to reach victims; there is a concern that the LGBT veterans scheme is closing while victims remain. It is important that institutions use the data they already hold to reach people directly, and that the evidential burden is as low as possible while still maintaining protections against fraud.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for her statement and for the work of the Public Accounts Committee on this important issue. I have seen at first hand how unbelievably difficult it has been for my constituents who were victims of the Windrush scandal to get compensation from that scheme. The Windrush compensation scheme was not co-designed with victims, and it forced victims to apply to the very Department that had done them wrong through processes that were unwieldy and Kafkaesque in their bureaucracy. I therefore welcome the Public Accounts Committee's recommendation that an independent body should oversee the design of compensation schemes. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is wrong that victims of the Windrush scandal were not afforded access to independent legal representation in making their applications? Does she agree that the Government still have the opportunity to correct that, and should do so forthwith?

Anna Dixon: I thank my hon. Friend for being such a champion for those in her constituency who suffered from the decisions that impacted on the Windrush generation. She is absolutely right. We heard significant evidence, not least from the Windrush commissioner, about the poor treatment and the difficulties people were having in seeking redress, in particular the complexity and, as she points out, the lack of legal support. The report recommends that, where possible, it should be clear from the start whether victims would have access to legal support and also that that should be more consistent. I agree with my hon. Friend's suggestion.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I am pleased to see this report. Back in January 2024, I asked the Comptroller and Auditor General if the NAO would examine compensation schemes. I looked at a number of them during my more than a decade on the Public Accounts Committee, and different Departments would set them up and they would have different foundations. My hon. Friend will obviously be waiting for the Government's response to this report in the relevant set of Treasury minutes. When the Committee was doing its thorough work looking into the schemes, with witnesses in front of them as a comparison, were there a couple of good lessons that the new body, if the Government agree to set it up—I hope they do—could take forward, whether that is an exemplar or even one of the better compensation schemes?

Anna Dixon: I commend my hon. Friend for all her years of work on the Public Accounts Committee and for her leadership and foresight in making sure that the work was done by the National Audit Office. We did hear some examples. In particular, the infected blood compensation scheme is not run by the Department of Health and Social Care, but has a degree of independence from being run out of the Cabinet Office, and that makes a difference. There were some examples where there had been some co-design with victims, but those examples were too seldom. Unfortunately, across the examples we looked at, there were simply too many examples of things that went wrong. In learning those lessons, we need to make sure that the emphasis in any future Government compensation scheme is on co-design, timeliness and fairness for victims.

Points of Order

3.47 pm

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker, two small businesses in my constituency of St Albans—Smallford farm shop and Hatch—have just been hit with a revaluation from the Valuation Office Agency that doubles their business rates bills overnight. It has taken the VOA 18 months to send this bill. The delay is entirely its fault, but the VOA is backdating the liability by 18 months and demanding that those businesses pay that bill right now, even though a challenge and appeal could take a year. These businesses may not survive this shock. The VOA cannot be allowed to behave like this. Madam Deputy Speaker, can you please advise how I can raise this with the relevant Minister today, given that the House is about to rise for a month? By the time we return, it could be too late to prevent two local businesses from closing down.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I understand that this issue is important to the hon. Lady, but she also knows, because of her experience, that it is not a matter for the Chair. She has most definitely got her point on the record, and no doubt those on the Treasury Front Bench will have noted it and will ensure that the right Department hears of it.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker, last week I met some of my constituents who were part of the Trans+ Solidarity Alliance lobby of Parliament. Unfortunately, when they were present, they overheard a passholder making negative comments about trans people. I am sure that you would agree that this House, the mother of Parliaments, should be welcoming to all people, particularly when they are on a mission to lobby their Members about issues that directly impact them. Is there any comment that you would wish to make about how we can ensure that passholders—we cannot control everybody—are reminded of the importance of courtesy and that this place is a place of debate and discussion, not for negative comments about groups of people?

Madam Deputy Speaker: The hon. Lady has raised an important issue, but as she is far more experienced than even I am, she knows that this is not a matter for the Chair. If she wishes to pursue it, she can raise it with those in charge of the independent complaints and grievance scheme, but I do not wish to become involved in matters that do not involve the Chair.

BILL PRESENTED

Church Appointments (Repeal of Discriminatory Provision) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary Louise Haigh, supported by the Prime Minister, Secretary Alex Norris, Secretary Angela Rayner, Secretary Chris Bryant, Secretary Douglas Alexander, Hamish Falconer, Kanishka Narayan, Dan Jarvis, Florence Eshalomi, Mark Ferguson and Jim McMahon, presented a Bill to repeal provision which prohibits persons to the Roman Catholic or Jewish faiths from advising the

Crown on appointments in the Church of England or Church of Scotland; and to repeal provision which precludes such persons from making ecclesiastical appointments.

Bill read the first time; to be read a Second time on Monday 12 October, and to be printed (Bill 150) with explanatory notes (Bill 150-EN).

Student Finance (Review)

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

3.50 pm

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require the Secretary of State to review student finance in England; to require the review to consider loan repayment arrangements and thresholds; to require the review to consider the terms and conditions applying to student loans when they were issued; to require the review to consider the relationship between student finance loan repayment thresholds and average earnings; and for connected purposes.

Before I begin, I wish to send my deepest condolences to the Prime Minister on the loss of his father. I am sure that the whole House will be thinking of them. I should also declare an interest, as a graduate with both a plan 2 loan and a postgraduate loan.

This is not the speech that I intended to make. In fact, it is not even the Bill that I thought I would be presenting. Originally, when I secured this slot, I was planning to present a Bill that would remove time restrictions on disability bus passes, but before I could get to my feet, or even table that Bill, the Prime Minister handed me my first big win in Parliament, for which I am eternally grateful to him. I thank him for that, and for his new approach to politics, which is about problem solving, not point scoring. I can only hope he continues in that spirit and hands me another big win today, because the timing could not be any better.

I want to start by paying tribute to the Chair of the Treasury Committee, the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier), and to all the members of the Committee for their very thorough work on this matter, about which we heard earlier. Their report asks, "Student loans: Broken and unfair?" I think we all know the answer, on both counts: they are both broken and very unfair. Let me make it clear from the outset that this is not a single, individual political party's failure. Every party that has sat on the Government Benches has had a bit of a shoddy record on this particular issue—Conservatives, Labour, and yes, even the Liberal Democrats, which might come as a surprise. In this regard, no one comes to the debate or to the Chamber with clean hands.

Honesty has to start with three things: the repayment thresholds, the terms that graduates were sold, and whether those thresholds have kept pace with earnings. I grew up in a former mining town, in a working-class family. My mum had me when she was 18, and I was the first person in my family to go to university. For people like me, taking out a student loan was not an option or a luxury; it was a necessity, and it was the only way I could get through the door of a university—Newcastle, where I secured a biochemistry degree and a master's in public health. Today, my student loans, combined, stand at more than £65,000. Between my two loans, 15p of every extra pound I earn goes on repayments, on top of tax.

This is the cruellest part for many people across the country. The poorer your family, the more you have to borrow. In 2016, maintenance grants for poorer students were scrapped and replaced with loans, so the students who have the least borrow the most, graduate with the

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biggest debts, and are then charged interest on every penny. A system that was meant to be a ladder of opportunity has become a penalty for being born poor. That is not social mobility; it is social injustice, with interest.

When I signed up, like millions of others, I was told a story. Department for Education slides compared repayments with a mobile phone contract: about £15 a month, we were told. Government-commissioned videos told teenagers that the threshold would rise with earnings. It was sold like a phone contract, and paid back like a second income tax. The Treasury Committee examined those materials, and concluded that they amounted to mis-selling. No other lender in this country would be allowed to sell a loan to an 18-year-old on one set of terms, only to rewrite them when the ink was barely even dry. If a bank did that, the regulator would shut it down. When the Government do it, they call it a policy change. Ministers wrote themselves out of the Consumer Credit Act 2006, and they have been getting away with it ever since. With no regulator watching, borrowers are left in the dark.

When my university friends saw that I had this ten-minute rule Bill, WhatsApp groups that had not been active for a number of years suddenly lit up with everyone getting in touch. One friend, Jasmine, told me that she was refused a straight answer on what she owed and that her balance then jumped by a few thousand pounds because interest had not been properly added back in 2021. In her words, "I am livid." My friend Rebecca had to open a case just to get back a refund she was owed. No customer of any other lender would put up with that.

In 2010, the Universities Minister told this House that the threshold would rise "periodically" to reflect average earnings and that

> "The Government are committed to the progressive nature of the repayment system."—[*Official Report*, 3 November 2010; Vol. 517, c. 924.]

That was not a hope; that was a promise made in this place. It has been broken again and again by Governments of all persuasions. The thresholds for repayment were frozen again at the last Budget for another three years from April 2027. On top of that is a system where the interest piles up from the day you take out the loan, before you can even repay a penny, and where you earn more, the higher the interest rate you are charged.

At its heart, this is an issue about fairness, and the injustice does not fall evenly. My friend Rebecca took maternity leave. While she was at home with her newborn, not making repayments and not earning, her balance rose by the best part of £2,000 in interest. Women have been charged interest for starting a family. Think of those living with long-term health conditions who cannot work full time or have to take time off sick. They are already fighting their bodies and now they watch their debt grow while their earnings often stall. This is damaging to our public services and our economy. I have heard from people who have turned down promotions because, after tax and loan repayments, the extra pay is simply not worth the extra responsibility. I have heard from doctors refusing extra shifts because once the higher tax rate, national insurance and the student loan repayments are added, they keep less than half of every extra pound. At a time when our NHS is calling out for extra staff and extra support, we are punishing those very people for trying to work harder.

We have a generation on track to be the first in modern times to be worse off than their parents. They did everything they were told: they worked hard, went to university and tried to better themselves. What did they get in return? In addition to a housing crisis, a property ladder with the bottom rung sawn off and a really grim graduate jobs market, they have had, added on top, a 9% tax that will earn on everything above the threshold before it ever reaches their bank account. I have friends who have put off having children because they cannot afford childcare while hundreds of pounds a month leave their payslip in student loan repayments. This is an injustice at its starkest: a generation told to borrow for the future are now paying for it with their future. The Prime Minister has rightly talked about bringing back hope. I agree with him wholeheartedly. There is no better place to start than honouring the deal that my generation were promised.

How have the Government responded to the Treasury Committee's cross-party call to reverse the freeze, which it called "a moral obligation"? They state that they keep

> "all aspects of the student finance system under review",

which does not sound like they are going to reverse that freeze. Martin Lewis called it

> "a very disappointing response that does little to help the millions of students already struggling."

The Government's answer is, in effect, that we will do better for future students, but millions of graduates are already paying under those terms today. They cannot wait for a better system to be built for people who have not yet borrowed a penny.

I said at the start that every party of Government have had a hand in this situation. I say it again, because it is exactly why I believe we can reach a cross-party consensus. No party can claim the moral high ground, so every party can help to be part of the solution. My message to the Government and the Prime Minister is simple: in the spirit of problem solving, not point scoring, will the Government commit to a genuine fix? Not another promise to keep things under review, but looking honestly at the deal graduates were promised and the deal they are getting. Restore the link between repayment thresholds and earnings. Guarantee that the terms will not be changed after people have signed them and put right the wrongs that have already been done. Let us make sure that that fix reaches every borrower, not just those who are yet to walk through a university's door. The Prime Minister has already shown this House that when he hears a good case, he acts on it, and I am asking him to do so again. The Select Committee asked whether student loans are broken and unfair, and we know the answer. The only question left is whether, together, we will commit to putting it right.

I commend the tremendous efforts of Rethink Repayment, Ollie Gardner and the team who have been pushing on this issue. For the best part of two years, internally within my party, I have been banging the drum to try to make this an issue to which we Liberal Democrats can be part of the solution. I am really pleased that we have seen Members from across this House add their names in support of the Bill. I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Tom Gordon, Vikki Slade, Liz Jarvis, Ann Davies, Dr Danny Chambers, Siân Berry, Cat Eccles, Cat Smith, Christine Jardine, Layla Moran, Ruth Cadbury and Alex Sobel present the Bill.

Tom Gordon accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 15 January 2027, and to be printed (Bill 151).

Backbench Business

Fracking Ban

4.1 pm

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the potential merits of a full ban on fracking.

I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for selecting this debate and giving me the opportunity to lead it. In December 2025, the Minister for Energy told this House that:

"the evidence base is not there at the moment to suggest that low-volume hydraulic fracturing activities have the same associated risks as fracking for shale gas."—[*Official Report, Westminster Hall,* 10 December 2025; Vol. 777, c. 151WH.]

I am leading this debate because I want to challenge that statement and bring the Government's attention to why I and many others believe that the understanding of fracking that the Minister referred to is not suited for purpose. I want this House to consider the evidence for that argument.

Let me begin with the point that matters most: we do not have a ban on fracking in this country; we have a moratorium, and the two are not the same. A moratorium is a pause, and a pause can be lifted. The previous Energy Secretary told the Labour party conference last autumn that this Government would legislate to ban fracking for good. This Government have been in power for two years, yet I see no indication that a full ban is due. Maybe the Minister will care to correct me, but it seems that this Government are not taking decisive action to stop all fracking activity.

The reason this activity continues is because of a legal loophole, and it is worth being precise about it. The Petroleum Act 1998 defines fracking by the volume of fluid injected: more than 1,000 cubic metres at any single stage, or more than 10,000 cubic metres in total. Stay below those figures and the moratorium simply does not apply. The intent is identical to fracking, and the technique is identical—a company injects fluid at high pressure to fracture rock and release the gas inside—but because the volume is lower, the law treats it as something else entirely and waves it through.

At Burniston, on the edge of the North York moors, Europa Oil & Gas has proposed exactly that—a so-called proppant squeeze—at volumes designed to sit just under the threshold. In correspondence obtained under freedom of information, the company itself referred to the operation as fracking, yet in its planning material it insists that it is not. The label changes, but the drilling rig does not. The Reform Mayor of Scarborough said, "frack ahead", although the local council voted unanimously against the plans, and the Secretary of State did not choose to overrule that. However, I am concerned about the direction that this is taking.

Before I move on, I want to insert a small caveat: I am supportive of the geothermal sector. Geothermal is a genuinely renewable source of energy. A small number of geothermal cases employ low-volume hydraulic simulation. My case for a permanent ban asks for fracking to be classified by intent, and would therefore ensure that geothermal was not under threat. This is important because the geothermal industry has great

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potential in this country that has yet to be realised, despite being extensively used in other European countries. I want to be clear that low-volume fracking—as a form of fracking—is something entirely different.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): Could the hon. Lady try to clarify that a little? Take an event with a seismicity of one—for ease of maths—with a hydraulic frack for the energy treasure of gas; how is that different from the seismicity of one on a geothermal site? It is the same seismicity. It is the same event. It is scarily called an earthquake, but it is not, for all intents and purposes—it is about the equivalent of moving rapidly from behind one's desk on a chair. What is the difference between the two?

Claire Young: I would like to clarify that. I am not suggesting that we should measure and judge these things by seismicity, because that is not something that can be predicted in advance. The point is that in one case fossil fuels are being extracted, but that is not the effect with geothermal—it is a different process with a different effect.

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): North Yorkshire council's planning committee rejected the Burniston site that the hon. Lady has mentioned not just on seismicity grounds, but because of issues of groundwater pollution, traffic and a whole range of other issues. Although these low-level fracking sites are technically legal, they still have a range of issues for us to deal with.

Claire Young: I quite agree. The hon. Gentleman better explains the point that I was trying to make, which is that other issues, such as the potential for groundwater contamination, are different in the situation of fracking for fossil fuels.

Ministers tell us that the evidence base is not there to show that lower-volume fracking carries the same risk as fracking for shale gas, but I say gently to the Government that the evidence is there, and it is sitting in their own records. The earthquake at Preston New Road that triggered the 2019 moratorium did not follow some enormous injection, but a series of lower-volume stages, every one of which was below the legal threshold. The tremor that shook Lancashire, felt across the area at a magnitude of 2.9, came in the days after a stage that used just 142 cubic metres of fluid. The then Oil and Gas Authority concluded that it was not possible to predict the timing or size of these events. The volumes proposed at Burniston were higher than the volume that caused that earthquake.

This matters well beyond seismicity. It matters for our countryside and for the rural communities and protected landscapes that would host this drilling and gain almost nothing in return. It matters for our waters, as has already been mentioned; parts of Yorkshire were under a hosepipe ban in 2025, yet we are asked to pump scarce water deep underground and accept the risk of contaminating the aquifers that families and farms depend on. It matters for the climate, too. Every new source of onshore gas means more methane, more emissions and a direct collision with the carbon budgets that this House has voted for—not to mention our net zero ambitions.

There are voices—Reform Members among them—who say that the answer to high bills is to return to fossil fuels and to frack our way out of trouble. I understand the appeal of a simple answer, but it is the wrong one. Gas is priced on an international market. Drilling a handful of wells in the English countryside would not move that price, and the companies doing the drilling would sell at whatever the market pays. Fracking would not take a single pound off a family's bill. What it would do is divide communities, tie up local councils in years of planning battles and lock us into the very fuel whose price swings caused the crisis in the first place. We would be more exposed, so I question their intentions.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Is it not true that fracking is a massive scar on the countryside and is far more visible and disruptive than, for example, an onshore wind turbine?

Claire Young: Absolutely, and I was just about to come to that point. In many cases, the very same people who would argue for fracking would argue for fewer wind farms, solar farms and other renewable energy sources due to their blighting of the countryside. I ask those voices, how is fracking supporting the upkeep of our countryside? How is it better than those other uses of countryside, which would produce clean energy, and how is contaminating our water supply helping anyone?

The honest route to lower bills and real energy security is the one that this country is already capable of taking: cheap, clean, home-grown power. By that I mean renewables, but also low-carbon generation; the prospect of new nuclear at Oldbury in my own constituency shows the part that low-carbon generation can play alongside renewables in a secure system. That is where the jobs are, and that is where the investment should be flowing. That is the future.

My ask of the Minister is a single, clear one. I feel as if this Government may need some clarity. I ask the Minister to commit today to defining fracking by its purpose and effect, not by an arbitrary measure of fluid used, so that every form of hydraulic fracturing is captured, the loophole is closed and the permanent ban that this Government have promised is written into law rather than left in a conference speech and forgotten. Our countryside, our water and our climate deserve nothing less.

4.11 pm

Alison Hume (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Thornbury and Yate (Claire Young) for securing a debate on this important issue. I first became aware of small-scale fracking when Europa Oil & Gas applied to explore for gas at Burniston, a village just on the edge of the picturesque North York moors in my constituency. I was surprised to discover that companies can still submit applications of that kind. I was surprised that it was not blocked by the moratorium on fracking that was introduced after earthquakes linked to fracking operations in 2019 at Preston New Road in Lancashire. It turns out that that is because UK legislation defines fracking based on fluid volume thresholds—1,000 cubic metres per stage or 10,000 cubic metres in total. That leaves a legal loophole for oil and gas companies to exploit.

Because Europa Oil & Gas' plans fall below the legal threshold, they are not calling it fracking, but "proppant squeeze" instead. Let me be clear: proppant squeeze is just hydraulic fracturing at lower fluid volumes. The intent and technique are the same. Europa wants to explore for and to extract gas, through causing the rock to fracture by injecting a substance into it at pressure. That is fracking.

There is strong evidence to suggest that small-scale fracking carries the same risks as larger-scale operations, particularly around seismicity. A report recently published by Professor Haszeldine at the University of Edinburgh found that earthquakes from high-volume fracking and low-volume fracking are equally large and equally unpredictable. That echoes findings commissioned by the then Oil and Gas Authority into events at Preston New Road, which also showed that seismic impacts cannot be accurately predicted regardless of fluid volume. Faced with this advice, why would we take the risk of allowing small-scale fracking to continue?

Other environmental concerns with fracking remain, too. They include potential groundwater contamination from methane migration or the chemicals in frack fluid, methane leaks, air pollution, and damage to the landscape. And of course, fracking at any volume leads to more greenhouse gas emissions, which contributes to climate change. After experiencing the hottest summer on record, I hope that the environmental consequences of continued gas extraction are at the forefront of our minds.

In the Labour party manifesto, we made a commitment to ban fracking. Our forthcoming energy independence Bill commits us to doing the same. Unless we implement a full ban on fracking, companies like Europa Oil & Gas will continue to exploit the existing loophole. Rathlin Energy is about to start small-scale fracking at its West Newton site in East Yorkshire—one of 66 current licences across the country.

Our Labour Government talk about banning fracking and safeguarding the places we love. I have the greatest respect for the Minister and appreciate the time that the Department has spent discussing this issue with me, but, respectfully, does he not see that unless the Government act boldly and close the loophole, communities across the country, such as those in West Newton and Burniston, will have fracking operations on their doorstep? These communities love where they live—do they not count? It does not matter to them whether it is a mini-frack or the full-scale version, as the net result is the same: drill pads, drill heads, gas flare and noise 24/7, with lights during the exploration stage and continuous heavy goods vehicle movements.

We cannot say categorically that small-scale fracking is safe for the environment. The Government have called for more evidence on its safety, but the sad truth is that it looks like the evidence will be gathered on the back of another incident like Preston New Road. I do not want that for my community in Burniston, and I am sure other hon. Members and hon. Friends do not want it for theirs.

Unless we legislate to ban all forms of fracking in our upcoming energy independence Bill, our fracking ban will be symbolic rather than material. We have a unique opportunity to show climate leadership. We have an opportunity as a Government to stand up to the frackers, to make our legislation watertight, to safeguard the natural environment, to listen to the concerns in our communities and to meet our climate commitments. By introducing a comprehensive ban based on process and intent, we can finally put an end to fracking once and for all.

4.16 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Thornbury and Yate (Claire Young) on securing this important debate and on her excellent introduction. I am in full solidarity with the communities of the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Alison Hume). In 2015, there was the threat of fracking near Bath, so I know exactly what the arguments are and how fearful communities are about it coming to them. We must all stand together to support her and her community to stop fracking.

The Liberal Democrats have long called for a complete and permanent ban on fracking. Fracked fuel is a fossil fuel, which cements our reliance on expensive gas and flies in the face of our net zero commitments. It also flies in the face of commitments to protect our environment.

I do not know who makes the argument that an onshore wind turbine or a solar panel is a scar on our natural environment but that fracking—the biggest scar we can inflict on our communities—is not. We should not be fooled. The gases produced by fracking contribute directly to global warming and climate change, the effects of which are not a distant threat but already taking place. In the UK this summer, 28,000 deaths were linked to extreme heat, wildfires destroyed homes and our countryside, and over 25 million people faced restrictions on their water use. We cannot continue to support the energy of the past; we must urgently replace it.

Martin Wrigley (Newton Abbot) (LD): Perhaps my hon. Friend, like me, saw several screenings of "The People's Emergency Briefing" over the summer recess. It paints a devastating picture of what will happen if we continue down this route, and that includes fracking. Does she agree that we need a national briefing to educate people on the issue?

Wera Hobhouse: I thank my hon. Friend for his contribution; I absolutely agree. It is important that people across the country understand why we in Parliament and the UK Government must lead on climate change. Many people are already aware, but a lot of misinformation is being spread around to try to reset the progress we have made. We must not get distracted by the naysayers and the people I call the flat-earthers—I know that is a bit of an insult. This is a science, and we must listen to the science.

Not only does fracking contribute to climate change, but it is very unsustainable in other ways. It demands vast amounts of water, which is completely at odds with public safety and security when droughts are becoming increasingly common. Additionally, as has already been mentioned, the pollutants released from fracking sites affect air and water quality, posing serious health risks to local communities living nearby. Lower-volume fracking is clearly linked to unpredictable earthquakes and poses a serious threat to public safety, yet there are currently multiple proposals for low-volume fracking across Yorkshire and Lincolnshire, and my hon. Friend the Member for Thornbury and Yate has already explained the difference. They cannot be permitted to go ahead.

[Wera Hobhouse]

The current definition of "high-volume fracking" would not even cover the activities of Cuadrilla in the lead-up to the earthquake caused by fracking at its Preston New Road site in Lancashire. That is despite the moratorium being introduced as a consequence of that very earthquake. Fracking is not sustainable and it is not safe. It is incomprehensible that in 2026 it is not banned outright.

The Government's proposal to end new onshore oil and gas licensing is a welcome step in the right direction, but it does not go far enough. It would have no impact on areas that are already licensed for fracking, which would remain covered only by a moratorium that can easily be overturned. It would fail to close the loopholes in the moratorium, where hydraulic fracturing is defined only by high fluid volume thresholds.

The public support a ban on fracking; in fact, when asked to choose, 60% of people would rather have a solar farm nearby than a fracking site—for very good reasons. Labour made its position on fracking clear before it came into power: it pledged in its 2024 manifesto to "ban fracking for good". Yet now they are in power, the Government seem to have forgotten about their pledge.

The energy independence Bill, as has been mentioned, is an opportunity for the Government to honour their promise and deliver a full ban on fracking. The Bill must do three things. First, it must close the loopholes that allow applications for damaging low-volume fracking and other harmful fracking techniques such as acid fracturing. Secondly, it must introduce a permanent ban in law. That would put an end to the current situation, where fracking is permitted because a Minister simply needs to make a statement to reverse the moratorium. Thirdly, the Bill must ensure that a ban on fracking applies to all areas covered by existing licences.

I urge the Government to act now and introduce a full ban on fracking to protect the security, safety and health of the public and our environment.

4.22 pm

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Thornbury and Yate (Claire Young) on securing this debate. As a keen environmentalist, I will speak in support of a full and permanent ban on fracking.

In my constituency, people care deeply about our shared natural environment. They care about access to nature. They care about protecting the landscapes that define our communities. I see that every time I visit the West Pennine moors and enjoy our local landscapes. Those moors and fields are a place of recreation, reflection and escape, and they are part of our local identity in Bolton West. What they are not is a resource to be gambled with in pursuit of a speculative industry that has never enjoyed public support in my constituency.

Way back in 2015, there were demonstrations against fracking in Horwich after the then Conservative Government granted licences to drill there and in Blackrod, Rivington and Belmont. Many of us will remember even larger demonstrations against fracking in neighbouring Lancashire over the years. Local people consistently turned out in their droves because they were worried about the consequences for their communities, their environment and their quality of life.

It is impossible not to mention the extraordinary events of 2022. The then Prime Minister, Liz Truss, effectively turned a vote on fracking into a confidence vote in her own Government. That evening, fracking extracted her from her job far more effectively than it has ever extracted shale gas. Fracking became a symbol of a political establishment refusing to listen to communities and refusing to recognise where public opinion had already moved.

My own concerns have always been primarily environmental and ecological, and these fears are repeatedly raised to this day by my constituents. Indeed, my friend, Horwich resident and long-standing environmental activist Stuart put it more clearly than I would be able to. He told me that, for him, the biggest problem is the toxic chemicals entering the watercourse. That echoes the sentiment rightly expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Alison Hume) earlier in the debate. That captures the heart of the issue. People are worried about the risk of pollution to the water table and the wider environment. Indeed, once groundwater is contaminated, the damage can last for generations.

So let us ask ourselves one simple question today: is fracking really worth it? The reality is that fracking has always asked communities to take environmental risks in exchange for highly uncertain rewards, and the truth is that the country at large has never bought into it.

Chris Kane (Stirling and Strathallan) (Lab): There are those in my constituency who work in the oil and gas industry and those who are pushing for more solar and other renewables, but I am struck by the fact that fracking is the one area where both sides are likely to find agreement. It is not wanted and it is not supported. Does my hon. Friend also find that common ground around fracking in his constituency? Is it evident that no one wants it there either?

Phil Brickell: That opposition to fracking across the divide is certainly something that I see in my mailbox in Bolton West.

My constituents know all about the costs of industrial exploitation. Back in the late 19th century, the north-west was a hotbed of industrial extraction. Coalmining in particular left its mark across the moors and surrounding communities in a way that still scars landscapes and undermines ecological wellbeing. We should not spend the 2020s trying to recreate the energy debates of 50 years ago. Instead, we should be embracing the technologies of the future. That is exactly why I proudly stood on Labour's manifesto commitment to make Britain a clean energy superpower. That is a commitment that this Government are now delivering through their clean power mission and their commitment to legislate for a ban on fracking.

However, the choice is not between fracking and keeping the lights on. The choice is between investing in the industries of the future and clinging to the arguments of the past, and I know which side of that choice my constituents are firmly on. Indeed, just last year, 200 jobs were secured at Hitachi Astemo in Horwich following £100 million of investment. That was investment into the electric vehicle supply chain, turning our back on fracking and embracing the opportunities of the future. That is a powerful vote of confidence in my constituency,

because those are exactly the kinds of jobs we should be championing: high-skilled, high-tech jobs that support clean economic growth while driving the transition to the renewable economy of the future, not jobs in speculative drilling or fossil fuel dependency. We should not be reopening arguments that communities settled many years ago.

After successive record-breaking temperatures and growing evidence of man-made climate change, reducing emissions and accelerating the transition to clean power are not optional but essential. A full ban on fracking protects communities and protects our environment. It protects treasured landscapes such as the West Pennine moors and the surrounding fields. It sends a clear signal that Britain's future lies not beneath the ground in ever-harder-to-reach fossil fuels but in the clean industries, innovation and jobs that will power the decades ahead. For those reasons, I strongly support a full ban on fracking.

4.28 pm

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): Well, this is a fascinating debate, full of nonsense and misinformation. Let us just set the context of what we are talking about, shall we? It is not actually a debate about fracking. It turns out that it is a debate about gas—shale gas, for example. I urge hon. Members in this House and those watching to just ask themselves why everybody in this country is arguing and distressed and concerned about the price of electricity and energy. Why is it that the price of gas in the United States is a mere 20% of the price of gas here in the United Kingdom? Well, I can tell hon. Members: it is because for the last 20-plus years, yes, the United States has been enjoying the benefits of shale gas, which it has extracted through one method, which is called fracking or hydraulic fracking.

Wera Hobhouse: Would the hon. Member give us some figures or comparisons of how much fracked fuel we can produce in this country compared with the United States?

Richard Tice: I am delighted to assist the hon. Lady, who is clearly not informed whatsoever. We have somewhere between 30 years and 50 years of gas for the whole of the United Kingdom available onshore. In Lincolnshire alone—

Wera Hobhouse: Fracked gas?

Richard Tice: Yes, exactly. It may pay the hon. Member to listen. In Lincolnshire alone, there is some 10 years of shale gas—a decade's-worth—for the United Kingdom, and that could generate thousands and thousands of jobs.

The context is very simple. In the United States, fracking has been transformational to the US economy. It is the reason that it has much lower gas prices and much lower electricity prices. In Lincolnshire alone, as I was just explaining, the density of shale gas in the Gainsborough trough is believed to be double that of the most productive shale gas in Pennsylvania of the Marcellus shale. The opportunity is enormous.

Even if hon. Members were to disagree with me completely, which I suspect may be the case, a middle ground might be to say, "Before we make a seismic decision, the answer might be to do a proper test, which could be independently monitored, supervised and checked for, let's say, a year, or two years"—I am a generous man, of course—"and that can then be verified." We could do that with a number of different wells using a number of different techniques, because there are indeed numerous different extraction techniques depending on the depth to which one goes. Some 11 techniques can be counted, including low-volume hydraulic fracking, high-volume hydraulic fracking, and acidic oscillation—on and on the list goes. Why would we be so dogmatic, so stubborn and, bluntly, so negligent against the financial interests and prosperity of all our citizens that we would refuse to use this glorious energy treasure that has made the United States so wealthy?

The potential is enormous: tens and tens of billions of investment into our community; tens and tens and tens, and tens and tens, more billions of tax revenue potential, with enormous community benefits.

Martin Wrigley: I understand that the hon. Gentleman thought the summer, while being the hottest on record, was more of a millionaire's paradise than the awful situation it was for many in our country. Does he not understand the science of climate change that he is encouraging us to continue to aggravate, or is he simply a flat-earther entirely?

Richard Tice: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his contribution, but we have to get real here: the climate has changed for millions of years, and it will continue. There is not a scrap of evidence that all of a sudden, we get to net zero, which is a new concept of about a decade, and that will stop climate change. For example, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change—

Claire Young: Will the hon. Member give way?

Richard Tice: I will come back to the hon. Lady. I am doing well; I am in full flow.

The panel said in its, I think, sixth report that even if we got to net zero tomorrow, it would take somewhere between 200 years in one context and 1,000 years in the other context to make any difference whatsoever to sea level rise—and it did say that with high confidence, which is reassuring. Maybe the smarter thing to do is to adapt to climate change rather than think we can stop it.

Let me come back to the essence of the debate, which is the importance of the decision as to whether we as a nation are prepared to impoverish ourselves by writing off one of the greatest treasure opportunities we have. Almost any other nation in the world that has this energy treasure—quite rightly, quite sensibly, financially and productively—uses that energy treasure. But the mood of this place is, "No, we're going to impoverish ourselves. We're not going to use that treasure. We're going to make people ever poorer because we're going to insist on putting all our bets on renewable energy." We keep being told that renewable energy is going to be cheaper and cheaper, but we now know from the experts that even if the price of gas goes to zero, by the time of the next general election our energy bills will be higher because the cost of renewables is going up and up. And guess what? When the wind does not blow and the sun does not shine, which occasionally happens here in the United Kingdom, we need back-up—it is basic common sense.

Dr Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): The hon. Gentleman has made extraordinary claims about the reserves of shale gas. There are currently no commercially proven reserves of shale gas in the UK, and yet he is suggesting that there are tens of billions at hand just to be plucked. The evidence actually shows that the cost of renewables is going down constantly. I ask him to pay courtesy to the convention of the House that we speak truth in this place and to cite his sources.

Richard Tice: Absolutely, I will cite the sources. Look at everybody's energy bills: they are going up and up, and—

Dr Chowns: No, the sources for your claims about reserves—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. The hon. Lady did point out the conventions and courtesies of the House. She has to ask the hon. Member if he will give way. It might be helpful for everybody if I add that interventions should be through the Chair. Please do not face the back of the Chamber. It makes it incredibly hard for the microphones to pick up comments and, indeed, it is quite discourteous to the Chair to turn your back on me.

Richard Tice: I am most grateful, Madam Deputy Speaker.

The hon. Lady asks a fair question as to the evidence. The evidence is from the experts I have just cited, who say that even if the price of gas goes to zero, our energy bills are going up and up. The next bit of evidence—

Dr Chowns: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Richard Tice: I will carry on, because I am in full flow.

Dr Chowns: I want to clarify the question I actually asked.

Richard Tice: I give way to the hon. Lady.

Dr Chowns: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I am requesting that he cites his sources for the claims he has made as to the reserves of shale gas in this country.

Richard Tice: I was just coming on to that. The British Geological Survey has, for example, made clear estimates that there are vast sums.

Dr Chowns: No!

Richard Tice: No, there have been tests into the Gainsborough trough, which is why I made the claim about the density. Then, of course, there is the evidence of successful businesspeople who invested hundreds of millions of pounds because they had done the geological work and realised that there is a huge opportunity, and they are still there. That is the evidence, because when people are prepared to invest sums of money, we know that they have done the research.

I come back to this point. It is gross negligence of the highest order—frankly, probably of a criminal order—to refuse to even try, and to not even say, "Okay Richard, I disagree with you, but let's have an independent test over a couple of years at a couple of different sites, using a couple of different techniques." Surely that would be the middle ground, because in the event that those on my side of the debate are correct and those on the other side of the debate are incorrect, we would then have taken advantage of this great opportunity.

Wera Hobhouse: Will the hon. Gentleman give way again just once more?

Richard Tice: I am delighted to give way to the hon. Lady.

Wera Hobhouse: In the spirit of co-operation, even if we did this test, could he explain the damage and disruption that would be caused to communities in the UK if we tried on the scale that the US has done, where there are vast amounts of empty country with no people disrupted by fracking? Can he explain how that compares and how disruptive it would be for our communities in the UK?

Richard Tice: I would be delighted to. The hon. Lady makes an excellent point. There are some 20 million people in the United States who live within 1 mile of fracking pads, shale gas pads or whatever one might wish to call them. I have seen the numerous nodding donkeys—oil drilling wells—in my county of Lincolnshire. You would not know they are there because they are hidden behind trees. Contrary to what some Members have said in the debate, the reality is that once a shale gas well is drilled, you barely know it exists. A well is a couple of metres high and there can be 10 pads on a site that is the size of about two football pitches—behind trees, so no one would even know that they are there.

The misinformation, the false information and the deliberate nonsense being peddled is depriving this great country of the opportunity to reduce our bills. If we carry on as we are, then our bills will be going up and up and up. Indeed, just today, we have heard that the forecast increase in bills for, I think, January will be at least 15%. We should at least have the courage to explore some alternatives.

I need to deal with the whole issue of seismicity—some people call it "earthquakes"—which is a very scary-sounding thing. At the Preston New Road site near Blackpool, there was a limit of just 0.5 on the Richter scale. Now, because the Richter scale is logarithmic, 0.5 is the equivalent of one of the Clerks of the House gently moving their chair backwards and standing up as they leave at the end of the day—that is 0.5. Hon. Members might like to imagine standing up with a melon in their hand, holding it to shoulder height and then dropping it in front of them—that would be about 1.5 on the Richter scale. A bus driving past your house would be in the order of 2.5, which is about the equivalent of the sort of limits applied to construction sites. We need some appropriate context and understanding as to the realities of the situation.

The opportunities here must be worth at least exploring. I fully accept that there are those who have a different view to me on issues around renewables, but we can all agree that diversity can be a wonderful thing—diversity of technologies and sources. Maybe one day—I am 62, Madam Deputy Speaker, so maybe after I am long

dead—renewables might be cheaper, but at the moment that is not the evidence. The evidence in the United States is that shale gas is driving bills all the way down.

Alison Hume: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that he is somewhat a voice in the wilderness? Fracking is unpopular with Reform voters—they do not want it. I am speaking in this debate to represent my constituents in Scarborough and Whitby, but can he honestly say that he is doing the same for his in Boston and Skegness?

Richard Tice: I can absolutely say that to the hon. Lady and to the good constituents across Lincolnshire. Rather than arrogantly in this place just thinking, "We're going to ban this process across the whole of the United Kingdom," given that the new Prime Minister is keen on devolution, maybe this decision could be devolved to individual counties that have the energy treasure? Maybe there will be the joy of Lincolnshire gas for Lincolnshire jobs for Lincolnshire growth? It is like a patriotic dream in the great county of Lincolnshire.

Chris Kane: If such a decision were devolved and, even in a devolved world, the entire country said, "We do not want fracking in all of our devolved places," how would the hon. Gentleman feel about it then?

Richard Tice: At least I would have put forward my argument to everybody and people would have had an individual choice, as opposed to what feels to me like an overarching umbrella of "No! You naughty, naughty children—you must not consider this," even though the evidence around world is that, actually, where there is cheap gas, guess what? There is higher GDP growth per person.

It is so important that people understand this. In the '80s and '90s, our energy use per person increased by some 20%, but in the last 20 years our energy use per person has tragically declined by some 20%. Meanwhile, our GDP per person has collapsed: in the '80s and '90s growth in GDP was over 3% per person per year, but now it is just about 0.5% per person per year. Maybe there is a direct link between the growth in electricity and energy prices because of renewables in the past 10 to 15 years and the decline in growth?

Before this House considers a full ban, I feel that it has not properly explored all the options and its ability to do an impact assessment—a popular phrase in this place. Let us have an impact assessment by having some independently monitored and supervised shale gas wells using different techniques and at different depths. With that full information, this House could then come back and make a decision to devolve or to make a national decision. I will conclude there.

4.44 pm

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): It is 100 days until Christmas, Madam Deputy Speaker, and in the last 15 to 20 minutes we have just had a little glimpse into pantomime season.

Let me move on to business. Decades of Governments taking wrong political decisions have made climate change not just an environmental emergency, but a crisis rooted in social and economic inequality. Major oil and gas corporations made nearly $93 billion in profits in the second quarter of 2026. Saudi Aramco made $33 billion in net income. ExxonMobil made $14.5 billion in profit. Shell's net income was just under $10 billion, and BP made quarterly profits of nearly $6 billion. This is an international oligarchy benefiting from war and conflict, holding Government and citizens hostage just so that record profits can be made. That rampant capitalism has created dire economic inequality and growing poverty, and it is ultimately leading to climate destruction.

Companies that want to frack care only about making profit and pursuing shareholder dividends; they certainly do not care about workers or communities. The need for a change in political direction could not be greater. Climate protection, environmental sustainability and the provision of a genuinely just transition for workers and communities all demand the restructuring of our economy. We absolutely do not need fracking; we need a green industrial revolution, and Grangemouth in my constituency is the ideal location to house it.

I am in complete agreement with the new Prime Minister's diagnosis of the societal consequences of mass deindustrialisation and deregulation. We have seen working-class communities and ex-industrial heartlands decimated. I have been heartened in these last couple of weeks that the Prime Minister has made enthusiastic contributions at the Dispatch Box about a future for sustainable aviation fuel in Grangemouth.

Chris Kane: My hon. Friend makes a good point about renewables at Grangemouth. Does he agree that the regional economic potential of the Forth valley, which includes my constituency, has Grangemouth as a key component? It is huge. Fracking is not the future that Grangemouth, the Forth valley or the wider country wants or supports.

Brian Leishman: My hon. Friend and constituency neighbour is 100% correct. That is exactly the sort of action we all need at Grangemouth and in the wider Forth valley area, which he so ably represents.

Let me focus just on my community, which has been the victim of corporations amassing phenomenal wealth on the back of the talent and skill of workers. Those corporations then decide to move on, which means mass redundancies, and leave behind an asset-stripped community. I say to the Minister that our Labour Government have the chance to change that. Let us move away from fossil fuels and fracking and instead accelerate building the renewables industry in Grangemouth. Let us use state funds, such as the £200 million dedicated from the National Wealth Fund and set aside to finance the green industrial revolution. Quite frankly, that money has sat untouched for far too long.

We could do something amazing in Grangemouth. We could combine the pressing need of the environmental agenda that is upon us with providing genuine social justice. Now it is time for a little more socialism: the Government could take some form of ownership of these new industries, which is a popular policy among the general public. We could create new, green, well-paid, secure jobs, and apprenticeships that would transform the life chances of local young people. With public ownership, we could reinvest profits back into the local Grangemouth community, regenerating and re-energising life in the town and lifting living standards for generations

[Brian Leishman]

to come. That is the sort of corporate social responsibility that has been so missing in recent times from Grangemouth industry.

I have said many times—and you have heard me say this many times, Madam Deputy Speaker—that Grangemouth is a blank canvas for us to build something truly special. The crucial question is: what kind of country do we want to live in? Is it one that continues to allow oligarchs and international capital to exploit people, place and planet, or do we use politics—our opportunity in government—to be bold and transformative? I say to the Minister: let us build Grangemouth for the future in the image of a Labour Government who want the best for workers and communities, let us make Grangemouth the example—the shining example—of what can be done and let us do it quickly.

4.51 pm

Dr Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Alloa and Grangemouth (Brian Leishman), who made a passionate and utterly convincing case for the need for a green energy revolution and the benefits it would provide not only environmentally, but socially for the communities we are here to represent. We have heard fantastic arguments from across the House for a full ban on fracking. It is not just about the earthquake risks and the environmental damage to local communities, or because it is completely publicly unpopular, as the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Alison Hume) pointed out. British citizens do not want fracking, and banning fracking fully is a very popular policy. Fundamentally, however, there is one key reason why we must have a full ban on fracking, which is that we must keep fossil fuels in the ground. We know that we live in a hugely warming world.

Douglas Lumsden (Aberdeen South) (Con): I understand the hon. Member's view about leaving fossil fuels in the ground, but does she not agree that, while we still need fossil fuels, it is much better for jobs, for the environment and even for the Exchequer that we produce our own oil and gas rather than rely on imports from elsewhere?

Dr Chowns: Fossil fuels are traded globally. If we open up new production of fossil fuels, the reality is that that will do nothing for bills, do almost nothing for energy security and be a complete distraction from the investments we must make in the transition to the clean, green, renewable energy future that is our only hope of a sustainable economy not just in the long term, but in the short and medium terms. These are the industries of the future, and people who argue that we should continue to invest in typewriters during the era of the personal computer or continue to invest in horses and carriages during the era of the car are simply stuck in the past. We cannot continue to have our heads in the sand.

Richard Tice: Talking of having heads in the sand, I think the hon. Lady has just agreed that it would be better to send our money overseas, send our skills overseas and send our jobs overseas, and to literally be impoverished in a tent on a sandbag with our heads in the sand. Is that really the future she wants?

Dr Chowns: No, that is a complete mischaracterisation of my argument. We know, for example, that Jackdaw would generate 27 jobs—the number of people who fit on the top of a double-decker bus.

Richard Tice: Seriously?

Dr Chowns: Yes, seriously. I can give the hon. Member the reference, unlike for the extraordinary statistics he cited in his speech, which apparently have no basis in actual evidence. Fundamentally, we have to stop pouring fossil fuel on the fire of the climate crisis, and that means we need a full ban on fracking.

Wera Hobhouse: Is it not true that, in the end, this is a choice? It is not the case that we invest large amounts of public money in the transition to net zero and nothing in the oil and gas industry. Is it not true that our energy bills are subsidised, and that we are subsidising the oil and gas industry? It is therefore a distraction to say, "Renewables are very expensive, so we need to subsidise them, whereas oil and gas are not expensive." That argument is completely wrong, because we publicly subsidise oil and gas.

Dr Chowns: It is indeed true that there is considerable public subsidy for oil and gas, as well as revenues from the windfall taxes. As the hon. Member for Alloa and Grangemouth pointed out, the fossil fuel companies are making tens of billions of pounds in profit, which is raked in from consumers.

Fundamentally, renewables are the cheap, clean, green energy of the future, and we need to shift in that direction as quickly as possible. We are here talking about fracking, but there is no commercially viable shale gas reserve in the entirety of the UK.

Richard Tice: Nonsense!

Dr Chowns: No, the argument that there is commercially viable production is a nonsense. The hon. Member should look at the information from the British Geological Survey.

Richard Tice: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Dr Chowns: I have already given way to the hon. Gentleman and several other people, so I will move to my conclusion.

Fundamentally, we are living in a burning world. The 11 hottest years on record were the past 11 years. The three hottest years on record were the past three years. The trajectory is going up and up, and this is not just a question of graphs on paper and reports from the World Meteorological Organisation; we are feeling it in our communities. The Prime Minister, when he considers decisions on things like fracking, should listen to communities in places such as Stourbridge, West Sussex and Stoke-on-Trent, where people have had their homes burned by wildfires that have been supercharged by the climate change that is already built in. It would be utterly irresponsible to pour yet more fuel on the fire of climate crisis.

We need to recognise the reality that is hitting us in the face: a barrelling and accelerating climate crisis. We need to do everything we can to change direction, and the very least of those things has to be a full ban on fracking. Can the Minister confirm that when the energy

independence Bill comes to this House after the recess, it will include a fulfilment of the Government's previous promise to implement a full and statutory ban on fracking that cannot simply be overturned by ministerial diktat? Will he apply the ban to existing licences? We have to leave fossil fuels in the ground and supercharge our transition to the green, clean energy revolution, which is the only fundamental basis for a sustainable and prosperous future for all of the UK.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): That brings us to the Front-Bench contributions. I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

4.57 pm

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Thornbury and Yate (Claire Young) for securing this vital debate with the backing of the Backbench Business Committee.

I am very far from being an elder of this House, but I am among the minority of Members who saw the end of the Liz Truss premiership during the last Parliament. That period is most associated with the Truss-Kwarteng mini-Budget, but as the hon. Member for Bolton West (Phil Brickell) pointed out, it should really go down in history for its association with fracking. What few people recall is that the Truss era fractured, gave out volatile gases and combusted on 19 October 2022 with a Conservative party rebellion over the Ban on Fracking for Shale Gas Bill. Forty Conservative MPs did not vote with their Government against an Opposition motion to ban fracking. Some Conservative MPs abstained because they were not in the House, but others abstained as a matter of principle, and I commend them. They included the former Minister Chris Skidmore, who was one of those principled MPs who would never vote in support of such a proposal. I want to set out why the rebels were right. It is fair to say that the moratorium is insufficient on two grounds: first because it is inadequate, and secondly because of climate change more broadly.

The moratorium came into effect in 2019 after serious concerns were raised about how fracking could cause damage to nature and our communities. However, a ban might not cover all forms of fracking and could potentially leave significant loopholes if that is not addressed. The hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Alison Hume) made an excellent speech, and I completely agree with her that at the moment we see the exclusion of small-scale fracking, often referred to as proppant squeeze. The guidelines in the Petroleum Act 1998 are outdated, defining the fracturing of rock for shale gas as involving

"the injection of…more than 1,000 cubic metres of fluid at each stage…of the hydraulic fracturing".

We need that loophole to be closed and a proper ban to be introduced.

In 2019 the Preston New Road fracking site in Lancashire recorded more than 120 seismic events. The British Geological Survey typically detects between 200 and 300 earthquakes across the country across the whole year. Before the fracking moratorium came into effect, drilling licences over shale gas reserves were issued across 127 constituencies in England and Wales, and there is a risk that communities will suffer from not just the seismic activity, but the polluted groundwater and the damage to natural habitats that flows from it. A full ban on fracking would provide certainty to our communities. The Minister for Energy has previously argued that the Government would need "objective evidence" in order to close those loopholes and include low-volume fracking in the ban. What additional evidence do the Government need?

There is large support in this country for a full ban on fracking—almost half the country believes we should not be fracking, and less than 30% of the British population support it. It can lead to water scarcity and risks polluting our air, our soil, our health and our biodiversity. Green space and nature are an intrinsic part of life in the UK, and we should be protecting our wildlife with everything we have. Ministers have previously suggested that all forms of fracking would be considered within the scope of a ban, and the former Energy Secretary, the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Ed Miliband), told the 2025 Labour party conference:

"Let's ban fracking and send the frackers packing."

I welcome the point made by the hon. Member for Alloa and Grangemouth (Brian Leishman), who reminded us of some of the traditional Labour arguments about social justice, but also that they could apply to creating new jobs in new industries.

What the public do support is action to mitigate the harmful effects of climate change. Eight in 10 people say that they are concerned about climate change—they want a transition to clean energy. In mid and east Devon, protecting our natural environment is a priority for thousands of people who have corresponded with me on the subject. Reports of nature in decline, and of the loss of our precious wildlife and biodiversity, are very concerning to them. I hope that this debate will not only protect communities from the damage of fracking now but, in a small way, help to protect future generations from the worst impacts of climate change. The hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Dr Chowns) talked about the need to keep fossil fuels in the ground. We have just seen the hottest average summer temperatures on record, which are around 130 times more likely because of human-induced climate change.

Last year, 47% of all the electricity generated in the UK was generated from renewable sources. That represents a fourfold increase in renewables since 2012, far in advance of the pace of progress that was forecast. Yes, we will continue to need some oil and gas in the years to come, but why would anyone want us to hitch ourselves to the slow wagons—of which fracking is one—as other countries gallop away behind the technologies of the future?

Douglas Lumsden: The hon. Member has agreed that we will need oil and gas for years to come, so can he clarify the Liberal Democrats' position? Do they support Rosebank and Jackdaw? Do they support new licences? Do they support jobs up in Aberdeen?

Richard Foord: I know that this is a local matter for the hon. Member, so he will be interested in my response. The Liberal Democrats are concerned about emissions resulting from the greater extraction of fossil fuels, both in UK waters and around the world. For oil in particular, the extraction exercise is pointless, given that we are exporting it so that other countries can refine it and take profits from it.

[Richard Foord]

The hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Richard Tice) referred to a similar point, and he made repeated references to treasure. For those who know the story "Treasure Island", he is the Squire John Trelawney of this House: a rich landowner who pays for the ship, but talks too much and trusts the wrong people.

There is a real danger that investment in fracking will be a catastrophic mistake, as the fuels, facilities and resources become stranded assets. There is a real risk that they will lose their value prematurely as the tide of renewable technology advances around them. To finish where I started, I am concerned about the Conservative party's journey towards political extinction. Polling suggests that support for any fracking is a complete misreading of where our constituents are. We Liberal Democrats could quietly gloat that the Conservative party has misread the room and enjoy the electoral dividends that that brings, but we would much rather that it returned to the consensus. Climate change is one of the gravest issues that our generation of politicians has been sent to this House to tackle. Let us not make a catastrophic mistake.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the shadow Minister.

5.6 pm

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): May I first congratulate the hon. Member for Thornbury and Yate (Claire Young) on securing today's debate? As we have heard in a number of speeches today, including from the hon. Members for Scarborough and Whitby (Alison Hume), for Bath (Wera Hobhouse), for Bolton West (Phil Brickell), for North Herefordshire (Dr Chowns) and others, there are a range of strongly held views about fracking. Those are not least concerns about the distinction between high and low-volume fracking, the environmental impacts, seismic activity and the wider impacts of onshore gas production on local communities. I start by acknowledging that view. Local communities, particularly rural communities, too often find themselves the hosts for onshore infrastructure, whether that is for energy, mining or transport projects. It is critical that these communities have a say, should any proposals for fracking projects come forward.

There are, as we have heard, mixed views on the suitability and capability of onshore fracking in the UK, so instead of us here deciding whether the UK has viable reserves that can be fracked, I will instead touch on two broader principles that we should all be considering when discussing not just fracking, but any industry.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): The shadow Minister is talking about principles, and the hon. Member for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord) has reminded us of some principled Conservative Back Benchers who rebelled against the Liz Truss Government to block plans for fracking. We have also heard the Leader of the Opposition's view that any Conservative who wishes to stand as an MP for her party must reject net zero. Can the Minister confirm whether Conservative MPs who are opposed to fracking are welcome in the Leader of the Opposition's Conservative party?

Harriet Cross: After that very long intervention, we finally got to the point. We are not opposed to net zero; we are opposed to a 2050 net zero target, which makes the country weaker and poorer and costs jobs, particularly in my constituency in north-east Scotland.

Returning to the principles that I was talking about, it is right that, where possible, countries utilise their own resources. That is a fundamental part of a country's national security. Whether it is jobs, investment, industrial capability or resource security, ensuring a domestic supply of crucial materials and products should be a concern for all Governments. That is becoming ever more pressing in a world that is increasingly uncertain, and where the flow of goods and products is becoming less predictable than we have known for decades.

The second principle, which I think only one Member touched on today, is market forces. It is not for us sitting here to tell the market whether an industry is commercially viable. Private companies with private money or bank financing looking to invest in a range of competing opportunities will decide that. The reason I mention this is relevant, because whether fracking is or is not banned is only half the story. If it is permitted but companies cannot make it viable, it will not happen, and that is a genuine concern. The amount of reserves we have in the UK and the viability of producing them remain an open question.

Richard Tice: On that point, surely the fact that companies have already invested more than £200 million in the potential for shale gas onshore proves that they believe the reserves are very considerable.

Harriet Cross: As I have said, private companies will invest where they see opportunities. They will risk their money how they want, and it is up to them to either gain or lose in the investments that they make.

A secure domestic supply of gas is a crucial consideration when it comes to our energy security. I want to see the UK safeguarded with a domestic supply of gas, which we use and need every day. However, there is a viable gas source that does not need onshore fracking, a source that has been producing in the North sea and safely entering our gas grid for decades. Today we are discussing whether fracking should be banned, but we should be more concerned about the Government's hostile policies when it comes to North sea oil and gas production.

Let us take Jackdaw, a gasfield that could produce enough gas to power 1.4 million homes in the UK this winter—about 6% of our gas needs. Those who are worried about onshore fracking should reflect on the fact that there is a choice here, because they cannot be against all sources of gas. Would they prefer gas from Jackdaw or another North sea gasfield, gas from onshore fracked resources, or imports of liquefied natural gas? The option is not "no gas"; it is just a question of where the gas comes from.

Wera Hobhouse: Is it not true that delaying the transition—the hon. Lady does not want to accept a delay until 2050, but whatever the delay may be—will make energy more expensive for our citizens? Is it therefore not highly irresponsible to delay something that we need when it will cost our citizens more in the long term?

Harriet Cross: What is important here is the reality and, as the Prime Minister said, being pragmatic. Some 24 million homes in the UK use gas, and that situation cannot change overnight. Whether or not we ban our own gas, that need does not change. The demand is what is important, not the supply. The demand is what will, or will not, dictate any sort of target or progression to other energy sources.

I think the crucial question hanging over us in this debate is "Why?" Why is there a desire for a full fracking ban? Is it a concern about the environment—about seismic activity? Yes, I am sure that is part of it, but I expect it is more a continuation of the hostile attitude—an attitude to which we have become all too accustomed—towards UK oil and gas production. Let us put the merits of fracking as a means of production to one side. It cannot, or at least should not, be denied that the UK's producing its own resources where at all possible—be they gas, oil, food, cement or steel; the list goes on—is a good thing. It is good for jobs, good for skills, good for investment, good for security of supply, good for industrialisation, and good for national security.

Phil Brickell: If the domestic production of gas is so fantastic for the UK economy, why did successive Conservative Governments massively constrain the amount of gas that can be stored in this country to prevent the huge fluctuations in price that we see?

Harriet Cross: Because, unlike this Labour Government, we were not banning new production from the North sea, so we would have had a flow of gas from there.

Let us be serious. No one who has expressed concern today about the loophole in the moratorium needs to fear, because there is no way that this Labour Government are going to use any loophole that might mean more UK gas production. Their record offshore shows that their plan is incoherent and self-defeating. They would prefer to ban new licences to rely on more imports. They would prefer to tax the industry so highly that investment is drying up and moving abroad at the expense of jobs and livelihoods here in the UK. They would prefer to pay Norway £20 billion every year to import gas from there instead of from the North sea. Just today, they have decided to put votes in a by-election ahead of permitting Jackdaw, and presumably Rosebank, before those results.

And what is the result of all that? The UK will import more LNG, which is more carbon intensive and which, with relevance to this debate, largely derives from fracked shale gas. So it is not true to say that Labour, the Liberal Democrats or the Greens oppose fracking, the same as it is not true to say that they oppose oil and gas. What they oppose is producing gas here in the UK, and therefore they oppose oil and gas jobs here in the UK.

Yes, this debate today is about fracking, but the more pressing issue is protecting the UK's established oil and gas sector: its jobs, its supply chain and the expertise that is disappearing. The steps the Government can take to do that are simple; indeed, the Conservatives have set them out many times. We must end the ban on new licences, permit Jackdaw and Rosebank, end the energy profits levy and get Britain drilling again.

5.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Martin McCluskey): I thank the hon. Member for Thornbury and Yate (Claire Young) for bringing this debate to the House this afternoon, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting it.

After the hottest summer on record, I would argue that the need for climate action is more acute than ever. We have seen really visibly this summer why it is so necessary, so I have to start by saying that what we have heard from the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Richard Tice) astounds me. He asked the question: who would forgive us? The question I would put back to him is this: who will forgive us if we, as he has done, deny the climate science? Who will forgive us if we fail to plan for a transition that is happening now—not in years to come—and on which work and jobs rely? And who will forgive us if we pass on to our children, grandchildren and the next generation a world that is worse than the one we inherited? To me, that is the question that sits at the heart of this debate. There may be parts of the debate where we disagree—even those of us who agree on the climate science—but on the basics of climate science, there is much that we can agree on.

It is important that the House, industry, communities and the wider public have clarity on the Government's position on this issue, the evidence base behind it and the safeguards that apply, so let me remind the House of our position. It comes in three parts: first, a clear commitment to ban fracking for shale gas; secondly, the distinction between that activity and low-volume hydraulic fracturing techniques used in conventional oil and gas operations, and, as the hon. Lady acknowledged in her speech, other industries such as geothermal; and thirdly, the broader reality that the benefits of getting off the fossil fuel rollercoaster significantly outweigh the cost, with clean energy providing cheaper power, travel and homes for our country.

The Government have been clear in our commitment to ban hydraulic fracturing for shale gas, commonly known as fracking. There is currently no fracking for shale gas anywhere in the United Kingdom. Many Members across the House, including my hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Alison Hume), asked about the energy independence Bill. The Bill was announced in the King's Speech and will meet our commitment to not issue new licences to explore new fields—onshore and offshore—including those that could be used for fracking for shale gas. That will deliver on our commitment in law to ban fracking.

The effective moratorium on fracking for shale gas in England remains in place for existing licences because of concerns about the prediction and management of induced seismicity. Those concerns are not minor and not theoretical. In all three instances of fracking for shale gas in the UK, there was evidence of induced seismicity, including earthquakes strong enough to be felt by surrounding communities. Where communities have concerns about safety, environmental protection and local impacts, the Government have a responsibility to proceed cautiously and transparently.

Fracking for shale gas is used where gas is located within very small pores of shale rock and it cannot be extracted without repeatedly fracturing the rock. It

[Martin McCluskey]

typically requires injecting high volumes of fluid and propane at high pressure and at multiple points in a horizontal well to create high numbers of fractures extending hundreds of metres into the shale.

Martin Wrigley: Does the Minister agree that not only did the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Richard Tice) exaggerate the amount of available gas that might be in the UK—less than 10% of such gas is usually recovered, and that normally trails off after a year—but that such gas is not actually pulled out of the ground by nodding donkeys? Typically, a structure called a Christmas tree is used, not the nodding donkeys described by the hon. Gentleman.

Martin McCluskey: I agree with much of what the hon. Gentleman said. I would also say that we are not Pennsylvania or Texas; we are the United Kingdom, and we will operate on the basis of our national interest, energy security and national security.

The process of high-impact fracking can lead to seismic activity that can be felt on the surface. It differs considerably from the proppant squeeze used in conventional gas extraction and in geothermal, which uses smaller amounts of fluid to improve the production rate of gas in non-shale rock types. The Government's commitment is directed at hydraulic fracturing for shale gas, where the combination of geology, the scale of the fracturing network, the fluid volume and the operational design has raised specific concerns.

I will say a little more about some of the other issues raised by hon. Members. We recognise that there are some concerns about low-volume hydraulic fracturing techniques, such as proppant or acid squeezes used in conventional, non-shale oil and gas operations. I am at pains to say that this is not the same as hydraulic fracturing for shale gas extraction, and it is not associated with the same safety issues.

Alison Hume: Does the Minister accept that using proppant squeeze is a loophole, because the industry has started using it to get round the moratorium, and therefore it needs to be included in any ban?

Martin McCluskey: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. In her introduction to the debate, the hon. Member for Thornbury and Yate raised the point about geothermal. The specific issues relating to high-intensity hydraulic fracturing that we have seen have been in shale, not in the types of fracturing used in conventional oil and gas, which are also used in geothermal. There has been some division across the House this afternoon: there was a suggestion from the Liberal Democrat Benches that we use a definition linked only to oil and gas, thus keeping geothermal out of it; there were suggestions from elsewhere that a full ban may also impact on uses such as geothermal. That points to why we have to be careful and specific about what it is we are trying to achieve.

Low-volume hydraulic fracturing has been happening in the UK for decades. It has been used not just in respect of oil and gas but in the water industry and geothermal. In that time, there has been no clear evidence that it induces seismicity that can be felt on the surface. Low-volume hydraulic fracturing operations are routinely used in conventional oil and gas operations. They target different types of rocks, create fractures close to the wellbore and are typically short, single-stage operations, as opposed to the continuous fracturing characteristic of shale gas fracking.

In practical terms, those operations are limited in scale and purpose. They are designed to improve flow from an existing conventional reservoir, not to fracture large areas of shale rock. They do not involve the same high-volume, multi-stage process associated with shale gas fracking, and they have not produced the same evidence of induced seismicity. Furthermore, all such activities are subject to a robust regulatory regime.

The hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) and my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Phil Brickell) spoke about safety. Operators must obtain planning permission, environmental permits and health and safety approvals before proceeding, covering issues such as groundwater protection, management of emissions, handling of fluids and waste, and monitoring requirements. Where health and safety approvals are required, operators must meet the standards expected for well integrity and operational safety. Planning processes also provide a route for local impacts to be considered before activities proceed. We recognise the strong interest that Members expressed in the Burniston application, for which the planning authority has now refused permission.

Let me be absolutely clear: there is no loophole and no hidden route by which shale gas fracking can resume. The evidence-based policy position is clear, the effective moratorium remains in place, and the Government will not issue new onshore licences in England, including those that could be used for fracking for shale gas. That is the reassurance that communities across the country are entitled to hear.

Finally, I will turn to the wider arguments sometimes made about energy security and domestic production. Some, like the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness, who spent his speech denying the climate science, suggest that fracking for shale gas would strengthen our energy independence or reduce consumer bills. However, oil and gas are traded on the international markets, as has been mentioned by a number of hon. Members, and increasing domestic production would not shield consumers from global price volatility.

Richard Tice: I just need to clarify for the hon. Member for Newton Abbot (Martin Wrigley) that when I referred to nodding donkeys, I specifically said oil wells. I hope that helps him.

With regard to the price of gas, can the Minister explain why the wholesale price of gas in the United States is 80% cheaper than the wholesale price in the United Kingdom? That completely undermines what he has just said. The Minister has inadvertently misled the House, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Martin McCluskey: Absolutely not. As I said a moment ago, we are not the United States; we are not Pennsylvania or Texas. It is a different energy market. There is nothing to suggest that the extraction of shale gas in this country would reduce the cost of energy, just as there is no evidence to suggest that extracting more oil and gas from the North sea would reduce the cost of energy, if that is the point the hon. Gentleman was making.

Douglas Lumsden: Does the Minister agree that if we produce our own oil and gas, that gives the Exchequer more money? If the Government want then to use that to take money off people's bills, that is up to them.

Martin McCluskey: That is a different argument to the one the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness was making. What is clear is that it will not directly reduce the cost of energy in this country.

Recent years have shown that the answer is not to double down on fossil fuel production, but to reduce our dependence on those markets over time through clean, home-grown energy, as my hon. Friend the Member for Alloa and Grangemouth (Brian Leishman) set out in his speech. That will ensure that our oil and gas workers and supply chains benefit from the clean energy transition and that we support prosperity, jobs, economic growth, communities and energy security. This Government's approach is both clear and pragmatic: ending new licences and introducing transitional energy certificates, maintaining the effective moratorium and accelerating the transition to clean, home-grown energy that improves resilience, supports jobs, reduces emissions and gives consumers greater protections from global price shocks.

The House should be in no doubt. Our position is evidence based, and it is clear: we will not issue new onshore licences in England, and we will maintain the effective moratorium on fracking for shale gas, because the concerns that led to it have not been resolved. Together, these measures will ensure that fracking for shale gas is not taking place in England. We will continue to ensure that conventional oil and gas activities are properly distinguished, properly regulated and properly scrutinised. That is the responsible course of action for communities, for consumers and for our climate commitments, and for the country's long-term energy security.

5.27 pm

Claire Young: I would like to thank all the Back Benchers who have spoken in this debate. When the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Alison Hume) talked about how proppant squeeze is being used for fracking, I was minded to say "a rose by any other name", but fracking is certainly not sweet. My hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) and the hon. Members for Bolton West (Phil Brickell) and for North Herefordshire (Dr Chowns) all made good arguments about climate change and other environmental concerns, and the hon. Member for Alloa and Grangemouth (Brian Leishman) set out the need for a green industrial revolution.

I do not have time to dissect in detail the speech made by the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Richard Tice). I am concerned that he may be suffering from amnesia. He seems to think that the recognition of the need for climate action is new, when it was in fact recognised back in the 1980s, including by such left-wing icons as Margaret Thatcher. He seems to have forgotten about the decades of testing on fracking that have already taken place. He either refuses to admit or does not realise that the geological situation in America is vastly different as well. Shale gas in the UK is deeper, is faulted and is contained in much more complex geological settings.

Fracking will never shift a price set on global markets and it will never be worth the earthquakes, the polluted water and the broken trust it leaves behind. This country was promised an end to fracking—it is time to deliver it.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the potential merits of a full ban on fracking.

Sepsis Awareness Month

5.30 pm

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con) [R]: I beg to move,

That this House has considered World Sepsis Awareness Month.

As co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on sepsis, I would like to begin by expressing my gratitude to the Backbench Business Committee for granting time for this debate. To the best of my knowledge, this is the very first debate in the House of Commons Chamber dedicated to sepsis. In the past, this devastating condition has been discussed only in Westminster Hall debates or raised through brief interventions and questions. Having sepsis debated on the Floor of the main Chamber during Sepsis Awareness Month is a major milestone, not only for Parliament but for the clinicians, charities and bereaved families across the country who have campaigned tirelessly to bring this condition out of the shadows.

I would also like to thank the co-sponsors of this debate: the hon. Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson), who cannot be here this afternoon but who led an important Westminster Hall debate on this subject two years ago, and the hon. Member for Dartford (Jim Dickson), vice-chair of the APPG.

Sepsis strikes indiscriminately, ruthlessly and with terrifying speed, without regard for background, class or, indeed, political allegiance. It is vital that we all stand united in our determination to tackle this deadly condition. It is a challenge that completely transcends party politics.

On Sunday, communities across the world marked World Sepsis Day. The international theme for this year could not be more apt: "Invest in Sepsis—Save Lives." The World Health Organisation recognises sepsis as one of the leading causes of death and disability globally, estimating that sepsis-related illnesses account for one in every five deaths worldwide. In the United Kingdom, NHS England has made it clear that sepsis claims more lives each year than lung cancer and represents the second biggest killer in our hospitals after cardiovascular disease.

Every single year, an estimated 245,000 people in the UK develop sepsis and, tragically, more than 48,000 lose their lives. That is a higher annual death toll than bowel, breast and prostate cancers combined. Behind every one of those figures is a family left grieving and asking the same agonising question: what if? What if the symptoms had been recognised an hour earlier? What if antibiotics had been administered sooner? What if someone had simply asked, "Could it be sepsis?"?

Madam Deputy Speaker, as you know, I do not approach this debate purely as a parliamentarian dispassionately analysing policy responses to one of the leading causes of avoidable death. I stand in this Chamber today because almost a decade ago, by the grace of God and the extraordinary skill and care of NHS staff, my life was saved.

In January 2017, I was a relatively fit and active 40-year-old Member of Parliament. I had developed what I assumed was merely a winter infection. Like many people would, I assumed that I could push through it, take some paracetamol and carry on working. I travelled out to Strasbourg to take part in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe on the Sunday evening, but within days my condition collapsed. An ordinary throat infection triggered a catastrophic immune response. My body, in attempting to fight the infection, began attacking its own tissues and organs.

By Thursday, after seeing a French GP, I flew back to Britain. On Friday, I attended the official launch of the local enterprise zone that I had campaigned hard for in my constituency, but as soon as I arrived there I was so ill that I had to rest in the back room. On Saturday morning, I got out of bed, started putting my suit on over my pyjamas and told my wife Laura that I had to come down to Westminster to vote. Like many in politics, my behaviour can at times appear to some people to be a little idiosyncratic; fortunately, Laura realised that, even for a Member of Parliament, that was not entirely normal behaviour.

Laura rushed me to Russells Hall hospital in Dudley, where my blood pressure plummeted into septic shock and my organs began shutting down. My life was hanging by a thread. The medical team had to place me in a medically induced coma. Doctors told my family that my chances of pulling through were no better than one in 10.

For 11 days, I lay in intensive care on life support—or, as my family sometimes remind me, I slept through the difficult bits. When I did finally wake up, my muscles had wasted away—I could barely lift my arms, let alone stand or walk—but it could easily have been so much worse. What if Laura had left me to get some rest that Saturday morning while she took our daughter to her dance class? Above all, what if the nurse who examined me at the accident and emergency department had not had the insight to check whether the symptoms, which could easily have been mistaken for other illnesses such as flu or meningitis, might be sepsis? I owe a debt of gratitude to the doctors, intensive care nurses and other staff at Russells Hall hospital that I can never repay, but as long as I have the honour of serving in this House, I will use my voice to fight for sepsis patients and their families.

There is a common misconception that sepsis is primarily the result of hospital-acquired infection, but the evidence demonstrates the exact opposite. A major 2024 population study led by Professor van Staa, analysing linked primary care and hospital data in England, showed that the vast majority of sepsis cases are community acquired, developing in homes, workplaces and local communities long before a patient reaches an acute hospital bed. That research also uncovered deep health inequalities in sepsis risk.

The risk of developing sepsis is significantly heightened by socioeconomic deprivation, by frailty, by being housebound and by chronic conditions such as cancer, diabetes and learning disabilities. Exposure to antibiotics in the previous two months was also identified as a strong risk factor. While ethnicity was not an independent biological factor, black and Asian individuals suffer from a higher prevalence of predisposing conditions including diabetes, chronic liver disease and severe anaemia, which puts them at a greater risk, so tackling sepsis is not merely a technical, clinical issue but a fundamental challenge of health inequality and community prevention.

One of the most critical clinical lessons learned in recent years is the direct link between viral infections and sepsis. For decades, the public and the medical

community viewed sepsis almost exclusively as a bacterial complication, but the covid-19 pandemic demonstrated that viral infections can trigger the exact same catastrophic septic response. The overwhelming cytokine storms, microvascular clotting and rapid progression to acute respiratory distress syndrome and multi-organ failure seen in covid intensive care units are classic manifestations of viral sepsis. It is thought by many experts in the field that the vast majority of covid deaths were a direct result of septic reactions.

Sepsis is not defined by the pathogen; it is defined by the body's life-threatening immune reaction to any severe infection, whether bacterial, viral or fungal. That reality extends directly into long-term recovery: millions who had covid-19 are still living with long covid. Sepsis survivors have known that reality for generations under the name of post-sepsis syndrome. In my case, it is little more than some nerve damage and tiredness, even a decade later, but for many the symptoms are more severe. Up to 50% of sepsis survivors suffer prolonged physical, cognitive and psychological impairments from debilitating fatigue and cognitive brain fog to severe muscle weakness and post-traumatic stress disorder. The clinical insights gained from viral sepsis during the pandemic must now be used to build integrated recovery pathways for all sepsis survivors.

To curb preventable deaths, a health system must act decisively in several areas; in the interests of time, I will go through just four. First, the system must ensure consistent rapid recognition. Time is the single most decisive factor in sepsis survival. Clinical research shows that administering appropriate antibiotics within the first hour of a patient presenting to an emergency department with sepsis reduces the risk of death by a full one third compared with delayed treatment.

Secondly, the system must ensure that where sepsis is suspected, appropriate clinical escalation pathways are in place. Where sepsis is suspected, early warning systems such as the national early warning score 2, or NEWS2, have saved countless lives, and the ongoing roll-out of Martha's rule across NHS trusts, which has already saved thousands of lives, is vital in ensuring that patients and loved ones can trigger an immediate independent critical review when they sense deterioration.

Thirdly, we must take advantage of innovation in rapid diagnostics. We know that administering broad-spectrum antibiotics within the golden hour that I spoke of massively increases survival rates, but clinicians often face the dilemma of judging whether that is compatible with responsible antimicrobial stewardship. Deploying rapid molecular diagnostics, bedside biomarker technologies and wearable continuous physiological monitors can remove that guesswork, and provide targeted care before septic shock takes hold and it can be too late.

Fourthly, although Britain has in many ways led the way in developing and enhancing sepsis care and treatment, we must be open to learning from established international models and practices. Sweden utilises standard sepsis alerts to prioritise patients at triage, and implements mandatory post-discharge telephone follow-ups. France, where I was when I was taken ill, has since introduced an integrated national sepsis plan spanning pre-hospital recognition, emergency pathways and structured rehabilitation to help patients return to employment. Australia established a national sepsis clinical care standard built around seven quality statements, ensuring end-to-end consistency from triage through to survivorship. The publication in July of the sepsis modern service framework by NHS England and the Department of Health and Social Care is an important step towards doing that and learning the lessons from around the world; I warmly welcome it. The framework is one of the first to be published under the 10-year health plan. Its headline goal,

"to reduce deaths, severe complications and long-term harm from sepsis…by at least 25% by 2035"

is a target that every member of this House can endorse.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): The hon. Gentleman is making a really moving speech. Although one in 100 cases of sepsis in adults is linked to meningitis, it is one in 10 for children—with harrowing consequences. One of those children is Hamish, who was a classmate of my nephew Louis in Sussex. He had all four limbs amputated, and I pay tribute to his resilience in getting on with life and going to university. Because of the link between vaccines and the prevention of sepsis, will the hon. Member join me in calling for the menB vaccine to be repeated for teenagers next year and every year until all children are protected, so we can reduce the risk of sepsis in young people?

Mike Wood: The hon. Lady makes a really important point. We know how these conditions can come round in a cycle. In order to break that cycle, we will need multiple years of vaccination.

The modern service framework contains a number of vital commitments, but I particularly welcome: action 4 on improving the audit and feedback of sepsis-related clinical data across trusts; action 5 on updating training for NHS staff, social care workers and unpaid carers; action 9 on optimising care pathways and expanding access to rapid diagnostics and specialist advice; action 11 on standardising digital specifications for early warning systems such as NEWS2; and action 12 on reviewing and addressing capacity gaps in critical and enhanced care.

A strategy on paper will not be enough to save a deteriorating patient on a cold winter weekend in an overcrowded emergency department. In the other place, my noble friend and our former colleague Lord Mackinlay of Richborough, who has spoken with enormous courage about his own life-altering encounter with sepsis, has repeatedly tabled written questions seeking clarity on how this framework will be delivered. Regrettably, the answers provided by Ministers in the Lords to date have been rather generic and vague, and lacking in operational detail. We cannot accept boilerplate responses on a condition that kills 48,000 people each year, so I have two direct questions that I hope the Minister will answer in her response to today's debate. First, what are the specific milestone-driven timelines for the delivery of each of the actions set out in the modern service framework, and when will trusts and integrated care boards be expected to have these standardised pathways fully operational? Secondly, can the Minister assure the House that the Department of Health and Social Care is prepared to commit the dedicated investment required to make this framework work?

When we call for investment, we must be clear that funding sepsis care is not an open-ended cost. It is one of the most cost-effective investments that the Department can make. Sepsis currently places an enormous financial

[Mike Wood]

burden on the national health service and the wider economy. Too often, cases of missed or delayed diagnosis and treatment result in weeks of high-cost intensive care unit admissions, in emergency readmissions due to incomplete recovery, in complex surgical interventions including amputations requiring lifelong prosthetic and social care support, or in the permanent loss of working-age adults from the workforce. Investing in rapid bedside diagnostics, digital early warning systems, specialist outreach teams and structured post-sepsis rehabilitation can dramatically reduce the lengths of stay in intensive care, lower readmission rates and keep people in work. Early intervention is not only clinically imperative; it is economically sound, and the theme "Invest in sepsis—save lives" is a call for smart preventive healthcare investment.

Dr Allison Gardner (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): Prevention is key, and an estimated 20% to 30% of sepsis cases are urosepsis. I have just learned today from my campaign with *Good Housekeeping* magazine of a gentleman who lost his wife due to urinary tract infection-related sepsis. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that if we are to really tackle sepsis, we also need to look at infection sources and get better diagnostics and treatment for those, particularly for ones such as UTIs, that are still not properly focused on?

Mike Wood: Absolutely. Of course, some infections are almost unavoidable, but where infections such as UTIs can clearly be reduced with the right care and precautions, we must do everything we can to reduce those risks.

Every Member in this Chamber has constituents whose lives have been permanently transformed by sepsis. Some Members have been directly impacted or have watched as close family and friends have encountered sepsis. We know the speed with which it strikes, but we also know that with early detection, immediate treatment and high quality critical care, thousands of lives can be saved. We have the clinical evidence and we have the modern service framework. What we now need is clear delivery timelines, rigorous parliamentary accountability and the necessary financial backing to make this ambition a reality. If the Minister can deliver this and provide the resources and tools that the NHS needs to implement it, the modern service framework truly can be a turning point in the fight against this silent killer and the battle to save thousands of lives.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Before we move on, I want to pay tribute to the hon. Member for Kingswinford and South Staffordshire (Mike Wood) for his bravery in sharing his personal story and, of course, to the noble Lord Mackinlay in the other place, who has spoken on this subject so often and with such power.

5.49 pm

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): I am pleased to co-sponsor the debate alongside the hon. Members for Kingswinford and South Staffordshire (Mike Wood) and for Ashfield (Lee Anderson), both of whom are fellow officers of the all-party parliamentary group on sepsis. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Kingswinford and South Staffordshire for that amazingly moving and revealing speech and for sharing his experience in a way that I hope all Members will take note of and that will make a difference to the way the Government take these issues forward. I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for granting time for this debate on Sepsis Awareness Month, with World Sepsis Day having taken place on Sunday.

I was pleased to welcome my constituent, John Snow, to Parliament last year and am extremely appreciative that he is with us today in the Gallery, alongside his wife Karen and his daughter Gracie. John developed sepsis in 2024. After first believing he was suffering with muscle pain, the situation rapidly deteriorated, resulting in hospital admission with heart attack-like symptoms and his lips turning blue. John and Karen were not aware at this point that John had many of the signs of sepsis. Within hours, his kidneys had shut down, needing dialysis, and his body went into septic shock with doctors putting him into an induced coma. It was unclear if John would survive, and the coma lasted for two weeks, during which time John was transferred from Darent Valley hospital in Dartford up to St Thomas's just across the river from where we are now.

After a month, thankfully, John pulled through. But this good news was accompanied by the desperately difficult decision from his doctors that he needed to have a quadruple amputation. He has received amazing support from the Dartford community, which has rallied round to help fund support for his family. A special mention must go to the wonderful Dartford working men's club, led by the amazing Nick Byram. The club not only held fundraisers for the family but has held sepsis awareness events to ensure that more people know the symptoms.

Notwithstanding this great community effort, there remains so much to do to improve post-infection support for people like John. I have been privileged to have kept in touch with John and Karen during John's exceptionally brave recovery journey. When we met in July, he told me of the exceptionally long delay he was experiencing in receiving his new prosthetic hand. John was cast for the prosthetic at the end of last year, but due to issues relating to the move of his local prosthetic centre, it was not assembled, leaving him worried that his body may change and the prosthetic would not fit. The challenges that causes are compounded by the fact that he cannot have the casting for the second prosthetic hand until he has had the first one for a year—a timer that has not yet been able to start. John has also experienced delays and dysfunctions with his facial surgery, which he is currently undergoing with the support of surgeons and doctors.

John's case illustrates how much we have to do to spread knowledge about sepsis and to improve care for those who have it. As others have done, I commend the campaigning work of Lord Mackinlay of Richborough, who has not only helped to raise awareness of sepsis in our health system, but has met John and provided encouragement to him in his recovery journey.

Vikki Slade: I too pay tribute to Lord Mackinlay because when Hamish's story made the papers, he did not hesitate to visit Hamish, an 18-year-old, and help him through his recovery. When I first met Lord Mackinlay myself in Buckingham Palace when we had just been elected, I went to him and said, "What a hero. What an incredible man to do that every time a similar case happens."

Jim Dickson: What the hon. Member and I have described is the mark of the man. Not only has he suffered that appalling setback in his life, come through it with huge brio and is an active Member of the other place, he has gone the extra mile to help others in the same predicament. I cannot thank him enough for the work he has done for those who have experienced sepsis and for my constituent John.

As Craig himself would say, sepsis remains something we do not know enough about, and what knowledge we have is not as widely known as it should be. I thought it would be helpful to remind all those present and anybody watching of the signs to look out for in adults, as set out by the UK Sepsis Trust: slurred speech or confusion; extreme shivering or muscle pain; passing no urine in a day; severe breathlessness; it feels like you are going to die; and skin mottled or discoloured. If you or another adult develops any of those signs, it is important to seek urgent medical attention.

John's story highlights both the work we need to do to raise awareness of the early signs of sepsis and how we support those who have been diagnosed with it. There remains too little data on sepsis, with inconsistencies in the definitions used across the country. Office for National Statistics data indicates that sepsis was mentioned on the death certificate in 27,971 deaths in England in 2025, but that is almost certainly not the full story.

Dr Gardner: There is also the issue that the infection source is not recorded. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to make significant improvements to this if we are to prevent sepsis? It is a slight repetition, but the lack of data collection worries me.

Jim Dickson: Absolutely. The data problems are much wider than simply understanding who has died with sepsis as a related cause and who has suffered sepsis at some point in the system. All the prevention and early diagnosis issues that my hon. Friend has highlighted go to the heart of the problems we have with data, and I hope the Minister will address that in her response.

I very much welcome the sepsis modern service framework, which was published last July and contains a much-needed plan to improve prevention, recognition, diagnosis, treatment and recovery for people affected by sepsis. It should mean that doctors are equipped to spot sepsis sooner and improve outcomes for patients like John and others who have been mentioned this evening. I hope the Minister will outline how the modern service framework will change the way the NHS supports John and others recovering from sepsis, so that the delays he has experienced in getting his prosthetics and the delays other people have experienced in the system become a thing of the past.

5.56 pm

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this very important debate during Sepsis Awareness Month; I pay tribute to the hon. Members for Kingswinford and South Staffordshire (Mike Wood) and for Ashfield (Lee Anderson) and my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Jim Dickson) for securing it.

The danger posed by sepsis cannot be overestimated. As we have heard, five people lose their lives to sepsis every single hour, and my mother was one of those it claimed last year. Deaths from sepsis rise sharply in the over-65s. Older people are more vulnerable to sepsis because ageing weakens the immune system, increases the likelihood of chronic illness and infection, and reduces the body's ability to recover from severe infection, making sepsis more likely to become life-threatening.

I am acutely aware at my age that one of my significant organs is visually fading and failing, and that is my skin. The serious point is that, as our skin fails, the increased risk of cuts, tears and the formation of ulcers becomes ever more prevalent, all bringing with them the attendant risk of infection. That, sadly, was the case for my mother. That sepsis is the second biggest killer after cardiovascular disease is evidence of why awareness is so important. The earlier sepsis is recognised and appropriate help sought, the better the chance of preventing a devastating outcome.

I want to use this debate to share the experience of one of my Carlisle constituents, Kelly Pattison. Kelly developed biliary sepsis in December last year. She describes how she did not know she had it until she woke up on a ward, having spent three days in intensive care. Kelly's story is an important reminder of just how unpredictable and unexpected sepsis can be. What she particularly wanted me to emphasise today is that there is no one single experience of sepsis; it can affect people in very different ways, and the seriousness of what is happening may not always be immediately obvious.

Sureena Brackenridge (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): There is really good practice across other countries, including Australia, which has a national sepsis standard, standardised clinical pathways and a public awareness campaign, similar to ours, which is aligned with the simple question: "Could it be sepsis?" Work that has reduced sepsis mortality has been happening around the globe, so does my hon. Friend agree that it is worth looking beyond our borders?

Ms Minns: My hon. Friend raises an important point, and I agree that the more best practice available elsewhere that we can bring to our country, the better.

Awareness cannot stop at the point of diagnosis. Surviving sepsis can be a major event in someone's life, and the effects can continue well beyond the immediate illness. Patients and their families may need information, support and help as they recover. That is why I welcome the Government's sepsis modern service framework. It represents an important step forward in how we approach this condition, setting out a long-term plan to improve sepsis care across prevention, recognition, diagnosis, treatment and recovery, with the ambition of reducing deaths, life-threatening complications and the long-term effects of sepsis by at least 25% by 2035. That ambition is significant. The success of the framework will be measured in earlier recognition, prompt treatment and ongoing support for survivors who need it.

The framework's focus on better data, research and innovation is particularly welcome. Improving how we identify sepsis, developing faster and more accurate diagnosis and learning from patients' experiences can all help clinicians to intervene earlier and improve outcomes. I hope that through the sepsis modern service framework we can ensure that when people do seek help, they are heard, sepsis is recognised as early as possible, and they receive the care and support that they need.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): That brings us to the Front-Bench contributions. I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

6.1 pm

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Kingswinford and South Staffordshire (Mike Wood) for so vividly highlighting his personal experience of sepsis. He gave a very emotional speech and it is good to see him in the Chamber looking so healthy.

Around one in five deaths worldwide are associated with sepsis—that is 11 million deaths a year. I recently met Ron Daniels, founder and chief medical officer of the UK Sepsis Trust, to discuss the new sepsis modern service framework. I very much welcome its ambition to reduce deaths, life-threatening complications and the long-term impact of sepsis by at least 25% over the next decade, but if we are serious about achieving that, we need to get much better at detecting infection early.

Sepsis is the body's extreme response to infection, whether viral, bacterial or fungal. It can cause organ failure, permanent disability and death. Crucially, patients can deteriorate incredibly quickly. There is no single diagnostic test for sepsis; its symptoms overlap with many other conditions and clinicians are often having to make decisions with incomplete information. That is why rapid diagnostic tests are so important. I recently held a meeting at Winchester hospital for local GPs, the local authority, laboratories and manufacturers of various rapid diagnostic tests to look at the barriers to implementing rapid diagnostic tests, and at how people can have them in the community for earlier diagnosis and the prevention of hospital admissions.

Better diagnostics mean earlier treatment. They mean being able to use the right antibiotic for the right infection; they mean preventing patients deteriorating into sepsis; and they mean using fewer unnecessary antibiotics, which ultimately can result in antimicrobial resistance developing and is another huge growing public health concern.

Prevention matters too. We must reverse the falling vaccination rates that we have seen in recent years to prevent infections occurring in the first place, as well as ensuring that hospitals have the facilities to isolate and care properly for infectious patients. Crucially, it also means tackling corridor care and long waits in A&E, because when somebody is deteriorating in those conditions, every hour matters, as we know. In the case of corridor care and long waits, that means that diagnosis and treatment is more likely to be delayed.

I wish to talk specifically about one group of patients—cancer patients. We rightly focus on treating the cancer itself, but infection, often sepsis, is the second-biggest cause of death for people with cancer. That may seem surprising, but cancer can cause a reduction in people's immunity. Chemotherapy and various treatments cause people to become immunocompromised, weakening their immune system and making them more prone to getting infections. That also means repeat infections, which means that they are more likely to have repeat uses of antibiotics and to have antibiotic-resistant infections.

The consequences of infection for people with cancer can be even more serious. That is why I find one omission from the Government's national cancer plan quite striking. It is an 86-page strategy setting out how we are going to transform cancer care by 2035, yet infection is mentioned only once, and that is just in the foreword. That is not a minor oversight; it is a glaring omission that risks undermining the entire cancer strategy. We would never produce a cancer strategy that treated radiotherapy, chemotherapy or surgery as peripheral to cancer care, so we need to ensure that we are treating infection, which is the second-biggest killer of cancer patients, as integral to cancer care. Infection prevention, rapid diagnostics, antimicrobial stewardship and surveillance need to be absolutely central to cancer care, not an afterthought. If we fail to address infection properly, we are setting the entire new cancer strategy up to fail.

Sepsis contributes to tens of thousands of deaths in the UK each year, as well as leaving many survivors with life-changing physical and psychological consequences. I have one specific request of the Government. Will the Minister commit to updating the national cancer strategy to incorporate infection control, sepsis and rapid diagnostic tests as being absolutely integral to cancer management? We welcome the new sepsis modern service framework; we just need to deliver it.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the shadow Minister.

6.7 pm

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I start by declaring my interest as an NHS consultant paediatrician, a member of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, a member of the British Medical Association and a mother of three children.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswinford and South Staffordshire (Mike Wood) on securing this debate, alongside the hon. Members for Dartford (Jim Dickson) and for Ashfield (Lee Anderson). In particular, I thank my hon. Friend for his speech, which was hugely moving. I cannot believe that it has been such a long time since his illness happened, but it is great to see him looking so well today. I express my condolences to the hon. Member for Carlisle (Ms Minns) and thank her for the brave speech that she gave.

I remember sitting in this Chamber a little over two years ago—I am sure you were there too, Madam Deputy Speaker—when the then Member for South Thanet, now Lord Mackinlay, received a rare standing ovation from the House and from the Gallery as he returned to Parliament following his remarkable recovery from sepsis. His journey has been incredible, and his story has brought renewed attention to a disease that kills nearly 50,000 people every year. For context, that is around the same number of people who die from bowel, breast and prostate cancer combined. However, with attention to prevention, early identification of infection, early diagnosis, better treatments and the avoidance of antimicrobial resistance, we can reduce that number and save people's lives.

As I said, raising awareness of sepsis and how suddenly it can change someone's condition is vital, and the previous Conservative Government got the ball rolling in that regard. My right hon. Friend the Member for Godalming and Ash (Sir Jeremy Hunt) adopted the UK Sepsis Trust's "Just ask 'Could it be sepsis?'" campaign in 2016 when he was Health Secretary. The Conservatives

also backed sepsis research with more than £1 billion through the National Institute for Health and Care Research. Research is important, because it will help us to improve diagnosis and treatment and to better understand why some people get an infection and it makes them a little bit ill, but some people get an infection and it turns into sepsis.

That was a good start, but of course, as always with medicine, there is more to do, and it was pleasing to see the previous Starmer Government build on this work by introducing the modern service framework for sepsis. We have modern service frameworks for other diseases, and it seems good to have one for sepsis specifically. The guiding light of this framework is the Government's ambition to reduce sepsis deaths by 25% by 2035, with which I think we could all agree. But simply saying it will not deliver it; it has to have a plan, and the plan has to be deliverable and funded. What funding have the Government committed to implement that framework?

As we know, early diagnosis is paramount, but sepsis is notoriously difficult to diagnose and very rapid. I remember seeing a patient whose mum had got up in the middle of the night to use the bathroom—not something she did normally, and she was not quite sure why she had on that particular night—and when she was walking back along the landing, she thought, "It's a bit cold—I'll just check." She checked her son had his blankets on and was warm, but as she did so, just in the light from the landing she spotted a little mark on the little boy's leg. She turned the light on, and saw that he was developing the rash, which does not blanch, that goes with meningococcal sepsis. She brought him in, and he survived and he went home well, but I shudder to think what would have happened if she had waited till she woke up routinely at 7 o'clock in the morning. So someone was watching to make sure he was safe, and I am so glad that was the case, but it is so very rapid, as others hon. Members have testified.

There is no single test. There is no single thing we can monitor or measure that helps. Flu-like symptoms mimic many other common illnesses, and on top of that, as we have heard, diagnosis and treatment are absolutely time-critical. The UK Sepsis Trust has developed the sepsis six—oxygen, cultures, antibiotics, fluids, lactate management and urinary output monitoring—and all these should be carried out within the first hour. The Government's MSF commits to rapid diagnostic tools and more advanced genomic sequencing. What infrastructure and workforce investment is required by the Government to set this up, and over what timeframe do they envisage that it will be achieved?

Talking about the workforce, the Government decided to ditch the previous Government's NHS workforce plan to create their own, which is of course their right. However, their replacement was originally due to be published in early 2025 and was most recently promised as "imminent" just before the summer recess, but we are now well into September 2026 and there is still no plan. The Minister in the other place was asked for more details about the workforce plan, but her written answer simply stated that the Government

"will provide an update on the 10 Year Workforce Plan in due course."

Could the Minister please update us on when this plan is going to be published, preferably with a date rather than an expression of "soon" or "imminent"?

I want to mention group B streptococcal infection, which I have seen in paediatric practice, particularly in babies. It is a common bacteria that lives harmlessly in the gut or lower reproductive tract, but there is a risk that it can enter the bloodstream, causing neonatal sepsis when passed to newborns. The GBS3 trial is looking to prevent and reduce the impact of group B strep, and the Government's framework commits to supporting that. Could the Minister tell us more about how the Government plan to do that?

I also want to talk about prevention, which the Government have said is one of their big shifts in medicine. Some sepsis can be prevented or reduced, and research has shown that, for example, if ibuprofen is given to children with chickenpox, it increases the likelihood of their developing sepsis. We know that completing the antibiotic course is important. We also know that handwashing technique is important, and that keeping things clean is important, particularly in preventing the sepsis that is acquired in hospitals. Management of chronic disease reduces the risk, too, and then there is vaccination.

Meningitis B is possibly one of the most scary infections and conditions that one sees as a doctor, because it progresses so quickly—and it can cause brain damage, amputations and death—but there is a highly effective vaccine, which was introduced for infants born from the middle of 2015 onwards. However, as the outbreak in Kent, Dorset and Berkshire showed last year, when three young people died, it can still come back in older children. The Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation met in July 2026 and suggested an increase in the vaccination schedule for those young people. It recommended that young children who had had one dose of vaccine should have another at age 15; that those who had not had the vaccine should have two doses; and that older people starting university should have a catch-up.

Very shortly, it will be freshers week, and around 580,000 young people will head off to university for the first time with great excitement. University students are seven times more likely to get invasive meningococcal sepsis than people who do not go to university, and the Government have only managed to vaccinate 246,000 of those young people—something that the UK Health Security Agency issued a document about last week. It said that last year, 97% of invasive meningococcal disease in 15 to 24-year-olds was caused by meningitis B, so I will ask the Minister some questions that I asked her during last week's vaccine debate and have not yet received an answer to. When is she going to review and respond to the requests for vaccines for younger children who have not had them yet—the doses at 15 and the two doses for those who have not had a dose yet? What is she doing to increase awareness among people starting university in the next week or so?

Vikki Slade: I am really grateful to the shadow Minister for raising this issue, which I also raised earlier in the debate. My son George and his girlfriend Maisie both had their two doses in the past few weeks as they turned 18, but my constituent Victoria asked me to write to the Minister a few months ago about education and awareness. I was really disappointed that the Department for Education did not think it was necessary to add meningitis awareness

[Vikki Slade]

into the personal, social, health and economic education programme in secondary school. Will the shadow Minister support me in advocating for that?

Dr Johnson: It is clearly important that young people are aware of the signs of infection, particularly such a serious infection, so I agree with the hon. Member about that.

I am interested in what the Minister is doing to try to prevent these infections by ensuring that the right people have the right vaccines. The Government are changing the way in which vaccines are being commissioned from NHS England, which they are abolishing. *[Interruption.]* Madam Deputy Speaker seems to have a cough, so I will finish my speech. The integrated care boards are going to be responsible for vaccinations. How is that change going to impact vaccines, particularly for students who live in one place and go to university in another?

To sum up, the Government's ambition to reduce sepsis and sepsis deaths should be welcomed, and it is good to have the modern service framework in place. However, I am sure that charities such as the UK Sepsis Trust and families affected by sepsis would be most grateful if the Minister could provide further clarity on the Government's road map and the funding required to reach this important destination.

6.17 pm

The Minister for Public Health and Patient Safety (Dame Diana Johnson): I start by congratulating the hon. Member for Kingswinford and South Staffordshire (Mike Wood) on securing this important debate on the Floor of the House of Commons from the Backbench Business Committee during Sepsis Awareness Month. I also thank him for his tireless advocacy on sepsis as the co-chair of the APPG. In his excellent opening speech, he spoke very movingly about his own experience. He said that consultants gave him a 10% chance of survival when he was ill with sepsis, so the odds were that he would not be with us today, but I am very grateful that he is and that he is looking so well, and that he can be such a strong voice in this place on sepsis.

I also compliment Lord Mackinlay on the work that he carries on in the other place. Like the shadow Minister, I remember the standing ovation he received when he returned to the House of Commons after battling life-threatening sepsis in 2023, resulting in four limb amputations—what a brave and decent man! Many tributes have been paid to him across the Chamber this afternoon.

I will refer to some of the contributions that have been made. My hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Jim Dickson) spoke powerfully on behalf of his constituent John, who fought sepsis and is a quadruple amputee. He talked very movingly about how the community had rallied around the family to provide support, but also spoke about how we need to do much more to support people like John in the post-recovery period.

My hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (Ms Minns) spoke eloquently about her mum, who she lost to sepsis last year—I hope she will accept my condolences—and also her constituent, Kelly Pattison. She reminded us that sepsis affects people in different ways and how important it is to remember that. The hon. Member for Winchester (Dr Chambers), who speaks on behalf of the Liberal Democrats, highlighted the particular risks that people with cancer face from sepsis. I will certainly take back to the Department the concerns that he has raised today.

Sepsis is a devastating condition. It also costs the NHS significant sums of money—more than £1 billion between 2024 and 2025. During Sepsis Awareness Month, I pay tribute to the charities, such as the UK Sepsis Trust and Sepsis Research FEAT, that do so much to support families, raise awareness and fund research. Their contribution to the new sepsis modern service framework was invaluable, and they acted as a megaphone for so many people whose lives have been devastated by sepsis. My deepest condolences go out to everyone who has been affected, not least Merope Mills and other campaigners, but I know that people are not seeking my sympathy today; they want the Government to support the case they are making.

Turning to the sepsis modern service framework, we worked hand in hand with patient representatives, clinical experts, professional bodies, NHS organisations and charities to build the framework. It has entered the history books as the first-ever large-scale engagement process for improving sepsis care. The framework spells out this Government's commitment to transform sepsis care by 2035. It sets out priority actions to improve prevention, recognition, treatment and recovery while accelerating innovation.

I completely understand that people will say, "Okay, you have now got the framework. What happens next?" We are going to make real progress, and by doing that, we are going to raise our game in a number of areas, including science, technology and data. The National Institute for Health and Care Research, working with academia, industry and other partners, will develop a national research and innovation action plan for sepsis by March next year. That will include research calls that cover sepsis improvement priorities, whether it is vaccination and screening, faster and more accurate diagnosis or innovative treatments.

It is true that the most recent data from the Office for National Statistics suggests that sepsis deaths went down in 2024. However, the data is incomplete and inconsistent. That is due to changes in awareness, diagnosis and recording, making it harder to understand variation and improve care. Without that data, we do not have a full picture, and that is why the framework commits to collecting better sepsis data and why NHS England is commissioning a national infection and sepsis audit. That should give us a clearer picture of mortality, underlying causes and which groups are most affected.

Turning to understanding, it is right to say that Members have highlighted that sepsis is a complex condition that is difficult to recognise because of the variation in symptoms. Many people are unaware that sepsis can develop from common infections, such as urinary tract infections, and few can recognise the full range of symptoms. That is precisely why raising awareness is so important. As we have heard from Members across the House today, the work of campaigners has had a huge impact across the NHS and wider society. The NHS now has a planned, targeted public communications campaign to improve awareness of sepsis symptoms and the actions to take.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): As was mentioned earlier, the UK Sepsis Trust had a big bang in 2016 with the famous orange and red posters saying, "Just ask 'Could it be sepsis?'", which can be seen in many GP surgeries, hospital waiting rooms and so forth. However, those information campaigns dwindle; they become samey, and people get used to seeing them and then not thinking about them. How can the Government organise an almost permanent campaign that refreshes awareness of such a huge killer in our country in the minds of the clinicians and doctors who do such wonderful work, but are under such incredible pressure that they need a constant reminder of conditions such as sepsis?

Dame Diana Johnson: I entirely take the hon. Gentleman's point. We are working all the time on maintaining good public campaigns on issues such as this, and we are reviewing what works and the best methods to use. A campaign of this kind should not be limited to one point in time; it must be ongoing.

The NHS has got better at recognising and responding to all causes of deterioration, including sepsis, since the introduction of the national early warning score. This system helps to identify patients who are seriously ill through clear, scored measurements that are routinely recorded by their bedsides. It is used by every ambulance trust and 99% of acute trusts in England, and the sepsis modern service framework will improve the consistency of its use. To further support the way in which we identify sepsis, the framework prioritises advances in faster, more accurate diagnosis to improve outcomes and the correct use of antibiotics. It will support better access to rapid tests in urgent and emergency care to tackle the problems that occur with the services that are often under the most pressure, where sepsis can slip through the cracks. In the longer term, the Government are promoting wearable health technologies as part of our 10-year plan. The framework will also explore new point of care tests that can determine exactly what kind of infection someone may have, alongside the use of those wearable technologies to support the monitoring of high-risk groups.

No one knows a child better than his or her parents or carers, which is why listening to patients, carers and families is vital to supporting sepsis recognition and escalation. Too many cases have shown the devastating consequences when deterioration concerns are not heard. The death of Martha Mills was an avoidable tragedy, but I hope that her parents take some consolation from knowing that Martha's rule is saving lives and helping thousands of patients to benefit from changes in their care. I thank them for their tireless campaigning in Martha' memory, and the real change that it has brought.

Let me remind the House that Martha's rule means that patients, their families and staff can request a rapid review from a different team if deterioration concerns are not being recognised. Between September 2024 and June this year, nearly 17,500 Martha's rule calls were made, 5,000 of which were made when a family feared that their loved one's condition was deteriorating rapidly. Of those, 60% required changes in treatment, with 13% leading to transfers to intensive care and 47% leading to other care changes, including investigations and procedural interventions. Today, Martha's rule is being rolled out in all acute hospitals in England.

As Members have pointed out this afternoon, it is important to note what happens to people who survive sepsis. They may experience a range of long-term physical, psychological and cognitive health consequences. As the Secretary of State has said, the NHS is cradle to grave, and that means everything in between. It is not acceptable that when someone has been through the worst experience of their life, they are just left to get on with it. That is why we are committed to improving access to post-discharge support and rehabilitation, with priority actions set out in the framework.

Of course, the best way in which to stop sepsis is to prevent infection. Vaccination and infection prevention and control are fundamental. As was mentioned earlier, the outbreaks of meningitis B in England this year demonstrated how quickly infection can lead to sepsis and death. Those outbreaks highlighted the importance of prompt treatment and the benefits of vaccination. The one-off NHS menB vaccination programme has successfully delivered nearly 250,000 first doses to eligible young people across England since its launch on 20 July 2026. I encourage everyone who has not yet come forward to do so, and to ensure that they obtain both doses of the vaccine for proper protection.

The framework commits to improving vaccine access. The shadow Minister put a number of questions to me. I will respond in writing, as I am conscious of the time. The framework also recognises the tension between prompt antimicrobial treatment for sepsis and the risks of unnecessary antibiotic use, and it complements initiatives within the antimicrobial resistance national action plan.

The hon. Member for Kingswinford and South Staffordshire raised a specific question about funding. I want to make it clear that the immediate and short-term actions will be delivered within existing funding under the current departmental allocation, following the 2025 spending review. Longer-term funding is subject to future spending reviews. The Department and NHS England are committed to prioritising funding for sepsis in future spending bids. The framework is a 10-year plan. I do not pretend that we will deliver everything overnight, but it sets clear targets to reduce deaths by a quarter over the next 10 years. That is a clear metric by which to judge our success and to hold Ministers to account. Implementation will be overseen by the National Quality Board.

In conclusion, it has become a bit of a cliché to say things like, "World Sepsis Day is marked once a year, but our work continues all year round." However, I can assure hon. Members that the sepsis modern service framework is doing just that. For every single day over the next 10 years, the framework will keep pushing us to do better. Let me end by again thanking the hon. Member for Kingswinford and South Staffordshire for securing the debate and for his leadership of the APPG. I look forward to working with him constructively going forward.

6.31 pm

Mike Wood: I thank all hon. Members who contributed to the debate.

The hon. Member for Dartford (Jim Dickson) spoke movingly about his constituent John. I was particularly pleased to hear how well he is now doing since recovering and about the support his family received from the community—in particular the work that Dartford working

[Mike Wood]

men's club is doing in the community. If we are to really increase awareness so that people understand both the science and the risks of sepsis, it cannot be left to the NHS alone. It really does need to be a full community effort, so it is great to hear that the working men's club is taking a lead. He also, rightly, spoke about the importance of data. Part of the problem is inconsistency in reporting sepsis cases. That makes it so difficult to have a meaningful figure for the number of cases, deaths and serious disabilities as a result of sepsis. We really need more consistency in the way that is coded, as well as a guide to best practice.

I join the Minister in offering my condolences to the hon. Member for Carlisle (Ms Minns) on the sad loss of her mother; it must have been an unbearably difficult time. She also spoke about her constituent Kelly, and gave us the very important message that different people experience sepsis very differently, both in terms of outcomes and the lasting impact, as well as the nature of their sepsis.

We heard important interventions from the hon. Members for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Vikki Slade), for Stoke-on-Trent South (Dr Gardner) and for Wolverhampton North East (Sureena Brackenridge). The Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Winchester (Dr Chambers), referred to the force of nature that is Ron Daniels, who has done so much to push sepsis up the public agenda, and to change the way that the NHS understands and responds to sepsis. We all owe him a huge debt.

The shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson), spoke about how notoriously difficult sepsis is to diagnose, and about the issues around prenatal strep and the additional work that needs to be done in both understanding and responding to the sepsis that arises. I thank the Minister for the kind words she offered to me, and for the spirit of her response, particularly around the implementation plan and funding. She rightly referred to Martha's rule, and the importance of ensuring that families, who know their children better than anyone else, are allowed to insist on an independent second opinion if they feel that there has been a deterioration in condition.

I will briefly thank the many campaigners who have worked so hard on this issue—often because, sadly, they or a member of their family has been affected. They are too numerous to name, but I will mention the incredible work done by Harry Redknapp, who works tirelessly, and often without an awful lot of publicity and credit, to raise awareness of sepsis following his wife Sandra's illness—I think he was in the jungle on "I'm a Celebrity...Get Me Out of Here!" when she was taken ill. Harry does so much incredible work voluntarily. Researchers and charities do incredible work, including Sepsis Research, and particularly the UK Sepsis Trust—both Ron Daniels and Sarah Hamilton-Fairley have helped to keep the issue rising to the level of importance it deserves.

I thank all Members for the valuable contributions they have made today, and I look forward to holding the Minister to account as she delivers on the modern service framework.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered World Sepsis Awareness Month.

Business without Debate

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Ordered,

That Damian Hinds be discharged from the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee and Nigel Huddleston be added.—*(Mark Tami, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.)*

PETITIONS

Young Carers' Champions

6.37 pm

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): When most children go home from school, they bury their head in a book, grab a football or turn on the TV, but for young carers, home time looks very different. They carry burdens on their shoulders that are way beyond their years and, as a result, their life chances are affected. Research shows that they are twice as likely to be persistently absent from school, less likely to pass their GCSEs, and much more likely to face suspension from school.

I have been working with MYTIME Young Carers, a charity based in my constituency, whose members have pioneered young carer champions in schools across Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole, and they are seeing a difference. During an event with the Carers Trust last week, the Children's Commissioner indicated her support for the scheme. Carers' charities across the country have shared my petition, which now has nearly 4,000 signatures, calling for a champion in every school to support young carers in their communities.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of England,

Declares that there are between 400,000 and 1 million young carers in England, who face overwhelming demands of providing care to a family member; further declares that research shows that young carers are twice as likely to be persistently absent from schools, less likely to pass GCSE English and Maths, and over twice as likely to be suspended from school all compared to their peers without a caring responsibility; further declares that it is wrong that young people giving their own time to support family members in need should then lose out themselves; further declares that it is welcome that the new Ofsted Framework includes a requirement to identify young carers in schools, but that there are currently no official means or roles for supporting those children once they are identified; further declares that vital wraparound support in schools is long overdue for young carers; further declares that establishing a Young Carers' Champion in every school in England would provide schools with tools to support young carers with their educational attainment and wellbeing.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to introduce legislation that would require every school in England to have a Young Carers' Champion to lead the school's strategic approaches to identifying and supporting young carers.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003241]

Dentistry in Coastal Areas

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): Further to our online petition on NHS dentistry, which had over 1,000 signatures, there continues to be a desperate need in many coastal communities, including mine in Torbay, for more NHS dentists. That is why I am delighted to present a petition that calls on the Government to reform the NHS dentistry contract to ensure that coastal communities such as mine are adequately served.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that more NHS dental appointments are needed in coastal communities.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to reform the NHS dental contract to bring more dentists back to the NHS from the private sector, and adopt a flexible commissioning approach to meet patients' needs, particularly in coastal areas.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003242]

Murder of George Low: 10th Anniversary

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*(Harpreet Uppal.)*

6.40 pm

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): I am grateful to have the opportunity this evening, just before we rise for recess, to raise the case of George Low, a Dartford resident who was tragically murdered in Cyprus in August 2016—now 10 years ago. Before I give an outline of the case, I want to pay tribute to George's parents, Martyn and Helen Low, who are with us tonight in the Gallery. Since my election two years ago, I have had the opportunity to meet them, and I never fail to be struck by their dignity and determination to seek justice for their son.

I also want to mention my predecessor as Member of Parliament for Dartford, Gareth Johnson, who I have spoken to in depth about this terrible case. He raised it repeatedly with Ministers in the previous Government and travelled to Cyprus himself to seek action. He pursued every avenue he could to support the Low family, and I pay tribute to him.

I want to speak tonight about the attack on George and his friend Ben, what we know about the subsequent events, and the very difficult context in which this case sits. I have tried to keep the information to which I will remain to material that is already in the public domain.

George, who was only 22 years old on the night of his murder, was holidaying with friends in Ayia Napa, in the south-east of Cyprus, as many people from the UK continue to do. It was the last night of his holiday, and he was coming home to the UK the next day. George had worked in Ayia Napa previously, but was back in the UK beginning what looked like it was going to be a highly successful career with the Acorn Group estate agents, which paid a touching tribute to him after his death.

The inquest into George's murder, which took place in Maidstone several years later, heard how a dispute occurred in the area near The Bell pub in the early hours of 14 August 2016. After this disagreement, two men returned with a knife, resulting in George being stabbed in the neck and tragically dying. The names of the two suspects, Mehmet Akpınar and Sali Ahmet, have been widely reported since that time. George's friend, Ben Barker, was also stabbed four times in the back, but thankfully survived. I pay tribute to Ben's family for their continued support to get justice for George.

The police collected substantial evidence from the incident—including, I understand, the knives used—but before any arrests could take place, the two suspects fled across the border to the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. Despite their arrests for a series of different offences, they were not handed back to the Republic of Cyprus for trial. That same week, George's parents made the first of a number of visits to Cyprus, beginning their fight for justice for George. It is believed that both suspects later made their way to Turkey, where, as far as we know, they remain to this day.

Since 2016, there have been two inquests: one here and one in Cyprus, which the family attended. Both suspects have faced trials in the north for crimes related to illegal entry violations and have served time in prison

[Jim Dickson]

as a result, but were not extradited to the south to face trial for George's murder. One suspect was then deported back to Turkey, and the other ended up in Turkey via a circuitous route. The one trial that has taken place related to the murder was of the girlfriend of one of the suspects—Mehmet Akpınar. She faced trial in 2016 for the assistance provided to him after the murder took place and would, I hope, be a witness in any potential trial.

The diplomatic situation in Cyprus and with Turkey remains extremely difficult, and there is limited co-operation between the two communities in Cyprus. It remains the case that there is no extradition treaty in place between Turkey and Cyprus to allow the suspects to be sent there for trial. Additionally, the constitution in Turkey specifically prohibits the extradition of their citizens for any offence. That makes the prospect of a trial taking place in Cyprus limited, despite the Cypriot authorities possessing evidence that seemingly would make a prosecution possible.

The Low family have been ably supported by the organisation Justice Abroad and barrister Michael Polak, whom I am pleased is in the Gallery tonight. They are acting pro bono, and Michael's expertise in this complex situation is greatly appreciated. He has repeatedly written to the Attorney General of the Republic of Cyprus over the last 11 months to ask that they release the evidence they possess to the family, but he has not yet received a response.

Recent news coverage, including by the BBC, has included confirmation from the Ministry of Justice in Turkey that

"the investigation was referred to the Hatay Public Prosecutor's Office which has subsequently issued a decision of non-prosecution (no grounds to proceed) in respect of Mr Mehmet Akpınar."

The report does not include any comment on the second suspect, which I hope may be some grounds for optimism that his prosecution in Turkey may still remain possible. The BBC report also includes the claim that a request for legal assistance in connection with the investigation had been made by the Turkish Ministry of Justice to the UK, but that it had not received a response.

The family are keen to assist Turkey and to receive an update from the Turkish authorities. Regrettably, our repeated requests for a meeting with the Turkish embassy have not yet provided any result. One of the suspects is, I understand, a dual Bulgarian-Turkish national. I appreciate the willingness of the Bulgarian embassy to meet with my predecessor, the previous MP for Dartford.

I believe that the UK Government can play a key role in securing justice for the Low family, given the strong relationship that they have with both Turkey and Cyprus and their long-standing position as one of the guarantor powers of Cyprus' independence and territorial integrity.

I am grateful to the Minister for her time today. I will now set out the questions that I hope she can answer. First, could she provide any clarity on the request that was made by the Ministry of Justice in Turkey to the UK Government for legal assistance and why it has not been answered? Secondly, will the UK Government make a request to the Cypriot authorities to release the evidence they hold in this case to assist a prosecution in another jurisdiction? I understand that were the suspects in the UK, a prosecution may be possible here. Will the Minister's Department engage with the authorities in Turkey to discuss the prospect of a prosecution and how evidence might be transferred?

I appreciate that the Minister may not be able to say everything that she might wish to here in the Chamber, so would she be willing to meet with me, the family and their barrister to discuss the issues that I have raised today in more detail? At the time of his death, George's daughter was eight months old. I understand that now, aged 10, she looks very much like him—a sweet reminder to George's family. It is my abiding wish in this case that George's daughter must not grow to be an adult without seeing justice for her dad.

6.49 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Uma Kumaran): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Jim Dickson) for securing this important debate and for his powerful support for George's parents Helen and Martyn, and their family. He spoke movingly, and I will do my best to respond to his points.

This is a deeply tragic case that continues to have a profound impact on George Low's family and loved ones. I also want to acknowledge the impact it has had on Ben, who survived the violent attack, and his family, who have continued to advocate on George's behalf.

Ten years on, I recognise the strength, determination and courage that George's family have shown in the face of unimaginable pain and loss. Losing a child is an unbearable pain and something you never truly recover from. At the heart of the debate is a young man whose life was taken far too soon and a family whose lives were changed forever. They have spent a decade seeking answers and justice for George, and I understand their frustration and their pain.

I turn to the Government's actions. While responsibility for the investigation lies with the Cypriot authorities, the UK Government have remained actively engaged on this case throughout. Consular officials have maintained contact with George's family and their legal representatives and will continue to do so. We have provided updates whenever new information has been available and sought clarification from the relevant authorities on developments in the investigation.

Consular staff contacted George's family shortly after his murder in 2016 and have remained in touch over the decade since. They supported the family during visits to Cyprus, helped facilitate meetings with investigators and officials, and provided assistance during the UK coronial inquest. I am glad that the family have been able to access the specialist support services offered by the UK's homicide service and have a dedicated caseworker in the FCDO. But, of course, what the family need and deserve is answers about George's death.

Cypriot authorities identified two suspects and issued international arrest warrants. The suspects are understood to have left Cyprus after George's death and are now believed to be in Turkey. The case remains open with the Cypriot authorities. Throughout this time, the British high commission in Nicosia and consular officials have pushed for progress with the investigation and prosecution of the suspects. George's family have, quite understandably,

engaged lawyers to represent them in this effort. I also acknowledge, as mentioned by my hon. Friend, the help of Justice Abroad.

Our FCDO officials are in contact with George's family's lawyers. At the family's request, the British high commissioner asked the Cypriot authorities in 2024 to consider transferring the case to Turkey so that Turkish authorities could explore a prosecution. This year, further representations were made in support of that request. Frustratingly, the Cypriot authorities decided not to pursue that option. They believed it would be difficult for Cypriot officials to provide the evidence and testimony needed to support the case in the Turkish court.

The FCDO has also engaged with the Turkish authorities directly to press them to take action on arrest warrants. We will continue to reinforce that message with Turkey.

My hon. Friend asked me several questions, so let me address them in turn. First, on legal assistance, as a matter of common practice I cannot comment either way on a matter of mutual legal assistance. However, I can confirm that United Kingdom officials are following up in Turkey and Cyprus to ensure that they have opportunities to progress the case and that those opportunities have been followed up.

Secondly, on release of evidence, I confirm that we have lobbied Cyprus to transfer the case to Turkish jurisdiction. The Cypriot authorities have told us they are not in a position to do that as a result of jurisdictional issues between the two countries. I am aware that the family's lawyer has asked the Cypriot authorities for clarity on the decision, and I have asked our officials to ensure that that is followed up.

Thirdly, on progressing the investigation in Turkey, again, I have asked officials to ensure that that is followed up to ensure we fully understand the reasons for Cyprus's position. I have also asked officials to speak again to Turkey about its position on this question.

Finally, on my hon. Friend's request to meet George's family and him, the answer is yes. I will speak to my colleague Lord Wood to agree who would be best placed to take that meeting, and I will ensure they get a timely response.

I understand the pain that George's family have felt for the last 10 years. Ten years without justice is unacceptable, and any family in their position would feel the same. As the Minister responding, it is important to be clear and honest about what the UK Government can and cannot do. We cannot compel another country to take specific investigative, prosecutorial or judicial decisions. Those powers rest with the competent authorities in the countries concerned. What we can do, and what we will continue to do, is support the family, raise the case where appropriate and pursue any credible avenue that would help move this forward. Looking ahead, the Cypriot authorities have confirmed that international arrest warrants remain in place and that they are ready to move forward if either suspect is detained, whether in Turkey or elsewhere. We will continue to press Turkey to take action.

Let me end by saying this. Ten years on, George's family continue to live with the devastating consequences of his murder. They have shown extraordinary determination in their search for justice, and I pay tribute to them. I also want to thank my hon. Friend for his and his predecessor's tireless advocacy on this matter. I know my hon. Friend has raised it consistently and tirelessly in this House and will continue to do so.

Although the UK Government cannot resolve the legal and jurisdictional barriers that have complicated this case, we have not forgotten George, and we have not forgotten his family. We will continue to support them, continue to engage with the relevant authorities and continue to press for progress wherever we can. Above all, George was a son, a father, a loved one and a young man whose life was cut tragically short. His family deserve answers, and they deserve to know that this Government will continue to stand alongside them in their pursuit for justice.

Question put and agreed to.

6.56 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 15 September 2026

[Dr Andrew Murrison *in the Chair*]

Residential Buildings: Safety Remediation

9.30 am

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the building safety remediation of residential buildings.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate, and all right hon. and hon. Members for their participation.

More than nine years after Grenfell claimed all those lives, we must ask whether the system that is intended to protect residents and deliver the safety and security they deserve is truly working. There has been progress. The Building Safety Act 2022, the Building Safety Regulator and remediation funding have strengthened our collective national response, but legislation must lead to safer homes, funding must lead to completed works and residents must be able to move forward with their lives.

Today, I will address three interconnected issues: the protection of residents during remediation, the operation of PAS 9980 and the competence of those making critical safety decisions, and the position of non-qualifying leaseholders. I will begin by drawing on an experience directly connected to my constituency. Surrey Heath is, by any definition, a semi-rural consistency, where one would not necessarily have expected this issue to rear its head, yet the correspondence reaching my office from Camberley, our principal market town, shows how deeply the problem affects ordinary households across the UK. We must judge the system by the experience of the residents who depend on it. At Dorchester Court, one of my constituents has lived in their shared ownership home for 20 years. They are unwell, unemployed and at risk of losing that home. They need to sell, but unresolved building safety and EWS1 issues have taken that choice away.

Another resident has lost two prospective buyers because lenders would not offer mortgages on that property. Cala Homes, the original developer, has accepted full responsibility for life-critical remediation, but residents say that they still have no clear timetable for those works to be delivered or completed. Accepting responsibility is only the beginning. Until the required work is completed, residents remain trapped. It is a repeat pattern across the country. People need to move because of illness, unemployment, caring responsibilities or just simple changes in family circumstances. Their lives cannot be placed on hold indefinitely while developers, building owners and managing agents decide what happens next.

Jessica Toale (Bournemouth West) (Lab): I can think of at least two buildings in my constituency that have been determined urgent life-critical but cannot be remediated because of delays in getting the certificates they need from the Building Safety Regulator. That leaves residents facing large insurance costs, unable to sell, and stuck with damp and mould and a whole range of other issues. Does the hon. Member agree that the Building Safety Regulator needs the resources so that residents are not left trapped in their homes for years?

Dr Pinkerton: I am incredibly grateful to the hon. Lady, who I know represents a Bournemouth seat. I have exactly the same issues in my constituency. Reports and certification are not being received in time, often frustrating sales and driving things like insurance premiums in the long term. Residents' lives cannot be placed on hold indefinitely while those who have the whip hand decide what happens next.

The problems do not end when remediation begins. At North Court, another development in Camberley, residents undergoing remediation through the Metropolitan Thames Valley housing association have reported restricted daylight and ventilation, broken windows and water leaks. Those issues are challenging at the best of times, but almost unbearable during a long, hot summer like the one we have just had, when temperatures inside properties regularly reached 40ºC.

Some residents have described deteriorating mental health and feeling increasingly insecure in their own homes. Scaffolding, sheeting, noise and disruption may be unavoidable for a time, but poor communication, unresolved damage and unhealthy living conditions are not acceptable. Clear information, prompt repairs and credible completion dates should be basic expectations throughout the remediation process. I ask the Minister to outline how residents will be protected during remediation works, especially during hot summer periods and cold winters.

Chris Kane (Stirling and Strathallan) (Lab): I am struck that the hon. Member used the phrase "collective national response" to start his remarks. As a Scottish MP, I am conscious that this is a UK-wide endeavour, but four different Governments could be looking at it. If work is accelerated in one part, pressure can be put on the resources available in another. Does the hon. Member agree that the collective national response has to be considered in a UK sense, not just under the relevant Department in Westminster?

The Public Accounts Committee looked at this issue on 21 March 2025. One of our conclusions was:

"Given the lack of progress to date and the remaining challenges ahead, we are sceptical about the adequacy and achievability of MHCLG's Remediation Acceleration Plan."

Does the hon. Member share that scepticism?

Dr Pinkerton: The hon. Gentleman is right to say that one main handbrake to remediation is national resourcing. There are simply not enough fire safety engineers or specialist companies that can do this remediation work on a fast timescale. That problem exists not only between Scotland and England but within the English regions. I entirely accept the hon. Gentleman's point that a co-ordinated national solution is the best response we could hope for for our residents, so that the work is undertaken in a timely and efficient manner.

My second question for the Minister relates to that topic. How will those responsible be held to enforceable timetables, so that residents have certainty and transparency from companies completing the remediation works? The examples I have cited concern the pace and conditions of remediation but, before any work begins, someone must decide what work is required.

[Dr Pinkerton]

That brings me to PAS 9980, the framework used to assess fire risks in the external walls of existing residential buildings. The Government have committed to making the standard mandatory for relevant external wall fire risk assessments, but its interpretation will influence the work that is carried out, the funding available and the conditions in which residents are expected to live. A proportionate approach is sensible. Assessors should consider the building as a whole, including its materials, construction and wider fire safety arrangements.

The work undertaken should reflect the risk that the building actually presents, but that approach relies heavily on professional and subjective judgment. Residents need confidence that those judgments are competent, consistent, transparent and properly scrutinised. When assessments of the same building reach different conclusions, remediation can be delayed, funding becomes harder to secure, lenders lose confidence and residents are left wondering whose judgment they can ultimately trust.

There is a particular concern where combustible materials, which would not be permitted on comparable new buildings, are allowed to remain on existing homes. An assessment may conclude that the immediate risk to life is tolerable, but residents could still face higher insurance premiums, difficulty securing a mortgage and a reduction in the value of their property. They may be told that their building meets the required standard, while continuing to feel unsafe and financially trapped.

Royal Artillery Quays clearly illustrates this problem. At this point, I pay tribute to Steve Day, who has been a doughty campaigner for that development and its residents. Many hon. Members might have heard directly from him. Royal Artillery Quays is a large, private residential development in Thamesmead, built by Barratt Homes in 2002, and home to around 1,000 residents. Barratt Homes's proposed approach there, assessed under PAS 9980, would leave some combustible panels in place, on the basis that the remaining risk is tolerable.

Residents—not unreasonably—remain concerned both about the safety of that approach and its financial consequences. They report that annual service charges have risen from £3,000 to £6,000, with much of that increase linked to insurance. That phenomenon is confirmed by the Association of British Insurers, which in October 2025 reported that buildings remediated only to PAS 9980 may face persistently higher premiums than those remediated to a higher standard. In other words, residents will be paying higher insurance premiums in perpetuity because of decisions that were made not just by this Government but by developers in the past. Some of those residents cannot sell without accepting a substantial reduction in the value of their home. Residents have drawn my attention to a fire safety engineering report that states that leaving the panels in place is

"not the most appropriate fire engineering solution"

for that building. Already there is contestation between the different approaches recommended. Where does that leave residents? The reliability of these decisions ultimately depends on the subjective competence of the people making them.

Will the Minister tell us whether the Government will publish the findings of their audits and reviews of the application of PAS 9980, and what steps are being taken to ensure greater consistency in its use? Where PAS 9980 assessments result in combustible materials remaining in place, how will the consequential impacts on insurance premiums, mortgage availability and property values be assessed and communicated to residents?

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The hon. Member talked about publication of the audit, with which I hope everyone will agree. Does he agree that it should be shared across the nations of the UK in order that all our Executives—the Parliaments in Scotland and Wales and the Executive in Northern Ireland—can take action where that is appropriate?

Dr Pinkerton: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. He parallels the case made by the hon. Member for Stirling and Strathallan (Chris Kane). There has to be a national-level approach, and I hope that the Government will share information with the devolved Administrations in all parts of the United Kingdom and with all Members of this House so that we can adequately support the affected residents, who are certainly not just in England.

The experience with the separate EWS1 process shows what happens when confidence in these professionals breaks down. One Surrey Heath constituent accepted an offer on their apartment for £260,000. That was for a flat originally bought for £316,000. They were prepared to accept a loss of £56,000 simply to move forward with their life, but even then the sale collapsed, because the buyer could not obtain a mortgage after lenders stopped accepting the building's EWS1 form, which had been signed by the now notorious Adam Kiziak of Tri Fire Ltd. The Institution of Fire Engineers suspended Mr Kiziak's membership and registration in 2024, following findings under its disciplinary process. It announced his expulsion on 5 March 2025, following even more complaints. Also in March 2025, alongside my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper), I met the then Building Safety Minister to raise concerns about Mr Kiziak and his behaviour.

My office has identified at least nine EWS1 forms issued through Tri Fire in Camberley alone that have subsequently been rejected by lenders. That is why independent verification is essential, including where an earlier assessment concluded that no remediation was required, because we now know that Adam Kiziak was faking EWS1 forms, suggesting that buildings were entirely safe when they in fact contained combustible material.

The consequences of failure in this area can be immediate. At the Courtyard in Camberley, a couple reported receiving five EWS1 forms that were not accepted before a sixth finally satisfied the relevant requirements. That delay pushed their purchase beyond the stamp duty deadline and left them with an additional bill of nearly £4,500. They had no control over the assessment process, yet bore the cost when it failed. When does the Minister expect statutory regulation of fire engineers to be introduced? Given the degree of subjectivity in PAS 9980 assessments and the potentially life-changing costs passed on to residents, how can leaseholders have confidence in a system that lacks a fully regulated profession?

Failures in assessment can impose substantial costs. The next question is who should be expected to pay them. The Building Safety Act introduced welcome protections and ensured that many leaseholders would no longer be expected to meet the cost of failures that they did not cause. Some non-qualifying leaseholders

may also receive support because of their landlord's responsibility, a developer commitment or the funding arrangements that apply to their building. However, significant gaps remain.

Once a lease is classified as non-qualifying, that status can remain attached to it when the property is sold. Someone buying their first and only home can therefore inherit the consequences of the previous owner's circumstances and become exposed to significant remediation costs. They had no involvement in the original construction and have no responsibility for the defects, yet under the current system, they can still be left with the bill.

On 10 April 2025, in response to a written question, the then Building Safety Minister said the Government was looking closely at how to

"sunset the 'in perpetuity' status of leases which do not qualify for the leaseholder protections."

Can the Minister update us on that work, and will the Government bring forward proposals to protect those who bought what they reasonably believed would be a safe and secure home?

The Government's promised remediation Bill provides an opportunity to resolve outstanding problems and turn commitments into delivery. Under their plans, by the end of 2029, buildings over 18 metres should be remediated and buildings from 11 metres to 18 metres should be remediated or firmly scheduled, with 2031 the intended final completion point. Those ambitions are absolutely welcome, but meeting them will require accurate building data, secure funding, skilled contractors, effective independent inspection and, as we have heard today, proper resourcing for agencies across the United Kingdom. It will require costs to be recovered from those responsible, including developers and construction product manufacturers.

Residents have already spent years waiting. Deadlines will mean little unless they are enforceable and backed up by the capacity required to meet them. When will those duties become legally enforceable, and how will the Government ensure that the funding, workforce and regulatory capacity are in place to deliver it?

The lesson of Grenfell is that building safety depends on the whole system working: sound regulation, competent professionals, effective oversight and accountability when things go wrong. When that system fails, danger can remain unaddressed and residents can be left trapped in homes they cannot sell and paying costs they cannot control. Behind every assessment, funding decision and remediation timetable is someone trying to protect their family, preserve their savings or move on to the next stage of their lives.

The bereaved and the survivors of Grenfell deserve justice, and my constituents in Surrey Heath and constituents across the country deserve safe homes and confidence in those entrusted to protect them. More than nine years on, we must take every reasonable step to prevent another loss of life and ensure that those still living with the consequences of this crisis can finally move forward.

9.48 am

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Murrison, and a delight to be called first. I congratulate the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Dr Pinkerton) on securing this important debate. It is an important opportunity for me to raise with the Minister the many issues that my constituents are facing, which are similar to those that the hon. Member has just described. I welcome the Minister to her place as well. In having this debate, we remember all the victims and survivors of Grenfell.

I also thank all the people across the country who have been campaigning on cladding. I have talked about cladding many times and yet we are still here; that is my frustration. I thank the previous Minister for Building Safety, my hon. Friend the Member for Chester North and Neston (Samantha Dixon), for her work on the remediation Bill. The Bill will place stronger legal duties on landlords and freeholders to remediate unsafe cladding and other fire safety defects within clear timeframes. That is very welcome. I am also grateful to her for meeting with me to discuss a number of long-running cases that I face in Putney, and I am glad that the new Minister will continue that important work.

I welcome the work of the remediation enforcement unit, the leadership of Lord Roe, and the work of the Building Safety Regulator, but I do not know why they are causing so many delays. I understand that 69 people work for the remediation unit and 500 people work for the Building Safety Regulator. I ask the Minister to look into their work and find out why they are not able to move so many developments ahead at the pace needed. There are long delays, a lack of clear guidance and a lack of connection between the different bodies involved, as I will demonstrate.

I would like to draw the Minister's attention to several developments that are covered by the developer remediation contract with major developers such as Barratt Redrow and Taylor Wimpey. Despite those contractual commitments, many residents in those developments continue to face lengthy delays before remediation works, which have been agreed and funded, can begin or be completed. In some cases, fire safety remediation has been delayed because structural defects need to be addressed first—if there are problems with the cladding, that often comes with problems with the entire building. In other cases, residents are waiting for final fire risk assessments, EWS1 forms, remediation plans, contractor appointments, updated certifications, smoke extraction systems or the installation of cavity barriers. In all those cases, it is the people in the building who have to chase things up.

One development in my constituency has been waiting for Network Rail to give permission for rear elevation works. Network Rail did not respond to the many repeated efforts by the project team to obtain the permission, so a specialist contractor had to be hired just to get a response, which added a lot of cost for leaseholders.

In another case, many defects have been found at the same time in the buildings of a really large development. Hundreds of families have moved out and moved back, and they have just been told that they will all have to move out again in a rota system, all while fighting for remediation. They have been worried about the safety of their building—they had a waking watch and then they did not—and they cannot sell their homes if they want to, so they cannot get on with their lives. The impact on all those residents of six years of fighting is unacceptable. They cannot sell or remortgage their homes, and they live in uncertainty about when their buildings will finally be made safe.

[Fleur Anderson]

This is affecting social housing tenants too. For some badly affected social housing in Wandsworth, specifically the Eliot and Wentworth blocks in Wandsworth town, tenants have been waiting for the Building Safety Regulator to give the go-ahead. They cannot have essential kitchen and heating system replacements or other work in the building done until the cladding remediation is completed. The council submitted the application on 31 March. The Building Safety Regulator's statutory response time for works to existing higher-risk buildings is eight weeks, but it immediately asked for an extension, which is worrying in itself. Here we are in September, and the council is still waiting for a response. The works will take 18 to 24 months. The blocks are in serious need of that repair and the other repairs they are waiting for.

Although I recognise that developers have obligations under the developer remediation contract, my constituents are understandably asking what more can be done by the unit, by Ministers and by the Building Safety Regulator when progress stalls for different reasons. The challenge is not whether a developer has signed up to a contract, but how quickly remediation can move through the assessment, approval and delivery stages, especially when there are other bodies involved.

To conclude, can the Minister explain how the Government intend to support and expedite remediation at developments already covered by the developer remediation contract? What steps can be taken to remove barriers that delay works, to speed up assessments and approvals, and to ensure that developers deliver at pace? The new legislation is very welcome, but leaseholders trapped in affected buildings need to know that existing remediation programmes will also be accelerated. They deserve not only stronger rules for the future in the upcoming Bill, but urgent action on the buildings that have already waited far too long for remediation to be completed.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Dr Andrew Murrison (in the Chair): Order. Many colleagues want to speak and we have limited time. Front Benchers will be called at 10.28 am, so I suggest everyone takes four or five minutes for speeches.

9.54 am

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Your Party): I thank the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Dr Pinkerton) for securing this debate and for the excellent way that he presented the case. This issue causes unbelievable levels of stress for many of our constituents.

We should briefly contrast the complications of getting remedial action to bring about safety and security for our constituents in multiple-ownership private sector developments with the relative speed and efficiency with which local authorities dealt with the problem of cladding after Grenfell. My own borough of Islington surveyed every property immediately, discovered unknown suspect cladding in a couple of places, and got on with it straight away. The issue was resolved very quickly. That was in 2018, but here we are, eight years later, and I have a considerable number of leasehold properties that have been built over the last 20 years or so where the residents, as the hon. Member for Surrey Heath pointed out, want to move on but cannot move or sell, and are paying massive insurance costs.

I say to the Minister that the excessive insurance costs many residents are having to pay are not their fault. The problem should absolutely not be their responsibility; it should be the responsibility of the developers that caused it in the first place. If those developers no longer exist or are not prepared to pay, surely the default position should be that the Government as a whole are prepared to pick up that compensation. People are getting deeply into debt just to insure their own flat, but at the same time cannot move on.

I want to make some quick points about local issues that I have raised many times with the Government. The first is about the Drayton Park development. I thank the Minister and her predecessors for at last getting to a situation where Government funding has been approved for Galliard Homes to help cover part of the fire remediation costs. I would be grateful if the Minister could assure me how quickly that work will now be completed. It has been subject to endless correspondence between my office, the local authority and many others just to try and get that remedial work done for the properties on Drayton Park in my constituency.

Secondly, there are the works that need to be done for Newlon Housing on the Queensland Road site, which is adjacent to the Arsenal football ground. Remediation works have been delayed, apparently mostly because of delays and complications created by Newlon. Again, I have raised this directly with the Minister and her predecessors, and I would be grateful if she could assure me that that work will now be done. Many lease extensions have been granted over the years, but the complication is that the people living there have not seen the work done. Now their lease is being eaten up as the years go by, and the value of the place is reducing, so they are losing out in lots of ways. That leads on to the wider issue of leasehold reform, but that is not the subject of today's debate.

The final issue I want to raise is one that I have raised many times in the past, and I am quite unclear where we have reached on it. At Highbury Gardens, where Aviva is the head lessor, there was an issue about wooden railings on balconies that were deemed to be a fire risk. That issue has gone on for a very long time, and once again, the residents are stuck without any certainty about their future.

I will not take much more time, but I will just say that we have a responsibility to get this done quickly. When the fire happened at Grenfell, an enormous shock was felt all over the country. Everything that happened at Grenfell was disgusting and disgraceful—we know that, and we do not want another Grenfell anywhere else. Local authorities have managed, by and large, to get the issue sorted out, but it is the miasma of insurance companies, leaseholders, ultimate freeholders, developers that disappear and go bust, and fire safety engineers who are in short supply or, in many places, non-existent that is the problem. At the end of the day, all the stress lands on our constituents. That is not right or fair and we need to get it sorted.

9.59 am

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. I warmly welcome the Minister to her post. I had meetings with most of her predecessors. I do not need to keep having meetings; I just hope that she takes up the points we have raised.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Dr Pinkerton) on laying out the issues so clearly—as a result, I have cut my speech in half. Sadly, it is a bit like "Groundhog Day": we have all raised these issues before. The peroration of the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) summarised the complexity that the Minister and the Government have to grapple with. It is not just the Government who are part of this challenge, but they have to be part of the solution.

I will not name any of the developments that I am talking about, because my residents are very concerned about being blighted. There have been some improvements. The Building Safety Regulator is getting better and the delays have reduced, but as well as dealing with historical issues, it has to work with new developments. Hackney council has a good track record of building council housing, but some of it has been delayed by the Building Safety Regulator. I understand that the delays have now reduced substantially, but I hope the Minister will look closely at that issue in her new role to make sure the Building Safety Regulator is working as efficiently as possible.

Skills remain a big issue, and there has been a woeful lack of activity. Some of us were here in 2018 talking about training fire safety engineers. It takes three years to train them, and if anyone had done that then, we would be in a much better place now.

I also wish to mention mortgageability. As recently as 3 September, I had a letter from Baroness Blake of Leeds, repeating what I have had from Ministers of different parties over time: that there are 10 mortgage companies that will lend on property with dangerous cladding. I point that out to constituents and keep referring them to the 10 companies, but there is always a reason why it cannot happen. Those companies obviously have criteria that are often not met. If the Government are routinely sending out that sort of information, it needs to be absolutely accurate.

Insurance is a huge and ongoing problem. For two developments in my constituency, only one insurer took part in the insurance tender process—insurers are just pulling out. The Treasury Committee is keen to look at that issue, but there is a real role for the Government to play. I spoke to the Minister's predecessors in the previous Government, but this nut has not yet been cracked. I think I speak for every Member in this Chamber when I say that we would be happy to put our weight and effort behind it to help the Minister tackle the issues with insurance companies. We cannot have properties that are effectively uninsurable and bankrupting our residents. As the right hon. Member for Islington North said, people are going into debt to pay their insurance premiums, and that is before they have a claim to make.

The lack of skilled contractors was first raised back in 2020 in a Public Accounts Committee report, when I was Chair of that Committee. We asked for work to be done, but nothing has happened.

The hon. Member for Surrey Heath spoke about tolerability. I have a very expert constituent who came to my advice surgery this summer. I am very happy to introduce the Minister to him. He has written to me and the Department a number of times, and we have had a number of exchanges about the changes in British standards since Grenfell, and specifically about building materials. Instead of having set standards, fire safety is now done on measures of tolerability. He says that there is now a scale of standards, depending on the individual who does the fire safety assessment. That is why, after the Adam Kiziak affair, in which a number of EWS1—external wall system fire review—forms were forged, other people qualified to do the EWS1 certificates came to different conclusions. Two buildings in Hackney that were tolerable were then said to have issues that require remediation.

My constituent said that insurance has become so expensive because the insurers are not certain about the standards, which will no doubt have an impact on mortgage lenders, too. The issue needs to be resolved. I say with respect to the Minister that the solution must be much more fundamental than the Government getting people in, banging heads together and saying, "Sort it out." This is fundamental to why Grenfell happened in the first place. It was the biggest public safety failure in several generations.

The Department's permanent secretary at the time spoke to several of her predecessors to find out who could have seen it coming. Changes happened here, there and everywhere, and no one saw what the cumulative impact would be on Grenfell—obviously, there were also other shocking aspects of the Grenfell situation. This is an opportunity for the Minister, who is a very capable woman—we are all delighted to see her in her post—to tackle this issue once and for all. It may not help our residents immediately, but it has to work for the future.

I have several simple asks. Will the Minister get working on the mortgage lender issue and make sure that we are sending out accurate information? Will she work with mortgage lenders not just to get them to sign up to a list saying that they support lending but to be really clear about the criteria that will allow them to lend? Will she look again at insurance and skills, and will she please tackle the issue of tolerability?

10.4 am

Mr Will Forster (Woking) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Murrison. I thank my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Dr Pinkerton), for securing this debate.

In my Woking constituency, residents have been the direct victims of construction failures. The Victoria Square development, a new shopping centre with two residential towers and another tower containing a hotel, is a glaring example. It was all built by Sir Robert McAlpine. This development was meant to help my town grow and ensure that we can build new homes and grow our economy. Instead, it has put Woking on the map for all the wrong reasons.

The original opening date was meant to be October 2020. However, after cladding failures, it opened at Halloween 2024, and it has continued to be a horror ever since. Cladding panels fell off after the hotel opened, leading to road closures that disrupted local businesses and massively inconvenienced residents in their day-to-day lives. This was next to the town's main road, an A road. One time the road was closed after being open for just 11 days, because another panel had fallen off.

The road was closed during Christmas, and we all know how important that time of year is for businesses. I asked town centre residents and businesses to tell me how this impacted them. One family-owned restaurant told me its bookings had dropped, and unfortunately it

[Mr Will Forster]

had to cut staff hours. A carers agency said its staff were constantly being delayed in delivering necessary care to vulnerable people, all because Sir Robert McAlpine did not build the building properly in the first place.

Thankfully, the road has now reopened and the cladding panels have now, only recently, been properly secured. Under the common law of negligence, according to the Chartered Institute of Building, purely economic losses are just not recoverable. However, this could be included under contract law. Why is that not standard practice for building projects? Will the Minister and her Department look at making it standard practice as part of forthcoming legislation?

Just a stone's throw from Victoria Square is another building safety issue in Woking. The Eastgate building has sat abandoned since late 2023, when over 100 residents were evacuated after a report identified significant structural defects. It has been years since then, and the developer says the building is safe. The owner says otherwise. After I got involved last year, independent testing was carried out. Although the testing was completed many months ago, the results still have not been released. There is no way that both sides can be right in this situation. I do not know what they are hiding, but this needs to be resolved immediately. Residents deserve to know what is going on. Does the Minister agree with me that the results of the testing need to be released immediately and that one of the parties must admit it is wrong, whether that means residents being allowed back in and an explanation of why the original structural testing was wrong or the developer needing to rebuild Eastgate and pay compensation?

These two examples from my Woking constituency show the pressing need for stricter oversight, stronger retrospective enforcement and clear accountability for those that are responsible. We live in a country where a university degree is needed to become a lawyer or a teacher, and maybe two to be accredited, so it is shocking that I could go to B&Q, buy some materials and become a cowboy builder tomorrow, without a licence. The construction industry is an unregulated wild west. I know the Federation of Master Builders has been calling on the Government to introduce mandatory licensing and testing for UK construction firms. Does the Minister agree, and will the Government include it in forthcoming legislation? I urge the Government to listen.

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): Will the hon. Member give way?

Mr Forster: I had better not, given the timings.

I urge the Government to listen to Members present and take the necessary steps to deliver the building safety and accountability that people back home in Woking, and across the country, deserve.

10.8 am

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Murrison. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting time for this important debate, and the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Dr Pinkerton) for so ably setting out the issues that our constituents face.

Dartford, perhaps unlike many city centre constituencies, is not necessarily somewhere that would be associated with high levels of building safety problems, but we continue to see issues, including new and previously unidentified ones. The key point I want to make is about the length of time it continues to take to resolve these issues. When I was first elected in 2024, I was contacted by residents of a set of four blocks at Ingress Park in Greenhithe who had a long-standing fire safety issue, first identified as far back as 2019, when it was found that flats had combustible material in the balconies and inadequate firebreaks. Frighteningly for residents, there was even a fire on the site in 2023, which left four people injured, bringing home the need to get the building sorted.

I have supported residents over the last two years, bringing together the developer and the managing agents to try to overcome the various obstacles to getting the works done. It was honestly with a sense of relief that I visited the buildings last week to see that the work was finally under way, with an end in sight to the cost and uncertainty with which residents had been living. From today's contributions and the conversations I have had with other MPs, I think this case is indicative of how these cases can drag on for years, even when the developer has identified the need for remediation works and agreed to fund them.

The second issue that I want to raise is that I am fairly astonished by the fact that we are still continuing to discover new issues. Partly, that is due to the now well publicised issues with fire safety surveys undertaken by, as the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Dr Pinkerton) and others have mentioned, Tri Fire and Adam Kiziak, who was expelled by the Institution of Fire Engineers. One instance that brings home to me the seriousness of this is Heron Court in Ebbsfleet in my constituency, where residents have recently had a waking watch imposed upon them by managing agents FirstPort, who obviously receive much attention in this place, and who once again have taken action without the agreement of the residents or builders.

Two of the four blocks at Heron Court are very slightly over 11 metres in height, and therefore in scope of the Building Safety Act. In this instance, there is a dispute between FirstPort, the managing agents, and Taylor Wimpey, the developer, about the fire safety report that has been undertaken, with one party not happy with it. Negotiations on access for a further inspection have been ongoing since the start of the year to try to clarify what work needs to be undertaken, which has left the building's leaseholders facing a bill for the 24-hour waking watch, while having no levers to bring the other parties together to move the issue forward.

I have asked to meet FirstPort and the developer in the coming weeks to try to find a way forward and seek assurances that leaseholders will not be hit with the costs of the waking watch. Particularly surprising is that some of the new issues occurring are, I think, in buildings built well after the terrible events at Grenfell in 2017, when lessons should really have been learned, so I hope that when the Minister responds—I welcome her to her place—she will be able to confirm that it remains the case that leaseholders should not be bearing the costs of these waking watches.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Dr Andrew Murrison (in the Chair): Order. We are going to struggle to get everybody in, so brevity, please, colleagues.

10.12 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Murrison. I thank the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Dr Pinkerton) for securing the debate. He often brings vital debates to Westminster Hall, and I am always glad to come along and support him in his requests. I welcome the Minister to her place. She is a busy lady. She responded to the Adjournment debate last night, and as if she never slept, she is back in Westminster Hall this morning. We wish her well in her role.

Building safety remediation is required to fix serious safety defects in residential buildings where those defects could put residents at risk. At the end of July '26, more than 4,500 residential buildings in England measuring 11 metres or more in height had been identified as having unsafe cladding that requires remediation. The figure had increased by some 228 in just one month, so there is a growing problem, unfortunately. That demonstrates that the demand for essential remediation works is continuing to outpace the rate at which works are being completed.

We need to remember that behind those stats are real people. Sometimes we think about the buildings, but what matters is what happens to the people living day to day in them with constant uncertainty about the safety of their own home. The pressure and the stress are almost overwhelming. Many report facing significant financial pressures due to insurance premiums and difficulties in selling their property. We have seen reports of some leaseholders in London losing around £100,000 on the value of their flat as a result of a five-year delay in remediation plans and works.

Following the tragedy at Grenfell Tower, we have seen the potential for fatal consequences because of failures and delays in building safety remediation, and I believe that lessons must be learned from that. I will quickly give a Northern Ireland perspective. More than £2 million has been paid to managing agents under the cladding safety scheme. However, despite that support, hundreds of people in Belfast are still living in high-rise buildings with cladding that has raised serious fire safety concerns, including buildings that contain some of the very same material that caused the Grenfell tragedy. I understand that it is early days for the Minister in her role, but has she had the opportunity to talk to the relevant Minister in the Northern Ireland Assembly to give them details of what is being done here in Westminster, perhaps to help us to do things better back home?

While the overall number of high-rise residential buildings in Northern Ireland is relatively small compared with other parts of the United Kingdom, that cannot mean that the standard of protection afforded to residents in Northern Ireland should be any lower. Every resident deserves to know that their home is safe, regardless of where they live. Does the Minister therefore agree that more must be done to accelerate the remediation of unsafe cladding in Northern Ireland and to ensure that residents are supported throughout the process?

I am coming to the end of my remarks, Dr Murrison; I am very conscious of your comments about time. Residents deserve safe and secure homes. They should not be left in limbo, facing rising costs and uncertainty while they wait for the building they call home to be made safe. It just is not fair.

Dr Andrew Murrison (in the Chair): Commendably brief—thank you very much indeed.

10.16 am

Mike Reader (Northampton South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison, and I thank the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Dr Pinkerton) for securing the debate. As you requested, Dr Murrison, I will keep my comments brief.

I want to put on the record that I was silver team, accountability, at Mace for this area in my portfolio, and it was my colleague Sam Kennedy who took on the delivery of that. I am sure that her work has made buildings safer in the long term. I want to make sure that her work is recognised, because I forgot to do so the last time that I spoke here on this topic.

The Building Safety Regulator was a serious bottleneck. After we spoke about this issue before, I could not go to a single panel event or roundtable, or open my LinkedIn account, without seeing complaints about the BSR and its performance, but the performance change has been substantial under Lord Roe and Charlie Pugsley. Given that the BSR is a public sector organisation that has changed so quickly, I do not think that we can have this debate without recognising the substantial change that they have made to the BSR, as the performance stats show. But as colleagues have mentioned, there are still areas to improve, so rather than focusing on what is happening now, I will focus on what I think will come next.

There are two big issues for the Department to focus on. First, there is the implementation of the building safety levy. In Scotland, the scheme has already been paused, because of concerns over its viability and how it can be implemented in such a complex system. For England, the Department needs to look at that with regard to bringing forward the remediation Bill. How does the implementation of that levy apply and does it impact on us delivering the homes that we need? Is it the solution now in a reformed system?

The main thing I will talk about, however, is the remediation Bill itself, which has yet to be introduced. I hope that it will contain a number of measures to address some of the issues that colleagues have talked about. First, there is the issue of enforcement deadlines—moving from targets set for the remediation plan to enforceable targets, with the enforcement unit properly equipped to deliver them.

There must also be a clear answer on buildings under 11 metres. I welcome the Government's extension of funding to buildings under 11 metres, but I understand that the funding pot is constrained by budget, rather than addressing the scale of the problem. Much more collection of evidence is needed to understand the amount of money that is needed to ensure that no building in the UK is unsafe.

There must be a resolution for non-qualifying leaseholders, who have been excluded for years now and, across our constituencies, still face large bills. We must also address the challenge of defect liability periods, because there has been consultation on expanding to

[Mike Reader]

15 or 30 years. That sounds great for a principal developer or contractor, but it is not mirrored in the Defective Premises Act 1972 and how that rolls through the supply chain.

Unfortunately, the big two big winners from the process have been the legal and the insurance professions. I have heard countless stories of contractors who have been encouraged to secure additional professional indemnity insurance to pay for building safety work, only then to be caught out by the insurers using every single technical loophole they can to avoid paying. Ultimately, that means there are buildings and homes across the country that are ready to be lived in that cannot be insured because of the actions of the insurance sector. Contractors are failing; we are seeing an increasing number of collapses among contractors in the construction sector.

Certainly, the big winners from all this have been the lawyers. I have unfortunately heard of schemes where the legal fees outweigh the cost of remediation. Something must be done by the Government to address such ambulance-chasing by some members of the legal profession, who are making millions out of a problem that homeowners inherited.

I thank the National Housing Federation, Real Estate:UK and many others across the sector who keep us informed, and I extend those thanks further down the chain, because without the stories shared by the contractors and suppliers who are working on this, we would not know the reality of trying to fix the problem day to day and the true scale of the challenges that we face. Does the Minister agree that alongside listening to trade bodies, leaseholders, freeholders and developers, we have to ensure that we are down in the supply chain, talking to suppliers and installers to understand what it is like on the ground?

10.20 am

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Dr Murrison. I thank the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Dr Pinkerton) for securing the debate, and introducing it ever so comprehensively and well.

One of the first emails I received when I was elected in 2024 was from Tillicoultry residents who had been told that reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete was present in their roofs. I remember being really moved by how those people have been affected in so many different ways. They have experienced immense stress and uncertainty at being evacuated at short notice. Three years later, they are still separated from their personal possessions: family heirlooms passed down through generations, photo albums, souvenirs and jewellery—items that cannot have a financial price put on them. Some people have had to move to temporary accommodation, such as hotels or rented properties that will never feel like home. The feeling of being unable to put down roots has taken a toll on their mental health, and having to still pay mortgages on uninhabitable properties has taken a toll on their financial health.

These people's lives have been turned upside down, but the most heartbreaking and scandalous part of their story is them feeling like they have been ignored. Confusion over repairs and the cost of them has been a hallmark of years of substandard communication from the council. Homeowners have struggled to get responses to emails or phone calls about their ongoing situation, meaning that people have been unable to make informed decisions—and these are huge decisions to make. Some homeowners have ended up selling their property at a vastly reduced price just to get it all over and done with in an attempt to move on with their life.

After a recent meeting at the start of this month, the council accepted that information in some instances could have been presented more clearly. That was welcomed, but it is not enough. I have to say that the SNP administration that run the council need to reflect on the lack of leadership displayed during this whole sorry saga. Both the council leader and the local Clackmannanshire and Dunblane MSP, who is deputy leader of the Scottish National party no less, have been found utterly wanting. They have been so ineffective at getting the Scottish Government to step up and do the right thing for Tillicoultry residents.

The SNP Government have utterly abandoned Tillicoultry residents. It is a disgrace that it took two years for the Cabinet Secretary for Housing to meet with the residents, and the outcome of that meeting was a dereliction of duty. Instead of taking meaningful action to sort this mess out, they just wanted to blame Westminster, but the Tillicoultry residents know that housing is a wholly devolved matter. This is the Scottish Government's responsibility. The Tillicoultry RAAC residents just want the council and the Scottish Government to treat them with empathy, compassion and fairness. That is not too much to ask. These people are in their hour of need.

10.23 am

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Dr Pinkerton) on securing today's important debate and setting out the issue so clearly. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Woking (Mr Forster) on all the hard work he is doing to deal with the Halloween horror of panels falling in the town centre.

I pay tribute to the 72 victims of the Grenfell disaster. No debate should pass without recognising how grotesquely they were failed by the systems that were meant to protect them. Let us not forget what the public inquiry panel, chaired by the judge Sir Martin Moore-Bick, said in its epic report on the disaster. On building inspectors, it said:

> "We have concluded that the conflict between the regulatory function of building control and the pressures of commercial interests prevents a system of that kind from effectively serving the public interest."

Similarly, it said that the Building Research Establishment

> "sacrificed rigorous application of principle to its commercial interests."

I will return to commercial interests shortly.

The remediation Bill announced in the King's Speech is expected to make it a legal requirement that every fire risk appraisal of external walls be carried out according to the publicly available specification, or PAS 9980, standard produced by the British Standards Institution. That document decides whether, by law, a leaseholder's building requires remediation or is considered safe.

The final version of that document has only just been published, but the draft that went out to consultation should worry us and every leaseholder in the country, and we need to know whether its deficiencies have been fixed. First, it says:

"Failure of a building to meet the benchmarks given in building regulations...at the time when the building was built, should not be used as the sole basis for determining the outcome of the FRAEW."

That means that a building can still pass the PAS 9980 test even if it is proven not to have complied with the building regulations in force when it was built. The fire safety order manages fire safety in occupied buildings on the assumption that they met the building regulations when they were built. The remediation regime should require the same standard that developers should have met when constructing the building, and that others were, and continue to be, required to meet when constructing buildings.

What is remediation for if not to make buildings meet the standards they should always have met? Frankly, what is the point of having building regulations for leaseholders in this position if they are not enforced in such clear circumstances? Can the Minister reassure leaseholders that the newly published standard requires the remediation of failures to comply with the building regulations that were in force at the time of construction? Such questions also point to worrying failures to enforce building regulations more generally, far beyond fire safety, which could lead to an unfolding tide of undiscovered construction failings.

After what we have heard from Sir Martin Moore-Bick and the panel in the Grenfell public inquiry report, any notion that the profit motive has a continuing role in building inspection following those tragic events is unacceptable and cannot be sustained. I am disappointed that the building control independent panel has recommended the continuation of private sector, and therefore profit-seeking, roles in building inspection. That is what got us into this mess; it will not get us out of it. The Liberal Democrats are calling for building control services to be in-house in local or regional authorities, or otherwise not for profit.

As we have heard, the second deficiency in PAS 9980 is the gap between "tolerable" and "low". Where an appraisal finds a tolerable risk, the draft allows for the work that is needed to bring that risk down to low to be delayed. The commentary on clause 7 suggests

"recommending upgrading the performance of external wall components if/when there is any refurbishment of the external walls in future."

If and when is not good enough for families who have to live in unsafe homes and with the knowledge that their external walls contain flammable material, sometimes including materials that are more flammable than that used on Grenfell Tower. The leaseholder pays for that wait in insurance premiums, mortgage difficulties and living in a building that is only partially safe. For too many, it also renders useless the leaseholder protections in the Building Safety Act, as they apply to unsafe cladding, and this cladding is not considered unsafe.

If components are found to pose a tolerable risk, are they unsafe? Why should they not be removed to reduce the risk to low? We have heard about the challenge of getting insurance; if buildings were remediated to the standard to which they should have been built in the first place and all flammable materials were removed, residents would not have any problem in getting insurance. Developers cannot be asked to come back to finish the job under those circumstances, because the developer remediation contract only requires a building to be brought up to the "tolerable" standard. Can the Minister confirm whether the newly published standard requires all the work needed to reach a low-risk outcome to be undertaken at the same time?

These are not technical quibbles. The Department's own figures, published in August, show that of the 4,600 buildings being monitored, only 1,800 have completed remediation, and over 2,000 of the 4,600 required remediations have not even been started, meaning. That means that in 46% of buildings with unsafe cladding no work has begun—nine years on from Grenfell, as other Members have pointed out—and the Department estimates that somewhere between 1,100 and 2,600 more buildings are in scope but have not yet been identified.

Meanwhile, leaseholders continue to struggle under the cladding crisis, buying properties that they believed met safety standards but that they now realise do not, and are suffering huge increases in premiums and so on. Many developers and building owners have passed on the cost of remediation work to tenants and leaseholders, putting many of them, quite unfairly, in serious financial peril. The Liberal Democrats, following the policy passed by our conference last year on the great property rip-off, are therefore calling for the removal of all such flammable cladding, whether above or below 11 metres, as soon as possible and without tenants or leaseholders, including non-qualifying leaseholders, having to pay.

After all, those who bought leases placed their trust in the private companies and regulatory bodies that let them down. The fault was not theirs. Solicitors' searches would have shown that buildings had not met building regulations. Homeowners were misled, and it was not their fault. They should not have to pay a penny towards that work. That is why my noble Friend Baroness Pinnock's Leaseholder Remediation (Building Safety) Bill, which had its Second Reading in the other place on Friday, would protect leaseholders in buildings of any height and would put developers, contractors and manufacturers on the hook for the cost.

In conclusion, I ask the Minister six things. Will she set out the changes between the consultation draft and the recent version of PAS 9980, which was published the other day? Will she make it clear that a building that has been found to fail the building regulations that were in force when it was built must be remediated back to the building regulations standard, and that the work needed to reach a low-risk outcome should be done once, not deferred to some future refurbishment? Will leaseholder protections be extended to every leaseholder in every defective building, including the hundreds of thousands excluded from the building safety regime? Will the Government commit to driving profit-making commercial interest out of every part of building control inspections and official product testing certifications, and to making physical inspections the norm once again in every development? What more will the Government do to end delays at the Building Safety Regulator? Finally, will the Government confirm that the remediation Bill will provide for cladding manufacturers to be pursued for their share of the costs of remediation, which they have at least partly caused?

[Gideon Amos]

We welcomed the legally enforceable duty to remediate on pain of criminal sanction, and we still do, but a duty to remediate is only as good as the standard against which it is measured. Commercial interest should have no place in policing commercial projects for safety and building regulations. Residents in Taunton and Wellington, in London and across the country deserve nothing less. Above all, the victims of the terrible and avoidable disaster at Grenfell deserve justice.

10.32 am

Lewis Cocking (Broxbourne) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison, and to take part in this debate on the building safety remediation of residential buildings. I thank the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Dr Pinkerton) for securing the debate and for eloquently setting out lots of issues in the sector.

This is a vital issue. As right hon. and hon. Members have rightly said, no one should be forced to live in an unsafe home. A great deal of progress has been made to improve our housing in recent years, and the share of unsafe homes has declined in the past decade, but we must go further. The need to press ahead is as great now as it was in the immediate aftermath of the Grenfell fire, which caused the horrific deaths of 72 people.

The last Conservative Government began the remediation work straight after Grenfell. It included the introduction of financial protections for leaseholders from the costs relating to remediation of unsafe cladding systems put in place by the developer remediation contract. That has ensured that major developers pledge to remediate life-critical fire safety issues in buildings over 11 metres that they have played a role in developing or refurbishing over the past 30 years in England, although some developers should be taken to task for not acting quickly enough and for leaving constituents to fend for themselves.

The last Government were also responsible for putting in place £5.1 billion through the building safety fund and the cladding safety scheme to recover cladding costs for repairs of buildings over 11 metres where no responsible developer could be identified. The Opposition welcome the continued progress by the current Government to implement the Grenfell tower fire inquiry's recommendations, especially regarding remediation. Residents expect to see the inquiry's recommendation implemented in full and to see remediation work completed swiftly and safely. For far too long, that has not been the case.

The Building Safety Regulator, established through the Building Safety Act 2022, was set up with good intentions for stronger regulatory oversight. Although it has done much to oversee remediation, it has worked at an unsustainably slow pace. I know that the Minister will be keen to point out that gateway 2 decisions, namely approvals, are coming in at a faster rate, but this is after years of delay. The regulator made just 118 decisions on remediation applications in the 12-week period to 31 August 2026, with a median of 33 weeks for a determination to be made in some older cases. At the end of July 2025, remediation works had been completed in just 39% of identified buildings, with barely half seeing remediation works to unsafe cladding start or finish. That means that, of the estimated 250,000 dwellings of a height of 11 metres or over with unsafe cladding in the private and social sector, 104,000 have not even started remediation.

In my constituency of Broxbourne, I have seen what happens when fire safety issues in flats are not addressed. Earlier this year, at a six-storey block in Waltham Cross, with known cladding issues and no working alarm, residents were told on the day before the Easter weekend that they would have to evacuate their homes that evening, because the management company had stopped funding the waking watch, where someone is paid to patrol the building to look out for fires. Local authorities were forced to intervene and to extend the waking watch, and fortunately residents were able to stay. Weeks later, Homes England and the Department supported the installation of a suitable alarm and detection system.

I am relieved that there were no fires in that block and that residents did not have to evacuate in the end. However, leaseholders ended up paying thousands of pounds for the waking watch and were left worrying about the risks of fire to their homes or being removed from their homes at the last minute. That could all have been prevented if the remediation works had been carried out when fire safety concerns were first raised. I hope that the Minister will outline how the Government plan to ensure that all buildings with fire safety issues are made safe before the situation gets so serious.

I conclude by reiterating the Opposition's firm and unwavering commitment to safe and decent housing, especially through the remediation efforts started after the tragedy of the Grenfell fire. We will continue to support the Government and work across the House to increase the pace of remediation work, improve the Building Safety Regulator and remove dangerous cladding and other materials from homes across the country.

10.37 am

The Minister for Homelessness, Democracy, Communities and Faith (Florence Eshalomi): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Murrison. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Dr Pinkerton) for securing this important debate.

I thank all hon. Members who are here this morning. Nine years on, a number of them have rightly raised the tragic incident at Grenfell Tower. As a London MP, I vividly remember the night of 14 June 2017. My son had been born a week earlier, on 7 June. Watching TV throughout the night was like watching a horror film with flames and black pieces, not knowing that the black pieces coming out of the building were people jumping. It is right that this House is united in continuing to scrutinise the pace of remediation and the support available to those affected.

Many residents across the country have lived with uncertainty about the safety of their homes, their financial security and their ability to move on with their lives. We recognise the impact that building safety can have not only on people's homes, but on their wellbeing and peace of mind. Nine years on from Grenfell, we have to be honest and say that there can be no justification for unsafe buildings remaining unaddressed. Although significant progress has been made, more than 4,000 buildings have been identified as requiring remediation, and too many residents continue to face the consequences of failures that they did not cause.

That is why this Government are committed to speeding up remediation, ensuring that those responsible bear the cost of making buildings safer, and strengthening protections for leaseholders and residents. Our objective is clear: to remove barriers to remediation, speed up delivery and ensure that people can feel safe and secure in their home. Since the launch of the remediation acceleration plan, more than 420 additional buildings over 11 metres have completed cladding remediation through the Government-funded scheme and the developer remediation contract, meaning that some 35,000 more residents are now living in safer homes. The Government have approved £2.1 billion of funding for cladding remediation since the plan was launched and have committed to more than £1 billion to accelerate remediation in the social housing sector.

But we recognise that further action is needed. We are considering how we can go further to protect residents, particularly those who fall outside existing protections, and to ensure that no responsible party can avoid its obligations. That is why we will build on the foundations established by the Building Safety Act through the forthcoming remediation Bill and our wider programme of building safety reforms.

The Bill will provide greater clarity and certainty about which buildings require remediation and the standards that must be met. It will strengthen regulators' ability to check delay and non-compliance. It will improve routes to recover remediation costs from those responsible and ensure that residents have a pathway to remediation even where responsible entities fail to act or are unable to meet their obligations. Taken together, these reforms will strengthen accountability across the system and help to ensure that buildings are made safer faster.

I turn to some specific issues raised during the debate. The hon. Members for Surrey Heath and for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos) raised the issue of PAS 9980. As hon. Members will know, PAS 9980 was developed by the British Standards Institution. The Government sponsored the BSI to review and update it to ensure that it remains fit for purpose and captures best practice, looking at the learnings since it was introduced in 2022.

As the hon. Member for Surrey Heath outlined, the BSI published an update to PAS 9980 yesterday. I do not agree with the hon. Member's characterisation. PAS 9980 provides an industry-wide accepted methodology to enable qualified and experienced assessors to undertake the fire risk appraisal of external walls. It provides a consistent and proportionate building-specific approach to risk assessments and helps to achieve the right solutions for each building, keeping residents safe while preventing unnecessary and disruptive works. As the update highlights, it has improved the clarity of the structure and usability of PAS 9980, with the aim of achieving greater transparency and consistency by assessors. It does not, however, materially change how risks are assessed, so fire risk appraisals of external walls undertaken using a previous version of PAS 9980 will remain valid. Government remediation programmes require that fire risk appraisals of external walls be undertaken using this methodology.

To further safeguard quality and ensure consistency in assessments, the remediation Bill will mandate how external wall assessments are carried out, to align with our best practice remediation programmes and ensure a nationally consistent approach to remediation work. It will also establish mandatory auditing of fire risk appraisals of external walls in law. This requirement will reinforce trust in both the assessors and the outcomes. I hope that that helps to reassure hon. Members.

Several right hon. and hon. Members rightly mentioned the issue of fire risk assessors. Fire risk assessors perform a critical safety role, and it is essential that they are fully compliant and competent. We have therefore accepted the full recommendation in the Grenfell Tower inquiry phase 2 report for mandatory certifications of fire risk assessors. To meet the recommendation, we intend to bring into law mandatory compliance requirements for fire risk assessors to perform that vital role, subject to parliamentary approval and timescale.

Dame Meg Hillier: I welcome that step, but what the Minister says suggests it is some way off. Can she give some indication of the timescale for getting mandatory licensing in place?

Florence Eshalomi: I agree that many people will continue to question when the fire risk assessors will be in place. The Government recently launched a public consultation on the proposal to establish a fire risk assessor profession with consistently high levels of competency, whereby trust is rebuilt and a strong and diverse pipeline of talent comes forward to ensure that fire safety standards are met. We are currently analysing all the consultation responses, and the Government will publish a full response later this autumn, so hopefully my hon. Friend will not have to wait much longer.

We recognise the additional pressures on building control and fire engineer capacity across the country. We have established the independent building control panel and the fire engineers advisory panel to examine the issues and provide recommendations on strengthening the system. The Government are committed to working with the BSR on long-term reform and exploring options for a more efficient building control system. Any future changes will be developed in consultation with the industry and other stakeholders.

Dame Meg Hillier: We all want to see stronger and better building control, but local authorities have been hollowed out. We have lost a lot of experienced planners and there is not always a pipeline coming through with the necessary experience. Can we lobby the Treasury for support for local government in that respect?

Florence Eshalomi: My hon. Friend will know that I will definitely continue to lobby Treasury colleagues very hard, and any help from colleagues around the House will be helpful. In the meantime, the current system includes a new initiative looking at digital building control programmes. I can confirm that over £45 million has been invested in growing the workforce to help to address the key issue of capacity, streamline the process and support development. More is coming, but a lot more needs to come through the pipeline.

A number of Members, including the hon. Member for Surrey Heath, mentioned the key issue of building insurance and the continuing financial strain felt by so many innocent leaseholders. They see their insurance premiums going through the roof, in some cases paying more than for their mortgages. In the remediation acceleration plan, the Government have committed to

[Florence Eshalomi]

working with the insurance industry to explore options to address the insurance challenges faced by residents living in buildings that are undergoing remediation.

To strengthen the evidence base, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government launched the remediation programme insurance survey, a UK-wide survey of buildings in Government remediation programmes. The findings, first published in July 2026, provide the most comprehensive dataset collected to date on insurance costs, premiums and claims and remediation status across more than 2,000 buildings undergoing remediation. The evidence is informing ongoing engagement with insurers and wider work to understand how insurance costs can better reflect improvements in building safety as remediation progresses. The Financial Conduct Authority is undertaking a short and focused review of the multi-occupancy building insurance market, and the findings will strengthen the evidence base on the next steps.

The Government are also undertaking action to improve transparency and fairness in residential building insurance. We are proceeding with secondary legislation to prevent insurance commissions, which can be opaque and excessive, from being passed on by freeholders and managing agents as freeholders' expenses, and to replace such arrangements with fair and transparent permitted insurance payments with a fee structure. Alongside that, we will introduce through secondary legislation a new transparency requirement for building insurance, including in respect of the disclosure of the relationships and financial arrangements among landlords, managing agents, brokers and insurers.

Jeremy Corbyn: I am pleased to hear what the Minister just said about looking at the fairness of the whole market for insurance, but the immediate issue is that many of our constituents have for several years paid exorbitant and very excessive insurance costs. This is not their responsibility or fault—they did not install the dangerous cladding or fail to inspect properly. They deserve compensation from the insurance industry for what they have been through, and if that is not forthcoming, the Government should have a default position of backing it up. Our constituents have suffered grievously through this problem.

Florence Eshalomi: I thank the right hon. Member for raising that point. He highlighted examples of various developments in his constituency, including Drayton Park and Highbury Gardens, underlining the fact that innocent leaseholders have continued to pay exorbitant fees for many years. It is really important that we get to grips with this, especially for new buildings. I know that my right hon. Friend the Minister for Housing and Planning will be discussing the matter in respect of the national planning policy framework and some other areas, and I will continue to discuss it as well. On the specific issue of backdating, it is important for us to look at clear insurance procurement—the pricing, the cover, the prescribed timeframes for providing information and the mechanism for challenging any future delays.

Together, the measures the Government have outlined are intended to improve transparency, strengthen accountability and help to ensure that residents have a clearer understanding of insurance costs. There is a lot of jargon and hidden figures. We need to make sure that the costs are clear and that when residents challenge them, they get the right information back so that they can assess what they are being asked to pay for.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister for her answers; she is giving a comprehensive and detailed response, as I knew she would. Ever mindful that she has been in place for only a short time, I have a specific question about what is happening here compared with the situation back home. We have an outstanding problem with many properties in Belfast. It would be helpful if we were able, perhaps through the Minister, to engage with the Northern Ireland Assembly, and in particular the relevant Minister there, to ensure that what is learned here can be passed on to those back home in the Assembly.

Florence Eshalomi: I thank the hon. Member for raising a valid point about what lessons can be learned from what happens in the UK. As he has outlined, buildings right across the UK need to be safe. Every home needs to be safe; it does not matter where a person lives. I am very open to looking at areas of best practice, which we can share as we develop legislation.

Several Members, including the hon. Member for Surrey Heath, outlined the big issue with EWS1 forms, which has caused many homeowners a great deal of stress. The Government recognise the difficulties in selling and remortgaging homes, and the concerns for residents living in buildings impacted by building safety issues. We have continued to work with major mortgage lenders to improve access to lending for affected buildings and support the functioning of the housing market while remediation progresses.

The hon. Gentleman referred to concerns about the validity of certain EWS1 forms. I can confirm that my Department is aware of those concerns, which relate to a fire engineer who was removed from his professional accrediting body and is, as I understand it, no longer operating in the field. Although I cannot comment on individual cases, it is important to reiterate that the EWS1 form is not an official Government form but an industry tool used by lenders and valuers to help them to understand the remediation status of participating buildings.

My officials continue to engage with the mortgage lending industry to encourage it to take a proportionate approach when using EWS1 forms. The Government consider that lenders should be moving away from the forms, but there is still an over-reliance on them. The hon. Gentleman highlighted an additional bill of £4,500 because of the delay in getting an EWS1 form. We understand that EWS1 forms continue to be used by individual lenders, and the Government will continue to stress loudly that lenders should move away from that requirement.

A number of Members highlighted the issue of cost and who pays for historical remediation. The Building Safety Act puts the responsibility for undertaking, and in most cases paying for, remediation on the building's landlords, while making it very clear that developers must pay to fix buildings that they have developed or refurbished even if they no longer own them. Courts have new powers to extend liability to associated companies,

thereby stopping complex corporate structures being used to dodge responsibility. This was not fair and took a mental toll on many homeowners.

Where a developer cannot be identified or has not yet agreed to pay, public funding is available to address life-threatening cladding risk on residential buildings over 11 metres high, so that no leaseholder in those buildings will face cladding remediation costs. Many holders of qualifying leases are protected in full from non-cladding and interim measures—for example, where the landlord or its group meets the contribution condition or where the property value is below the set threshold.

Other qualifying leaseholders have their costs firmly capped and spread over 10 years, with costs already paid out since 28 June 2017 counting towards the cap. For obvious reasons, in Greater London the cap is £15,000 and across the country it is £10,000. That rises to £50,000 for properties valued between £1 million and £2 million, and to £100,000 for properties valued at more than £2 million.

The hon. Member for Taunton and Wellington mentioned the building safety levy, which will come into force on 1 October and will raise funds to pay for the remediation of cladding on residential buildings where the developer cannot be held responsible or identified. That is a key element for ensuring trust.

Under the work started by the previous Government, 53 developers signed the developer-led remediation contract with the Government. The contract covers more than 2,000 buildings in England that are over 11 metres high and have life-critical fire safety defects. Developers have contributed and committed to pay or fix the matter, at a cost of around £4.2 billion. Any developer that fails to comply with the remediation obligations faces significant commercial consequences, including the imposition of statutory prohibitions, effectively preventing them from building new homes in England. We expect all developers to accelerate their remediation work without compromising safety.

Luke Myer: That is very positive, but of course those are the developers that are willing to engage, and many of them are not. I recently spoke to Carl Harris from Teesside who suffered life-changing injuries when a wall collapsed on him. He has been trying to engage the sector with an innovation he has developed to prevent unfinished walls from collapsing. What more can the Government do to encourage developers who are not already involved to innovate and protect workers and residents?

Florence Eshalomi *rose—*

Dr Andrew Murrison (in the Chair): Minister, please allow a couple of minutes for the winding-up speech.

Florence Eshalomi: As of April 2026, developers had assessed whether remediation work was required in 94% of their buildings. Despite the progress, there is still a lot to do. Some developers are behind that stretch target and we will continue to engage with them.

The Government remain firmly committed to building a safety regime that is robust, proportionate and protects residents while enabling the delivery of much-needed homes. We have listened to concerns and have already taken decisive steps to strengthen the regulator's capacity, improve its processes and ensure it is fit for purpose. We will continue to work with the industry, residents and Parliament to ensure that the regulation delivers effectively.

I am grateful for all the points Members have raised and will come back to them on any points I have not addressed, especially where they raised individual constituency cases. I look forward to the ongoing dialogue as we continue to address this really important issue.

10.59 am

Dr Pinkerton: I hope that every right hon. and hon. Member who participated in the debate accepts my thanks for their excellent contributions. I thank the Front-Bench spokespeople and the Minister, who is new to her role.

To pick up on one thing, the Minister said—forgive me for paraphrasing; I was writing it down as she spoke—that "no responsible party" in this whole scenario should be able to derogate, or words to that effect, from their obligations. I will leave her with one thought: the risk of PAS 9980 is that it allows those responsible to do exactly that—to be absolved of their responsibility. The defects that were built at the point of construction will be retained because of the new risk-based approach. The responsibility then falls on the purses of our constituents, because they will pay higher insurance costs in perpetuity. I know the Minister is new to her role—

Dr Andrew Murrison (in the Chair): Order.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Ocean Conservation and Stewardship

11 am

Tristan Osborne (Chatham and Aylesford) (Lab) [R]: I beg to move,

That this House has considered ocean conservation and stewardship.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. We spend a lot of time in this place talking about land, housing and farms—what grows and what gets built. We spend less time talking about the three quarters of a million square miles of ocean that fall under UK jurisdiction. That is a mistake, because our seas are the foundation of a great deal of our national life. They regulate our climate, feed our coastal towns, carry our trade and increasingly hold the key to this country's resilience in the decades ahead.

As vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for the ocean, I watched David Attenborough's documentary on the oceans alongside many colleagues in this House and the former Prime Minister. I echo Attenborough's words that

"We are living in the greatest age of ocean discovery, yet we are also witnessing its greatest peril."

I am the Member of Parliament for Chatham and Aylesford, and my constituency has a centuries-long maritime history through its association with the dockyard and global trade. That is highlighted by the outstanding work of the Chatham Historic Dockyard Trust in its recent "Awesome Oceans" exhibition with Steve Backshall, which seeks to educate our younger generations. Our nation's heritage runs through our seas and oceans.

I want to use my time to cover four key elements: the state of our marine protected areas and bottom trawling within them, fisheries and sustainability, the case for parity in marine pollution fines, and the UK's wider leadership role in the ocean, including in the recently signed biodiversity beyond national jurisdiction agreement and the plastics treaty negotiations.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing this issue forward. My constituency based on the scenic Northern Ireland coastline, and I am particularly interested in what more can be done to protect the sea that surrounds us. Raw sewage contains bacteria, harmful chemicals and microplastics, all of which have serious consequences for both marine and human health. Those microplastics are essentially impossible to remove once they enter the environment. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that more must be done to tackle the problem of microplastics?

Tristan Osborne: I do agree. The UK Government's engagement on the global plastics treaty, in alignment with the European Union and other nations, is looking to resolve that exact issue. Microplastics that get into the human biology can significantly heighten the risk of cancer and other problems, and they are a persistent form of pollution that needs to be resolved.

Let me start with a number that should give every Member in this room pause. A third of UK waters now sit within a marine protected area. On paper, that sounds like a country taking marine conservation seriously; in practice, however, the Government's own assessment finds that we are failing on 13 of the 15 indicators of good environmental status in our seas, and not one of our offshore habitats is currently assessed as in good condition. How can that be when so much of our sea is supposedly protected?

The honest answer is that designation is not always the same thing as protection. Across large parts of the MPA network, bottom trawling and dredging remain entirely lawful. Oceana estimates that, in 2024 alone, there were more than 31,000 hours of suspected bottom trawling in UK offshore marine protected areas. More than 70% of those hours were concentrated in just 41 English sites—the same 41 sites covered by the Government's stage 3 consultation. That consultation ended some time ago, and fishermen, conservation groups and coastal communities responded to it in good faith, so will the Minister provide a clearer timetable for the publication of the outcome?

Bottom trawling deserves a moment of its own, because it is not a marginal or peripheral issue. Heavy gear dragged across the seabed flattens reefs, uproots seagrass and disturbs carbon that has been locked in the sediment for centuries. It is, by some distance, one of the most destructive things that we allow in our oceans.

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): I had the pleasure of going out with some non-governmental organisations and marine conservation groups into the Lyme bay marine protected area, which has been protected from bottom trawling for over a decade. We had an opportunity to take a drone down to the seabed to see exactly how quickly nature can recover when we remove artificial barriers such as bottom trawling. There are now reefs and fish, but more than anything, the marine protected area now provides a sustainable business for local fishermen because the fish population has improved. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we need more of these conservation areas in order to allow British fisheries to recover?

Tristan Osborne: I absolutely agree. Marine protection and a viable fishing industry are not competing interests; they depend on each other. It is impossible to fish from a stock that has collapsed, and coastal communities cannot be sustained by paper promises about future abundance. I agree that the question needs to be looked at, because we can do both and they are mutually beneficial.

That is why this year's fisheries data should worry us. The Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science assessed 79 baseline catch limits negotiated for 2026 and found that 46 of them, or 58%, were set above scientific advice. The consequence of repeatedly setting limits above what the science recommends is not an abstract matter; it shows up in the value of the fishery itself. The Blue Marine Foundation reports that UK fishing opportunities in 2026 fell in value by around £136 million on the year before, as well as real declines in commercially important stocks. There are also more troubling findings on illegal discarding; more than a decade after the practice was banned under EU law, there are reports of trawlers discarding six times more fish than they land. I would welcome an assessment from the Minister of how discard rules are being policed.

I want to be clear that the transition to sustainable fishing must work for the people who fish for a living as well as for the ecosystem. Vessels under 10 metres make

up more than 80% of the British fleet. These small operations are often family businesses and the economic backbone of the harbour towns they sail from, including in my home county of Kent. If we ask the industry to change how it fishes, we owe it investment in skills, in lower-impact gear and in a genuine transition plan, as opposed to simply handing down a new set of rules with no support attached.

There is an anomaly in our law that I do not think gets enough attention. If a company pollutes land in this country under the Environmental Protection Act 1990, there are no limits to the fines that the courts can impose. Sentencing guidelines allow courts to fine large numbers of organisations amounts running into many millions of pounds, scaled to the seriousness of the harm and the means of the offender. But for those who pollute the sea, the picture looks very different. Fines for illegal discharge of oil were historically capped under the Merchant Shipping Act 1995, and even where caps have been raised over the years, marine pollution offences have not often been brought into full alignment with the uncapped regime that applies on land.

Campaigners have documented the practical result. Over the past five years, there have only been two recorded convictions or fines for oil pollution breaches around our coasts, and one of those fines was as little as £7,000. The rate of inspection of offshore oil and gas infrastructure has fallen from a quarter of sites to fewer than one in six. I struggle to see the logic in treating a spill into the Irish sea or an ocean more leniently than the same spill into a field or other terrestrial habitat. Marine ecosystems are, if anything, harder to clean up and slower to recover than land is. A tanker or platform operator that calculates that the maximum possible fine is a rounding error against its annual turnover has very little reason to invest properly in prevention. I ask the Minister to set out whether the Government intend to bring marine pollution penalties in line with the uncapped regime for pollution on land.

Stopping damage is necessary but not sufficient on its own. Passive recovery—simply removing the pressure from trawling and dredging—can allow habitats to bounce back if the damage is not too severe, but we have lost more than 90% of our seagrass meadows since the 1930s, and salt marsh in the south-east of England continues to erode at about 40 hectares a year. Habitat loss on that scale will not reverse itself; we need active restoration of seagrass, salt marsh and native oyster reefs, delivered in partnership with local communities so that it creates jobs and skills locally. It should be something done not to a place, but with it. Blue carbon habitats matter for the climate as well as for nature, and restoring a meaningful share of them by the end of the decade should be treated as seriously as any land-based nature target that we set ourselves.

I want to end on a hopeful note. This country has genuinely led on the international stage. The UK's ratification of the biodiversity beyond national jurisdiction agreement, or the UN high seas treaty, was a significant moment, because for the first time there was a legal framework for protecting biodiversity on the high seas—the two thirds of the ocean that sit outside any nation's territorial waters. Until that point, it was outside the law. The UK was among the states that pushed the hardest to get the agreement over the line, and I pay tribute to the Department and Ministers for their diligent work on it.

The same is true of the global plastics treaty. I understand that the negotiations have not been easy, and the talks in Geneva last year did not deliver the agreement that many of us hoped for, but the UK has led as part of a coalition of more than 100 nations pushing for legally binding limits on plastic pollution. That is the right side of the argument to be on. I hope the Minister will update the House on when negotiations are expected to resume and what the UK's position will be when they do.

Then there is the science. If they have not already done so, I ask colleagues to look at the work of our outstanding universities, including the National Oceanography Centre in Southampton, which I and many Members of this House have had the pleasure of visiting. We lead on oceanographic science. I have met a number of researchers who are mapping deep-sea ecosystems that most of us will never see, tracking how the ocean absorbs and moves heat and carbon, and building the evidence base that underpins almost everything that we are discussing today, from stock assessments and blue carbon to the physical behaviour of the deep sea floor. That expertise is a genuine national asset, and it deserves long-term, stable funding.

We have real strengths in this country to build on, including a strong domestic marine science base, genuine international credibility on ocean treaties, and a public who, by a wide margin, want our seas to be better protected. What is missing in some cases is the follow-through—the stage 3 decision. Trawling continues inside sites that we call protected, and fines for marine pollution remain a fraction of what the same offence would attract on land. These are not difficult things to understand, and none require significant new pieces of legislation to fix. They require political will and a timetable. In the words of David Attenborough,

"We can now destroy or we can cherish. The choice is ours."

11.13 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Stephen Morgan): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Dr Murrison. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tristan Osborne), a fellow south-east coast MP, for securing this debate, and to all those who intervened. I also congratulate my hon. Friend on his leadership of the APPG.

Marine issues, including sustainable fisheries, have only recently become part of my ministerial portfolio, so this is a very timely debate for me. I am pleased to have the chance to set out my stall.

Our stewardship of the ocean matters. Our seas are central to so much of what we care about: nature recovery, food security, clean energy, coastal livelihoods and communities, climate resilience and our identity as an island nation. People rightly care deeply about the marine environment, but they also care about livelihoods, food production, energy security and the future of communities that depend on the sea. I pay tribute to campaigners and all those who work in the sector on these important matters.

Having responsibilities across those issues will enable me to take a more strategic view, consider the whole picture and look for a balanced decision-making process that supports our prosperous fishing industry and healthier, more resilient seas. I want my Department to make

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decisions that recognise the connections. I also want our decisions to be rooted in evidence, engagement and long-term stewardship.

The Government are committed to protecting and improving the marine environment, including playing our part in delivering the global biodiversity framework target to protect at least 30% of the ocean by 2030. Domestically, our marine strategy and environmental improvement plan provides an important framework for action, including our statutory target for at least 70% of marine protected area features to be in a favourable condition by 2042. We are committed to the effective protection of our comprehensive network of MPAs around the UK.

In English waters, we are continuing to implement fisheries management byelaws, including introducing further protections in due course. That includes proposals to restrict bottom trawling, following the Marine Management Organisation's consultation last year. The MMO is carefully considering the significant number of responses received and will announce its response in due course. Such decisions are not always easy, and must be taken carefully, transparently and with a clear understanding of both environmental and socioeconomic impacts.

We are also reviewing the English marine protected area network to consider whether sites are in the right places and have the right levels of protection. That matters because the network is effective only if it is ecologically coherent, well managed and able to respond to the pressures that our seas face now and in the future.

Those pressures are increasing. Climate change is already altering the marine environment, affecting habitats, species distribution and the communities and industries that depend on them. At the same time, we must manage the impact of growing demands on our marine environment and space, including those resulting from the expansion of offshore wind. That expansion is essential to our clean power and energy security ambitions, but it must be delivered in a way that also supports marine recovery.

Reforms led by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, such as the marine recovery fund launched in December last year, will help unlock clean power while delivering effective compensation to protect nature. The marine recovery fund is one element of our offshore wind environmental improvement package, which aims to ensure continued protection of the marine environment while speeding up consent for offshore wind.

Marine spatial prioritisation and co-location work will also help us manage competing demands, including offshore wind, fishing, conservation and other sea uses. That is exactly the kind of area where we need to look across Government goals and avoid treating each decision in isolation.

We are also committed to supporting the fishing sector to adapt to growing pressures on marine space, and we will work with the industry to safeguard its long-term viability. I know that the European Commission is developing its Ocean Act, and I look forward to learning more about the important work that the EU is doing to cover both conservation and stewardship.

Marine protection also relies on enforcing the rules. Responsibility for delivering on that and tackling marine pollution incidents depends on the nature of the incident and source of the pollution. A number of bodies have statutory roles in responding to marine pollution, while any investigation and enforcement action are matters for the relevant independent regulators and enforcement authorities. In the case of pollution originating from terrestrial sources, the Environment Agency has a key role to play, while the Maritime and Coastguard Agency has an important role if the pollution comes from a marine source. Fines and sentences are imposed independently by the courts, which determine the appropriate penalty based on the circumstances of each case and applicable sentencing guidelines.

I can confirm to Members that DEFRA and the Environment Agency are engaging with the Ministry of Justice to strengthen the overall enforcement regime so that environmental offences carry meaningful consequences and provide a stronger deterrent against pollution.

Links between marine protection and fisheries are particularly important. Food security is national security, and seafood has an important role to play. A sustainable fishing industry depends on healthy fish stocks and healthy seas. Fisheries management plans are helping us to take a more evidenced view of how we support fisheries sustainably. They demonstrate why fishery management and protection of the marine environment must be addressed together, and set out a range of short, medium and long-term actions to maintain or restore stocks to sustainable levels and to improve the marine ecosystem.

We cannot, however, deliver ocean conservation alone. As my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford said in his opening remarks, the UK continues to play a leading role internationally in ocean protection, and it remains committed to delivering our shared global mission to halt and reverse biodiversity loss by 2030. We are proud to be a founder and chair of the Global Ocean Alliance, as well as ocean champion of the High Ambition Coalition for Nature and People, in which role we are committed to protecting and restoring the health of our ocean.

We continue to work with partners to protect vulnerable ecosystems and coastal communities. The UK has bolstered these efforts by leveraging finance for the ocean through the Blue Planet Fund, which is our largest marine official development assistance programme. Also, I am delighted that in July the UK ratified the biodiversity beyond national jurisdiction agreement. It will enable greater conservation of the two thirds of the ocean that lie beyond national jurisdiction, and support the delivery of the global biodiversity framework, including the target to protect at least 30% of our ocean by 2030.

Later this month, the International Whaling Commission will mark its 80th anniversary, and next month will also mark the 40th anniversary of the global moratorium on commercial whaling, but there is more work to do. The UK will be at the forefront of global efforts to protect and promote the welfare of whales and other cetaceans as the chair of the IWC conservation committee. We also look forward to being a leading voice on ocean issues at the UN biodiversity conference in October and the climate conference of the parties in November, and to engaging proactively in the work of the first meeting of the BBNJ conference of the parties next year.

We are also working with international partners to secure a new international agreement to end plastic pollution that addresses the full life cycle of plastics and promotes a global circular economy. We are committed to reaching an agreement at the first round of negotiations in March 2027.

Finally, this Government recognise the continuing need for high-quality science to support our domestic and international work, and to ensure that Government decisions are based on the best available evidence. The UK has a leading role to play in ocean science, and we regularly call on others to help us to address emerging ocean threats and to inform the implementation of our international commitments and management measures.

As this debate has shown, effective ocean stewardship means taking a long-term and joined-up approach, both domestically and internationally. As I have said, bringing together marine and sustainable fisheries will help to balance environmental, social and economic considerations. By protecting and restoring the marine environment, supporting sustainable fisheries and coastal communities and grounding decisions in the best available evidence, we can help to secure healthier seas for future generations. I again thank my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford for securing today's debate, and for raising such important issues.

Question put and agreed to.

11.22 am

Sitting suspended.

Grey Belt Land: Definition and Application

[Dame Siobhain McDonagh *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Sir Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the definition and application of grey belt land.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Siobhain, and to have the opportunity to introduce this debate on the definition of grey-belt land. Shortly after their election, the Government introduced a new concept to planning and development: grey-belt land. This would be a subset of land currently designated as green belt that the Government considered less worthy of protection than the rest of the green belt, on which they wanted to make development easier. I asked for this debate because it is important that we understand the significance of this new concept. Specifically—I know the Minister will do his best to help with all these items—I am interested in understanding, first, how different grey-belt designation seems from what the Government originally said it would be; secondly, its likely impact on our countryside; and thirdly, how it combines with other changes the Government are making to the balance of development in rural and urban areas.

Let us start with the difference between what the Government originally suggested grey belt would be and their definition published in the "National Planning Policy Framework" document. In July 2024, the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), in her first incarnation as Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, told the House that the Government's intention was to

"release lower-quality grey-belt sites, disused car parks and garages, and ugly wasteland".—[*Official Report*, 19 July 2024; Vol. 752, c. 315.]

She also said:

"The land we are talking about—grey belt, which we define in the NPPF consultation—is not agricultural land; it is disused garages and things of that nature".—[*Official Report*, 30 July 2024; Vol. 752, c. 1196.]

However, when the actual definition of grey-belt land appeared in the NPPF of December 2024, the concept was considerably wider. Grey belt is now defined as land in the green belt that does not strongly contribute to three of the five purposes of the green belt that were included in the previous definition of green-belt land. Those three purposes are to check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up are, to prevent neighbouring towns merging into one another, and to preserve the setting and special character of historic towns. In other words, to remain as green belt and not be reclassified as grey belt, land must need protecting in order to prevent urban sprawl or to stop urban areas merging, or be near enough to a historic town to affect its setting or character. Even a moderate contribution to those objectives will not be enough; to save the land from grey-belt status, it must contribute "strongly".

The remaining two purposes of green-belt designation are no longer considered important enough to preserve green belt from becoming grey belt. Namely, they are assisting in safeguarding the countryside from

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encroachment, or assisting urban regeneration, by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land.

We can draw two conclusions from all this about what is actually green belt and what is grey belt. First, quite a lot of what is now green belt will probably end up redesignated as grey belt, because the Government have set the bar quite high to retain green-belt status. Only a strong contribution to the three remaining effective green belt purposes will do. I am not the only one who thinks that much of the green belt could end up as grey belt. Recent analysis from "Channel 4 News" suggested that 96% of the green belt around Guildford could be grey belt, along with 92% of the green belt around Stoke-on-Trent and 80% of the green belt around Solihull.

My second conclusion is that land that continues to qualify as green belt as opposed to grey belt will largely be on the edge of urban settlements. That is because the grey belt is, in effect, all green-belt land that does not strongly contribute to the three green belt purposes that only apply very near to urban settlements. It follows that land in open countryside currently in the green belt will be less able to meet one of those three purposes, and is therefore more likely to be redesignated as grey-belt land. Much of that is agricultural land, which the Secretary of State said the green belt would not be.

The Secretary of State also told the House in a written statement on 30 July 2024 that much of the green belt is:

"better described as 'grey belt': land on the edge of existing settlements or roads, and with little aesthetic or environmental value."

Given the actual definition of grey belt that the Government have decided on, the opposite is surely true. By their definition, the land on the edge of existing settlements or roads is in fact more likely to be green belt, and land further from existing settlements is more likely to be grey belt.

Why does any of this matter? It matters because grey-belt designation is intended to facilitate more development—that is the point. The Government are trying to release more land that is currently called green belt for housing and other things, so it matters what land the Government are actually making it easier to develop with grey-belt designation. The reality is that the land that the Government are making it easier to develop is not disused car parks and garages or ugly wasteland; it is agricultural land and open countryside.

We can see an indication of that in the decisions of planning inspectors in cases where developers have argued for grey-belt status. The Campaign to Protect Rural England has examined cases in the year following the first definition of grey-belt land in the NPPF of December 2024. In that period, planning inspectors approved 13 developments of 10 or more houses on green-belt land, which they believed should be reclassified as grey belt in accordance with the Government's definition. Of the 1,250 homes those schemes deliver, nearly 90% are in previously undeveloped countryside, not on wasteland or former car parks.

I appreciate that the Minister may say that grey-belt designation is not enough on its own to allow development; other criteria must also be met. That is so, but it is worth examining those other criteria. First, development on green-belt land must also meet an unmet need, but with many councils unable to demonstrate a five-year land supply—often, it has to be said, due to recent increases in Government housing targets, to which I may return—I suspect that, routinely, that unmet need will be easy to demonstrate.

Secondly, the development must be in a sustainable location, but sustainability is an elusive concept. If I am right that most grey-belt land will be in countryside away from urban settlements, then transport infrastructure, health and education provision and even mains gas and sewerage may well be less plentiful. Therefore, we have to ask if many of the grey-belt locations will really be sustainable. Presumably, the Government must believe so, or grey-belt designation is not going to move the needle on housing provision.

Perhaps the Minister expects to see considerable infrastructure upgrades to rural grey-belt locations, but that will be expensive and will affect the viability and deliverability of the housing developments that the Government may be relying on. Then housing developments in grey-belt locations must provide more social housing than elsewhere—perhaps 50% of the total. Whatever the merits or viability of that, social houses will have the same impact on the openness of the green belt and our countryside as any other kind.

Finally, the Minister may remind us that, according to the NPPF, a development on grey-belt land may only take place if it

"would not fundamentally undermine the purposes (taken together) of the remaining Green Belt across the area of the plan".

I accept that, theoretically at least. That brings back into consideration both the encroachment of the countryside and urban regeneration. Again, it is worth exploring how valuable and usable that safeguard is likely to be, and it seems it will be challenging to argue. The plan area for most of my constituency is south Warwickshire. It would be difficult to claim that building on a single grey-belt site would fundamentally undermine the green belt in half the county, unless the cumulative effect of many grey-belt developments could be considered in measuring the fundamental undermining of the green belt. Would the Minister clarify whether the cumulative impact of other sites, in conjunction with the sites subject to individual consideration, will be relevant in that exercise? If not, why not?

I turn to the broader impact of the grey belt on the countryside. As I said earlier, it appears to me that grey-belt land as the Government have defined it will increasingly be agricultural land and other land in the countryside, which will be easier as a result to turn into housing estates, warehouses or solar farms, for example. The protection for our countryside that green-belt status has thus far offered will be substantially eroded, and for constituencies with large amounts of green belt, that could be very significant.

My constituency is roughly 30% green belt, and others are substantially more. The residual green belt will be areas on the fringes of towns and cities but, to be clear, not around our villages, which are specifically excluded from the definition of an urban area in the NPPF. That might seem uncontroversial—logical even—but it has a practical effect in the context of the debate. That is because the difference between small towns and large

villages is becoming increasingly academic. In my constituency, for example, the town of Southam had a population in 2024 of around 9,200, and the village of Wellesbourne had a population of around 7,600. Under the Government's definition, small towns in the green belt can defend themselves from grey-belt designation, but large villages in the green belt cannot. Grey-belt designation means more pressure from development on villages and rural areas, more pressure on rural roads and schools, and more of our countryside lost to bricks and concrete on top of the huge housing developments already in and around villages in constituencies like mine.

It is hard to believe that that impact is accidental, because it has to be seen in the context of other changes the Government have made. Making it easier to build houses in the countryside goes hand in hand with revised housing targets from the Government that are higher in rural areas and lower in urban areas. My constituency, again, is a good example. Most of it falls within Warwick district and Stratford district, and just across the border is the city of Coventry. The Government have reduced Coventry's housing target by 50%. The target for Warwick district, which is mostly green belt, has gone up by 65%. Stratford district's new target is 99% higher. That is not accidental; it is a deliberate plan to transfer housing pressure from urban to rural areas.

It is no surprise, then, that the Government do not want the green-belt purposes of safeguarding the countryside from encroachment and assisting urban regeneration to stand in the way of grey-belt designation and easier development. However, my constituents and those of other Members present have seen considerable housing development around them already, and now they face even more, while predominantly Labour councils, it has to be said, in urban areas are not asked to find housing land within their own borders—land that would largely be brownfield sites. That is not just bad news for our countryside; it is bad news for our cities, too, as they will not get the new housing, particularly for first-time buyers and young families, that would help to revitalise the economy of places like Coventry.

It seems to me that the Government have described the green belt as one thing and then defined it as something else. It seems to me that there will be much more grey belt and much less green belt as the Government ask local authorities to review their green belt and as they or the Planning Inspectorate accede to developers' arguments that the green belt they want to build on is actually grey. All of that will have a significant and irreversible impact on our green-belt countryside.

The Minister is of course entitled to disagree with my analysis or to tell me that I do not need to worry, but I would like him to address in particular the following points. First, does he accept that grey belt is likely predominantly to be open countryside and greenfield sites, contrary to what the Government originally suggested? If so, does he accept that the impact on our countryside in green-belt areas will be significant and destructive? Finally, is that likely impact deliberate or accidental? If accidental, will he look again at what grey-belt designation will likely deliver in practice? Will he be prepared to continue the conversation that I hope we will have this afternoon and seek to minimise the impact of this change on our rural communities, about which many of us are extremely concerned?

2.45 pm

Mr Will Forster (Woking) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dame Siobhain. I thank the right hon. and learned Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Sir Jeremy Wright) for introducing the debate. As the Member of Parliament for Woking, housing is the top issue in my inbox due to issues such as overcrowding, evictions, problems with bedbugs or mould, and problems with leasehold. We need more and better quality homes in Woking and across the country. There is planning permission for more than 2,000 homes in Woking town centre and the surrounding area, including 1,000 in the EcoWorld site on Goldsworth Road and the 100 in the former Greenfield school site on Brooklyn Road. All those 2,000 homes got planning permission before the pandemic, and none are under construction—absolutely none. None of them are financially viable for the developers, so they are sitting on that land.

Recently, the Secretary of State stated that there is a "slim chance" that the Government will hit their target of 1.5 million new homes by the end of this Parliament. The Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee has raised its concerns about that with the Government before. Instead of tackling the high construction costs that leave sites for new homes abandoned in Woking and across the country, the Government have adopted the concept of "grey belt" to encourage development to meet their housing targets. In one Surrey borough it is believed that 80% of its green belt would be reclassified as grey belt. Woking borough council is doing the same assessment to find out how the reclassification will impact my constituency. I agree with the right hon. and learned Member that the definition of grey belt is too broad. It has been described in a very specific way—with which even the average nimby would have no problem—but it has also been defined in a very broad manner that would, I worry, fundamentally damage our local environments.

Last year, I held a public meeting in Mayford to hear from residents about how a large proposed development would impact them. They do not want to see the fields north of Saunders Lane, which are used for recreation and agriculture, turned into a housing estate. People in Maybourne Rise in Mayford do not want to lose their fields either. Residents in Sutton Green are concerned about the green belt being lost there. Rather than unlock sustainable development in Woking and other brownfield locations, the Government have chosen to encourage development in less sustainable locations, where there is no or limited infrastructure. That will damage the local environment; that is what grey belt does. Rather than building in the places that we should be, we are targeting places for housing growth that should be protected for future generations.

I ask the Minister, will the Government seek action in the Budget to unlock the brownfield development sites that are stalled, to relieve pressure on nature and on our grey and green belt and build the homes we need? Are the Minister and his colleagues urging the Chancellor to go big in the forthcoming Budget to ensure that it unlocks those development sites? Are the Government looking at reducing tax on development on brownfield sites? Have they ruled out changing the community infrastructure or development contributions? Is everything on the table to try to unlock development, or have they

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not got that far and are happy to sit on empty construction sites while people on housing waiting lists wait for evermore?

If they have not thought about financial measures, will the Minister and the Government consider the Liberal Democrat proposal to introduce "use it or lose it" powers for long-term empty sites? My constituents do not want a town full of empty sites and people sitting on a housing waiting list, while the Government introduce grey belt and damage our environment. I am afraid that, without a change of course—remember that this Government have been happy to U-turn—that is what is going to happen.

2.50 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dame Siobhain. I give great thanks to the right hon. and learned Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Sir Jeremy Wright) for raising this matter. Both he and the Minister know that the Minister is not responsible for housing in Northern Ireland, but I always wish to give a perspective, as an MP for Strangford contributing to debates in the House and in Westminster Hall, on what we have done back home.

Although I understand the need for increased housing development, as the MP for Strangford, a constituency covered by vast stretches of countryside, I am most concerned for the protection of our rural communities. I support the Government's aim of 1.5 million houses. That figure will not be achieved, according to comments in the paper yesterday or the day before from the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government. Whatever the figure may be, it has also been indicated from the stats that, in its totality, the United Kingdom faces a shortfall of some 4.3 million homes.

I want to share some of what we have done in Northern Ireland and in my constituency, just to give a flavour. There is a need to build adequate, affordable homes, to give people a chance to get on to the housing ladder. I remember that one of our former Prime Ministers, Margaret Thatcher, always said she wanted to make sure that people had the chance to buy their home. As a young person—I was much younger than I am now—I thought that was an admirable policy, and I certainly supported it. What did we all want to do? We all wanted to own our home.

That reminds me of a story—I want to give you an idea of prices back in 1971. I was only 16 at the time; I had just left school when a man came to buy my dad's coal business. It was Mr Dowds and, being 16, I always called him "Mister", never by his first name. When he came down, he told me he had bought a house up the Dunover Road in Ballywalter. I said, "Mr Dowds, how much will that cost you?" He said, "£3,750." My words to him, as a 16-year-old, were: "Mr Dowds, how will you ever pay it back? My goodness—£3,750!" If he had had the intellect, ability or money, he would have bought four of them, sold them later and made his fortune. The fact of the matter is that housing is not £3,750 any more—it is much more. I support the Government's policy of giving people access to affordable homes, ensuring that they have the opportunity to secure their retirement and future through owning their home.

The UK faces a shortfall of some 4.3 million homes compared with other western European countries. In the United Kingdom, we are falling far behind when it comes to housing being provided or built across the country. The housing shortage has worsened housing affordability, growth and living standards as a result. In recognition of those issues, the Government introduced grey-belt land, which would permit certain areas of green-belt land to be considered for property development where they are deemed to make a limited contribution to green-belt purposes.

The right hon. and learned Member for Kenilworth and Southam has set the scene incredibly well and has expressed both his own and his constituents' concerns—he knows his constituency much better than I do. I hope that the Minister can give the assurances that the right hon. and learned Gentleman has been seeking.

I have always been supportive of development on brownfield sites—land where businesses have closed or factories have become derelict. As a councillor for 26 years from 1985, and as a Member of the Legislative Assembly for 12 years before coming to this place, I recognise that there have been opportunities in my constituency of Strangford. Rather than letting land lie derelict in the centre of town, why not use it for housing developments? The right hon. and learned Member will no doubt know of brownfield land that could be used for that purpose. I suppose one question for the Minister would be: how are we ensuring that all opportunities for brownfield sites are used? I should have welcomed him to his place; apologies for not doing so. It is always nice to see him and he always endeavours to answer the questions we pose to him, and he does it incredibly well, so we look forward to his answers later.

Brownfield sites offer an opportunity to deliver most of the needed housing development, but grey-belt land that is a good, productive agricultural land should be retained for food production. The right hon. and learned Member for Kenilworth and Southam illustrated this very well in his introduction, as did the hon. Member for Woking (Mr Forster), who spoke just before me, but while I believe there are opportunities where these things need to be considered, my concern is that we are no longer sustainable when it comes to food production. We cannot feed our whole nation, but we need to be able to do that.

There are some negatives with grey belt—the right hon. and learned Gentleman referred to them, and he did it incredibly well. Green-belt land is generally protected from development, so the development of grey-belt areas raises serious concerns about the potential loss of farmland, woodland, animal habitats and public access to nature, for example. Proposed developments of grey-belt land have also been assessed as posing a greater flood risk and increasing car dependency in what are often poorly connected areas. There are also other issues that have to be considered in grey-belt areas. With respect, I do not believe that this is sustainable development. Indeed, the proposals have faced significant public opposition, with thousands, and maybe even tens of thousands, taking part in protests in April alone.

I live on a farm in the Ards peninsula. In my constituency of Strangford, the rules are very strict. Anyone with a farm business number—anyone who does more than just work the land—is allowed one site on their land every 10 years, whether it be for their farm labour or

their family, or as a retirement home. The conditions are strict, but they are strict for a purpose. Fortunately, I do not think we will have the issues with the grey belt that the right hon. and learned Gentleman has raised—we will not find ourselves in that position—but through the years we have had other opportunities to develop land.

Although grey-belt land is not applicable to Northern Ireland, there are still protections in place for development of the countryside. A key issue in Northern Ireland is our infrastructure capacity for housing development. This always has been, and must be, addressed before consideration is given to larger developments in countryside areas. In my time as a councillor and as an Assembly Member, and now as the MP for Strangford, there have been a number of developments on fairly good agricultural land on the edge of the town that lent itself to development.

A proposal has been agreed for some 700 new houses in the east of Newtownards. Importantly, the developer has committed himself, under the very conditions in the planning application, to ensure the infrastructure—the roads process, sewerage and water, playgrounds, green areas, and access to infrastructure, whether that is health clinics or schools. The developer has to do a lot of things, and that is right. The developer should not throw everything on to the present infrastructure, but should have a responsibility to ensure that the development is sustainable.

As an example, I think of Rivenwood, a lovely development in Newtownards—they are finishing the third phase and are going to the fourth. It is connected to Movilla Road, over to Donaghadee Road and then ultimately over to Bangor Road—they developed the road infrastructure. Again, that was the way to do it. In Comber, Enler Village is another development where, again, there was an opportunity on the edge of the town on land that was not productive. That is an example of where the development was acceptable and did not cause any problems. Does the Minister agree that grey-belt land should not be viewed as the whole solution to the housing crisis—this is a simple question, and I am sure that he will give me some response to it—and that greater consideration should be given to building up the infrastructure that we already have?

What do we need to do? We must find the right balance, and I believe that there is a balance to be found. It is a question of making sure that people have access to affordable homes and that sustainable development can happen, while protecting the environmental value of our countryside. I love where I live. I am fortunate always to have lived in the countryside, and I am fortunate to live on a farm. I go out my back door and I am in the fields—I love the countryside; I always have—and my sons have opportunities to do that as well.

Grey-belt land may remain a grey area, but I believe that development and environmental protection are not irreconcilable aims. The question to the Minister is this: do we have the balance between retaining the environment and providing houses? Those are two things that we are all committed to—every one of us in this Chamber today—to ensure that people have opportunity, but we have to be committed to ensuring that our environment is protected as well.

I do some country sports, and I always think about the fact that we have a responsibility to ensure that what we have now is there for those who come after us. That is our responsibility today. As someone who is 71 years of age, I am very conscious, now more than ever, of what I will leave for my sons and my grandchildren. I want them to have the same opportunities—the chance to have a house, but at the same time the chance to enjoy what we enjoy now.

3.2 pm

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under you in the Chair, Dame Siobhain. I thank the right hon. and learned Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Sir Jeremy Wright) for bringing to the House an important debate on an issue that affects a lot of our constituencies. I also thank all the Members who contributed today, including my hon. Friend the Member for Woking (Mr Forster)—indeed, I thank him for contributing in this Chamber for the second time today.

The Liberal Democrats want to see more homes built, principally the 150,000 council and social rent homes that the country needs, but the right way to deliver those homes is by working with communities and trusting them, and prioritising brownfield sites, the 700,000 empty homes in the country, and the 500,000 homes that could be provided in empty commercial buildings, according to the London School of Economics.

When it comes to the green belt, few of us, and certainly not the Liberal Democrats, would object to a community deciding, through its democratic local plan, to release formerly green-belt land for its own reasons, and particularly for social homes. But the Government's grey-belt policy is not that. It is being abused, giving carte blanche to development pretty much anywhere and, as it is currently set out in the national planning policy framework, it has to go. We were told that "grey belt" meant disused car parks and old petrol stations, but the CPRE has found that, in the first year, 88% of homes approved on the grey belt at appeal were on land that had never been built on, as the right hon. and learned Member for Kenilworth and Southam also pointed out.

In this Chamber in July, the Minister told us:

"The definition of grey belt is set out in the glossary of the NPPF."—[*Official Report,* 16 July 2026; Vol. 789, c. 466WH.]

There is a definition there, but for me it has more holes than a Swiss cheese. It omits to protect two of the green belt's five purposes—safeguarding the countryside from encroachment and recycling derelict land. Because the purposes that are left do not apply to villages, it has also removed villages from the green-belt protections that they have had for more than a century, so a field on the edge of a green-belt village is very likely to be grey belt. Developers know it and are trying their luck.

On 7 September, the Secretary of State told the House that she is

"strengthening and clarifying the rules around the release of grey belt".—[*Official Report*, 7 September 2026; Vol. 790, c. 643.]

If there is no confusion, what is being clarified? The answer so far has been to take the test for protected landscapes out of the definition altogether. That widens the grey belt rather than tightening it. On the same day, the Minister confirmed that the Government do not collect data on how much land councils have identified as grey belt. Will the Minister commit to collecting that? My hon. Friend the Member for Harpenden and Berkhamsted (Victoria Collins) asked for that last October.

[Gideon Amos]

The new national planning policy framework requires every green-belt council to plan for grey-belt releases, allocated in its local plan. But since the Government's grey-belt rules allow any developer to apply for grey-belt development on any site, whether or not it has been allocated as grey belt in the local plan, there can be little point in pretending that the local plan approach is the only one, or that grey-belt development is, in any sense, being plan led.

Developers do not need a grey-belt policy to redevelop an old petrol station in any event. Redeveloping previously developed land in the green belt has been allowed since 2012, if not longer, as long as it does not harm openness more than the development previously there. What grey belt adds is the field next to it, and it is decided at appeal, rather than through the local plan—that is, rather than by the local community. That is another instance where community powers have been stripped away in what the Town and Country Planning Association has called an "unprecedently permissive" planning regime.

This policy comes into play where there is unmet need—in practice, where a council cannot show a five-year land supply. In Somerset, the Government are mandating that another 75,000 homes—a 41% increase—should be found in the next local plan. I have not met anyone who believes that is realistic or achievable. The targets are derived from the Government's new standard method, which has in one fell swoop thrown much of England under the threat of development, as the majority of councils cannot meet such impossible targets under the new standard method. It would take them the two-year local plan process to escape that threat, and millions of pounds to boot. This could be called a developer's charter but, unfortunately, many of these sites are not being developed, so it is more of a land speculator's charter.

Developers, not the community, end up selecting which part of the green belt is up for grabs. Villages are hit hardest, not just because they have lost their green-belt protection but because for many, if not all, the new targets have undermined the one thing that has reliably delivered affordable homes for local people in rural areas: rural exception sites. Last week, I brought to the House an example from an inspector's decision in Gweek, Cornwall.

The Minister told us in July that the framework makes exception sites easier. In reality, exception sites work where agricultural land that is worth, say, £12,000 an acre cannot be sold for a higher price for commercial housing due to strict planning rules, so it might as well be allowed to be sold for agricultural value, or a little more, for social housing that helps the village. The Government, however, have now told every landowner around villages and elsewhere that their acre could be worth not just £12,000 but anything from £150,000 to £3 million—the price of land with residential permission—because those strict planning policy preventions no longer apply, and because anyone can apply for it to be developed as grey belt anywhere in the green belt.

If a landowner is told that their field might be grey belt, why would they sell it for £12,000 for social housing, when they could get £150,000 or more? It would definitely be more in the home counties and near London. Hope value has always been the enemy of exception sites, and the way that the grey belt has been implemented has created hope value around every village and green belt—so goodbye to social housing on such exception sites. Building the kind of homes that villages lack just got harder.

We do agree on the golden rules, which rightly require more affordable and social housing where green-belt land is released. That is absolutely right, but it does not mean that valuable green spaces should be up for grabs. Ironically, an area with no green belt can be better protected from some of these policies, but that does not mean that our green spaces in Taunton and Wellington are safe.

In Taunton, we have green wedges—countryside running right into the town and doing the job that the green belt does elsewhere—but those spaces have only local policy protection. Earlier this year, consultants recommended releasing Trull green wedge from its green wedge status, ironically because it was the last bit of green remaining in a built-up area. That is something that, in my opinion, made it more valuable not less. An application for 125 homes quickly followed, because the council, like most in England, cannot meet its new five-year land supply. Our councillors rightly refused the application. Fortunately, it was under the 150 homes limit, above which councillors must now ask Whitehall's permission to refuse a development.

The appeals public inquiry has just begun showing how thin green wedge protection is. The green belt, green wedges and local green spaces can all be weakened by the next rewriting of the framework, without this House having a vote. In the Liberal Democrats' view, all communities—not just those in the green belt—should have a stronger and longer-lasting way to protect their most precious green spaces.

What should we do instead? First, we should scrap the grey belt and instead release green-belt land through community-led local plans, with the golden rules applying in full and with social homes at their heart. Secondly, we should keep the long-standing exception for previously developed land, and make brownfield-first a legal requirement. Thirdly, we should give communities who review their green belt 20 years' statutory protection for the green wedges and green belt that they prioritise. That would give them confidence that, instead of a free-for-all, their most precious green spaces will be protected in law for the long term.

If people are to accept the homes that we need—and we do need them—they must have confidence in the protection for the bits of green space that are most precious to them and most dear to those communities, as our amendment to the Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025 set out. We were promised that the grey belt would turn old petrol stations into homes, but what it is actually delivering is the loss of green field after green field, as decided by the Government's policy issued in Whitehall. It is time to scrap it and put communities back in charge of their green belt and their green spaces.

3.11 pm

Gareth Bacon (Orpington) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Siobhain, and to take part in this debate about the definition and application of so-called grey-belt land. I thank my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Sir Jeremy Wright) for securing this important debate and for his excellent opening speech.

The first mention of the Government's novel term "grey belt" came in their 2024 election manifesto. Labour MPs campaigned on a promise to release

"lower quality 'grey belt' land",

which they described as scrub land, disused car parks and old petrol stations, alongside a commitment to "preserving the green belt". Those policies were part of an overarching pledge to build 1.5 million homes by 2029.

Just over two years later, however, and almost halfway through this Parliament, we are left wondering where it all went so wrong, because the Government are not releasing low-quality land, they are not preserving the green belt, and they are nowhere near their stated target of building 1.5 million homes. How could that be the case, given that they have such a mammoth majority with which to make it happen? The answer is that the concept of the grey belt was a fiction from the start. It is, and always has been, a thinly veiled conceit. As my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam and the hon. Member for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos) highlighted, the grey belt has been talked up as low-quality land made up of disused car parks, but behind the façade it is usually found to be prime green-belt land.

That is not just a political point; it is a factual one. As my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam pointed out, research from the Campaign to Protect Rural England has shown that by December 2025, of the 13 developments of 10 or more homes that had been approved by Government planning inspectors on so-called grey-belt land, 88% were earmarked for building on previously undeveloped countryside. To be clear, that is not disused petrol stations or low-quality land, but our local and valued countryside. What is worse is that those developments made up more than 90% of homes granted planning permission on allegedly grey-belt sites.

With so much grey belt looking far more like green belt, at least according to the Government's own NPPF definitions, what is the true definition of grey belt? For the sake of our concerned constituents, perhaps the Minister can explain what definition inspectors are working to, as it is clearly not the same as the one that has been codified and publicised.

Even if the Government stuck to their stated definition of grey belt and refused to waver from it, we would still be left without a clear route to their target of 1.5 million homes. As the hon. Member for Woking (Mr Forster) pointed out, that is because the Government have done nothing to make development on previously developed land any more viable than before; indeed, they have made it worse.

The Government have made an effort to increase and swiften planning permissions, but there has been no corresponding effort to make proposed sites more viable. The Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025 did much to silence the voices of democratically elected local councillors in order to push planning permissions thicker and faster through the system, but it did nothing to make building new homes more affordable. There has been no recognition at all of the barriers—largely been created by the state—that have been thrown in the way of developers. The top-down housing targets that our rural councils were saddled with, representing an increase of up to 487% in some cases, make sites no more viable; they just put more pressure on local planning authorities to grant more permissions.

Superficially, supposedly grey-belt sites may be an attractive prospect for development because there are likely to be fewer complications than anticipated for brownfield development. However, when supposedly grey-belt sites are released, they might not deliver substantially more housing because the Government will still have done next to nothing to improve the site's viability. The Government have imposed the golden rule of at least 15% affordable housing above local policy requirements, up to a 50% cap. Sites still come with a biodiversity net gain requirement; they still require landfill tax payments, they still have to meet building regulations and soon they will be subjected to the building safety levy.

After a site's release, some building will likely take place. But given the Government's unwillingness to help to make brownfield sites more viable, we will be left with the lamentable scenario of losing chunks of green-belt land without getting anywhere near the required housing numbers. As the Government hide behind their own nebulous grey belt definition, they chip away at our local green belt without making a dent in their 1.5 million homes target. That is not progress; that is failure.

The statistics show it too. It is estimated from the energy performance certificate lodgements data that the Government oversaw the net addition of just 392,400 homes between 9 July 2024 and 14 June 2026—a paltry 26% of their manifesto target. Far from using the green belt to meet their targets, they are ditching its protections and removing its special place in our communities, all for the sake of plodding progress towards an increasingly distant target.

I am pleased to say that there is a way out of this malaise that dually serves to protect the green belt and build more houses. Instead of sham terms and shady insincerities, the Opposition stand for a genuine brownfield-first approach to building. We on this side of the Chamber will not just pay lip service to brownfield development but prioritise it and make it easier. It can and will be done. We all want to see more homes built, but they must be built in the right places, with local understanding and on brownfield sites first. That is the common-sense answer. It is the Opposition's answer, and it is an achievable outcome.

Further research from the CPRE shows that a large proportion of the Government's lofty housing target could be swiftly met using brownfield land that already has planning permission. The CPRE estimates that up to 1.41 million homes could be built on existing brownfield land in England, based on data from local planning authorities' brownfield land registers up to 2024. The same data shows that, as of September 2025, more than half of those sites had planning permission already. The 1.41 million amounts to 93% of the Government's manifesto pledge. Perhaps when considering this, the Secretary of State may change her mind again and once more view 1.5 million homes as a viable goal rather than a "stretch target", as she described it at the weekend.

The Government must change course. The returning Secretary of State has already U-turned on her disastrous and costly programme of local government reform. Perhaps the Minister can use his platform to join Conservative colleagues and stand against concreting over our green belt. I hope he uses his time to do exactly that. I hope he also takes the chance to not just acknowledge but to respond to the concerns shared by hon. Members and take a better and fairer approach to our green belt.

3.18 pm

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Dame Siobhain. I congratulate the right hon. and learned Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Sir Jeremy Wright) on securing this debate. He is an assiduous and highly effective parliamentarian, whom I have the upmost respect for, and he opened the debate with a characteristically incisive and challenging contribution. I thank him for the opportunity he has given the Chamber to debate this issue, and I will seek in the course of my remarks to respond to each of his specific points.

I also thank the hon. Members who have spoken in the debate. I appreciate fully that this topic provokes strong views, to put it mildly, but in the time I have available, I hope to provide some further clarity on the Government's green belt policy, specifically the nuances of national policy relating to grey belt. Hon. Members and the right hon. and learned Member for Kenilworth and Southam will appreciate that, due to the quasi-judicial nature of the planning process, I will be unable to comment in detail on individual local plans, planning applications or how individual local planning authorities may interpret national planning policy.

As the right hon. and learned Member made clear in his opening remarks, the definition of grey belt is set out in the glossary of the "National Planning Policy Framework". It is defined, for the purposes of plan making and decision making, as

"land in the Green Belt comprising previously developed land and/or any other land that, in either case, does not…contribute to any of purposes (a), (b), or (d)",

as set out in NPPF policy GB2. As I make that point, it is also worth making it clear that we have not altered the five purposes of the green belt that we inherited. They remain as they were, and we do not propose to alter the general extent of the green belt either.

I will come on to expand on the role of local planning authorities in the process. It is for individual local planning authorities to undertake the necessary assessments to identify if land is grey belt, either through plan making or through considering specific applications that come forward. Let me take each of those in turn, starting with plan making, and in doing so gently push back on the Liberal Democrat spokesman, the hon. Member for Woking (Mr Forster).

This is, and is intended to be, a plan-led approach. The NPPF allows for local planning authorities to alter green belt boundaries using the local development plan process in "exceptional circumstances". That includes situations where a local authority is unable to meet its identified need for development, having examined all other reasonable options for doing so, including making as much use as possible of suitable previously developed land, optimising the density of development and assessing whether sufficient sites can be identified outside the green belt. As set out in NPPF policy GB2, any decision to alter green belt boundaries should be informed by a green belt assessment, which identifies grey-belt land within the green belt.

Following the publication of the revised NPPF in December 2024, the Government awarded over £9.3 million to 133 local planning authorities to support them with the costs of undertaking such green belt reviews. An assessment of the strategic role of the green belt should also inform the preparation of spatial development strategies, as legislated through the Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025, where these will be setting the strategic context for land release.

Gideon Amos: The Minister is always generous with his time and in responding to interventions, which is appreciated by all of us. If the intention is that this should be a plan-led approach, will he remove the provisions in the NPPF that allow developers to claim that their land is grey belt through an application by reference to the policies that have been put in the NPPF for such grey belt decisions to be made outside of the local plan process through individual planning applications?

Matthew Pennycook: I will say two things in respect to that, and I will come on to detail how the approach works in relation to decision making very shortly. In general terms, developers can make whatever claims they like about any particular site across the country; it is for the local authority to assess whether, in its view, that site constitutes grey belt, if that is part of the application that is submitted. Where there is disagreement and it goes to appeal, I have set out exactly how planning inspectors need to determine such applications.

It is crucial to note that where grey belt is identified, it does not automatically follow that it should be allocated for development or released from the green belt, or that development proposals be approved in all circumstances. Other considerations in decision making are relevant, as I will expand upon shortly. I also want to stress that any alterations to green belt boundaries must promote sustainable patterns of development by ensuring that any alterations, taken together, do not fundamentally undermine the five green belt purposes of the remaining green belt when considered across the plan area. Considerations also include giving priority to the release of previously developed land in the green belt, then considering low-quality grey-belt land, which will include disused petrol stations and other previously developed land of that kind, although not necessarily be limited to it, and only then exploring other green belt locations.

To respond to the right hon. and learned Member for Kenilworth and Southam on whether allocating grey-belt land for development will necessarily lead to the cumulative erosion of the green belt over time, I would point out two things. First, as I have already mentioned, development proposals on grey-belt land must respond to a demonstrable unmet need—I will come to his points about the standard method shortly. Secondly, it is precisely to avoid the situation that we inherited—which was a haphazard and piecemeal approach to green belt land designation and release—that this Government have implemented the approach that we have. Its effective working is predicated on ensuring that designation and release take place in a strategic manner over time through local plans with a 10-year horizon, and in due course—because they are just as important—through spatial development strategies with a 20-year horizon. We want the approach to be plan-led.

Sir Jeremy Wright: I know that the Minister recognises the point that the hon. Member for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos) was making to him is that, although we all want this to be a plan-led process, the NPPF still allows for grey belt designation to be achieved through an individual application, and that is what the Conservatives are also concerned about. I wanted to test him on this

question of cumulative impact. He may come on to this later, in which case I apologise, but I put to him in my speech that if we look at an individual application or site, it may be difficult to make a credible argument that building there would undermine the purposes of the green belt across the plan area. On the other hand, if we look at a series of grey belt applications and their cumulative impact on the green belt across the plan area, it might be easier to demonstrate. Can he clarify which of the two the Government believe it should be?

Matthew Pennycook: I am more than happy to do so; it is a fair question. In terms of the sequential approach that local authorities need to take with grey belt assessment and green belt release through local plans, the test of fundamentally undermining is at a plan level. Local authorities look at all the sites they have assessed through a review to constitute what is grey belt and then select those that they might need to bring forward to meet assessed housing need. I cannot go into detail, but the joint local plan for south Warwickshire, which includes the right hon. and learned Gentleman's constituency, is instructive in that regard. It has gone through its regulation 19 consultation and the authority is looking towards submitting that emerging local plan. That will release land equating to 1.54% of Stratford-upon-Avon and 6.99% of Warwick. That is a plan-led approach to green belt release that will meet need in that area. I will come on to speak about decision making, but that is the test, in terms of fundamentally undermining the five purposes in the remaining green-belt area. I will briefly speak about what the guidance says in that respect as well.

There have been several questions about decision making. It goes without saying that we want local planning authorities to get up-to-date plans in place. I repeat that ad nauseum; we inherited a dreadful situation, where less than a third of plan coverage was up to date. We cannot have a plan-led system with such low levels of coverage; we are doing lots as a Government to ensure that we are driving towards universal coverage, including intervening where necessary. However, when development proposals come forward outside of a local plan, the NPPF also provides a limited route for development proposals of grey-belt land in the green belt in certain circumstances.

When considering development proposals, decisions should be informed by green belt assessments, as I have previously referenced. Where grey-belt sites are not identified in existing plans or green-belt assessments, authorities should consider evidence, informed by our guidance, on whether the site strongly contributes to the relevant green belt purposes.

It is important to note that where a site is judged to be grey belt, development proposals on grey-belt land must also respond to demonstrable unmet need for the type of development proposed. If that does not exist, that is grounds for the local authority to refuse. It must also be sustainably located and meet our golden rules, which, as hon. Members are aware, require additional benefits to be provided to local communities— including higher levels of affordable housing, new or improved green spaces and improved local infrastructure where the green belt is developed—in recognition, and rightly so, of the value placed on that type of land.

As previously mentioned, the contribution that a specific plot of green-belt land makes to the relevant green belt purposes is only one consideration involved in the decision on whether to develop there. Decisions should also be informed by an overall application of the relevant policies in the NPPF. That includes policies in the natural environment chapter, which safeguard areas of importance for the landscape, geodiversity or biodiversity value, including protected landscapes and designated sites for nature.

To assist local planning authorities and other decision makers in both plan making and decision making, and to support a consistent approach to determine whether land is grey belt, my Department published updated planning practice guidance on 27 February last year. That PPG sets out a range of considerations to help to determine whether land is grey belt and how to consider proposals on potential grey-belt land. When considering how any given land performs against the relevant green belt purposes, the guidance also sets out illustrative features to help to inform judgments.

The PPG does not—we have been challenged on this point, so I want to address it head on—provide an exhaustive or overly prescriptive list that accounts for all possible scenarios. It is ultimately for the decision maker to consider those factors in accordance with national policy and guidance. It is right that they exercise their judgment in doing so, given that local context and development-specific considerations will vary markedly across the country. We want that flexibility to allow expert local judgment to be applied. The more prescriptive we get in national policy, the more edge cases and difficulties we will create. Our system is discretionary in nature; it is for local authorities and decision makers to make that judgment in the round.

To the point made by the hon. Member for Woking, in instances where a given application goes to appeal, and the relevant inspector is asked to determine whether a site is classified as grey belt, they will consider relevant legislation and national planning policy, including the NPPF and PPG, and any relevant local development plan policies and material considerations.

I want to briefly address the standard method and the urban-rural balance. This issue is put to me frequently in debates and I attempt to set the record straight, but it appears in the next debate none the less. The targets we have introduced are ambitious—they entail uplifts in many areas, and we expect rural areas to play their part in providing the homes the country needs—but the formula does direct housing growth to larger urban areas. It does not, though—this is the significant change we made—direct it by applying an arbitrary 35% urban uplift to the 20 largest cities and urban centres. That was the previous Government's approach; we think it was arbitrary.

Instead, the standard method that we have introduced increases targets by 20% across city regions. It also better directs housing growth to a range of urban areas, including smaller cities and other areas of growth, as well as to the larger cities. We think that is a fairer approach. It is not the case that we have uniformly dropped housing targets across metro areas.

Before I conclude, I want to touch briefly on villages—

Sir Jeremy Wright: Before the Minister does that, I understand his point earlier about guidance, and I am certainly not asking him to comment on an individual application, but the purpose of the point that I made to him earlier was to suggest that the reality of grey-belt

[Sir Jeremy Wright]

designation is that grey-belt sites are likely to be further away from urban settlements rather than closer to them, because those closer are more likely to remain as green belt. As the Minister says, there are three purposes—A, B and D—that would enable a site to remain as green belt rather than be designated grey belt. Can he see circumstances in which a field in my constituency that is not on the outskirts of an urban settlement could possibly satisfy the test of those three requirements and remain as green belt rather than be redesignated as grey belt?

Matthew Pennycook: I will address the right hon. and learned Gentleman's specific question in due course. Before I do so, I want to put on the record the policy in relation to villages. He can rest assured that I will address the point; if he is unsatisfied, he is more than welcome to intervene again.

A number of hon. Members mentioned villages. The PPG that I have referenced throughout my remarks makes it clear that, in assessments of contribution to the relevant purposes, large built-up areas and towns do not include villages. However, neither the NPPF nor the PPG includes a definition of a large built-up area, town, historic town or village. Considering whether any particular settlement constitutes a village is, again, a matter for the given local planning authority to judge, and it may be informed by the adopted local settlement hierarchy in that area. Where authorities may wish to restrict development in villages for other reasons, a range of tools are available, such as conservation areas or normal development management policies.

On the right hon. and learned Gentleman's specific point, I say to him directly that I do not recognise his assertion that grey-belt land, in every part of the country, is likely to be predominantly in open countryside. The guidance that I have referenced is clear that land that is likely to be assessed as grey belt is more likely to include "existing development" or "other urbanising influences", with land that is free from development more likely to make a strong contribution to the three relevant green belt purposes listed in policy GB2.

A point that needs to be made generally is that this issue is incredibly place-specific across the country. It will vary widely, given the significant variation in how green-belt land is constituted in different geographies throughout the country, so it is very hard to apply a blanket or generalised approach, as the right hon. and learned Gentleman has, to say, "In all circumstances, such will apply." It varies across the country and, as I have said, our policy as a whole ensures that development is directed towards sustainable locations, which will act to prevent development from coming forward in isolated or unsustainable locations. That hopefully clears up the right hon. and learned Gentleman's point about open countryside—one of three.

Sir Jeremy Wright: Will the Minister give way?

Matthew Pennycook: I will give way to the right hon. and learned Gentleman one last time, but I am more than happy to set out the full policy in writing.

Sir Jeremy Wright: That may be very helpful, and I am genuinely grateful to the Minister, because I know he is doing his best to provide clarity. I know he would accept that the starting point for all these decisions will be the NPPF definition. I accept his point about guidance and the other qualifying criteria; we have spoken a little about the limitations that there might be on those qualifying criteria.

The substantial point remains, does it not, that the definition in the NPPF of grey-belt land overwhelmingly—perhaps not in every instance, but overwhelmingly—will be met by fields, farms and greenfield sites that are not near to urban settlements. A, B and D in the list clearly each relate to the fringes of urban settlements, and the Minister knows that the green belt encompasses more than just such sites. It is inevitable, is it not, that the starting point will be that grey-belt land will be those sites that are not on the fringes of urban settlements, which is of course the direct antithesis of how the Government originally described the concept.

Matthew Pennycook: I understand the point that the right hon. and learned Gentleman is making. I am afraid I do not agree with his characterisation of the policy, which is, again, in essence that grey-belt land in every part of the country is more likely to be found predominantly in open countryside.

All I can do is to repeat again our approach: land that is likely not to make a strong contribution to the relevant green belt purposes is likely to contain existing development or other urbanising influences. But I say again that it is for individual local planning authorities to make green belt assessments and to make judgments about sites that might constitute grey-belt land. If some of those sites—in most cases not all of them, but some of them—are required to meet demonstrable unmet need, it is for the authority to select the most appropriate and sustainable sites from that list. I refer the right hon. and learned Gentleman to his local plan, which is hopefully on the verge of submission—a small percentage of green belt will be released over the plan period to meet demonstrable unmet need.

Sir Jeremy Wright: Will the Minister give way again on that specific point?

Matthew Pennycook: I think I am testing the Chair's patience. I will give way one more time.

Sir Jeremy Wright: I am sure the Chair will remind the Minister that we have plenty of time left in this debate.

On the specifics of the local plan, the Minister is right, of course, to point me to the specific statistics in relation to my local plan area. But he will recognise that, as was said earlier, there is a difference between decisions that a local authority makes about what to seek to extract from the green belt, and subsequent decisions about whether part of the green belt is in fact grey belt. The Minister has referred me to statistics relating to the former, not the latter.

Matthew Pennycook: This is where I come back to the importance of having up-to-date local plans. If a local planning authority has in place an up-to-date local plan, it may or may not include grey-belt sites, as the policy feeds through the system. At the point that an authority has a plan in place that meets demonstrable unmet need, it has robust safeguards against grey-belt

applications that come through the decision-making route. That is why we are encouraging local areas to get local plans in place.

We have inherited a situation in which we have extremely low up-to-date local plan coverage. That has exposed communities to speculative development, and it is happening all over the country. We have to put in place policies that, through the decision-making route, allow homes still to be brought forward in that interregnum, but then we have to push heavily to drive towards universal plan coverage. At that point, the protections are in place. Over the 10-year plan period and, as we roll out spatial development strategies on a sub-regional level, over a 20-year horizon, that will ensure that there is a strategic plan for green-belt land designation and release.

To come back to the point I made earlier, it is not as if no green-belt land was released before 2024. I know the Conservative party likes to give the impression that it did not, but it oversaw plenty of green belt release, in a completely haphazard and unplanned way. We are taking a strategic approach, which we think is right.

I have addressed the right hon. and learned Gentleman's point about what is likely to constitute grey-belt land. Let me directly address his other two specific points. Is this a significant policy? Absolutely, and it has been judged as much by the Office for Budget Responsibility and other external commentators. Is it deliberate? Absolutely. We want, as the right hon. and learned Gentleman asserted, to release more land into the system. This is where I take a principled different view from the CPRE and other commentators that say we can simply meet housing need through existing brownfield land. There is not enough land on existing brownfield land registers to meet the volume of homes that our country needs, let alone enough that is viable and in the right location. Where it is necessary, we want to see green-belt land released to meet demonstrable unmet need. It is right that when we look to release green-belt land, we focus on the lower-quality grey-belt land that does not make a strong contribution to those purposes.

To conclude, I again thank the right hon. and learned Member for Kenilworth and Southam for securing the debate, and other Members for their contributions. I hope that, while I may not necessarily have been able to convince Members in my response, I have been able to provide some valuable clarity on the national policy with respect to grey-belt land, and particularly the different approaches to plan making and decision making.

As set out in the Government response to the consultation on the new NPPF that was published last month, we have already recognised that further guidance may be helpful to support spatial development strategy-led strategic reviews of the green belt, and we will consider producing guidance on the considerations that should inform that process. As we update PPG to fully reflect the changes made in the new NPPF—and we absolutely must do that—we will of course consider whether any further clarity might be helpful to inform decision makers. To that end, I will reflect on a number of the points made in the debate.

3.41 pm

Sir Jeremy Wright: I thank everyone who participated in the debate, from the Back Benches and the Front Benches. I particularly thank the Minister, who—there will be general agreement on this—is an excellent Minister. He tried to engage properly with the issues in the debate and to give us the clarity that we asked for. He is a perceptive man, and he is right when he says that he has not quite persuaded all of us of everything, but I am grateful to him for what he said last, which is that he will reflect on what has been said here and consider whether further clarity needs to be provided.

Ultimately, the evidence as to which of us is right about what the grey belt turns out to be will become apparent over the years during which the policy is used. If I can ask the Minister to reflect on one other thing, it would be that the Government keep under review—as I am sure they will—what the impact of the policy change ends up being. If we see a great deal of new development in open countryside within green-belt areas, rather than in the type of land that he and his Secretary of State have previously described as wanting the grey belt to be, I hope the Government will reconsider the policy and look again at whether it is doing the damage to the countryside that many of us fear it will.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the definition and application of grey belt land.

3.42 pm

Sitting suspended.

Goods Trading: Great Britain and Northern Ireland

4 pm

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): I beg to move,

That this House has considered goods trading between Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Siobhain. Trade within any nation should be so simple and uncomplicated that it ought not to be a focus of much debate. And so it was within this United Kingdom until some time ago. One of the founding principles of this United Kingdom, as set forth in the Acts of Union, is that all parts of the United Kingdom should be on an equal footing when it comes to trade. That, of course, would manifest itself in utterly unfettered trade among and within all parts of the United Kingdom.

But then, sadly, along came the Windsor framework, previously called the protocol, which upended that equilibrium. That happened because the Windsor framework treats Northern Ireland alone within the United Kingdom as subject to the EU's customs union. As a consequence, the EU's customs union requires Great Britain, the other part of this United Kingdom, to be treated and regarded in trade terms as a third or foreign country, and from that flows the iniquitous Irish sea border—a full international customs, sanitary and phytosanitary and trade border—which is truncating and partitioning this United Kingdom.

In consequence of the Irish sea border, we have checks and customs declarations on goods travelling from Great Britain to Northern Ireland—a part of this United Kingdom whose economy was historically very integrated with Great Britain, which is where our raw materials came from, and to where we sold most of our goods. To impose upon such an integrated economy an international customs border was inevitably going to grossly and disadvantageously affect trade, and so it did.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): It may seem of little consequence to say that there is a customs border, but in practical terms, does the hon. and learned Gentleman accept that it means that when goods are brought from GB, they are subject to full customs checks and customs codes have to be filled in? If Laird Grass Machinery in my constituency wants to bring a tractor in, about 15 items in the tractor have to have separate customs codes. Filling in the paperwork to bring in one piece of machinery can sometimes take an hour.

Jim Allister: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. All our constituents in Northern Ireland who are in the business of trading goods have had many very daunting experiences in that regard.

Of course, the Minister will probably tell us, "Oh, but the Windsor framework established the UK internal market system." What a fraudulent name. An internal market is customs-free, yet under the UK internal market, previously called the green lane, customs declarations still have to be made. People make customs declarations when they are travelling from one single market to another. They have to be in a trusted trader scheme, to which they have to pay to belong. They have to undergo checks on 5% to 8% of all goods passing through, and in some circumstances, they have to pay duties—truncating and utterly upending the idea of free trade as it should operate within any national internal market.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. and learned Gentleman on introducing the debate. One of the greatest issues we all face is the crisis in the supply of veterinary medicines following Brexit. They continue to be subject to additional EU regulatory requirements, and farmers continue to face potentially serious consequences for animal welfare and the responsible management of antimicrobial resistance. Does the hon. and learned Gentleman therefore agree that Northern Ireland cannot continue to be economically cut off under the regulatory burdens placed on farmers and vets? Those burdens must be reduced.

Jim Allister: I think all that is self-evident, but sadly, we have a Government who are deaf to those issues, and sadly, the hon. Member's party seems to have come to terms with them, because in Stormont, the DUP is now prepared to implement the Irish sea border and the Windsor framework, but let me be very clear: the integrity of our single market has been utterly destroyed.

Among the practical consequences of that are unimaginable levels of trade diversion. We were once a wholly integrated part of the United Kingdom. Once barriers are erected, trade is discouraged. Various surveys show that that has happened. From the Federation of Small Businesses survey, we know that 34% of GB companies that used to trade with Northern Ireland have ceased trading. Why? Because this paperwork and this checking is such a disincentive that it is not worth the bother.

This week, I received figures from the Department for Transport that I find quite astounding, and they make the point with great clarity of what it means to have had trade diversion. According to the Department for Transport, in 2022, 8.6 million tonnes of goods were distributed in Northern Ireland by GB-registered vehicles—in other words, GB haulage companies bringing goods into Northern Ireland. Last year, that figure fell to a staggering 2.2 million tonnes. In just four years, there has been a fall of 75% in the quantum of goods coming from GB to Northern Ireland by GB-registered vehicles.

Alex Easton (North Down) (Ind): I thank the hon. and learned Member for securing the debate. Would he agree that the very fact that businesses face customs processes, extra paperwork and EU-derived rules when moving goods from Great Britain to Northern Ireland proves that the Irish sea border is still very much in place? Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom, and goods moving from one part of our country to another should not be treated as though they are crossing an international frontier. Is it not time that the Government restored Northern Ireland fully to the United Kingdom's internal market, instead of pushing us towards an economically united Ireland?

Jim Allister: I absolutely agree. The hon. Member makes a valid point. Some might say, "Well, what does trade diversion matter? As long as you get the goods, does it matter where they have come from?" Of course, the corollary of trade diversion is what it is doing to our economic links. It is consciously and deliberately building an all-island economy. In place of Northern Ireland being a fully integrated part of the UK economy, the whole idea of trade diversion—indeed, the whole idea of the protocol and the Windsor framework—was to

build the stepping stone to an all-island economy, to step us out of the United Kingdom. And that is what is happening.

When the Windsor framework was introduced, it contained article 16. It promised that if there were any trade diversion, the Government would step in and sort it out with the EU. There is lamentable and demonstrable trade diversion, but the Government are blind and deaf to the issue, refusing to act. The challenge to the Minister is this: why, in the face of demonstrable trade diversion, is that other part of the Windsor framework—article 16—not being implemented?

Sammy Wilson: There are not many MPs here from other parts of the United Kingdom, but I find it even more staggering because that trade diversion has impacts on constituencies of MPs across Great Britain. If goods are being brought from the Irish Republic or other parts of Europe, that means jobs lost in GB, from suppliers that would normally have been selling goods in Northern Ireland.

Jim Allister: Of course. The fact that 34% of businesses—many of them small—that previously serviced and supplied Northern Ireland have ceased, is obviously having a detrimental employment consequence for those firms in GB. It is not just big or small firms that are suffering but ordinary consumers.

One of the most striking illustrations of that, particularly pertinent to this House, is that items purchased online from our own House of Commons shop cannot be delivered to Northern Ireland. It cannot supply to Northern Ireland because of the EU's general product safety regulations. It is impossible to order a packet of House of Commons fudge, a leather folder, a candle, a keyring or a Christmas bauble—not even this bookmark I have here. Who would have thought that the EU single market was so delicate that it could not withstand the import into Northern Ireland of a bookmark? How preposterous and ridiculous is it that we have got to that point?

I suspect that the Minister, in trying to excuse and wave this away, will tell us that we have the wonderful advantage of dual market access. What a fraud and con. Dual market access has amounted to nothing for Northern Ireland. We were told that dual market access would make Northern Ireland the Singapore of the west. Strange then, that in all the years of the Windsor framework there has not been a single incidence of foreign direct investment because of dual market access.

That is for one very good reason. If a manufacturer coming to Northern Ireland is told it is wonderful that they can sell to GB and to the EU, they should ask where they are to get their raw materials. If they are told they should get their raw materials from Great Britain, they would have to pass through an international customs border. They might have to pay duties and do all the paperwork. Suddenly, the attraction of setting up in Northern Ireland as foreign direct investment disappears very fast.

Any perceived advantage of dual market access is cancelled out by the Irish sea border itself. Many the Minister will tell us that the Government will do an SPS deal, which will solve many of these problems. Will it? The SPS deal is not a United Kingdom-EU deal; it is a GB-EU deal, leaving Northern Ireland utterly, totally, irreversibly under EU rules pertaining to everything of the nature of SPS. The SPS-GB deal means that, in addition to Northern Ireland being disenfranchised by being allowed to make the laws that flow under SPS, the whole United Kingdom is to be disenfranchised and Great Britain is to join us, unable to make laws about her own SPS arrangements. It is no silver bullet whatsoever.

We might be told, as we are often foolishly told, "Oh, but it's about protecting the Belfast agreement." It has absolutely nothing to do with the Belfast agreement. Indeed, if it had anything to do with it, it is in this context: the Belfast agreement created a scenario where cross-community consent was supposed to be the barometer for everything, yet when it came to the Windsor framework being imposed on and extended to Northern Ireland, the one thing in the Belfast agreement that was liquidated was cross-community consent. That was taken out so that the protocol could be extended, knowing that it did not and would not have cross-community consent. The Windsor framework makes a nonsense of the Belfast agreement argument by trashing the very core of it—namely, by removing cross-community consent.

I come back to where I started. If we are a United Kingdom, why oh why are we denying to my part of the United Kingdom and that of my colleagues the most fundamental tenet of being a United Kingdom—namely, unfettered trade between and within all parts of the United Kingdom? It does not have to be like this. We could deal with the border issues with the EU through mutual enforcement—in other words, something relatively simple. It is a hallmark of international trade that if you are making goods for a foreign country, you make them to their standards and vice versa. That is the essence of mutual enforcement, with criminal sanction so that there is liability if that is not done. That is what protects each other's markets.

We do not need all this paraphernalia of the Windsor framework. Indeed, if it had anything but the political purpose that lies behind it, we would not have all this paraphernalia. We are in the appalling situation where local businesses, particularly those that depend on GB-Northern Ireland trade, have no help from the Government and are having to set up their own Intertrade UK business association to try to highlight these issues. I am grateful for the work they have done and the statistics they have provided; thankfully, at least they are trying to look after our interests, in sharp contrast to this Government.

4.18 pm

The Minister for Science, Innovation and Investment (Chris McDonald): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Dame Siobhain. I congratulate the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister) on securing this important debate—its importance was reflected in the urgency and tone of his remarks. I thank him for his comments, particularly those on the importance of the Union, with which I agree.

That is why I would like to start by very much refuting the hon. and learned Member's assertion that it is the policy of this Government to enable Northern Ireland to step out of the United Kingdom. I am sure that he does not fully mean that, although he is clearly very concerned about these issues of trade. I acknowledge those concerns, but the situation is more complex than his remarks have perhaps allowed for. Clearly, if there

[Chris McDonald]

were a simple solution to this that would deliver all the benefits he has described for Northern Ireland, the Government would want to move to that solution, but it is more complex than that. Through my remarks, I will try to address the many points that he and other colleagues have raised, and I will perhaps be able to elaborate on some of that complexity.

First, I will address the hon. and learned Member's point about unfettered access. The Government remain fully committed to unfettered access for qualifying Northern Ireland goods moving from Northern Ireland to Great Britain. I also want to be clear about the importance of the UK internal market and Northern Ireland's place in that market. The Office for the Internal Market highlights the importance of the internal market and of the sales to the rest of the United Kingdom, equivalent to around a quarter of Northern Ireland's economic output in 2021. In 2024, which is the last year for which we have published data, Great Britain accounted for 52% of Northern Ireland's trade in goods, and that figure is broadly the same as it was in 2018, indicating the robustness of Northern Ireland's place in the United Kingdom internal market.

Jim Shannon: Shops in Newtownards that have always bought their goods from a certain company across the water have been unable to do so because of the bureaucracy. By not being able to trade with that company directly, they are not able to offer the prices they once did. Nurseries and those that buy plants and seeds have also been restricted in what they do. DIY stores have been restricted by the bureaucracy and their ability to be competitive has been reduced. Has the Minister given any thought to that? I write to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland regularly about these matters, although not to the Minister in particular, but has the Minister had a chance to understand the issues and problems that my businesses in Strangford are feeling?

Chris McDonald: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that. He raises concerns around bureaucracy and paperwork, essentially, for small businesses, and the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim mentioned our own House of Commons gift shop as well for low value items. I very much want to come on to this point in my speech, so I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising it.

I will start by talking about the general performance of Northern Ireland trade with the rest of the United Kingdom. Northern Ireland's goods exports within the UK and with the European Union have been strong. In fact, Northern Ireland's exports to the European Union have outperformed the rest of the United Kingdom, increasing since 2019, whereas in the rest of the United Kingdom, exports have decreased in that period. It is therefore important to note that Northern Ireland does benefit from being a fundamental part of the UK internal market and having unique access to the EU single market. Of course, I do recognise—and the point was made by the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim—that this experience varies across sectors, companies and individual constituents, which is why this debate is so valuable. I will go on to talk more about that.

I understand the challenges around this, but public authorities have a statutory requirement to have special regard for Northern Ireland's place in the United Kingdom internal market under section 46 of the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020. That guidance gives real statutory power to ensure that policymakers within the United Kingdom actively consider Northern Ireland's place in the internal market when they are implementing the Windsor framework or making policy involving the movement of goods in the United Kingdom. Where that is the case, the statutory guidance ensures that those policymakers must have special regard for Northern Ireland's place in the UK internal market.

Most importantly, one part of having special regard means the need to facilitate the free flow of goods between Great Britain and Northern Ireland, with the aim of streamlining trade between the two, and maintaining and strengthening the integrity and smooth operation of our internal market. The guidance ensures that policymakers must give that special regard considerable importance and weight above other factors in policymaking. That represents how this Government have implemented a key commitment in the "Safeguarding the Union" Command Paper published under the previous Government to ensure that proper process is in place to always consider both Northern Ireland's place in the UK internal market and the flow of goods between Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Members have spoken in detail about the Windsor framework and the challenges it brings. I would like to stress that the Government are wholly committed to the Windsor framework. The framework supports the peace and prosperity brought by the Good Friday agreement, one of the proudest achievements of our last Labour Government, and it plays a vital role in ensuring the smooth flow of goods between Great Britain and Northern Ireland, but of course I recognise the concerns raised by hon. Members.

It is clear that the Windsor framework is delivering benefits and smoothing the flow of goods between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. I have already noted how the Northern Ireland-Great Britain supply of goods has been maintained through the implementation of the framework. Over 15,000 traders are now signed up to the UK internal market scheme, and more than 1,100 operators are registered for the Northern Ireland retail movement scheme and the Northern Ireland plant health label. Northern Ireland traders are benefiting from these facilitations, and businesses are choosing to invest in the dual market access that Northern Ireland uniquely offers.

The hon. and learned Member for North Antrim is concerned about the level of investment and believes that businesses will not wish to invest in Northern Ireland for that reason. On my recent visit to Northern Ireland, however, I saw significant investment from Boeing, Airbus, Navantia and many other businesses. It is clear that this is not a uniform experience across all businesses, but it has been possible for Northern Ireland to attract significant inward investment.

Sammy Wilson: Although the Minister paints a picture of firms signing up and supply still coming through, does he accept that the FSB has indicated that in retail, plant nurseries and firms that use steel, 32% of small businesses in those sectors in GB are no longer supplying to Northern Ireland? He cannot ignore the problem of

suppliers stopping supplying from GB and businesses in Northern Ireland not being able to get the supplies that they were previously able to get.

Chris McDonald: Far from trying to ignore issues, I am trying to explain that it is quite a complex situation. I have already acknowledged that there are concerns in particular sectors and with particular companies, but as I have said, I think it is important to take a more balanced approach. Overall, in my view and the Government's view, and according to the economic numbers that I have presented, the Windsor framework is in fact having a net positive effect on the economy in Northern Ireland.

For example, the company Evri has invested in Northern Ireland being home to the new EU gateway. In Lisburn, PRM Group, which is a major chilled and frozen food distributor, has said that this influenced its investment decision, as well as the growth of its business. Businesses in other sectors, from medical devices to advanced manufacturing and consumer goods, have made a similar call.

I recognise that if businesses and consumers are to benefit from the Windsor framework, they must have access to clear advice and guidance. In our response to Lord Murphy's review, the Government committed to strengthen our offer, and we are taking action in that regard. We are building on the comprehensive support available through the free trader support service beyond 2026, and work is under way to progress the £16.6 million regulatory support service, which will provide clear and targeted support to help businesses to trade across the UK and EU markets and to benefit from Northern Ireland's unique dual market access. I am personally grateful to businesses and civic stakeholders for their engagement on this project as we design and build the new service.

Jim Allister: The Minister will know, because I dealt with it at some length, about the issue of diversion of trade, which is illustrated by the fact that there has been a 75% fall in the tonnage of goods supplied by GB-registered vehicles into Northern Ireland. Does he accept that there is diversion of trade? If he does, when will the Government activate article 16 of the Windsor framework, which is supposed to be a protection against it?

Chris McDonald: The hon. and learned Member did indeed raise the issue of diversion of trade and I was just about to address it directly. He gave some figures, but there is a more complex picture and perhaps I can just illustrate some of it.

Great Britain and Northern Ireland trade remains robust, with over £17 billion in goods moving into Northern Ireland from Great Britain in 2024. The independent monitoring panel confirmed that the internal market guarantee—that 80% of Great Britain-Northern Ireland freight moves as "not at risk" goods—was met in 2025, and the latest figures confirm that 96% of goods moved under freight did so within the internal market system. We expect the panel's next report shortly.

Alex Easton: Is the Minister not concerned that 32% of businesses across the UK will not trade with Northern Ireland? Furthermore, does he agree that that is unfair on consumers in Northern Ireland, who cannot get goods from the rest of the United Kingdom?

Chris McDonald: Hopefully, the hon. Gentleman heard me outline some of the measures that the British Government are taking to enable businesses in the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland to trade freely with one another.

As we are in the dying seconds of this debate, I hope that Members will not mind if I do not take any more interventions, because I want to confirm some final statistics that I think are important. Sales from Northern Ireland to the rest of the UK reached £10.9 billion in 2024, and that figure was up by 0.8% on 2023. The UK internal market is expanding, not shrinking. As I have set out in detail, the importance of the Union and the many ways in which this Government are committed to maintaining and smoothing the flow of goods between Great Britain and Northern Ireland run through all the points that we are making about how we interact with the Windsor framework.

To conclude, I thank the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim for raising these points. Hopefully, he has heard from me that the Government are committed to the internal market, and that we are committed to the Union and the economic prosperity of Northern Ireland.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Civil Service Pension Scheme

4.30 pm

Dame Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): Order. *[Interruption.]* Congratulations to the Minister—right on time.

Ian Byrne (Liverpool West Derby) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the administration of the Civil Service Pension Scheme.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dame Siobhain. I thank all hon. Members from both sides of the House for attending on a one-line Whip, which shows the strength of feeling. Their presence proves that the unresolved problems that have emerged for many in Liverpool West Derby represent a national scandal requiring a national response. In my constituency alone, 35 people have contacted me with serious concerns about the administration of their civil service pension. I speak for them, and for civil servants, pensioners and bereaved families across the country being badly let down. They have served the public, paid into their pensions and planned their retirements in good faith.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): On a point of order, Dame Siobhain. I wonder if it is reflective of the failure to pay pensions on time, or to get the basic administration right or even a quote out, that the Minister does not turn up on time for a debate that follows an earlier one about the failure to look after pensioners under this Government.

Dame Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): I call Ian Byrne.

Ian Byrne: These civil servants are entitled to expect accurate information, pensions paid when they are due and accountability when things go wrong. With the permission of my constituents, I want to place on the record three West Derby cases. Dave Barlow has spent around 18 months trying to obtain up-to-date pension information. He tells me that he has not received an annual benefit statement for several years. Dave, who is reducing his working week partly to care for his elderly parents, is due to begin partial retirement on 6 October, yet he still does not have the information needed to plan his finances. He was given no guarantee that his pension would be ready, no timescale for his statement and, incredibly, was told by Capita to approach his employer for hardship support if necessary. Think about that—a civil servant may have to seek hardship support because the private company paid to administer his pension has totally failed to do its job.

Henry Tufnell (Mid and South Pembrokeshire) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the failure of the private sector in this instance, which also affects pensioners in my constituency, shows the benefits of the Government taking control and in-sourcing this pension scheme once and for all to deal with the issue?

Ian Byrne: That excellent point is well made, and I will raise it in my speech.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The civil service pension scheme is not delivering for the people who have put faith in their hard-earned income, as the hon. Gentleman said. When Capita took on the scheme, it was already facing a backlog of cases and was likely ill-equipped for the task. Serious questions must be asked about whether a sufficiently thorough assessment of Capita's capability to take on such an important responsibility was undertaken before this transfer occurred. Should its capability to do the job it was tasked with not have been ascertained?

Ian Byrne: A point well made.

James Bourke works for the Department for Work and Pensions in the Child Maintenance Service. James entered partial retirement, reducing his working week salary by about 20%, with his pension intended to replace the lost income and provide a lump sum. Neither has arrived. With his mortgage due for repayment on 30 July, his borrowing increased and his provider told him it could not offer a new product. James made nine calls to the helpline, sometimes waiting around two hours. He was promised resolution, then told payment was imminent before being informed that no timescale could be provided.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): In my constituency, constituents have complained of delays of over nine months to receive their pension. One terminally ill constituent's case should have been fast tracked, but was not. Like my hon. Friend, I have had complaints about people waiting over two hours to get through to the helpline and then receiving conflicting information, and of documents sent by constituents being lost. Does my hon. Friend agree that we should put more pressure on Capita, and perhaps have stronger oversight by the Cabinet Office, to get better accountability and more investment in technology and data quality?

Ian Byrne: I agree completely with my hon. Friend. I will not be taking any more interventions, because people have put in to speak.

Another of my constituents, Karen Morrow, took early retirement at the end of June. She will not receive a state pension for another two years. The civil service pension she earned was supposed to supplement her income. After two years of delay and inaction, she was told that her documents would be uploaded by 4 August and she might receive her pension by the end of that month. August came and went, and Karen received nothing. She has chased every single week. On her latest call, she waited three hours to be told only her that her case would be escalated—with no payment, no explanation and no reliable timescale. Karen has been left without an income since the end of June.

The circumstances of the constituents' cases I raise may differ in nature, but the pattern is the same: they earn their pension, yet carry the debt, uncertainty and stress created by a failing system. These are not minor administrative errors; they are major failures with serious human consequences.

It is not just my constituents and many others around the country waiting for their pensions who have been failed by Capita; it is Capita's own staff as well. Workers employed by Capita, including many in my city, have reported to the Public and Commercial Services Union that they are suffering due to the company's failure to deliver on the contract. They struggle physically and mentally as a result of inadequate staffing levels, insufficient training, poor processes, inappropriate IT systems and constantly changing demands.

More than half of Capita's workers who took part in a PCS survey said that they experience stress every day or most days, with a quarter responding that they are frequently extremely stressed. One PCS member described their day-to-day experience:

"every day is draining and it's always a massive relief when my working day is over."

Many are resigning because working conditions have become intolerable. More than 75% told PCS that they are considering leaving their roles. Is there any wonder we are in this mess? We know that Capita has failed in its duty to run the civil service pension scheme, but clearly it is also failing its own staff.

The Government's actions confirm the scale of the crisis. In February, Ministers said that they were working to bring most aspects of the service back to expected levels by June. That deadline was missed. In July, after sending two separate letters to the Cabinet Office in December and March, the Government confirmed, in response to a written parliamentary question of mine, that Capita had failed to restore standard contractual service. Ministers rightly withheld the £9.9 million, deployed independent auditors, appointed a remedial adviser at Capita's expense and recovered the cost of Government surge teams.

Last Friday, Karl Flinders from *Computer Weekly*, having covered the scandal over the last year, reported that the Cabinet Office is establishing a team with direct access to Capita's systems to independently validate its data. That is welcome, but is it not extraordinary that the Government have relied on Capita's own management information in the first place? The contractor under scrutiny has been supplying the figures by which its performance is judged. How can Capita possibly be held to account in the way that it clearly needs to be?

Despite those repeated interventions by the Government, on 7 September more than 1,000 bereavement cases were still more than 100 days old, alongside 308 death-in-service cases and 288 payment cases. Around 900 retirement quotations also remained from the backlog that Capita committed to clear. Bereavement, death-in-service and retirement are not cases on a spreadsheet; these are human stories—people facing some of the most difficult moments in their lives. The sequence is clear: a deadline was set, missed and followed by emergency measures, yet hundreds remain trapped in the backlog.

Progress is welcome, but progress is not resolution. The question is no longer whether there has been a serious failure—that is absolutely beyond dispute. The question is when will civil servants, pensioners and bereaved families finally see the end of it? I have raised this repeatedly with Ministers; sought Cabinet Office engagements with the PCS general secretary, Fran Heathcote; supported parliamentary motions; and tabled questions on the backlog, compensation, sanctions and bringing the service back in-house. I secured this debate because constituents are still coming to me in absolute distress.

This brings us to the fundamental question of outsourcing. We are told that outsourcing delivers efficiency and transfers risk, but when Capita failed, civil servants cleared the backlog, employers provided hardship funds and Government-appointed auditors and MPs became an escalation route, so where exactly was the risk transferred? Administration was outsourced; responsibility was not. A private company holds the contract while the public sector picks up the pieces, and all the while our constituents carry the consequences.

This is the failed ideology of outsourcing laid bare: born under Thatcher, followed by successive Governments of all colours in the name of efficiency while delivering absolutely the opposite and putting the burden on ordinary people. Whether it is Fujitsu in the case of the Post Office Horizon scandal, or even our failing water industry, how many more examples must we bring before this House before the political establishment finally accepts that this experiment has completely failed?

Today I ask the Minister for three clear commitments: recovery, compensation and accountability. First, on recovery, will the Minister set out a firm dated timetable for returning the scheme to normal service? That must include clearing overdue cases and urgently prioritising those without income and those with serious welfare, bereavement and ill-health cases. As part of that, the Government must also commit to publishing the number and age of outstanding cases until that has been achieved. The parliamentary caseloads that MPs have received on this issue should also be highlighted.

Secondly, there is compensation. When failure creates debt, higher borrowing costs, mortgage problems or reliance on hardship support, people should not face another battle to regain the position they would have been in had the service worked as it should have. Will the Minister provide a clear, simple and accessible route to compensation for financial loss?

Thirdly, there is accountability. The Government have announced a public interest test under which contracts worth more than £1 million will be assessed for in-house viability before renewal. If ever a service justified considering whether public provision would be more resilient, reliable and accountable, surely this is it. After months of failure under the administration of Capita and every indication that problems will persist, surely we have our answer. Will the Minister commit to bringing the administration of the civil service pension scheme back in-house, to put it back in the service of the people it exists to support?

This is not an attack on the staff working hard to clear the backlog; it is about the system and the political choices that have put us in this position. David should be able to reduce his hours to care for his elderly parents, James should not fear losing his home, Karen should not be left without an income and spending hours chasing her pension, and the other 32 constituents who contacted me should not need their Member of Parliament simply to access the pension service they were promised and have earned. Civil servants have served our country and our communities; they have paid into their pensions and planned their futures in good faith. They have kept their side of the bargain; it is time for the Government and the system for which they are responsible to keep theirs.

I ask the Minister for three things: recovery, compensation and accountability. The administration may have been outsourced, but responsibility cannot be outsourced with it. It is time for the system to do its part for our civil servants.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Dame Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): Order. Everyone can see the nature of my dilemma. I lost a wager with the previous Clerk by suggesting you would not all be here because there was a one-line Whip at 4.30 pm, but you all are. To clarify for Mr Stuart and other Members, I should say that the Doorkeepers have informed me that the Minister was here in plenty of time, but was caught in the mêlée as people left.

I regret to inform all of you that, with the authority of the Chairman of Ways and Means, I am imposing a time limit of one minute on Back-Bench speeches. Even then, I cannot guarantee that everybody will get called, so please do not take interventions.

4.43 pm

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): I wrote to the Cabinet Office in January in response to constituents' concerns about late payments, dreadful customer service and, in some cases, desperate pleas for pensions to be released. Shortly after, I met Capita representatives; they made assurances that pension arrears would be cleared by the end of April and that overall service levels would be restored by June. Those were hollow words: both targets were missed and everything has got worse. One constituent told me that he had given 43 years of service to the Royal Navy. He retired in October last year and is still waiting for his pension forecast to arrive. That is nearly a whole year.

My case workers have been exhaustively responding to constituents who are attempting to access statements and payments. In January, I wrote to the Cabinet Office but we are still waiting for movement on this issue. I suspect that my caseworkers are doing a better job than those hired by the Government, who have somehow seen an increase in the number of complaints. I do not think that bringing the contract in-house will make a difference—

Dame Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): Order.

4.44 pm

Alex McIntyre (Gloucester) (Lab): I have heard from far too many residents in Gloucester who have devoted their lives to public service only to be unable to access their pensions in retirement. In the short time I have, I want to highlight a specific example of one constituent who sadly lost her husband and was trying to get access to his pension. She had to relentlessly battle Capita during one of the most difficult times in her life. In her first email to me, she said that she felt that Capita were waiting for her to die. Her husband served our country, first in the Navy and then for 12 years at GCHQ.

In cases like these, widows are being failed by Capita. While suffering immense grief, they face the administrative burden of trying to secure what is rightfully theirs. I am pleased that after support from my office, my constituent has secured a lump sum and is due her husband's pension this month, but even after my involvement, the communication from Capita has been limited and poor.

I know that the Government are working around the clock to improve the situation, with the taskforce of civil servants being deployed. Progress is being made, and I know that the Minister is determined to build on that. I would be grateful if she could outline the steps that the Government are taking to improve the situation.

4.45 pm

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): Since Capita took over the administration of the civil service pension scheme, about 8,500 retired civil servants have experienced delays or failures in their pension payments. There are many in my constituency of West Dorset—many of them widows or ex-servicepeople—and many of them are having to take out hardship loans. We have seen delays, inaccurate calculations, enormous backlogs and, more recently, a data breach affecting 138 members in which some received other members' annual benefit statements. The Public Accounts Committee warned in 2025 that Capita was not ready to take on this contract.

I recognise that the Government have introduced a recovery plan, including interest-free hardship loans and additional surge teams, but a hardship loan is not a pension, not compensation and not a substitute for people receiving the money that they are owed after decades of public service. I hope that the Minister will tell us today what the Government intend to do to rectify this.

4.46 pm

Lorraine Beavers (Blackpool North and Fleetwood) (Lab): I stood on a manifesto that promised the biggest wave of insourcing in a generation. This situation is only one of many since the 1980s in which the responsibility of the state has been outsourced to private companies, which have consistently failed to deliver for working people. I will not stop fighting until this scheme is brought back where it belongs.

Will the Minister commit to drawing up plans to bring the scheme in house? Will she also apply pressure on Capita to issue comprehensive finalisation statements for each case? How will the Government hold Capita to account in the meantime? Will the Minister clarify who made the terrible decision to award the Synergy contract? Will she push for a compensation scheme for all affected by Capita's failures that considers both the stress and the financial loss caused to our much-loved civil servants?

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Dame Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): Order. Some Members have left the Chamber, so I am increasing the time limit to one minute and 30 seconds.

4.47 pm

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): My Spelthorne residents were given incorrect quotes months after I intervened and despite my office regularly pressing for updates. Some are still waiting for their initial quote—again, despite my office repeatedly following up. Others were told that their pensions could not be found, despite their furnishing the details several times. Only three of our 17 cases in Spelthorne have been resolved.

Spelthorne residents are not statistics. They are people who paid into their pensions throughout their working lives. They are the newly retired, the medically retired, widows and widowers, who are experiencing serious financial hardship and experiencing difficulties in securing the loans promised by the Government. It is futile for the Government to continue to go over old ground and play the blame game. What residents need and deserve is to receive without any further delay the pensions that they paid into over a long time.

4.48 pm

Lee Barron (Corby and East Northamptonshire) (Lab): For Capita, our constituents are now paying the price. We are talking about workers like my constituent Simon, who lives in Stanwick. He put in 37 years of public service at HM Courts and Tribunals Service. He gave six months' notice that he wanted to retire, but Capita simply never processed his application, and his retirement date has now passed. Simon now plans to retire in March 2027, but has no confidence at all that that date will be met. After 37 years of service, he is unable to receive the money that he has earned.

This just shows the absolute madness of outsourcing. This Government promised to deliver the greatest wave of insourcing in a generation, and I agree with the 20,000 PCS members who signed a petition urging them to demonstrate it here. Members of the civil service pension scheme deserve a cleared backlog with every case resolved, deserve without delay the money they are owed, deserve those responsible for failures to be held to account, and deserve a pension scheme back in house, under Government accountability.

4.49 pm

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Liverpool West Derby (Ian Byrne) on securing the debate.

Like everyone here, I have constituents who, after years of dedicated public service in our armed forces, prisons and vital public services, are now struggling to make ends meet because of failures by Capita. I raised those issues back in April, when the then Minister made a statement on this matter, but sadly it is now like a conveyor belt: just as we get one case resolved, another one appears from a constituent who cannot access the pension they have worked for and earned.

The most important point I want to make today is that behind every delayed pension is a person whose life has been put on hold. One of my constituents is grieving the loss of her husband, who passed away in July. As if that were not already enough, she cannot access his civil service pension. She spoke with Capita last week and was told that her case was "progressing"—exactly the same update as she had a month earlier.

I attended Cabinet Office questions last week, at which the Minister outlined the Government's insourcing plans and the penalties that Capita is experiencing, but I want her to address two questions today. First, what are the timescales for insourcing? "Plans" do not help our constituents right now. Secondly, what criteria are being applied in relation to penalties for Capita? Constituents need answers and reassurance.

4.50 pm

John Grady (Glasgow East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dame Siobhain. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool West Derby (Ian Byrne) for securing this debate and for focusing so well on the human costs. Many constituents have come to me about this issue. They are living in poverty and misery, having given decades of service to the British people.

This is an absolute scandal. Quite simply, the backlog flows from the repeated, serious failures of Capita, and Capita has very serious questions to answer. I have a great deal of sympathy with those who argue that this should be brought in house, both for the sake of the staff working at Capita who, as my hon. Friend explained so well, are suffering from immense stress, and so that constituents across Britain who have given decades of public service can have confidence that they will be treated properly and be able to access their pensions on time.

4.51 pm

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I will share with the House one particular case that is representative of many. My constituent, Mrs Gillian Pothecary, lost her husband almost a year ago. She wrote to me in July about her valiant but so far unavailing quest to obtain a civil service widow's pension. She wrote:

> "Throughout this process, I have been given differing information about the status of my claim…More recently, I was told that I was at the top of the list for assessment, only to then be informed that some of my paperwork had become out of date and needed to be resubmitted, causing further delay."

I was very impressed to get a reply, when I forwarded this on, from someone holding the exalted position of deputy director of civil service and Royal Mail pensions in the Cabinet Office. She said:

> "Mrs Pothecary's…case falls under the commitment to be fully resolved by early September at the absolute latest. Capita has assured me that her case is on their escalation log and has been flagged for priority handling."

I rang up Gill just before coming into this debate and—you've guessed it, Dame Siobhain—she has not yet received her pension. She is now dipping into her savings and working longer hours at the supermarket.

4.53 pm

Imogen Walker (Hamilton and Clyde Valley) (Lab): The people affected by this issue have worked hard, done the right thing and put money aside for the future, and of course the consequences when things go wrong are dreadful. One of my constituents has experienced a catalogue of errors lasting more than six months, from a £27,000 mistake about a lump sum to a tax code error that still has not been resolved.

That is just one case among many. People are spending hours on the phone only to be fobbed off, paperwork is going missing, money is taking months to arrive and lives are being ruined. Capita's response is arbitrary targets that come to little or nothing. Will the Minister say what will happen if Capita continues to set itself targets and then miss them? The Government's action so far is welcome, and it is entirely right that Capita should be audited. Can we have progress on this, please? Can the Minister also tell me who will pay the interest on any delayed payments?

A pension, of course, is about money, but more than that, when they have tried to sort out this mess with Capita, my constituents have been left feeling that they do not matter—but they matter very much. This is not Capita's money; it is their money, and every single penny must go where it belongs.

4.54 pm

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): Thank you, Dame Siobhain, and my apologies to the Minister, who was indeed here on time. I have written her a note to apologise.

[Graham Stuart]

I am aware of at least 10 people in Beverley and Holderness who are still waiting to receive what is rightfully theirs, as colleagues across the Chamber have so powerfully expressed. Angela from Burstwick gave 37 years to the civil service, most recently at His Majesty's Land Registry. She retired in May and, four months on, has received neither a quotation nor a payment. She is now living off her savings and struggling to meet her mortgage.

Sally from Beverley has spent nearly a year trying to retire, after almost 40 years of service. Capita wrongly closed her case as a duplicate, lost the documents sent by the company's HR team and gave her conflicting retirement dates. In August, it admitted that its own notes on her case did not add up.

This case will resonate powerfully with the Minister. John from Withernsea retired in April 2026 after 30 years as, like the Minister, a prison officer—in his case, at HMP Hull and HMP Full Sutton. Five months on, he has received neither a pension quote nor a penny of income, despite his former employer sending Capita the same information three times.

That is three lives and more than 100 years of service, yet none of them can get what they are owed. Ministers knew that the IT was not ready, but it went live anyway. Can the Minister explain why that decision was made?

4.56 pm

Danny Beales (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Lab): Time and again this issue is raised in the House, whether at business questions or in questions to Ministers, and we are assured that the situation can and will get better. We are given deadlines and meetings. My constituent Mark's case was even taken off the tracker, and my office was assured by Capita that the case was solved. Then, last week, we found out that it still had not been resolved and he still did not have the pension he was due.

Barbara had to fight six months for her late husband's pension. She dealt not only with the grief of losing a husband, but with not being able to get the pension that was owed. Frankly, it is disgraceful that we are treating anyone like this, let alone public servants who have served for many years and deserve a peaceful retirement. Instead, they are having to battle the system to get what they are owed.

What out of pocket expenses will be covered? People are having to pay extra for legal support and to get extra documents reprinted and sourced, as well as getting by day to day. At what point do we draw a line and say, "Enough is enough," end this contract, and bring it back in house or give it to another supplier that can actually provide what it is paid for?

4.57 pm

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Siobhain.

I first raised the case of my constituent Sarah Rees in January. A year after retiring, Sarah had not received her civil service pension, and it took my raising it in the Chamber to get any sort of action. Sarah's husband is now in the same situation and has had to endure Capita's delays and incompetence. Since first asking for his quote in January, he has chased it 20 times and still not had it.

I am asking for three things. First can the Minister give us further details on the long-term strategy being developed to bring the contract in house? I welcome that move, but we need more detail. Secondly, on behalf of my constituents, I seek assurance on exactly how the UK Government intend to hold Capita to account, as we know that it is not hitting even basic benchmarks. Finally, will the Minister fully consider calls for compensation to reflect the financial cost of these failings for people and their families, many of whom have been without income for nearly a year or more?

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Dame Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): Order. Isb apologise for the hokey-cokey way of chairing. We are back down to a minute for speeches.

4.59 pm

Dr Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dame Siobhain. Let me tell Members about two men. The first is Adolfo Hernandez, the chief executive of Capita, who has an annual remuneration, I believe, of £1.6 million. The other is my constituent, a man who gave 33 years of service to the Metropolitan police and, despite giving ample notice of his retirement, did not receive his pension for at least six months. He wanted to fund his daughter through university, but was unable to do so. He took out loans from the police. He then developed cancer and is under treatment at my local hospital. He has finally received a quotation for his pension. This is an utter disgrace and we in this place must surely be able to do something about it. We all came to this place to change things. Surely, this is something that we can change. I look forward to hearing the Minister's view.

5 pm

Susan Murray (Mid Dunbartonshire) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for Liverpool West Derby (Ian Byrne) for securing this debate. I was contacted in February by a constituent who sadly lost her partner in November 2025. She was left caring for two children on one income. When she reached out to access a hardship loan, she was denied. The Government had shut out bereaved families at the time they most needed help. When I asked the Minister how much it would have cost to include them, I did not get an answer.

That has been the theme throughout, for myself and my constituents. I have asked what penalties have been applied to Capita—no answer. Given that much of Capita appears to be nothing more than a rebranding of MyCSP, with the same workforce doing the same job, can the Minister tell me what assurances she can provide that we will not see a repeat of the Capita fiasco? The Cabinet Office is responsible for civil service pensions. Unlike other pension providers that are monitored by the Financial Conduct Authority, this issue is not subject to FCA scrutiny.

5.1 pm

Sadik Al-Hassan (North Somerset) (Lab): It is an understatement to say that Capita's service in administering civil service pensions is unacceptable. One resident has faced real financial hardship because it took five months and considerable pestering from my office just to receive

a quote from Capita. That pension has still not been paid. It does not end there. I have heard from a bereaved and grieving widow, Carolyn. On top of the pain of losing her other half, she has had to fight through a mountain of administration just to receive a widow's pension.

I have personal experience. I am incredibly proud that my father worked in the civil service and shared a pension with my mother, who passed away in November. MyCSP did not even have my mother's name spelled correctly on the account, and all progress I had made was lost when Capita took over. I personally experienced the difficult situation that residents in North Somerset have to go through. Surely it is time to act decisively and consider ending Capita's involvement in the administration.

5.2 pm

Gordon McKee (Glasgow South) (Lab): Saving for a secure retirement is a baseline expectation for the people I represent. For some members of the civil service pension scheme, that expectation has been replaced by unanswered emails, long phone calls and an indefinite wait. That frustration is compounded by the fact that they are not waiting for a favour but for their own money. I will never forget a woman who came to one of my summer coffee mornings. She had worked all her life and to mark her retirement had booked the holiday of a lifetime with her husband. Instead of being able to enjoy that holiday, it was punctured by the anxiety caused by Capita's incompetence.

There is a power imbalance: retirees know that they are owed and Capita knows there is a problem, but Capita is the only one able to fix it. People are left screaming into a faceless bureaucracy, somewhere inside which their pension is trapped. I know the Minister cares as deeply as I do, and I look forward to hearing of the work she is doing to ensure that we fix this urgently for my constituents.

5.3 pm

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): Capita is causing a real financial and emotional impact on decent, hard-working people across our country. Examples from my constituency include Anne-Marie from Brotton, who served in the Department for Work and Pensions for 40 years and is still waiting for her pension after nine months. Ivan from Nunthorpe retired in 2023 and is still waiting to make his McCloud remedy choice three years later.

Samantha from Marton is trying to secure a death payment following the death of her mother Angela, but has been chasing the bereavement team since February. I met the Minister about these problems recently, but the reality is that Capita is not delivering for long-serving, decent people who spent their lives in public service. I urge the Government to act more quickly to sort it out.

5.4 pm

Terry Jermy (South West Norfolk) (Lab): I have a constituent with terminal cancer still waiting after months for their pension. Another constituent has been trying to finalise his deceased mother's pension for two years. Other constituents have had hardship loans that have now run out. In the words of my caseworker, it is "just dreadful". Constituents have told me that, when their payments have been delayed, they often have to borrow money simply to make ends meet.

Why should somebody whose pension has been unlawfully or negligently delayed have to borrow money to replace income that is already theirs? I hope Capita will be properly held to account. I look forward to hearing from the Minister about how the Government intend to compensate people who have suffered financial loss, distress or serious inconvenience as a result of these failures.

5.5 pm

Euan Stainbank (Falkirk) (Lab): Capita and MyCSP have failed public servants and ground lives to a halt. Derek tragically lost his wife Julie last year. We found that vital information in relation to Julie's pension had been lost by Capita, and despite raising this in a previous debate, that case is still unresolved. Despite Capita's supposed priority to death-in-service cases, it is Derek's sincere and despairing belief that he will never get what he is entitled to. Tim retired in May. He sent everything he needed to immediately to Capita, which quickly confirmed it had received everything it needed, only to come back to Tim two months later requesting documents it did not initially send him.

I could go on and on—terminally ill people waiting for hours on the phone; prison officers mentally battered and left for months without any updates from Capita. The fact that a single penny has been earned by Capita's shareholders since it took on the contract is shameful. The fact that that contract was transferred to Capita on the cheap in 2023 is shameful. Minister, enough is enough. Insource this contract.

5.6 pm

Andrew Cooper (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Siobhain. I completely agree with the concerns that my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool West Derby (Ian Byrne) raised about Capita's unacceptable performance. Sadly, despite repeated promises from Capita that it would prioritise, escalate and expedite such cases, too many of my constituents continue to live with the consequences. One constituent has been waiting nearly 11 months for their bereavement case to be resolved. Despite Capita's assurances that it would clear stock cases involving bereavement by 1 September, that one remains pending.

I am also concerned that Capita appears to be providing constituents and their MPs with incorrect and often conflicting information. In one particular case, my constituent and I contacted Capita separately, and I additionally raised the matter with Ministers in the Cabinet Office. Shockingly, my office received a different answer from the one that Capita provided directly to my constituent, and we both received a different answer from the one given to the Cabinet Office. That is three different answers on one case. The ineptitude is simply staggering, and no one will be surprised to hear that that case is still outstanding.

In the meantime—

Dame Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): Order.

5.7 pm

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): This Capita situation is not acceptable. I have constituents who have served for decades who are now living off their savings because they cannot get a response from Capita, never mind the pension payments that they are owed. Others have had to borrow money from friends and family just to make ends meet, and have no idea when this will be resolved. One person worked for 30 years in the prison service. In September, he received a letter promising that he would receive his pension "by the end of August".

Those are not isolated examples. I have received hundreds of emails—about 400 in total. Whatever uniform they wore, and whatever office they worked in, they worked hard, they paid in, and they planned for their retirement on the understanding that the pension they had earned would be there when they needed it most. They have kept their side of the bargain; it is time the system kept its side, too. I ask the Minister to lay out the plans and timescales for getting this resolved for my constituents.

5.8 pm

Deirdre Costigan (Ealing Southall) (Lab): My constituent Sarabjit partially retired last year. Capita wrongly worked out her pension, and over a year later she has still not got the money she is owed. Another constituent, Inderjeet, retired after 39 years in the Met police to spend more time with her parents, who live abroad, but five months later she has still not had a penny and her mum has sadly died since then. This is affecting real people's lives.

I know the Minister is new to the job, but I congratulate her on how she has already grasped the nettle on this issue. We have had two virtual surgeries offered to us next week for both those cases, but could she confirm the new deadline we should be working to, in order to ensure that Sarabjit and Inderjeet get the money they are due?

5.9 pm

Jessica Toale (Bournemouth West) (Lab): Dozens of my constituents have been waiting months on end for their pensions, but I want to raise just one case. My constituent Cally came to see me in February this year. Her mother, Sarah Mitchell, died in August 2025. Despite repeated efforts from my team, Capita still cannot locate her details. Sarah died before getting her pension, and Cally is still waiting for her survivor benefits. I hope the Minister agrees with me—and, it sounds like, everybody in the Chamber—that the shameful cases raised today show that Capita is not fit to deal with this contract. *[Interruption.]*

Dame Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): I apologise; I did not see you, John. I will reduce the Minister's time so that you can speak.

5.9 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): Thank you, Dame Siobhain—I am not sure if that is beneficial to the debate, but there you are.

I declare an interest as the chair of the PCS trade union parliamentary group. I first want to thank the Civil Service Pensioners' Alliance, which worked with the trade union to expose what is going on. I also thank the Minister for her open-door policy. On 9 September, Capita supplied her with information that, let us say, has a passing relationship with the truth.

For the October statement, could we ensure that we have the full publication of the Grant Thornton audit report, so that we can see the hard information? The PCS is willing to work with the Minister on the insourcing strategy. I also ask that we have a full inquiry into how this contract was awarded in the first place, and how Capita has been awarded further contracts despite its successive failures.

Dame Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): I call the Lib Dem spokesperson. You have five minutes.

5.10 pm

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dame Siobhain. I commend the hon. Member for Liverpool West Derby (Ian Byrne) for securing this important debate. We always say that in this Chamber, but we can see from the number of Members who have come here today to represent their constituents that this issue really needed to be debated.

In August, I hosted a surgery in the bucolic surroundings of the Rushfields nursery, at the foot of the south downs near the village of Poynings. A gentleman called Greg Mountain came to see me. I know Greg because before I stood for election in Mid Sussex, he was the Labour candidate there—I believe in 2015 and 2017. I was not sure what he was going to raise with me, but Greg was there in his capacity as a member of the executive committee of the Civil Service Pensioners' Alliance. He advises former civil servants living in my constituency. Greg described the situation we have heard about this afternoon as a "national scandal", and he is right.

Let us look at some statistics. As recorded by the Cabinet Office on 20 August this year, annual benefits statements for existing members were still not available. There were 68 retirement cases more than 100 days old, with a further 267 requiring additional information before payment could be made. There were six ill-health retirement cases over 100 days old, with another 12 awaiting information. There were 45 death-in-service cases over 100 days old, and a further 242 requiring more information. Perhaps most troubling of all, there were 1,082 bereavement cases more than 100 days old, with another 779 awaiting third-party information.

These are people who have given decades of their lives to public service. Newly retired civil servants say they are struggling to pay bills and buy food because delays in their pension scheme have left them without an income for months. These repeated failures in pension administration are causing real distress and uncertainty for people who deserve better. The outrage and anger is particularly understandable given that the Public Accounts Committee warned of a clear risk that Capita would not be ready to take over full administration in December 2025.

Graham Stuart: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Alison Bennett: I will not, because I have a time limit.

The Committee called on the Cabinet Office to explain how it ensures sufficient staffing and resources, and raised serious concerns about weak contract management and poor oversight. It is now clear that those concerns have come to fruition.

I have five questions for the Minister. First, how did this happen, and when will it end? When Capita bid for this contract, did it properly understand the scale and complexity of the work it was taking on, and did the Cabinet Office undertake sufficient due diligence to satisfy itself that the company had the capability to deliver this vital public service? Has the Cabinet Office put a date in place for getting this right?

Secondly, are teachers going through the same ordeal? I have received very concerning casework from teachers in my constituency who seem to be having similar or the same troubles with their pensions. The idea that the immense stress and potential financial hardship that we have heard has been inflicted on civil servants has been mirrored for teachers is appalling. Can the Minister tell us what guardrails the Government have put in place to ensure that when the teachers' pension scheme transfers to Tata from Capita, that will not result in similar issues?

Thirdly, the Government must tell us how they intend to put this right. How will they restore the confidence of 1.7 million current and former civil servants who simply want reassurance that their pensions, earned through years of public service, will be administered competently, fairly and with dignity? The Government must outline exactly how they are ensuring that the most vulnerable of those affected are being prioritised.

Fourthly, will the Government commit to inflation-linking payments to all outstanding cases, to make sure that those affected by Capita's mistakes do not suffer even more for the delays? Fifthly, what assessment have the Government made of the systemic failures in civil service pension administration? What lessons have they learned to ensure that the same thing cannot happen again when similar contracts are awarded in future? These people served this country. They earned their pensions. They should not now have to fight to receive them.

5.15 pm

Charlie Dewhirst (Bridlington and The Wolds) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Siobhain, and to take part in this debate. I take the opportunity to formally welcome the Minister to her role. The turnout for the debate shows the strength of feeling of hon. Members of both sides of the House. I join them in expressing my deepest sympathies to the civil servants and families of civil servants who dedicated their lives to public service and who have been left without the pensions they earned throughout that service. Recent updates from the civil service pension recovery plan show that although progress has been made, thousands of families are still waiting for retirement quotes and pension payments. Of particular concern is the number of older cases involving bereavement, death in service and ill health that have yet to be resolved, as highlighted in the most recent updates. I trust that the Minister will use the opportunity of this debate to highlight what further steps the Government are taking to ensure that those cases are dealt with.

An adequate explanation from Ministers for why they allowed Capita's contract to administer the civil service pension scheme to go ahead in the first place has been entirely absent. I know, and the Minister will no doubt point out, that the contract was signed in November 2023 under the last Government. The last Government agreed to a two-year transition period with clear milestones that Capita was required to meet to take over the administration of the scheme without causing disruption to service.

Graham Stuart: The mistake that the Government made was trying to transfer a complex system in disarray. Is the danger not that the Government now will take a system that is still in disarray and seek to transfer it again? It must be put right under Capita and then, at that point, a consideration can be made of its being brought back in house, not before.

Charlie Dewhirst: I could not agree more. It was under this Government's watch that it became clear that many of the milestones were not being met, and Ministers failed to take the necessary action to ensure a smooth transition and prevent such disruption. That was certainly not through lack of warning, given that both the National Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee published reports in the weeks and months before Capita was due to take over administration of the scheme highlighting a clear risk that it was not ready to do so. Ministers said they received personal assurances from Capita on its readiness to take over the scheme, and they have not said why they chose to believe those claims despite the findings of the National Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee.

Will the Minister clarify who in her Department authorised the go/no-go decision in November 2025, clarify what criteria were used to make that decision, and commit to publishing all documents relating to that decision with only necessary commercial redactions?

Ministers have spoken at great length about potentially insourcing the civil service pension scheme in the future, but they appear far less willing to consider using powers that they already have at their disposal under the Procurement Act 2023 to address issues with suppliers.

Dame Caroline Dinenage: Does my hon. Friend agree that since the Government have got involved in this situation, the backlog has got worse? Does he think that they should prevent Capita taking on any more Government contracts until this is sorted out?

Charlie Dewhirst: I could not agree more, and I am about to come to that point. We have all seen our inboxes full of horror stories of individuals who have been caught up in this situation. I therefore ask the Minister specifically to confirm whether the Government will refer Capita to the Debarment Review Service, or does she intend to allow Capita to continue freely bidding for public contracts while the Government take months to complete their review of insourcing?

It is clear that the mishandling of the civil service pension scheme is the result of not only corporate failures on the part of Capita but the Government's failure to manage the contract effectively. Ministers should reflect on the Government's shortcomings in regard to that before outsourcing blame elsewhere. However, I am aware that the Minister took a keen interest in this subject from the Back Benches and I will work constructively with her to try to find a resolution to an issue facing many thousands of people up and down the country.

[Charlie Dewhirst]

It is absolutely right that, while we try to understand how we got to this point, we must work more closely together to try to resolve it. That is in the interests of the civil servants and their families who have been so deeply impacted by this travesty. I therefore look forward to hearing what plans the Minister has to take this issue forward and resolve it as quickly as possible. I look forward to her response.

5.19 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Sally Jameson): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Siobhain. I declare that I have a Capita Prison Service pension of six years, but I am 34 years away from my retirement age, so I do not have a current financial interest. I am also a member of the Prison Officers' Association. I want to apologise as I was not in my seat for the start of the speeches; I will endeavour in future Westminster Hall debates to be more bullish in fighting through the crowds to make sure I am here on time.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool West Derby (Ian Byrne) for securing this debate and actively campaigning on this issue for his constituents, as all Members present have done. I raised this issue both in Westminster Hall and the main Chamber before I became the Minister responsible for it—life comes at you fast. I am absolutely committed and determined to ensure that this issue is dealt with.

I want to thank the constituents who have been affected by this issue. They are public servants who have given so much to our country and our communities. I give a special shout-out to my former colleagues in the Prison Service and at HMP Moorland, because public servants like them have dedicated their working lives to this country and deserve financial security and unwavering dignity in retirement—not corporate failure, not empty promises and not severe administrative failure.

I will do my best to get through as much of my speech as I can in the time I have, but I am happy to speak to any Member after the debate to deal with individual case issues. Subject to the Speaker's permission, I also hope to come to the House in October to give a full update.

The continued poor experience delivered to the many public servants and their families by Capita, which has been the administrator of the civil service pension scheme since 1 December 2025, is totally abysmal. I have read accounts of the endless delays faced by scheme members, many of whom have written to their local MPs and Ministers, I have heard the concerns raised by hon. Members in the debate, and I have heard the concerns of my constituents in Doncaster Central. I am truly sorry to hear about the worry and distress that has been caused, particularly to those dealing with bereavement and death in service. Resolving this matter is of the utmost urgency for the Government, and we are taking direct action to intervene.

I will answer some of the questions from my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool West Derby. First, on recovery, Capita has set a commitment to achieve its full service level agreements from the end of this month. I am meeting senior Capita staff later this month to challenge them again and get their assurance on that. On the commitment to redress and compensation, we are committed to ensuring that no member is left financially worse off. All complaints will be handled in line with Pensions Ombudsman standards. There is further work to do on that, and I intend to bring my focus to it, but in the immediate future, I want to make sure that as many scheme members as possible are getting their pension and the money they are owed. Further work will then be done to ensure that people are properly compensated. I will come to insourcing later in my speech.

I will explain the context of this issue and how we got here. The contract was signed in 2023 under the previous Government. On 1 December, the administration of the scheme transferred from MyCSP to Capita. While the core payroll for over 730,000 existing pensioners continued to be paid correctly and on time, following the change of administrator, the process for retiring since December has been fraught with delays, and a large number of public servants and their families have been significantly impacted.

Following that, Capita defaulted on its major recovery commitments, missing its end of April target to clear payment arrears and its end of June milestone to clear the backlog of inherited cases. Following Capita's failure at the end of June, we mandated the production of a formal contract rectification plan, which was submitted by Capita in July. A remedial adviser from Grant Thornton was appointed at Capita's expense to test the validity of that plan. They will test whether Capita can realistically deliver what it needs to with the systems it has in place and in the timeframe it has set out. Once Capita reports next month, we will hold it to account for the quality of its planning and execution.

In addition, the Government have appointed a Government internal audit agency to undertake a deep review of the effectiveness of Capita's operational arrangements between December and July. After I get all that information back and break it down, I will then report again in October. That will allow us to understand how Capita got it so wrong, despite Ministers receiving explicit personal assurances from the chief executive officer. We will hold it accountable for the quality of its delivery.

In evidence given to the Public Accounts Committee and the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee on 8 July, Capita committed to two further operational milestones: 1 December to clear all remaining backlog and retirement arrears; and 30 September to restore normal operations and standard contractual levels, excluding 600 complex cases. As stated in my ministerial statement on 9 September, Capita has reported that it has met that in five priority areas. I want to be clear that that is Capita's reporting, not my or the Government's reporting. I am personally testing that, based on cases that MPs have sent me that have come through my ministerial correspondence. I will be holding Capita executive to account on individual cases next week when I meet them.

I am also working towards setting our own measures of Capita's success. At the minute, it is setting its own milestones and measurements, and that is not good enough. We are in charge, so we need to tell it what our terms and measurements are, and it needs to work towards that. I am doing a separate piece of work on that.

On transition and go-live, the decision obviously predated my elevation to Minister for this area, but it was based on evidence requested from Capita about capability and readiness in critical delivery areas. By November 2025, assessments indicated that Capita had made significant progress since the PAC hearing in July. It gave assurances via external audit by the National Audit Office, technical security assurance, gateway reviews in the go/no-go discussions in October and November, and weekly assessments of critical cases against specific acceptance criteria.

To support and provide financial security to those impacted, the Government have approved more than £100 million to provide interest-free transitional support loans to public servants. Let me be clear: the Government should not have to financially plug any gaps due to Capita's failure, but to date it has been necessary to supply more than 4,100 loans.

I turn to Capita's engagement with Members in this House. The volume of outstanding MPs' correspondence has grown significantly, and peaked at 2,200 open cases. It has decreased slightly to 1,700, but it is still not good enough. In recognition of the need to do better, my predecessors set up the virtual surgeries system. To date, it has had more than 870 sessions with 260 parliamentary officers, which underlines the scale of the catastrophe we are facing. We will maintain those surgeries until the pension scheme is running smoothly. It feels like that could be a while, but we will not withdraw them.

I am personally committed to continuing to work with the unions. I have already met the PCS union, which represents Capita employees and scheme members, and other unions, including the POA and the FDA. I met the Civil Service Pensioners' Alliance this week to ensure that it is involved and that its views are heard throughout this process.

I am using all commercial levers to hold Capita to account. We have held nearly £10 million in contractual payments for undelivered milestones. We will pay only for what has been successfully delivered, and nothing more. We have a Capita-funded remediation adviser, and we will be hearing from them very soon. We have also deployed auditors to Capita to get a full understanding of its failure, and we will be recovering all costs from it, including to pay for the 140 surge staff that the civil service has provided.

Core operations are currently being propped up by the 140 surge staff, and we will put more in if required. The surge team will remain in full service until restoration is completed. We will not permit Capita to reduce its own headcount until performance has improved.

The contract awarded by DWP followed a separate rigorous process; it was not done via the Cabinet Office. I have expressed my own views on that in this House before, so they are on the record. I think there is further work to be done to look at how we can hold Capita and similar companies to account when they fail in these areas.

It has been nine months since Capita took over the new contract. The Government are very clear that members of the civil service pension scheme and their families deserve better. If any Members who have raised personal cases today have not already done so, I ask that they get in touch with me so that I can personally escalate them.

I will hopefully come back to the House in October with a better update and more information. The Labour Government stood on a manifesto pledge to have the biggest wave of insourcing in a generation. I am personally committed to that. I have said in this House before that I think that is a priority for this scheme, but we can do that only if it is done in the interests of the members. There must be no disruption, so we have to do it in the smoothest and quickest way.

I want Capita, not the taxpayer, to pay for its mistakes. It does not get to just walk away and do nothing about it. It needs to pay for this and get everyone their pensions, and then we will look at what needs to be done in terms of the long-term viability of the scheme. I am committed to doing that. I assure all hon. Members that this is absolutely a Government priority. It is also a personal priority for me, and I feel I have demonstrated that in recent months when I have raised it. We will not rest until it is sorted.

I am conscious of time—I have about 15 seconds left. The Government will not accept further caveats or moving targets. We will not accept continued poor delivery for current and former civil servants, who deserve better in their retirement. I thank everyone for showing the strength of feeling today. More will come in October.

5.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).

Written Statements

Tuesday 15 September 2026

DEFENCE

Defence Nuclear Enterprise; Annual Update

The Secretary of State for Defence (Wes Streeting): I am today placing in the Library of the House the Defence Nuclear Enterprise 2026 annual update to Parliament.

Since its inception, the United Kingdom has used its nuclear deterrent every day. It remains as relevant today as it was then. Since taking office in 2024, this Government have made clear our commitment to maintaining the UK's nuclear deterrent, highlighted through our triple lock. This guarantees the building of four Dreadnought nuclear submarines in Barrow-in-Furness, that we will maintain our continuous at-sea deterrent, and the delivery of all future upgrades to ensure its safety and effectiveness. This commitment is even more critical today than it was then and was reinforced through the strategic defence review and the defence investment plan, which outlined this Government's plan to invest £63 billion into the UK's deterrent over the next four years, representing more than a £20 billion increase on the previous four.

Over the past 12 months the Defence Nuclear Enterprise —DNE—has continued to drive delivery of our programmes that are of critical importance to the security of the UK and that of our Allies.

In September 2025 we marked major milestones with the steel cut for Dreadnought Boat 4, marking the start of its construction, and the commissioning of HMS Agamemnon into the Royal Navy. In July 2026, the Prime Minister announced an £8.4 billion investment in industry to begin delivery phase 4 of the Dreadnought build programme, supporting tens of thousands of jobs and delivering growth in every postcode. We are transforming infrastructure across our locations, including at Rolls-Royce Submarines Ltd's Raynesway facility and BAE Systems' Barrow shipyard, to support a continuous production rate of one submarine every 18 months, as announced in the spending review. The warhead programme, supported by £15 billion of investment over this Parliament, continues to progress as we develop our replacement warhead, Astraea.

Delivering value for money across our programmes is an absolute priority, and we are driving productivity across the enterprise and breaking down barriers to delivery. This includes working with partners across Government to deliver the recommendations of the Fingleton review of nuclear regulation, which identified significant opportunities to streamline regulation, speeding the delivery of nuclear projects. The Government have accepted the review in full and committed to implementation by the end of 2027.

In June, the Government announced that they had agreed to seek to establish a new House of Commons-only Committee, appointed by the Prime Minister, to conduct scrutiny of DNE expenditure and programmes. As recommended in the SDR, and by the Public Accounts Committee, this will enhance our ability to demonstrate to Parliament how the DNE is delivering value for money for the taxpayer.

I look forward to driving this work over the next year, working together in the face of ever-evolving uncertainty and conflict across the globe.

The attachment: Defence Nuclear Enterprise 2026 (DNO-26-057 DNE 2026 Annual Update to Parliament_v05-1.pdf), can be viewed online at: http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2026-09-15/HCWS345/

[HCWS345]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Statehood and Sea-level Rise

The Minister for International Development (Kirsty McNeill): My hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Indo-Pacific (Baroness Winterton of Doncaster) has today made the following statement:

In recent years, many small island developing states have continued to voice concerns about the issues they will have to deal with as a result of the encroaching sea. These issues are particularly acute and urgent for those islands only a few metres above current sea levels.

The UK has for many years worked in partnership with those island states to address the impacts of climate change and rising sea levels, and we will continue to do so. It is also right for the UK to address the concerns of SIDS about the implications for their statehood of potential future rising sea levels.

It has been the long-held position of the UK under successive Governments that the normal criteria applied for recognition of statehood are that the entity should have, and seem likely to continue to have, a clearly defined territory with a permanent population under effective control of the Government, and independence in external relations. The UK has, however, accepted that other factors may also be relevant.

In this respect, His Majesty's Government acknowledge the real and present challenge that rising sea levels induced by climate change pose for states. As sea levels rise, coastlines are likely to regress, and territory may become completely inundated and lost. Such scenarios should not automatically call into question the statehood of those island states already recognised by the UK, nor should the disappearance of one of the normal criteria for statehood necessarily require us to withdraw recognition.

I can confirm that in such scenarios, the starting point for His Majesty's Government is to continue to recognise a state, notwithstanding the loss of some or all of its land territory to rising sea levels. Due regard would then need to be given to the prevailing circumstances in each case, which would include—among other considerations—the other criteria of statehood set out above, and the wishes of the people of that state.

These would, in modern times, be situations without precedent, and if they arise, the international community should approach them with due care and sensitivity.

[HCWS348]

Venezuela: Diplomatic Relations

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Chris Elmore): The United Kingdom has long supported the right of all Venezuelan people to shape their own future through a peaceful, democratic process. We remain steadfast in

our commitment to free, fair elections, and the promotion of human rights and other fundamental freedoms in Venezuela.

Developments in Venezuela since 3 January have created an important opportunity for the international community to support the restoration of democracy. Working closely with the United States and with international partners, the UK considers that this moment calls for pragmatic engagement to help advance a credible transition and to encourage further reforms. We welcome the Venezuelan-led political talks between Jorge Rodriguez and Dinorah Figuera, and the progress already achieved through this process to date.

Accordingly, the Government have decided to upgrade their diplomatic relations with Venezuela. We will deepen our engagement with the Interim President, Delcy Rodriguez, and with her Government in pursuit of UK priorities. As part of this approach, the UK and Venezuela have agreed our intention to upgrade our representation to ambassador.

Upgrading our relations will strengthen our ability to play a constructive role in support of a democratic transition. It will enable us to advocate more effectively for the upholding of human rights, and play a role in the recovery and reconstruction of the country following the devastating earthquakes of 24 June. It will enhance our capacity to support British nationals, and promote UK businesses in Venezuela, and it will enable us to contribute positively to regional stability and the security of our overseas territories in the Caribbean.

This decision is part of a broader international re-engagement, in which key partners and multilateral institutions are also re-establishing or upgrading their relationships with Venezuela, based on a shared understanding that engagement, both constructive and challenging, is the best way to influence outcomes on the ground.

This approach does not represent any change in the UK's assessment of recent electoral processes, including those held in 2024, nor does it signify endorsement of any party. The UK's long-standing position is to recognise states, not Governments.

The UK's priority remains working towards a peaceful, democratic transition that reflects the will of all Venezuelans. I will keep the House informed as our approach develops.

[HCWS349]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

UK Medical Specialty Training Programmes: Prioritisation of Doctors

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): We have now laid before Parliament the Medical Training (Prioritisation for Specialty Training Programmes) Regulations 2026. These regulations specify categories of person who will be prioritised for interviews and offers for UK medical specialty training programmes from 2027 onwards.

The Medical Training (Prioritisation) Act 2026 introduced a system of prioritisation for the allocation of postgraduate medical training places across the UK. It delivered the commitment in the Government's "Fit for the future: 10 Year Health Plan for England" to prioritise UK medical graduates for foundation training and to prioritise UK medical graduates and other doctors with significant NHS experience for specialty training places.

The Act is designed to support a sustainable medical workforce that can meet population health needs, reducing the UK's reliance on the international labour market, and ensuring we make best use of the substantial taxpayer investment in UK-based medical education and training. By creating a clear pathway from medical school to specialty training, we strengthen domestic talent and improve retention.

For specialty training, the Act prioritises graduates of medical schools in the UK or Ireland; international medical graduates who studied in Iceland, Norway, Liechtenstein and Switzerland, to reflect international agreements; and individuals who have completed or are completing the UK foundation programme or the relevant previous stage of a UK specialty training programme.

For specialty training offers made in 2026 only, the Act also prioritises individuals holding the following immigration statuses: British citizens; Irish citizens who do not require leave to enter or remain in the UK; Commonwealth citizens with the right of abode; individuals with indefinite leave to enter or remain in the UK; and those with EU settled and pre-settled status. These provisions were intended to act as a proxy to capture applicants most likely to have significant experience of working as a doctor in the NHS.

For specialty training places starting from 2027, the Act provides a power to specify by regulations groups to be prioritised, by reference to criteria indicating significant experience of working as a doctor in the NHS or health and social care in Northern Ireland, or described by reference to their immigration status, in a way that best delivers our policy intent.

During the Bill's parliamentary passage, we committed to engaging with stakeholders on future regulations in this area. In spring 2026, NHS England undertook targeted stakeholder engagement on behalf of the four UK Governments. This included, among others, the medical royal colleges, bodies representing international medical graduates, trade unions including the BMA, NHS providers, the General Medical Council, think-tanks and medical schools. Most stakeholders favoured moving away from immigration status as the basis for prioritisation once NHS experience can be measured directly. Views on an appropriate minimum threshold for NHS experience were more mixed and based on limited evidence due to how recently prioritisation had been implemented, and we do not believe that we have a sufficiently robust evidence base to define alternative criteria setting a threshold for NHS experience in regulations at this stage.

The urgency of the Act meant that for 2026 it came into force after applications had closed and only introduced prioritisation for the offer of places. This meant that the evidence available from the 2026 recruitment round is necessarily limited, as prioritisation could have had little effect on applicants' behaviour.

Having considered the available evidence, we have concluded that the immigration statuses that applied for specialty training offers made in 2026 remain the most appropriate basis for prioritisation at this stage. These statuses capture people with a permanent,

unrestricted right to live and work in the UK and remain an effective proxy to capture doctors most likely to have significant experience working with the NHS. While we recognise this is not a direct measure of NHS experience, applicants with these immigration statuses are more likely to have worked in the NHS for a significant period of time or to remain working in the NHS for longer.

Using these immigration statuses from 2027 provides continuity with 2026 prioritisation arrangements while enabling evidence gathering from future recruitment rounds to support a fuller assessment of potential alternative approaches for future years.

These regulations do not amend the other categories of person already prioritised for specialty training places under the Act as set out above. These regulations also do not affect the prioritisation regime for foundation training under the Act.

[HCWS350]

Thirlwall Inquiry: Final Report and Recommendations

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Yvette Cooper): Please refer to the oral statement I have made today on this subject.

[HCWS352]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Anti-Money Laundering and Asset Recovery Strategy

The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis): Today the Government published the anti-money laundering and asset recovery strategy 2026-29, setting out our response to the money laundering that enables serious and organised crime across the UK and threatens our national security.

Money laundering fuels drug trafficking, people smuggling, fraud and corruption. It can also enable terrorism, hostile state activity and other threats to national security. It damages communities, distorts legitimate markets, and undermines confidence in the UK's financial and legal systems. Criminals are using increasingly sophisticated methods, including complex corporate structures, cryptoassets and emerging technologies, and cash-based laundering. To address these growing risks, a co-ordinated and intelligence-led response is required.

Backed by over £550 million of investment over three years and resulting in an increase of 500 new law enforcement officers and specialists by end 2029, the strategy sets out three objectives: first, to make the UK's defences more effective and efficient, while making it simpler and safer for honest businesses to grow; secondly, to disrupt money laundering and dismantle high-harm criminal networks at home and abroad; and finally, to recover more criminal assets for law enforcement, victims and the public.

To achieve these objectives, we will better target, integrate and empower the UK's anti-money laundering and asset recovery system.

First, we will target the highest priority threats, focusing on the criminals and activities that cause the most harm, and reducing low-value activity. We will focus action on risks including cash-based money laundering, criminal activity on the high street and the abuse of professional and financial services. We will intensify enforcement against criminal fronts, strengthen controls on post office cash deposits, and reform anti-money laundering supervision to make it more consistent, intelligence-led and outcomes-focused. We will also consult on changes to reduce low-value compliance and reporting activity, ensuring proportionate requirements that focus efforts on areas of highest risk.

Secondly, we will integrate financial intelligence and deepen collaboration between Government, law enforcement and the private sector to identify criminal networks earlier, and support faster disruption and asset recovery. We will establish a new national financial intelligence service within the National Crime Agency's National Economic Crime Centre, bringing together public and private sector intelligence to identify criminal networks earlier and support faster disruption and asset recovery. We will strengthen the UK Financial Intelligence Unit, including through building a new suspicious activity reports digital service, and by improving access to and usage of financial intelligence across policing. We will also deepen international partnerships against shared illicit finance risks, piloting a multinational public-private information-sharing partnership and improving co-operation to trace, restrain and recover assets held overseas.

Thirdly, we will empower the system with the people, powers and technology required to act. We will intensify the response to professional money laundering networks and enablers, by investing in financial investigators, forensic accountants and cryptoasset capabilities. We will expand the asset management office to support all agencies with powers to recover assets under the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002. We will also consider further legislative changes to improve training for law enforcement, the judiciary and the legal profession.

Taken together, these reforms will strengthen the UK's ability to prevent illicit finance, disrupt the criminal networks that depend on it and recover the assets that sustain them. They will protect communities, support legitimate businesses and ensure that victims and the public benefit when criminal assets are recovered, making the United Kingdom a harder place for criminals to operate and a safer place to live, work and do business.

This strategy forms part of the Government's wider approach to economic crime, alongside the UK anti-corruption strategy and the UK fraud strategies.

The anti-money laundering and asset recovery strategy 2026-29, CP 1677, has been laid before the House and is also available on gov.uk.

[HCWS353]

Amendments to the Poisons Act 1972: Consultation

The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis): The Government remain committed to protecting the public from the threats posed by dangerous substances that could be misused to cause serious harm. As part of this responsibility, the Government keep the framework that governs explosives precursors and poisons under regular review to ensure that it remains effective, proportionate and responsive to any evolving risks.

Today I announce the Government's intention to launch a six-week public consultation regarding proposed amendments to the Poisons Act 1972. This process will seek views from the public on several changes that are intended to strengthen public safety and national security, and it is expected to launch during the conference recess.

The proposals support the Government's commitment to respond decisively to the findings of the Southport inquiry, particularly by strengthening controls where substances present a clear risk. They also form part of a broader approach to reducing access to means of harm in a proportionate way.

Overview

The consultation follows ongoing policy development and consideration of the current legislative framework in the light of evolving threats, lessons learnt from recent incidents, evidence provided to public inquiries, and wider concerns regarding the accessibility of certain hazardous substances.

The consultation will invite views on a number of proposals, including:

The introduction of controls on materials containing the highly toxic plant-derived substances ricin and abrin, in particular castor beans and rosary peas;

the reclassification of sodium nitrite from a reportable poison to a regulated poison above a specified concentration threshold;

the regulation of explosives precursors sodium nitrate and potassium nitrate above specified concentration thresholds;

amendments to specified concentration thresholds of already regulated explosives precursors sodium chlorate, sodium perchlorate, potassium chlorate and potassium perchlorate; and

a range of technical and operational improvements to the underpinning framework, including updates to licensing arrangements, record-keeping requirements and existing concentration thresholds.

The Government recognise that many of these substances have legitimate commercial, scientific, agricultural, educational and recreational uses. The purpose of the consultation is therefore to assess the potential impact, proportionality and deliverability of any proposed changes before decisions are taken. No final decisions have been made at this stage. Consultation responses will help to inform the Government's consideration of whether legislative changes should be brought forward.

The consultation proposes a range of options, from maintaining the current arrangements through to a broader package of reforms. Responses will help determine the most effective and proportionate approach to managing the risks presented by these substances while supporting legitimate users and minimising unnecessary burdens on business. The consultation will be supported by targeted stakeholder engagement, to ensure that a balanced and well evidenced view is obtained.

Consultation

The consultation will be available on gov.uk and will be accessible for six weeks. It is intended to:

Gather further evidence on the impacts of the proposed measures across affected sectors, including businesses, suppliers, online marketplaces and individual users;

improve understanding of the nature and scale of legitimate uses;

test the proportionality and seek insight into the practical implications of any proposed controls or thresholds; and

inform final ministerial decisions ahead of any legislative changes.

Following the consultation period, the Government will carefully consider responses and publish a summary of the findings. Subject to the outcome of the consultation and subsequent ministerial decisions, any necessary legislative changes will be delivered through secondary legislation.

Explosives precursors and poisons legislation is reserved in Scotland and Wales, and officials will continue to engage with the devolved Governments throughout the consultation process. Northern Ireland authorities will be engaged as appropriate, recognising the distinct legislative context.

Protecting the public is the first duty of Government. This consultation represents an important opportunity to ensure that the legislative framework governing dangerous substances remains effective, proportionate and responsive to current risks, while continuing to support legitimate use.

Upon publication, a copy of the consultation will be placed in the Library of each House.

[HCWS346]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Exceptional Financial Support: Transformation Funding

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jim McMahon): After a decade and a half of austerity, over-centralisation and rising demand for targeted services, we have inherited a system in which too many councils have been left struggling to manage financial pressures.

Over the past two years, the Government have taken steps to fix the foundations for a more sustainable funding system for local government in England. In February, the Government delivered the first multi-year local government finance settlement in a decade, with a fairer and simpler approach to allocating funding for day-to-day services. This was alongside major reforms to high-cost services, including children's services, homelessness and rough sleeping, and action to resolve special educational needs and disabilities deficits by writing off 90% of councils' dedicated schools grant high needs deficits accrued to the end of 2025-26.

This has been part of a wider commitment to support councils differently and work in partnership to deal with the causes that are contributing to system strain, rather than short-term measures that focus only on the symptoms.

Following requests from 37 areas, in February the Government agreed to provide exceptional financial support of £1.5 billion to enable all of them to set a balanced budget—while being clear that we would continue to work with them to provide the support and challenge necessary to break the damaging cycle of councils having to borrow or sell assets to manage financial pressures.

Today I am updating the House on a further step that we are taking, by providing £91 million of targeted funding that will support some of those councils in the most challenging financial positions to invest in prevention and modern, effective services that will underpin long-term sustainability.

As the Government set out when confirming exceptional financial support, the most important first step has been to fix the underlying drivers of financial failure by delivering a fairer local government settlement that puts funding where it is needed most. Most councils in receipt of exceptional financial support see significant increases in core spending power over this Parliament, which demonstrates that we are getting money to where it is needed most.

However, we know that the challenges facing councils are complex, and there is no single solution. The Government are working to support and challenge councils in a range of ways, tailored to their circumstances.

In a small number of councils where there is clear evidence that councils' challenges are rooted in or exacerbated by weak financial management or governance arrangements, the Government are taking the appropriate action under the best value framework. Depending on the severity of issues, this can mean commissioning an inspection, appointing commissioners or envoys, or issuing a best value notice to set clear expectations for local improvement where a council is at clear risk of not meeting their best value duty. In July this year, my Department confirmed that new or renewed best value notices would be issued to four of the councils that received EFS in February, and, reflecting more significant concerns, we commissioned a best value inspection in Bedford borough council, which we expect to report in due course.

Aside from those already subject to statutory intervention, for each of the councils that received exceptional financial support, MHCLG has also commissioned the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy to work with each of the councils to identify the steps needed to support its financial recovery. This support is funded by MHCLG, and the first set of 15 reviews have now been published on gov.uk—providing councils with a clear diagnosis and road map for improvement. To support that improvement, in a number of places the Department and the Local Government Association are also working with councils to provide targeted support, for example to improve capacity.

We have also today written to 14 of the councils to confirm some additional funding to accelerate their plans for service reform and transformation. These councils are: Bradford, Brighton and Hove, Haringey, Havering, Isle of Wight, Isles of Scilly, Lambeth, Redbridge, Redcar and Cleveland, Sefton, Stoke-on-Trent, Trafford, Waltham Forest and West Berkshire.

My officials have worked with those councils as they have developed robust plans for showing how targeted additional investment could transform high-cost services and put the council on a more sustainable long-term footing. The councils will be supported to implement their plans with a share of £91 million in further support across 2026-27 and 2027-28.

This investment marks a turning point in how the Government intend to support councils to manage their financial position, with greater emphasis on long-term prevention rather than short-term fixes.

Through this approach, the Government aim to demonstrate that with co-ordinated, purposeful investment and effective support and expertise across Government, councils can move towards more sustainable models of service delivery over the long term. Stoke-on-Trent, for example, will use this funding to accelerate the roll-out of the Families First Partnership programme locally. These reforms will help children get the best start in life, break down barriers to opportunity, and reduce the long-term pressure on local authority budgets.

Changing the way we work with councils in financial difficulty is a key part of our mission to rewire the state and raise living standards. We will draw lessons from these projects and encourage councils to share their learning widely.

This written ministerial statement applies to England only.

[HCWS347]

Homes for Ukraine: Funding

The Minister for Homelessness, Democracy, Communities and Faith (Florence Eshalomi): Over the past four years, the Government have remained committed to supporting Ukrainians fleeing Putin's illegal and unjustified full-scale invasion. Through the Homes for Ukraine scheme, we have welcomed over 181,000 Ukrainians to the UK. Our commitment to Ukraine and its people remains steadfast, as the Prime Minister made clear last month in making Kyiv the destination for his first international visit.

The Government are sincerely grateful to sponsors and hosts who have opened their homes to those fleeing from the invasion. They have played a truly pivotal role in helping Ukrainian families to find safety, stability and community in the UK. The response across the last four years reflects the generosity and solidarity of the public in providing sanctuary to those in need. In addition to sponsors and hosts, councils and voluntary and community sector organisations have been central to the strength and effectiveness of the Homes for Ukraine scheme.

Since the launch of the Homes for Ukraine scheme, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government has provided two core types of funding to support those seeking sanctuary in the UK. Local authorities receive the Homes for Ukraine tariff—a payment made in respect of each arrival to meet their costs associated with the delivery of the programme. Sponsors and hosts can also claim thank you payments as a gesture of appreciation for their generosity in opening their homes. To date, the Government have provided over £1.81 billion in funding for the scheme.

The Homes for Ukraine scheme has evolved from an initial emergency response into a more established programme. The Government are therefore making changes to Homes for Ukraine funding to ensure that the scheme remains sustainable, so that we can continue to support those fleeing the war in Ukraine.

Changes to Homes for Ukraine funding

The following changes will take effect from 1 January 2027:

Where sponsors/hosts are claiming thank you payments from local authorities, the Government will reimburse local authorities via the Homes for Ukraine sponsor thank you grant at a rate of £100 per month, per household, irrespective of how long a guest has been on the Homes for Ukraine programme. This is a reduction from the current rate of £350 per month. All thank you payments made by local authorities during the Ukraine permission extension visa period will be reimbursed at a rate of £100 per month for a maximum of 18 months. Sponsors/hosts and guests are encouraged to consider what this change means for them. If

a sponsor/host is looking to end sponsorship, then they could explore moving on to a more formal rental arrangement. Advice on renting a room in their home (including through the Government's rent a room scheme) or renting out a property is available on gov.uk.

The Homes for Ukraine tariff will decrease from £5,900 to £3,300 for arrivals after 1 January 2027 to ensure this funding remains affordable. This funding can continue to be used flexibly to meet local and individual needs, and remains at a sustainable level that continues to meet core administrative costs, while still enabling investment in rematching and homelessness prevention activity.

Funding for the most vulnerable arrivals—unaccompanied minors—will remain at the current levels, in recognition of the complex needs and safeguarding requirements associated with unaccompanied minors. Local authorities will continue to receive multi-year tariff funding via the Homes for Ukraine eligible minor grant, which remains at £10,500 per arrival in year one and £6,100 for subsequent years.

Implementation and next steps

The Government will be writing to sponsors/hosts, local authority leaders and chief executives, and colleagues in the devolved Governments, to set out the planned changes to Homes for Ukraine funding.

Updated guidance will also be published on gov.uk. This guidance sets out the changes and what they mean in practice, including arrangements for local authority quarterly claims.

[HCWS351]

JUSTICE

Contingencies Fund Advance

The Minister for Courts and Legal Services (Sarah Sackman): I hereby give notice of the Ministry of Justice's intention to seek a further advance from the Contingencies Fund totalling £1,850,000.

This is the second occasion on which the Ministry of Justice has sought a Contingencies Fund advance for this work. An initial advance of £1,700,000 was announced in a written ministerial statement on 28 April 2026. The further advance would bring the total pre-Royal Assent funding for the interim inquests digital solutions to £3,550,000.

The Public Office (Accountability) Bill is currently progressing through Parliament and is not now expected to receive Royal Assent before November 2026. The further advance is required to maintain delivery ahead of Royal Assent.

Parliamentary approval for additional resource of £1,850,000 for this new service will be sought in a supplementary estimate for the Ministry of Justice. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £1,850,000 will be met by repayable cash advances from the Contingencies Fund.

[HCWS344]

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