

**Wednesday  
4 September 2024**

**Volume 753  
No. 17**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY  
DEBATES  
(HANSARD)**

**Wednesday 4 September 2024**

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# House of Commons

*Wednesday 4 September 2024*

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

## PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

## Speaker's Statement

**Mr Speaker:** I remind Members that the private Member's Bills ballot book is open today in the No Lobby until 6pm, at which point it will be taken to the Public Bill Office and remain open for signatures until the rise of the House. The ballot draw will be held at 9 am tomorrow in Committee Room 8.

## Oral Answers to Questions

### SCOTLAND

*The Secretary of State was asked—*

#### Industrial Strategy

1. **Martin Rhodes** (Glasgow North) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Scottish Government on a new industrial strategy. [900230]

2. **Frank McNally** (Coatbridge and Bellshill) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Scottish Government on a new industrial strategy. [900231]

15. **Gregor Poynton** (Livingston) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Scottish Government on a new industrial strategy. [900244]

**The Secretary of State for Scotland (Ian Murray):** This is, of course, my first Scottish questions on this side of the House, and I am delighted to be joined by so many colleagues from Scotland behind me. I welcome back returning Members from all parties and thank those who have not returned for all their hard work on behalf of their constituents. I thank the former Secretary of State for Scotland, Sir Alister Jack, for his work representing Scotland in Whitehall and the UK Government in Scotland. I also thank all the staff in the Scotland Office for making us so welcome. Their professionalism is unsurpassed.

I am very pleased that we were recently able to welcome 19 female Afghan medical students to Scotland so that they can continue their studies. The work to bring them here was initiated by Sir Alister Jack, and their safe arrival in the UK is a credit to our commitment to helping them.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) on his new position. I am sure he will be diligent in holding me to account, and I hope that I was diligent in holding him to account.

I am sure the whole House will join me in congratulating Scotland's Olympians and Paralympians, who have achieved so much sporting success this summer.

This Government will introduce a new industrial strategy to drive long-term, sustainable growth by securing investment in crucial sectors and industries in all parts of Scotland and the UK, which involves working in close partnership with the Scottish Government. That will support our national mission to have the highest sustained growth in the G7.

**Martin Rhodes:** An industrial strategy that embraces the jobs of the future must involve our higher education institutions, including the three world-class universities in Glasgow. What are the Government doing to ensure that that is the case?

**Ian Murray:** I thank my hon. Friend and congratulate him on his wonderful victory in Glasgow North. Scotland's 19 world-class higher education institutions are an essential part of our economy, culture and global reputation, and they are paramount to the successful delivery of our missions. We punch well above our weight in Scotland, which is something that we need to protect and nurture. By the end of next week, I will have met the principals of all of Scotland's universities. I want to deepen and strengthen those relationships, and I believe that the knowledge and expertise of those institutions will be crucial to delivering a new industrial strategy and the goals of this new Government.

**Frank McNally:** Coatbridge and Bellshill has a rich history of heavy industry, but following years of empty rhetoric and empty soundbites from the previous UK Government and the current Scottish Government, there has been a failure to honour the legacy of industry across Scotland and deliver a long-term, sustainable and coherent strategy. What steps will the Secretary of State take to ensure that industrial jobs in Scotland are as much a part of its future as they are of its history?

**Ian Murray:** I thank my hon. Friend and congratulate him on winning Coatbridge and Bellshill. Scotland and its world-class industrial workforce will play a driving role in our ambition to become a green energy powerhouse in this country. For example, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, the Scottish Government and I met representatives of Petroineos earlier this week to discuss what support can be provided to ensure a sustainable future for the industrial clusters in the wider Falkirk and Grangemouth region, which is crucial to the entirety of Scotland and the UK. That includes our commitment to fund Project Willow with the Scottish Government.

**Gregor Poynton:** I thank my right hon. Friend for his response. A UK-wide industrial strategy that supports jobs in Scotland is incredibly vital. However, this week we have heard the concerning news that the Mitsubishi Electric plant in my constituency is looking to reduce its workforce by 440 from its current complement of 1,600. This is a highly skilled workforce creating world-leading products such as air source heat pumps and air conditioning units, which are vital as we look to decarbonise our economy. Through no fault of its own, however, Mitsubishi Electric has seen its order book fall away due to short-term economic pressures. May I ask the Secretary of State to meet the management, workers and me to see what the UK Government can do to support—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I think the Secretary of State has heard the question.

**Ian Murray:** I thank my hon. Friend for his question. I am really sorry to hear of the difficulties facing Mitsubishi Electric's workforce, and of the uncertainty those workers face during this difficult time. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his efforts to support the workers in his constituency, and we have talked about this issue already. I will commit as a matter of priority to a meeting with the company and its workforce in the coming weeks.

**Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I, too, welcome the Secretary of State to his new position and congratulate him on his appointment to what I can tell him is a splendid job to hold in government. On an industrial strategy, will he focus his ministerial colleagues' minds on the potential development of tidal stream generation? That provides an enormous opportunity for our manufacturing sector to create a supply chain that is based here in the United Kingdom, rather than having to bring capacity from overseas.

**Ian Murray:** I agree with the right hon. Gentleman and congratulate him on his role when he was in the Scotland Office. We hope to emulate much of the work that he did. I have met the European Marine Energy Centre and those involved with tidal resources in his constituency. This is critically important to our net zero ambitions and in getting to clean power by 2030. I am due to meet them when I visit his constituency in the coming weeks, and I will make sure that this is top of the agenda.

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

**Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): I congratulate the Secretary of State and welcome him to his place. I associate myself with his earlier remarks, particularly about Scotland's Olympians and Paralympians. I was delighted to hear the recognition in his first answer of the role that our universities will play in a new industrial strategy, which is going to be vital in Scotland, particularly in the light of the recent admissions about the mess that the Scottish National party has made of our economy in Scotland. That is why I was baffled to see the UK Government cutting £800 million from a supercomputer project at the University of Edinburgh that has the potential to support research on drug discovery, climate change and advanced engineering. What discussions did the Secretary of State have with the Chancellor of the Exchequer about the impact of that?

**Ian Murray:** As the hon. Lady will know, the Chancellor of the Exchequer did a full audit of Government spending in the first weekend that she was in office, and found a £22 billion black hole. The exascale computer that she talks about was announced by two previous Prime Ministers and two previous Chancellors, and indeed was in the Budget in the early part of this year, but no money was allocated and therefore the project has been paused, pending both the Budget on 30 October and the spending review next year.

## Support for Working People

3. **Elaine Stewart** (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Lab): What steps he plans to take to support working people in Scotland. [900232]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Kirsty McNeill):** I am proud to be part of a UK Government that will oversee the biggest upgrade of workers' rights in a generation. We have set out the new deal for working people and will write it into law within our first 100 days. Over 75 reforms will deliver on a core part of our growth mission to raise living standards, and up to 7,800 workers across Ayrshire stand to benefit from Labour's plans to make work pay.

**Elaine Stewart:** In addition to this Government's action on the new deal for working people, we should ensure that there is a fair deal for those who powered our country in the past. From my previous work with the Coalfields Regeneration Trust, I know the vital difference that that extra support makes to those communities and their families. Can the Secretary of State give an update on the proposals to end the injustice of the mineworkers' pension scheme before it is too late?

**Kirsty McNeill:** Mineworkers from my own constituency of Midlothian, from my hon. Friend's constituency and from across our coalfields powered this country, so I am delighted that our Labour manifesto committed to ending the injustice of the mineworkers' pension scheme by conducting a review of the unfair surplus arrangements and of transferring the investment reserve fund back to members. I would be delighted to write to my hon. Friend and to other Members representing coalfield seats with a further update in due course.

**Dave Doogan** (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): I welcome the Secretary of State to his position. He will know that the Scottish Government have their own tax-raising powers. He will remember criticising the Scottish Government for not using them, then criticising the Scottish Government when we did use them. Nevertheless, this generates £1.5 billion of extra revenue in Scotland, and taxing those who earn more slightly more allows us to tax those who earn slightly less even less than is the case in the rest of the United Kingdom. What advice would he give the Chancellor to mirror those efforts in Scotland to have a more progressive and fair tax system for our workers?

**Kirsty McNeill:** The Member will be aware that the Institute for Fiscal Studies has said this morning that the tax policies of the Scottish Government have actually cost Scotland money rather than raised it. He will know, too, that this Government have had to undertake a comprehensive audit of spending to make sure that we can clear up the mess that we have inherited. The £22 billion black hole is real, and the Treasury reserves have been spent more than three times over. He will be aware that the focus of the Chancellor is on making sure that we fix the foundations and get the economy back on track.

### Borderlands Inclusive Growth Deal

4. **David Mundell** (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support delivery of the Borderlands inclusive growth deal. [900233]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Kirsty McNeill)**: This Government are committed to delivering economic growth in all parts of the country and we are working closely with local partners and the Scottish Government on the Borderlands growth deal. Together, we are ensuring that it delivers the uplift in economic benefits set out in the deal.

**David Mundell**: I congratulate the hon. Lady on her appointment, and I particularly congratulate the Secretary of State on his. Being on your own in this House is a tough gig, and he exercised it in exemplary fashion over seven years, but—as I found—having new colleagues brings a whole new set of challenges of its own.

Will the hon. Lady ensure that the mountain bike centre at the Caerlee mill in Innerleithen is prioritised? There has been a suggestion that the project will not now go ahead in that location. It is vital that we have that centre and it is vital that the mill is refurbished.

**Kirsty McNeill**: The UK Government have pledged £19 million for the mountain bike innovation centre project, as part of the Borderlands growth deal. My officials are working closely with all local partners, including Scottish Borders council, to progress this project. I expect to provide an update on the development of the project shortly.

### Relationship between UK and Scottish Governments

5. **John Grady** (Glasgow East) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Scottish Government on the effectiveness of the relationship between the UK and Scottish Governments. [900234]

**The Secretary of State for Scotland (Ian Murray)**: I congratulate my hon. Friend on winning Glasgow East. The people of Scotland want their two Governments to spend more time fighting for them than fighting each other, which is why resetting the relationship has been a priority for this Government and, indeed, the Prime Minister. I have had numerous productive meetings with Scottish Government Ministers, including the Deputy First Minister. We have had 17 days of visits across Scotland, and seven members of the Cabinet have already visited. There have been dozens of calls between Secretaries of State and Cabinet Secretaries. I look forward to working with the Scottish Government to deliver our shared priorities for the people of Scotland.

**John Grady**: Scotland's official economic forecaster, the Scottish Fiscal Commission, has said of the Scottish Budget that

“much of the pressure comes from the Scottish Government's own decisions.”

Does the Secretary of State agree that the Scottish Government must accept responsibility for the catastrophic state of Scotland's public finances?

**Ian Murray**: My hon. Friend is right; the Scottish Fiscal Commission did say that. While this new Government are cleaning up the mess of the previous Conservative Government, the SNP seems to be cleaning up its own mess. In 2023, Audit Scotland said:

“The Scottish Government's projections suggest that it cannot afford to pay for public services in their current form.”

As we have heard, the IFS said this morning that SNP decisions have reduced the tax take rather than increase it. This is about treating taxpayers' money with respect and being honest about the tough choices we face. An honest assessment of the SNP Government's Budget is that these problems have been stored up for years. Tough decisions have been kicked into the long grass, and money has been spent recklessly. It is a problem of the SNP's own making, and the Scottish people will suffer as the SNP tries to clear it up.

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

**John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): I, too, start by congratulating both Ministers on their appointment to the Scotland Office. I loved my time at the Scotland Office, and I know they will be very well supported by the Department's excellent team of officials, some of whom are in the Box today.

Labour plans to end the winter fuel payment, taking money away from elderly people who have worked all their days. Age Scotland has said:

“At minimum, a quarter of a million pensioners in Scotland on the lowest incomes or living in fuel poverty will no longer receive this vital financial support over the winter months, while hundreds of thousands more on modest incomes are going to struggle”.

Labour has cut the winter fuel payment across the UK, and the SNP is doing Labour's dirty work in Scotland. What does the Minister have to say to the 250,000 elderly Scots who are in poverty and struggling with the decisions of Labour and the SNP?

**Ian Murray**: I welcome the shadow Secretary of State to his new post.

During the inheritance statement a few weeks ago, the Chancellor set out how the current Government are fixing the foundations and trying to clear up the dreadful legacy left by the Government of which the hon. Gentleman was a member. The Chancellor did not want or expect to make these decisions, but they had to be made to try to get the finances in balance and to make sure that we can fix the foundations to deliver on our manifesto. That is the legacy of the previous Government and, as I said in my previous answer, the SNP has made a mess of the public finances over the last 17 years. As we saw in the Scottish Parliament yesterday, the SNP has one hell of a mess to clear up, and it is Scottish pensioners and the Scottish people who will pay the price.

**John Lamont**: Labour is taking a leaf from the SNP playbook by refusing to take responsibility for its own actions. This is happening because of choices made by this Labour Government that have been passed on by the SNP in Edinburgh. Labour's election slogan was all about change and, under this Labour Government, pensioners do not seem to have any change to spare. A woman called Lesley told Age Scotland that the winter fuel payment

“is literally a life saver for us.”



Another person, Brian, told Age Scotland: “I would freeze without it, or go hungry.”

Is this the change that Labour meant—taking money away from struggling pensioners?

**Ian Murray:** There seems to be no recognition or apology from the shadow Secretary of State for the legacy his party has left this Government to try to clear up. We knew about the massive overspend in public services by the previous Government, and the audit the Chancellor did in her first weekend in office revealed the £22 billion black hole. These things have to be fixed. We did not expect or want to make such tough decisions, but we have had to make them to fix the foundations of our economy.

**Stephen Gethins** (Arbroath and Broughty Ferry) (SNP): May I add my congratulations to the Secretary of State? I know it has not always been easy and sometimes it has been a lonely path, so I offer my personal congratulations to him on his appointment and to the hon. Member for Midlothian (Kirsty McNeill) on taking her place.

I will take the Secretary of State at face value on improving the relationship between the Scottish and UK Governments, but he will be aware of the devastating consequences of the cuts in the winter fuel payment for pensioners in both our constituencies and across Scotland. In order to work better with the Scottish Government, will he do better than giving them just 90 minutes’ notice next time?

**Ian Murray:** I welcome the hon. Gentleman back to his place, having won the election for the new constituency of Arbroath and Broughty Ferry. He should look at what the Finance Secretary said in the Scottish Parliament yesterday: she announced half a billion pounds of cuts, including £120 million in health services and £20 million in mental health services, and she has sold the family inheritance by using the ScotWind money to plug the additional funding gaps in the budget. Audit Scotland and the Institute for Fiscal Studies have been clear that this is a problem of the Scottish Government’s own making, so if they want to reset the relationship, they can start by taking responsibility for their own actions.

### Economic Growth

6. **Stephen Gethins** (Arbroath and Broughty Ferry) (SNP): What discussions he has had with the Scottish Government on steps to help promote economic growth in Scotland. [900235]

**The Secretary of State for Scotland (Ian Murray):** I am committed to working with the Scottish Government and have already met the Deputy First Minister four times in eight weeks. Resetting the relationship between Scotland’s two Governments is crucial to driving economic growth. Just last week, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer was in Glasgow and met the First Minister. The Prime Minister has made resetting the relationship a key part of his new way of working in government. He has met with the First Minister to have those discussions and with members of the business community to discuss growing the Scottish economy. It is the choice of all of us to grow the Scottish economy and something we all need to do together.

**Stephen Gethins:** The Secretary of State will be aware that macroeconomic policy sits here in Westminster and that decisions taken here have a huge impact. We have worked on this issue before, so does he agree with the SNP that being outside the customs union and the single market is bad for growth in the Scottish economy, or does he agree with the Conservatives and their Reform party colleagues that it has been good for the Scottish economy?

**Ian Murray:** The hon. Gentleman is taking no responsibility for the decisions that his party makes in the Scottish Government. We saw that yesterday with them plugging the hole in their own public finances. The IFS has been clear that the decisions the Scottish Government have made have taken the tax take down in Scotland, despite being it being the highest taxed part of the country. If we are to reset this relationship, they have to start off by taking accountability and responsibility for their own decisions.

**Rachel Taylor** (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): Sport has played an essential role in economic growth in Scotland. What steps will the Secretary of State take to ensure that the legacy of Sir Andy Murray is recognised in Scotland?

**Ian Murray:** I would like to announce to the House that Andy Murray and I are not related, despite the fact that we share the same physique [*Laughter.*] I assure the House that the Scotland Office and this Government will do all we can to ensure that the wonderful legacy of one of Britain’s best sportspeople of all time is maintained.

### Energy Industry

7. **Torcuil Crichton** (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support the energy industry in Scotland. [900236]

9. **Gordon McKee** (Glasgow South) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support the energy industry in Scotland. [900238]

10. **Richard Baker** (Glenrothes and Mid Fife) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support the energy industry in Scotland. [900239]

**The Secretary of State for Scotland (Ian Murray):** Scotland is at the forefront of this Government’s mission to make Britain a clean energy superpower by 2030. We will headquarter Great British Energy, a new publicly owned clean energy company, capitalised with £8.3 billion, in Scotland. That will help create thousands of jobs, and deliver energy security and lower prices permanently for consumers. Just this week, the sixth allocation for the contracts for difference scheme was announced, with over 130 renewable projects awarded contracts and 20% of those projects based in Scotland.

**Torcuil Crichton:** I welcome the Secretary of State to his position. We watched him for many lonely years as he held the fort on his own. He was always outnumbered, but never outgunned. Will he now use the full firepower of the Scotland Office to convince Cabinet colleagues and industry players of the vital role and potential of the Arnish fabrication yard in Stornoway and its sister yard in Methil, both of which are coming up for sale as part of the going to market of Harland & Wolff? Will

he assure workers at the Arnish yard and at Stornoway port that they will play a big role in the renewables future and in GB Energy?

**Ian Murray:** I thank my hon. Friend for that question, and congratulate him on winning the Western Isles. He is Mr Western Isles, and he will be a champion for those islands.

The Government will continue to engage with Harland & Wolff, local MPs and the Scottish Government to monitor the situation and support a resolution that provides long-term certainty for the yards and workforces across the whole UK, with all four yards across the UK being treated as one. The Under-Secretary of State for Scotland, my hon. Friend the Member for Midlothian (Kirsty McNeill), recently visited the Arnish yard. I have visited the Methil yard twice—once before the election and once during the election—and I have regular meetings with the Deputy First Minister on this issue and hope to meet her again in the coming weeks. We will do all we can to protect these yards.

**Gordon McKee:** Having spent many years working for my right hon. Friend when he was on the Opposition Benches, may I welcome him to his position as Secretary of State for Scotland? The creation of GB Energy will support 50,000 new jobs across Scotland. It will deliver lower household bills and help us meet our net zero obligations. Given that Glasgow already has a fantastic renewables industry, may I ask what work he has done with his Cabinet colleagues to ensure that GB Energy supports jobs in Glasgow?

**Ian Murray:** I congratulate my hon. Friend on winning his seat in Glasgow South. His question is much better than any that he ever wrote for me.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero is due to make an announcement on the location of GB Energy very soon. I regret that, in the interim, I can say no more than that, although I am sure that my hon. Friend's words of encouragement in respect of Glasgow will not have escaped the attention of my Cabinet colleagues. I can announce exclusively to the House today, Mr Speaker, that GB Energy will be headquartered in Scotland.

**Richard Baker:** My right hon. Friend will be aware that I have been working closely with Unite, GMB and local management at the Methil yard in my constituency during the restructuring process at Harland & Wolff. Does he agree that 200 skilled workers at Methil and those at Arnish have a vital contribution to make to our ambitions to grow our renewable sector, and also that all stakeholders have a vital role in securing the long-term future of these yards?

**Ian Murray:** I congratulate my hon. Friend on winning Glenrothes and Mid Fife. I acknowledge his efforts, and those of many hon. Friends in the House and of people in the local area, advocating for the Methil fabrication yard. The yard, along with many others like it, will have a key role in fulfilling our ambition for Scotland and the UK to become a green energy powerhouse. In addition to GB Energy, there is the national wealth fund, which will help unlock further investment opportunities for ports and heavy industry, and manufacturing companies

will have a crucial role to play in creating jobs in our transition to net zero. I have been to the Methil plant twice. It has a world-class workforce, and I can assure them that we will do everything we possibly can to make sure that they have a bright future.

**John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con):** I welcome the Secretary of State to his place and thank him for his generous words about the work of Sir Alister Jack, who was previously in that role. Does the right hon. Gentleman share my consternation this morning that two sanctioned Russian oligarchs now have a share in Harbour Energy, our largest producer of North sea oil and gas? That seems incredible at this time, not least because the company that they are using to have this stake—LetterOne—was forced to divest itself of a broadband company because it was a threat to national security. Can we look again at this decision?

**Ian Murray:** May I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his place and congratulate him on winning his seat? The Foreign Secretary is sitting two seats along from me, and I am sure that he will have heard what the hon. Gentleman said. I am sure that the issue is a concern to everyone in the House, and we will make sure that a written response is given to the hon. Gentleman as soon as possible.

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

**John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con):** The Rosebank oilfield will provide more than £6 billion of investment in UK-based businesses. The Jackdaw oilfield will cater for the energy needs of 1.4 million UK households. This Labour Government are jeopardising all that investment, energy and jobs by dropping the UK Government's opposition to the judicial review, which aims to block these vital energy projects. Can the Secretary of State seriously tell the 90,000 people whose jobs rely on oil and gas in Scotland that the future of this crucial industry is secure under Labour, when it is his Government's policy to oppose all new developments?

**Ian Murray:** I thank the shadow Secretary of State for his question, but he should stop scaremongering, given the 90,000-strong workforce in the North sea. Oil and gas will be with us for decades to come. The Finch decision, to which he refers, was something that this Government had to consider very carefully. The Secretary of State has started a consultation on consenting, which will affect Jackdaw and, indeed, Rosebank, and that should conclude within the next six months.

### Scottish Work Visa Scheme

8. **Brendan O'Hara (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP):** If he will make an assessment with Cabinet colleagues of the potential merits of devolving the power to introduce a Scottish work visa scheme to the Scottish Government. [900237]

13. **Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP):** If he will make an assessment with Cabinet colleagues of the potential merits of devolving the power to introduce a Scottish work visa scheme to the Scottish Government. [900242]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Kirsty McNeill):** We will strengthen the Migration Advisory Committee, and establish a framework for joint working with skills bodies across the UK, the Industrial Strategy Council and the Department for Work and Pensions. The needs of our economy are different across the regions and nations, and different sectors have different needs. Given that skills policy and employment support are devolved, we will work with the Scottish Government when designing workforce plans for different sectors. This will ensure that our migration and skills policies work for every part of the UK.

**Brendan O'Hara:** The tourism and hospitality sectors right across my Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber constituency are desperate for people to come and work, but because of Brexit and the end of freedom of movement, we have the jobs but we do not have the people. The Government know that Scotland needs people, so will the Government reaffirm Jackie Baillie's commitment—her assurance to voters—and commit to facilitating the creation of a Scottish visa?

**Kirsty McNeill:** We are committed to ensuring that there is effective Scottish representation on the Migration Advisory Committee, and I look forward to working with the Home Office and engaging with sectors on ensuring that immigration works for all parts of the UK.

**Kirsty Blackman:** The skilled worker salary threshold and the skills list are simply not working. Will the Minister ensure that the skilled occupation list is fit for purpose in Scotland, and that it works for our energy transition?

**Kirsty McNeill:** Fixing the foundations of our economy is the key to long-term prosperity. That includes future-proofing the economy for all, whether that is long-established families or new arrivals. The Chancellor will set out plans to fix the foundations in the Budget on 30 October.

## PRIME MINISTER

### *The Prime Minister was asked—* **Engagements**

Q1. [900255] **Bill Esterson** (Sefton Central) (Lab): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 4 September.

**The Prime Minister (Keir Starmer):** I know the whole House will want to congratulate our Team GB Olympic and Paralympic athletes and support staff for their outstanding achievements so far.

Yesterday's incident in the channel was shocking and deeply tragic, and our thoughts are with all those who have lost their life, and their families. We must have a renewed determination to end this.

The chair of the Grenfell Tower inquiry, Sir Martin Moore-Bick, has today published the inquiry's phase 2 report. I know that the thoughts of the whole House will be with the bereaved and the survivors of the Grenfell Tower tragedy, and the residents in the immediate community. I will make a statement shortly after PMQs today.

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

**Bill Esterson:** I associate myself with the Prime Minister's remarks about the loss of life in the channel, and about Grenfell.

The latest suicide figures are a sobering reminder of the misery caused by mental ill health. Maghull Health Park in my constituency is a centre of excellence, with high, medium and low-security hospitals on the same site. The staff do an amazing job, but demand has gone through the roof, especially since the pandemic. Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that it is essential that we give mental and physical healthcare the same level of priority in this country?

**The Prime Minister:** Yes, and I thank my hon. Friend for raising this critical issue. So many are affected by the tragedy of suicide. I am pleased to hear about the work that he refers to, but 1 million people are not getting the mental health support that they need. That is why we will recruit 8,500 mental health workers to treat adults and children, and bring forward legislation to modernise the Mental Health Act 1983—an Act that I think is well overdue for modernisation.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Leader of the Opposition.

**Rishi Sunak** (Richmond and Northallerton) (Con): I join the Prime Minister in paying tribute to the Grenfell community. We will rightly discuss that important issue shortly after Prime Minister's questions. I also join him in congratulating our record-breaking Olympians and Paralympians on everything that they have achieved. Lastly, I pay tribute to the hard work, bravery and dedication of our police. This summer, in challenging circumstances, they served our communities commendably and kept us all safe.

Government is about making choices, and the new Prime Minister has made a choice: he has chosen to take the winter fuel allowance away from low-income pensioners and give that money to certain unionised workforces in inflation-busting pay rises. Could I ask the Prime Minister, why did he choose train drivers over Britain's vulnerable pensioners?

**The Prime Minister:** This Government were elected to clear up the mess left by the Conservative party, and to bring about the change that the country desperately needs. Our first job was to audit the books, and what we found was a £22 billion black hole. It is no good their complaining. Richard Hughes, the chair of the Office for Budget Responsibility, was very clear: he described it as

"one of the largest year-ahead overspends against...forecasts outside of the pandemic".

Those are his words. We have had to take tough decisions to stabilise the economy and repair the damage, including targeting winter fuel payments while protecting pensioners. Some 800,000 pensioners are not taking up pension credit, and we intend to turn that around. We will align housing benefit and pension credit—something the previous Government deferred year after year—and, because of our commitment to the triple lock, pensions are projected to increase by over £1,000 in the next five years.



**Rishi Sunak:** The Prime Minister also inherited inflation back at target, interest rates being cut, low unemployment and, indeed, the fastest-growing economy in the G7. But that is not the point, because the Prime Minister now has to start taking responsibility for his own decisions. If, as he says, the public finances are a priority, it was his decision, and his alone, to award a train driver on £65,000 a pay rise of almost £10,000, and it was also his decision that a pensioner living on just £13,000 will have their winter fuel allowance removed. Can the Prime Minister explain to Britain's low-income pensioners why he has taken money away from them while at the same time giving more money to highly paid train drivers?

**The Prime Minister:** We spent the whole election with the right hon. Gentleman trying to tell the country that everything was fine, and this is the result the Conservatives got: a massive Labour mandate to change the country. If he carries on pretending everything is fine for ordinary people across the country, his party will be in opposition for a very long time. I remind him that we inherited absolute chaos from the Conservatives. We lost an average of 3 million working days a year to strikes under his watch. You cannot fix the economy if the trains do not work, and you cannot fix the economy if the NHS is not working.

When it comes to winter fuel payments, the Conservatives are having a competition, as I understand. They will be voting later on today. From the shadow housing Minister, the right hon. Member for North West Essex (Mrs Badenoch), we found this—she is the favourite, I think, and some Conservative Members will probably be voting for her this afternoon. She said:

“I have people in my constituency telling me that they don't need the winter fuel payments...Why do we not have a more sophisticated mechanism for means-testing?”

She is the favourite, I think, in the contest the Conservatives are having.

**Rishi Sunak:** The Prime Minister talked about the public finances. The UK's public finances are more robust than those of almost any other major advanced economy. Here we have it: he inherited a lower deficit than France, America, Italy—[*Interruption.*]

**Mr Speaker:** Order. When I point at someone to be quiet, I mean it. I do not need a reaction back like that.

**Rishi Sunak:** The UK currently has a lower deficit than France, America, Italy and Japan; it has the second-lowest debt in the entire G7. The Prime Minister opposed every difficult decision that we took to deliver that, so I certainly am not going to take any lectures from him on that score. He talked about protecting ordinary people; last year, under the Conservative Government, a low-income pensioner with just £13,000 received not only the winter fuel payment, but hundreds of pounds of additional cost of living support, both of which he has now scrapped. Age UK has said that cutting the winter fuel allowance is “the wrong policy”, and only this morning we have learned that the vast majority of the poorest pensioners—pensioners in poverty—will see that vital support removed. Can the Prime Minister tell the House very specifically, and the pensioners who are watching, how much less support a pensioner on £13,000 will receive this winter?

**The Prime Minister:** The right hon. Gentleman talks about tough decisions. It is tough to inherit a £22 billion black hole, which the OBR did not—[*Interruption.*] That is the inheritance; that is what the Conservatives left. Back when they were in government, they would pretend that it was not there. They would have walked past it and put it in the long grass. We are not going to do that, because we were elected to change this country for the better and stabilise our economy. No Prime Minister wants to do what we have to do in relation to the winter fuel allowance, but we have to take the tough decision to stabilise our economy to ensure that we can grow it for the future. As I have said, we are working hard on pension credit. We are aligning it with housing benefit, which they did not do for years, and over five years it has a projected increase of up to £1,000 for those on pensions—tough decisions that they ducked.

**Rishi Sunak:** The Government do not have to choose to take money off low-income pensioners in order to give it to highly paid train drivers. That is a choice that the Prime Minister has made, and it will be clear to any pensioners watching that he simply cannot explain why he has made that choice.

Turning to another important issue, the Government have suspended 30 of the UK's 350 arms export licences to Israel. It is a decision that the Chief Rabbi says “beggars belief” and will “encourage our shared enemies”. Can the Prime Minister therefore explain how his decision will help to secure the release of the 101 hostages still being held by Hamas?

**The Prime Minister:** May I start by saying that I think the whole House will be shocked by the horrific killing of six hostages in the last few days? I know that I speak for the whole House when I say that. The remaining hostages must be released, and we need a ceasefire to ensure that that can happen, that desperately needed aid can get into the region, and that we can begin the path to a two-state solution.

The right hon. Gentleman asks how we arrived at this decision. He knows very well, because the legal framework is clear. The latest guidance was issued in 2021, under his Government, and that means that licences have to be kept under review, as they were by his Government. I think he probably knows the advice that was given to his Government; he understands the framework. We have carried out the review in the same way and come to a clear legal conclusion, and shared that conclusion and assessment with Parliament.

We will, of course, continue to stand by Israel's right to self-defence, but it is important that we are a country committed to the international rule of law. That gives us the strength of argument in discussion with our allies on important issues. This is a difficult issue—I recognise that—but it is a legal decision, not a policy decision. The Leader of the Opposition knows the framework—[*Interruption.*] The Conservatives shout, but they issued the guidance and they know what the test is. That test has been assessed. We have come to a conclusion, and we have put that before the House for it to consider.

**Rishi Sunak:** I appreciate the Prime Minister's answer, but he will know that decisions like this also have important and broader geopolitical implications. He mentioned allies. It is essential that we maintain transatlantic

unity in the face of terrorist threats and avoid any perception of splits between our two nations. Can he therefore update the House, or tell it what engagement he had with the United States prior to taking this significant decision?

**The Prime Minister:** I acknowledge the importance of working with our allies on all issues, as we have been doing, as I was able to make very clear at the NATO summit that I attended in the early summer. Of course, as the right hon. Gentleman and the House would expect, we have talked this through with our allies. They understand; they have a different legal system. That is the point they made. *[Interruption.]* The shadow Foreign Secretary chunters. This is a serious issue and it requires serious consideration. The Leader of the Opposition knows the legal framework very well. He also knows that applying the framework—the facts of that framework—and arriving at a decision does not permit me to simply say, “I am not going to implement the legal decision or conclusion that has been reached.” I do not think he is really inviting me to do that.

**Rishi Sunak:** These decisions have not only geopolitical consequences but emotional ones. The Prime Minister took that action on the very same day as the funerals of Israeli hostages murdered by Hamas—something that the Board of Deputies of British Jews described as “a terrible, terrible message to be sending”.

I hope the Prime Minister understands the hurt that has been caused. Will he take this opportunity to reassure Israel and the Jewish community that the United Kingdom and this House stand behind Israel and its right to self-defence?

**The Prime Minister:** Let me be very clear, as I have said before and I say again: we recognise and support Israel’s right of self-defence, and we have taken action in support of that right of self-defence. I have made that repeatedly clear in all my engagements with Israel, across the region and with all our allies; I stand by that.

In relation to licences, this is not an Israel issue; it is the framework for all licences that must be kept under review. It is the same test for all licences, as the Prime Minister knows, and we have applied the law to the facts and come to a legal conclusion. I do not think the Prime Minister—*[Interruption.]* I do not think the Leader of the Opposition is really inviting me to put that to one side. This is a serious issue; we either comply with international law or we do not. We have strength in our arguments only because we comply with international law. I appreciate that the Conservative party did not think that international law mattered, and that is why we got into the pickle that we did.

Q2. [900256] **Lloyd Hatton** (South Dorset) (Lab): I welcome the Home Office’s decision to close the Bibby Stockholm barge in my constituency. We all know that barge is a gimmick. First, it arrived late; secondly, it cost the taxpayer a fortune; third, it was laden with fire and disease risks; and fourthly, it likely contributed to the death of a 27-year-old asylum seeker on board. Will the Prime Minister reassure my constituents that this and similar unworkable gimmicks will be closed down as we clear up the Conservative party mess?

**The Prime Minister:** Unlike the Conservative party, we will not waste money on gimmicks. That is why, within days, we ended the Rwanda scheme and announced the launch of the border security force, and we have been preparing legislation to introduce counter-terrorism powers to tackle gangs. In the first two months, we have removed on planes more than 400 people who had no right to be here. Compare that with the four volunteers sent to Rwanda, which cost £700 million. This is a Government of service, not a Government of gimmicks.

**Mr Speaker:** We come to the leader of the Liberal Democrats.

**Ed Davey** (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I echo the Prime Minister’s words about the terrible tragedy at Grenfell. I welcome the inquiry and look forward to discussing the statement shortly.

For the past 18 years, Norman has been a full-time carer for his wife, Ros, who has multiple sclerosis and Alzheimer’s disease. Earlier this year, he was forced to go back to work to earn the extra money for the cost of caring for his wife. As their income is just a few hundred pounds above the limit for pension credit, they are set to lose their winter fuel allowance, unless the Prime Minister listens to the Liberal Democrats and others and changes that plan. If he does not, what advice does he have for Norman and Ros, and millions of struggling pensioners, as they face rising heating bills this winter?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank the right hon. Member for raising that important point. I know how much he has championed carers, both politically and personally. We have taken a difficult decision—I do not pretend it is not difficult; of course it is—because we have to stabilise the economy. The first thing that the Chancellor did was an audit. She found £22 billion-worth of unfunded spending commitments. We cannot walk past that; we cannot pretend that it does not exist—that is what the last Government did. We have to take tough decisions. We will put in all the support that we can, and will talk to the right hon. Gentleman about it, but we have to take the tough decisions on this. The Conservatives walked away from those decisions, and that is what got us into this mess in the first place. We cannot grow and fix our economy unless we stabilise it first.

**Ed Davey:** We recognise the appalling financial problems left to the Prime Minister by the last Conservative Government, but no one understands the difficult decisions required to balance the books as much as unpaid family carers such as Norman. Many millions of pensioners have struggled over recent years thanks to the last Government—the number who cannot afford to heat their homes has doubled since 2019—so will the Prime Minister support our campaign for more urgent action to invest in insulation and renewables, so that we can help pensioners and all families make it cheaper to heat their homes every winter?

**The Prime Minister:** Yes, of course. I remind the right hon. Gentleman that 800,000 pensioners are not claiming pension credit, which of course then deals with the winter fuel payment. That is why we are taking so much care to ensure we get those pensioners on to pension credit. Again, aligning housing benefit with pension credit—something that the last Government left undone

for years—will make a massive difference, and of course there is the triple lock, which over five years will mean that pensions are expected to rise by up to £1,000.

**Q3. [900257] Yasmin Qureshi** (Bolton South and Walkden) (Lab): Four years ago, the previous Government ordered a review into the hormone pregnancy test drug Primodos, and found that it had caused “avoidable harm”. Primodos was given to women in the 1960s and ‘70s, and resulted in many babies being born with severe disabilities. For the past 12 years, I have stood in this Parliament and pleaded repeatedly with the last Government to do the right thing. Will the Prime Minister commit to a fresh approach on this issue, and will he meet with me and the campaigner Marie Lyon to discuss how we can give closure to the families who have been denied justice for the past 50 years?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank my hon. Friend for that question, and for her work on the all-party parliamentary group on hormone pregnancy tests. I am sympathetic to the families who believe their children suffered from those tests, and committed to reviewing any new evidence that comes to light. At the moment, the Department of Health and Social Care is reviewing a publication from Professor Danielsson, and we will follow the results of that review. I am happy to ensure that the Health Minister meets my hon. Friend to discuss this matter further.

**Gavin Robinson** (Belfast East) (DUP): I thank the Prime Minister for visiting Northern Ireland within the past fortnight, and particularly for the time he spent with injured officers of the Police Service of Northern Ireland. He will know of their courage, but he will also know of the dogged determination of our chief constable, Jon Boutcher, in his desire to see adequate resourcing for his officers who not only stand for law and order in Northern Ireland, but stand in the face of racism, violence, and an ongoing national security threat from dissident republicans. May I therefore ask the Prime Minister to earnestly and urgently engage in a discussion about uplifting the national security grant afforded to the Police Service of Northern Ireland, and to ensure that the PSNI can face the challenges that we need them to face head on?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that question. It was important for me to go to Belfast to meet the injured officers and simply to say thank you for what they are doing, and of course, to recognise the impact on their families. I recognise the difficult financial position that the PSNI faces, and the chief constable and I have spoken about this issue on more than one occasion, as Members would expect. Predominantly, it is for the Justice Minister and the Executive to set the PSNI’s budget, and how the chief constable allocates that budget is an operational matter for him, but I have been talking to him about what further support might be possible, because I realise just how important it is to him, to the PSNI and to Northern Ireland more generally.

**Q4. [900258] Emma Foody** (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): Last week, ticket-selling websites such as Ticketmaster left millions of Oasis fans furious, but worse still came minutes later, when tickets started to be relisted online for thousands of pounds. This profiteering

at fans’ expense is not a one-off, and the Co-operative party is campaigning for a new licensing body with real teeth to tackle this online touting. Does the Prime Minister agree that fans should be at the heart of live music, and that urgent action is needed to protect fans against this horrid practice?

**The Prime Minister:** Yes, I do. First, it is great that Oasis are back together—from what I have determined, about half the country was probably queuing for tickets over the weekend—but it is depressing to hear of price hikes. I am committed to putting fans at the heart of music and ending extortionate resales, and we are starting a consultation to work out how best we can do that.

**Q5. [900259] Harriet Cross** (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): Offshore Energies UK reports that the Government’s proposed windfall tax increases will cost our economy £13 billion, risk 35,000 jobs and see investment in the North sea slashed from £14.1 billion to just £2.3 billion by 2029. It also suggests that there will be a £12 billion cost in tax revenues. How does this proposal chime with the Prime Minister’s goal of economic growth, and will he reverse this tax increase, which industry leaders are calling economic suicide for the oil and gas sector?

**The Prime Minister:** We are committed to the necessary transition to renewable energy, which will lead to cheaper energy, energy independence and the jobs of the future. But let me be clear: oil and gas will play their part for many years to come, and that is why I have been clear about the support that we have for them. I am sure the hon. Member and others will want to celebrate the fact that, just this week, contracts for difference secured a record 131 new clean energy projects—enough to power 11 million homes—and they are the jobs of the future.

**Q6. [900260] Mr Luke Charters** (York Outer) (Lab): The Prime Minister will remember visiting my constituency in June, when we toured Germany Beck, a fantastic development of 600 new homes, but because of Tory dither and delay, it took the best part of a decade for that site to get through planning. *[Interruption.]* Opposition Members can grumble all they want, but my families are paying the price for their mistakes. Can the Prime Minister reassure me that this Government will speed up the planning process so that we get more homes built, and will one of his Ministers meet me to discuss the housing crisis in York?

**The Prime Minister:** Yes. I remember that visit well, and was struck by the delays in planning because the system was broken by the previous Government. We will deliver 1.5 million new homes, drive economic growth and fulfil the dream of home ownership shattered for 14 years under the former Government. That means changing the planning rules—a tough decision they were not prepared to make—to make that happen and to grow our economy.

**Q8. [900262] Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Last month, SSE, the operators of the new Viking energy wind farm in Shetland, was paid £2 million in order not to generate any electricity from it. Is there not something badly wrong with an energy market that pays big corporates not to produce electricity while the people living among the turbines endure some of the highest levels of fuel poverty in the country? Will the



Prime Minister and the Government now look seriously at the idea of an islands tariff, so that islands communities such as those represented by me and his hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Torcuil Crichton) may see some genuine benefit for the community from hosting such renewable energy developments?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for raising this issue, which is obviously a considerable concern to him and his constituents. National Grid, as he knows, does balance the grid by occasionally requesting some generators to stop when there is not enough capacity on the network. That is not good enough. That is not acceptable, for the reasons set out in his question. It is a problem that was not fixed over the last 14 years, but a problem we are determined to fix as we go forward. I will make sure that a relevant Minister speaks to him about the particular issue in his constituency.

Q7. [900261] **Peter Prinsley** (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): As a surgeon from East Anglia, I welcome the measures the new Government have taken to fulfil their mission to fix the NHS. In my constituency of Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket, the West Suffolk hospital is badly affected by RAAC—reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete—just like the James Paget hospital in Norfolk, where I have worked for nearly 30 years. Does the Prime Minister agree with me that the RAAC hospitals must be priorities as the new Government undertake their review of the new hospital programme?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank my hon. Friend, who brings huge expertise to this area, for his question. We have to reset the new hospital programme and put it on a sustainable footing. The last Government promised 40 new hospitals. The problem is there were not 40, they were not new and some of them were not even hospitals. Hospitals with RAAC, including West Suffolk hospital, must be a priority, so we are reviewing the programme, and the Secretary of State will update Parliament as soon as possible.

Q10. [900264] **Pete Wishart** (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): After 14 miserable years of the worst Tory Government in modern times, the best this Prime Minister can offer the British people is, “Things can only get worse.” For him and his calamitous opinion ratings that is probably true, but why does he think he has such an unprecedented fall in his popularity? Is it his attacks on the pensioners? Is it leaving children in poverty? Is it the re-emergence of Labour cronyism, or is it because his austerity is even worse than the Conservative variety?

**The Prime Minister:** I remember when Scottish National party Members used to sit at the front, but they are now a long way up and there are very few of them, so I do not think we need lectures on popularity and winning elections.

Q9. [900263] **Ashley Dalton** (West Lancashire) (Lab): I welcome this week’s news of the changes that the Government plan on Ofsted, including the removal of single-word judgments. This is great news for headteachers in West Lancashire who have raised the issue with me along with other issues about Ofsted, and for parents, who will have more transparency on the performance of schools. How does the Prime Minister see those changes

developing a more positive relationship between Ofsted, Government and schools, and improving standards so that all our young people thrive?

**The Prime Minister:** We are committed to the best education for every child, whatever their background and wherever they come from. The current single grade does not work well. That is why we are going to have a richer dashboard, which will give parents more information and allow intervention more quickly, and why it has been so warmly welcomed across the country.

Q12. [900266] **Rebecca Paul** (Reigate) (Con): I am new to this House, but I know that we all want our pensioners to live with dignity and security. In my constituency around 17,000 pensioners are expected to lose their winter fuel payment this year. Of most concern are those just above the pension credit threshold, who will be hardest hit. Will the Prime Minister consider broadening eligibility for the winter fuel payment, so that those low-income pensioners who rely on it to stay warm can continue to benefit?

**The Prime Minister:** I welcome the hon. Lady to her place. Reigate is obviously a place I know very well, as she knows. The reality is this: that decision has been taken because of the £22 billion black hole, so responsibility for the decision lies with the party that broke the economy. There is a reason we have a mandate for change, and a reason why Conservative Members are sitting on the Opposition Benches: it is because they broke the economy, and I am not going to apologise for clearing up the mess that they left.

Q11. [900265] **Deirdre Costigan** (Ealing Southall) (Lab): After 14 years of Conservative failure, crime and street drinking blight areas of Southall town centre, West Ealing and Hanwell Broadway in my constituency. Will the Prime Minister set out how his Government will take action to ensure that our town centres are transformed into places where my constituents can finally feel safe again?

**The Prime Minister:** This is an important issue. I have heard too many people say that antisocial behaviour is some sort of low-level issue, but it really impacts lives across the country and we have to tackle it. That is why we will put more police on the streets, have more effective powers to deal with antisocial behaviour, and introduce Young Futures programmes to divert young people who are getting into trouble.

### Haygrove School

Q14. [900268] **Sir Ashley Fox** (Bridgwater) (Con): If he will visit Haygrove School in Bridgwater.

**The Prime Minister:** The Schools Minister will be happy to visit the hon. Member’s constituency.

**Sir Ashley Fox:** I thank the Prime Minister for his answer. Haygrove School is one of the top-performing schools in Somerset, but it is unfortunately one of those built by Caledonian Modular and now condemned as unsafe. I am grateful for the meeting with the Schools Minister, but can the Prime Minister give Haygrove and the other schools affected an assurance that they will be rebuilt, and quickly, because those pupils and staff are still working in portacabins?



**The Prime Minister:** I am grateful, and I recognise how serious an issue this is and why the hon. Member raises it. It is of real importance. The Minister will visit, and the Department for Education is pursuing all available avenues for redress against the parties responsible for the issues at the school. I will ensure that the Minister is fully briefed and has a full discussion about that when the visit takes place.

### Engagements

Q13. [900267] **Shaun Davies** (Telford) (Lab): I am a proud MP for a new town, but over the past 14 years, Telford has lost its A&E and has fewer police officers, GPs and teachers per head. We have also had 40% cuts to our local government budgets. Will my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister back places such as Telford, rather than overlook us as has been the case over the past 14 years?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue, and I know he will be a really strong champion for his constituency. We are a Government who will be based on action, not slogans, and that is why we will have local growth plans, improved public services and investment in transport links. We will fix the mess that the Conservatives left after 14 years, and we will devolve power to those with skin in the game.

Q15. [900269] **Tim Farron** (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): In the past five years, there have been 10 fatal accidents on the A66 along the short stretch in the Eden valley in Westmorland. In our community, we are naturally deeply concerned that the vital A66 northern trans-Pennine project, which would make the roads considerably safer, has been put under review by this Government. Will the Prime Minister take the opportunity now to end the uncertainty today, commit to this project and save lives?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this question about fatalities on roads, which are a very serious issue on the A66 and other roads across

the country. We have inherited a broken economy, and we have to review what we are spending money on. We are going through that review, and we will report back as soon as we can.

**Gurinder Josan** (Smethwick) (Lab): Will the Prime Minister join me in sending condolences to the family of Jahziah Coke, a 13-year-old boy who was stabbed and tragically killed in my constituency? Does he share my concern about the prevalence of young people carrying knives? What more can be done to end this scourge that is destroying families and communities?

**The Prime Minister:** I am sure I speak for the whole House in saying that our thoughts are with Jahziah's family at this difficult time. This is tragic, it is senseless and his age just absolutely makes one shudder. Our mission is to halve knife crime. Zombie-style knives and zombie-style machetes will be banned from 24 September, and there is a surrender scheme, which started on 26 August. We are doing a rapid review of the online sale of knives, which is often a problem in these cases. We will pursue that with determination, and I invite everybody across the House, in light of this and so many other tragic cases, to join with us on that mission.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Speaker:** Final question.

**Dame Karen Bradley** (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): Those of us from Staffordshire Moorlands are immensely proud of our beautiful area and unique identity. Can the Prime Minister guarantee that we will not be forced into a devolution deal or local government reorganisation against our will?

**The Prime Minister:** It is very important that local people have a say, but it is equally important that we devolve to those who have skin in the game. One of the ways in which we can restart our economy is by making sure that those with skin in the game take the decisions that are relevant to them and their area.

## Grenfell Tower Inquiry Phase 2 Report

12.39 pm

**The Prime Minister (Keir Starmer):** This morning, Sir Martin Moore-Bick published the final report of the Grenfell Tower inquiry. I am sure the whole House will join me in thanking him, the members of the inquiry and the whole team for their dedicated work.

I want to speak directly to the bereaved families, the survivors, and those in the immediate Grenfell community, some of whom are with us in the Gallery today. Sir Martin concluded this morning—I am afraid that there is no way of repeating this that will not be painful—that

“the simple truth is that the deaths that occurred were all avoidable and that those who lived in the tower were badly failed over a number of years and in a number of different ways”

by, as the report lays out in full, just about every institution responsible for ensuring their safety. In the face of an injustice so painful and so deserving of anger, words can begin to lose their meaning, after seven years still waiting for the justice that you deserve. I want to say very clearly, on behalf of the country, that you have been let down so badly before, during and in the aftermath of this tragedy.

While Sir Martin sets out a catalogue of appalling industry failures, for which there must now be full accountability, he also finds

“decades of failure by central government”.

He concludes:

“In the years between the fire at Knowsley Heights in 1991 and the fire at Grenfell Tower in 2017 there were many opportunities for the government to identify the risks posed by the use of combustible cladding panels and insulation...by 2016, the department was well aware of those risks, but failed to act on what it knew.”

Further, he finds:

“The department itself was poorly run”

and

“the government’s deregulatory agenda...dominated the department’s thinking to such an extent that even matters affecting the safety of life were ignored, delayed or disregarded.”

So I want to start with an apology on behalf of the British state to each and every one of you, and indeed to all the families affected by this tragedy. It should never have happened. The country failed to discharge its most fundamental duty to protect you and your loved ones—the people we are here to serve—and I am deeply sorry. I also want to express my admiration for the strength it must have taken to relive those events when giving your evidence to the inquiry, and indeed to see written down today the circumstances that led to the deaths of your loved ones.

After all that you have been through, you may feel that you are always one step away from another betrayal. I get that, and I know that I cannot change that with just words today. But what I can say is that I listened carefully to one of the members of the inquiry, Ali Akbor, this morning. He said this:

“What is needed is for those with responsibility for building safety to reflect and to treat Grenfell as a touchstone in all that they do in the future.”

I consider myself someone responsible for building safety, and that is exactly what I will do and what I will demand of this Government.

Today is a long-awaited day of truth. It must now lead to a day of justice—justice for the victims and the families of Grenfell—but also a moment to reflect on the state of social justice in our country and a chance for this Government of service to turn the page. That is because this tragedy poses fundamental questions about the kind of country we are. A country where the voices of working-class people and those of colour have been repeatedly ignored and dismissed. A country where tenants of a social housing block in one of the richest parts of the land are treated like second-class citizens, shamefully dismissed, in the words of one survivor, as “people with needs and problems”

and not respected as citizens, as people who contribute to Britain, who are part of Britain and who belong in Britain. Unbelievably, that continued even after the tragedy. Sir Martin highlights:

“Certain aspects of the response demonstrated a marked lack of respect for human decency and dignity and left many of those immediately affected feeling abandoned by authority and utterly helpless.”

That alone should make anyone who feels any affinity towards justice bristle with anger. Sir Martin continues that he finds

“systematic dishonesty on the part of those who made and sold the rainscreen cladding panels and insulation products.”

He goes on to say:

“They engaged in deliberate and sustained strategies to manipulate the testing processes, misrepresent test data and mislead the market.”

Sir Martin also cites

“a complete failure on the part of the LABC”—

the Local Authority Building Control—

“over a number of years to take basic steps to ensure that the certificates it issued...were technically accurate.”

He finds that the work of the Building Research Establishment

“was marred by unprofessional conduct, inadequate practices, a lack of effective oversight, poor reporting and a lack of scientific rigour”

and that the tenant management organisation

“must...bear a share of the blame”.

Its only fire safety assessor

“had misrepresented his experience and qualifications (some of which he had invented) and was ill-qualified to carry out fire risk assessments on buildings of the size and complexity of Grenfell Tower”.

He also finds

“a chronic lack of effective management and leadership”

on behalf of the London Fire Brigade, with tragic consequences on the night of the fire.

In the light of such findings, it is imperative that there is full accountability, including through the criminal justice process, and that this happens as swiftly as possible. I can tell the House today that this Government will write to all companies found by the inquiry to have been part of these horrific failings, as the first step to stopping them being awarded Government contracts. We will, of course, support the Metropolitan police and the prosecutors as they complete their investigations. But it is vital that as we respond to this report today, we do not do or say anything that could compromise any future prosecution, because the greatest injustice of all would be for the victims and all those affected not to get the justice that they deserve.

There must also be more radical action to stop something like this from ever happening again. One of the most extraordinary qualities of the Grenfell community is their determination to look forward. They are fighting not only for justice for themselves but to ensure that no other community suffers as they have done.

Some important reforms have taken place in the last seven years, which we supported in opposition, including banning combustible cladding, new oversight of building control, a new safety regime for all residential buildings over 18 metres, new legal requirements on social landlords, and making sure that fire and rescue services are trained and equipped to handle large-scale incidents, including moving from “stay put” to “get out” when needed. We are now addressing the recommendation from Sir Martin’s first report to introduce a new residential personal emergency evacuation plan policy for anyone whose ability to evacuate could be compromised, with funding for those renting in social housing.

We will look at all 58 of Sir Martin’s recommendations in detail. There will be a debate on the floor of this House. We will respond in full to the inquiry’s recommendations within six months, and we will update Parliament annually on our progress against every commitment we make. But there are some things I can say right now. There are still buildings today with unsafe cladding. The speed at which this is being addressed is far, far too slow. We only have to look at the fire in Dagenham last week—a building that was still in the process of having its cladding removed. This must be a moment of change. We will take the necessary steps to speed this up. We will be willing to force freeholders to assess their buildings and enter remediation schemes within set timescales, with a legal requirement to force action if that is what it takes. We will set out further steps on remediation this autumn.

We will also reform the construction products industry that made this fatal cladding, so homes are made of safe materials and those who compromise that safety will face the consequences. We will ensure that tenants and their leaseholders can never again be ignored, and that social landlords are held to account for the decency and safety of their homes. As the Government tackle the most acute housing crisis in living memory, building 1.5 million new homes across the country, we will ensure those homes are safe, secure and built to the highest standards; places of security, health and wellbeing that serve the needs of residents and their wider communities, because a safe and decent home is a human right and a basic expectation, and the provision of that right should never be undermined by the reckless pursuit of greed. One of the tragedies of Grenfell is that this is a community that nurtured so much of what we want from housing: people who had made the Tower their home and were entitled to a place of safety and security, not a deathtrap. And yet, time and again they were ignored.

Two weeks ago, I made a private visit to Grenfell Tower. I laid a wreath at the memorial wall and affirmed the Government’s commitment to the work of the Memorial Commission, delivering a permanent memorial on the site through a process led by the Grenfell community. As I walked down that narrow staircase from the 23rd floor and looked at walls burned by 1,000-degree heat, I got just a sense of how utterly, utterly terrifying it must have been. As I saw examples of the cladding on the

outside of the building and listened to descriptions of the catastrophic and completely avoidable failures of that fatal refurbishment, I felt just a sense of the anger that now rises through that building. It left me with a profound and very personal determination to make the legacy of Grenfell Tower one of the defining changes to our country that I want to make as Prime Minister.

To the families, the survivors and the immediate community, we will support you now and always—especially those who were children. In the memory of your loved ones, we will deliver a generational shift in the safety and quality of housing for everyone in this country. In the memory of Grenfell, we will change our country; not just a change in policy and regulation, although that must of course take place, but a profound shift in culture and behaviour, a rebalancing of power that gives voice and respect to every citizen, whoever they are and wherever they live.

We will bring the full power of government to bear on this task, because that is the responsibility of service and the duty we owe to the memory of every one of the 72. In that spirit, I commend this statement to the House.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Leader of the Opposition.

12.52 pm

**Rishi Sunak** (Richmond and Northallerton) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for advance sight of the statement, especially given the timing of Prime Minister’s question time. I associate myself and everyone on this side of the House with the Prime Minister’s powerful words regarding the pain of the bereaved families, survivors and all those affected the tragic events surrounding Grenfell Tower. Many are with us today in the Gallery, and I want to pay tribute to their strength and patience in waiting for this moment. It is not hyperbole to say that we would not be here today without them. It was their tenacity and strength that brought the truth to light. For that, they deserve our thanks. Their search for truth and justice is a noble one and has our full support. While the Grenfell community’s loss will have left a hole that nothing will ever be able to fill, I hope that whatever healing is possible from today, each and every one of them takes some small measure of it. I know they will never forget the 72 people who tragically lost their lives, and nor shall we.

Today’s publication, as the Prime Minister said, is, to put it bluntly, a damning indictment of over 30 years of successive state failures, stretching as far back as Knowsley Heights in 1991 and then multiple incidents from there. Sir Martin Moore-Bick and the work of the inquiry have painted a picture of systemic indifference, failure and, in some notable cases, dishonesty and greed. Sir Martin and the team working on the inquiry are to be commended for the depth and rigour of their work. While such a comprehensive report as has been published today deserves to be considered in full, and I welcome the Prime Minister’s commitments for time in the House to do that, there are some immediate points that I feel will command support across the House and that I will address to the Prime Minister.

First, the work to remediate and, where possible, identify new at-risk buildings must continue if we are to meet, as I am confident the whole House would agree, the former right hon. Member for Maidenhead’s pledge



[Rishi Sunak]

that no such tragedy could occur again. I know that task is not a simple one and I thank the Prime Minister for recognising the importance of this issue. A significant barrier to making progress quicker is financial liability. That was an issue I was all too aware of when I became Chancellor and why one of the first major spending decisions I made was the creation of a new £1 billion fund to pay for remediation works in public and private buildings affected by materials beyond dangerous ACM cladding. The previous Government's cladding safety scheme has ensured an additional £5.1 billion is available to support remediation work, coming from a combination of a developer contribution and a building safety levy. I ask the Prime Minister and the Chancellor to give due consideration to any further requests, especially with the upcoming fiscal event towards the end of October.

The second point I am confident the Prime Minister would agree on is the need to maintain and update our legal and regulatory framework to keep pace with changes in materials, construction and supply. The last Parliament passed the Fire Safety Act 2021 and the Building Safety Act 2022. I acknowledge, as the Prime Minister said, that he worked constructively with the then Government to deliver those improvements. These pieces of legislation comprehensively reformed our fire safety and building regulation regimes and ensured that a new building safety regulator, located in the Health and Safety Executive, was created. But I also know that these are stepping stones towards a fire and building safety regime that remains persistently fit for purpose. In particular, I urge the Prime Minister to give special attention to the recommendations in today's report, especially its call for: more regular updating of approved document B; a single regulator; a sole Secretary of State responsible, to end the fragmentation of Whitehall responsibilities; and a new chief construction adviser. I want the Prime Minister to know that should he deem that further legislation is required to support proportionate and necessary measures to protect the public, while protecting leaseholders from excessive cost, we will work collegiately with him to deliver that.

Thirdly, allied to the need for continued improvement in the legal and regulatory frameworks, the report also shines a light on the significant failures of oversight. Those responsible for ensuring the independence and rigour of testing and compliance were found by this report to have had those very things compromised. In particular, the BRE in its work with suppliers in part enabled what Sir Martin Moore-Bick's report has plainly described as systematically dishonest behaviour on the part of suppliers. So, I welcome the Prime Minister's commitment to continue to support the Metropolitan police and the Crown Prosecution Service in pursuing any appropriate criminal charges against a small number of developers and contractors who knowingly and fraudulently cut corners on building safety for greed and financial gain.

I do not want to let this moment pass without also acknowledging the local failures today's report highlights, whether from: the tenant management organisation responsible for the building itself, which allowed relationships with those living in Grenfell Tower to become so broken that tenants were marginalised and, at worst, ignored; the repeated fire safety reports that

were not acted on; the lack of effective management and leadership at London Fire Brigade; or the local council, which had a lack of adequate oversight into the management and maintenance of the building, and the cares and concerns of those living in it.

There will be further lessons to learn from this inquiry. There will be difficult questions for all those responsible, acting over a long period of time. I know the Prime Minister will agree that we must approach those questions with the honesty and directness they deserve.

Let me conclude. At the time, the former right hon. Member for Maidenhead apologised to the victims for what she described as failures at a local and national level in response to the fire. I share in those same words still. I think today, however, demands more. As a Prime Minister, current or former, you are a custodian of the state. Its failures, whether on your watch or not, are something that you feel deeply. To that end, I want to extend my deepest apologies to the families and victims of the Grenfell Tower tragedy. The state let you down, and it must never do so again. The mission to ensure that no such tragedy can ever happen again is one that I know the whole House supports, but more than that, it is part of a legacy that we must create and maintain, so that our actions meet the full meaning of our words.

**The Prime Minister:** I thank the Leader of the Opposition for the tone and substance of his response. We do owe it to the victims, their families and the community to work together to ensure that they get the justice they deserve, and that we make this a turning point that means this will never happen again. There will be a debate in which the whole House can participate, because although hon. Members have an opportunity to ask questions today, they will also want to make substantive contributions on this tragic issue and, no doubt, on issues of concern in their own constituencies relating to cladding and fire safety, so we will ensure that time is available.

I welcome the right hon. Gentleman's approach to working jointly, as we were able to do ourselves when we were in opposition. In particular, the remediation work is behind schedule and needs to speed up, and we must do all we can in that regard. Financial liability is obviously an issue, and we will look into the sufficiency of that. As for the legal and regulatory framework, obviously changes have already been made, but I think further changes will be necessary, and we will share those with the Opposition as soon as we have some realistic proposals to put before the House. If we can then join together in passing the necessary legislation as quickly as possible, it will be a mark of our determination to treat this as a turning point.

I agree with the right hon. Gentleman's comments on criminal proceedings. We clearly do not want to prejudice those proceedings, but I do not think anyone could read this report and not be absolutely shocked by the description of some of the dishonesty—this was not just incompetence but dishonesty: the manipulation of tests and the market. It is not possible to read about that in the pages of this report and not have a renewed determination to ensure that justice is delivered for those who deserve that justice.

**Several hon. Members** rose—



**Mr Speaker:** Order. I thank the Prime Minister for his remarks about the need for caution in comments relating to particular legal cases or inquests. I repeat the waiver that I granted under the sub judice rule on 21 June 2022, and I appeal to all Members absolutely to speak, but to be cautious about what they say.

I now call the Mother of the House.

**Ms Diane Abbott** (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): Does the Prime Minister recognise how painful it must be for the Grenfell community to have had that tower looming over them for seven years, and for it to have taken seven years even to reach this stage? Having visited Grenfell, he will be aware that most of the 72 who died were among the most marginalised, and that they were largely people of migrant heritage. Can he give an assurance that the bereaved will receive all the support they need, including financial support, and can he also give an assurance that it will not take another seven years to bring those responsible to justice?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank my right hon. Friend for that question. She is absolutely right to focus on the community and the bereaved. Decisions on a memorial, whatever form it takes, must be taken in consultation with the community, and I give an absolute commitment that we will do that as well as providing the support that they need. During my visit, I had a sense—just a small sense—of just how painful this must have been and continues to be. We cannot allow another seven years to pass before we take the necessary action.

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

**Ed Davey** (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I thank the Prime Minister for his extremely powerful comments and associate my party with all of them. The Grenfell disaster is a tragedy that shames our whole society. The report lays bare failings of Governments of all parties over decades, and on behalf of my party, I am sorry. We must all learn from it and do everything we can to change the system, in order to prevent more horrifying tragedies like this from happening in the future.

It is right that we pause today and remember the 72 people who lost their lives, as well as the survivors and bereaved families and friends who have fought so long and so hard for justice. This is their day. They have waited far too long to get the truth, and many will remain frustrated that even after today they will still be waiting for justice and meaningful action. Let me therefore raise three of the many issues that the families have raised.

First, in order to get the justice that the families crave, criminality must be investigated, tried and punished, whether it is corporate manslaughter, fraud or misconduct in public office. Will the Prime Minister confirm that the police, prosecutors and courts will have all the resources they need to bring those responsible swiftly to justice?

Secondly, what more can the Prime Minister do—what more can we all do—to bring about greater urgency when it comes to acting on all these recommendations, so that the report does not just gather dust on a Whitehall shelf? Even now, seven years on, essential work to make more than 2,300 buildings safe has not even started. Can the Prime Minister tell the House what more will

be done to remove dangerous cladding as quickly as possible, forcing those responsible to pay, not the tenants and leaseholders?

Finally, we must tackle the big systemic issues that come up time and again in such scandals, from Hillsborough to Horizon to infected blood. Like the victims of other scandals, the bereaved and survivors of Grenfell have called for a duty of candour on public officials, and we welcomed its inclusion in the King's Speech. Can the Prime Minister tell us when that legislation will be published, and whether the duty will cover all public officials?

**The Prime Minister:** I join the right hon. Gentleman in the sense that this has taken too long and has been too hard, and it is not unique in that respect when it comes to injustices of this kind. Let me deal with his specific points. It is really important that criminality is fully investigated, and we will give the relevant authorities all the support and resources necessary. We will respond as quickly as possible to the report's recommendations, within six months. It is a long report and there are many recommendations, and I think it is right that we take time to look through them, consider how they can be complied with and then come back to the House, and come back to the House annually, to assess the progress that we are making and to be held to account on it. There is no doubt that the removal of cladding needs to be speeded up, and measures have already been taken in that regard.

The right hon. Gentleman mentioned the Hillsborough law, which featured in the King's Speech. The duty of candour is very important. We will look at it again in the light of the report, because although we are determined to introduce the legislation as quickly as we can—it is long overdue—I think, having read some of the report already, that it is worth reflecting and ensuring that what is in the report is incorporated in whatever law we bring forward.

**Joe Powell** (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): As we have heard, it is now more than seven years since 72 people lost their lives in Grenfell Tower in north Kensington. As we have heard again today, the disaster was entirely foreseen and entirely preventable. It was the result of organisations and individuals being systemically dishonest and putting profit before people's lives. I pay tribute to the next of kin, the bereaved and the survivors, including those who are here today, for their resilience and strength; this is a very painful day for the community.

The shameless merry-go-round of buck-passing that has happened for the past seven years must now come to an end, so I thank the Prime Minister for his personal commitment to driving lasting change and holding people accountable. Can he assure me that the Government will now do everything in their power to ensure that criminal prosecutions take place as soon as possible? Can he commit to ensuring that companies identified in the report are excluded from public contracts, are held to account to the full extent of the law, and pay their full weight of the cost of the building safety remedial work that is necessary? Can he also ensure that the phase 2 recommendations for central Government will be a blueprint for real change, and that their implementation will be swift and as comprehensive as possible, so that we can truly say that a tragedy like Grenfell will not happen again?

**The Prime Minister:** I can confirm that we will do everything to ensure that there is full accountability, including criminal accountability, where appropriate. I remind the House—as you have done, Mr Speaker—that notwithstanding the strong findings in the report, the last thing that the victims, the bereaved and the community want or need is for anything to go wrong with possible legal proceedings. We must all bear that in mind, but I absolutely understand my hon. Friend's sentiment. On the contracts, I stand by what I said in my statement.

I concur with my hon. Friend on the resilience and strength of the victims, the families, the survivors and the community. It must have been really hard to give evidence to the inquiry, and it must be really hard to read the details of what happened in this long report. It must be even harder still to read the conclusions about the failures and the dishonesty, so we must pay respect to their resilience and strength.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): Very sadly, for most of us this report is not a surprise, because many of the things that were being said over many years have now come to fruition in its recommendations. As the Prime Minister has rightly alluded to, it is clear that the conspiracy around the testing of products must be subject to criminal proceedings. Will he therefore look immediately at some of the recommendations that affect the Government: namely, bringing responsibility under one Department, with one Minister being responsible and answerable to this House, to make sure that action is taken? Secondly, will he ensure that a single regulator is introduced to make sure that the various different aspects that were clearly wrong do not occur again?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question, which is really important. We will report back on all the recommendations within six months, but if we can act more quickly on some of them, we will do so straightaway. We have six months to report back, but if there are recommendations that we can accept and move forward, we will do so rather than wait for the end of the six-month period, because it is very important, for all the reasons that he powerfully put across.

**Andy Slaughter** (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for his comments on the community in north Kensington, which is also my community in Shepherd's Bush and Hammersmith. Grenfell Tower is a daily presence not only for the survivors and the families of victims, but for all of us in west London, particularly those who live in the many high-rise buildings surrounding Grenfell. Will the Prime Minister ensure that all housing is built safe and made safe from the risk of fire, which his predecessors failed to do? Above all, will he pledge that those complicit in the Grenfell fire are brought to justice so that there is no mistake about their guilt or their punishment?

**The Prime Minister:** It is important that there is full accountability and that, where appropriate, people are brought to justice—that is the least that the families, the survivors, the bereaved and the community deserve. I absolutely understand my hon. Friend's point about the wider community. This tragedy has impacted the wider community, as he well knows from his work as the constituency MP. I saw a bit of that when I visited. There are various writings on the wall around the

memorial, where people from the area have recorded their private views, and they are an important read for anybody who wants to be in a position of leadership.

**Sir Bernard Jenkin** (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for his statement, and I also thank Sir Martin Moore-Bick.

May I refer the Prime Minister to recommendation 113.58? After Piper Alpha, an independent offshore safety investigation body was established. After the Paddington rail crash, we established the independent Rail Accident Investigation Board. Former Fire and Housing Minister Nick Raynsford, former chief investigator of the air accidents investigation branch Keith Conradi, a leading building control specialist and I made a submission to the inquiry recommending that there should be independent incident investigation of serious building failures of this nature, which would be able to conduct an investigation far more quickly than a public inquiry and with accumulated expertise. However, that role has been left to the London Fire Brigade, which has been heavily criticised and would therefore be conflicted in any investigation of a similar incident. That is why the LFB was not put in charge of investigating this incident in the first place. Could we come and see the Prime Minister about this very serious matter?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank the hon. Member for raising a really serious issue. We will, of course, look at that recommendation. We will report to the House, and I will make sure that a meeting is set up so that he is able to input directly into our considerations on that particular recommendation and any others that he has concerns about.

**Florence Eshalomi** (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): First and foremost, today is about the families of Grenfell and the 72 people who died. For them, today is another emotionally exhausting day, but we must remember that their fight for justice is also our fight. Grenfell laid bare the sad truth of the stigma attached to social housing. It is a stigma I remember experiencing when people made assumptions because I lived on a council estate. It is a stigma that attaches to people from all walks of life—teachers, doctors and firefighters. They are people who pay their rent on time, but who are treated with disdain by housing providers.

This damning report confirms that people's voices were ignored, and that safety concerns about the industry were ignored or disregarded at all levels of the Government and the housing sector. It is unforgivable. The Prime Minister has spoken about the culture. Will he commit to ensuring that this new Government address the culture within our housing sector, which often treats social housing tenants as an afterthought?

**The Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend speaks powerfully and makes a really important point in relation to social housing, and the report is littered with examples of disrespect and of people not being listened to or taken seriously. Yes, policy and regulation are part of the answer to this issue, but policy and regulation on their own are not the complete answer. There has to be a change in culture and behaviour, and turning a corner needs to mean something more than passing a new law or putting in place new guidance, much needed though

that is. It means all of us adopting a different culture and behaviour. Otherwise, we will be back here in I don't know how many years having the same debate again, and we cannot visit that on the victims, the survivors, the deceased and the communities of Grenfell.

**Stephen Flynn** (Aberdeen South) (SNP): Our hearts ache at the injustice and horror that befell individuals and their families at Grenfell Tower, and I commend the Prime Minister for the strength and power of his remarks from the Dispatch Box today. Can he give a commitment that his Government will continue to work constructively with the devolved Governments to ensure the quick removal of all cladding right across these isles, so that we do not see a repeat of this horrible tragedy?

**The Prime Minister:** Yes, and that is a really important point. Regardless of where someone lives or which Government they live under, the right to safe and secure housing is important. The Deputy Prime Minister has already met the First Minister of Scotland, and we will take every opportunity to work jointly on this issue.

**Clive Efford** (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): How many times must we come here and hear another example of how the state, which should be on the side of ordinary people, becomes the enemy of working-class people? We have had Hillsborough, the Horizon Post Office scandal, the contaminated blood scandal, Windrush, and the treatment of former armed forces personnel who are members of the LGBT community. In each of those, the state has become the enemy of the people and delayed paying compensation to them.

Can the Grenfell inquiry be a watershed when we end the process by which the state becomes the enemy of working-class people, we treat them with the dignity they deserve, and we ensure that their compensation is paid rapidly and not delayed, as it has been in all those other cases? In the case of freeholders who are still holding out and not paying for the remedial work to their properties, it is about time they paid fines for delaying that work.

**The Prime Minister:** That is a really important point, because there have been I don't know how many examples of injustice where people have not been listened to and have been disregarded. Different Prime Ministers over the years have stood at this Dispatch Box and quite genuinely made commitments on the back of reports. I do not doubt that for a minute. I think every Prime Minister who has stood here in relation to any of those injustices meant every word that he or she said in response, and yet it goes on. So there is something more fundamental that we have to make time to consider, because I do not want to be back at this Dispatch Box—or any future Prime Minister to be at this Dispatch Box—having a version of the same discussion about injustice, about people being disregarded, not listened to and not taken seriously after the event for too long, and about justice coming too late for people who desperately need it. That is what I mean by turning a corner.

**Daisy Cooper** (St Albans) (LD): The inquiry report is damning, and the testimony that we heard is utterly devastating. First and foremost, all our thoughts are with the victims, the survivors, the bereaved and everybody affected.

In the last Parliament, many of us fought tooth and nail on a cross-party basis to improve the Fire Safety Bill and the Building Safety Bill so that social tenants and leaseholders who are still living in buildings covered in cladding and with other fire safety defects could get that remediation work done as quickly as possible. It is now clear that in some cases, the waterfall system that has been set up, by which we identify who is responsible, is simply not working and is taking far too long. One idea that was on the table in the last Parliament was that in some cases, the Government could put the money up to pay for the remediation, to take away the risk, and then use the power of the state and its lawyers to go after those responsible with penalties, so that the taxpayer would not lose out. Will the Prime Minister, who says that this is a moment of change and has committed to speed things up, please review that idea to see whether it could be used in some limited cases where there has still been no action?

**The Prime Minister:** That is a really important point. From my own constituency, I know of examples where there was a contract, then a subcontract, a subcontract and another subcontract. In one case in my constituency, it went through seven subcontractors before the person who was actually responsible was found. Everybody simply took a cut of the contract and passed it on. That is a real problem, and we have to get to the bottom of it. We cannot allow that to happen. Of course, we will consider any proposals that are put forward in response to this report, but this is a very real problem of contracts simply being subcontracted over and over again. Trying to find accountability is very, very difficult.

**Dawn Butler** (Brent East) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for his statement today. I recently visited the Grenfell site with Lord Boateng, who is in the Gallery today—

**Mr Speaker:** We do not mention names.

**Dawn Butler:** Excuse me, Mr Speaker. Everybody there at Grenfell wants people to be held responsible—those in boots but also those in suits. A lot of money has also gone missing, and some have called for the use of joint enterprise to ensure that everybody is held responsible. Some survivors have written a poetry book, and there is one poem called “So What Simon” by Mary Gardiner. This is just the ending:

“This is not about mercy, grace or kindness.

It's about justice and honesty and believing we are all born equal and that is how we die.

No amount of wealth can make us differ so much that where we live becomes a rabbit hutch.

Change your minds, you people with power, or give it over and let us flower.”

Does the Prime Minister agree that justice delayed is justice denied?

**The Prime Minister:** Yes I do, and I particularly agree that justice is not a question of grace or kindness; it is an entitlement. It is an entitlement of every single citizen in this country, and that needs to be honoured as we go forward from here. Can I just take the opportunity to thank all those working on the memorial, which I know is very important? The work on the memorial is at an important stage, and I know it is very important to the community.



**Robert Jenrick** (Newark) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for his statement today. The Grenfell fire was an unimaginable tragedy but, as he rightly said, it was also a comprehensive failure by the British state, and in many respects that comprehensive failure persists today. I am grateful for the words that he said about giving all resource and support to the police and the Crown Prosecution Service, because clearly the victims, the survivors and the community of North Kensington want the insights and the answers that they have partly had today, but they also want justice, and that needs to be delivered as soon as possible.

Equally, I fully support the effort that the Prime Minister is going to make to see if further regulatory changes are required. They need to be made in a proportionate and effective way, and there are lessons to be learned from changes that we have made in the recent past. But when making those changes, can I urge him to look in particular at the status of the testing facility—the Building Research Establishment—and at the way it operates, which I think has failed significantly, as is laid out in the report?

Finally, I concur with the broader point that the Prime Minister made today, which is that when one speaks to the victims and their families, one is left with a very strong sense that many people in social housing in our country feel that they are second-class citizens and that they are being treated with disrespect. That must end. Will he take forward the work that began with the social housing White Paper to ensure that that never happens again?

**The Prime Minister:** Yes, all support will be given to the police and the CPS, and I absolutely agree that this must be done as swiftly as possible. I think the police made a statement in relation to that earlier today. I will look at the particular point the right hon. Gentleman raises in relation to testing. I think the whole House needs to come together to recognise that in social housing there has been a profound disrespect for a very long time across a number of communities, and we have to turn a corner on that.

**Margaret Mullane** (Dagenham and Rainham) (Lab): Following the wildfires of 2022 in Dagenham and Rainham, the ongoing crisis at Launders Lane in Rainham and now the devastating fire at the Spectrum building, also in my constituency, will the Prime Minister join me in commending the outstanding work of our emergency services? Will he also comment on the Government's plans to improve fire resilience and safety in residential buildings and to hold those who are responsible to account when tragedies like this happen?

**The Prime Minister:** Yes, it is important that they are held to account. I thank my hon. Friend for raising those issues in relation to Dagenham and I join her in commending the emergency services who have to respond to these awful incidents. From speaking to some of the first responders, I got a real sense of the impact it has on them. I know that the Deputy Prime Minister has visited the Dagenham scene in the last few days.

**Jeremy Corbyn** (Islington North) (Ind): I thank the Prime Minister for his statement and the way he delivered it, and Sir Martin for his comprehensive report. The

needless deaths that happened at Grenfell will never go away and never be forgotten. Those of us who have been on the silent walks for Grenfell every year since it happened, and visited many times, fully understand the strength of feeling and the deep anger in the community at this needless loss of life, brought about by a contract culture, deregulation, privatisation, ignorance and, frankly, contempt for working-class communities by many who should have done much more to protect and defend those people. So I hope the Prime Minister's words will be carried through, and that criminal action will follow against those who deliberately neglected those who were in appalling and extreme danger.

Will the Prime Minister assure the House that the removal of dangerous cladding that has happened at most local authority-owned buildings all over the country will now also take place in the private sector leasehold buildings that many of our constituents live in, where they are faced with enormous insurance costs because of the existence of dangerous cladding? This has gone on for several years, and as the companies that are responsible for the dangerous cladding refuse to pay up, the problem is forced on to the people who are themselves the victims who are being put in danger.

There are so many lessons to be learned from Grenfell, and I hope that the contract culture in local government that the Prime Minister just spoke about—the endless subcontracting, subcontracting and subcontracting so that those responsible for dangerous conditions evade all responsibility—will end. I also hope that we will end the idea of the local government internal market and instead have the principle of local government delivery of service as the primary responsibility to ensure that all citizens live in safety, and that council housing grows rapidly over the next few years and we get more good quality, secure council housing built for the good of the people who are living in desperate housing need, often in the private rented sector.

**The Prime Minister:** We are taking action on that important point about leaseholders, be it in relation to insurance or in relation to other issues of which the House is well aware. It is important that is included in the work we take forward, and I am absolutely committed to ensuring the quality of council housing and social housing as we build those 1.5 million homes. As the whole House knows, it is not just a number that we are talking about. Each and every person who lost their life is a human being to be respected, cherished and remembered for who they were.

**Ben Coleman** (Chelsea and Fulham) (Lab): On the Chelsea council estates that I have the honour of representing, Grenfell and the incompetence and indifference shown by the local council and the tenant management organisation, both before and after the tragedy, are still very much discussed. One of the striking things brought out by the report is the extraordinary response of the local community where the official response failed. It was heartening to hear the Prime Minister talk about a rebalancing of power, which is essential. I hope that we will ensure that councils gather proper information on the disabled people living in social housing, 15 of whom died in the Grenfell fire, to ensure that they can be evacuated safely in such a situation.



As well as taking action against companies, which I fully support, will the Prime Minister commit to working closely with local authorities to implement the report, and to protect our fellow citizens, whether they live in social housing or not, from this sort of thing happening again?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank my hon. Friend for that question. It was really hard to read the part of the report that deals with the indifference and disrespect after the tragedy. I would have thought that after such a tragedy, whatever the failures that went before, these people would at the very least be treated with the utmost respect, yet the same disregard and lack of basic respect and dignity continued. That is part of what this report is about.

It is important that there are plans in place for disabled people, and we have taken that forward for people with disabilities who are housed in circumstances in which they clearly need an evacuation plan. Of course we will work on this with local authorities and all relevant authorities.

**Kit Malthouse** (North West Hampshire) (Con): One of the things I learned from my interactions with the bereaved, survivors and Grenfell United during my time as Housing Minister is that their pain was compounded by their frustration at the pace of change, even some years after the fire. I shared their frustration as we tried to make progress on building safety issues. One of the things that sharpened our minds and made the Government machine jump to it was the prospect of external scrutiny. I heard the Prime Minister say that he wants to return annually to update the House on progress. I know he will do his best, but I am afraid that I do not think that will give the Government machine the kind of impetus required. Will he recommend to whoever is elected Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee that they establish a Sub-Committee to look at progress on the report's recommendations? If not, will he support the establishment of a cross-party Committee of the House to drive through these changes and to monitor Government progress? Although an annual debate is welcome, I do not think it will give the sense of urgency required to address these issues swiftly.

**The Prime Minister:** The question of external scrutiny is really important, and we will, of course, report annually. As the right hon. Gentleman probably knows, the report has a recommendation on scrutiny that we want to look at carefully and discuss with the community, which has strong views on this. Obviously, we will take into account the views of Members on both sides of the House, including on whether this is something a Select Committee should look at. I am not sure it is my role to tell a Select Committee what to look at, but I agree that the question of external scrutiny and accountability is really important. We have to make sure that the most robust scrutiny is in place.

**Barry Gardiner** (Brent West) (Lab): I do not think I have ever heard my right hon. and learned Friend speak more powerfully, more personally or more movingly than he did in this statement. I know that the more than 20,000 residents in my constituency who are still living in high-rise blocks with the nightmare of fire risk constantly upon them will welcome what he said about the Government taking a consistent and measured view of

the recommendations, and moving to implement them systematically. They will also welcome what he said about the prosecution of those responsible for what Sir Martin called "systematic dishonesty" and "deliberate and sustained strategies to manipulate the testing processes".

I reinforce what the hon. Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper) said about remediation. Many of the owners of these blocks have sold on to further owners, and to further owners beyond that. The Prime Minister spoke about subcontracting, but there has also been on-selling. Some of those owners live in tax havens such as the British Virgin Islands, and they are simply not complying. They are not even applying to the building safety fund to get this remediation work done. Will my right hon. and learned Friend consider very carefully what powers the Government can take in order to take control of these buildings, get the work done and then recover the costs, if necessary by acquiring and selling the buildings themselves?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising that very real issue. One of the things we need to do is look at what further powers may be necessary. We cannot suggest for a minute that the existing legislation, guidance and policy is sufficient. We need more powers, and we will look at that and bring proposals back to the House. There will be a general debate, of course, because I know that many Members will want to discuss particular issues facing constituents who are fearful of the conditions in which they live.

**Siân Berry** (Brighton Pavilion) (Green): I thank the Prime Minister for his very serious and compassionate statement. The events of June 2017 feel like yesterday. Although I cannot imagine how the people directly affected are feeling right now, we must act in every way we can, and we must act together as much as possible.

However, I note that the inquiry's report does not make new proposals on transparency and accountability for social housing tenants and leaseholders, particularly on access to fire risk assessments and related information, which are still very hard for residents to access—I saw that for myself in London, and I am still seeing it in Brighton. The previous Government did not act on the calls for housing associations to be subject to freedom of information requirements, despite them including calls made by the Information Commissioner as long ago as August 2017. Will the Prime Minister act now to fix these gaps in resident empowerment and access to information? That would be very simple, but it is not covered by today's report.

**The Prime Minister:** We will obviously look at all the recommendations and report back to the House, but we need to look at the wider issues too. Access to risk assessments is an important issue that we are considering. There should not be gaps. One of the benefits of a general debate is that it will be an opportunity to raise these and further points, which we will take away and consider.

**Marsha De Cordova** (Battersea) (Lab): Today my thoughts are with the victims, the survivors, the families and the entire Grenfell community. The systemic dishonesty and many other injustices meant that the people of Grenfell were treated like second-class citizens. Successive Governments, the local authority and industry knew about the risks, but they failed to act.

[Marsha De Cordova]

As Sir Martin said, the deaths that occurred were entirely avoidable. Seven years on, no one has faced criminal proceedings and there are still thousands living in homes wrapped in unsafe cladding. I welcome what the Prime Minister has said today, I welcome the way he delivered his statement, and I am thankful that the Government will implement the phase 1 recommendation to ensure that every disabled person living in a high-rise block has a personal evacuation plan specific to their needs, but when the Prime Minister returns to update the House, it is vital that those living in unsafe homes have clear deadlines for when the flammable or unsafe cladding will be removed, so that they can have a decent night's sleep.

**The Prime Minister:** I agree that the work is going too slowly; we need to push that work on, with clear timetables to ensure it is done. In response to the first part of my hon. Friend's question, the wording of the report, which says that the deaths were entirely "avoidable", must be chilling for all the family members and the community at large.

**Simon Hoare** (North Dorset) (Con): I commend the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition for their candour, and the tone that they adopted—it was pitch perfect. May I press the Prime Minister on a point made by Sir Max Hill KC in broadcast interviews this morning, about the urgent need for justice and for prosecutions to be brought? Colleagues across the House have raised the issue, and the Prime Minister has addressed it, but will he ensure that there is adequate resource in the policing arena and capacity in the court system to bring cases, where appropriate, as speedily as possible? Businesses are inclined to dissolve themselves and disappear into the ether very quickly. Will he make sure that there is capacity in both the investigation and prosecution arenas to ensure speed? We all recognise that people have been waiting far too long.

**The Prime Minister:** Sir Max Hill has personal experience of these sorts of cases, as have I. We need to ensure that resource is in place, and that we are clear about the speed of decision making. They are not straightforward decisions, but none the less they should be taken as swiftly as possible. We need to ensure that the courts are in a position to handle the cases as soon as they are ready to go to court, if there are cases to go to court.

**Zarah Sultana** (Coventry South) (Ind): I join colleagues in remembering the 72 people who lost their lives in the Grenfell Tower fire tragedy, and I say to their friends and families that I will always fight to deliver justice for their loved ones. As chair of the Fire Brigades Union parliamentary group, I put on record my admiration for the heroic bravery of the firefighters who attended that night. The FBU has long said that deregulation and corporate greed were the reasons for the catastrophe, and the report vindicates that view. Does the Prime Minister agree? When will the Government set up the statutory advisory body on fire policy, in order to give firefighters and control staff a voice in setting national standards, and to ensure lessons are learned? When will the timetable for that be set?

**The Prime Minister:** I place on record my gratitude to the firefighters on the night. Having been to Grenfell Tower, I can only begin to imagine what it must have been like to have been confronted with the situation that they faced, and to deal with the circumstances they had to deal with. Time and again, our first responders are asked by us, rightly, to do very challenging things. They do it, and we should thank them for that.

**Joy Morrissey** (Beaconsfield) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for taking the recommendations so seriously, and for raising concerns about the parity of esteem for social housing tenants. We have seen problems in that area so many times, so I thank him for taking those recommendations forward. Will he join me in paying tribute again to the volunteer organisations, including the founding members of Grenfell United, as well as members of other charities and churches who worked tirelessly in the aftermath of the Grenfell tragedy?

**The Prime Minister:** A passage in the report highlights two groups: one group is the TMO, the businesses and those charged with responsibility, and the other is those who lived in the tower. Those groups were treated differently before, during and after the tragedy, which relates to the question of esteem that the hon. Lady rightly touches on. We must stop talking about the issue and act on it.

**Kim Johnson** (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): My thoughts today are with the families and loved ones of the 72 people who died so tragically in the fire. As the report identifies, those deaths were entirely "avoidable" and were the result of corporate greed, because profits were put before people. Some 3,000 medium and high-rise buildings are still being monitored by the Government because they are clad in unsafe cladding. Will the Prime Minister state how he will support leaseholders living in those buildings, whose lives are on hold at the moment? I stand in solidarity with the families in support of justice. I hope they do not wait as long as the Hillsborough families.

**The Prime Minister:** Many premises are being monitored. That needs to continue. We need to bear down on all the relevant authorities to ensure they are safe and give leaseholders the support they need.

**Sarah Gibson** (Chippenham) (LD): Will the Prime Minister help to ensure this type of disaster will not happen again by looking carefully at building control inspection? Since deregulation, such inspection is often not carried out in person but through phone calls and photographs. Poor inspection of works across the UK building industry means other such disasters will happen again and again, unless we look carefully at how our building control inspection works.

**The Prime Minister:** I agree with that. The way building control inspections were carried out in this case makes for a shocking read in the report. It is particularly grave, but not the only example of such building control inspection. We will look at that as we respond to the report.

**Mike Amesbury** (Runcorn and Helsby) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for the most powerful and heartfelt statement I have ever heard him make, putting the 72 victims of the Grenfell fire and survivors in the community at the heart of the road map going forward.

As the Prime Minister said, justice must be speedy, with prosecutions for those who were involved in systemic dishonesty. Justice also means that those responsible for the broader building safety crisis should pay to make buildings safe, so how will the Prime Minister ensure that now happens at pace?

**The Prime Minister:** Justice needs to be speedy and, in this case, it is important we ensure that it is swift. We should bear in mind it has already taken seven years to get to where we are today, which doubles the need for that speed. All those with responsibility need to take responsibility; I thought the words of one member of the inquiry this morning, about those with responsibility taking the report as a template and guide for the future, were very important. All those with responsibility for building safety includes me, which is why I will take that approach in government.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Prime Minister for his tone, compassion and understanding, and the seriousness in his voice and words today. I honestly and sincerely believe the Prime Minister speaks for everyone in the House in the way he conveyed the statement, and I thank him for that. On behalf of Democratic Unionist party Members, I convey our collective sympathies to the families. They are never far from our thoughts, even though a number of years have passed. The report catalogued failures. There are similar buildings in Northern Ireland, so will the findings and recommendations of the report be conveyed to the Minister at the Northern Ireland Assembly with the urgency required, ever mindful that the Northern Ireland housing executive and others are financially stretched? What help can be given to deliver the much needed improvements across this great nation, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising the question in relation to Northern Ireland. Of course we must work with all the relevant authorities in Northern Ireland. I took the early opportunity after the formation of the Government to go to Northern Ireland to make clear that would be the way I will work on all issues. That is particularly important in relation to the safety of people in the place that they live.

**Nesil Caliskan** (Barking) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for his statement. I associate myself with the remarks made about thinking about the victims and their families, who are still fighting every day for justice. I welcome the Prime Minister's commitment to ensuring they will see justice through the criminal justice system. The report makes over 50 recommendations and suggestions about the regulatory framework, so will he reassure me that the Government will work closely with local authorities to ensure they have the support they need to respond to any additional regulatory burdens that might be put on them in the coming months and years?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank my hon. Friend for her question. It is important that we work on the regulatory framework with local authorities and with all those charged with responsibility so that there is justice in this case, and secondly, that we take the necessary action to ensure that this never happens again.

**Mary Kelly Foy** (City of Durham) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister's personal commitment to changing the culture and behaviour towards council tenants that allowed this tragedy to happen. It is a national scandal. Can he ensure that residents, tenants and professional firefighters on the frontline are heard and listened to? We cannot trust those who caused the tragedy in the first place to put things right.

**The Prime Minister:** That is an important issue. This case is an example of where those concerned for their safety in the place where they live have made points, put forward issues and raised concerns but not been listened to. That is a characteristic of how not just housing but other aspects of life are dealt with. We must ensure that we listen to those who are most concerned. It is their place, their home, they are entitled to feel safe and secure there, and it is our responsibility to ensure that they are.

**Ruth Cadbury** (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): As the Prime Minister so painfully said, the Grenfell fire destroyed lives and ripped families apart, but constituents of mine are suffering, too. They are afraid to go to sleep at night, because they live in buildings that were built more recently than Grenfell, with fire safety risks. The building standards that informed the recladding of Grenfell and the building of more recent blocks of flats were strong on thermal insulation to save energy costs but very weak on fire safety, and their implementation, as we now know from this report, has been even worse. The building regulations of other jurisdictions cover both thermal insulation and fire safety risks. How long will it take for UK building regulations to catch up?

**The Prime Minister:** That is one issue that we will have to look at in light of the report, but I accept that there are people today in accommodation where they fear for their safety, because of the conditions in which they are living. Having spoken to some of those people, I got a sense of what it is like for them to worry every night about the safety of themselves and their family, particularly those with children.

**Nadia Whittome** (Nottingham East) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for his statement and his commitments today. As he has said, the report makes it clear that the Conservative Government's obsession with deregulation meant that safety issues were ignored, delayed or disregarded. It says that the Government were well aware of the deadly risk of cladding before the fire, but failed to act. It concludes that all 72 deaths were avoidable.

This morning, Grenfell United—survivors and bereaved families—urged our new Government to break old habits and bring systemic change by both separating Government from corporate lobbying and tackling social and racial injustices and inequalities. Will the Prime Minister undertake this work without delay?

**The Prime Minister:** I read very carefully what the report said about deregulation. As we go forward from here, we must avoid the habit of simply blaming somebody else for everything and pull together and say that it is our responsibility. We are a new Government. Irrespective of where the failure lay, it is our responsibility now to take this forward to ensure safety. I know that is a sentiment shared across the House and I thank the Leader of the Opposition for the approach that he has



[The Prime Minister]

taken. If we do it in that way, we can do what the survivors, the bereaved, the families and the communities most want, which is to show our determination to ensure that this never happens again.

**Alan Gemmell** (Central Ayrshire) (Lab): Today's report lists a series of terrible failures that let down the Grenfell community. The Grenfell fire affected communities in every part of the UK, and I wish to pass on the thoughts of my constituents in Irvine to the families and loved ones. A fire at a 14-storey block of flats in Irvine in 1999 spread via external cladding. The Garnock Court fire resulted in one fatality and led to changes to Scottish building regulations, which the then local MP fought to have implemented. I hope my right hon. Friend will look at the lessons from the Garnock Court fire as he starts to address this terrible injustice.

**The Prime Minister:** We must look at this question of external cladding. Some measures have been taken in the past seven years, as I referenced in my statement, but we need to look at this again. The description that I was given when I was at Grenfell Tower of how the fire spread, and the role played by the cladding, was chilling.

**John McDonnell** (Hayes and Harlington) (Ind): Having read the summary of the report, may I say how difficult it has been to contain one's anger? Like many west London MPs here, I visited the site soon after the fire. In the following months, we met the victims, the families of the victims, the firefighters, the local representatives, and the traumatised call centre operators, some of whom have never recovered. I was castigated then for

using the expression "social murder". This report defines; it was social murder. Exactly as the Prime Minister said, we need urgent action. We have been promised a debate. For that debate, may we have the definitive report for each of our constituencies on what action has been taken, what action will be taken, and what the deadline will be?

May I return to recommendation 113.7 in the report? In the building regulations, we defined higher buildings as above seven storeys or 18 metres. That takes no account of those other properties in which there are vulnerable residents in particular who are now at risk. The recommendation is to urgently review those regulations. May we have a timetable for that review, as it has consequences for many of our constituents?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank my right hon. Friend for making that point. On the debate, it is important that as much information as possible is made available and that we are able to deal with the questions that Members of this House have raised. That is why we are looking at the date of that debate. I wanted it to be as soon as possible, but I do not want it to be so quick that Members will be frustrated because they will rightly want information or assurances that need a little bit of working through. I will try to make sure that that happens. The safety of buildings that are not at the specific height is among the issues that we have to consider here. We are all well aware of these very troubling cases, and they have to be part of the debate.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Ghani):** That concludes that very serious statement. I will give those on the Front Bench some time to vacate the Chamber and allow the new Ministers to take their seats.



## Budget Responsibility Bill

*Considered in Committee*

[Ms NUSRAT GHANI *in the Chair*]

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

### Clause 1

#### ANNOUNCEMENT OF FISCALLY SIGNIFICANT MEASURES

1.58 pm

**Nigel Huddleston** (Droitwich and Evesham) (Con): I beg to move amendment 9, page 1, line 14, at end insert—

“(c) or any changes to the government’s fiscal targets.”

*This amendment requires the OBR to produce and publish a section 4(3) report at the time new fiscal rules are announced by the Treasury.*

**The Chairman:** With this is will be convenient to take the following:

Amendment 2, page 1, line 25, at end insert—

“(2A) In any case where the Office has acted in accordance with subsection (2), it may notify the Independent Adviser on Ministers’ Interests of the circumstances in any case where it considers those circumstances may be relevant to—

- (a) the Ministerial Code, or
- (b) the functions of the Independent Adviser on Ministers’ Interests.”

*This amendment enables the OBR to notify the Independent Adviser on Ministers’ Interests where the OBR considers that any instance where the Treasury had not requested a report under section 4A(1) in advance may give rise to consideration of compliance with the Ministerial Code.*

Amendment 5, page 1, line 25, at end insert—

“(2A) Where the OBR prepares a report in accordance with subsection (1) or (2), it must take account of the impact of the measure or measures on—

- (a) the UK’s compliance with, and
- (b) the fiscal cost of meeting,

the UK’s net zero target as set in section 1(2) of the Climate Change Act 2008.”

*This amendment requires the OBR to report on the impact of fiscally significant measures announced by Government on the UK’s statutory net zero target.*

Amendment 1, page 2, line 4, at end insert “or

- (b) the measure, or combination of measures, is likely to have an impact on—
  - (i) the cost of government borrowing,
  - (ii) interest rates, or
  - (iii) the rate of growth of gross domestic product.”

*This amendment broadens the definition of fiscally significant measures to those which fall below the costing threshold, but have wider fiscal effects, by affecting either the cost of government borrowing, interest rates or rates of economic growth.*

Amendment 6, page 2, line 4, at end insert

“or if the condition in subsection (3A) is met.”

*See the statement for Amendment 7.*

Amendment 7, page 2, line 6, at end insert—

“(3A) The condition in this subsection is that the measure, or combination of measures, forms part of category of measures with a cumulative impact on—

- (a) public sector net debt,
- (b) public sector contingent liabilities, or
- (c) both,

that exceeds a specified percentage of the gross domestic product for a specified period.

“Specified” means specified in, or determined in accordance with, the Charter for Budget Responsibility”

*The purpose of this amendment is to extend the definition of fiscally significant measures to include measures with a cumulative impact on public sector net debt or contingent liabilities when taken together with other measures in the same category, such as public projects with private sector partners.*

Amendment 3, page 2, line 16, leave out “28” and insert “56”.

*See the statement for Amendment 4.*

Amendment 4, page 2, line 17, at end insert—

“(6A) After the publication of a draft under subsection (6), the Treasury must consult—

- (a) the Office for Budget Responsibility,
- (b) the Treasury Committee of the House of Commons, and
- (c) such other persons as the Treasury considers appropriate.

(6B) When a modified Charter so as to include provision by virtue of this section is laid before Parliament, the Treasury must also lay before Parliament a report on the outcome of consultation under subsection (6A).”

*The purpose of this amendment is to impose a requirement on the Treasury to undertake a full consultation and publish the outcome of that consultation prior to revision of the Charter for the purposes of the Bill.*

Clause 1 stand part.

Clause 2 stand part.

Amendment 10, Title, after “measures” insert

“and of any changes to the government’s fiscal targets”.

*This amendment is consequential to Amendment 9. It would amend the long title of the Bill.*

**Nigel Huddleston:** Thank you very much, Madam Chair. May I first take the opportunity to congratulate you on your election? I promise to try not to try your patience over the coming weeks, years and so on, but we will see how things go.

I wish primarily to speak today to amendment 9 and, of course, consequential amendment 10, which effectively seek to ensure that the fiscal lock proposed in the Bill should also include any changes to the fiscal rules and would require the Office for Budget Responsibility to produce a report on their effect on public finances. The Office for Budget Responsibility was of course constructed by a Conservative Chancellor following the poor forecasting record of the previous Labour Government. Between 2000 and 2010, the then Labour Government’s forecasts for economic growth were out by an average of £13 billion, and their forecasts for the budget deficit three years ahead were out by an average of £40 billion. Their forecasts therefore lacked credibility, and to re-establish confidence and credibility the OBR was created by the Conservative Government.

Labour lacked economic credibility in the past, and I am afraid it still lacks it now. The facts simply do not stand up the false claim that the Government have inherited the worst economic circumstances since the second world war; they transparently have not. Contrary to the rewriting of history that the current Labour Government are attempting, when we took over from

[Nigel Huddleston]

Labour back in 2010, inflation was 3.4%. When they took over from us, it was 2.2%. The annual deficit is half what we inherited in 2010, unemployment is about half what it was in 2010, and we handed Labour the fastest economic growth in the G7. The dominant political and economic narrative since the second world war is in fact, as has been widely commented on, that every single Labour Government end up with unemployment higher at the end of their time in power than when they took over from the Conservatives preceding them.

The British public should not be taken for fools. Just because Labour keeps claiming something, that does not mean that it suddenly becomes true, which is why clarity over plans and rules is so important. The fiscal rules are of course restrictions on fiscal policy set by the Government to constrain their own decisions on spending and taxes. The fiscal rules set by the previous Government said that the debt to GDP ratio should be falling within a five-year horizon, and that the ratio of the annual budget deficit to GDP should be below 3% by the end of the same period. Labour's manifesto for the election proposed the following fiscal rules: balancing the current budget, so that day-to-day costs are met by revenues, and that debt must be falling as a share of the economy by the fifth year of the forecast. On the surface, therefore, the debt rules appear to be broadly the same under the new Government. The Government have even said that they have an "ironclad" commitment to reduce Government debt. It is therefore critical what definition of debt is used for the fiscal rules. Clearly, any changes to the fiscal rules are financially significant decisions because they affect how much the Government can borrow and spend.

On Second Reading, the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury said:

"Our fiscal rules are non-negotiable."—[*Official Report*, 30 July 2024; Vol. 752, c. 1263.]

Great, but why then has the Chancellor repeatedly failed to rule out that she will change the definition of debt in her fiscal rules to allow, presumably, for massive borrowing? The Government cannot run from the scrutiny that they should be subjected to if they are considering making such a change. We believe that our amendment requiring an OBR report on changes to the fiscal rules is entirely consistent with the Government's stated policy intent, and should therefore be fairly uncontentious. After all, on Second Reading, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury said that

"the announcement of a fiscally significant measure should always be accompanied by an independent assessment of its economic and fiscal implications, in order to support transparency and accountability."—[*Official Report*, 30 July 2024; Vol. 752, c. 1211.]

We agree, and not accepting our amendment would be contrary to those goals, because clearly changing the fiscal rules would be a fiscally significant measure in anybody's book. Furthermore, the Chief Secretary said that

"fiscal discipline and sound money is the bedrock of our plans."—[*Official Report*, 30 July 2024; Vol. 752, c. 1213.]

Well, changing the fiscal rules would be changing the foundations and that bedrock.

Transparency and clarity are important in relation to the public finances, because Ministers should never forget that it is not their money that they are spending;

it is the public's money. The public have a right to know how their money is being spent, and government is about making difficult choices with limited resources. With Government spending being above £1.2 trillion per year, the British public recognise that the Government clearly have choices. It is not an endless supply of money, but it is a very, very large amount. In the last few weeks, the new Labour Government chose to spend the public's money on pay settlements for their union friends rather than on supporting pensioners. Those settlements are estimated to cost about £10 billion. They also chose to spend £8.3 billion on a public energy company and £7.3 billion on a national wealth fund, so far from inheriting a £22-billion black hole, they have actually just spent £25 billion creating one within their first few weeks of coming to power.

**Andrew Griffith** (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a fantastic speech on the importance of being responsible with our public finances. Much of the Bill is concerned with responsibility and transparency. Does he know whether the Government published an impact assessment when they took away the winter fuel allowance?

**Nigel Huddleston:** I thank my hon. Friend for that point. My understanding is that the Government have not published an impact assessment, as would normally be the case for something with such a significant impact. I think that speaks to the whole narrative that we are hearing from the Government: claiming one thing when the facts speak differently. As I said, far from inheriting a £22 billion black hole, they have actually spent, or committed to spending, an additional £25 billion. That is a choice that they made, so the claim that the Labour Government are having to take the winter fuel allowance away from millions of pensioners as a response to unexpected financial constraints simply does not stack up against the facts, or indeed the words of the Chancellor herself, who on 25 March 2014—yes, a decade ago—said:

"We are the party who have said that we will cut the winter fuel allowance for the richest pensioners and means-test that benefit to save money".—[*Official Report*, 25 March 2014; Vol. 578, c. 174.]

That is a direct quote in *Hansard* from the current Chancellor, so no, the Government's restriction of winter fuel payments is not a response to financial circumstance; it is a long-established, clearly stated Labour policy intent—a deliberate policy choice, but a policy that they conveniently forgot to tell the public about in the run-up to the last election.

I hope, however, that the Government can be straight with the public on this point about the fiscal rules, accept the amendment that we are proposing, and provide assurance to all Members and the outside world that there is no sleight of hand here. We want the Bill to work as they say it is intended to, and to include financially significant decisions, such as on the levels of Government borrowing and the fiscal rules. I would therefore appreciate it if the Chief Secretary to the Treasury confirmed in his wind-up that the Government do not intend to change the definition of debt in their fiscal rules or practise some accounting trick to hide the level of Government borrowing, and that they do indeed wish to be clear and transparent about the public finances. If Labour Members vote against our amendment, it will merely prove that they are planning to change their

fiscal rules in the Budget to borrow more money, increase debt, and run away from independent OBR scrutiny—the very opposite of the stated intent of the Bill.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Ghani):** I call Dr Jeevun Sandher to make his maiden speech.

**Dr Jeevun Sandher** (Loughborough) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Chair, for allowing me to give my maiden speech in this House. Like every Member across this House, it is the greatest honour, privilege and responsibility of my life to represent my community of Loughborough, Shepshed and the villages. I rise at the most difficult moment for our communities and our country since the second world war, when many feel despondency, despair and anger. I know that every Member across this House wants our communities to succeed and to contribute to our national success. That is what my community has done before and will do again, with hope and determination.

My story does not begin in Loughborough. I was not born there—unlike my neighbours, who are now my friends, and who have made it my home. My story instead begins in rural Punjab, 4,000 miles away, where my father was born almost 70 years ago. His chances of dying before his fifth birthday were one in four. Today, a child born in the same place is around nine times less likely to die. That is what economic growth means. It means less suffering, it means less misery and it means less death. That is why I became an economist: to build prosperity and to lessen misery.

I learned my trade in the Treasury and then went to work in Somaliland, one of the poorest nations on Earth, where I helped to write its economic policy, its budgets and its national development plan. That was where I saw the horrors of climate change lead to drought, hunger and death, but also where I learned that even in the darkest of hours and the most difficult of moments we can build prosperity.

Now I stand here as the elected Member of Parliament for my community. It says something remarkable about our nation that the fact that I, the son of immigrants, am standing in this Chamber is in and of itself unremarkable. It speaks to our common culture—a culture forged of different backgrounds, a culture that not only rejects the violence we saw over the summer, but completely rejects its reasoning too.

My election represents an historic first for my community. I am a member of an under-represented minority—I am, of course, the first Member of Parliament elected by the men and women of Loughborough to have a beard. To the organisers of the beard of the year competition I say, “Call me.” Luckily for me, my dad is not eligible for that particular competition. I know that the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) has won the award several times; I hope he does not mind me winning the prize this time, as long as I let him win the argument.

My predecessor in this place, Jane Hunt, was not a contender for that award, but no one can doubt her commitment to team Loughborough, and every single Member across this House and across my community will wish her the very best, especially as she has recovered from cancer. Her predecessor, Baroness Morgan, has talents that are well known both in this and the other place. Before her was my good friend and mentor Andy Reed. Members who know Andy will know that he is

still a leading figure in sports policy, and they will also know that Andy is the nicest man in British politics. It is his character that I hope to live up to in this place.

However, I rise to speak at the most difficult time for our communities and our nation since 1945. Our communities are in crisis. Wages in my constituency are £10,000 lower than they would be had we grown at new Labour rates. The divides caused by deindustrialisation have widened from cracks into chasms, with young men who used to leave school and get good jobs now 20% less likely to get any job; in our most deprived neighbourhoods, life expectancy falling before the pandemic; more than any fact or figure, the despair, the despondency and the anger; across and beyond our shores, war in Europe once more, with democracy in danger; and, most seriously of all, a planet that is burning.

For my community, this was the hottest summer we have ever known, followed by the worst flooding we have ever seen, destroying homes. The Prime Minister and I saw that destruction when we visited the homes of Ian and Alan. No one should wake up in the morning to find their home destroyed by flooding, but that will only become more common in the years ahead. What we do in the next decade will determine the fate of our communities, of democracy and of our planet. Either we will rise to this moment, build prosperity for all, protect democracy and stop emitting carbon, or everything we hold dear will crumble and fall.

Previous generations have shown us that we can rise to this moment that threatens us. Our country stood alone against fascism in Europe and won. I think today of my constituent William Williams, 104 years old, who flew Spitfires in the war. As his generation rose to their moment, so can we. My community have shown me that we can. When the waters came and the floods rose, my constituents Caz and Carl did not pause to think if they could help, but only how they could help. They organised collections, they provided refuge, and they looked after perfect strangers. It is their spirit that I carry into this place—asking not if, but how. How can we build prosperity and protect our planet from burning? We can do so by investing in a green transition that creates good jobs and gets wages rising for the people and places left behind when the factories closed. That is what we can achieve, and we are seeing it work already in the United States.

2.15 pm

In my community there is world-leading hydrogen research and industry. We need green hydrogen for fertiliser and to keep our trucks moving. It is not a coincidence that I have chosen to speak in this debate, with Treasury Ministers on the Front Bench; I say to them, “Get out the cheque book”—they are very excited by that—“because I will be asking for money from both the National Wealth Fund and GB Energy.”

However, this is about more than cash. It is about rebuilding hope and prosperity. As a previous generation rose to their moment, in the midst of the most destructive war in the history of humankind, an economist wrote a report that still defines our nation. He wrote:

“Freedom from want cannot be forced on a democracy or given to a democracy. It must be won by them.”

It was won by them. They built prosperity for all, with good jobs across our country, education for all, housing for all and healthcare for all.



As that generation rose to their moment, so will we, by building prosperity, protecting our planet and ending despair and despondency. As previous generations rose to their moment, we will too, with the hope and determination that defines our communities and that defines our country.

**The Chairman of Ways and Means (Ms Ghani):** A very strong maiden speech, without a script in hand—your parents will be proud.

**Andrew Griffith:** It is a delight as ever to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ghani. I congratulate the hon. Member for Loughborough (Dr Sandher) on his maiden speech and his kind comments about his predecessor Jane Hunt, a great colleague of this House. It was one of my great pleasures in my previous role as Minister for science and research to visit the fine university he now represents; I wish him and them well, and I wish him all the best of luck with those on his Front Bench in procuring the financial support he seeks.

This is a disreputable Bill, if we are brutally honest. It is a piece of political theatre, which all of us on both sides of this House should think very strongly about giving our support to. This history of this place is of legislation made in haste, which this House subsequently repents at leisure. I say this in all seriousness and in the spirit of this place: at a time when there is low trust in politics, did our constituents—did the hon. Gentleman's constituents, when they trooped to the ballot box and returned him to this place only weeks ago—seriously expect that our role would be to give away even more of our responsibilities? Can any of us, hand on heart, say that our constituents know what and who the OBR is? Did the electors of Bristol North West, Hampstead and Highgate, Richmond Park or, indeed, Arundel and South Downs send us to this place only to give away our duties and responsibility to the unnamed, unknown and unelected officials—well-meaning, no doubt—of the Office for Budget Responsibility? Hands on the face of a stopped clock are sometimes more accurate than the OBR forecasts, as they are at least correct twice a day for sure.

In truth, this legislation, put together at breakneck speed, has more holes than a Swiss cheese. If we look at clause 1(3), who decides the “costing”? Proposed new section 4A exempts any measure that is intended, at the time of its introduction, to be temporary. Members of this House will be familiar with the fact that income tax itself, one of the largest ever fiscal measures, was intended to be temporary; perhaps the Minister will address that fact when he winds up. Income tax was introduced by Pitt the Younger in 1799 as a temporary measure. Well, here we are, 225 years later, and that temporary measure is still going extremely strong.

Who defines what is and is not a fiscal measure—a measure with a potential impact on the GDP of this country? Many things decided in this House will have a direct or indirect impact on the GDP of this country; the decision by Tony Blair to take us to war without a vote in this House undoubtedly had an impact on our GDP. Decisions to introduce a four-day working week—if this House so chooses to make them, as is its right—would have a material impact on the GDP of this country. The Centre for Business and Economic Research estimates that every bank holiday costs this country a sum

approaching £3.6 billion. Three, four, five or six bank holidays add up to a 1% impact on GDP, which I speculate may be the threshold for the OBR to intervene.

On trade deals, if those on the Government Benches fulfilled their ambition to realign with Europe—to federate and once again abrogate our trade to Europe—that would potentially have a material fiscal impact on GDP. There are very few domains of this House—very few of the decisions that our constituents have sent us here to legislate and decide on their behalf—that would not potentially fall foul of this rule.

**Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op):** I will delight the hon. Gentleman, because, as I am sure he saw on the amendment paper, I have tabled an amendment that would look at trade deals. One of the reasons why I felt compelled to do that, and explore this question that he raises about the economic impact, is that while he was in government and, indeed, a Treasury Minister, the Government did not publish any information for the very trade deals he is talking about. I will always welcome a sinner who repenteth but, for the avoidance of doubt, is he saying that he now believes there should be independent scrutiny of things such as the trade and co-operation agreement?

**Andrew Griffith:** It is good to have a proper debate. I certainly think that if we want and seek good government—which, like the human condition, is not a perfect state, but a state that we should seek constantly to perfect—the highest levels of transparency and the very important exercise in Government publishing of impact assessments when they make material decisions, as required by Cabinet Office guidance, are things that the whole House should join hands and agree on. It is one of the reasons why I asked my colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Droitwich and Evesham (Nigel Huddleston), whether the Government had published an impact assessment on their callous decision to withdraw the winter fuel allowance from so many pensioners. The hon. Member for Walthamstow (Ms Creasy) will well know that the process of trade deals undergoes extensive scrutiny in this House, and I took one of those trade deals through that process of scrutiny in a former life.

I will conclude, because I simply want to alert hon. Members to what they are potentially doing as they seek to support this Bill. It is not for partisan or political advantage, but about the important role of Parliament, which has been litigated many times in this Chamber and in debate.

**Graham Stringer (Blackley and Middleton South) (Lab):** Unsurprisingly, I have listened to the hon. Gentleman's speeches on a number of occasions, and I agree with quite a lot of what he is saying about transparency. Does he agree that the burden of his argument is that we cannot make a Government behave better or govern more effectively by quango? This quango was set up by George Osborne to trap an incoming Labour Government and restrict and slow them down, and it is an odd thing that we see this quango being gilded.

**Andrew Griffith:** As ever, the hon. Member makes an important and weighty contribution. He is exactly right about the direction of travel. On both sides of the House, we will all find our own particular point on the envelope when it comes to the balance around organisations

that can hold us to account and, in particular, hold a mirror to Government and ensure that this House acts with the best, most accurate and well-meaning data.

My core point is that we are sent here by our constituents. I again congratulate the hon. Member for Loughborough, who has been sent here on behalf of his constituents and has given a fine speech today, but I do not believe—he may intervene and correct me—that the citizens of Loughborough, whether they voted for Jane Hunt or for him, intended that one of the very first actions he and we would take as legislators would be to award more of our powers and place more fetters on ourselves. This is the right Chamber for accountability. We should hold ourselves to account; we have a number of ways in which to do that to ourselves. The hon. Member for Blackley and Middleton South (Graham Stringer) makes a very real point about quangos, arm's length bodies and how we hold ourselves to account.

That is my point. I understand that many colleagues wish to get in. I support the amendment put forward by my hon. Friend the Member for Droitwich and Evesham, because it is quite right that we have rules. I was an accountant by training, and the first thing we learn—whether someone is an accountant or in performance sport—is that we play by the rules as they are; we do not seek to rig the rules in our favour.

**Ms Creasy:** It is a pleasure to speak in the same debate as the maiden speech given by my hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Dr Sandher). I am sure other speeches are coming that will show just how impressive the new generation of MPs is across the House.

It is also a joy to follow the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Andrew Griffith), because I have always enjoyed the experience of listening to him. When he was a Treasury Minister in the previous Government, I watched him, debated with him and tried to encourage him to take on the buy now, pay later lenders—that is related to what I will say about legal loan sharking. But I have to be honest: being lectured by former Conservative Ministers about fiscal probity is a bit like being lectured by Toad of Toad Hall about safe driving, given the experiences of many of our constituents, which have led to the need for this legislation.

I put on record my support for this legislation, because frankly anybody who has had to renegotiate a mortgage since the Liz Truss Budget knows exactly why it is needed and why we must protect the British public from the consequences of bad decision making at a national level. As we saw in many examples under the previous Administration, the public have paid the price for that and will continue to do so.

**Andrew Griffith:** Of course, the legislation does not fetter previous Governments, but it would fetter the discretion of the hon. Lady's own Front Benchers. In that context, does she not have the same confidence in her Front Bench that many others seem to enjoy?

**Ms Creasy:** I am a bit disappointed that the hon. Member did not seek to call me Ratty. I am also quite struck by the fact that he, a former Conservative Treasury Minister, rises not to hold himself accountable for the consequences of decisions made by the previous Government, or indeed to defend them, but simply to say, "You will be held to a higher fiscal standard." We on the Labour Benches welcome a higher fiscal standard;

that is the purpose of the legislation. Political decisions will still be made, but we will make them with the benefit of independent information. He will know that there were many debates in the previous Parliament, and indeed in those before it, in which independent information about and verification of the economic impact of policies mattered but were missing. Indeed, he mentions trade deals, which are an example of where we did not have independent information. I will comment on that only briefly, because my amendment has not been selected—he will be as disappointed as I am about that.

2.30 pm

The amendments that I have tabled are intended to probe the legislation and the concept of "fiscally significant." Amendments 6 and 7—and indeed amendment 8, although it was not considered in scope for selection—are about how we hold ourselves to account for the impact on future generations. I am not here to make a maiden speech; I am essentially the old guard now because I have been here for 14 years—[*Interruption.*] I know, it is very sad—my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton North (Lucy Rigby) is looking at me in horror.

**Graham Stringer:** You are not as old guard as some.

**Ms Creasy:** Yes. But in that time, many of us have had persistent concerns, and one of mine has always been the private finance initiative. The Government are asking all of us to make and support some very tough decisions because of the economic mess that the country now finds itself in. My view is that we must look at all outgoings in that process. If somebody came to a constituency surgery because they had multiple outstanding loans and could not pay their rent, we would look at the debts that they held. That is the challenge with private finance: it is the legal loan-sharking of the public sector. Amendments 6 and 7 are about the process of getting a grip on our debts and ensuring that we learn from the damage that private finance has done.

Let us be clear: nobody can absolve themselves from private finance. Governments of all persuasions have sought to use that process—the ability to put only the repayments on the books, rather than the substantial cost of borrowing. That started under John Major; yes, there were multiple PFIs under the previous Labour Government; and indeed, the previous Conservative Government continued to use private finance until 2018. That is why, as of February this year, there are still 700 PFI schemes representing a capital value of £57 billion, but for which we will pay back £151 billion in the years ahead. We are asking pensioners to pay more for heating their homes, but we should be asking how we can pay less for the private finance debts that we have built up.

Private finance was about being able to build things such as schools and hospitals. Anybody who has an outstanding PFI debt in their constituency, or a school or hospital that urgently needs rebuilding, such as Whipps Cross hospital in my constituency, understands the importance of being able to access private finance. For the avoidance of doubt, I am not saying through my amendments that we should never work with the private sector; I am saying that PFI was a catastrophically bad deal and that, cumulatively, it would meet the legislation's targets of 1% of GDP, so it is a fiscally significant

[*Ms Creasy*]

policy. My amendments are about trying to understand how we will deal with cumulative debt and cumulatively fiscally significant policies.

**Graham Stringer:** I agree completely with my hon. Friend. As a member of the even older guard than hers—

**Ms Creasy:** The original OG!

**Graham Stringer:** I am certainly the old guard from the start of the previous Labour Government. That is relevant because I had a discussion at the time with the then Paymaster General, Geoffrey Robinson, about the cost of PFIs for hospitals. His answer was succinct: “If you want the hospitals, you have to go down the PFI route.” He said that because the Treasury rules were so rigid about finding money for socially needed projects—hospitals in that case—the Government had to work around them, at what would eventually be a huge cost to the taxpayer. There is a warning there about rigid rules and not dealing with reality.

**Ms Creasy:** It will not surprise my hon. Friend that I agree with him not just about his football team but in his analysis. The legislation is about having better fiscal rules and tougher constraints when Governments make decisions. We saw with the Liz Truss Budget how catastrophic those decisions can be.

Many Members will have come across PFI in their constituencies, but it is worth putting on the record just how big it is, because that is relevant to the legislation. We are talking about 700 projects, but each project can be hundreds of individual buildings. One of those 700 projects is made up of 80 schools, for example, which shows the scale that we are talking about. About half of PFIs are held between the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department for Education. That is how we built desperately needed schools and hospitals, but the cost is absolutely critical.

Some NHS trusts are now spending 13% of their total budget on PFI repayments—£2 billion a year for some. In practical terms, that means that some trusts are spending more to repay what is essentially a payday loan for the public sector than they are spending on drugs for their patients. It is a huge drain on our public finances. In 2020, during the pandemic, Norfolk and Norwich University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust paid £66 million to service its PFI commitments—the same amount that it spent on lab equipment, surgical tools and personal protective equipment. University College London Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust has already paid out £200 million in dividends to the company that owns its PFI, so the money is not just going to repay a debt for building a hospital; it is going out in pure profit to those companies. That is why I draw the parallel with payday lenders and buy now, pay later companies: once you are hooked in, you have to keep paying the debt.

It is not just a problem in the NHS. Hanson academy in Bradford has reached a debt of £4.16 million because of its PFI debt. It is now referred to as the UK’s “orphan” school because nobody wants to run it or take it over, given its financial position. Liverpool city council pays £4 million a year for Parklands high school, which

was, again, built under PFI but is no longer needed because of falling school rolls. The council has roughly £42 million left to pay back on that contract for an empty, dead building. The equity solutions company that owns it has posted profits of £340,000 from that project this year alone.

PFI companies have made £111 million in pre-tax profit from education projects alone. That is about £800,000 per project, and the equivalent of 5,500 new teachers’ salaries. The companies took on the risk of those deals to rebuild our public infrastructure, but the reality is that we do not let schools and hospitals go bust, so they took on the ability to print money. That is what the deals are doing. I will wager that every new and returning MP has had a conversation with someone in local government, a local hospital or a local school who talks about the damage that PFI is doing to their budgets, as if it is non-negotiable.

My amendments are about changing that culture. One challenge is that we have let those companies run rampant. That does not mean that we should not work with the private sector; it means that we should learn lessons, and I think we could learn some very simple ones. For a start, a lot of the companies are incorporated in overseas territories, which raises questions about the amount of tax that they are paying on those deals. Tax was originally part of the Treasury assessment of the deals, which was why working in that way was considered good value for money, and why my hon. Friend the Member for Blackley and Middleton South (Graham Stringer) was told that it was the best way to get a school or hospital.

We could also learn from payday lending by capping what the companies pay. After all, we cap the returns on defence projects. It makes no economic or ethical sense that we cap what can be earned from a military contract, but when someone builds a school or a hospital, they have free rein.

Above all, we need to know how much we owe, because even the Infrastructure and Projects Authority within Government could not get a grip on the total reality of our PFI commitments to date. That is partly because this has been done at a local government level, through devolution and in silos within companies, but it seems a very simple thing: even if those debts are being held overseas, the people paying them are very much here. In Northampton, there are 42 schools costing £30 million per annum, including £4.2 million in pre-tax profits in 2021-22, and Northampton’s budgets as a local authority are in a very difficult position right now. The firm that owns all those schools is based in Guernsey. In Birmingham, 11 schools are part of the Birmingham Schools Partnership, owned by Innisfree. Innisfree owns 260 schools across this country, as well as my local hospital in Whipps Cross. It is based in Jersey and is making millions of pounds in profit from these deals. We have never consolidated those loans to ask ourselves whether we could renegotiate them as a country and therefore claw some money back, because we do not know who we owe what to, or how much it is going to cost.

Amendments 6 and 7 deal with the challenges posed by the threshold of this legislation. It is absolutely right to set a threshold for what is fiscally significant, and individual PFIs would not go anywhere near a threshold of 1% of GDP, which is about £28 billion. However, when we add them up, it is very clear from what we



already know about our PFI commitments that they do. As such, these amendments are intended to probe the Government about how we deal with debts and spending that might not meet that threshold individually, but might do so cumulatively, and to look at what we can do in the future to make sure that if we work with the private sector—again, I am not saying that we should never do so; I am saying that we should learn from PFI—we make better decisions. After all, this legislation is about making better-informed, independent decisions.

That is why I also tabled amendment 8, to learn the lessons from trade deals. The hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs is right: the Government's decision to go for the trade and co-operation agreement—the hardest of Brexits—has cost us an estimated 4% of GDP, so again, that would be a fiscally significant decision. It would be as catastrophic as that Liz Truss Budget—indeed, many of us can see that it has been—but we did not have an independent assessment. Amendment 6 and amendment 7, which is an enabling amendment, would ensure that we have an independent assessment of cumulative spending looking at these issues.

I know that the Minister is as interested as I am in what we can do to tackle the drain that PFI represents and work better with the private sector. I hope that this legislation and the concept of putting PFI on the books is the start of a conversation about better public spending, and I hope that Toad of Toad Hall will recognise that maybe this time it is good that they are in the passenger seat.

**Sarah Olney** (Richmond Park) (LD): I will speak in favour of amendments 1 to 4, which were tabled in my name. Once again, I welcome this Bill and this Government's intent to rebuild trust with the financial markets and across our economy as a whole. The Liberal Democrats are optimistic about the new Government's stated commitment to building a strong platform for economic growth, particularly after years of Conservative turmoil. I remain hopeful that this Bill can support fiscal responsibility and transparency and help prevent a repeat of the Conservatives' disastrous mini-Budget. The amendments tabled in my name would strengthen the legislation so that that aim can be achieved.

I welcome the concern that the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Andrew Griffith) has shown for my constituents in Richmond Park and their thoughts about this legislation, but I wonder where his concern for my constituents was when the Government of which he was a part cheered on, championed and voted for that disastrous mini-Budget that so undermined our stable economy, to the detriment of the wellbeing of individuals, communities and businesses.

Liberal Democrats understand how much our constituents have suffered from the increase in mortgage payments, higher fuel bills and escalating food prices. We understand the disastrous effects of the chaos and uncertainty wrought by the previous Conservative Government in their horrendous mismanagement of the economy, and we know that future prosperity can only be built upon a firm foundation. We know the heavy burden that our constituents continue to feel in their pockets and their personal finances, and we know that they deserve better.

As I have previously acknowledged, the broad positive response that this Bill has evoked across the business and finance sector is indicative of the desire for stability,

and we welcome the engagement from economists—such as the new hon. Member for Loughborough (Dr Sandher), who I wish well in the beard of the year contest—and industry experts who advise of the beneficial impact this Bill will have on confidence in the public finances. We have carefully scrutinised the details of the Bill to make sure it will achieve its intended aims.

In particular, we have looked closely at the threshold for fiscally significant measures, which will be set at 1% of GDP or approximately £30 billion, and whether the proposed fiscal lock could be circumvented by Governments announcing major changes that fall just below that threshold. Although we understand that the bar has been set relatively high to prevent a large-scale irresponsible fiscal event such as the disastrous mini-Budget, we are aware of the limitations this places on the Bill, especially when it comes to measures that might have relatively small up-front costs to the Government but significant indirect fiscal or economic effects. I therefore ask Treasury Ministers whether a GDP measure alone can adequately capture the impact on the economy of a spending or taxation measure, and whether the Government should examine the possibility of using additional criteria when setting the threshold.

2.45 pm

That is why I have tabled amendment 1, which would broaden the definition of “fiscally significant measures” to include those that fall below the costing threshold but could have wider fiscal and economic effects. The amendment would ensure that the OBR was able to produce a report when it judged that proposed measures were likely to affect interest rates, the cost of Government borrowing, or economic growth. Whereas a fiscal lock based solely on GDP could leave open the possibility of circumvention, that wider definition would enable the OBR to step in if it thought it likely that Government measures might precipitate the kind of economic disaster we saw after the mini-Budget. It is possible to imagine a situation where a fiscal measure fell just short of the 1% of GDP threshold, but was none the less likely to carry significant ramifications for the cost of Government borrowing, for economic growth and, crucially, for interest rates.

We cannot forget that any spike in interest rates does not just carry grave consequences for the public finances, but has a huge impact on household finances and people's living standards. We all witnessed mortgage rates skyrocket in the aftermath of the previous Government's catastrophic mini-Budget, and millions of families are still struggling with higher bills as a result. It is therefore wholly appropriate that interest rates be taken into consideration when assessing whether a measure is fiscally significant. This Bill is an encouraging sign of this Government's intention to act with more integrity and transparency than the last, but its provisions alone may not be enough to protect voters from the consequences of another disastrous mini-Budget if a future Chancellor or Prime Minister is so minded to deliver one. That is why strengthening the fiscal lock by broadening the definition of “fiscally significant measures” is such a vital safeguard.

I also wish to speak in favour of amendment 2, which would enable the OBR to notify the independent adviser on Ministers' interests if they think a failure to request a report ahead of a fiscal event might constitute a

breach of the ministerial code. The 2022 mini-Budget was clearly the moment when the Conservative party's carelessness took our country to the brink. However, we should not forget that it was the culmination of years of mismanagement and disregard for the principles of good governance from a Conservative party that considered itself to be above the rules. Sidelining the OBR ahead of a major fiscal event was the pinnacle of the arrogance we had seen so many times before.

The ministerial code puts in place guardrails that are crucial for good governance. It promotes essential principles such as transparency, accountability and openness. For example, it states that Ministers have a duty to "be as open as possible with Parliament and the public".

Those are principles that all Governments should abide by, especially when they relate to economic matters, and the Liberal Democrats have long called for the ministerial code to be enshrined in legislation. In the same vein, amendment 2 would provide for useful scrutiny of the Government's actions by empowering the OBR to notify the independent adviser on Ministers' interests if they have reason to believe that vital principles of the code may have been violated. We must never again have a Government put the country's finances at risk out of their disdain for the rules, and this amendment would help achieve that aim.

Finally, I wish to speak in favour of amendments 3 and 4. Their purpose is to strengthen scrutiny of any changes to the charter for budget responsibility, so that provisions of the Bill cannot be circumvented simply by revising the threshold set out in that charter. A full consultation, along with an extended period of scrutiny, would ensure that Parliament and the public were fully informed of any proposed changes and given the opportunity to engage with them, improving transparency and accountability.

Responsible public finances are essential for the stability, certainty and confidence that drive economic growth, and for getting mortgage rates under control. The Conservative Government have shown all too clearly the damage and pain caused by fiscal irresponsibility. I therefore urge the House to accept the amendments I have tabled. The Liberal Democrats want to see a thriving British economy—one that provides jobs and opportunities for working people and is attractive to businesses and investors. We believe that this Bill is a significant step in promoting long-term stability, and we urge the Government to accept our amendments, which would strengthen the legislation and help create the conditions for responsible economic governance.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**The Chairman of Ways and Means (Ms Ghani):** I thought I would offer some tips to colleagues in the Chamber. If you are bobbing, you will be called. If you are on the list, but are not bobbing, you are indicating to the Chair or the Speaker that you no longer wish to be called, so if you hope to be called, bob throughout the debate. If you are on the list and committed to bobbing, but leave the Chamber, you are indicating to the Chair or the Speaker that you no longer wish to be a priority on the list. However, you can speak to the Chair or the Speaker and ask permission to leave and return, and you will then remain where you were in the priority list. Unless Members stand, I do not know whether they wish to contribute to the debate, so who wishes to bob?

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**The Chairman:** I call Amanda Martin to make her maiden speech.

**Amanda Martin** (Portsmouth North) (Lab): Thank you, Ms Ghani. I start by commending my hon. Friends for their impassioned speeches, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Dr Sandher). He will be pleased to know that I will not be a contender this year in the competition that he mentioned. Maybe later, menopause depending.

It is a huge honour to stand before you today as the newly elected Member of Parliament for Portsmouth North. This moment is not lost on me; I am filled with immense emotion at the thought of representing the place where everyone I love lives. Portsmouth is a city rich in history, innovation and, most importantly, community spirit and pride. It is also a place of firsts. Throughout our city's storied history, we have been pioneers in many fields, be it shipbuilding, maritime trade or cultural advancement. Portsmouth has always led the way, and it is that spirit of innovation that I intend to champion while in this House.

I am deeply humbled to make my maiden speech in this debate highlighting the importance of fiscal standards, because during the election campaign so many people told me that their mortgage had gone through the roof, or that they had lost the ability to buy or rent their first home, or indeed any home, because of the actions of the last Government.

I understand personally what it is like when a full-time job does not even cover the bills. My gramps was a train driver. He taught me the importance of hard work and public service. He introduced me to the trade union movement and to the Labour party, which I am proud to say have been at the centre of my adult life. My mum was a factory seamstress and my dad was a plumber and then a police officer. As a kid, times were tough, but our house was always full of love, humour and determination. My dad worked three jobs and my mum set about making childhood the very best it could be. My gramps navigated the tracks with precision and care, my mum sewed with love, and my dad served his community. I know I will bring the same attitude to my time in this House, because the opportunity here is so very precious.

Like so many of my colleagues on the Government Benches, I was the first in my family to go to university and the first to become a teacher, but thankfully not the last to enter what I still deem to be the very best profession in the world. The right education really does empower young people and give them belief and the opportunity to succeed, whatever their background and circumstances. I am so very proud to be part of a Government who will bring down the barriers to opportunity and tackle child poverty, working across Departments to ensure that all kids get the best start in life.

Having been a teacher for 24 years, I know that not everyone has the start in life that I feel privileged to have had. Being allowed to try things and fail was a great lesson. My working-class background means that I sometimes seem a bit impatient. This is because I know that people from my background must fight harder, and do not often get a second chance, so they have to seize

every opportunity as it arises. As an MP, I want to champion children and young people from all backgrounds across my city, so that they are given every chance to succeed and fulfil their potential, whatever that may be and wherever that may take them. The children and young people in Portsmouth deserve nothing less.

Portsmouth, as I have said, is a city of firsts. The first dry dock in the world was built there in 1495. The first ragged school was established there in the name of John Pounds in 1818. We were the first to have a steam railway in 1837, and the first co-operative society in Britain was set up there in 1796 by dockyard workers fed up with being ripped off by local tradesmen. The first oil-fired HMS Queen Elizabeth was built there in 1913; the second ship is very close to my heart. In 1956, the first football league game played under floodlights took place there; it was Portsmouth versus Newcastle. In 2024, the Portsmouth women's football club turned professional for the first time. Another first is the nursery on Whale Island's naval base; it is pioneering a brilliant programme to help children deal with separation and the unique challenges of having a parent in the military who is serving away.

Portsmouth also produced the first female Secretary of State for Defence, and as I raise this first, I would like to pay tribute to my predecessor. Penny Mordaunt's service to our city, and particularly her role in the coronation of our King, is to be celebrated. In this House she had many roles in Government. She has always championed the Royal Navy, and from what I hear, she loved her time in the parliamentary hairdressers'. However, the sword now passes to me, and I will continue her lead as I champion our Royal Navy and our great city, both here and at home.

Now for my final first for our great city. For the first time in our city's history, both Portsmouth MPs are Labour MPs. We build on the work of our predecessors: Lord Frank Judd; Sarah McCarthy-Fry; and my very dear friend, mentor and freeman of our city, Syd Rapson. Together, my good friend the new Minister with responsibility for early education, my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan), and I will work night and day to be champions of change for the city we call home, Portsmouth.

I am so very proud of the positive campaign we ran in Portsmouth North. We unashamedly focused on the need for opportunity and for real change. I want to put on record my thanks to the many people who helped me get here, including the Pompey Belles, my amazing family of 17, friends and the dozens of volunteers from Portsmouth Labour and beyond.

As I begin my journey in this House, I know that the need for change has never been so great. As this debate highlights, after 14 years of Tory rule, there are so many uncertainties for the people in my city. People are struggling; the money just does not go far enough. Schools are underfunded and understaffed. Appointments in primary care, the NHS and dentistry are, in some areas, almost impossible to get. Youth services outside the voluntary sector stretch only to offering support with probation. Our high streets are a mess, and housing is in complete chaos.

However, not everything is about money and pay. This is about pride. Pompey people are proud people. They do not shout about successes, unless they are in football. They rarely grumble—equally, unless it is about football. Many of them just get their heads down, roll

up their sleeves and get on with it, and many feel betrayed and let down by those who should have been there for them. For some, trust in politicians has disappeared, and I can understand why. People on the doorstep and in the street are wary and fed up with broken promises. Many feel alone, isolated and betrayed. Coming from one of the most trusted professions in the country to one of the least, I get it. I know that, as the MP for Portsmouth North, the chance for opportunity and real change lies with me—real change, that people can see, feel and be part of; positive change that they can proudly shout about. As Alan Ball said,

“This is Portsmouth, people went to war from this city”.

It is a city that deserves the very best, and I aim to give my very best in representing and serving it.

What of the city of Portsmouth? We officially turn 100 years old in 2026, and a raft of famous figures have helped shape our city, including Charles Dickens, Isambard Kingdom Brunel and James Callaghan, a Labour Prime Minister in whose honour I hope next year to secure a blue plaque. As rich in culture as our city is, it is also full of unsung people who should be right up there with the famous people I listed. These include—this is in no way an exhaustive list—Shamila from Portsmouth City of Sanctuary, Roni at Pamodzi, Isabelle from Loaves of Love, Laura at STEMunity and Mandy, an award-winning community volunteer. They are just a few of the people in my city making it great.

I feel extremely privileged to have seven magnificent wards in my constituency, and to have lived, worked or had family and friends in every single one of them. They are all special and unique in their own right, from Paulsgrove, Drayton and Farlington to Cosham, Hilsea and Nelson, and Copnor and Baffins. They are also all very much Pompey, and when you walk down the street it would not be uncommon to hear, “Oi, mush, don't be a squinny”, or “Oi, you loon”, or “din”.

As a whole, Portsmouth North is made up of those magnificent seven wards, with 70,000 constituents, 35 schools, our brilliant Queen Alexandra hospital, 11 GP practices, hundreds of charities, small, family-run, large, regional and national businesses, a municipal and thriving international ferry port, seven allotments, 27 pubs, one mobile and four static libraries, a shoreline, the best view in the world to watch the sun rise or set at Portsdown hill with a cracking burger van, a pond, a marshland, a forest—albeit a mini one—and the training ground for the football club who are simply the best. As a season ticket holder and a trust board member, it is sad to say that Fratton Park resides in the south of my city, but I get the brilliantly named John Jenkins training ground.

3 pm

I stand here today not only as the Member of Parliament for Portsmouth North, but as a proud representative of a city that has always been full of firsts, and will have so many more to come. I will acknowledge that together as we work we may face times of choppy waters and, as they say in the Navy, “Fair winds and following seas”. And as they say at Fratton Park, “Play up Pompey”.

**The Chairman of Ways and Means (Ms Ghani):** That speech will delight every corner of Portsmouth North.

I call Dave Doogan.



**Dave Doogan** (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Portsmouth North (Amanda Martin) and that rundown of her fantastic constituency. I want to go there now that I have heard about it, although she might be surprised to know that I am quite familiar with that part of the world around Portsmouth North, Fareham, Gosport, Hayling Island and Southsea. It is a beautiful part of the world, and while it cannot compete with Scotland in scenery, it certainly wins the day when it comes to weather in the summertime. She might also be surprised to know that there is a fairly high concentration of Pompey supporters in Perthshire. That is a legacy of the Royal Naval aircraft workshops outside Perth, when people used to go down to the Royal Naval aircraft yard in Gosport, and picked up a loyalty to Pompey from there. I offer many congratulations, not least on a fantastic maiden speech but also on those exceptional shoes.

I am concerned, indeed troubled as many people will be, about the role of the Treasury and Chancellor in the last couple of months. We are here to talk about budget responsibility, and I wonder what answer we would get if we were to ask the 80% of pensioners on these islands who are about to be stripped of their winter fuel payment what they think is responsible about that budget intervention. We could ask the millions living in poverty across these island—a disgrace in and of itself—what they think about budget responsibility in their lives, now double scuppered by Labour's two-child cap. We could ask the millions of working poor across these islands, who are trying to do right by their children, their employer, and just pay their bills to get by, and who put their kids to bed every night and then sit up all night worrying about everything, what difference this fiscal lock will make to their lives.

The Chancellor's first two acts on taking up her role was to make life harder for the poorest families in society who have the least. Once she had dispatched them, she turned her fire on pensioners, removing their winter fuel allowance. Austerity 2.0—it does not matter to Scotland whether austerity comes in a Labour or Tory wrapper, it is still as caustic. That is relevant because the Chancellor wants us to believe that the Bill and the fiscal lock will make everything okay, but it does not. The Office for Budget Responsibility will take no view on the qualitative merits or otherwise of any Treasury decision, but merely on the quantitative dimension in fiscal terms. There are no locks in the Bill to protect the people of these islands from this Labour Chancellor.

We hear ad nauseam that the Chancellor had no choice in any of these actions, and the worst inheritance since the war, and it goes on and on. Well:

"The numbers may be a little bit worse than they thought at the time, and I think there were some things that were hidden from view, but the overall picture over the next four or five years is very, very similar to what we knew before the election."

Those are not my words, but those of Paul Johnson, the director of the Institute for Fiscal Studies. If that is not good enough, the SNP warned throughout the election that if Labour stuck to Tory spending plans, taxes would rise and/or budgets would be cut, and here we are. The SNP even challenged Labour in Scotland on that point during the election, and the leader of Labour in Scotland, Anas Sarwar, said,

"read my lips: no austerity under Labour".

He is not saying that now is he, because he cannot. Perhaps the Chancellor, or those on her Front Bench, can advise us about whether Mr Sarwar was having a stumble with the truth that day, or whether they had forgotten to let their branch office in Scotland in on the plan. Despite all that, the Chancellor and her Treasury Front Bench persist in their claims about a £22 billion black hole to defend their indefensible attacks on the poorest in society. It is unacceptable, and the Bill, if enacted, will do nothing to protect communities from that.

I am also troubled by the language that those on the Treasury Front Bench seek to use to accrue some form of disproportionate credit for bringing forward the Bill. At its core, the Bill is nothing more than an additional provision to the existing Act, and the exaggerated language around it exposes the weakness of the Government's position on this fiscal lock. Nothing is either locked in or locked out by the Bill. The OBR cannot stop any Budget or fiscal adjustment, good, bad or indifferent. That is Parliament's role, as other right hon. and hon. Members have pointed out. On Second Reading I pointed that out to the Minister, who declined to concede on the absolute fact that the position is as I have just set out. I hope he has had a chance to reflect on the so-called fiscal lock, which is nothing more than an administrative assessment of Treasury plans on which nothing is contingent. The hon. Member for Walthamstow (Ms Creasy) said that she is keen for those on the Treasury Front Bench to be held to a higher fiscal standard. Fair enough, but the Bill will not do that. This is in abstract the narrowest one-dimensional protection from bad fiscal policy.

Labour Members are seemingly addicted—the Bill evidences this—to some sort of pound shop exaggeration, and a troubling reliance on hyperbole when detailing something profoundly ordinary. The fiscal lock and the Bill will not protect the devolved nations and their budgets from the austerity of the Labour Front Bench. Before the general election, when Labour in Wales was facing NHS budget pressures, the now Secretary of State said that

"all roads lead to the Tories"

and Westminster, in accordance with those budget pressures. Now, after the election, we have a Labour Government, the SNP in Scotland is facing those same budget pressures, and it is the SNP's fault. They cannot have it both ways. They have got the job and they need to own it.

The Chancellor claimed that the SNP should raise income taxes to pay for her cut to the winter fuel allowance in Scotland. The cheek of it! I remind those on the Treasury Front Bench that 70% of taxes raised in Scotland go directly to the Treasury. We have paid our dues, and shame on the Chancellor for trying to get Scottish taxpayers to pay twice to compensate for her axe wielding. The double standards of it all are staggering. She wants the Scottish Government to raise income taxes in Scotland, which is precisely what she refused to do ahead of the UK general election. Why will she not mirror the Scottish Government's progressive income tax regime to increase taxes slightly on those of us who are better off, and reduce taxes slightly for those on the lowest incomes? That would raise nearly £16 billion for the Treasury. If she had done that and followed the SNP Scottish Government's lead, she would not have had to attack our pensioners' winter fuel allowance. A significant

element of budget responsibility is ensuring that people own their decisions and their own mess. Labour will find that SNP Members are keen to help them in that pursuit. In summary, there is nothing particularly to object to in this inherently ordinary and transactional provision in the Bill, except for the behaviour of the Government advancing it.

**The Chairman of Ways and Means (Ms Ghani):** I call Will Stone to make his maiden speech.

**Will Stone** (Swindon North) (Lab): Thank you, Ms Ghani, and congratulations on your position. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North (Amanda Martin) on her inspiring speech. I feel like I know her constituency a little better now, and I commend all those who have delivered their maiden speeches today and in recent weeks. You have all been fantastic.

It is truly an honour for me to make my maiden speech in a debate on budget responsibility, and I am proud to be elected in this new Labour Government—a Government committed to fiscal responsibility, credibility and accountability. We will ensure that taxpayers' money is managed and spent wisely, not recklessly as the previous Administration did. I have the absolute pleasure of representing Swindon North, the town where I was born, raised and am proud to call my home. I am also proud of the fact that I am the first Member of Parliament in Swindon North's history to have been born in the town.

I pay tribute to my predecessor, Mr Justin Tomlinson, who served as the Member of Parliament for North Swindon for 14 years. Justin was a ferocious campaigner and he also supported many local community groups and was incredibly passionate about football, namely our local club, Supermarine FC. While we do not align politically, Justin has my respect, so I thank him for his service.

I would also like to mention another former Member of Parliament for Swindon: one of my mentors, the Labour peer Lord Michael Wills. I have learned so much from Michael. Even though he is going through an incredibly tough time with his health, he has always been there to support and guide me with his expert knowledge. Michael is not only a top-notch politician, but a published author of crime novels. I only recently found that out, but I guess it is not too much of a surprise, considering he was once a Minister of State for Justice. I am truly privileged to follow in his footsteps. If I am half the parliamentarian he was, I will have done Swindon proud. I hope the House will join in wishing him a speedy recovery, and I hope to repay his trust in the Chamber.

I am the first Brazilian jiu-jitsu black-belt to be elected to Parliament, and I used to run my own academy. Ms Ghani, I promise this is somewhat relevant. When I left the Army, I had offers to teach Brazilian jiu-jitsu across the world, from Abu Dhabi to Arizona, but I picked Swindon. I am often asked, "Why did you choose Swindon?", but it is an easy answer for me: I love Swindon. I love my hometown. It is a wonderful town built on industry and is full of passion and hope. Our history is a proud history of reinvention. We started life as a farming town with a focus on pig markets, then we transitioned and became a hub for the railways in

the 19th century. Generations of railway workers and their families benefited from the cradle-to-grave healthcare that is rumoured to have inspired the great NHS. As technology developed, so did Swindon, and we became home to the likes of Rover, Honda and Mini, but what is next?

We are at a pivotal point in history for my town. Where does Swindon go next? My hope is that it will go as it always has: into the future, at the forefront of new technologies and green technologies. I hope that my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Ed Miliband) hears that. It is my mission to foster green growth in Swindon and see the town thrive again with high-skilled, well-paid jobs. I believe that in a growing, stable economy, we can see that happen. Swindon is not just famous for its high number of roundabouts—if anyone in the Chamber has ever visited, I am sure they will remember those fondly—as we have also had the pleasure of not one, but two James Bond movies being filmed in the town.

It is impossible to talk about Swindon without mentioning its people. The people make Swindon what it is: a kind, welcoming, industrious place full of passion, innovation and a desire to support others, including strong local charities such as BEST, a charity at the forefront of tackling antisocial behaviour through mentoring and sports, the Kelly Foundation, which supports people suffering with mental health issues, and Changing Suits, which is breaking down barriers in diverse communities to ensure that people get the help they need. I want to say how proud I am of the residents in Swindon. We have seen tough times across the country, with riots sparked by division invading many communities, but they did not come to Swindon because in Swindon we know that diverse communities can stand strong together against extremism. We will not let division and hatred divide us; we will unite together and stand strong.

Swindon, for all its qualities, is not without its fair share of challenges—challenges that I will face head on. Our people are among the least likely in the country to go on to higher education. We have growing levels of knife crime and antisocial behaviour, raw sewage being pumped into our streams and residents of large housing estates being affected by unjust management companies and fleecehold. However, I am confident that with our renewed Labour party and our ambitious agenda set out in the King's Speech—whether that is recruiting and retaining teachers, increasing police presence on our streets, providing mental health professionals in schools or reforming leasehold and fleecehold—all backed and fully costed in a fiscally responsible Budget, the people of Swindon North will experience the positive change they deserve.

To finish, I am proud to be here representing such a fantastic group of people. It truly is the opportunity of a lifetime, so once again, I say thank you so much to the people of Swindon North who have put their faith in me. I will not let you down.

**The Chairman of Ways and Means (Ms Ghani):** I call Marie Goldman to make her maiden speech.

**Marie Goldman** (Chelmsford) (LD): First, I congratulate Members who have also made their maiden speeches in the Chamber this afternoon. In particular, I congratulate the hon. Member for Swindon North (Will Stone).

[*Marie Goldman*]

I wonder whether his skills as a Brazilian jiu-jitsu black-belt led him to apply to be an extra in those movies that he mentioned. I will be watching out for him in the fight scenes.

3.15 pm

It is the honour and privilege of my life to be standing in this Chamber giving my maiden speech as the Member of Parliament for Chelmsford. It is a wonderful, young city located in the heart of Essex that I have had the joy to call my home for the past 20 years or so. The constituency covers the main urban area of the city of Chelmsford. It is blessed with beautiful parks and flanking rivers that wind their way through the city centre, passing the home of the Essex Eagles at the Essex county cricket ground. We have a thriving high street that attracts shoppers from miles around. Investment into the constituency from the public and private sectors means that its future continues to look bright.

From Waterhouse Farm in the west, to Chelmer village in the east, and from Springfield in the northern reaches to the southern boundaries of Goat Hall and everywhere in between, I am proud to call Chelmsford my home and even prouder to be standing here today representing its constituents in this magnificent place.

Chelmsford has one of the busiest two-platform train stations outside of London. Having now rejoined the ranks of the commuters, I know at first hand the importance of the brand-new station being constructed just outside of the northern edge of the constituency. The new Beaulieu Park station will have a significant positive impact on passengers from Chelmsford, giving them more choice and flexibility and removing the need for many of them to travel into the city centre to commence their rail journey.

A new station must not be seen as job done, however. Train travel in this country is expensive and complicated. Ultimately, I do not believe that the public care too much about who runs the trains; they care more about how much rail travel costs them, whether the trains run on time and whether they are comfortable and efficient. They are often frustrated by the bewildering array of ticket options, whose detailed restrictions seem designed either to make them miss their train as they try to work out which one to buy, or to make them buy the wrong ticket. They are not designed for the faint of heart or the novice traveller. That seems like madness if we want to encourage more people to make use of public transport. The whole system needs to be simplified, and I am keen to see the legislation passed yesterday do just that. Without an economy that can support investment in new rail stations or the redevelopment of junctions, including the major Army and Navy interchange in the centre of Chelmsford, we know that such projects are in danger of never happening at all.

I am pleased to support the Bill before us today to ensure that the terrible, wasteful fiscal mistakes of previous Governments are not repeated, leaving more headroom for investment in our country's future. The new Beaulieu Park station was important to my predecessor, Vicky Ford, and I pay tribute to her dedication to that project. It is the culmination of more than a decade of partnership work in Chelmsford that Vicky joined after her first election to Parliament in 2017. Knocking on doors

throughout this year's campaign, many constituents were grateful for her help with issues they had raised with her. They also noted her visible loyalty to her party, as she was rarely seen without her trademark blue nail polish to match her little blue car and an outfit that almost invariably included a splash of blue. I thank her for the time she spent serving the Chelmsford constituency.

From the very bottom of my heart, I thank the constituents of Chelmsford who have placed their trust in me to represent them in this place. I know they did not do so lightly. Indeed, it has taken 74 years of careful consideration for the good people of Chelmsford to send to this place anyone other than a Conservative. Indeed, it has been 100 years since they made the choice to elect a Liberal to represent them. That slow pace of electoral change in Chelmsford may lead those not familiar with Essex's first city to conclude that Chelmsfordians have little appetite for innovation, but nothing could be further from the truth.

Among other things, Chelmsford has a rich and distinguished history in the world of science and technology. Most notably, it hosted the first ever entertainment radio broadcast in the United Kingdom in 1920 from the Marconi New Street works right in the centre, featuring Dame Nellie Melba. That led to regular entertainment broadcasts from Great Baddow in the south of the constituency and eventually to what we now know as the BBC.

It is hard to spend much time knocking on doors in Chelmsford and speaking to Chelmsford residents without coming across someone who used to work for Marconi. Its modern-day successor Teledyne e2v, located little more than a stone's throw away from the site of the original Marconi factories, has more than taken up the mantle of innovation in Chelmsford. Many of my constituents are now employed there. Think of any space mission of the past few decades and the chances are that its imaging equipment contained components designed and built by Teledyne in Chelmsford. From NASA's New Horizons mission to Pluto and the Kuiper belt, launched in 2006, to the planned 2028 launch of Ariel by the European Space Agency to observe the atmospheres of thousands of planets beyond our own solar system, Teledyne and its employees are reaching for the stars.

That is what I want everyone to have the opportunity to do: to reach for the stars, to feel that sense of opportunity and to know that even the sky is not the limit. But they can do that only if we invest, and the very best place for that investment is in our children and young people. We are lucky in Chelmsford to have excellent schools. I thank the teachers and other school staff who work so hard every day to give the children we entrust into their care the best possible start in life, but they are increasingly doing so with their hands tied behind their backs, with dwindling resources, crumbling buildings and ever greater workloads.

I am the first in my family to go to university and the first elected to any public office—let alone as a Member of this House. I have been able to achieve that because I have had a loving and supportive family, lots of incredible campaign volunteers—and, of course, a sizeable dose of luck. But I also know that a critical part of my success is owed to the amazing state school education that I received, the dedicated and inspirational teachers I was lucky enough to be taught by throughout my



school life, and the extracurricular activities—in my case, largely music based—that broadened my horizons and lifted my eyes to the stars.

I worry that that is not the overwhelming experience of those going through our education system today. I worry that children are going through the day with little or no food in their bellies, I worry that schools are having to cut clubs because they no longer have the time or the resources to hold them, and I worry that the performing arts, such as music and drama, have been seen for too long by previous Governments as expendable and an unimportant luxury without recognition that they provide children with the skills and confidence to stand up on large stages—dare I say, in parliamentary Chambers—and be heard. If you are a child with special educational needs or disabilities, well, good luck with that, because the system is utterly, tragically, devastatingly broken. But I also take hope from the wind of change that blew just a couple of months ago. We know that there will be difficult choices ahead, but my hope is that we recognise that investing early on and giving children the best possible start can pay much greater dividends in the future.

When Guglielmo Marconi brought his fledgling inventions and experiments to the United Kingdom in 1896, he did so because he believed that this is a country that can see potential and will invest in that potential for the long term. It paid off, and a whole industry grew from the humble beginnings of a short radio broadcast in the heart of my constituency. Whatever choices are made by the Government in the looming Budget, it is my sincere hope that they recognise the importance of giving schools and teachers the resources they need to allow all children to reach for the stars.

**The Chairman:** I call Bayo Alaba to make his maiden speech.

**Mr Bayo Alaba** (Southend East and Rochford) (Lab): I would like to commend the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman) for a great speech. I know Chelmsford well—it is a beautiful town—and I commend her passion for supporting young people in schools and their journey, which is very important and something that we need to protect.

Thank you, Ms Ghani, for allowing me today to make my first contribution to the House. I think it is right to start off by thanking my predecessor as MP, Sir James Duddridge, for 19 years of dedicated service. He became MP in 2005 when Southend East and Rochford was newly redrawn. The rural areas to the north of Southend have been brought back within the constituency for the first time in many years. Throughout many boundary iterations, from Southend East and Rochford to Rochford and Southend East and back again—you can see the creativity in renaming the constituency—the area has always been Tory-held, up until now. I am particularly proud to speak here today as the seat's first ever Labour representative.

The constituency consists of not just the city of Southend but the villages of Great Wakering, Canewdon, Barling, Paglesham, Stambridge and Shoeburyness, the suburbs of Southchurch and Thorpe Bay, and Rochford itself. It is a beautiful constituency, rich in culture, where you should bring your walking boots as well as your swimming costume. It is the place where Dame Helen Mirren went to primary school and home to the

Cliffs Pavilion, which hosted Oasis in 1995—that might be tricky next time round depending on who can get tickets.

As a Southender, I am contractually obliged to mention that Southend is the site of the longest pier in the world, at 2,158 metres, with the option to walk or take a purpose-built train. I made the mistake some years ago of walking it with my son—he is a little bit older now, and he is up in the Gallery. My calves were struggling by the end of it.

From watching the maiden speeches of Labour colleagues past and present, I have been struck by the nature of the local industry that is so often name-checked. Tin, pottery, steel, textiles and coal are among the staple products in historical Labour seats. Those are noble and important goods—they are Labour goods—but they are not the stock-in-trade of my own seat. Southend's primary industry and expertise has always been tourism: good times, escapism and happy memories. Those are our exports.

Southend is a city that allows people to meet a sea turtle, admire a vintage car, win a large teddy bear and even have their palm read, often during the course of a single day. It is a place where past generations have gone in search of freedom and pleasure, and it is hard in today's world to think of a calling more important than that. Indeed, the musician Billy Bragg immortalised one of the roads that takes people to Southend in his 1985 song “A13 Trunk Road to the Sea”. The chorus name-checks Shoeburyness, and Bragg later said that he hoped his song would imbue the A13—I know this is a bit of a reach—with the same romance as route 66 in America, “The Road to Your Dreams,” which runs from Chicago to Los Angeles. That was a lofty lyrical ambition indeed, and it was always going to be a hard ask, but speaking as someone who grew up in the east end of London in that era, I can confirm that the idea of Southend always carried a certain magic. That is one reason why I feel so privileged to represent the area today.

Another reason is the constituency's military heritage. At the eastern part of my seat we find Shoebury garrison, an area steeped in military history, and in the north is Southend airport, which now serves holidaymakers but in a past life was Rochford airfield, a fighter base that helped to fend off fascism during the second world war. As a former soldier, I was stationed in the Southend area for a short while. One of my great pleasures when canvassing is running into old Army friends still living in the seat—if they are prepared to open the door to me.

For me, as someone who left school with no qualifications, got into a lot of trouble as a young boy and needed a second chance, night school and the military provided a lifeline. I quite simply would not be here today in the mother of all Parliaments without the opportunities that gave me and the ethos of service that it instilled in me.

To properly understand Southend, we need to understand its proud military history. The city is built on a unique blend. The discipline and the dignity of the armed forces is combined with the creativity and the freedom of the arts—a place for both the soldier and the singer, if you like. But there is a risk of getting too misty-eyed. Coastal areas such as mine have been on the economic sharp end for 30 or 40 years. The root cause of that, most notably, is budget air travel, and that is not going away. Recent years have brought fresh challenges. Southend's economy was at the sharp end during the covid pandemic.

[Mr Bayo Alaba]

The city is still in its recovery phase. Many of the jewels in Southend's crown—the Kursaal venue on the seafront or the Freight House in Rochford—remain unused or underused. I am determined that these buildings will come back to life again, as part of our future.

3.30 pm

I believe that change is afoot. There is a Southend renaissance at work. The people of Southend are ready to seize the initiative and want more. Southenders are strong, independent and unbelievably hard-working. This weekend we held City Jam, an awe-inspiring international street art festival, now in its third year. But we cannot do this alone. That is one of the reasons why I am so pleased not just to be Southend's first ever Labour MP, but to be one of many first-time Labour MPs in seaside seats that we have never won before.

Seats such as Southend East and Rochford need a real and impactful regional policy. Too little thought has been put into how we build on existing assets and specialisms, to create a sense of place and an economic centre of gravity. Southend East and Rochford's future will be found in modern technology, modern infrastructure and green energy, by identifying opportunities in well-paid, modern job sectors. We need a year-round economy, not just a seasonal one, so that young people can move from seasonal work into better-paid positions.

Simply put, Southend East and Rochford will need to regain its cultural capital. This is something I have some experience in, having been one of the creative pioneers of east London's creative industries. My wife Debbie and my children are here in the Gallery today, and they have always been there for me—certainly during my career pivot from the creative industries into politics. I thank them for their unwavering support and complete belief in me. I believe it is my duty to help shape and create the future jobs and businesses for this generation and future generations to grow into, just like Adebayo Alaba and Atinuke Awesu, my late parents, who sacrificed everything as part of the Windrush generation to leave their families and communities behind in Nigeria in order to raise a family here, in one of the most welcoming countries in the world.

Simply put, it is now my job to ensure that communities such as Southend East and Rochford are vibrant, dynamic, stable and welcoming. When we talk about the public finances, as we are in Committee today, we should all bear that in mind. Our economy will be strongest if we can fulfil the potential in every corner of the country, including on the esplanades of Southend and in the town centres of Rochford and Southend—places that have so much to contribute to our economy and our culture, yet too often have been sidelined. I look forward to representing my constituents in this House. I look forward to contributing to future debates about our economic future, and I look forward to contributing to many other discussions.

**The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Caroline Nokes):** I call Will Forster to make his maiden speech.

**Mr Will Forster (Woking) (LD):** Thank you, Ms Nokes, for giving me this opportunity to make my maiden speech. Before I do, I pay tribute to the hon. Member

for Southend East and Rochford (Mr Alaba), who spoke of his and his constituency's proud military past. I am sure that he will see his constituency through these tough challenges and on to a brighter future.

It goes without saying that it is a great privilege and an honour of a lifetime to be here, having been elected by the people of Woking. I thank them for electing me as their Member of Parliament. However, I must begin by addressing the Bill and severe crisis facing my local authority, Woking borough council. Despite being relatively small, the Conservatives left Woking with more than £2 billion of debt following risky investment decisions. This legacy is one of negative equity, service cuts and unsustainable debt repayments. It could be argued that the Conservatives in Woking invented Truss economics before the former right hon. Member for South West Norfolk had her small stint as Prime Minister. What has happened in my constituency shows why the Bill is so important. I fear that, without support from the new Government, the situation in Woking, like the rest of local government, will only worsen. My constituents will suffer the most, and that is unacceptable when it is not their fault. I urge the Government to step in and provide the assistance we so desperately need to ensure that my community can recover and thrive.

Most people might think of Woking as a modern constituency, but it has a rich history that stretches back through the centuries. Woking was mentioned in the Domesday Book. Sutton Place, famous for being the former home of Paul Getty, dates from 1525, and is one of the oldest unfortified houses in the country. Woking palace—now sadly a ruin—was a royal residence for both Henry VII and Henry VIII. As a result, Woking football club, my local team, is affectionately known as the Cards, after Cardinal Wolsey.

Several Acts of Parliament have had an especially profound impact on Woking. For example, the Basingstoke canal was authorised by Parliament in 1778. The canal runs through much of Woking constituency. It has shaped our area, and is a popular cycling and walking route and a haven for nature. But like so many places in the country, Woking as we know it today was shaped by the railways. With steam, stone and iron, Woking was cast into the proud town it is today. In the mid-1800s we laid the foundations to become the great commuter town we are.

Woking is also a wonderfully diverse and welcoming place, home to the Shah Jahan mosque, the oldest in the country. A vibrant Muslim community has developed in the town as a result. More recently, we have welcomed Ukrainian refugees, and I attended many events to support our new Ukrainian residents with my predecessor, our former MP Jonathan Lord. That was a powerful example of cross-party co-operation, and I thank Jonathan for his service as Woking's MP, especially on this humanitarian issue where there was no disagreement whatsoever. Although we were opponents at the last election, I wish him and his family well for the future. Woking's MP before Jonathan was Humfrey Malins, who founded the Immigration Advisory Service in 1992, which to this day provides free asylum and immigration advice to those who need it. He got a CBE for his work. Woking has a proud history of electing MPs who welcome immigration, and I am pleased to follow that tradition.

Our town is also known for its connection to McLaren; it hosts its Formula 1 team and luxury cars are built there. I was privileged to make a visit only yesterday. As a young child of around 11, I remember watching with excitement as McLaren toured the town with its Formula 1 cars, driven by Mika Häkkinen, to celebrate their success. McLaren is winning again, much like the Liberal Democrats.

The town also takes great pride in being home to the World Wide Fund for Nature. We have pressing issues, such as sewage in our rivers and the fight against climate change. I am already working alongside the five other newly elected Liberal Democrat MPs in Surrey to hold Thames Water to account for sewage dumping in our local rivers and streams. One of my first acts as an MP is to bring all the Surrey MPs together to meet Thames Water to petition it for improvements and a better service.

Woking is fortunate to be surrounded by green spaces. I love walking my dachshund Toffee on Horsell Common, where HG Wells famously landed his aliens in “War of the Worlds”. So it was not a great surprise when Ed Davey’s Liberal Democrats turned up and started campaigning with their out-of-this-world stunts. Of course, I’m only “woking”—I wouldn’t dare call my Liberal Democrat colleagues aliens.

Getting back to the matter at hand, my constituency has a much-loved local hospital, Woking community hospital. Despite feeling like I was born and bred in Woking, I was not actually born in the constituency. Actually, no one has been born in a hospital in Woking for generations. I was born in Frimley Park hospital, one of the nearby hospitals we depend on, as Woking lacks maternity services. However, Frimley Park is plagued with RAAC—reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete—and its future is far from certain. I will work with my hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Dr Pinkerton) to press the Government for a solution to rebuild Frimley Park hospital.

Another major issue is the cost of rent and mortgages. As someone under 40—just—I understand these issues deeply. They have been raised consistently by local people on the doorstep. The increased cost of mortgages and rents in the past two years is a further reason why the Bill is so important.

My journey into politics began because of Surrey county council’s failure to protect vulnerable children. At the time, it was rated the worst county council in the country because of that failure. We cannot allow vulnerable children to be failed again.

The wider theme of why I was elected, and indeed why so many of my hard-working Liberal Democrat colleagues have been elected, is that we understand our communities’ local issues. I have worked for 15 years in local government and served as deputy leader of Woking Council. I have seen first-hand the crippling issues that some councils face. When I look at the faces of the Liberal Democrat MPs here, I see people who have worked hard in local government for years. What a glorious theme for this new Parliament: a cohort of 72 who understand the local issues our communities face, and a force for good in the country and in the Chamber when we need it most.

**The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Caroline Nokes):** I call Jake Richards to make his maiden speech.

**Jake Richards (Rother Valley) (Lab):** Thank you, Ms Nokes. It is such a great privilege to speak in this debate and make my maiden speech after the hon. Members for Woking (Mr Forster) and for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman). My hon. Friend the Member for Southend East and Rochford (Mr Alaba) made a fantastic speech about the city in his constituency, which I have had the great privilege of swimming in. His speech did due justice to that great place. My hon. Friend the Member for Swindon North (Will Stone) made a faintly terrifying speech about his Brazilian jujitsu skills, and he certainly did justice to Swindon, too.

It is a great honour to speak in the Chamber as the Member of Parliament for Rother Valley. For so many on the Labour Benches in particular, making our maiden speeches is the conclusion of long and hard-fought campaigns in which we were ultimately victorious. In the early hours of 5 July, which just happened to be my birthday, we celebrated the end of 14 years of Conservative Government and the first Labour Government of my adult life, but we also humbly accept the responsibility that we have been given. In the context of an often bitter and heated political campaign, and from the thousands of valued conversations I had in my constituency, one cannot avoid the fact that we as a country face daunting and urgent challenges.

We cannot overlook the deep apathy towards the ability of politics, and indeed this place, to effect change. There has been the rise of online disinformation blaming bogeymen who do not exist. Conspiracy theorists and keyboard warriors purposefully ignore the complexities of the world around us for attention. Political culture too often thrives on division and controversy, not the common good. The hyperactive vitriolic politics seen so often across the Atlantic is seeping into our discourse here, undermining constructive dialogue. There is an epidemic of alienation among our young people, with levels of self-harm and suicide in my constituency increasing all the time. Children are arriving at school still in nappies and too often without breakfast in their bellies. Waiting lists for mental health support now stretch to half a decade, with many young people reaching their majority by the time they are seen. Too many people in my constituency feel they have to leave their village or town to get on in life. There is a disillusionment that their home, their community, their place is no longer offering the security and hope that people deserve. There is a fear for the future. I was told so often during the election campaign, “What’s the point of politics? This country is broken.”

Perhaps some of those factors came to the fore over the summer recess, when a group organised to attend a hotel just a few miles from my constituency in Wath, planning to set that building on fire knowing full well there were innocent people inside. The pictures on our televisions were difficult to comprehend. I spoke to a young mother who had been made homeless and was being temporarily accommodated there with her children. The terror she described will haunt me forever.

But from the gloom of that violent act came hope. The day after the hotel was attacked, I reached out to the Muslim community in my constituency and was invited to a meeting after evening prayer. I arrived eager to show solidarity, but anxious about the fear and damage that the community would have suffered—and yes, there was plenty of concern. But the first question



[*Jake Richards*]

I encountered was not one of anger or retribution, but instead a comment urging me to speak with the perpetrators of the violence in order to better understand the causes and motivation. It was a moment of great generosity and sensitivity, and one that will always stay with me.

3.45 pm

Indeed, that spirit of togetherness, caring about the bonds that unite us, is everywhere to be seen in the Rother Valley. Dinnington boxing club held an event after the riots, with several south Yorkshire boxing clubs, to show unity and togetherness; a determination to portray south Yorkshire in a different light. That spirit runs through the club. I will always recall having a pint at the Little Mester in North Anston when a young lad from the club arrived to rapturous applause, only to explain that he had casually run a marathon that morning, on his own, wholly unorganised, to raise money for a local children's hospice. He had heard that it required more funds for toys.

I think of the dementia café in Winthrop Gardens, which provides such an invaluable service, or the Maltby Lions, who are out every week, rain or shine, to raise money for deserving causes. I think of the community café at the beautiful Ulley reservoir, the work of the Salvation Army at the Dinnington food bank, the Community Fridge in Kiveton Park, the volunteer gardeners in Harthill, the community energy project in Woodsetts, or the MacMillan coffee mornings in Anston. This spirit ultimately wins the day, even in the shadow of horror.

In a previous life, as a pupil barrister, I sat behind prosecuting counsel at the trial of the murderer of Jo Cox MP. I learnt an awful lot—not about legal process or criminal procedure, but from Jo's family, who arrived each day at court with smiles, holding hands and with a bag of sweets that they offered to assembled journalists, security guards and indeed the lawyers, including the defence barrister. I take inspiration from their strength. It was an honour to campaign for my hon. Friend the Member for Spen Valley (Kim Leadbeater) in that vital by-election, and it is even more so to share these green Benches with her today.

That spirit of generosity, the strength of unity in the face of the darkest forces, is what I will try to further in my role in this place. In that spirit, I praise Alexander Stafford, my predecessor, who was a hard-working MP, and who leaves the House as his brother arrives—no doubt the hon. Member for Farnham and Bordon (Gregory Stafford) will follow in his brother's footsteps. In this place, Alexander will perhaps be best remembered for his work promoting the independence of Somaliland, and I know from my own social media that many in Hargeisa were very grateful for his adoption of their cause. I thank him for his service.

Let me end by saying that I will work every day in this place to do my utmost to tackle the forces of division and darkness during my time here, and to do my bit to bring people together, because after all, as Jo Cox told us, we have more in common than that which divides us.

**The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Caroline Nokes):** I call Clive Jones to make his maiden speech.

**Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD):** Thank you very much for calling me, Madam Chair. I congratulate the hon. Member for Rother Valley (Jake Richards) on his very interesting speech—I learnt an awful lot about his constituency. I have also learnt a lot today about Southend East and Rochford, Portsmouth North and Swindon North, and especially about my colleagues, my hon. Friends the Members for Woking (Mr Forster) and for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman). I actually knew quite a lot about them before, but it was nice to hear some more. I particularly liked the speech from the hon. Member for Loughborough (Dr Sandher), who suggested that the Minister might like to get his chequebook out. Let me say to him, “If you are getting your chequebook out, I would like you to spend some money for the constituents of Wokingham.”

Members on these Benches have a strong sense of social justice. This comes to us from many directions during our lives. Fifty years ago, I had an inspirational social and religious studies teacher, John Featherstone, to whom I am grateful for helping to instil these values in me. This sense of social justice will, I hope, guide me during my time in this House. I am very pleased that John is up there in the Gallery today.

It is a pleasure to represent the constituency of Wokingham, whose boundaries somewhat changed at the last general election. I would like to pay tribute to my three predecessors, who each represented part of the constituency. From James Sunderland, the former MP for Bracknell, my constituency inherited the parishes of Finchampstead and Wokingham Without. I always found James approachable and straightforward, and I understand that his constituents found the same.

Sir John Redwood was the MP for the former Wokingham constituency for a remarkable 37 years—a tremendous stint of public service—during which he had a profound influence on public policy. He served in Margaret Thatcher's Government as a junior Minister, and in John Major's Cabinet as Secretary of State for Wales, where he is best known for his enthusiastic miming of the Welsh national anthem.

The wards of Thames and Twyford were represented by Theresa May—now Baroness May of Maidenhead—for 27 years. She was a dedicated public servant who served as Home Secretary and Prime Minister. She also has a well-deserved reputation among her former constituents, who hold her in high regard and talk about her warmly, with affection and with much respect. Although our politics are different, I wish all of my predecessors well in their future endeavours.

It is an honour and a privilege to be elected to represent the people of Wokingham, where I have lived for much of the last 50 years. I went to school there, and my children went to school there. They were born in the nearby Royal Berkshire hospital, where I am proud to be a governor. It is also the hospital where doctors found my cancer in 2008 and began my successful treatment. In 2016, they were there to help me again, and diagnosed a need for a quadruple heart bypass. Without the Royal Berkshire hospital, I would not be standing here today. Our NHS staff are wonderful, and clinicians at the Royal Berkshire hospital deserve all the praise that is heaped on them by my constituents.

Today we are debating the Chancellor's Budget Responsibility Bill. In a previous debate, she announced the pausing of the new hospital building programme,

which included the Royal Berkshire hospital. Parts of the building date back to 1839, and staff have to work in offices where the windows do not open, and they regularly have to walk around buckets that are there to catch dripping rainwater. I must repeat my plea to both the Chancellor and the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care for a speedy decision as to when the much-needed rebuild of our beloved hospital will happen.

If I may, Madam Chair, I would like to give you a short tour of the Wokingham constituency. In the north is the world-famous Henley regatta course at Remenham and the very successful Leander rowing club—one of the most successful sports clubs in the world. I was delighted that the former Prime Minister chose to visit the Leander Club during the recent general election, and even more so that his visit coincided with a boat trip that I and my hon. Friends the Members for Henley and Thame (Freddie van Mierlo) and for St Albans (Daisy Cooper) were making to highlight the dumping of raw sewage into our waterways. It was fun to wave at the Prime Minister from that beautiful stretch of river, and the media all seemed to enjoy it as well.

Wokingham has wonderful, picturesque villages. Wargrave was first recorded in 1061 and features in the Domesday Book. The village of Twyford dates from 871, when Alfred the Great's army escaped Viking pursuers by crossing the River Loddon. Wokingham has a thriving and growing brewing sector that is establishing great reputations among beer lovers, including the Loddon brewery, the Elusive brewery and the Siren brewery. The Stanlake Park wine estate in Hurst is one of the oldest wine producers in England.

The Chancellor will know that our town centres and village centres, like many others in the UK, are finding life difficult. The cost of living crisis created by the previous Government continues to limit people's spending power, and online competition is ruthless. Business rates are a huge issue for our local retailers, who make our high streets the great places they are, and I do hope that the Chancellor and Ministers will look into the reform of business rates at the earliest opportunity.

Wokingham town received its market charter in 1219. I thoroughly recommend the market, especially the fruit and veg stall and the fishmonger. My wife likes me to buy flowers for her from Darren's flower stall. She says they last longer than any supermarket flowers. Using this market is good value for money and it is an important part of our local character.

Today, the constituency is gaining a reputation as a home for life sciences businesses. I was pleased, when leader of the council, to be involved in the early stages of discussions with Lonza, a Swiss public company that will be investing several hundred million pounds in the constituency over the next few years.

Wokingham has many charities in which volunteers work hard to improve the lives of our residents. I will mention just a few: the Wokingham food bank, First Days, Wokingham in Need, Building for the Future, Citizens Advice, Age UK Berkshire, Wokingham United Charities and the Cowshed. The dedication and hard work of the volunteers in these charities and many others is truly inspirational.

In the southern part of the constituency, in Arborfield, there is a former Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers garrison, with which the town had an important relationship for many years.

John Walter, a newspaper editor and politician, and the son of the founder of *The Times*, lived on the Bearwood estate. He was a Whig MP for the county of Berkshire before 1832—early beginnings of what I hope will become a long-standing tradition in our area.

Madam Chair, from your chair you must be thinking that this 59th Parliament has so many young faces, and I hope you will be including me in that category. I bet you are wondering, "What is his secret?" It is very simple: I worked in the toy industry for many years, running manufacturing and importing businesses. Playing with toys every day for the last 30 to 40 years is what makes me look so young. Our toys made many young people and their parents happy. I am hoping to be just as successful in my second career, helping the people of Wokingham to improve their lives. If I can achieve this, I will have had two worthwhile careers.

Finally, I am grateful to the many people—in particular, my family and friends—who have helped me in my campaigns to be elected to the House of Commons, some of whom are in the Gallery today. Wokingham has never before elected a Liberal Democrat MP. I will work tirelessly to represent my constituents and I will endeavour to make them feel recognised and supported. I come here idealistic and hopeful, hoping that we can make the public feel the same about our institutions, and I want to ensure that we do them justice on these battered but far from broken green Benches.

**The Second Deputy Chairman:** I call Sonia Kumar to make her maiden speech.

4 pm

**Sonia Kumar (Dudley) (Lab):** It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Wokingham (Clive Jones), and to listen to the excellent speeches made in this Chamber.

It is an honour to address the House as the new Member of Parliament for Dudley. The last Labour MP to represent Dudley was Ian Austin, now Lord Austin, who served as Minister for the West Midlands in the last Labour Government. He was a passionate and dedicated servant of the town in which he grew up. My immediate predecessor, Marco Longhi, also had a deep passion for the heritage of Dudley. In his contributions to the House, he sought to protect the historical buildings not just in our town but throughout our country.

I now look forward to playing my part in protecting and preserving our heritage, and to go further by preserving our remarkable healthcare system. Working at the Dudley group NHS foundation trust as a physiotherapist, I saw patients from across our town—from Gornal, Castle and Priory, St Thomas's, Brockmoor and Pensnett, St James's, Sedgley, and Upper Gornal and Woodsetton. Seeing at first hand the ongoing issues faced by our NHS, and hearing at first hand the challenges my patients encountered, served as the catalyst for my decision to enter this House.

My primary goal is to enhance the wellbeing of my residents in Dudley, and to secure an NHS that is equipped to meet the evolving needs of our country. The NHS, founded by a Labour Government, is truly a remarkable institution, and its history, achievements and challenges remind us of the importance of investing in a comprehensive and fair healthcare system.

[Sonia Kumar]

Dudley is the capital of the Black Country, and I know my constituency neighbours will agree. It has a long and proud history, celebrated on Black Country Day. Dudley was the driving force behind the industrial revolution. It is home to Dudley castle, which was built by the Normans and is where people can visit the delightful Dudley zoo.

Yet Dudley's attractions go back even further. Wren's Nest national nature reserve is part of the Black Country UNESCO geopark. It has one of the oldest lime works in the UK, and the rock there is 428 million years old. Wren's Nest contains over 700 different types of fossils. People come from all over the world to find fossils, and I invite hon. Members to walk around Wren's Nest with me to look at the spectacular landscape and to see if they can find a fossil of their own to take home.

Perhaps nothing displays the pride of the people of Dudley as much as our Black Country Living Museum. This magnificent tourist attraction not only promises a bostin' day out; it has also been used as a filming location for, among others, the TV series "Peaky Blinders" and films such as "Stan & Ollie". The museum has recently added a new attraction to show what life was like in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. A few years ago, the museum had an exhibition to mark 100 years since the granting of women's suffrage. It is a measure of the progress we have made since then that I can now make my maiden speech as Dudley's first female MP.

Like the Black Country Living Museum, Dudley has changed through time. In the past, Dudley smelted iron ore, mined coal and limestone, and built a canal network that stretched across the country. Now, the Dudley-based Black Country Innovative Manufacturing Organisation is a world-class centre for rail innovation, helping towns and cities across the world meet the challenges of the 2020s.

This Bill will also help us meet the challenges of the future. It will protect market stability and public trust, and ensure the Government's fiscal plans are independently and transparently scrutinised, future-proofing our economy. That will help business owners like my father, Ashok Kumar, who arrived in this country at the age of nine. He set up his own business and is still working as a greengrocer 45 years on. He taught me the importance of hard work and heritage. As a new MP, nothing gives me more pleasure than talking to business owners like my dad.

I would like to finish by paying tribute to two extraordinary women, without whom I would not be in this Chamber today. My sister has been my guiding light from the moment I was born. She has supported me unconditionally and encouraged me to pursue my dreams, and today, as every day, she teaches me to never give up. My maa, Rajinder Kaur, taught me the values of community, faith and resilience. She was an aspiring Bollywood actress. While those dreams may have fallen short, her legacy will be etched in history by being mentioned in this House today.

Hon. Members will be pleased to know this speech is nowhere near the length of a Bollywood movie, and is coming to a close. I finish by turning once more to the people of Dudley. It is an honour to represent them and our great town in this House. I promise I will work as hard as I can to bring prosperity and happiness to our town, and I will not let them down.

**Ellie Chowns** (North Herefordshire) (Green): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Dudley (Sonia Kumar) for her excellent maiden speech. Indeed, we have heard more than half a dozen excellent maiden speeches today, several of which touched on the climate crisis and the future of children in our country, themes that relate to my amendment. I was touched to hear the passion with which all the new Members spoke about their experiences and commitments.

My amendment 5 requires the OBR to report on the impact of fiscally significant measures announced by the Government on the UK's statutory net zero target. The justification for my amendment is that we simply cannot separate the economy and the climate—they are interlinked. To deliver the green economic transformation that we so urgently need, as referenced by hon. Members speaking earlier, every single policy must be aligned with the UK's net zero target and every Government spending decision should be as well.

It makes sense to increase the OBR's remit on net zero to specifically consider the impact of climate risks on economic stability, and how far policies introduced at fiscal events will reduce or increase these risks. Fiscal events, namely Budgets and spending reviews, lock in what is happening in our economy for years to come, even generations, so it beggars belief that they are not properly taking account of climate impacts. Whether those policies are spending on new roads, subsidies and tax breaks for oil and gas, investment in renewables infrastructure or giveaways like a freeze on fuel duty, they all have direct impacts on the UK's prospect of meeting our net zero targets. Those impacts should be made clear and considered explicitly in the policy-making paper. We need to be thinking about the impacts of today's economic policies on the prospects for future generations.

The costs of failing to take an approach that considers climate impacts are eye watering. A 2022 report by the Grantham Institute found that climate change damages to the UK are projected to triple by 2050 and more than double again 50 years later, so climate prudence and fiscal prudence are one and the same thing. Given that the OBR's main duty is to assess the health of the UK economy and the sustainability of its public finances, it needs to be charged with assessing whether fiscal events are reducing or increasing climate risks to the economy.

Bringing net zero into the OBR's mandate is consistent with the Government's five missions. Indeed, in announcing its clean energy superpower document, Labour said that it will add net zero mandates to all relevant regulators that need it. I would argue that the OBR is a relevant regulator that needs a net zero mandate. That is why I am proposing this probing amendment today. As other Members have mentioned, it would also represent increased transparency around how fiscal policy choices are impacting the UK's progress towards our net zero targets and help ensure that future Governments also consider that.

It is also an important stepping stone towards a net zero test, which would assess the aggregate climate and nature impact of every fiscal event. Again, this is something that Labour committed to in opposition. In his winding-up remarks, will the Minister comment on whether he is able to ensure that this test is integrated into the legislation that he is proposing?



I hope that Labour will use this opportunity to commit publicly to introducing a net zero test in Government, and will take a step towards doing that by backing my amendment.

**The Second Deputy Chairman:** I call Lauren Edwards to make her maiden speech.

**Lauren Edwards** (Rochester and Strood) (Lab): Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak, Madam Chair.

I pay tribute to the many hon. Members who have given such impressive maiden speeches today. It is an honour to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley (Sonia Kumar) who gave such a passionate speech about her constituency, and who certainly did her family very proud. Although she has left her place, may I also commend the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman) for her excellent speech, which, as somebody born in Australia, I particularly appreciated for its reference to the Australian opera singer, Dame Nellie Melba?

Financial market stability and public trust in announcements on fiscally significant measures are, funnily enough, not issues that come up regularly on the doorstep. But the real-life consequences when these two important pillars of our society are lacking was central to the recent conversations that I had across Rochester and Strood.

The cost of living pressures, already challenging for most, were heightened as families found that they had to pay, on average, hundreds of pounds more just to put a roof over their heads. The cause of that additional pressure—the former Truss Government’s mini-Budget—was a deeply undesirable situation that this Bill seeks to prevent from ever happening again. One reason given for the adverse market reaction to that mini-Budget was the lack of forecast by the Office for Budget Responsibility—an omission which, in turn, contributed to a lack of investor confidence in the plans. Political parties, whatever their colour, can have the best policies in the world, but if they are not backed with economic competence and market confidence in those who are holding the purse strings, no one will be better off for them.

We cannot and should not play fast and loose with the economy, so, like many others, I take great comfort from the Bill. That includes the chair of the OBR himself, Robert Hughes, who says that the Bill will address a gap in the current law and

“serve to strengthen the legal foundations for fiscal management.”

It is surely only right that policymakers, when making major fiscal decisions, base those decisions on up-to-date economic and fiscal outlooks, published at the same time to give maximum transparency.

I dwell so much on economic stability as I view it as a necessary precondition for economic growth—this Government’s chief mission—and because, in recent years, there has not been enough focus on the latter in places such as Medway. I am immensely proud to call Rochester and Strood my home and honoured to have been given the opportunity by its residents to represent them here in this place. I will work hard every day to ensure that residents’ voices are heard in this Chamber and to get a better deal for everybody in Rochester and Strood. I will do that by continuing to drive regeneration

work in my constituency, work that I began as a former cabinet member on Medway council. I will work with the Government and the private sector to bring more investment to our towns and villages, support the local business community to thrive, and provide more opportunities for young people, so that they do not feel that they need to move away to get on in life.

Rochester and Strood has many strengths, not least the military presence at Brompton barracks, home of the Royal Engineers. The River Medway, which runs the length of the constituency, has so much potential for industry, leisure and tourism, and a very rich maritime history from the days of Chatham dockyard. We have a burgeoning creative community centred at Chatham Intra, developing green industries out on the Hoo peninsula, and high-quality technical colleges and universities. However, we also have high levels of deprivation in the constituency, not enough good-quality and affordable housing, an overburdened hospital, and not enough infrastructure, including health services, public transport and banking services, to support our communities, particularly on the more rural Strood side of the constituency.

4.15 pm

Tackling those issues, among others, will occupy my time in this place, with the simple aim that I leave things better than when I arrived. My commitment to public service will not waver, whatever the political weather, because that is what I have been sent here to do and it is a responsibility that I take immensely seriously. Although I chose Rochester and Strood as my home in adulthood, I pay tribute to my predecessor, Kelly Tolhurst, who was born and raised in the constituency and is rightly very proud of that fact. As she said in her own maiden speech, her successful journey

“is one that every young person in my community should feel is possible for them”.—[*Official Report*, 25 June 2015; Vol. 597, c. 1121.]

Her commitment to, and love for, the place that she grew up in is undisputed, and I thank her genuinely for her years of service.

Like many new MPs, I have been thinking very carefully about how I can use the skills and experience from my previous career to support the important legislative work done in this place and to benefit my constituents. It was my experience of working here during the last financial crisis that led me to become a financial regulator at the Bank of England, so I aim to use my voice to ensure that the pursuit of much-needed economic growth is done in such a way as to preserve the stability of our economy and our financial system. I intend to draw on my 13 years of experience as an elected trade union representative to ensure that the new deal for working people delivers for my hard-working constituents, who often struggle with insufficient pay and rights, and to help to drive the Government’s commitment to invest in our people by improving their knowledge and skills.

I will use my experience in local government to ensure that legislation allows local authorities to invest to save, and to think much more long term—both things that I consider to be in the best interest of council tax payers. I will try to ensure that this Government’s approach to devolution is one that will genuinely pass power to local communities, which I think are best

placed to know what their areas need, and work in the best interest of my constituents. Finally, I hope to continue the cross-party working I have enjoyed with representatives from across Kent and the south-east, so that our region grows and prospers under this Government.

We face significant challenges in our region—infrastructure, transport and border issues alone. These cannot be resolved solely within our distinct geographical areas. My politics is underpinned by collaboration and co-operation, and I know that by working together we can deliver the regional economic growth that is needed to drive so much of what we want to achieve: well-run public services, decent and affordable housing, and better life chances for all.

**The Second Deputy Chairman:** I call Fred Thomas to make his maiden speech.

**Fred Thomas (Plymouth Moor View) (Lab):** Thank you, Madam Chair. Before I talk about Plymouth, may I celebrate the amazing speeches that we have heard this afternoon, and pay tribute to the wealth of experience and passion, not just on the Government Benches but across the Chamber? It is really heartening. My hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Jake Richards) spoke about the spirit that we have all seen in the communities that we represent, and the confidence that he has in that spirit to overcome some of the challenges that we are facing as a nation and in our communities. I completely share that.

Let me now talk about Plymouth, the city that I call home and the city that I am so proud to represent in this place as the Member for Plymouth Moor View. I want to talk about our people, our institutions, our rolling hills, grey warships glinting in the south coast sun and the noise that 43,000 Argyle fans make on match day. I want to talk about the gritty determination of staff at one of the biggest hospitals in the country, and I want to talk about hope.

I will frame this speech with two principles that I lived by during my time in the Royal Marines, principles that are well known amongst the armed forces community in Plymouth. First, a leader must be a dealer of hope. When the chips are down, leaders have to step forward and give hope. I believe that is our job in Parliament too. In Plymouth, communities come together to give each other hope. There is immense strength and resilience in the streets, the housing estates, the front rooms and wherever folks get together and organise to change the lives they and their neighbours are living, making simple, tangible changes by addressing the needs in front of them.

We have Whitleigh Big Local, the Four Greens Community Trust and Connecting Youth CIC, to name just a few, working in partnership with the local community to improve the things that matter and to bring hope. I want to use my position in this House to empower our community to effect change and generate hope that life will get better and that families can be lifted out of poverty.

Today, relative child poverty in Plymouth Moor View is at 23%, set against the regional figure of 17%. I will not accept rising child poverty, because the second principle that I live by, one I believe a lot of us share, is this: “The standard you walk past is the standard you accept.” If we see something that we know is wrong and

we keep walking, we are effectively saying we are happy with that situation. The harder option is not to walk past, but to take action.

Derriford hospital in Plymouth serves almost 2 million people across Devon and Cornwall. I have met the nurses, paramedics, doctors and volunteers, who do fantastic work under immense pressure. They are people who do not just walk past. However, the hospital is up against it: in June alone, there were 5,000 instances where a patient waited more than four hours in A&E. That represents a series of personal tragedies for the patients affected. With the new Government, I will work tirelessly to change that story.

Away from the hospital, the beating heart of our city is Plymouth Argyle football club, which is in its second season now in the championship, making it one of the top clubs in the English football league. Yet in Plymouth, many families struggle to afford access to sport for their kids. I am a keen footballer and I believe in the power of sport to set young people up for life. I will use my platform to improve access to sport in Plymouth, because a standard where this country has the finest football leagues, watched the world over, but our own youngsters cannot afford to play is not a standard I will walk past. I pay tribute to the excellent work that the Argyle community trust and the Plymouth football boot bank do already to broaden access to sport in Plymouth.

As a former Royal Marines commando, it is a particular privilege to represent the city that is home to not only the largest naval base in western Europe, but the Royal Marines, who are still headquartered in Plymouth. Ours is a city where so many residents have served in uniform, and I take this opportunity to thank every single one of them for their service and dedication. I also pay tribute to my predecessor for his heartfelt efforts to raise the profile of the veterans agenda.

For centuries, Plymouth has had a proud military history, and the Prime Minister recently called it “the frontline of defence in this country”.

Navy, Marines and Army personnel have deployed from Plymouth for hundreds of years. The tradition of proud military service runs through our city like the writing in a stick of rock. Now, as we find ourselves as a country in another moment of critical international instability, Plymouth is again a keystone of our national security. Devonport dockyard is the home port for the frigates, survey vessels and amphibious shipping that are crucial for our safety. It is also where the submarines that host our nuclear deterrent are maintained, and will be for generations to come. We are also home to highly skilled small and medium-sized enterprises such as MSubs—makers of unmanned submersible craft used in the most special military projects—Barden bearings and Collins Aerospace, whose cutting-edge engineering is integral to the UK’s modern weapons systems.

From our military institutions and our manufacturing base to our hospital, our football club and our dockyard, we stand up and we serve in Plymouth. We give a lot to this nation, but for all this—if I can borrow a phrase from a friend and a constant source of advice, my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard)—Plymouth does not get its fair share. I will work tirelessly with the Government to change that, because in Labour we respect service, and ours will be a Government of service—a Government of hope.

As I served my country before in uniform, so I will serve my city now in office. As I was trained to do in the Marines, I will strive to be a dealer of hope. When it comes to taking action, I will remember, along with colleagues on both sides of the House, that the standard we walk past is the standard we accept.

**The Second Deputy Chairman:** I call Lucy Rigby to make her maiden speech.

**Lucy Rigby** (Northampton North) (Lab): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth Moor View (Fred Thomas) on his fantastic maiden speech and to all hon. Members who have made such brilliant maiden speeches in this afternoon's debate. It is a privilege to follow them and to make my own maiden speech in the context of such an important Bill.

Northampton has sent Members to Parliament since 1283, and it is the honour of my life to be among them as the Member of Parliament for Northampton North. One of those former Members, I am proud to say, was the trailblazing Margaret Bondfield—the first woman to serve in Cabinet in this country, the first to be appointed to the Privy Council and the first to chair the TUC. I hope, in the course of my time here, that we might find ways to see Margaret's name given greater recognition and prominence, as I believe is due. Some 51 years after Margaret Bondfield's arrival in this House, the good people of my constituency elected Maureen Colquhoun—a trailblazer herself in relation to many issues, including being the country's first openly gay MP.

I want to pay particular tribute to my two immediate predecessors: Sir Michael Ellis and Sally Keeble. Sir Michael stepped down at the last election, having served Northampton North for 14 years and served the country as a Minister in multiple roles. He is also remembered locally for performing lifesaving CPR on a constituent having a coronary episode—I am more than aware that that sets me a very high bar for looking after my constituents. Like Sir Michael, Labour's Sally Keeble served Northampton North for well over a decade and served her country in government too. Sally has many achievements—notable among them was the taking through of one of the last pieces of legislation under the previous Labour Government to protect developing countries from vulture funds. Sally remains a dedicated and committed public servant. I do not mind admitting that I spoke to plenty of residents during the election campaign who told me that while they really appreciated my doorstep pitch for their support, they would be voting for Sally Keeble.

I am aware of the examples of good service in this place that have been set for me, and I hope to live up to them, so I want my constituents to know that serving our community in Northampton will be my first and highest priority for as long as I remain in this place. This place could, in fact, be in my constituency, because Northampton has been the seat of Parliament on more than 30 occasions. King John even moved the Treasury to Northampton in 1205, when he fell out with a few people in London over something akin to the disastrous mini-Budget—an option that I suspect those supportive of the Treasury's current location will be glad to know was not suggested, as far as we know, to the former right hon. Member for South West Norfolk.

We are a town of deep pride in both our present and our past. We are the largest town in England. We have buildings of neo-gothic splendour; strong communities; beautiful green spaces such as Eastfield Park, Abington Park and the Racecourse; and not one but two shoe armies: Premiership champions Northampton Saints, and the mighty Cobblers. Our boot and shoemaking industry has provided many Members of this House with their footwear over the years, including, I am proud to say, the former Prime Minister and Member for Sedgefield, who wore the same lucky pair of Church's brogues at every Prime Minister's questions for 10 years, which just goes to show where a good pair of Northampton shoes can get you.

4.30 pm

Service runs deep in my family. My mum worked for the NHS and the Ministry of Defence. My dad served in the Royal Engineers for 30 years, including in the first Gulf war and in the Balkan conflict. I was born on RAF Wegberg in Germany, and, like many forces children, grew up on military bases all over the place. I learned the true value of service, and acquired a continuing and personal respect for the dedication of our armed forces and a deep patriotism—not for its own sake, but through a commitment to our British values of the rule of law, democracy, tolerance and liberty.

That strong sense of fairness led me to train as a lawyer, so 13 years after my dad served on the NATO deployment in Bosnia, I went out to The Hague to be part of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, the body established to bring to bear some semblance of justice following that conflict. I will never forget the testimony of witnesses to the most appalling of crimes against humanity. That experience showed me not only the importance of the international community, but the value of justice being done. Those principles are particularly important in the context of Russia's aggression in Ukraine and the Ukrainian people's brave fight for freedom.

My career as a solicitor has offered me a rich and varied experience for which I am very grateful. I specialised in competition law and spent time in the City, at the regulator and at Which?, which gave me particular insight into how markets and regulation work—and can work better—for consumers, businesses and the country as a whole. Given the serious ongoing pressures on living standards and family budgets in my constituency, and the challenges in our wider economy, the Government's focus on those issues is extremely welcome. The Bill is so vital precisely because it will guard against the recklessness that unfortunately caused so many of my Northampton North constituents so much financial pain and additional hardship.

It is an extraordinary privilege to represent Northampton North in this place. I will continually endeavour to live up to that honour for as long as I am here.

**The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Darren Jones):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Nokes. May I start by congratulating hon. Friends and others on delivering their maiden speeches? It has been a pleasure to be in the Chamber to hear them this afternoon. They will clearly be great champions for their constituencies.

I will take a few moments to remind the House of why we are taking forward the important clauses in the Bill, and to set out the Government's views on the



[Darren Jones]

proposed amendments. At the general election, the Government received a mandate for economic growth. That is the only route to improving prosperity, and it is now our national mission. A crucial first step to achieving it is to deliver economic stability. We have seen what happens without stability: at the 2022 Conservative mini-Budget, huge unfunded fiscal commitments were made without proper scrutiny, and key economic institutions such as the Office for Budget Responsibility were sidelined. That is why we have made a commitment in our manifesto to a fiscal lock that will strengthen the role of the OBR, and why we have taken quick action to deliver on that commitment. That will reinforce credibility and trust by preventing large-scale unfunded commitments that are not subject to an independent fiscal assessment, and proves that we are a responsible Government who will not play fast and loose with the public finances as the previous Government did.

The Bill sets out the legal framework for the operation of the fiscal lock, and builds on the Budget Responsibility and National Audit Act 2011. In line with that established legal framework, some of the technical detail underpinning the fiscal lock will be set out via an upcoming update to the charter for budget responsibility, a draft of which the Treasury has published to support scrutiny of the Bill today.

I will now talk through the Bill's two clauses. The first is the main substantive clause, setting out the operation of the fiscal lock. It introduces a new section 4A into part 1 of the Budget Responsibility and National Audit Act 2011, which relates to budget responsibility and was used to legally establish the OBR.

Clause 1 makes five key changes. First, new subsection (1) of section 4A guarantees in law that from now on, every fiscally significant change to tax and spending will be subject to scrutiny by the independent OBR. It will require that before a Government Minister makes any fiscally significant announcement to Parliament, the Treasury always requests that the OBR prepare an economic and fiscal forecast. This builds on existing legal frameworks requiring the OBR to produce at least two forecasts per year. Importantly, the OBR's assessment should include the extent to which the Government are meeting their fiscal mandate. That requirement applies when two or more announcements are made and the combination of measures is fiscally significant, irrespective of whether the measures are announced at the same time. It will also apply separately to costs and savings, so that those cannot be offset against each other.

New subsection (2) strengthens the role of the OBR by requiring it to produce an independent assessment if it judges that the fiscal lock has been triggered. If a fiscally significant announcement is made without the Treasury having previously requested a forecast, the OBR is required to inform the Treasury Committee of this House of its opinion, and then prepare an assessment as soon as is practicable.

New subsection (3) defines a measure or combination of measures as "fiscally significant" if they exceed a specified percentage of GDP. In line with the existing legal framework, the precise threshold will be set via an update to the charter for budget responsibility, a draft of which will be published on gov.uk. The threshold

level itself will be set at announcements of at least 1% of nominal GDP in the latest forecast—as an example, this year, that 1% threshold would be £28 billion.

New subsection (4) ensures proper scrutiny of the Government's fiscal plans without preventing them from responding to emergencies such as the covid-19 pandemic. It sets out that the fiscal lock does not apply in respect of measures that are intended to have a temporary effect and are in response to an emergency. The charter will define "temporary" as any measure that is intended to end within two years. To safeguard against this subsection being used to avoid proper scrutiny, as set out in the updated charter, the OBR will have the discretion to trigger the fiscal lock and prepare a report if it reasonably disagrees.

Finally, new subsection (6) prevents any future Government from choosing to ignore the fiscal lock by simply updating the charter for budget responsibility alongside a fiscally significant announcement. It achieves this by requiring the Government to publish any updates to the detail of the fiscal lock, such as the threshold level at which it is triggered, at least 28 days before the updated charter is laid before Parliament.

Clause 2 sets out when the Bill will come into force and to whom it applies. Subsection (1) confirms that it deals with reserved or excepted matters, and that its provisions extend and therefore apply to England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Subsections (2) and (3) allow for the commencement of the legislation to occur at the appropriate time, as is usual practice. We expect this will take place ahead of the upcoming Budget on 30 October.

I will now turn to the amendments that right hon. and hon. Members have tabled.

**Karl Turner** (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): Before my right hon. Friend does so, will he give way?

**Darren Jones:** Briefly, yes.

**Karl Turner:** Is this Bill not designed to prevent the recklessness of the previous Tory Government, who effectively crashed the economy, leaving this new Labour Government with the responsibility of putting things right?

**Darren Jones:** My hon. Friend has hit the nail on the head. Indeed, I might go so far as to say that that was one of the reasons we achieved such a large mandate at the last general election, with so many hon. Friends on the Government Benches. We will never play fast and loose with the economy, as Members on the Conservative Benches did, and this Bill will prevent that from happening again in the future.

I start with amendments 9 and 10, tabled by the shadow Chancellor. They would require the OBR to publish a report whenever His Majesty's Treasury announces new fiscal rules. The purpose of the Bill is to ensure that no Government can make large-scale announcements of tax and spending without being subject to independent assessment. The Government's robust fiscal rules will support economic stability, but do not change tax and spending. It is those decisions that matter, as we saw when the previous Conservative Government announced £45 billion of unfunded commitments in the 2022 mini-Budget.

**Andrew Griffith:** Will the Minister give way?

**Darren Jones:** Briefly.

**Andrew Griffith:** The Minister can answer this briefly as well. Could he confirm that he has no plans to change the fiscal rules?

**Darren Jones:** The hon. Gentleman is enjoying himself, but he knows the answer: wait for the Budget.

The amendments from the official Opposition are therefore not necessary. To answer the question from the shadow Financial Secretary, the hon. Member for Droitwich and Evesham (Nigel Huddleston), as I have been invited to do so, the Chancellor has already confirmed that the Government will set out the precise details of our fiscal rules at the Budget on 30 October, alongside an updated OBR forecast.

amendments 6 and 7, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Ms Creasy), focus on the definition of “fiscally significant” measures to which the fiscal lock will apply. They would extend the definition to include measures that have a cumulative effect on public sector net debt or contingent liabilities. I welcome my hon. Friend highlighting this issue, on which I know she has worked for many years. The draft charter text states that measures will trigger the lock when the combined costing is at least 1% of GDP in any year, and specifically:

“The costing of a measure is the direct impact of a policy decision on the public finances”.

It is difficult to set and interpret a threshold consistently for contingent liabilities as they can often be large in maximum exposure, but low in expected or reasonable worst-case losses. Effective management of contingent liabilities is important, and transparency is key to good fiscal management. The Government plan to announce new significant contingent liabilities at fiscal events to make sure there is transparency with Parliament. We will of course continue to notify Parliament of new contingent liabilities, as set out in “Managing Public Money”.

The amendments would also place a condition on policies with a cumulative impact on public sector net debt, and my hon. Friend noted public-private partnerships as an example. She was referring to PFI and PF2 models, which the previous Government had no longer proceeded with, and there has been no change to this policy. As the Chancellor said in her Mais lecture earlier this year, we will also report on wider measures of public sector assets and liabilities at fiscal events to ensure transparency across the whole balance sheet, which includes non-debt liabilities. Reporting transparently on the Government’s stock of contingent liabilities is key to ensuring we do not take excessive risk. I can therefore confirm today that the Government will publish a report on our contingent liabilities. I expect the contingent liability central capability to do this in early 2025. Having said all that, I recognise the issues my hon. Friend raises, and I will arrange to meet her to discuss them further.

Moving on to the Liberal Democrat amendments, amendment 2 was tabled by the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney). As she said, it would enable the OBR to notify the independent adviser on

Ministers’ interests if the fiscal lock was triggered. I remind hon. Members that the purpose of this Bill is to ensure that never again do we find ourselves in a situation, like at the 2022 Liz Truss mini-Budget, in which fiscally significant measures are announced without accompanying OBR analysis. If a future Government were to act in this way, the Bill provides a clear remedy. The OBR is empowered to independently notify the Treasury Committee and to produce its own report. This would be available for full scrutiny by stakeholders and Parliament, which would be able to hold Ministers to account in the normal way. We therefore do not consider the amendment necessary.

Amendment 1, also tabled by the Liberal Democrats, would broaden the definition of fiscally significant measures to cover anything that is likely to have an impact on the cost of Government borrowing, interest rates or economic growth. The Bill is focused on preventing irresponsible large-scale fiscal announcements that could undermine macroeconomic stability, such as at the mini-Budget. To support that, we need clear and robust legal frameworks that ensure the provisions are triggered only when appropriate. This requires precise definitions that everyone, including the OBR in particular, can understand clearly and work with practically. It would therefore not be helpful, in the Government’s view, to have a broader, vaguer definition that might repeatedly trigger the fiscal lock under many different circumstances.

Amendments 3 and 4 would require the Treasury to consult the OBR and the Treasury Committee before the charter can be updated for the purposes of the fiscal lock, and to publish a report on the outcome of any such consultations. It is of course important that the views of the OBR and of Parliament are taken into account when making changes to the charter. However, I hope the hon. Member will accept that it will not be necessary to set out this specific process in primary legislation, because the Bill already includes an important safeguard on the fiscal lock, which is the requirement that any changes to the charter for budget responsibility are published in draft at least 28 days before they are laid in the Commons. That will ensure that the OBR, the Treasury Committee, this Parliament and all stakeholders will have a clear opportunity to make representations to the Treasury and to publish their views, as they see fit.

Amendment 5, tabled by the hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Ellie Chowns), would require the OBR to take net zero targets into account when preparing a report on fiscally significant announcements. Strong legal frameworks are already in place in the Climate Change Act 2008 to support the transition to net zero in 2050. The Act legislates for interim five-year carbon budgets, and requires the Government to report on those periodically. Parliament and its Select Committees already scrutinise that in great detail. The Green Book, the Treasury’s guidance on how to appraise policies, projects and programmes, requires Departments to assess the climate and environmental impacts of policy proposals, with major bids and proposals at fiscal events being assessed accordingly in that way. We therefore do not consider the amendment to be necessary.

**Ellie Chowns:** Does the Minister agree that having committed to give a net zero mandate to all relevant regulators, the OBR is indeed a highly relevant regulator?

**Darren Jones:** And it is equipped to do the job it is supposed to do, alongside the other regulatory body that holds the Government to account, the Committee on Climate Change.

In conclusion, I hope I have been able to provide some assurances and that hon. Members will be content to retract their amendments. If not, I urge the House to reject them. I thank other Members for their contributions to the debate. I gently invite the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Andrew Griffith) to reflect on his own party's record in crashing the economy through unfunded tax cuts, losing control of public spending and ruining family finances, before offering advice to this Government on fiscal responsibility. I say to the SNP spokesperson, who is not in his place, that I was surprised to see so many discredited Conservative party lines to take in his speech. Who knew that the SNP and the Tory party were one and the same thing?

With this Labour Government our commitment to fiscal discipline and sound money is the bedrock of all our plans. The Bill will guarantee in law that from now on every fiscally significant change to tax and spending will be subject to scrutiny by the independent OBR. That delivers on a key manifesto commitment to provide economic stability and sound public finances by strengthening the role of the independent OBR. That is a crucial first step to achieve sustained economic growth, and I commend the Bill to the House.

**The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Caroline Nokes):** I call shadow Minister Nigel Huddleston.

**Nigel Huddleston:** I will not detain the House long by repeating the arguments that I made in my opening comments, but I am disappointed by the Minister's response, and in particular by his refusal to accept our amendments. It is alarming that he is refusing to do so because, as I outlined, I believe they are consistent with the goals of the Bill overall, and I think the credibility of the Bill will be seriously undermined if it does not include the fiscal rules. I like the Minister a lot. We go back a way and have always had civil conversations, but if he does not believe or consider the level, type and definition of debt to be "fiscally significant", then with the greatest respect perhaps the Treasury is not the right home for him. They are transparently fiscally significant, and an important part of the consideration we are talking about today.

**Darren Jones:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way, and for inviting me to suggest whether I should try to find a job in another Department. I just point out that, having arrived at the Treasury, I have seen the impact of fiscally significant levels of debt after 14 years of the Conservative Government. Has he got anything to say to the House on that matter?

**Nigel Huddleston:** Yes, I have indeed. As I outlined in my original statement, the arguments the right hon. Member is making do not stack up with the facts. The economic circumstances that Labour inherited are better in many areas than those we inherited from them back in 2010. The economy is the fastest growing in the G7. On unemployment, every Labour Government since the second world war has increased it while in power, for us to then clear up and reduce it when we take over.

Inflation was lower when Labour took power than when we inherited it, and annual debt was higher when we took over in 2010.

Labour Members keep saying all those things, but the challenge is that it does not stack up with the facts. They make arguments about the level of debt, as I outlined earlier, but they have already announced £10 billion for inflation-busting salary increasing for their union mates, £8 billion on energy provisions, and £7 billion on the national wealth fund. That is £25 billion of additional money that they have spent. If there is a black hole in the finances, it is clearly one of their own making by the announcements they have made since coming into government. That £25 billion is a huge amount of money, but I will finish discussing those points, because we had this debate earlier.

**Darren Jones** *rose*—

**Nigel Huddleston:** I will not give way at the moment, because I want to move on to some more positive things.

**The Comptroller of His Majesty's Household (Chris Elmore):** There is loads of time.

**Nigel Huddleston:** We have Third Reading as well, so let us enjoy ourselves. Just because the Government keep repeating the narrative does not make it true. I am sure they will continue to do so, but the £25 billion of additional spending that I have just outlined is a choice they have made. The arguments they are having to make—that they are having to cut payments to pensioners in response to the circumstances they have inherited—are not true because, as I outlined in my opening speech, it is a deliberate, long-stated policy choice articulated by the current Chancellor a decade ago. It is not a response to circumstances, but deliberate Labour policy.

On a more positive note, I congratulate all those who have made their maiden speeches today: the hon. Members for Loughborough (Dr Sandher), for Portsmouth North (Amanda Martin), for Swindon North (Will Stone), for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman), for Southend East and Rochford (Mr Alaba), for Woking (Mr Forster), for Rother Valley (Jake Richards), for Wokingham (Clive Jones), for Dudley (Sonia Kumar), for Rochester and Strood (Lauren Edwards), for Plymouth Moor View (Fred Thomas), and for Northampton North (Lucy Rigby). They have made incredible contributions. The breadth of experience that they bring to this Parliament is astounding, and I am largely talking here about Government Members. I say it with a great degree of respect, because in many circumstances—in fact, in nearly every single circumstance—they have replaced good friends of mine who contributed significantly to this House. They all have big shoes to fill, but what they have said today was impressive. In particular, those who spoke without notes are a lesson to us all.

What a beautiful tour we had around the United Kingdom. Everyone who spoke today spoke eloquently about their constituencies and their constituents and showcased their rich heritage and rich history. It was incredibly impressive. I am sure their constituents will be proud of what they have said. With that, I will finish my comments, but the debate will continue.

*Question put, That the amendment be made.*



*The Committee divided: Ayes 109, Noes 366.*

## Division No. 10]

[4.52 pm

### AYES

Andrew, rh Stuart  
 Argar, rh Edward  
 Atkins, rh Victoria  
 Bacon, Gareth  
 Badenoch, rh Mrs Kemi  
 Baldwin, Dame Harriett  
 Barclay, rh Steve  
 Bedford, Mr Peter  
 Bhatti, Saqib  
 Blackman, Bob  
 Bool, Sarah  
 Bowie, Andrew  
 Bradley, rh Dame Karen  
 Brandreth, Aphra  
 Braverman, rh Suella  
 Buckley, Julia  
 Burghart, Alex  
 Cartledge, James  
 Cleverly, rh Mr James  
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey  
 Cocking, Lewis  
 Cooper, John  
 Costa, Alberto  
 Coutinho, rh Claire  
 Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey  
 Cross, Harriet  
 Davies, Gareth  
 Davies, Mims  
 Davis, rh Sir David  
 Dewhurst, Charlie  
 Dinenage, Dame Caroline  
 Dowden, rh Sir Oliver  
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain  
 Evans, Dr Luke  
 Fortune, Peter  
 Fox, Sir Ashley  
 Francois, rh Mr Mark  
 Freeman, George  
 French, Mr Louie  
 Fuller, Richard  
 Garnier, Mark  
 Glen, rh John  
 Griffith, Andrew  
 Griffiths, Alison  
 Harris, Rebecca  
 Hayes, rh Sir John  
 Hinds, rh Damian  
 Hoare, Simon  
 Holden, rh Mr Richard  
 Hollinrake, Kevin  
 Huddleston, Nigel  
 Hudson, Dr Neil  
 Hunt, rh Jeremy  
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard  
 Jenrick, rh Robert  
 Johnson, Dr Caroline  
 Jopp, Lincoln

Kearns, Alicia  
 Kruger, Danny  
 Lam, Katie  
 Lamont, John  
 Lopez, Julia  
 Mak, Alan  
 Malthouse, rh Kit  
 Mayhew, Jerome  
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew  
 Mohamed, Iqbal  
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan  
 Moore, Robbie  
 Morrissey, Joy  
 Morton, rh Wendy  
 Mullan, Dr Kieran  
 Mundell, rh David  
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew  
 Obese-Jecty, Ben  
 O'Brien, Neil  
 Paul, Rebecca  
 Philp, rh Chris  
 Pritchard, rh Mark  
 Raja, Shivani  
 Rankin, Jack  
 Reed, David  
 Robertson, Joe  
 Robinson, rh Gavin  
 Rosindell, Andrew  
 Shannon, Jim  
 Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil  
 Simmonds, David  
 Smith, Greg  
 Smith, Rebecca  
 Snowden, Mr Andrew  
 Spencer, Dr Ben  
 Spencer, Patrick  
 Stafford, Gregory  
 Stephenson, Blake  
 Stride, rh Mel  
 Stuart, rh Graham  
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond  
 Thomas, Bradley  
 Timothy, Nick  
 Tugendhat, rh Tom  
 Vickers, Martin  
 Vickers, Matt  
 Whately, Helen  
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John  
 Wild, James  
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin  
 Wood, Mike  
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy

**Tellers for the Ayes:**  
**Paul Holmes and**  
**Stuart Anderson**

### NOES

Abbott, Jack  
 Abrahams, Debbie  
 Ahmed, Dr Zubir  
 Akehurst, Luke  
 Alaba, Mr Bayo  
 Aldridge, Dan  
 Alexander, Mr Douglas  
 Alexander, Heidi

Al-Hassan, Sadik  
 Ali, Tahir  
 Amesbury, Mike  
 Anderson, Callum  
 Anderson, Fleur  
 Antoniazzi, Tonia  
 Arthur, Dr Scott  
 Asato, Jess

Asser, James  
 Athwal, Jas  
 Atkinson, Catherine  
 Atkinson, Lewis  
 Bailey, Mr Calvin  
 Bailey, Olivia  
 Baines, David  
 Baker, Alex  
 Baker, Richard  
 Ballinger, Alex  
 Bance, Antonia  
 Barker, Paula  
 Barron, Lee  
 Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex  
 Baxter, Johanna  
 Beales, Danny  
 Begum, Apsana  
 Bell, Torsten  
 Benn, rh Hilary  
 Betts, Mr Clive  
 Billington, Ms Polly  
 Bishop, Matt  
 Blake, Olivia  
 Blake, Rachel  
 Blundell, Mrs Elsie  
 Bonavia, Kevin  
 Botterill, Jade  
 Brackenridge, Sureena  
 Brash, Mr Jonathan  
 Brickell, Phil  
 Buckley, Julia  
 Burgon, Richard  
 Burke, Maureen  
 Burton-Sampson, David  
 Butler, Dawn  
 Byrne, rh Liam  
 Cadbury, Ruth  
 Caliskan, Nesil  
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan  
 Campbell, Irene  
 Campbell, Juliet  
 Campbell-Savours, Markus  
 Carden, Dan  
 Carling, Sam  
 Carns, Al  
 Champion, Sarah  
 Charalambous, Bambos  
 Charters, Mr Luke  
 Clark, Feryal  
 Coleman, Ben  
 Collier, Jacob  
 Collinge, Lizzi  
 Collins, Tom  
 Conlon, Liam  
 Coombes, Sarah  
 Cooper, Andrew  
 Cooper, Dr Beccy  
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy  
 Costigan, Deirdre  
 Cox, Pam  
 Coyle, Neil  
 Craft, Jen  
 Creasy, Ms Stella  
 Crichton, Torcuil  
 Curtis, Chris  
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas  
 Dalton, Ashley  
 Darlington, Emily  
 Davies, Jonathan  
 Davies, Paul  
 Davies, Shaun  
 Davies-Jones, Alex

De Cordova, Marsha  
 Dean, Josh  
 Dearden, Kate  
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh  
 Dickson, Jim  
 Dixon, Anna  
 Dixon, Samantha  
 Dodds, rh Anneliese  
 Dollimore, Helena  
 Dowd, Peter  
 Downie, Graeme  
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil  
 Eagle, Dame Angela  
 Eagle, rh Maria  
 Eastwood, Colum  
 Edwards, Lauren  
 Edwards, Sarah  
 Efford, Clive  
 Egan, Damien  
 Ellis, Maya  
 Elmore, Chris  
 Entwistle, Kirith  
 Eshalomi, Florence  
 Esterson, Bill  
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta  
 Farnsworth, Linsey  
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh  
 Ferguson, Mark  
 Ferguson, Patricia  
 Fleet, Natalie  
 Foody, Emma  
 Fookes, Catherine  
 Foster, Mr Paul  
 Foxcroft, Vicky  
 Francis, Daniel  
 Frith, Mr James  
 Furniss, Gill  
 Gardiner, Barry  
 Gardner, Dr Allison  
 Gelderd, Anna  
 Gemmell, Alan  
 German, Gill  
 Gilbert, Tracy  
 Gill, Preet Kaur  
 Gittins, Becky  
 Glindon, Mary  
 Goldsborough, Ben  
 Gosling, Jodie  
 Gould, Georgia  
 Grady, John  
 Greenwood, Lilian  
 Griffith, Dame Nia  
 Gwynne, Andrew  
 Hack, Amanda  
 Haigh, rh Louise  
 Hall, Sarah  
 Hamilton, Fabian  
 Hamilton, Paulette  
 Hardy, Emma  
 Hatton, Lloyd  
 Hayes, Helen  
 Hayes, Tom  
 Hazelgrove, Claire  
 Healey, rh John  
 Hendrick, Sir Mark  
 Hillier, Dame Meg  
 Hinchliff, Chris  
 Hinder, Jonathan  
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon  
 Hopkins, Rachel  
 Hughes, Claire  
 Hume, Alison

Huq, Dr Rupa  
 Hurley, Patrick  
 Hussain, Imran  
 Ingham, Leigh  
 Irons, Natasha  
 Jameson, Sally  
 Jogee, Adam  
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana  
 Johnson, Kim  
 Jones, rh Darren  
 Jones, Lillian  
 Jones, Louise  
 Jones, Ruth  
 Jones, Sarah  
 Josan, Gurinder  
 Joseph, Sojan  
 Kane, Chris  
 Kaur, Satvir  
 Kendall, rh Liz  
 Khan, Afzal  
 Khan, Naushabah  
 Kinnock, Stephen  
 Kirkham, Jayne  
 Kitchen, Gen  
 Kumar, Sonia  
 Kumaran, Uma  
 Kyle, rh Peter  
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura  
 Lamb, Peter  
 Lavery, Ian  
 Law, Noah  
 Leadbeater, Kim  
 Leishman, Brian  
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma  
 Lewin, Andrew  
 Lewis, Clive  
 Lightwood, Simon  
 Long Bailey, Rebecca  
 MacAlister, Josh  
 Macdonald, Alice  
 MacNae, Andy  
 Madders, Justin  
 Malhotra, Seema  
 Martin, Amanda  
 Maskell, Rachael  
 Mayer, Alex  
 McAllister, Douglas  
 McCluskey, Martin  
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain  
 McDonald, Andy  
 McDonald, Chris  
 McDonnell, rh John  
 McDougall, Blair  
 McEvoy, Lola  
 McFadden, rh Pat  
 McGovern, Alison  
 McIntyre, Alex  
 McKee, Gordon  
 McKenna, Kevin  
 McKinnell, Catherine  
 McMahon, Jim  
 McMorris, Anna  
 McNally, Frank  
 McNeill, Kirsty  
 Midgley, Anneliese  
 Minns, Ms Julie  
 Mishra, Navendu  
 Mohamed, Abtisam  
 Moon, Perran  
 Morden, Jessica  
 Morris, Grahame  
 Morris, Joe

Mullane, Margaret  
 Murphy, Luke  
 Murray, Chris  
 Murray, rh Ian  
 Murray, James  
 Murray, Katrina  
 Myer, Luke  
 Naish, James  
 Naismith, Connor  
 Narayan, Kanishka  
 Nash, Pamela  
 Newbury, Josh  
 Niblett, Samantha  
 Nichols, Charlotte  
 Norris, Alex  
 Onn, Melanie  
 Onwurah, Chi  
 Opher, Dr Simon  
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena  
 Osamor, Kate  
 Osborne, Kate  
 Osborne, Tristan  
 Owatemi, Taiwo  
 Owen, Sarah  
 Paffey, Darren  
 Pakes, Andrew  
 Patrick, Matthew  
 Payne, Michael  
 Peacock, Stephanie  
 Pearce, Jon  
 Perkins, Mr Toby  
 Phillips, Jess  
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David  
 Pitcher, Lee  
 Platt, Jo  
 Pollard, Luke  
 Powell, rh Lucy  
 Poynton, Gregor  
 Prinsley, Peter  
 Quigley, Mr Richard  
 Qureshi, Yasmin  
 Race, Steve  
 Rand, Mr Connor  
 Ranger, Andrew  
 Reader, Mike  
 Reeves, Ellie  
 Reid, Joani  
 Reynolds, Emma  
 Rhodes, Martin  
 Richards, Jake  
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny  
 Rigby, Lucy  
 Robertson, Dave  
 Roca, Tim  
 Rodda, Matt  
 Rushworth, Sam  
 Russell, Mrs Sarah  
 Rutland, Tom  
 Ryan, Oliver  
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun  
 Scrogham, Michelle  
 Sowards, Mr Mark  
 Shanker, Baggy  
 Shanks, Michael  
 Siddiq, Tulip  
 Simons, Josh  
 Slaughter, Andy  
 Slinger, John  
 Smith, Cat  
 Smith, David  
 Smith, Jeff  
 Smith, Nick

Smyth, Karin  
 Snell, Gareth  
 Stainbank, Euan  
 Stevens, rh Jo  
 Stewart, Elaine  
 Stone, Will  
 Strathern, Alistair  
 Streeting, rh Wes  
 Strickland, Alan  
 Stringer, Graham  
 Sullivan, Kirsteen  
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren  
 Sultana, Zarah  
 Swallow, Peter  
 Tami, rh Mark  
 Tapp, Mike  
 Taylor, Alison  
 Taylor, David  
 Taylor, Rachel  
 Thomas, Fred  
 Thomas, Gareth  
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick  
 Thompson, Adam  
 Thornberry, rh Emily  
 Tidball, Dr Marie  
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen  
 Toale, Jessica  
 Tomlinson, Dan  
 Trickett, Jon  
 Tufnell, Henry  
 Turley, Anna  
 Turmaine, Matt  
 Turner, Karl

Turner, Laurence  
 Twigg, Derek  
 Twist, Liz  
 Uppal, Harpreet  
 Vaughan, Tony  
 Vaz, rh Valerie  
 Vince, Chris  
 Wakeford, Christian  
 Walker, Imogen  
 Ward, Chris  
 Ward, Melanie  
 Waugh, Paul  
 Webb, Chris  
 Welsh, Michelle  
 West, Catherine  
 Western, Andrew  
 Western, Matt  
 Wheeler, Michael  
 Whitby, John  
 White, Jo  
 White, Katie  
 Whittome, Nadia  
 Witherden, Steve  
 Woodcock, Sean  
 Wrighting, Rosie  
 Yang, Yuan  
 Yasin, Mohammad  
 Yemm, Steve  
 Zeichner, Daniel

**Tellers for the Noes:**  
**Gerald Jones and**  
**Keir Mather**

*Question accordingly negatived.*

*Amendment proposed: 2, page 1, line 25, at end insert:*

“(2A) In any case where the Office has acted in accordance with subsection (2), it may notify the Independent Adviser on Ministers’ Interests of the circumstances in any case where it considers those circumstances may be relevant to—

(a) the Ministerial Code, or

(b) the functions of the Independent Adviser on Ministers’ Interests.”—(*Sarah Olney.*)

*This amendment enables the OBR to notify the Independent Adviser on Ministers’ Interests where the OBR considers that any instance where the Treasury had not requested a report under section 4A(1) in advance may give rise to consideration of compliance with the Ministerial Code.*

*Question put, That the amendment be made.*

*The Committee divided: Ayes 73, Noes 375.*

**Division No. 11]**

**[5.9 pm**

**AYES**

Amos, Mr Gideon  
 Aquarone, Steff  
 Babarinde, Josh  
 Bennett, Alison  
 Berry, Siân  
 Brewer, Alex  
 Brown-Fuller, Jess  
 Cane, Charlotte  
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair  
 Chadwick, David  
 Chamberlain, Wendy  
 Chambers, Dr Danny  
 Chowns, Ellie  
 Coghlan, Chris  
 Collins, Victoria  
 Cooper, Daisy

Dance, Adam  
 Darling, Steve  
 Davey, rh Ed  
 Davies, Ann  
 Dean, Bobby  
 Denyer, Carla  
 Dillon, Mr Lee  
 Dyke, Sarah  
 Eastwood, SORCHA  
 Farron, Tim  
 Foord, Richard  
 Forster, Mr Will  
 Franklin, Zöe  
 George, Andrew  
 Gibson, Sarah  
 Goldman, Marie

Gordon, Tom  
Harding, Monica  
Heylings, Pippa  
Jarvis, Liz  
Jones, Clive  
Kohler, Mr Paul  
Lake, Ben  
MacCleary, James  
MacDonald, Mr Angus  
Maguire, Ben  
Maguire, Helen  
Martin, Mike  
van Mierlo, Freddie  
Miller, Calum  
Milne, John  
Mohamed, Iqbal  
Moran, Layla  
Morello, Edward  
Morgan, Helen  
Morrison, Mr Tom  
Murray, Susan  
Olney, Sarah

Perteghella, Manuela  
Pinkerton, Dr Al  
Ramsay, Adrian  
Reynolds, Mr Joshua  
Roome, Ian  
Sabine, Anna  
Savage, Dr Roz  
Saville Roberts, rh Liz  
Slade, Vikki  
Smart, Lisa  
Sollom, Ian  
Stone, Jamie  
Taylor, Luke  
Thomas, Cameron  
Voaden, Caroline  
Wilkinson, Max  
Wilson, Munira  
Wrigley, Martin  
Young, Claire

**Tellers for the Ayes:**  
**Wera Hobhouse and**  
**Sarah Green**

### NOES

Abbott, Jack  
Abrahams, Debbie  
Ahmed, Dr Zubir  
Akehurst, Luke  
Alaba, Mr Bayo  
Aldridge, Dan  
Alexander, Mr Douglas  
Alexander, Heidi  
Al-Hassan, Sadik  
Ali, Tahir  
Amesbury, Mike  
Anderson, Callum  
Anderson, Fleur  
Antoniazzi, Tonia  
Arthur, Dr Scott  
Asato, Jess  
Asser, James  
Athwal, Jas  
Atkinson, Lewis  
Bailey, Mr Calvin  
Bailey, Olivia  
Baines, David  
Baker, Alex  
Baker, Richard  
Ballinger, Alex  
Bance, Antonia  
Barker, Paula  
Barron, Lee  
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex  
Baxter, Johanna  
Beales, Danny  
Begum, Apsana  
Bell, Torsten  
Benn, rh Hilary  
Betts, Mr Clive  
Billington, Ms Polly  
Bishop, Matt  
Blake, Olivia  
Blake, Rachel  
Blundell, Mrs Elsie  
Bonavia, Kevin  
Botterill, Jade  
Brackenridge, Sureena  
Brash, Mr Jonathan  
Brickell, Phil  
Buckley, Julia  
Burgon, Richard

Burke, Maureen  
Burton-Sampson, David  
Butler, Dawn  
Byrne, rh Liam  
Cadbury, Ruth  
Caliskan, Nesil  
Campbell, rh Sir Alan  
Campbell, Irene  
Campbell, Juliet  
Campbell-Savours, Markus  
Carden, Dan  
Carling, Sam  
Carns, Al  
Champion, Sarah  
Charalambous, Bambos  
Charters, Mr Luke  
Clark, Feryal  
Coleman, Ben  
Collier, Jacob  
Collinge, Lizzi  
Collins, Tom  
Conlon, Liam  
Coombes, Sarah  
Cooper, Andrew  
Cooper, Dr Beccy  
Costigan, Deirdre  
Cox, Pam  
Coyle, Neil  
Craft, Jen  
Creasy, Ms Stella  
Crichton, Torcuil  
Curtis, Chris  
Dakin, Sir Nicholas  
Dalton, Ashley  
Darlington, Emily  
Davies, Jonathan  
Davies, Paul  
Davies, Shaun  
Davies-Jones, Alex  
De Cordova, Marsha  
Dean, Josh  
Dearden, Kate  
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh  
Dickson, Jim  
Dixon, Anna  
Dixon, Samantha  
Dodds, rh Anneliese

Dollimore, Helena  
Dowd, Peter  
Downie, Graeme  
Duncan-Jordan, Neil  
Eagle, Dame Angela  
Eagle, rh Maria  
Eastwood, Colum  
Edwards, Lauren  
Edwards, Sarah  
Efford, Clive  
Egan, Damien  
Ellis, Maya  
Elmore, Chris  
Entwistle, Kirth  
Eshalomi, Florence  
Esterson, Bill  
Fahnbulleh, Miatta  
Farnsworth, Linsey  
Fenton-Glynn, Josh  
Ferguson, Mark  
Ferguson, Patricia  
Fleet, Natalie  
Foody, Emma  
Fookes, Catherine  
Foster, Mr Paul  
Foxcroft, Vicky  
Francis, Daniel  
Frith, Mr James  
Furniss, Gill  
Gardiner, Barry  
Gardner, Dr Allison  
Gelderd, Anna  
Gemmell, Alan  
German, Gill  
Gilbert, Tracy  
Gill, Preet Kaur  
Gittins, Becky  
Glindon, Mary  
Goldsborough, Ben  
Gosling, Jodie  
Gould, Georgia  
Grady, John  
Greenwood, Lilian  
Griffith, Dame Nia  
Gwynne, Andrew  
Hack, Amanda  
Haigh, rh Louise  
Hall, Sarah  
Hamilton, Fabian  
Hamilton, Paulette  
Hardy, Emma  
Hatton, Lloyd  
Hayes, Helen  
Hayes, Tom  
Hazelgrove, Claire  
Healey, rh John  
Hendrick, Sir Mark  
Hillier, Dame Meg  
Hinchliff, Chris  
Hinder, Jonathan  
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon  
Hopkins, Rachel  
Hughes, Claire  
Hume, Alison  
Huq, Dr Rupa  
Hurley, Patrick  
Hussain, Imran  
Ingham, Leigh  
Irons, Natasha  
Jameson, Sally  
Jogee, Adam  
Johnson, rh Dame Diana

Johnson, Kim  
Jones, rh Darren  
Jones, Lillian  
Jones, Louise  
Jones, Ruth  
Jones, Sarah  
Josan, Gurinder  
Joseph, Sojan  
Juss, Warinder  
Kane, Chris  
Kaur, Satvir  
Kendall, rh Liz  
Khan, Afzal  
Khan, Naushabah  
Kinnock, Stephen  
Kirkham, Jayne  
Kitchen, Gen  
Kumar, Sonia  
Kumaran, Uma  
Kyle, rh Peter  
Kyrke-Smith, Laura  
Lamb, Peter  
Lavery, Ian  
Law, Noah  
Leadbeater, Kim  
Leishman, Brian  
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma  
Lewin, Andrew  
Lewis, Clive  
Lightwood, Simon  
Long Bailey, Rebecca  
MacAlister, Josh  
Macdonald, Alice  
MacNae, Andy  
Madders, Justin  
Malhotra, Seema  
Martin, Amanda  
Maskell, Rachael  
Mayer, Alex  
McAllister, Douglas  
McCluskey, Martin  
McDonagh, Dame Siobhain  
McDonald, Andy  
McDonald, Chris  
McDonnell, rh John  
McDougall, Blair  
McEvoy, Lola  
McFadden, rh Pat  
McGovern, Alison  
McIntyre, Alex  
McKee, Gordon  
McKenna, Kevin  
McKinnell, Catherine  
McMahon, Jim  
McMorris, Anna  
McNally, Frank  
McNeill, Kirsty  
Midgley, Anneliese  
Minns, Ms Julie  
Mishra, Navendu  
Mohamed, Abtisam  
Morden, Jessica  
Morris, Grahame  
Morris, Joe  
Mullane, Margaret  
Murphy, Luke  
Murray, Chris  
Murray, rh Ian  
Murray, James  
Murray, Katrina  
Myer, Luke  
Naish, James



Naismith, Connor  
 Narayan, Kanishka  
 Nash, Pamela  
 Newbury, Josh  
 Niblett, Samantha  
 Nichols, Charlotte  
 Norris, Alex  
 Onn, Melanie  
 Onwurah, Chi  
 Opher, Dr Simon  
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena  
 Osamor, Kate  
 Osborne, Kate  
 Osborne, Tristan  
 Owatemi, Taiwo  
 Owen, Sarah  
 Paffey, Darren  
 Pakes, Andrew  
 Patrick, Matthew  
 Payne, Michael  
 Peacock, Stephanie  
 Pearce, Jon  
 Perkins, Mr Toby  
 Phillips, Jess  
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David  
 Pitcher, Lee  
 Platt, Jo  
 Pollard, Luke  
 Powell, rh Lucy  
 Poynton, Gregor  
 Prinsley, Peter  
 Quigley, Mr Richard  
 Qureshi, Yasmin  
 Race, Steve  
 Rand, Mr Connor  
 Ranger, Andrew  
 Reader, Mike  
 Reeves, Ellie  
 Reid, Joani  
 Reynolds, Emma  
 Rhodes, Martin  
 Richards, Jake  
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny  
 Rigby, Lucy  
 Robertson, Dave  
 Roca, Tim  
 Rodda, Matt  
 Rushworth, Sam  
 Russell, Mrs Sarah  
 Rutland, Tom  
 Ryan, Oliver  
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun  
 Scrogham, Michelle  
 Sowards, Mr Mark  
 Shanker, Baggy  
 Shanks, Michael  
 Siddiq, Tulip  
 Simons, Josh  
 Slaughter, Andy  
 Slinger, John  
 Smith, Cat  
 Smith, David  
 Smith, Jeff  
 Smith, Nick  
 Smyth, Karin

Snell, Gareth  
 Stainbank, Euan  
 Stevens, rh Jo  
 Stewart, Elaine  
 Stone, Will  
 Strathern, Alistair  
 Streeting, rh Wes  
 Strickland, Alan  
 Stringer, Graham  
 Sullivan, Kirsteen  
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren  
 Sultana, Zarah  
 Swallow, Peter  
 Tami, rh Mark  
 Tapp, Mike  
 Taylor, Alison  
 Taylor, David  
 Taylor, Rachel  
 Thomas, Fred  
 Thomas, Gareth  
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick  
 Thompson, Adam  
 Thornberry, rh Emily  
 Tidball, Dr Marie  
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen  
 Toale, Jessica  
 Tomlinson, Dan  
 Trickett, Jon  
 Tufnell, Henry  
 Turley, Anna  
 Turmaine, Matt  
 Turner, Karl  
 Turner, Laurence  
 Twigg, Derek  
 Twist, Liz  
 Uppal, Harpreet  
 Vaughan, Tony  
 Vaz, rh Valerie  
 Vince, Chris  
 Wakeford, Christian  
 Walker, Imogen  
 Ward, Chris  
 Ward, Melanie  
 Waugh, Paul  
 Webb, Chris  
 Welsh, Michelle  
 West, Catherine  
 Western, Andrew  
 Western, Matt  
 Wheeler, Michael  
 Whitby, John  
 White, Jo  
 White, Katie  
 Whittome, Nadia  
 Witherden, Steve  
 Woodcock, Sean  
 Wrighting, Rosie  
 Yasin, Mohammad  
 Yemm, Steve  
 Zeichner, Daniel

#### **Tellers for the Noes:**

Gerald Jones and  
 Keir Mather

5.26 pm

**Darren Jones:** I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

I will not take up too much more time, but I will provide a final reminder of how important this legislation is. At the general election, the Government received a mandate for economic growth. Sustained growth is the only route to improve prosperity and to improve the living standards of the British people. It is now our national mission.

Economic stability is key to achieving this. We have seen what happens without it, when huge, unfunded fiscal commitments are made without proper scrutiny and when key economic institutions such as the OBR are sidelined. We cannot let ourselves get into that position again. Unfunded, unassessed spending commitments not only threaten the public finances, they can threaten people's incomes and mortgages, as we saw under the previous Government.

I therefore encourage Conservative Members—who have told us today that, after 14 years of Conservative government, the economy has never been so good—to reflect, if only for a moment, on why they lost all credibility for economic competence and suffered the worst election result in their history.

Once again, I congratulate all my hon. Friends and other hon. Members on their excellent maiden speeches today. I thank hon. and right hon. Members on both sides of the House for their contributions, and I thank the Clerks and officials who have supported the Bill's rapid passage.

The Budget Responsibility Bill forms a small but vital part of our plan to restore economic stability and deliver economic growth. For these reasons, I commend it to the House.

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

5.28 pm

**Alan Mak (Havant) (Con):** I thank everyone who has contributed to the debates on the Bill, both today and before the summer recess, especially new Members who have made their maiden speech: the hon. Members for Loughborough (Dr Sandher), for Portsmouth North (Amanda Martin), for Swindon North (Will Stone), for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman), for Southend East and Rochford (Mr Alaba), for Woking (Mr Forster), for Rother Valley (Jake Richards), for Wokingham (Clive Jones), for Dudley (Sonia Kumar), for Rochester and Strood (Lauren Edwards), for Plymouth Moor View (Fred Thomas) and for Northampton North (Lucy Rigby). They all spoke incredibly well, with passion and eloquence, and we wish them well for their time in the House.

We Conservatives believe that sound public finances, fiscal responsibility and independent forecasts are the foundation of economic stability, which is why it was a Conservative Government who created the OBR more than a decade ago, and it is why today we tabled our amendments to improve the Bill and stop Labour moving the goalposts on the fiscal rule. By voting against our sensible proposal, Labour Members have shown they are not serious about our public finances. What are they trying to hide? It is clear that the purpose of the Bill is to distract everyone from Labour's economic record and pave the way for tax rises in the autumn Budget.

*Question accordingly negatived.*

*Clauses 1 and 2 ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

*The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair.*

*Bill reported, without amendment.*

*Third Reading*

Let us examine Labour's economic record. The party has been in government for just nine weeks and has already carried out nine acts of economic vandalism. It has removed the winter fuel allowance from 10 million pensioners despite promising not to; caved in to its union paymasters by agreeing inflation-busting pay rises; failed to commit to investing 2.5% of national income on defence; cancelled vital infrastructure upgrades on the A27 and A303; cut funding for a vaccine manufacturing plant that would protect our health; imposed Whitehall diktats to concrete over our green spaces; stopped Conservative plans to build 40 new hospitals; scrapped funding for a next-generation supercomputer, undermining our status as a tech superpower; and appointed Labour donors to senior civil service jobs without open competition. Nine weeks, nine acts of economic vandalism.

We know there is more harm to come, with Labour's autumn Budget set to raise taxes. During the election campaign, Labour promised over 50 times not to raise people's taxes, but the Labour Government are planning to do just that. It will be hard-working people, pensioners and businesses who will pay the price. May I invite the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to return to the Dispatch Box to rule out raising taxes on working people, such as drivers, savers and business owners? At the same time, will he rule out changing the fiscal rules to allow for more Government borrowing and debt?

**Darren Jones:** I always welcome the opportunity to return to the Dispatch Box, and I thank the shadow Minister for inviting me to do so. Opposition provides an opportunity for reflection. While he is offering his thoughts on our two months in office—two months of great relief for the British people—does he have anything to say about his 14 years in office before the election?

**Alan Mak:** I think the answer from the Chief Secretary to the Treasury is no, which confirms everything we already knew. It means that the people can never trust Labour with our economy, that Labour will raise taxes and cut investment at every opportunity and that Labour's honeymoon is well and truly over.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.*

## HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

*Resolved,*

That

(1) in pursuance of section 1(2)(d) of the House of Commons (Administration) Act 1978, Rachel Blake be appointed to the House of Commons Commission, and

(2) in pursuance of section 1(2B) of that Act, the appointment of Shrinivas Honap as an external member of the Commission be extended to 30 September 2026.—(*Lucy Powell.*)

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins):** I call Tim Farron to present a petition. The Member is not present.

## Police Station Closure: Sutton Coldfield

*Motion made, and Question proposed,* That this House do now adjourn.—(*Vicky Foxcroft.*)

5.33 pm

**Mr Andrew Mitchell** (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): It is not often I see so many Members in the House when I talk about the royal town of Sutton Coldfield, but it is a great honour to see so many here tonight. It is not often, either, that I have needed to raise a constituency matter on the Adjournment of the House, but the subject I address today is of such grave importance to my constituents and to the future security of the royal town of Sutton Coldfield that it demands urgent ministerial attention at the Dispatch Box.

The last time I held an Adjournment debate was in respect of the reassertion of the royal status of Sutton Coldfield. On that occasion, the Government made clear our right to use the word "royal" in the title of our town, and my constituents were grateful and deeply honoured by the reassertion of the royal status that we have now enjoyed for 496 years. Today, 10 years later, I am once again extremely grateful to Mr Speaker for granting me this debate on the subject of the proposed closure of the Royal Sutton Coldfield police station. This proposal is being peddled by the Labour police and crime commissioner and has appalled virtually all my constituents and appears to be supported only by two Labour councillors in the royal town.

The royal town of Sutton Coldfield has more than 100,000 inhabitants. We also host the second biggest new housing development in the country—around 5,500 new homes in the Langley area. A town of this size requires a fully equipped, proactive and professional police station, housing all manner of relevant police assets. Our current police station has protected our town since 1960 and sits on the main road into the town centre, giving police officers immediate access.

Core policing means local policing, serving our community by dealing with all policing issues, reassuring the community and offering a safe refuge to victims of crime and harassment. Core policing is about a 24/7 response, where officers work locally to cover response calls and know their areas and the local hoods and villains. It is about a locally based criminal investigation department that can provide qualified investigators who focus on locally reported crimes, from minor offences to major crimes, such as robbery, serious assault and burglary.

Investigators become aware of local crimes and emerging problems through locally based intelligence. Neighbourhood officers know local issues and problems. They deal with minor offences and antisocial behaviour, providing proper reassurance to the local community. Our excellent business improvement district, led by Michelle Baker, which helps drive progress in the town centre, continually warns about the dangers of shoplifting and antisocial behaviour.

The police deal with local offenders, including sex offenders. They work with all agencies—probation services, social services, children's services, the NHS and fire services—to address local issues. There are specially trained officers working with partner agencies, and they need privacy to work with victims of domestic violence and sex crimes, who need an appropriately sized safe space. A town of 100,000 souls and rising deserves all of that, and, in our case, we pay for it. The residents of

[Mr Andrew Mitchell]

Sutton Coldfield pay £8 million into the police precept every year. The estimated running cost of £303,000 a year for the current station represents less than 4% of the annual local police precept. I mention in passing that £20 million was found to renovate and embellish the police headquarters at Lloyd House.

Over recent years, I have made it crystal clear to my constituents, who so generously re-elected me at the last general election, that I would do my best to prevent any closure or any diminution in police activity in the royal town. I was very pleased to see that pledge mirrored in the election material produced by the newly elected Labour West Midlands Mayor, who pledged to halt the closure of all 27 police stations throughout the west midlands. He clearly has little influence with his Labour colleague.

**Wendy Morton** (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con) *rose—*

**Mr Mitchell:** I give way with great pleasure to my neighbour.

**Wendy Morton:** I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend. I think he would acknowledge that Sutton Coldfield police station covers more than Sutton Coldfield. It also covers communities in my constituency, particularly in the Streetly area. The Labour police and crime commissioner's closure programme has been going on for far too long, and we need our police stations now more than ever.

**Mr Mitchell:** My right hon. Friend makes an excellent point. I will come to the strategic point that she has made in just a moment.

I was pointing out the apparent lack of influence that the newly elected Labour Mayor of the West Midlands has with his colleagues, as, in his literature, he promised to keep open the 27 police stations. But not even a fortnight after the general election, I was astonished to see a "For Sale" sign in front of our police station. Neither I as the Member of Parliament, members of the Royal Sutton Coldfield town council nor any of our councillors were informed. Back in March 2023, there were promises by the PCC of consultation with our town council. Mr Speaker has made it clear that he wants to see greater respect for politics and politicians, but how can that noble aim be achieved when we see this sort of cynical, manipulative disregard of the wishes of the local people by those elected to serve our interests?

I have no doubt that some will argue that such a decision is an operational matter for the police. The whole point of police and crime commissioners is that they should represent the wishes of local people, and speak up for us in respect of policing decisions. I was a member of the Cabinet that introduced police and crime commissioners, and I have to say that in my view the jury is out on whether they have been a successful reform to our law and order architecture. If police and crime commissioners are captured by the local police establishment, that reform is by definition a failure. They are meant to represent us to the police, not the police to us. They are our servants, not our masters.

**Gareth Snell** (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): Does the right hon. Gentleman share my concern that in my constituency we do not have a single publicly accessible police station? They have been closed under a programme led by our previous police and crime commissioner. We have never had a Labour police and crime commissioner in Staffordshire; our police and crime commissioner has always been a Conservative. Would the right hon. Gentleman hold my commissioner accountable for those closures in the same way that he seeks to hold his commissioner accountable for his?

**Mr Mitchell:** The hon. Gentleman must, as he is, champion the interests of his constituents as he sees fit, but I am very glad to hear that he had a Conservative police and crime commissioner. I do not know whether he still does, but if he does, I am sure that they will serve the community extremely well.

On the subject of consultation, the perfectly fair and legitimate request by myself and the leader of the Royal Sutton Coldfield Town Council, Mr Simon Ward, for the police and crime commissioner to come before the town council and answer questions from the councillors and public has been turned down. Instead, he wants a behind-closed-doors meeting with me, the leader of the council and a couple of other councillors. No! We want genuine public consultation—transparency, not behind-closed-doors private meetings.

I fully understand the need for value for money, and that the Royal Sutton Coldfield police station is at present inadequately used. Indeed, for many years at Christmas I visited our local police station to dispense House of Commons fudge and humbugs to the hard-working officers and staff who work there. Over recent years, the consumption of fudge and humbugs has diminished as resources have been taken away from the station, but instead of denuding police services from a significant location in a key strategic part of the west midlands to the north-east of Birmingham, the police service should be looking at basing far more of the services that I described earlier in a strategic hub, building on the advantage of a significant space in Sutton Coldfield, rather than trying to flog it off.

Our police station was once an operational command unit for the West Midlands police, which now looks set to be reduced to a refit of three small dilapidated semi-detached houses. What a contrast to the brilliant West Midlands Fire Service, which has invested in its strategic location in the royal town, adjacent to the police station. Before anyone suggests that this is all down to the wicked Tories mercilessly culling budgets, consider these four facts: funding for the West Midlands police has been increased by nearly £40 million, taking the annual police budget to £629.2 million; we have recruited an extra 2,176 police officers; we have invested £24 million in violence reduction units in the west midlands, to tackle the most devastating crime and put the worst criminals behind bars; and we have invested £9 million in the west midlands through the safer streets fund.

During the course of the campaign to save the police station, I have had the benefit of advice from several former West Midlands police officers responsible for policing in the royal town. I thank them for their years of diligent service and for their insights and advice. They told me that they were totally opposed to the closure of the police station, and that this was their professional



opinion and advice. They made it clear that they opposed the loss of a significant visible deterrent and the easy access to a fast redeveloping town centre, with the recent reopening of the Royal Cinema—probably the finest boutique cinema anywhere in the UK—and the purchase of the Gracechurch shopping centre, as well as the millions of pounds of investment secured under the previous Conservative Government.

All that adds to the case for more policing in Sutton Coldfield. The loss of our police station will mean a significant reduction in services and a diminution of policing. The loss of the custody cells, currently mothballed, comes at a time when we have seen, from the recent disgraceful rioting and demonstrations, that circumstances could arise where there would be a strategic need for such things. Those regionally strategic facilities should not easily be disregarded. It is not that long ago that the expensive facilities were provided; indeed, I think I performed the opening ceremony. That strategic point is at the heart of the intervention from my right hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), who rightly talks about the importance of a strategic location north-east of Birmingham, serving both my and her constituents.

**Wendy Morton:** My right hon. Friend is so right to make that point. He demonstrates that police stations are integral to our communities, but with the potential loss of the Sutton Coldfield station and Aldridge under threat, what does that leave us with strategically on the eastern flank of the west midlands, at a time when we know resources have been increased? In the case of Aldridge police station, if we lose the base, we lose the base for our police officers as well. This should not be about “bricks or bobbies”; it should be about both and making sure we have a strong police presence in our communities.

**Mr Mitchell:** Once again my right hon. Friend puts her finger on the critical point and underlines the case that she and I are making for the good policing of our constituents. The sale of our police station will realise millions of pounds, much of which will clearly not be spent in Sutton Coldfield. In its place we are offered a low-grade option for policing with very limited facilities, selling short the people of Sutton Coldfield: at best, a small public contact centre, comprising three small police houses to the rear of the existing station. That is clearly a wholly inadequate marginal replacement for a proper police station. It is a measure designed to save money and not to enhance policing. It is well known that policing is local or it is nothing, and the proposed closure takes the local out of policing in the town.

The motto of the West Midlands police is “Forward in unity”. This decision takes us backwards in great disunity. The PCC’s proposal has been strongly condemned by residents, former police officers, all elected Conservative councillors, senior figures throughout the local community, and by me as their MP. I pay particular tribute to the vigorous campaigning and eloquent arguments put forward by Simon Ward, the leader of Royal Sutton Coldfield town council, and his hard-working councillors, by our energetic local Birmingham City Conservative councillors, including the highly effective David Pears, and by Jay Singh-Sohal, a former police and crime commissioner candidate with immense experience of policing issues.

However, those are but the tip of a huge local campaign, vigorously supported and engaged in across my constituency. On the day of the disastrous announcement of the sale of the police station, I received a letter in the post from the PCC—not addressing the pressing matter, but instead discussing his hopes on matters such as community policing. For community policing to be effective, it must take advice from the community it hopes to police and protect, and not press ahead without consulting that community.

With decisions such as this paying such little regard to local opinion and safety requirements, it cannot be a surprise that West Midlands police were placed under special measures under the Labour police and crime commissioner. Until he starts working alongside local communities, instead of dictating to them the fate of key services such as the police station, things may only get worse.

The decision to close the royal town’s police station is a mistake. I urge the Labour police and crime commissioner to reconsider his stance and to engage with humility, rigour and energy in a proper public consultation with the local people whom he serves, so that he can listen to their concerns directly and honour the West Midlands police mantra of “Forward in unity”.

**Wendy Morton:** My right hon. Friend is being very generous. On the subject of engagement, it is high time that the Labour police and crime commissioner engaged fully with us on Aldridge police station and came clean about his intentions. I want to make sure that he is left in no doubt that my right hon. Friend and I will continue to fight tooth and nail for these vital services that our communities deserve. It is wrong, as I am sure my right hon. Friend agrees, that resources are all too easily directed to other parts of the west midlands, particularly to Lloyd House, when we have needs in our communities as well.

**Mr Mitchell:** I must draw my remarks to a close so that we can hear from the Minister, on whose appointment I wish belatedly to congratulate her, but my right hon. Friend once again makes a critical point about consultation on these decisions. As I have said, the whole point of having police and crime commissioners is that they should listen to their local community and represent their heartfelt views. I hope that by listening to what my right hon. Friend and I and so many others are saying in our respective areas, the police and crime commissioner will have another look at this matter and see what he can do to satisfy us on a vexed subject that has caused enormous local anxiety, fear and pain about such a sharp diminution in the policing resources that we all wish to see.

5.51 pm

**The Minister for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention (Dame Diana Johnson):** I congratulate the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) on securing this debate. It is a pleasure to see him back in his place after the general election. I know that he has a very long-standing interest in this issue, and I commend him on taking the necessary steps to secure this debate. I think he first raised this subject in 2018, if my records are correct. As came through in his very powerful remarks, the subject of the debate is very important to him and to his constituents.

[*Dame Diana Johnson*]

I am very grateful to the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) and my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell), who made interventions. I will state at the outset that as a constituency MP, I fully appreciate that the status of police stations can be the focus of significant attention and generate strong feelings in communities. Of course, I am not as familiar with developments in the constituency of the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield as he is. He will also understand that, in the main, we are talking about decisions and considerations that are not within the direct purview of central Government and myself as the Minister for Policing. Indeed, he admitted that he was part of the Government who introduced police and crime commissioners to give that accountability at a local level. I remind him that we had elections for police and crime commissioners earlier this year, in which the police and crime commissioner for the West Midlands was elected on his own mandate.

I say this not to try to minimise the matter at hand, but simply to set out the context of my response. I stress the general importance of a strong local police presence. Before I come on to the particular situation in the right hon. Gentleman's constituency, I will make a general point about this Government's recognition of the importance of police forces having a strong local footprint. I think we would all acknowledge that technology has changed the way that the vast majority of us communicate and interact with the world, and it is therefore right to have a range of means by which people can contact and engage with the police, including online and by telephone, but these channels should not be seen as a substitute for a physical police presence, such as that provided by police stations. None of us would wish to see the possibility of going to a local police station to get assistance or to speak to an officer consigned to history, and it is important for many of our constituents.

I know that the focus of this debate is very specific, but I will make two broader points. First, the Government need no reminders about the importance of that strong local police presence in communities. After all, it is this Government who have committed to restoring neighbourhood policing in all our communities, so that people feel confident that they are being protected and our laws enforced.

Secondly, Members will be aware that police forces are operationally independent from Ministers and Government, and that is absolutely as it should be. It means that the democratically elected police and crime commissioners, and the operationally independent chief constables, are responsible for taking decisions on police stations and their whole estate. In doing so, they will use their judgment, local knowledge and expertise to ensure that the use of their estate gives the best service to the community and fulfils value-for-money obligations. I know that the right hon. Gentleman will be concerned about getting value for money.

Let me turn to Royal Sutton Coldfield. I know that the police station has served the town for many years—since 1960, as I understand it. The police and crime commissioner's office has confirmed to me directly, and to my officials, that although the police station is

currently listed for sale, as the right hon. Gentleman mentioned, it remains operationally open and with police access as normal.

A new police station, located on Anchorage Road, immediately adjacent to the existing building—I understand the distance between them is 300 yards—has been confirmed as the new police station site by the police and crime commissioner. It is smaller—I heard what the right hon. Gentleman said—but I understand that the current building is occupied at only 20%, meaning that 80% of it is not occupied at the moment, which does not seem to be value for money. The smaller police station will be more modern and more appropriately sized for the local presence, based on the current levels of occupancy, and it is expected to be ready to move into next year.

The police and crime commissioner has already publicly committed to the new station housing the response team, the neighbourhood policing teams and the criminal investigation teams, and it will be open to the public. Furthermore, ownership of the current police station will be retained until the new police station is open. It has also been confirmed to me that there will be no disruption or break in the public's access to the police. [*Interruption.*] The right hon. Gentleman looks like he wants to intervene, so I happily give way.

**Mr Mitchell:** I am extremely grateful to the Minister for giving way. I completely agree with and accept a lot of what she said prior to her last point. The burden of the case that I and my right hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) have been making is that more resources should be put into the existing police station, which is underused, as the Minister rightly said. The police should not be selling it; they should be reinforcing it with services that are needed not just in the royal town but regionally. The three dilapidated houses at the back will in no way whatsoever provide a full police perspective of the sort that the royal town and adjacent areas should get. There is no comparison between what is proposed—in spite of the language that the Minister has received from the police and crime commissioner—and what exists at the moment. We are arguing that a strategic increase in services should be put into the existing building, which, as she rightly says, has served the town and the area since 1960. Will she perhaps reflect back to the police and crime commissioner the importance of engaging with the local community, in a way that he has not, which would be good both for the position of police and crime commissioner and for the local community?

**Dame Diana Johnson:** The right hon. Gentleman makes his case, and I am sure that the police and crime commissioner will have heard it. I further understand that there has been an offer—which I think the right hon. Gentleman referred to—to have that meeting with the police and crime commissioner, to discuss the options and what he is planning to do. Can I also gently say, as I did at the beginning of my remarks, that it is for the police and crime commissioner and the chief constable to decide how best to use the assets available to them? I understand that the chief constable is absolutely committed to this new way of providing the police station in this area. Operationally, that is what he believes is the best way of providing policing to the right hon. Gentleman's constituents.

Before I finish, I want to take the opportunity to express my gratitude and thanks to all our serving police officers, police community support officers and specials. I am sure that all Members of the House will agree that they do an amazing job in very difficult circumstances, particularly over the past few weeks when we have seen disorder on our streets. As I have set out and tried to explain to the right hon. Gentleman, decisions about police stations are ultimately matters that sit outside my remit as a Minister. In any event, I hope that it has been helpful to have this discussion this evening and to talk through some of the issues. I have

set out the Government's commitment to ensuring that we have a strong, visible neighbourhood policing offer in all our communities, which is central to what this Government will deliver through our safer streets mission. I again thank the right hon. Gentleman for raising this important issue on the Floor of the House this evening, along with other right hon. and hon. Members.

*Question put and agreed to.*

6 pm

*House adjourned.*





# Westminster Hall

*Wednesday 4 September 2024*

[PETER DOWD *in the Chair*]

## Preventable Baby Loss

9.30 am

**Lee Anderson** (Ashfield) (Reform): I beg to move,  
That this House has considered preventable baby deaths.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Mr Dowd. This debate is not the type of debate I look forward to because it is filled with sadness and sorrow. I am delighted to be joined by some of the Ashfield families who have been affected by baby loss in the past couple of years or so. According to the Royal College of Midwives, every day in the UK 1,845 babies are born alive and there are between 302 and 428 miscarriages. We have eight stillbirths per day with 145 babies born prematurely and five neonatal deaths.

When a pregnancy is announced in the family, on most occasions it is a joyous, wondrous time in people's lives. They are happy. Dads make plans for their son to be a footballer—they have picked the football team already. Mums look at princess dresses, even though the baby is about as big as your thumb. Grandparents squabble over who will have rights to look after the new grandchild. There are all sorts of plans such as what schools they will go to. Especially for first-time mothers it is a strange time—a wondrous, joyful time—and once things settle down would-be parents sometimes get a little bit apprehensive and scared, worried about the baby and whether he is going to be well. Will he be born well? Will he develop properly? It turns from being happy to being concerned, but still happy.

There are quite a few risks, as we know, in pregnancy, during birth and in the postnatal period. Every preventable stillbirth, neonatal death or infant death of a child is a tragedy and we must make all efforts to prevent it happening. The families that I have brought here today believe, along with the hospital, that deaths were preventable. Mistakes were made and things were missed. I hope that today the ministerial team can give the families something so that they can go away and know that they have been listened to.

There are factors apart from mistakes, such as diabetes, obesity, drinking too much, smoking and other factors in pregnancy that can affect how a baby develops and ultimately how healthy it is once it is born. But as I say, in these cases mistakes were made. I have spoken to some of the families, and two families are here today. I will read out their stories—not my words, but their words. I asked them to print out their stories so that I could read them out here in Westminster Hall.

The first one is from Rob and Emma Stretton. They tell the story of Olivia. This is from Rob:

“On the 31st of May 2023, Emma and I attended a routine scan at King's Mill Hospital, Mansfield. During the scan a few issues arose. The sonographer called for assistance from her senior and her recommendation was made to contact a consultant. His decision was that Emma needed admitting immediately for observation. The time was approximately 14:30. We were taken

upstairs to the maternity unit where the situation was explained to a midwife at the nurse's station. Her reply was we should return later as no beds were available and a phone call should have been made to the ward prior to attending. The consultant suggested for us to return in a couple of hours to which the midwife replied this wouldn't be feasible due to shift change over. She said between 19:30-20:00 would be better.

After this we left for home and returned to the ward around 19:45. Emma was admitted for monitoring and once she was settled, I returned home. Upon entering the house, I received a phone call from a midwife advising me to return as soon as possible as no foetal heartbeat could be obtained. I went straight back to the ward to be informed our baby...had died. Emma was given medication to induce labour and gave birth to our stillborn daughter three days later at 18:13.”

The next story is from Bianca Chapman. This is Imiza's story:

“My placenta was completely covering my cervix. I was a high risk pregnancy. I had a bleed in the November and wasn't given much advice on any risks. In the early hours of 3/12/22 I had a big bleed and went into KMH. The registrar raised concerns but was ignored by the consultant. In the space of just over 24 hours I then had several more bleeds. It wasn't until my daughter's heartbeat baseline stopped beating I was considered to be allowed surgery.

The consultant in charge had gone missing, which delayed my daughter coming out. The ward was on code red. It took 45 minutes to find him. I was then operated on to find out my placenta had abrupted inside me. They struggled to get my daughter out so they had to make a further cut in my stomach, which now due to that I will never be able to give birth naturally.

My daughter came out at 11.16 am not breathing. It took 7 minutes to resuscitate her. I had clumps of placenta floating around my stomach and had to be put to sleep to have further surgery. We were led to believe she was fine, but we weren't able to see her. We were told they was just waiting for her to urinate. She was later transferred to LRI, which was when we were finally told the truth: she had a bleed on her brain due to being left inside me too long with no oxygen. Her nappy was filling with blood.

Within the space of a few hours, we were told she would be highly disabled, to get your family here, who you would like to meet her, as it's in her best interest we turn her life support machine off. After turning her life support machine off I was then told I was going to be put back on the maternity ward around all mothers and babies...There was no way in this world I wanted to be around alive babies.

Once we had our investigation, we were told a lot of things that could have prevented all of this. We was told if she was taken out around 7 am she would be alive right now. Those vital few hours made all the difference yet we was left to suffer a lifetime of pain through a choice of a fully qualified consultant...We were also told he would of known her life expectancy would be short due to the abruption yet he told us she would be home with us for Christmas and not to worry.

We believed in them to be later proved it was all a lie. All that happened to the consultant responsible for our baby girl's death was he was audited. We are now both changed forever...I was pushed out in a wheelchair holding a memory box as that's all my daughter then was, a memory.”

Amelia Bradley wants to tell Theo's story:

“My pregnancy was the typical normal pregnancy. I attended all antenatal appointments and was deemed as low risk. On the 13th September 2023, I attended King's Mill Hospital in the evening, despite being a booked homebirth, to get some pain relief. On the first admission to the Sherwood Birthing Unit, I was left waiting for 40 minutes, before being told by a supporting midwife that they were really busy, and someone would see me shortly. 30 minutes later, the same midwife returned to complete my original triage assessment, something that should be undertaken within 15 minutes of arrival.

This midwife apologised for the delays and started my assessment immediately when she came back into the room. She told me that I was 1 to 2 cm dilated and that my cervix still had some changes to make until I was in active labour. She still deemed me as low

[Lee Anderson]

risk, gave me a codeine tablet and said that I would still be suitable for a homebirth, as the only pain relief I could get with a water birth would be gas and air.

I got home at around about midnight and got into my birthing pool, before leaving it to use the toilet at around 12:30 on the 14th September. I had 2 contractions on the toilet and felt a pop, which was followed by bleeding. I put on a pad to monitor the bleeding and within 2 to 3 minutes, it was full. Luke rang the Birthing Unit and put the phone on speaker so I could consent to them talking to Luke and my mum because of how much pain I was in, and I couldn't speak for myself.

They asked if I had lost more than a teaspoon of blood, to which my mum said 'Yes, it's like a heavy period, but pure blood.' The midwife didn't ask any questions about the pain I was in and didn't try to gather further information on the amount of blood loss. She told me to come back to the hospital.

We returned to the hospital just before 1 am and on getting to the ward at 01:04, I was put into a triage room. 10 minutes later, a support worker came to take my observations, but ignored my mum when she tried to show her the blood-filled pad, and then failed to alert any of the midwives that I was bleeding.

After being in the room for 37 minutes, while 2 triage midwives, a labour ward co-ordinator and several other staff were sat around their nursing station discussing how many Haribos they'd eaten on the shift, and how other midwives who were on bank shifts were getting paid more...a midwife"

never entered the room. When one did enter, she

"took a look at the pad and her face dropped, noting the seriousness of my condition. She couldn't find Theo's heart rate, so went to get support and a Doppler to see if this could pick the heart rate up. She found him to be bradycardic and issued a 2222 emergency. The consultant came and ordered for a category 1 C-section to take place."

The baby died.

This is the story of Hayley Moore:

"My story...Had previous placenta eruption in 2021, was very lucky—was picked up and I was straight down to theatre for an emergency C-section. This time around I was very anxious about it happening again, was questioning the consultant. He said I was only under him because small baby last time. I wanted a planned C-section, but he kept pushing me to go natural and full term.

I went in on the 17th of February with reduced movements and pains, was hooked up to the monitor, was told I can't be having contractions so was sent home. On the 19th, went for a scan. I felt it was rushed, still said I don't feel right. They said baby had grown and looked fine. Felt movement early hours.

The next morning by 10 am on the 20th I was at home in agony, rang the birthing unit, they told me to go down so I did. Got there, was sent into assessment unit. Midwife came, checked for heartbeat...had to wait for scan...then moved down to room 11, where the bereavement midwife came up. The doctor was pushing me to go natural again as I was stable.

The midwife at the time, along with my sister, was pushing for my C-section...in the end, I did get rushed down for a C-section, and again my placenta had erupted. The aftercare I received from midwife Holly...was outstanding."

That is four stories.

Recently, I visited King's Mill hospital and the maternity unit, where I managed to walk around with the chief nurse, Mr Phil Bolton. It is a brilliant facility at that hospital. The problem that hospitals have, however, is the headlines in the newspapers, which are always bad. We never see the front page of a local paper saying, "Hospital saves a life", although that is what they do every single day.

Mistakes have been made, and individuals have made mistakes, but I also have to say that I am incredibly proud of King's Mill hospital, which is where I was born and where my children were born, and it is probably

the place where I will leave this earth, when I eventually go—though I have no plans to do that just yet. It is a brilliant hospital, but mistakes have been made. But King's Mill hospital acknowledged the mistakes; it put measures in place and learnt from some of the heart-breaking stories we have heard today.

I am not here to talk about King's Mill hospital; I am here to talk about my constituents, who have suffered the most horrendous grief. Baby loss will always happen—we know that—but those were preventable deaths. We must do all we can in this place to ensure that our national health service has the support it needs to make sure that we reduce baby loss.

We know about the Ockenden report in Nottingham. Some of the news coming out of that is quite shocking. I fear that we sometimes treat the birth of babies like a production line—it is not. It is very personal and emotive. Every single family is completely different; mums and dads are different. If we can learn anything from today's debate, it is that from the families I have spoken to, baby loss touches every single family in this country. Somebody along the line will know or be related to somebody who has had baby loss, whether that be a miscarriage or during childbirth or post-natal.

I ask the ministerial team to have a look at my constituents here in the room today. I know it is not always possible to empathise, because we have not all been through the same thing, but please reassure them that they have been listened to. I cannot go any higher than this. We have the complaints in and the solicitors involved. As a Member of Parliament, all I can do is listen to my constituents and their stories, bring them to this place, let them see the people running this country, and ensure that their stories are listened to and that the facts I have given today are acted upon.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Peter Dowd (in the Chair):** I remind Members that if they wish to speak, they should bob—as some of you have done. Thank you for that.

9.46 am

**Nigel Farage (Clacton) (Reform):** My hon. Friend the Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson) has raised a subject that is, for many families and communities, a taboo. It is very, very difficult to talk about. When it comes to prevention, he is quite right to pay tribute to the hospitals where every week, thousands of healthy babies are born. Where there have been errors—we have seen it not just in Nottingham; one of the Kent hospitals had a particular problem with this—everything should be done to make sure these deaths are prevented. Whatever we do, however, naturally some stillbirths will still happen.

I have seen the effect of stillbirth in my own family. It is pretty devastating. It does not go away or get forgotten. Are those that go through this, particularly the women, able to talk about it? Can they share their experiences? A problem shared may not be a problem solved, but it might just make life a little bit more bearable—a little bit easier. I must be honest: when my niece had that stillbirth, I did not feel I could face her and talk about it. I felt too awkward. Would I say something that was wrong? Was it best we just did not discuss the subject? A decade on, even though I am close to her, I have never discussed it. I have just felt too awkward to do it.



I suspect that is the case with many men, including husbands and partners. It is just something that is not talked about.

I want to pay tribute to councillor Jeff Bray, the former leader of Tendring district council, who has talked about the stillbirth experience as a father. I am also encouraged by Maria Gormley's charity in Clacton, where women—and men if they want to—can come together regularly and share their experiences. It is not an easy thing to do. I have admitted my own failings, but I suspect I am far from alone in finding this subject incredibly difficult.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Ashfield said, anything that can be done to prevent avoidable disasters must be, but I want to put it on the record that naturally, these things will happen—hopefully in very low numbers. There needs to be counselling and support for people who have been through that experience. To be honest, I feel that in most parts of the country, it is very sadly lacking.

9.49 am

**Lizzi Collinge** (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson). As a woman who has lost two very much wanted pregnancies, baby and pregnancy loss is very close to my heart. I also represent an area that, in the past, has seen poor maternity care cause the death of babies. I want to speak about the importance of local support for parents and families, and to give those support organisations a voice here in Parliament. I also want to highlight the absolute necessity of rigorous investigations and true candour when babies die. My constituency hosts two excellent support groups for people affected by pregnancy and baby loss: Matilda's Mission, set up by Chelsie and Matt after the death of their baby Matilda, and the Tigerlily Trust, set up by Val in memory of her daughter Lily.

Matilda's Mission and the Tigerlily Trust work with local bereaved families. They provide a whole host of support, including remembrance boxes for bereaved parents to make and collect as many memories as possible in the short time they have with their babies, and to give them resources when they return home. There are sibling memory boxes for bereaved living siblings, sibling play sessions, and support groups, which in particular can combat the loneliness and isolation often felt with this sort of grief. They provide a place where people can come and heal together. There are dad drop-ins, one-to-one catch-ups, grandparent events, older sibling events, whole family events at holidays such as Christmas, and of course events around Mother's and Father's day. The two groups also work with hospitals and universities on maternity bereavement care and host Baby Loss Awareness Week events.

I asked Chelsie, Matt and Val what they wanted me to say today, and they told me that funding is an issue. For example, the bereavement suite at the Royal Lancaster infirmary, co-designed with bereaved parents, has been closed for some time due to safety concerns. While the trust continues to work on that, maternity bereavement does not seem high on the agenda when it comes to budgets. As Chelsie said in her beautifully blunt way, "Dead babies and their families matter too." Funding for support groups is also extremely difficult, with some groups struggling to get support for funds to continue.

Support for families is currently a postcode lottery, often involving lengthy referral times for NHS services or support from charities. When families are in the depths of grief, 12 weeks' wait for a referral is tough going. Families need consistent and timely care.

Matt, Chelsie and Val also wanted me to mention bereaved dads and non-birthing parents. The lack of support again is apparent, and their role can often be seen as merely supportive to the mother or birthing parent, rather than as a grieving parent themselves. Something important to me—this was mentioned by the hon. Member for Ashfield—is tackling the idea that natural childbirth is somehow superior to medically assisted childbirth. At its worst, that belief—and it is no more than a belief—has killed babies.

Finally, I want to mention something that touches all aspects of health and social care, and that I am sure our new Government will take very seriously. When things go wrong, it is the duty of all organisations involved to be fully truthful, transparent and willing to learn. When adverse outcomes are potentially due to failures in care, too often families experience insufficient and prolonged investigations that add to the trauma. We owe it to the babies lost—baby Matilda, baby Lily, baby Theo, baby Olivia, the baby daughter lost to placental abruption and Hayley's baby—not only to find out what happened to them, but to ensure that we prevent every single future death we possibly can through a rigorous commitment to investigations at pace, a culture of safety, and the best possible patient care.

9.54 am

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Lizzi Collinge) and to hear her contribution as well. In particular, I thank the hon. Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson) for setting the scene, as he often does, with a passion and an understanding of his constituents that we all see, and for describing the examples of his constituents who have suffered in this way. He did it with sensitivity, because it is a very sensitive debate. As a father and a grandfather, my thoughts are with those who have faced and are living through baby loss; there are many who have. I say "living through" because I know that it is not something to get over as such.

I could give many examples, but I will give just one. The hon. Member for Ashfield said that every family has been touched, and he was right. My mother has had a number of miscarriages, as has my sister and Naomi in my office, so the issue of baby loss resonates with us all.

There was a lady I greatly admired. Her name was Agnes Thomas. She is dead and gone, but she was 4-foot-nothing. There wasn't much of her, but she was definitely a whirlwind. I remember her coming to see me. She took care of her 105-year-old mother—and that is the age her mother was when she passed away. Agnes had a very ill husband, and she had minimal help from anyone. Within a few months of her passing away, her mother and her husband died too. She was the centre of that home and one of the strongest women that I have ever known—apart from my own mother, of course, who at 93 is equally strong. However, underneath all that undeniable strength was also a lady that, in her 80s, came to the office to see whether she could find out where her stillborn son—

**Helen Morgan** (North Shropshire) (LD): The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful speech. It is good to hear the story of Agnes, and I hope that he will agree with me that sympathising with our constituents who have suffered such awful circumstances and telling their stories in Parliament is a good way to ensure that they are heard in the future.

**Jim Shannon:** I thank the hon. Lady for that. The story of Agnes's son is this: her stillborn son was born sleeping in the early '70s and was buried. Agnes came to see me over 50 years later.

**Lee Anderson:** The hon. Gentleman is making a very passionate speech, and I think everybody in Westminster Hall can tell how impassioned he is. He tells a very touching story. Does he agree that it does not matter how long ago baby loss occurred—it will always stay with the family?

**Jim Shannon:** I am sorry for being emotional. I know that I should not be. I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving me a chance to recover some of my composure.

Agnes came in tears to ask where the Royal Victoria hospital had buried her son. It meant something to her, even though it was 50 years later—that wee small lady, standing in my office telling me her story, which was breaking her heart 50 years later.

The loss of a baby is life-changing, and my thoughts are with those families who have been mentioned in this debate. There will be others. Other hon. Members will speak, and they will tell the same story with the very same emotion, compassion, understanding and that realness that the hon. Member for Ashfield compounded in such a fantastic way in his introduction.

The fact that baby loss can be preventable makes the outcome that bit more difficult to accept. Sands is a phenomenal charity, and it has given the following statistics. I always give a Northern Ireland perspective simply because I feel it adds to the debate, but it also tells us that the things happening here are no different for us back home. The stillbirth rate declined 17.7% in Northern Ireland between 2010 and 2022. However, comparing the rate over a three-year average shows a smaller reduction of 10.1%. My goodness! Though it is decreasing, it is still there with a vengeance. The neonatal mortality rate has been higher in Northern Ireland than in any other UK nation since 2013. It is equally bad wherever it is, but I am just making the point that Northern Ireland has examples of it that are above the rate anywhere else.

**Carla Lockhart** (Upper Bann) (DUP): I thank my hon. Friend for his powerful speech. This is certainly a debate that resonates with me on a very personal level, but I want to make mention of a little boy called Teddy from my constituency of Upper Bann, who died from sudden infant death syndrome. He will be forever seven weeks old. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need better wraparound services, particularly in our hospitals, with rooms made available for families who find themselves in these most tragic circumstances? There should be support, counselling and help right through their grief journey.

**Jim Shannon:** I thank my hon. Friend and colleague for that intervention. What she says is absolutely true.

I tend to be emotional at the best of times, but whenever someone loses someone, particularly at that time, it resonates with everyone. It is a time when people want to wrap their arms around them, because it is the right thing to do. At the same time, there has to be someone outside. The hon. Member for Ashfield gave some examples where—with respect—people were just sent home when they needed someone. That is so sad. I feel that there should be a greater role for churches and ministers to help and, as best they can, to give succour and support physically, emotionally and mentally. Those are things that we have probably all tried to do.

Unlike stillbirths and neonatal deaths, the total number of miscarriages and miscarriage rates are not reported in Northern Ireland. That needs to change. It is a matter for us back home and not the Minister's responsibility, because health is devolved, but I do feel that we need to do better. I still feel that the aims in the mainland should be replicated. I know that the Minister is sitting in for another Minister who cannot be here, but maybe it could be conveyed to the responsible Minister that we should look at an overall strategy for the whole United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Although there is an ambition in England to halve the 2010 rates of stillbirth, neonatal death, pre-term birth, maternal death and brain injury by 2025, there is no equivalent ambition in Northern Ireland. There really needs to be one; that is one thing that I would love to see. Sands states:

"The Northern Ireland Executive must commit to reducing pregnancy loss and baby deaths and eliminating inequalities. Any future targets must have a clear and agreed baseline to measure progress against."

It is not just about having a goal; it is about having a goal that means something. With respect, we can have words until the cows come home, but they mean nothing unless they turn into action. Sands further states:

"These targets should be the driving force behind a programme of policy activity, with funding and resources to meet them."

I agree. The ambition of this debate is to highlight the need for funding and resources, highlight the issue, make people aware and give an outlet to those who have suffered so painfully and who will carry that burden with them all their life. That is what I too am advocating, not simply for England but throughout the whole United Kingdom.

We have midwives who regularly find themselves staying after handover, as they are understaffed. We find exhausted junior doctors being left with full maternity wards while their SOs catch up on the never-ending paperwork. We have cleaning staff telling us that they do not have time to do all they need to clear rooms of infections. All those things are a matter of funding, and they are all UK-wide.

In all parts of this great nation, these are matters of life and death. The death of just one little baby that did not need to happen—we all have examples in mind today—is a tragedy. The number of babies who have died needlessly is not just a tragedy, but a catastrophe. We need to change it. With that in mind, I congratulate the hon. Member for Ashfield on giving us all an opportunity to participate in this debate in a small way, but with united force. Politics aside, we are here as MPs on behalf of our constituents, and we will all say the same thing: the loss of a baby is devastating to a family.

If we can do something, we must. Let us support staff and, by doing so, support the health of our mothers and their children.

10.4 am

**Mrs Sharon Hodgson** (Washington and Gateshead South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I thank the hon. Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson) for securing this important debate and for his moving opening speech. My thanks also go to Bliss for the briefing that it provided.

This is an incredibly important debate for me and, I have no doubt, for all of us here today. As some Members will know, I—like many others here today, sadly—have experienced the devastation of baby loss. Having not spoken about my experience of baby loss until 2016, 11 years after I became an MP, I know how difficult this can be to talk about openly. I want to thank all colleagues for being here, some of whom have personal motivations, as we have heard.

I want to tell you a little bit about my daughter Lucy and about my experience of baby loss. My daughter Lucy was born at 23 and a half weeks, and sadly she was stillborn. Her heart beat throughout my labour until just minutes before she was born. The experience of giving birth to a stillborn child is incredibly traumatic, as we have heard and as I have spoken about previously. It feels weird that the world around you is not responding as it would if you had given birth to a live baby. I felt that I made everyone around me, or anyone I met, feel very uncomfortable: it is one of the last taboos, as the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) spoke about. No one knows what to say to you when you have lost a baby or given birth to a stillborn baby—it is everyone's worst nightmare—so I did not talk about it, and I certainly did not tell anyone new to my life who had not known me before I lost Lucy. When I became an MP in 2005, it took me until 2016 to actually talk about it in this place, or to anyone from my post-baby-loss life.

What compounded this grief was the fact that Lucy did not receive a birth or death certificate. Even more upsettingly, in my records it was not recorded as a stillbirth; it was recorded as a miscarriage. Because she was just days away from being 24 weeks, she was three or four days short of the required legal age to be eligible for a death certificate. Because of that, she does not officially exist in any official records other than our own family records.

We did name Lucy during a blessing in a private room, which I was moved to after she was born, when I had to give birth in the maternity ward among all the live babies. She was then taken to the chapel of rest and we held a very small funeral service for her, organised by the chaplain at the hospital and the Co-op, which funded everything. I will be forever grateful for that: it meant a lot at the time and still does. The acknowledgment of Lucy's existence that they provided us with was truly invaluable, particularly when it had been denied to us by the lack of a death or a birth certificate.

After my experience, I knew things had to change, even though I could not talk about it for a long time. Alongside the former Members Will Quince, Antoinette Sandbach and Victoria Prentis—some of us here will remember Victoria, who left the House at the last election—I became one of the founding members of the all-party parliamentary group on baby loss in 2016.

I am pleased that the APPG is still going; I hope it gets reformed. It has become a vehicle for making great progress with regard to baby loss, in particular for securing bereavement suites across the country, improved patient pathways and better recording of data, among many more improvements. Still more are needed, sadly.

I then became one of only two MPs on the pregnancy loss review, alongside our former colleague Tim Loughton, following his private Member's Bill. The review's work resulted in significant changes—not least the decision, announced just earlier this year, that parents who lose a baby before 24 weeks of pregnancy in England can now receive a certificate in recognition of their loss. I know that this has been a great source of comfort for many who now feel they can finally get a formal recognition and acknowledgment that their baby existed. I am certain that it would have made a huge difference to me and my family.

**Carla Lockhart:** I thank the hon. Member for the moving real-life story that she has told. I commend her and her colleagues for their efforts on baby loss certificates. Does she agree that a greater effort needs to be made in the devolved regions—I am thinking of Northern Ireland—to replicate what is happening here in England with baby loss certificates, such is the importance of the issue for families?

**Mrs Hodgson:** I absolutely agree. I only realised that the certificates were just for England when we were pulling together my remarks for today. That is remiss; I encourage the devolved nations to follow the example of England and bring the certificates in, because they really make a massive difference to parents suffering early baby loss.

Despite these improvements, we still have a long way to go to provide the care and respect that all families need during such a difficult time, as well as to ensure that we take steps to reduce stillbirth rates. As expressed by Bliss, an organisation that campaigns for change for babies born premature or sick, there has been a concerning increase in the neonatal mortality rate and the pre-term birth rate. It points to a high variation in care as a factor that can be addressed to reduce that worrying increase.

As the MP for Washington and Gateshead South in the north-east, I know just how damaging the impact of inequality can be as we experience the acute end of regional inequality, which can manifest itself through less investment and less access to the resources we need. In relation to baby loss, inequality prevails and, as Bliss highlights, the number of babies lost to mothers from the most deprived areas has increased at a rate twice that of babies lost to mothers living in the least deprived areas.

It would be remiss of me not to mention that neonatal mortality rates are much higher for babies from an ethnic minority. Babies of black ethnicity are twice as likely to be stillborn as babies of white ethnicity. It is a failure of our healthcare system that babies of black and Asian ethnicity continue to have much higher rates of neonatal mortality. Disgracefully, that disparity is also seen in maternal healthcare. Maternal mortality for black women is currently almost four times higher than for white women. As some Members may have heard, the tennis star Serena Williams has spoken in great detail about her awful experience in that regard. I encourage



[Mrs Hodgson]

Members to read her article in *Elle* magazine, which is still available online. Even as a very wealthy and globally recognised figure, Serena's voice was dismissed during pregnancy and childbirth.

We must ensure that there is the right training and support for healthcare professionals to ensure that all those terrible disparities are addressed. The cases that we have heard today are so traumatic. Crucially, we must centre the voices of patients—usually mothers, but sometimes their partners as well—and listen to what they are saying about their own bodies and experiences. As we have seen with the high level of disparity in neonatal healthcare outcomes, we will fail to achieve change if we are not listening to those at the heart of this crisis.

If we are to effect change, we must also increase our midwifery workforce, as well as increasing the capacity in our NHS to allow the necessary training to be delivered. I am pleased that Labour is taking strong action to get our NHS back on its feet. In our manifesto, we committed to training thousands more midwives as part of the NHS workforce plan. It is also significant that Labour has said that we will ensure that trusts failing on maternity care are robustly supported into rapid improvement, and we will set an explicit target to close the black and Asian maternal mortality gap.

**Mr Gregory Campbell** (East Londonderry) (DUP): Does the hon. Member agree that two points that have emerged from this important debate are that greater resources are required to deal with the problem, and that a greater understanding is needed of the individualistic nature of the problem? No two mothers or families will react to baby loss in exactly the same way, as she and other hon. Members have so passionately outlined. Those are two of the most important issues arising from the debate, and hopefully we can learn from them.

**Mrs Hodgson:** I absolutely agree. The hon. Member makes a very valuable point: resources matter, but it is also about how they are implemented. Human interaction and professional training is so important.

I am hopeful for the future and proud of the change that has been made so far. Looking at all colleagues in the Chamber today, I know that together we are a powerful voice that can make such a difference to families during that terrible time and can help to improve outcomes for others, so that fewer people experience this most dreadful loss in future.

10.15 am

**Andy MacNae** (Rossendale and Darwen) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson) for securing this important debate, and the families for being in the Public Gallery and sharing their experiences. I speak as the father of a daughter called Mallorie, who we lost at five days, so I share their experiences.

We have heard some stark statistics, and I will seek to summarise the national picture and some of the measures that we might be able to take. We have heard about the number of losses, and that every loss is a personal tragedy. We have also heard that every loss is not inevitable. Up to one in five stillbirths and neonatal deaths are preventable. In 2015, the then Government announced an ambition to halve the rate of stillbirths

and neonatal deaths by 2025 but, sadly, progress on delivering on that ambition has stalled. Without renewed action we are going to fall well short.

To dig a bit deeper, as my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson) highlighted, there are still further causes for concern. According to the 2022 perinatal mortality report, black babies are more than twice as likely to be stillborn as white babies, and black and Asian babies are more than 50% more likely to die shortly after birth compared with white babies. Research by baby loss charity Sands has explored the reasons for that inequality, and as a result is calling for specific actions to deliver positive, joined-up, empathetic maternity and neonatal care, through its End Inequality In Baby Loss campaign. I urge our new Government to support those actions.

Baby loss charities are highlighting wider areas where improvements could help to prevent baby loss, including greater consistency in ensuring that maternity services meet nationally agreed standards and guidelines. In effect, we know what needs to be done but we need to implement it, particularly in respect of the NHS saving babies' lives care bundle. Linked to that is the need for maternity units to be properly staffed, as we have heard so many times today. The Sands and Tommy's joint policy unit estimates that nearly a third of neonatal intensive care unit shifts are not properly staffed. In addition, 63% of midwives have felt unwell in the last 12 months due to stress. Overall, in 2022-23 nearly half of maternity services were rated as "inadequate" or "requires improvement" by the Care Quality Commission.

We know that the NHS as a whole has been left broken by 14 years of neglect, and now we must look to our new Government to ensure a safe maternity care system in which national guidelines are consistently followed. But sadly, even with the best care and support, many families will still suffer the pain of baby loss. Effective bereavement support can be crucial in helping families to come to terms with their loss. Again, I speak from personal experience in that regard.

Despite wonderful work done by charities—I want to mention the Friends of Serenity in my area of Rossendale and Darwen in Burnley—and by NHS trusts, far too many bereaved parents cannot access the compassionate care that they need. That can hugely impact their wellbeing in the short term and for the rest of their lives. Of course, this has related social and economic costs. As with so many aspects of primary care, effective early support reduces demand in the longer term. The issues and solutions are well understood.

Healthcare professionals across the UK do not have sufficient access to bereavement care training, which means they are not adequately supported to gain the skills and confidence they need to provide excellent care for families when a baby dies—or, indeed, to look after their own wellbeing. The national bereavement care pathway provides nine standards of care across five different experiences of pregnancy and baby loss to ensure equality of bereavement care no matter where a parent lives in the UK. In England, all 128 NHS trusts have now signed up to the NBCP standards. I hope the new Government will consider making the pathway mandatory and providing the funding to help trusts to implement the standards.

I will finish off with a reminder that Baby Loss Awareness Week is coming up in October, culminating in the global wave of light on 15 October. I hope that fellow Members can support the events in their constituencies.

10.20 am

**Olivia Blake** (Sheffield Hallam) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Dowd. I thank the hon. Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson) for securing this important debate. My thoughts are with all the families whose experiences he shared today and with all those present who have shared their personal experiences.

This is an issue that is deeply personal to me, and I have spoken about it many times in the last five years. I am sad to say that I have not yet had my rainbow baby, but that does not stop the questions every single month for probably the last year, asking whether I am pregnant. I encourage colleagues not to ask women, because not only is it very rude but it can cause a lot of heartache for those who are struggling to conceive.

I have had the honour of working with dedicated campaigners, including Myleene Klass, and we were privileged to welcome the then Minister responsible for women's health to Tommy's at Birmingham Women's hospital. It was great to get them there. I extend that same invitation to the new Government's health team to see the research that has been done there; to see an alternative model of care, which would see the end of the three-miscarriage rule and has since been piloted in response to the review; and to meet the families who Tommy's has helped to have their rainbow children. It was incredibly rewarding to hear their stories about how small changes in care can really make that difference and allow people to have the families they so desperately need, while remembering the children they were unable to hold in good health. It has been brilliant to work with Tommy's and Sands for several years, pushing for meaningful and long-overdue changes.

It is estimated that 50% of people will be affected by baby loss during their lifetime, either personally or through someone they know. Miscarriage is common but that does not make it any less heartbreaking, and often that leads women—as well as men who have gone through it—to face grief in isolation. We have been trying hard to break the taboo, increase support from employers and establish bereavement leave and better mental health support, because in many cases there is none. Most importantly, we have been trying to improve the pathway of care by pushing for more early intervention for women who may be at higher risk—such as myself as I had undiagnosed diabetes—and for funding for research to make sure we are doing all we can to improve the life chances of people going through pregnancy.

In the UK, 13 babies tragically die before, during or shortly after birth every single day. National reports indicate that up to one in five of those stillbirths and neonatal deaths could be prevented if guidelines were simply consistently followed. That is not good enough, and those deaths are not mere statistics but heartbreaking losses that call for our immediate attention and action.

I want to highlight the progress being made in addressing the challenges in miscarriage in response to the independent pregnancy review, because it is important that we show that more can be done. We have touched on the three-miscarriage rule; it is important that we make sure that

ending that is rolled out successfully. We are waiting for the results of the pilot, but I hope the Government will take seriously that change in the model of care, which is backed up by research.

By all accounts, the number three was picked out of mid-air, and there is no reason why someone should have to wait to have three miscarriages before they get basic tests for diabetes or for other reasons to understand why they may have miscarried. It is cruel—we would not expect anyone to have three heart attacks before doing a basic test—and it lays bare the sexism in our medical system that we would allow people to go through that so many times and face so much loss and trauma before giving them the answers they need to perhaps go on to have successful pregnancies.

The review provided 73 recommendations across various areas, including the graded model of care, which would be the alternative to the three-miscarriage rule and would give people the support they need after one miscarriage. It is currently being trialled at Birmingham.

Another vital recommendation is 24/7 access to miscarriage care. At the moment, people may or may not have access to an early pregnancy unit, depending on where they live in the country. They may not have any access to information about what to do if they are suffering a miscarriage, which leads to people turning up to A&E or staying at home and losing a child unnecessarily. This critical measure would ensure that nobody has to navigate that painful experience alone, and I would love to work with the Government further on how we can develop it in an affordable and successful way to reach all communities, whether rural or inner-city.

Data collection is an important area that I feel has been left out of the conversation somewhat. It is vital that we understand the issue. There has been a push for the systematic recording of all miscarriages in order to understand their true scale. The numbers we quote today are unknowns, really, because we have not been recording them systematically.

I had an experience when being called for my flu jab. I was a bit bemused and asked why I had been called for one. They said, "Oh, it's because you're pregnant." They looked down and saw that I was not pregnant and said, "Oh wait, you're not." That was a very difficult thing for me to go through. They did give me the flu jab, which is quite funny I suppose, but it was really hard for me to go to that appointment and hear that.

Many of my constituents have been asked whether it is their first child or how their other children are doing, because the notes are not there. The way that miscarriage and baby loss is flagged on medical records is not sufficient to stop those awkward and very upsetting experiences for women who have been through baby loss. We want to get national statistics because we want to understand the true picture. That will allow us to set targets and measure the impact of the interventions that we so desperately need to introduce.

Although the previous Government's commitment to 20 short-term actions, including on some of the issues I have highlighted, is a positive step, it is deeply concerning that families are still having to face the trauma of multiple miscarriages before receiving investigative tests and mental health support, which is not fully understood either. People who have suffered loss are more likely to suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and suicide. These are very material issues for families

[*Olivia Blake*]

who have experienced one miscarriage, never mind the trauma of three. I hope the Government can look into the issue in more detail.

We have heard about issues of inequality. Black babies are more than twice as likely to be stillborn, and black and Asian babies are more than 50% more likely to die shortly after birth than white babies. High rates of child fatality and miscarriage are also reported in the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities. This disparity is unacceptable. I urge the Government to renew and extend the national maternity safety ambitions and to set clear targets to reduce these inequalities. I welcomed the reviews of these two areas that were brought forward by the last Government, but I hope we can learn the lessons soon and get action for those mothers. Every baby deserves an equal chance of survival; their background should not matter.

We must also focus on improving prenatal care. This is an area that people are again not given enough information on. Early and regular antenatal care is critical, but if we can provide advice, guidance and support for women who have disabilities and illnesses, we can help them have safer pregnancies. As we have heard today, the basic care is still not there for many people, and it is essential for us to focus on that gap.

As I said, we need to ensure that every expectant mother has access to timely, high-quality care regardless of their background. Alongside that, addressing health inequalities is crucial; sadly, babies born into poverty are more likely to die by their first birthday than those born into wealthier families. That disparity is a stark reminder of the broader social determinants of health that contribute to infant mortality. We must tackle these inequalities head-on by improving access to healthcare, education and support for families—particularly those from disadvantaged communities.

Preventable baby deaths are a tragedy that we have the power to address and prevent. Although we have made important strides, more work is desperately needed. I urge the Government to commit wholeheartedly to giving every baby the chance to thrive and ensuring that every family receives the support they need throughout pregnancy and, unfortunately, throughout baby loss.

10.30 am

**Helen Morgan** (North Shropshire) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Dowd. I start by thanking the hon. Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson) for securing this important debate. Sadly, we have revisited this issue a number of times, even in the short period since I was elected in 2021.

Members' speeches today have been excellent, and I will touch on them briefly. I thank the hon. Member for Ashfield for telling the stories of his constituents who have come along today, and I thank them for sharing their stories, which were very moving. It is tragic that they have been through such experiences.

The hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) addressed the fact that the subject is taboo and that we need to get over that if we are to support families properly. The hon. Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Lizzi Collinge), who I welcome to this place, stressed the importance of providing support for bereaved families and of the groups in her constituency that do that.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) told us the moving story of his constituent Agnes, who felt her loss for the rest of her life.

The hon. Member for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson) has been a pioneering campaigner on this issue. In particular, she has campaigned successfully on the issue of the birth and death certificate for a lost baby, and I am sure everybody is grateful to her for that. The importance of making memories for bereaved families is so important. The hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Andy MacNae) pointed out the important statistics we need to consider and the importance of effective bereavement support. The hon. Member for Sheffield Hallam (Olivia Blake), who has also been an effective and tireless campaigner on the issue of miscarriage, made an excellent speech.

I became co-chair of the APPG on baby loss shortly after I was elected, because of the scandal at Shrewsbury and Telford hospital NHS trust and the Ockenden report, which was issued shortly afterwards. There have been similar incidents at Morecambe Bay and East Kent, and we suspect there is a similar issue emerging at Nottingham, with the review by Donna Ockenden currently under way. The fact that scandals have emerged across the country means that there are endemic failings that we need to address, rather than blaming individual trusts.

The reports on Morecambe Bay and East Kent were by Dr Bill Kirkup, while the Ockenden report was for Shrewsbury and Telford. They raised very similar issues, albeit in quite a different style. The first issue was the importance of safe staffing in ensuring that babies do not die unnecessarily on maternity wards. Sands and Tommy's have also led a campaign on that, which the APPG supported. The former Government responded quite well in trying to improve midwife numbers and ensure that maternity units are safe places to be. Shrewsbury and Telford hospital NHS trust has achieved its targets on safe staffing. We need to keep the focus on that area, because safe staffing obviously needs to be maintained; it is not a one-off thing that we can do and then hope for the best for the future.

Other issues that came up include learning from mistakes, listening to mothers and their families, and doing a proper review when something goes wrong, as it inevitably occasionally will, to make sure that lessons are learned. It feels like that has not happened across the NHS as a whole. In every review, we have heard about a lack of openness and transparency with the families and about blame being passed on to mothers who have lost their babies. We have heard about a toxic environment in some hospital trusts and about a willingness to cover up what has gone wrong rather than be candid and learn from mistakes. Those issues have been highlighted time and again, and it is important that the three reports—we are expecting a fourth—do not just gather dust on a shelf somewhere. Action must be taken to ensure that those mistakes do not keep happening.

The hon. Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale raised the fact that there is an obsession with natural birth, and I feel that very strongly. After having an emergency C-section, I was asked by a midwife whether I felt like a failure for having been through that emergency medical procedure. The answer was, "No, not until you suggested that maybe I ought to," but hon. Members can probably imagine the shame, guilt and depression



that followed. We must get away from this obsession with natural childbirth. It is the best option for mothers with low-risk pregnancies, but it is not great for anybody who has a medical issue. We must not let ideology lead the evidence and science.

I am conscious of time, so I will not take too long. Shrewsbury and Telford hospital NHS trust has made great inroads in implementing the immediate and central actions that Donna Ockenden recommended, but I would welcome an update from the Minister on progress on the national actions. If the disparity for ethnic minority women—whether they are black, Asian or from another ethnic minority—was happening in an individual trust, we would be up in arms and would get in a professional to investigate what was going wrong. We must not lose sight of that disparity and inequality. We must deal with the terrible outcomes for some of these women, as well as with the wider situation in the NHS.

Independent whistleblowing is particularly important. In Shrewsbury and Telford hospital NHS trust, the freedom to speak up guardians report into hospital management, and people frequently report that they do not feel safe whistleblowing. I urge the Government to look at safe whistleblowing and to create an independent office of the whistleblower to ensure that when people raise medical concerns about safety, they are listened to, are not closed down and do not fear losing their jobs.

These scandals do not apply to a single hospital trust; there is huge variety in the quality of care across the country. I urge the Government to look at maternity care across the country and to ensure that getting safe care is not a postcode lottery but is consistent and fair for all women.

10.37 am

**Dr Caroline Johnson** (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I congratulate the hon. Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson) on securing the debate; the stories he read were very emotive.

Many people witnessing birth for the first time describe the experience as the miracle of birth. It is indeed the most wonderful occasion. I have been honoured to be present at the birth of many hundreds of babies in my work as an NHS doctor. Unfortunately, birth is an unpredictable process, and the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan) is right that we should focus not on natural birth but on the outcome of a healthy mother and child.

Birth does not always go smoothly. Generally, and increasingly as I became a more senior doctor, I attended only the very high-risk deliveries—those when things go wrong. In a job focused on saving lives, the opportunity to do so at birth is perhaps the most rewarding, but sadly, despite the best efforts of the whole team—midwives, obstetricians, paediatricians and allied professionals—some babies die, and that leaves a hole in the families that, as others have said, does not go away.

I spoke in the baby loss debate in 2022 as the responsible Minister, and I am reminded today of the words of Hayley Storrs, which were read by the hon. Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon):

“What people fail to understand when someone loses a child, it is that you have lost a lifetime. First days at school, first steps, graduations, what their favourite story would have been, birthdays, Christmases.”—[*Official Report*, 25 October 2022; Vol. 721, c. 65WH.]

That very moving account has stuck with me. It reminds us that this pain endures, so we must do all we can to prevent it.

I pay tribute to my NHS colleagues who strive every single day to ensure that pregnancy and birth lead to the happy, healthy outcome that we all want. Politicians and the Government must do all we can to support that. We must hold the NHS to account when it fails to uphold the very highest standards.

I also pay tribute to the many great charities, such as Sands, Tommy's and Bliss, which have been mentioned by others, that do such great work in this area. I was proud to run the London marathon with a constituent earlier this year to raise money for Bliss, and I am grateful for the support it provided to him.

We must focus relentlessly and systematically—starting at pre-conception, as the hon. Member for Sheffield Hallam (Olivia Blake) said—on every single factor that can cause or increase the risk of baby death. That includes reducing teenage pregnancy, smoking and obesity; ensuring that there is chronic illness optimisation, so that if someone has diabetes, it is optimally managed before they conceive; making medication changes if needed, so that someone is not taking teratogenic drugs at the onset of pregnancy; and ensuring that women are aware that folic acid should be taken before and during the early parts of pregnancy. Before the general election, the Government consulted on the fortification of flour with folic acid to reduce the number of babies who suffer from a shortage of folic acid during pregnancy. Can the Minister confirm whether this Government will go ahead with the proposed legislation to fortify bread products?

Additionally, the Chancellor has said that she will stop all non-essential communications. Many of the messages we are talking about are public health messages that need public communication strategies. Can the Minister confirm that this essential form of communication is not affected by the Chancellor's restrictions on communication costs?

NHS England introduced the saving babies' lives care bundle, which currently focuses on six areas: smoking; the assessment of foetal growth during pregnancy; awareness among parents and families that a reduction in foetal movements can be a significant warning sign; expertise training for cardiotocography monitoring during labour and pregnancy; the reduction of premature birth; and the management of diabetes to ensure that people have optimal control. The NHS had a plan to update the bundle to introduce maternal early-warning schools and tracking tools. Can the Minister confirm whether it is on track to deliver that? Can she also confirm that the saving babies' lives care bundle will be updated this year and at regular intervals, as evidence improves on how we can best reduce the number of baby deaths?

Two years ago, as Minister, I delivered a statement to the House on behalf of the Government regarding the outcome of Bill Kirkup's independent review of maternity services in East Kent. His report was very sobering. Those tragic events revealed failings—failings seen previously elsewhere, which should and must not be repeated. In response to the review, the Government set up a group chaired by Maria Caulfield, then the Minister for Women's Health, to oversee the work being done to improve maternity services nationwide, including by implementing the recommendations in Dr Kirkup's report.

[Dr Caroline Johnson]

Can the Minister confirm that the group's work will continue under the new Government? If so, can she confirm who will lead it?

Can the Minister confirm that she will support the work of the healthcare safety investigations branch, which investigates all cases of stillbirth and life-changing injury, to see what lessons can be learned and how care can be improved?

Other have talked about the Sands and Tommy's "Saving Babies' Lives" report, and particularly about workforce issues. The previous Government invested heavily in increasing workforce numbers, building five new medical schools. That takes time, but it will ultimately increase the number of obstetricians and paediatricians. The number of midwives also increased. There were 23,361 full-time equivalent midwives in NHS trusts and other core organisations in 2023, which is an increase of 19% since 2010. Births fell in England and Wales during a similar period. In the spring Budget, the Government committed £35 million to improving babies' care, £9 million of which was related to preventing brain injury. The remainder related mostly to funding 160 additional posts in midwifery and neonatal care. Can the Minister confirm that that investment will proceed in order to support the care of pregnant women and babies?

In summary, it is almost 10 years since the Government launched the maternity safety ambition. While that goal has not yet been achieved, from 2010 to 2022, the stillbirth rate fell by a fifth, the rate of maternal mortality fell by a fifth, and the rates of neonatal mortality for those babies born after 24 weeks fell by 36%. Those statistics are a good achievement, representing many hundreds of families who will now enjoy watching with love as their children grow, thrive and develop. We must build on that now to ensure that many more families—all families—have the same opportunity.

10.44 am

**The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd, and to speak for the Government in this important and moving debate. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson) for raising this important issue. As my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson) said, it is the last taboo, and the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) articulated well the difficulties that many people have in knowing what to say.

The debate gives me the opportunity to put on the record my deepest sympathies to the bereaved families: thank you for making the decision to come here today. Others might be listening in on the Parliament channel. The decision to attend is brave, and I commend the hon. Member for Ashfield for giving voice to the moving and harrowing stories of Emma and Rob, Bianca Chapman, Amelia Bradley and Hayley Moore, about their babies, Olivia, Imiza and Theo.

We know that preventable baby loss remains a serious issue every time such debates come before the House. Today, we have heard how many people have taken part in previous debates; I have listened in before. What little consolation they must be for parents and wider families who have lost a loved one, but I am always inspired. I hope that the families present today recognise that

every Member of Parliament is also a human being, with their own experience and that of their families. The issue touches every family; as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, it stays with families for decades. Sharing such experiences is brave of hon. Members, but they have given voice to how important the issue is.

Every baby's death is tragic, but all the more devastating when parents are told that it could have been prevented. As we have heard, report after report has told us that this remains a serious issue in our health service, and that is backed up by the data. Two years ago, the Office for National Statistics found that almost 2,300 stillbirths were recorded in England and almost 1,700 neonatal deaths, a rate of 2.9 per 1,000 live births.

In 2022, I welcomed the Ockenden review, as many did, but it made for harrowing reading. The Government's position is that any preventable death is unacceptable. We are committed to ensuring that all baby deaths that can be prevented will be prevented. Donna Ockenden's review shone a light on maternity staff too exhausted to do their jobs. It showed patterns of poor care, a lack of adequate training for staff, and failure in governance and leadership that led to widespread avoidable harm and death, and to shocking inequalities in maternity provision. Dr Bill Kirkup's review of East Kent identified similar themes, but also showed that leadership and culture changes were needed. That is why this Government stood on a manifesto commitment to train thousands more midwives and to set an explicit target to close the black and Asian maternal mortality gap.

There are a number of initiatives, some of which we have heard about today, and I will run through some of them. If I do not address some concerns expressed by hon. Members in my update, we will get be in touch with people, including the official Opposition—I commend the hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) on her experience in this area as a clinician as well as a spokesperson.

The NHS put in place a three-year plan to deliver the reviews' recommendations to make maternity and neonatal care safer, more tailored to every new mother's needs, and more equitable. That includes the Saving Babies Lives care bundle, which is being rolled out to every trust. That provides maternity units with guidance and interventions to reduce stillbirths, neonatal brain injury, neonatal death and pre-term birth. That will need to be updated regularly, but I will confirm the details to the hon. Lady.

The plan also includes initiatives to reduce inequalities. As we have heard, a serious cause for concern is the higher rate of stillbirths, neonatal deaths and pre-term births among babies from the black and Asian ethnic groups. Babies of black ethnicity are about twice as likely to be stillborn as babies of white ethnicity. That is unacceptable in modern Britain. We will not rest until outcomes are equally good for everyone in this country.

We also know that women living in deprived areas, not least my own constituency, are more likely to suffer adverse outcomes. In 2022, the stillbirth rate per 1,000 births in the 10% most deprived areas in England was 5.0, or 389; in the 10% least deprived areas in England, the stillbirth rate was 3.7 or 155. All local maternity and neonatal systems have equity and equality action plans

in place to tackle such inequalities. NHS England is investing £10 million every year to target the 10 most deprived areas of England.

Wider work is also important. NHS Resolution's maternity incentive scheme is improving maternity safety by rewarding NHS trusts that demonstrate that they are taking concrete steps to improve the quality of care for women, families and newborns. The National Institute for Health and Care Research has commissioned studies into how we can prevent pre-term births and improve care for mothers and babies. This year it launched a £50 million funding call, challenging researchers and policymakers to come up with new ways of tackling maternity inequalities and poor pregnancy outcomes.

There are ongoing initiatives to ensure that lessons are learned from every individual tragic event and to prevent similar events from happening in the future. All hospitals already carry out internal perinatal mortality reviews, which create reports that aim to provide answers for bereaved parents about why their baby died. They also help hospitals to improve care and ensure they try to learn something from every tragedy, wherever it happens.

The maternity and newborn safety investigations programme conducts independent investigations of early neonatal deaths, intrapartum stillbirths and severe brain injury in babies following labour. All trusts are required to tell the programme about these incidents. It will then carry out an independent investigation and make safety recommendations to improve maternity services. Coroners are also required to investigate deaths that are violent, unnatural or of unknown cause, although their remit excludes stillbirths; but that should leave no stone unturned when it comes to uncovering the cause of death, including an inquest where appropriate. Additionally, as of June 2024, I am assured that all NHS trusts have signed up to the national bereavement care pathway, which many hon. Members have raised today.

The existing measures, taken together, are helping to achieve improvements; we have already heard about some of the positives. Since 2010, the neonatal mortality rate has decreased by 25% for babies with at least 24 weeks' completed gestation, the stillbirth rate in England has decreased by 23%, and the overall rate of brain injuries occurring during or soon after birth fell by 2%. But we know, and have heard so movingly today, that more must be done.

People rightly expect assurances that lessons will be learned and that things that went wrong are not repeated. As hon. Members have pointed out, the sad truth is that we are likely to be debating these issues in the future, when the CQC releases its next report on maternity inspections and when Donna Ockenden completes her investigation into Nottingham. I expect to be speaking with hon. Members again about this issue, and my noble Friend Baroness Merron, Minister for Patient Safety, Women's Health and Mental Health, will be following that very closely.

Many of the issues identified locally are being repeated across the country, so I am clear that national leadership is needed. The Government will be honest about the challenges facing the health service and are serious about tackling them. I will listen to women and their families and do everything I can as a Minister to help deliver safer and fairer maternity and neonatal services for women and their babies. I really commend hon. Members who have shared their experiences today—

particularly new Members; I do not think I would have been able to do that as a new Member of Parliament. My hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Gateshead South spoke very honestly about how long it took for her to do that. That was valuable.

It may not be for me to say as Government Minister, but I commend the work that my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Gateshead South and other colleagues across parties have done in the APPG on baby loss. They have raised these issues and worked with Government Ministers, which is really important as parliamentarians. I hope that is reassuring to families here today. That work will hopefully be continued by parliamentarians across the House. Perhaps that will be an outcome of the issue being raised today, so early in this Parliament.

We need to listen to these women and their babies. We need to make sure that we have the midwives and other staff necessary to keep women and their babies safe. Before I finish, I should say that if I have missed anything, hon. Members should please get in touch. I say to my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Hallam (Olivia Blake) that we welcome the Tommy's miscarriage pilot, and my ministerial colleague will be looking closely at those recommendations.

As a new Government, we want to end sticking-plaster politics; that means real and lasting change in the health service. That will take time, but we will build a better future for women in this country. That includes by making sure that all baby deaths that can be prevented will be prevented.

10.54 am

**Lee Anderson:** First, I want to thank everybody for coming to this debate. It has certainly been an education for me—the number of Members who have all been touched by baby loss and turned up for this Westminster Hall debate is incredible.

During this debate, I have been educated about C-sections. When I went to my local hospital to talk about births and the number of C-sections as opposed to natural births, I asked the question: why are people having all these C-sections and why not just—and I apologise for this—make them have a natural birth? But actually, during this debate, I have come to understand why there are different outcomes for different people, and that sometimes a C-section is more appropriate for the woman. I know that it creates problems as well with the scarring and wounds and that sort of stuff, but I thank Members for educating me on that.

One of the most moving stories came from my good friend, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). As he said, this never leaves a family, no matter if it is 50 years on. These parents and family members will probably celebrate birthdays—first birthdays, second birthdays, the child's fifth, their 10th, when they would have started school, their 18th and their 21st. They will go through all that because they will be around other children and young people who were born around the same time, and they will be thinking, "That could be my child in that class", "That could be my child in that football team", "That could be my child playing in that netball team", and, "That could be my child going to prom in a Cadillac." I thank the hon. Member for Strangford for that. He always speaks with great passion.



[Lee Anderson]

I thank all Members for all speaking with great passion and great dignity. It has been a wonderful debate—very sad, but a wonderful debate nevertheless. I thank the ministerial team and the shadow Minister, but most of all I want to thank those in the Public Gallery. They have been extremely brave. The families from Ashfield, the councillor and the lady from Sands have been incredible.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered preventable baby deaths.

## Space Sector: Government Support

10.58 am

**Peter Dowd (in the Chair):** I will call Mr Alistair Carmichael to move the motion and I will then call the Minister to respond. As is the convention for 30-minute debates, there will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up.

**Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government support for the space sector.

It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Dowd. I welcome the Minister to his place and to his new role, and I wish him every success in it. When we talk about the UK space sector, it is worth reflecting that, when the Minister and I first arrived here as fresh-faced and enthusiastic newbies in 2001—

**The Minister for Data Protection and Telecoms (Chris Bryant):** You might have been!

**Mr Carmichael:** I don't think I ever was, actually.

Back in 2001, there was no such thing; the sector has emerged at a quite remarkable pace and has its roots in the early days of the coalition Government. Competitions were set up looking for opportunities to develop infrastructure in a UK space sector. That has led to a UK-wide space strategy, with interests in the north of Scotland, Cornwall, the Western Isles and other parts of the country. It is worth reflecting that the legacy of that competitive start-up has been a sense of competition between the different players in the sector. Now, as we approach maturity—we are perhaps months from the first vertical launch in the United Kingdom—a different picture is emerging. The success of any one of the different parts of the UK space industry can be only good for all parts.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on introducing this debate. I wholeheartedly agree with the point that he made and I will explain why. The space technology exploitation programme was introduced in Northern Ireland in 2023 through a pilot scheme

“to enhance UK space capability by developing new technologies...to overcome technology challenges and unlock new potential market opportunities.”

That pilot scheme concluded last year. Does he agree that additional funding is necessary for all the devolved nations, including his own and mine, to support them in contributing towards the roll-out of a potential national STEP programme that can help everybody in this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

**Mr Carmichael:** The hon. Gentleman anticipates the tack I will take. Of course, we are talking about support from the UK Government for our space sector, but the success story that we have seen thus far has been achieved with remarkably little public money. The support required goes beyond the financial, often to the political and the regulatory. Yes, he is almost certainly correct in saying that some money will be necessary, but there has to be more to ask for than simply financial support.

The space sector is widely recognised as an industry with both economic and strategic importance for the UK. I want to focus mainly on the vertical launch industry, but that is just one part of the sector and it is an industry in which the UK has a genuine advantage. There are currently only two licensed vertical space ports in western Europe: our neighbours in Norway have Andøya and we have SaxaVord spaceport in Shetland. With three ready launch pads in SaxaVord to Norway's two, for the foreseeable future the United Kingdom, through Shetland, will contain 60% of western Europe's vertical launch capacity. That is a significant opportunity for our economy and country as a whole, but it is an opportunity on which we must capitalise in the immediate term. With the nation's finances being as they are, it is worth reflecting—as I have just said to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—that we have got this far without excessive financial support from the Government, but what there has been is exceptionally welcome. SaxaVord spaceport is privately held, but recently secured a £10-million convertible loan from the Government, allowing the potential of a Government minority stake in the future. That Government investment was designed to attract interest and further investment from the private sector, and in that respect it has been successful. It has been taken as a vote of confidence for those involved.

SaxaVord is working closely with the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology and the UK Space Agency, and I am told it is in daily dialogue with the Civil Aviation Authority as the industry regulator. We are looking forward to seeing the Secretary of State for Scotland visiting the site in the not-too-distant future. Parenthetically, at this stage, I hope we might see better co-operation between the Scottish Government and the UK Government as we go ahead. There was, at least in the early days, a bit of a sour feeling as a consequence of people in Shetland feeling that other projects were being given a more favourable ride by the Scottish Government. The expression put to me was, "The thumb was being put on the scales to their favour." However, I think we have passed that point and, again in the spirit of a positive and forward-looking joint strategy, we need to put those differences behind us, although we do not forget them.

There is no shortage of potential clients for SaxaVord; the demand for a UK site of this sort is clear, but the infrastructure needs to be completed in order to maximise the opportunity. I hope that the Minister will be alive to the potential cost-benefit of getting this one across the line. More Government engagement and assistance is welcome in order to speed up the process and ensure that SaxaVord continues to lead the way in Europe, in what is a highly competitive and fast-moving global industry.

**Graham Leadbitter** (Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey) (SNP): My constituency has close links to Shetland when it comes to space, with the SaxaVord spaceport company headquartered in Grantown-on-Spey. I also have Orbex, with 130-plus employees in Forres, which is manufacturing rockets and will soon conduct launches in Sutherland. We know that for those companies, developing launch and manufacturing capability there is a significant capital expenditure in research and development. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that it is vital that private investment is underpinned by

easily accessible and, importantly, repayable state support, which needs to be reasonably substantial to get the venture to the point of commercial viability?

**Mr Carmichael:** In essence, yes, I do, and I acknowledge what the hon. Gentleman says about the siting of SaxaVord in Grantown-on-Spey. I pay tribute to Frank Strang, who has driven the project from day one. It has not always been straightforward—progress is never linear—but I am fairly confident that without somebody like Frank Strang driving it, we would not have got to this point. Having developed SaxaVord to where it is today, the team are now more or less at the point of readiness in terms of the site itself. All that is needed is a ready launch client that has passed the necessary tests and acquired its own launch licence. It would be remiss if I did not mention the state of play regarding the tests and potential launches. SaxaVord has hosted several successful engine tests over the last few years, including by HyImpulse, Latitude and Rocket Factory Augsburg. I witnessed one of the HyImpulse tests that did not work; it did not work in a way that nothing ignited.

More recently we saw a more spectacular test difficulty. I think the term that RFA used in relation to the nine-engine test on site was an apparent "anomaly". There was thereafter a fairly widely circulated video, circulated not least by RFA, which makes the fair and necessary point that this is the purpose of having a test. We do not expect every test to be successful, but from the point of view of RFA, and of SaxaVord as the host location, it is significant that they faced that difficulty and that everything—all the procedures and safeguards in place—worked. As a consequence, there was no injury to human life. There was a spectacular flare for a few seconds, it has to be said, but the testbed itself remains viable and has not been taken out of commission despite that event.

That was a test, but that is why we have tests: to find out what can go wrong. All the procedures and the necessary infrastructure substance that was put in place worked. That is something that, rather than diminishing confidence in the future of SaxaVord, should actually increase it. RFA is the most advanced of the clients working at SaxaVord, but it is not the only one. I understand that what happened was fully expected at some stage and prepared for. The schedule to which RFA was working has naturally had to be revised, but it expects to resume testing in Shetland soon.

At the point at which I anticipated securing this debate, I hoped that we would be looking at a launch early next month. We are probably a little bit further away than that. One expression I keep hearing from people in the sector is "space is hard", even though there is a strong feeling that the final pieces are almost in place for launches soon to begin in earnest. That is why the UK Government must play their role and be a still more active supporter of the sector as we come into this critical period.

I give credit to the previous Government, for all their flaws. They identified the opportunities and engaged with stakeholders regularly. There is plenty of scope for improvement in both the UK's big-picture space strategy and the granular element of helping to bring SaxaVord to its full potential in the months and years to come. On the big-picture level, can the Minister share his plans to improve the national strategy and its implementation?

[Mr Carmichael]

He will doubtless be aware of the tempered criticisms from the National Audit Office in July of the previous approach to the space sector:

“The government did well to draw its many different interests and activities in this very diverse sector into a single vision in its 2021 national Strategy, which set high ambitions...However, it did not produce the implementation plan that it had originally planned to, and three years later DSIT and UKSA are still in the early stages of identifying and developing the plans and capabilities needed to deliver the Strategy’s ambitions.”

It continued:

“If UKSA is able to address these issues and DSIT provides the required clarity on the aims and outcomes of the Strategy, then they will be much better placed to secure value for money from the government’s multi-billion pound investments in the sector and achieve the government’s ambitions for the UK in space.”

Focusing on the UK vertical launch sector and SaxaVord itself, will the Minister reaffirm the Government’s commitment to supporting the Shetland launch site as further tests and launches go on? With the advantage the UK holds, there is a clear opportunity to make progress and capitalise on that. The only risk is that we may spread ourselves too thinly. I would appreciate whatever engagement the Minister and officials can make in partnership with the Scottish Government so that we are all singing from the same hymn sheet. It is in all our interests to ensure that this gets off the ground—pun intended—so that we can start to witness and leverage the benefits to the national economy.

We have made remarkable progress in a short period of time and in an area that is of enormous strategic significance to the United Kingdom as a whole. It is embraced by the people of my constituency. It has been made possible because we have held thus far the strong political consensus between Government and Opposition and between Governments. Can the Minister confirm, as part of the new Government, that that consensus remains and that that is the way in which we will continue to develop support for the UK space sector as we go ahead?

11.13 am

**The Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism (Chris Bryant):** It is a great delight to see you in your seat, Mr Dowd, not least because, as I have commented before, you are one of the snappiest dressers in Parliament and London fashion week is fast approaching. That is not part of my space portfolio, but it is part of my culture portfolio. I very much hope we will see you on the catwalk.

What goes around comes around. It is a funny old world, isn’t it? I think the last debate I addressed in Westminster Hall from this side of the Chamber was also led by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael). It was about the global abolition of the death penalty. We completely agreed with one another on 28 October 2009 and, funnily enough, we completely agree with one another today.

I am slightly nervous about the right hon. Member saying that we should sing from the same hymn sheet, only because I am an Anglican—not a particularly good one—and I have a particular loathing of paraphrases sung to dirges, so I am not sure we can sing exactly from

the same hymn sheet, but he makes an extremely good point. The Government are very keen to work with the Scottish Government, with local authorities and obviously the commercial players in the field to make sure that we gain all the possible benefits from space to the UK economy and to the way we run our society, our business and our Government.

It is a particular delight also to see the hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier), because I know he has been interested in the subject and led the last debate on it in Westminster Hall. I know that a series of Members are interested in the matter, and I hope to ensure that by the end of this Parliament even more Members are cognisant of the issues and able to drive the agenda forward with the Government. There are many things that we need to change in this country, but we are absolutely committed—as committed as the previous Government—to ensuring that we harness and garner the benefits and opportunities of space.

I do not think of space as the final frontier; I think of it as the biggest opportunity in my portfolio when it comes to economic growth and our economic advantage in relation to other countries. There are other aspects, some of which the right hon. Member referred to, and I will of course come on to the specifics of Shetland—though my family is rather more Stornoway.

**Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): There is of course room for more than one space launch site in the UK, and we wish SaxaVord well in its future endeavours. The Minister has talked about the economic benefits to the country, but for Sutherland a space launch represents a social benefit to young people and jobs for the future in a fragile and remote part of the UK. My request is simply this: Ministers have a good relationship with the company Orbex, referred to by the hon. Member for Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey (Graham Leadbitter), and I would be grateful if that relationship could be built on.

**Chris Bryant:** I have every intention of building on all these relationships as fast as I possibly can. There are others—indeed, I am going to see Airbus in the next couple of weeks. Hundreds of companies in the UK are engaged in the various aspects of the value chain that lead to sending something up into space, keeping something up in space or taking something down from space, or that use the data that comes from space, or that provide the software, the mission control or whatever. There is a wide range of companies, and I want to engage with as many of them as fast as I can. Obviously, the two that we have referred to are already high on that list, and I would like to make a visit to Shetland soon if possible.

I know Grantown-on-Spey very well because I spent a lot of my childhood in Aviemore. I had a very constructive conversation with Mr Strang last week, and we are keen to work with his organisation. I suspect I will be visiting Grantown, as well as Shetland, in the not-too-distant future. Incidentally, there are some issues in relation to telecoms on mountains in Scotland that I would also like to address.

As has been said, space is a strategic priority for this Government, as it was for the previous one. It is also a competitive advantage for the UK. The point has been made about vertical take-off; we have more than half the capacity across Europe. The right hon. Member



referred to Norway as a neighbour. It does not feel so much like a neighbour in the south Wales valleys, but I understand his point. None the less, because of our geography, our time zones and so on, the UK has a unique opportunity to steal a march on the rest of Europe, and we are determined to do so if we possibly can.

The right hon. Member also made a point about skills and young people coming into the industry. We have spent quite a lot of time and DSIT money trying to ensure that we have the skills in the UK. We are well served, and we need to ensure that there is an ongoing build-up of people available to work in the industry, that they are able to get the training and support they need, and that people from a variety of backgrounds can conceive of a future career in those industries, even if it is not necessarily on their doorstep. We intend to work on that.

Of course, this is a commercial domain in large measure, but it is not necessarily a cheap or easy one. As has been said, space is hard; long-term investment is obviously far more important than short-term gain. We want to ensure that all commercial operators working in the field have an opportunity to seize investment opportunities, and we are aware that there will have to be Government involvement in that process.

**Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con):** Will the Minister give way?

**Chris Bryant:** I thought I might have stimulated the hon. Member.

**Mark Garnier:** Before I start, I refer hon. Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Everything the Minister has said so far is music to my ears. I hope to carry on as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for space, as I was in the last Parliament. One criticism that the all-party group had of the Government then was although the space strategy was a very good manifesto, it did not stack up to being a strategy. Everything the Minister has talked about in relation to the commercialisation of space is really important, but the strategy needs detail. He will not be able to answer this question immediately, but could he consider, as he gets more involved in his portfolio, looking into more details on the strategy in order to make it more than just a manifesto, so that businesses can really get their teeth into the industry?

**Chris Bryant:** That is a very fair point. All the new Ministers arriving in DSIT have been very keen to provide as much strategic clarity as possible about our direction of travel. Perhaps one could say that the advantage of having a decent majority in Parliament is that one can lay out a strategy for a period of time, rather than just running to catch up with one's tail. Likewise, I take the point made by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland that it is that clarity of strategic objectives that shows, "Yes, this is what we are doing; that is not our priority." That makes it much easier for inward investment into the UK to make secure investments for the long term.

Some of the things that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor has said about business taxation are important as well. The aim is to create an environment in which people can invest securely, knowing where they are going, that the Government will have their back and

that the strategy will not change every six months. I note the points made by the National Audit Office. I think the previous Government were very much trying to point in this direction, but perhaps they did not quite land it; maybe there was an anomaly at some point in the process of developing the long-term strategy.

Some hon. Members might not initially think of space as significant to the daily lives of their constituents, but I think it is worth pointing out something that is part of our lives: sat-nav. We all used to have rows in the car, trying to work out where we were going. Sat-nav now does the work for us—although I note that none of the sat-nav operators seems to understand how to say the name of my street in Wales or, frankly, any of the roads or towns in Wales—but this is not just about sat-nav for personal life; it is also about Earth observation, which makes it much easier to predict weather patterns. I had an interesting conversation the other day with a wine operator from the south-east, who was saying that that is really important for them to work out when they should harvest to ensure that there is the right amount of sugar in the grapes and so on. Similarly, data coming from satellites will enable the Government and many operators to provide services more effectively, efficiently and cheaply, and in a way that is more intuitive for ordinary consumers.

In all those fields, space is a really important part of how Government do their business, and how we better facilitate a strong economy and better society. Of course, it is not just the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology that has a very significant interest in space. I pay tribute to the Ministry of Defence, which has been a major player in the field; obviously, it is a NATO operational domain, apart from anything else. The MOD is investing £6.5 billion over a decade, including £5 billion for satellite communications through Skynet and £1.5 billion through the defence space portfolio. Many other Departments—the Department for Business and Trade, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, the Department for Transport, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and so on—are also engaged in this work.

Skills were mentioned earlier. The UK Space Agency has been funding £19.6 million since 2022 in this skills field, because if people want to invest, they are going to do so on the basis that we have a skilled workforce in the UK that is available not just today but in five, 10, 15 and 20 years' time.

I will say a few things about the launch sector, which is obviously of primary interest to the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland. Roughly 200 companies are engaged in the launch sector in the UK. As I said, some are involved in rockets; we have also referred to subsystems, spaceports, mission control, apps and all the technology that goes into making all of this possible. Roughly 1,500 people in the UK are involved, and they are fairly well paid, so that is a significant part of our economy with significant opportunity for growth. It brought in something like £336 million last year and had a GVA of £153 million. Over the past six years, the Government have invested something like £91 million in our launch capabilities—the right hon. Gentleman referred to the £10 million loan to Saxa Vord.

We are ongoing in our commitment, and that commitment has not been shaken by any anomalies that might have been seen on launch. I did feel a bit

*[Chris Bryant]*

worried that my first engagement with space was something going not entirely to plan, but I do not think that there is a causal relationship between that and my arriving in post.

In relation to Shetland, the right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that we need to work with the devolved Administration. I am very keen to have conversations with our colleagues in Scotland, my counterparts in Scotland, and of course with the Scotland Office. We need to work as a united Government to achieve what we want in the field.

As I say, I have spoken to Frank Strang and I am very keen, at the earliest opportunity, to visit both Grantown-on-Spey and Shetland. I cannot say when the next attempted launch may be, but Members are absolutely right: it is not a failure to have an event that does not go entirely to plan, when all of the contingency plans do click in correctly and properly so that there is no harm or danger to life. We see it as a blip, not as a final problem, and it does not undermine our long-term commitment.

There are a couple of points to be made about value for money, which goes to the point about clarity of strategy. We are going to have a very tough spending

review—I think everybody might have sussed that by now; the messaging has been strong enough on the subject—and that will undoubtedly be true in this field too. We need to be absolutely clear about what we are seeking to achieve, and about what the whole consortium of businesses and players in the space field want to achieve, so that we get really good value for money for the UK economy. It would be a terrible dereliction of a significant economic and strategic opportunity for the UK if we were somehow or other to abandon this field or diminish our commitment.

I hope that I have reassured the right hon. Member—just as I reassured him on 28 October 2009, when we were both in favour of the abolition of the death penalty everywhere in the world—that the UK Government are not stinting in our commitment to space and to the strategic and economic opportunities that it affords us.

**Peter Dowd (in the Chair):** Thank you. On the subject of space, Minister, can I say that your tie is stellar?

*Question put and agreed to.*

11.28 am

*Sitting suspended.*

## Sheep Farming

[DR RUPA HUQ *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

**Joe Morris** (Hexham) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the future of sheep farming.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq. The future of our sheep farming sector is vital to my constituency and my constituents in Northumberland, which is, after all, famous for having more sheep than people. I was privileged in the run-up to and during the recent general election to meet local farmers in my constituency at events that play an important role for our rural communities, such as the Northumberland county show, and to discuss the future of their industry. Since the election, I have been delighted to attend the Allendale agricultural show and the Slaley show as the sitting MP.

This is a debate about not just sheep farming, but our upland farms, the communities that have grown up around them, and the land that has been tended by those communities for centuries. Farmers I have spoken to expressed their concerns about how a hierarchy of land use is being pushed in some quarters—a hierarchy that does not place enough importance on the public good of using land for food production. I have been told of farmers being bought up by companies that are simply chasing subsidies, which has led to perfectly farmable land being taken away to allow opportunistic companies to line their pockets and launder their reputations.

Farmers I have spoken to acknowledge that change is needed with regard to biodiversity, but that change should not be about absolutes. Rewilding can go hand in hand with active farming, and it does not have to take out large swathes of land from food production. The way in which much of the land is managed is a centuries-old process. Unsurprisingly, as England's largest constituency, the land on which sheep graze in Hexham encompasses a diverse landscape, from our borders with County Durham and Cumbria, into Newcastle, all the way up to the Scottish border, and across sites such as Hadrian's Wall, the site of the much-missed Sycamore Gap tree.

Before I go on, I want to specifically thank the farmers across my constituency who have engaged with me. When I was first selected as Labour's candidate for the constituency at a meeting at Hexham farmers' mart on an October evening in 2023, I knew that it would not be easy to win the trust of the farming community, but it was fundamental to winning the seat and being the best constituency MP possible. The farming communities in my part of the country told me that they felt let down and taken for granted by the last Government. As I will cover later, they told me of the previous Government's betrayal and how they have been left to face the result of extremely damaging trade deals.

**Tim Farron** (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I welcome the hon. Gentleman to the House and, as the MP for England's second-largest constituency, I praise him for making a great speech on an important topic. He mentioned upland farmers. Sheep farming is huge in the uplands that we both share and love, and 41% of upland farmers are tenants. In the Rock review that

happened during the last Parliament, Baroness Rock proposed a tenant farmer commissioner to ensure fairness for tenants in this time of flux and change. Would he agree that the new Government should adopt that measure, and do so very quickly, to protect our tenants against the poor and dangerous decisions that some landlords make?

**Joe Morris:** I will come on to tenant farmers later, and I hope the hon. Gentleman will like some of what he hears.

The election of the Labour Government is an opportunity to reset the relationship between sheep farmers, the wider farming community and the Government. The farmers I have spoken to are aware that this is our chance to have an honest and productive relationship built on trust, with the long-term viability of the agricultural industry and communities in this country at its heart. I thank members of my local farming community, particularly Robert Phillipson and Nick Howard, both sheep farmers in the Allen Valleys, who have been straightforward and patient and have taken time to aid me in representing them and their colleagues as best I can.

For many of those communities, engaging with the Labour party was new and challenging—perhaps not something that came naturally. It was also difficult for many of my local party members to believe that we would be brave enough to walk down those paths into farming communities to try to win votes. I thank the Northumberland National Farmers Union and Catherine Bowman, who have been great at facilitating that dialogue, which I am determined to continue every single day. I know that we will not always agree, and that many of the conversations will be difficult and robust, but we all know how vital sheep farming is for our constituents. In this relationship, trust is earned, not given.

As we discuss the future of sheep farming, it is important to talk about the next and emerging generation of sheep farmers. They will be the custodians of our beautiful countryside and ensure that the industry can face the challenges of sheep farming as a priority. Recently, I visited West Wharmley farm just outside of Hexham town, where I was hosted by James Johnson and joined by other livestock farmers. James's family are fifth-generation tenants and, as such, have an impressive understanding of their industry and the land they farm.

James's brother, Stuart, took the family down the path of a more conscious relationship with how they manage their soil, and began to use regenerative methods of agriculture to be a more resilient business economically and environmentally. The methods that Stuart is undertaking have allowed him to slash his use of pesticides and fertiliser, have reduced their livestock vet and med, and have improved the biodiversity, which led to Stuart being named soil farmer of the year 2023.

The Government have a role to play in supporting families such as the Johnsons as they venture into new ways of managing their land and livestock. They also have a role to play in promoting and demonstrating these methods to the wider livestock farming industry, and in supporting their implementation. The Government could be an active participant in this conversation, helping more livestock farmers to explore how such practices could allow them to become more resilient as businesses and environmentally.



[Joe Morris]

Many of my constituents are tenant farmers. It is incredibly important that the Government listen to their concerns and look at the Rock review carefully to identify what is implementable. I am aware of the strained circumstances we find ourselves in and that not everything can be done straightaway, but tenant farmers have suffered a great deal from spiking energy bills and food costs, and often a simple inability to make farm financing work. Whether I was in West Woodburn, Slaley or Allendale, that came through in almost every conversation I had.

**Catherine Fookes** (Monmouthshire) (Lab): In my constituency and Wales as a whole, we cannot underestimate the value that sheep farmers bring to our local economy and the importance of our local livestock marts, where farmers of all generations gather each week not only to sell their fabulous livestock, but to socialise and access services, which can really help their mental health. Does my hon. Friend agree that we must look again at the UK-Australia and UK-New Zealand free trade agreements? We have a really big issue with New Zealand lamb. In my local butcher this weekend, I could buy a leg of good Welsh lamb for £46.14, but I could buy a leg of New Zealand lamb in the supermarket for £20. Does my hon. Friend agree that we must see some action to ensure our farmers in Monmouthshire and across Wales are protected against the flood of imports from overseas?

**Joe Morris:** As I was discussing with my hon. Friend before the debate, I spent two years working for the UK steel sector, which also faces dramatic challenges from goods produced at far lower costs flooding into our markets and damaging production. Those issues that affect steel also affect farming, and it is incumbent upon us to look at the trade deals we sign and how they impact us. Later in my speech, I will urge the Government to look at how trade deals are negotiated and how we can shed more light on the process, and I am sure that many others will join me in that. I think all of us share the disappointment of the former Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, when he assessed the Australia deal as a failure for UK farmers.

During my visit to West Wharmley farm, I was told about the struggles that farmers have faced this year, with high rainfall affecting sheep farmers. This year's lambing season was particularly traumatic, and farmers told me about the high losses due to persistent rain and cold conditions. The impact on farmers has been immense, with high rainfall continuing to impact harvesting and the sowing of next year's crops. That has had an impact on the overall ability of farmers to operate as a business, particularly their ability to get silage and hay.

As I said, the deals that were signed with Australia and New Zealand let down rural communities, which were shut out of the process. The Government claimed to be on their side but in my view, the Government gaslit and ultimately damaged many of those farmers in some of the communications around the deals. As we discuss trade deals, I hope that we consider how to maintain the ability to feed ourselves as a nation. Prioritising food security does not mean signing any trade deal. For my constituents, when those trade deals are signed, food security is not the only thing on the chopping block—it is their economic security as well.

**Ann Davies** (Caerfyrddin) (PC): I am a tenant farmer, so I am very aware of the issues that the hon. Member is bringing to the table, and I am delighted to support him. I agree with the hon. Member for Monmouthshire (Catherine Fookes) that we are fortunate to have many excellent sheep farmers throughout Wales.

I will bring up two issues. The last Government, as we know, failed to pass much-needed legislation on sheep worrying. It is unclear what plans the new Labour Government have for tackling the problem. Does the hon. Member agree that it is important that the new UK Government commit to introduce legislation to tackle sheep worrying, which causes so much financial and mental hardship for farming families?

I also note that sheep farming in upland Wales has faced an unsustainable 33% decrease in income over the past year. We need to do everything we can, including tackling sheep worrying, so that our farms are as viable as they can be.

**Joe Morris:** The hon. Member makes a valid point, which takes me back to a conversation about rural crime that I had near Byrness in my constituency. A local farmer told me that when criminals came out, she had to wait 45 to 50 minutes for the police to arrive. I hope that the Government will look carefully at sheep worrying as part of a broader rural crime strategy and I look forward to the Minister's answer on that.

On trade deals, we must look at the lack of basic oversight and scrutiny in our trade negotiation processes. I know that is not the Minister's responsibility, but I hope that he will energetically lobby his colleagues at the Department for Business and Trade to make sure that decisions are made with the security of our farmers in mind.

I spoke to farmers who were consistently worried about rising input costs, with the rise in the cost of energy and the rate of inflation biting away at their takings. More than most, farmers have been hit by the chaos inflicted on the country by the mini-Budget and the previous 14 years. They saw their income drop because of the playing field being rigged in favour of producers from other countries who did not have to meet the same welfare and production standards. They also saw big business whittling away at small farmers and able to continually—

**Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Will the hon. Member give way?

**Joe Morris:** I will finish my sentence and then give way. Farmers saw larger businesses able to continually dictate terms to tenant farmers when it came to selling their produce.

**Mr Carmichael:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way and remind the House of my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests as an owner and operator of farmland on Islay. On the imbalance between the small operators—as people are predominantly in the sheep sector—and the bigger players, one thing that the public sector could do to add a bit of value would be to support the reconstruction of a network of local abattoirs. That is a genuine opportunity to put in place meaningful and direct support for the small farmers and small units that he is talking about.

**Joe Morris:** Many farmers who are small operators have expressed their frustration to me about people assuming that the majority of farmers are incredibly wealthy and can shoulder the burdens. I am reminded of the current Leader of the Opposition, the right hon. Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak), saying to the National Farmers Union conference that a lot of farmers did not do it for the money—forgive me if that is not a direct quote. It was brought up at an NFU roundtable during the election campaign and was a source of genuine anger.

I will say a bit more about my constituency in Northumberland. We are proud to be the home—I apologise to Scottish colleagues—of one of the oldest tartans in the world: Northumberland tartan, which is woven, of course, from Northumbrian wool. I raise that not simply out of pride for my constituency, but because we are talking about food production as well as a potential staple of clothing production. I was told by my staff that, despite my football leanings, it was Northumberland tartan that inspired Newcastle United's home kit. I should put on the record that my football allegiances lie with Sunderland, but I have yet to find a tartan that inspired their kit. Ultimately, I encourage everyone to support local producers and to show pride in their community by purchasing home-produced clothing where possible, rather than chucking their money away on fast fashion from the likes of Temu, Boohoo or ASOS.

Ultimately, my county did not just mine coal but wove gold. As one of the farmers said to me, if we took the farms out of the Hexham constituency, it would be a disaster for our area. It would not only chip away at the foundation of our economy, but destroy the quintessential nature of much of Northumberland. As we consider the future of sheep farming, and of upland farming in general across the country, I urge the Minister to embrace that new relationship; to embrace the fact that many colleagues on the Government side have been returned by constituencies with huge agricultural footprints; and to engender a relationship with those communities based on mutual respect. I consider myself an environmentalist—it was the climate movement that drew me into politics—but I do not see any tension between ensuring our planet can survive, making improvements in biodiversity and securing futures for generations to come, and securing a future for our farming communities and a nation that is able to feed itself.

I hope that the Minister will comment on his plans to work with the Department for Business and Trade on the reform of the Groceries Code Adjudicator to reassure my farmers that this Government stand on the side of producers as well as consumers, and that he will comment on what I hope will be a respectful and open dialogue, particularly regarding upland farmers who feel that the system of Byzantine regulations created by the previous Government regarding post-Brexit subsidy arrangements is weighted against them. One farmer I recently met said that the Government had managed to create a lot of jobs in navigating those arrangements rather than getting the money where it needs to be.

**Several hon. Members** *rose—*

**Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair):** I remind Members that they should bob if they wish to make a speech, so that we have an idea of how to divide up the time. I call Jim Shannon.

2.47 pm

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** It is not often I get called first after the introductory speech—so thank you, Dr Huq. It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship. I commend the hon. Member for Hexham (Joe Morris) on setting the scene so very well. I was at the Adjournment debate with him last night and now we are in Westminster Hall together—we are on a roll, and I wish him well.

As Members who have known me for a longer time will be aware, and perhaps those who are new, I represent a fairly rural constituency where farming is a massive contributor to our local economy. I live in a farm down the Ards peninsula at Greyabbey, and I have been steeped in agricultural activities all my life, so I understand the pressures and challenges faced by the farming industry and our local farmers. It is a pleasure to be here to speak on this issue and to give the Northern Ireland perspective. I am so pleased to see the Minister in his place—well done. I look forward to him responding to our questions as much as he can, although I am ever mindful that farming is a devolved matter; a theme of my speech will be how we can do it together across this United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

I declare an interest as a member of the Ulster Farmers' Union. I was also at one time, in a very small way, a hobby farmer of sheep. I enjoyed it, but the workload became so great with other activities that it was impossible to look after the sheep, so I sold them to my neighbour up the road. I have fond memories of lambing times and helping all those ewes to lamb.

Sheep farming is a significant part of the UK agricultural sector, shaping both landscapes and rural economies in the four regions of the United Kingdom. There are some 31.8 million sheep in the UK, down from a recent peak of 34.8 million in 2017. This debate is so important, because there has been a decrease in many such sectors.

Sheep are predominantly, but not exclusively, found in the north and west of the United Kingdom. I will share some figures to give a Northern Ireland perspective. The value of output from sheep decreased by 0.5% to £109 million in 2023. The total number of sheep slaughtered increased by 4% in 2023, whereas the average carcass weight decreased by 2% to 22 kg. I have to say that I owe all these stats to the Ulster Farmers' Union; I thank it for making them available. The volume of sheepmeat produced increased some 2% in 2023, and the 2023 sheep census showed that there were approximately 2 million sheep in Northern Ireland, including almost 1 million breeding ewes. Thirty-eight per cent of farmers in Northern Ireland—quite a large number—have sheep, and the value of the sheep industry output in 2022 was £106 million, so sheep farming plays a critical part in the farming community in which I live and in the Ards peninsula.

Strangford has numerous sheep farmers who farm sheep for meat and wool. Wool has not been getting much of a price over the last few years, but it is all part of farmers' revenue, albeit a small one, in rural villages like Carrowdore, Ballywalter, Greyabbey—where I live—Kircubbin and Portaferry, across the whole peninsula, across Ards and indeed further out to Comber and Ballygowan in the new constituency, which takes in more of South Down, down as far as the Quoile bridge

[Jim Shannon]

in Downpatrick. There are numerous sheep farmers there too; countless farmers contribute to the local agricultural economy.

Farming is a huge aspect of the local economy of Strangford. Our sheep and lamb farmers provide high-quality meat to subsidiaries for retail purposes. Numerous local farm shops, such as McKee's in Newtownards and Harrisons in Greyabbey, provide a farm-to-fork service, showcasing the locality and local restaurants. Doing farm to fork means that the shops get all the revenue from the breeding of the lambs, their sale and ultimately the eating. For McKee's and Harrisons, it is quite productive.

The United Kingdom imports sheep products under new free trade agreements signed since we exited the EU. The hon. Member for Monmouthshire (Catherine Fookes) spoke about the price of legs of lamb from here and from New Zealand. Agreements include tariff concessions for a range of products, such as lamb meat.

The previous Government set out their priorities for England in the 2023 environmental improvement plan, including the need for more environmentally friendly farming to meet further targets. Although I appreciate that farming is devolved, I believe the UK Government and the Minister here have a responsibility to ensure the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland as a collective has a joint policy on promoting sheep farming and protecting our family industries through future trade deals. The hon. Member for Hexham referred to trade deals, as did the hon. Members for Monmouthshire and for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron). They have an effect on farming back home and on farmers in my constituency.

There are environmental factors that will ultimately impact the future of farming. Steps must be taken to protect our sheep numbers through adequate funding. We often come here to ask for funding, but the fact is that sheep farming is such an integral part of my constituency and, indeed, of Northern Ireland. It makes a £106 million contribution to the economy, which is quite significant and cannot be ignored. We sometimes overlook the number of jobs involved and the families that live on those incomes.

When the hon. Members for North Antrim (Jim Allister) and for South Antrim (Robin Swann) speak, they will give their perspectives. There will be three contributions from Northern Ireland, and we will all say the same thing about the importance of sheep farming. The point is that we are here to represent our constituents.

The Ulster Farmers' Union has called for a sheep scheme in Northern Ireland to improve the welfare of sheep and increase the sustainability of sheep businesses. With the Northern Ireland sheep industry taskforce, it will continue to lobby for a sheep scheme. I therefore urge the Government to engage with officials back home from the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, including Minister Andrew Muir, to ensure the long-term sustainability of the Northern Ireland sheep industry. If the Minister is not able to tell us today what discussions he has had with Minister Muir, perhaps he can come back to us. I understand the Minister has met him, on probably more than one occasion, so I would be interested to hear what discussions have been had and what that means.

Our farming sector is such an important aspect of our economic success. In this case we are talking about lamb and sheep, but it is also about dairy, beef, poultry and cereals; they are all part of the massive jigsaw that contributes to the economy. What we are debating today is an integral part, and we must do more to promote and expand it. I look forward to seeing the plans of the Minister and our Labour Government, and I have hope that the devolved institutions can play a significant role in our agricultural success.

The Minister told me that he had been in Northern Ireland in my constituency—I was unable to be there at the time. He was there before he was elected as Minister, and I told him, "Minister, last time you were here, you were asking questions; the next time you come back, you'll have to answer them." Today, Minister, questions have to be answered.

**Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair):** If Members could keep to within seven and a half minutes each, everyone will get in.

2.56 pm

**David Smith** (North Northumberland) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to make a contribution. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Joe Morris) for securing the debate and for his knowledgeable, thoughtful and heartfelt speech. There have been some great contributions from other hon. Members. I note that we have heard from the Members representing the largest constituency in England, the second largest—and now the third largest.

As in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham, farming plays a vital role in the community life, the economy, and the past and the future of North Northumberland. The very landscape that we view as quintessentially British has been shaped by farming—especially sheep farming—so it is integral to our vision for Northumberland, North Northumberland and the country as a whole.

We have around 2,000 farm holdings across Northumberland, and we are a proud and productive farming county with great produce and excellent conditions for growing and rearing. I recently met a farmer in my constituency from the Coquet valley, who farms both sheep and cattle, and he said that if he could choose to farm anywhere in the world at the moment, it would be in Northumberland—I could not agree more. Indeed, more broadly, the world record for wheat production by yield is currently held by a farm near Bamburgh in my constituency. The area has great conditions.

The suitability for farming in North Northumberland is true of sheep farming in particular. The climate and topography lend themselves well to sheep farming, especially hill farming, which we have heard about already. DEFRA estimates that there are approximately 457,000 sheep and lambs being raised in my constituency of North Northumberland. That is 3% of the national total.

We have touched on trade. The UK is the world's sixth largest lamb producer, and third largest exporter. Brexit and some recent trade deals by the last Government have brought new challenges, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouthshire (Catherine Fookes), but the export of sheep and lambs must be part of the sector's future. This world-class produce—by quantity and quality—is immense in North Northumberland and around the country.



We have also said that food security is national security. In the world in which we live, the United Kingdom must be as self-sufficient as possible when it comes to the staples of life, so we must produce as much of our food chain in Britain as possible. That would be good not just for our food security and health, but for our efforts to tackle climate change. In fact, sheep farming in particular has a strong cyclical benefit with regard to recycling carbon emissions.

The question is: how do we ensure that farming, and sheep farming in particular, flourishes into the future? I will suggest a few points that I have heard when speaking to farmers, especially tenant farmers in the Cheviot hills, the Coquet valley and all around North Northumberland. I do not claim to be an expert on the subject in any way, but I have tried to listen to my constituents and to present their points here.

The first point is that we need to encourage younger people—the farmers of the future—into sheep farming. That came across loud and clear from the farmers I have spoken to in my constituency. A common theme is the fear that the intergenerational link is being lost, and it is harder than ever to see where the next generation of farmers, especially sheep farmers, is coming from. There are many reasons for that, including the difficulty of the work for relatively modest financial gain, as we have discussed; the growing distance for many in our society from the land and knowledge of the land; and the lack of broad agricultural education, whether that be in mainstream education or even in some sector-specific agricultural colleges. Finally, many young farmers face difficulties in securing a tenancy—access to land is a real issue. What more can we and the Government do within our education system to give young people a taste of the land and farming and to draw them into that connection with the land?

Secondly, sheep farming is a good entry point into the broader world of farming, given its relatively low initial capital costs, but access to land and the affordability of tenancies is a key barrier. Will the Government to consider how the sustainable farming incentive can be used to sustain farming itself? Is there a way in which the SFI or other Government funding could be used as long-term loan finance, for example, to enable more entry-level farmers to get into sheep farming with a portion of the risk shared? Could landowners be given tax incentives to incentivise them to let land at more affordable rates? We need to think about how we can increase access to land in what we might call starter farms.

My third and penultimate point is that we need to make rapid progress on the overall funding subsidy settlement for British farming. I am regularly told by constituents that the uncertainty around the successor to the common agricultural policy and the basic payment scheme in the next few years—up to 2027 and beyond—is making it difficult for many of our farmers to plan in the medium to long term, and that is particularly true for sheep farming. For the Government to bring clarity to the future of farming, subsidy is key. Notwithstanding the strained state of public finances, overall I urge the Government to commit to at least the current £2.4 billion of funding for farming for the duration of the Parliament.

Fourthly and finally, it is so important to get the calibration in the SFI correct when it comes to the balancing of environmental subsidy and subsidy for

food production. I am told that currently the scheme seems to make it much more financially attractive for farmers to take good-quality land out of production—for instance, to rewild or plant forestry, or to prioritise soil and nutrient management. Those are worthy and important aims that I support; however, we need to ensure that we choose the correct land for those purposes so that we can maintain adequate food production. A land use framework cannot come soon enough. I truly believe that there are Venn diagrams where all these worthy enterprises can come together; it is not necessarily a zero-sum gain.

However we proceed on all these issues, I am sure that all Members present agree that sheep farming makes a rich and important contribution to British farming and society, and we must do all we can to secure a flourishing future for it.

3.3 pm

**Robin Swann** (South Antrim) (UUP): I thank the hon. Member for Hexham (Joe Morris) for bringing forward this important debate. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) has already indicated the Northern Irish interest in this subject and the fact that, as a rough calculation, 20% of the contributors are from Northern Ireland. We value the input of our agricultural and farming sector not just in Northern Ireland but across the United Kingdom.

Before moving on to the substantive subject of the debate, I will pick up on a topic referenced by the hon. Member for North Northumberland (David Smith): the next generation of farmers. As a past president of the Young Farmers' Club of Ulster, I know that ensuring opportunities has been a challenge in the farming sector across all parts of the United Kingdom, and even further afield. We must ensure that the next generation of farmers has the opportunity not just to take over ownership of a farm or follow on a family tradition, but to enter into a profitable, future-proofed industry where they are supported by the Government here and back home in Northern Ireland.

As the hon. Member for Strangford pointed out, agriculture is a devolved issue. I know that our Government back home have looked at a number of new entrant schemes relating to the various supports that are out there. Unlike England, Wales and most of Scotland, we do not have the challenge with tenancies, but we do with the passing of land from one generation to the next, and inheritance tax and all those other additional problems, so there are commonalities and solutions that the Government can bring as well.

The hon. Member for Strangford obviously got the same briefing on numbers for our sheep industry as I did from the Ulster Farmers' Union. There are just short of 1 million breeding ewes and more than 2 million sheep, so we actually have more sheep than people in Northern Ireland; that has been a proven statistic in this debate. There are 9,669 sheep farmers currently registered and, as has already been referenced, the industry makes a £109 million contribution to our economy.

What is glaring and needs highlighting in this place, given that we have established the importance and the contribution of our sheep sector back home, is that the future agricultural policy of our Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs does not mention sheep

[Robin Swann]

at all. It is important that the message that we realise that comes from today's debate, and that that message gets to our Minister back home as well.

A sheep taskforce was established back in 2022, representing members from the Ulster Farmers' Union, Ulster Wool, the National Sheep Association, the Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers Association, the Livestock and Meat Commission and the Northern Ireland Meat Exporters' Association. They took it upon themselves to establish a taskforce with a number of key aims and targets, because at that point we were once again without an Executive and an agriculture Minister to support our farmers and our industries.

The sheep taskforce has produced a robust, evidence-based report that highlights the stimulus programmes and opportunities for the vision and the future of the sheep sector. That is the task they have taken on, and they have set themselves a strategic vision for the Northern Ireland sheep industry of being

“a resilient, vibrant and sustainable industry that uses leading edge technologies to deliver safe high-quality meat and wool through increased productivity while adding value by increasing carbon sequestration, reducing greenhouse gas intensity, and enhancing landscape biodiversity while maintaining the mosaic landscape of our hills and uplands and securing social cohesion.”

All those topics have been raised not just by the hon. Member for Hexham but by all the contributors who have spoken today. However, the Northern Ireland sheep sector faces specific challenges that are not replicated across the rest of this United Kingdom, but in which the Minister and his Government can play a part.

Our agriculture and veterinary industries are currently seeing major challenges in the future-proofing of the supply of veterinary medicines into Northern Ireland because of the protocol. That matter has been raised not just by the farmers' union and farmers but by the British Veterinary Association. Anyone around here who has farmed and worked with sheep knows about the importance of regular dosing for the gut worm and all the rest of it, so access to medicines and veterinary products is crucial to the sustainability and the future-proofing not just of our sheep sector but of our agricultural sector in Northern Ireland in general.

Another thing that is possibly within the Minister's remit is the ability to move livestock—I know the topic today is sheep, but I also mention cattle—between Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and the additional bureaucracy and challenges that farmers face in moving pedigree animals back and forth between not just sales but shows. I have a constituent who was present today for Prime Minister's questions and who is here for this debate, and he has raised an important issue. He has pedigree cattle in Scotland at this moment in time that he has not been able to bring home to Northern Ireland since October because of bluetongue and the restrictions that have applied in respect of moving livestock even within this United Kingdom. Will the Minister look into that and see whether something can be done?

I do not want to finish on the challenges or the negatives, given the contributions that have already been made and that will be made. We have to look to the potential and consider the future-proofing of our agricultural sector in the United Kingdom. It is what this country was built on, it is what this country is based

on and it is what we are good at. We produce good-quality food that we should be able to look to as the safe and sustainable food supply for the people of the United Kingdom. I thank the hon. Member for Hexham for moving the motion and look forward to hearing the Minister's response.

3.10 pm

**Torcuil Crichton** (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Huq. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Joe Morris) for securing this debate and herding us in.

As we are gathered here today, some 4,500 sheep and lambs will be sold at the community-owned and run Lewis & Harris Auction Mart in Steinish, which is outside Stornoway in my constituency of Na h-Eileanan an Iar. The sheep will end up with finishers across the UK, and represent the culmination of a year's work for crofters in Lewis. They also represent the deep connection that we see here today between the Hebrides and Scotland, Wales, England and Northern Ireland, which is probably best symbolised in this place by the Woolsack that the Lord Speaker sits on in the other House.

Wool and sheep are not worth as much as they used to be. I will not give you live market prices, but I know that with the main store lamb sales season in full swing prices are up. In Stornoway, prices were up by £11; in Dingwall, where Lewis lambs are sold, they were up by £6.85; and at Lochboisdale prices were up by £12. It is unfortunate that the corresponding lamb sale in Lochmaddy in North Uist has not gone ahead this year, but hopefully it may be restored. That shows the economic and cultural importance of sheep to my constituency and the Outer Hebrides.

Sheep have played and will continue to play a great role in keeping communities alive. I come from a crofting community. I grew up on a croft rearing and sheering sheep, sending them out to the moor to our common grazing land, and overwintering and feeding sheep. Ironically, the common grazing lands, which we no longer use so much for sheep, now house wind turbines that bring community profit to the tenant crofters in our area.

The crofting communities are in good shape, and they are in good shape because of sheep. Crofting is best described as small tenant farming, and it is the small tenant farmers who held together communities, towns, villages, language and culture across the whole north-west of Scotland and the islands. The backbone of crofting is, of course, sheep, but the sheep alone will not support us. The industry needs accessible and proportionate support to ensure its future.

A recent in-depth report highlighted the importance of crofting and agriculture to island economies, but it also revealed the extent of the decline in sheep farming in the Western Isles in the last 20 years. Sheep numbers in the Outer Hebrides have decreased by 52% in the last 20 years, down from nearly 300,000 to 143,000 in 2021.

**Ann Davies:** It is really interesting to hear from you when we are talking about crofting and tenant farmers. As other speakers have noted, when we are talking about access to land there is such an issue with farm business tenancies at the moment. The maximum term being offered is 10 years and the average can be as little as five to seven years.

Most tenant farmers work as well as keeping their holdings, as you will know, and over the long term, because of the incomes involved, that is unsustainable. We need an understanding and legislation that secures tenancies in the long term, offering our young farmers—we have talked about young farmers and the YFC movement—security when they start their farming careers. We do not have that at the moment with the current farm business tenancies, so we need to look at introducing legislation from this House.

**Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair):** Order. I appreciate that there are new Members present and not everyone may be aware of this, but I am being reminded by the Clerk that Members should not use the word “you”. “You” means me, because I am in the Chair. That is just a general reminder for all.

**Torcuil Crichton:** Forgive me if I made that error, Dr Huq. I appreciate what the hon. Member says about farm tenancies. We have the 19th-century land radicals and activists, who fought the crofters’ war, and this place, with the Crofters Holdings (Scotland) Act 1886, to thank for giving us secure, heritable tenancies in crofting, which play an important part in maintaining families and people on the land.

As I was explaining, sheep numbers have fallen in the Western Isles by about 52% in the last 20 years—I knew that I was in the middle of a depopulation crisis, but I did not know that it included the sheep stock as well! That fall in numbers can be explained, in part, by the decoupling of support from headage payments and the move to area-based payments. That policy has had a significant impact on agriculture in our areas because agricultural support payments have decreased by 20% in real terms between 2014 and 2022. That is despite policies that say that they are increasing support, because inflation has eroded their value.

The Minister will be aware that most crofting, agricultural and environmental policy is devolved, but it is important to make the point, which the Scottish Crofting Federation itself has made, that the Scottish Government’s recent Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Act 2024 was a missed opportunity 10 years in the making—a chance to redistribute support towards smaller producers. That is not a mistake that this new Government should repeat, and we should learn the lessons of that missed opportunity.

The research showing that decline in sheep numbers covered Orkney, Shetland and the Western Isles. It also showed that, despite that decline, 21% of the working-age population in the Outer Hebrides is involved in agriculture. That shows that crofting and sheep farming still play a lively and vigorous part of our economy.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hexham mentioned rewilding and the balance between agriculture and the environment—whenever I hear the term “rewilding”, or read any correspondence about it, I always search the address and suggest that the wolves be released at that postcode first, before being released in our constituencies. However, there is a balance to be had. Some 31% of the land in the Outer Hebrides is of ecological significance, and much of it is managed by crofters. Crofters already manage their environment well and have done for generations. The balance can be made, and we do not have to choose between sheep and peat. Both can co-exist, and crofters can restore these habitats while still producing high-quality livestock.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland (David Smith) mentioned the future, and the future, of course, is in the next generation—in youth. I am glad to report that that same auction mart in Steinish that is holding its sales today also hosted an event for young crofters earlier this summer, which more than 200 young people attended—giving it the accolade of being the hottest dating agency in the Western Isles. That shows that there is a huge demand for people to get involved in agriculture; the land and managing the land well; rearing sheep and sheep husbandry—although I produced figures about lamb sales and meat production, looking after sheep really is husbandry—and that cycle of life that people are involved in in the countryside.

Once again, I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham on bringing this issue to the Floor and on allowing us to highlight the situation in Scotland.

3.18 pm

**Jim Allister** (North Antrim) (TUV): I thank the hon. Member for Hexham (Joe Morris) for bringing this important matter to the Floor. As has been clear from the contributions from Northern Ireland, sheep farming is a significant but, sadly, poor relation of farming because the lowest farm incomes in the farming sector arise among sheep farmers. That is an indication of an indisputable fact: what is needed in Northern Ireland, and particularly in a constituency such as mine, which has a lot of sheep farmers, is a sheep support scheme.

In Northern Ireland, we do have a beef support scheme—it is called the beef carbon reduction scheme—and we have a separate cow scheme. Those contribute to environmental enhancements on what used to be the single farm payment, now the direct payment. But there is no scheme for sheep farmers, and that is a lamentable failure on the part of the local Department. It has been sitting on a taskforce recommendation since early last year and has failed to move on that matter. Not only is that failure to move doing nothing to increase incomes, but it is going to decrease them. From 2025, sheep farmers farming only sheep are set to lose 17% of their basic payment unless they change to include protein crops and cattle. For many, that is just not possible, so there is an urgent need for action.

**Robin Swann:** The hon. Member talks about sheep farmers in Northern Ireland looking enviously on at beef farmers in Northern Ireland, but he will be aware that they also get to look across the border, where the Republic of Ireland Government have introduced a sheep support scheme that pays up to €17 to €20 a head. That puts our farmers in Northern Ireland at a further disadvantage.

**Jim Allister:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, but it is actually worse than that. Yes, we can look across the border and see the advantage, but the problem is that, courtesy of the Windsor framework and the protocol, Northern Ireland farmers are subject to the same rules and regulations but none of the benefits. Members should never forget that the laws concerning farming in Northern Ireland are not made in this place or in Stormont; they are made in a foreign Parliament to which we elect no one. That is the ultimate constitutional absurdity of the Windsor framework: we have created a situation where, in more than 300 areas of law, the laws are foreign-imposed—colony-like—on Northern Ireland.



[Jim Allister]

The laws concerning the whole agrifood industry are made in Brussels, and that is an appalling constitutional and economic affront.

Because we are subject to the European veterinary regime, we now have a looming crisis: come 2025, our veterinary medicines, which are produced in Great Britain, will not be permitted to enter Northern Ireland, and up to 50% of our medicines will be excluded from Northern Ireland. That is a serious challenge, which the last Government did nothing about and which I trust this Government will do something about. This Government will need to stand up with vigour against the European Commission and insist that every part of this country must be entitled to have the same veterinary medicines as the rest of the country. It is time that we shook off our shackles and insisted on that.

Of course, it gets even worse. As has been alluded to, movements of livestock from Great Britain to Northern Ireland are subject to every EU rule that applies. We therefore have quarantine periods of six months for those wanting to bring in livestock, and of 30 days for the host farm it is coming from. Why? Because that is what EU rules, which we have been left subject to—serf-like—insist on. To take sheep farming, farmers need to constantly improve the genetic line; they need to bring in new rams, but bringing one in from Scotland or Wales, which would be our traditional sources, is now nigh impossible because of these quarantine rules. That needs to be addressed.

There are other dimensions. Reference has been made to the fact that hundreds of cattle and other livestock have been stranded on this side of the Irish sea since last year and cannot be moved to Northern Ireland, due to EU rules about bluetongue. We have the ludicrous situation that someone who buys rams in France or cattle in Sweden or elsewhere can bring them straight through GB to Northern Ireland, but if they buy them in GB, they cannot bring them to Northern Ireland, because GB is said to be a bluetongue zone. Even though the livestock is, in many cases, being bought from Scotland, which has no bluetongue difficulties, it still cannot be brought to Northern Ireland. Why? Again, because of the absurdity that we are subject to EU rules.

This House, far outside the framework of farming issues, needs to get hold of the fact that unless we deal with the constitutional imperative of restoring Northern Ireland to the rules of this House and this country, and not of a foreign jurisdiction, we will have these problems, which manifest themselves in our farming industry in the way I have described. It is not just a multifaceted problem, but a multifaceted problem with many deep issues that need to be addressed. The last Government had no appetite to address them—in fact, they deepened the problems with their Windsor framework. I trust that this Government, who have inherited the ludicrous situation of Northern Ireland being a condominium ruled in part by laws made in the United Kingdom and in part by foreign laws in a foreign jurisdiction, will address this issue. We cannot go on like this. Neither our sheep farmers, nor any other farmers, nor our citizens should be living in a colony-like situation where we are ruled by laws we do not make and cannot change.

3.26 pm

**Sarah Dyke** (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Dr Huq, and I thank the hon. Member for Hexham (Joe Morris) for securing this important debate. Livestock, including sheep, are a big contributor to the south-west rural economy, but the sector is facing several challenges. Food production is worth more than £500 million in Somerset, and the industry provides employment for 8,500 farmers and food producers, which is the highest number for any UK county.

Farming, by its very nature, cannot be as responsive as other industries. Crops take time to grow and animals take time to rear. That means that farmers need the certainty to be able to create long-term plans and invest in their businesses, rather than making changes on the hoof, but the previous Government failed to provide that stability. From U-turning on actions to take land out of food production to the botched trade transition, and from direct payments to environmental land management schemes, their policies undermined farmers and have led to a collapse in their willingness to invest in their businesses.

Farmers need to be able to run their businesses with certainty. They need to know what funding is available, what standards are to be met and what support they are going to receive from the new Government. It is regrettable that this Government seem to have decided to continue in the Conservatives' footsteps by refusing to commit to the agricultural budget. With over 55,000 agri-environment agreements in place this year, a big part of the industry has been encouraged to become reliant on Government payments. Unless the Government commit to the agricultural budget, those farmers will not hear whether those payments will continue at current rates until the spending review in the autumn, impacting on their ability to plan. It is no surprise that the National Farmers Union found that short and mid-term confidence is at its lowest level since records began in 2010.

I have spoken before in this place about how many farmers are leaving the industry because they do not have the confidence to continue and about the impact that that is having on their mental health. Ninety-two percent of farmers under the age of 40 say that poor mental health is the biggest hidden problem that farmers face today, and those pressures will likely be compounded further by yesterday's report that the Government are going to slash the nature-friendly farming budget. Not only would that seriously threaten many farmers' livelihoods, but it would result in at least 239,000 fewer hectares of nature-friendly farmland, according to research by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. The National Trust, the RSPB, and the Wildlife Trust warned before the election that the nature-friendly farming budget had to increase if the UK is to meet its legally binding nature and climate targets. Cutting it would be tantamount to ignoring our legal targets.

Livestock play a central role in my Glastonbury and Somerton constituency, so my constituents are particularly worried about the threat of diseases such as bluetongue and Schmallenberg. As the proud owner of a small flock of non-commercial pedigree Shetland sheep, I share those concerns. The pandemic showed us that Britain is capable of being a vaccine superpower. I call on the Government to again work with industry to prevent us from experiencing an outbreak of bluetongue like those

we have seen in the Netherlands, Germany and Belgium. It is essential that DEFRA and the Animal and Plant Health Agency have learned lessons from the covid inquiry and previous inquiries into the 2001 foot and mouth outbreak, and have robust and tested traceability data processes in place to enable effective disease response.

There are also smaller, cost-free changes that would improve our ability to trace livestock and reduce the amount of bureaucracy that farmers face. For example, although farmers can report sheep movements electronically, they also have to use paper passports with the exact same information. If we want accurate tracking, which is essential for proper biosecurity, we need to incentivise the use of digital reporting and remove that outdated requirement. That small change would be a step in the right direction to transform livestock information services into a system that is fit for purpose and fit for the future.

The previous Government were woefully irresponsible for failing to protect British agriculture from Brexit and the botched trade deals. The new Government must give British farmers the tools they need to seize new trade opportunities and must introduce robust policies to protect them from uncompetitive imports.

Since leaving the EU, the food and drink industry has been burdened with additional friction and cost, often paying for checks on goods that have never taken place. It is essential that we give our farmers the ability to trade with our European neighbours with minimal need for checks by negotiating comprehensive veterinary and plant health agreements. The Government should support the country's largest manufacturing sector by expediting their talks on this issue and improving our working relationship with our largest trading partner.

Similarly, the Government must ensure that sheep farmers can export breeding stock without delay by providing additional capacity for border control. We need to protect our markets from lamb and mutton from countries that have less rigorous animal welfare and environmental standards. If we do not, we risk undermining our farmers and the faith that consumers have in our meat.

As a Liberal Democrat, I believe that there needs to be fairness throughout the supply chain. Our ability to produce world-leading lamb and mutton is being constrained by a bottleneck at slaughterhouses caused by vet shortages. The British Veterinary Association believes that those shortages are worst in rural areas such as Glastonbury and Somerton. I am concerned about the impact that that will have on food prices, animal welfare, Somerset's rural economy and vets' mental health.

I have always been proud to represent this industry because we have a world-leading animal welfare system, but we need vets to maintain that. We have some of the best vets in the world, but the Government need to focus on retaining them. The UK's chief veterinary officer, Dr Christine Middlemiss, said that almost half of vets who are leaving the profession have been there for less than four years. We must rise to that challenge by increasing the UK's training capacity, which will require an increase in the amount of funding available per student and the introduction of a regulator.

We have many more Liberal Democrat MPs representing rural constituencies than ever before, because rural communities know that we understand them and will

always fight for them. Farmers trust us to have their backs because of our track record and our policies, which include properly funding ELMs with an additional £1 billion a year, renegotiating the Australian and New Zealand trade agreements, and making the supply chain fairer by strengthening the Groceries Code Adjudicator. With farmers facing new challenges, there is a huge amount of uncertainty across all agricultural sectors, including sheep, and the new Government must take clear steps to support them.

3.34 pm

**Robbie Moore** (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Huq. I thank the hon. Member for Hexham (Joe Morris) for securing this really important debate. He represents a beautiful constituency in a county I know very well, having worked there for many a year. I welcome him to this place. I also welcome the Minister to his place in probably the best Department in Government.

Before I start, I want to thank our farming community, not only in my constituency of Keighley and Ilkley in West Yorkshire, but across the whole United Kingdom. We all know that farmers work tirelessly throughout the year in all weathers. Having lambed many a yow in the cold winter months up in Yorkshire, I know just how hard our farmers work.

I echo colleagues' comments highlighting just how important the sheep farming industry is. It not only contributes £1.8 billion to our economy but provides the high-quality food on our plates and sustainable textiles on our backs—perhaps even Northumberland tartan, as the hon. Member for Hexham mentioned.

I support the National Sheep Association's calls to maintain, if not enhance, the UK's flock. I want sheep farming to be supported and developed, not cut back. So much of our natural landscape is as it is because of the hard graft of sheep farmers across our nation. We owe it to them to keep food at the centre of what we do in this place, in the knowledge that supported food production goes hand in hand with our duties to the environment.

During the previous Conservative Government, I was proud to play my part in making much progress in the sheep sector, both in my time on the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee and as a Minister. We made strong progress in cracking down on livestock worrying—a blight on our farmers, who have enough to deal with without having to worry about inconsiderate dog owners. I only hope the new Administration will pick up that legislation where it was left off and not scrap it, as is being reported in the farming press.

We also delivered the biggest change in a generation in how the Government work with farmers, following our exit from the European Union. Replacing the common agricultural policy with a framework that works for farmers, food producers and the country has been a huge task. Although I would be the first to accept that the sustainable farming incentive and other schemes are not perfect, they are major milestones in delivering a farming subsidy support scheme that works for sheep farmers and other farmers across the country as the basic payment scheme is phased out.

I was pleased that, at the National Sheep Association's Sheep Event 2024, the Minister indicated that the new Administration will not overturn those schemes. However,

[Robbie Moore]

it is now being widely reported in the media that the Labour Administration are intent on cutting the farming budget, which not only will have dire consequences for the farming industry, but will negatively impact our nation's food security agenda and efforts to enhance the environment. Will the Minister confirm whether that is the case? Will he provide some clarity on his intentions for the farming budget? The farming budget needs at least to be maintained, if not enhanced, and be properly ringfenced and secured to provide certainty for our farming community.

The harsh climate of our upland farmland will always be a challenge for any business in the area, but that is why we must support our sheep farming sector, which is able to turn land that would otherwise be uneconomical into productive land that contributes valuable produce to the economy. I urge the Government to ensure that the new expanded offer for the sustainable farming incentive is quickly rolled out, and that much clarity and reassurance is provided through the extended offers that were announced.

I know from my time in Government that the DEFRA team and their officials have been working incredibly hard on this proposal. I thank the officials, including Janet Hughes, who has a huge amount of respect from the farming community. We all want reassurance and clarity to be provided on those extended offers so that they can be taken up in full.

With a new Government, we must look to the future and at how we can further support this dynamic and ever-changing sector. As a guiding principle, I urge the new Labour Government to trust the excellent sheep farmers across the country, who know so much about what they are doing and have the best intentions. They are keen to get on with the job, and we have a duty to support them without burdening them with unreasonable red tape.

A clear example of that is the ongoing efforts to combat bluetongue. It is in everybody's interest to combat that disease, and I hope that the DEFRA team will deliver effective support for sheep farmers, particularly with regard to proper surveillance. I know that bluetongue is of deep concern to our sheep farming community. Like the National Sheep Association, I urge British farmers to remain vigilant for signs of bluetongue, as I am aware that around 50 suspected cases have been reported within a week, and restriction zones have been implemented in Essex, Suffolk and Norfolk to limit the spread of the virus. Will the Government support the development of a licensed bluetongue vaccine and work with the industry to deploy it as soon as possible?

Moving on to another area of concern, I am aware of the pressure in the farming sector to reduce regulation around carcass splitting. Of course, any Government's first concern is rightly to ensure that food stocks in the UK remain safe for the broader public, but I urge the Government to look at regulation. I would be interested to understand their view on the issue and to hear whether they would consider rolling back carcass-splitting requirements so that farmers are able to maximise value.

Where the Government can really make a direct and positive difference is in the delivery of greater fairness in our food supply chain, to help sheep farmers run successful businesses. The industry-wide consultation in

February 2024 provided compelling support for carcass classification. I urge the Government to pick up on that proposal as quickly as possible. It can only be right that, after doing the hard work of raising and caring for their animals, sheep farmers have certainty about the price they can expect to get for them. It is vital that transparency is applied right across the food supply chain, as we have seen in other sectors, including pigs and cattle.

As we look to our domestic supply chain, we must recognise the globalised world we live in and the opportunities and challenges that it brings. Last week, the Prime Minister unveiled the first step in his supposed reset with Europe. Much has been made of what the new relationship might look like. Although promises not to return to the single market or the customs union are welcome, it is possible that farmers could fall foul of EU law under any new arrangement, so I seek the Government's reassurance about what the new relationship will look like. Complicated and bureaucratic EU animal welfare laws will only damage our sheep farming community, so will the Minister reassure me that none of the four nations across the United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland, will be subject to additional rules, which we have spent much time since 2016 trying to remove ourselves from for the benefit of the sector?

**Jim Allister:** The shadow Minister says that no part of the United Kingdom should be subject to EU rules, but the reality is that Northern Ireland is subject to them. That is the problem: we were never delivered from them. His Government failed to deliver us from them. That is why we have the mess we have.

**Robbie Moore:** Of course, the Windsor framework was an element of trying to address many concerns, not only in the food and farming sector but in other sectors. Although it is indeed not perfect, I am interested to see what the new Government want to do on the specific issue that the hon. Gentleman raises.

There is much to do to support our sheep farming sector. It is vital that the new Government move quickly to continue the work of the Conservative Government and deliver a vision for upland and lowland sheep farming that will give businesses the ability to plan, produce and thrive.

3.43 pm

**The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Daniel Zeichner):** It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Dr Huq, and to follow the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore). I am sure that a number of us will spend a lot of time in Westminster Hall debating issues in the months and years to come. There was always a positive and constructive relationship, in particular with the junior Ministers at DEFRA, and I am sure that that will continue. I welcome the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke).

I was struck by how the debate covered all four countries of the United Kingdom. I have been to all four in the past few months to try to start the process of building a closer relationship, absolutely respecting the devolved Administrations and devolution settlements but also recognising the importance of the UK Government's working closely with them.



Most of all, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Joe Morris) for bringing forward this debate and raising points of considerable importance to the sector in what I thought was an excellent introductory speech. I am very fond of his constituency; I remember being at the northern farming conference a few years ago. I look forward to working closely with him.

We have had some excellent contributions. Among those from Government Members, I particularly commend that of my hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland (David Smith), whose points about the need for new entrants were very well made. Long-term parity is absolutely required by the sector. The land use framework has been long promised and we will be working on it with urgency.

I was also struck by the contribution from the Member for the Western Isles, my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Torcuil Crichton). I was in Shetland recently, where there are similar issues, I suspect. The points about crofters are very well made. I absolutely respect the role of the Scottish Government, while reflecting the points that I have already made about the role of the UK Government.

The UK Government are grateful to our sheep farmers. I echo the points made by Opposition Members: we commend sheep farmers for all their work to provide us with products that meet such high environmental and welfare standards and to support the domestic food supply chain and strong export markets. They play a very important role in supporting rural communities, with some 150,000 jobs contributing to economic growth.

Sheepmeat production was worth £1.6 billion in 2023 and is crucial to our food supply chains. Sheepmeat is a protein-rich food that is produced in often challenging environments that are not necessarily suitable for other livestock. Sheep farmers, I am glad to say, are experiencing record high prices: prices in June 2024 were up 24.4% year on year and 42.5% higher than the five-year average, with further benefits coming from stronger export markets, and with new markets such as the United States opening up.

Hon. Members made important points about past trade deals. I do not think we need to rehearse the arguments; certainly we on the Government Benches know what happened, and it is really important that we learn lessons for the future. Issues around our relationship with the European Union are very important as we go into renegotiations. Many of the points that have been raised would be dealt with by negotiating a better phytosanitary agreement, as this Government are very much committed to doing.

It is very important to make the supply chain work more fairly and to prevent shock rises in bills by tackling energy prices through GB Energy. We want to help protect farmers from flooding, through a new flood resilience taskforce. We will use the Government's purchasing powers to back British produce. Overall, we will achieve a new deal for farming by listening closely to people on the frontline, in this case sheep farmers and everyone who has a stake in our food and farming system. The Government are looking at the data and will set out detailed plans in due course. I was delighted to attend the National Sheep Association's 2024 event in Malvern, which gave me a chance to listen, learn and say a little about our plans for the future.

Several hon. Members touched on the farming budget and environmental land management schemes. I reiterate our full commitment to those schemes. I would not believe everything that one reads in the newspapers about budgets: there is a spending review process going on and announcements will be made in due course, but our commitment to the agricultural transition to a different form of farming is absolute. We will be trying to improve those schemes; as the shadow Minister acknowledged, there is room for improvement. We will make sure that they produce the right outcomes for all farmers, including sheep farmers, and the wider industry and that they ensure food security and nature recovery in a just and equitable way.

The schemes work across the country, supporting a wide range of grassland and moorland types, including action to support productive improved grasslands, extensive low-input grasslands and grazed priority habitats. They include a range of actions to support arable farmers, including the management of herbal leys and winter cover crops. They have been designed to support farmers who wish to reintroduce sheep and other livestock to their arable rotation, which is certainly a very salient issue in my part of the world, the east of England.

There are opportunities for sheep enterprises as part of sustainable farming systems to introduce livestock to some farms that have not had them for more than a generation. Anyone who goes around the east of England will see the evidence that there was a different farming system in the past. The expanded sustainable farming incentive also includes an improved offer, which has been much demanded—and, I hope, welcomed—by upland farmers, including sheep farmers. We hope that it will offer a wider range of actions and greater flexibility.

I have already touched on the trade and border issue. We are absolutely determined to make sure that our trade strategy promotes the highest food production standards. The UK is a net exporter of lamb and mutton; it exports approximately a third of domestic production. More than 90% of exports go to EU destinations. The Government recognise the continuing importance of the EU as one of the sector's biggest export destinations and, as I have said, we recognise the importance of negotiating a new agreement to prevent unnecessary border checks while maintaining biosecurity.

We will also support our farmers by setting a clear target for half of all food purchased across the public sector to be locally produced or certified to higher environmental standards. In the supply chain, we absolutely recognise that fairness is important. We want farmers to get a fair price for their products and are committed to tackling contractual unfairness where it exists. We will continue to work closely with stakeholders from all sectors on how best to achieve that.

Jointly with the Welsh Government and in tandem with the Scottish Government and the Northern Ireland Government, DEFRA has consulted the industry on proposals for a new carcase classification and price reporting system; the shadow Minister raised a query about that. We understand the importance of the new system to the sheep industry in providing stronger price certainty by setting out a clear, consistent and robust scheme for carcase classification and price reporting. The consultation closed in March 2024. We are now looking at it and will make announcements in due course.

[Daniel Zeichner]

Welfare and disease issues are very important to this Government. We are alive to the challenges and threats posed by lameness and by diseases such as bluetongue serotype 3 and peste des petits ruminants. New controls suspending personal imports of certain sheep and goat commodities, such as unpackaged meat, were announced on 21 August to safeguard Britain's sheep and goat populations from PPR.

The shadow Minister queried the work that we are doing on bluetongue. Clearly there were outbreaks in Norfolk some 10 days ago; we are deploying the tried and tested procedures for animal disease control, with which I am sure he is familiar, in response to the cases found in Norfolk and Suffolk. We decided to permit the use of the currently available vaccines for this virus serotype under certain circumstances. However, I am advised that they only reduce clinical signs; they will not produce immunity to the disease. Animal keepers will need to work closely with their vets to make a decision on usage.

The animal health and welfare pathway is live. It enables farmers with more than 21 sheep registered in England to apply for funding to improve animal health and welfare. That service provides diagnostic testing for priority diseases and conditions, alongside bespoke advice to improve health, welfare and biosecurity, supporting the responsible use of medicines, including antibiotics. DEFRA also continues to work closely with sheep sector bodies on plans to enhance the statutory sheep movement reporting service over the next 18 to 24 months; I think the shadow Minister raised a question about that issue.

Finally, DEFRA supports the sheep sector through conserving valuable genetic resources to help to increase sustainable food production and help breeders to adapt to climate change and new diseases. DEFRA research is also exploring how genetics can help farmers to increase productivity while mitigating greenhouse gas emissions.

I thank all hon. Members for their contributions. I expect that we will be having further discussions; I have to say that my experience of Westminster Hall debates on this sector is that there has always been a relatively

small group of interested people. I am looking forward to building those relationships over the months and years ahead, and I am sure that we will all learn a lot from one another. My responsibility is to provide Members with answers to their questions. I will do my very best, and this afternoon is the first step in that process. Overall, the Government recognise the value of a thriving and productive sheep sector and look forward to working with Members and with the sector to achieve that.

3.54 pm

**Joe Morris:** I thank all hon. Members who have taken part in the debate. It has been an incredibly valuable experience for me and for the constituents who have been in contact throughout the process of writing my speech and going to local agricultural shows. It has been heartening to hear the Minister's response, the input from all colleagues and the collegiate tone of the discussion, particularly as we look to the uncertainty created by the cliff edge that some farmers face as payment schemes are phased out and new payment schemes are developed. I will continue to be as strong an advocate as I possibly can for the farmers across my constituency, as I am sure colleagues will be for farmers across theirs.

We are aware that farms do not exist in a vacuum. They are anchors of our community; they define who we are and define the very nature of our constituencies. They provide for so many people, provide local economic anchors and first jobs, and teach young people the importance of punctuality, timekeeping, hard work and resilience in countryside environments. It is incredibly important that as the constituency MP for Hexham, I continue to bring similar debates to this place. I look forward to doing so and to working with colleagues around the House to drive better outcomes, and hopefully better incomes, for our farming communities.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the future of sheep farming.

3.56 pm

*Sitting suspended.*

## SEND Provision: Hertfordshire and Central Bedfordshire

4 pm

**Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair):** As this is a 30-minute debate, I will call Alistair Strathern to move the motion, then I will call the Minister to respond. People can intervene on Alistair; that is the format for these debates.

**Alistair Strathern (Hitchin) (Lab):** I beg to move,

That this House has considered SEND provision in Hertfordshire and Central Bedfordshire.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship today, Dr Huq. While I regret not being able to secure more time to discuss this important topic, I am very glad to see the keen interest across the House evidenced in the room today. I am particularly grateful to see many more Labour colleagues in this room than might have had quite such a geographical interest in the debate prior to the election.

I would like to start by welcoming the Minister to her new role. In my admittedly rather short time as an MP before the election, her energy, wisdom and reassuring positivity was a real source of comfort for me in what can be a pretty mystifying place to navigate. I have no doubt that young people across the country will be better off for her ability to bring exactly that same warmth and drive to her new role. As a former teacher and children's lead, I am under no illusion of the scale of some of the challenges she will inherit. I am sure she will agree that fixing special educational needs and disability provision and the broken national system we have inherited is right up there with the biggest of them.

It is a near universally accepted truth that SEND provision across our country is simply not working. Indeed, the system had become so broken that, by the time of the election, the Conservatives' own Education Secretary had to admit that they were presiding over a system that had become, "lose, lose, lose". Vulnerable young people right across the country looking for the support they need to thrive at school are the ones who are losing.

**Andrew Lewin (Welwyn Hatfield) (Lab):** When discussing SEND provision with families in Hertfordshire, the phrases that most often resonate with me are people describing their experience as a fight or a battle. This is a consistent pattern. Parents spend months or even years pushing the system to get the support and care their children deserve, at huge personal and financial cost to their families. The fight can take many forms: securing an education, health and care plan in the first place, finding an appropriate school, or even fighting for recognition from the council that their child has additional needs at all. There is much that must change. It is of paramount importance that we reform the system so it is no longer characterised by defensiveness, but becomes one of empathy and support. I hope my hon. Friend agrees.

**Alistair Strathern:** I could not agree more, because the sad reality is that Hertfordshire—a county we share—and Central Bedfordshire, which my constituency straddles, are far from exceptions to the national challenges we currently face. Both Central Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire face real challenges in SEND provision, which is letting

down schools, families and, crucially, the young people the system is meant to wrap around. Rather than providing support at the earliest possible moment of need, all too often it is pitting them as adversaries against the very stakeholders that are meant to support them.

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** I commend the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. He is right that every constituency in this place is affected by the issue. Does he agree that without more trained staff, facilities and enhanced funding, it will not simply be SEND children who struggle, but everyone in that classroom? Does he agree that resources to meet the need in a long-term funding stream need to be delivered for all, because they are all affected?

**Alistair Strathern:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing his keen interest to Hertfordshire and Central Bedfordshire today. He is renowned for that forensic insight across the House. He is, of course, quite right. When one young person in the classroom is let down, whatever their needs, the whole class is losing out. Putting that right is a fundamental challenge for our new Minister and new Government.

The Ofsted reports received by authorities in 2019 and 2022 across my constituency painted a damning picture of local provision and the challenges families were facing. It is important to acknowledge that since the reports were published, there have been some welcome steps forward. Increases in staff capacity were needed and are welcome. Moves to boost specialist school capacity, however delayed, have to be welcomed. The model that Hertfordshire is moving towards—a model of making SEND everyone's business to ensure a breadth of ambition for those who look after young people with additional needs right across the partnership—is a novel and noteworthy approach. I am sure it is one that will be of interest to the Minister.

**Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD):** I thank the hon. Member for securing the debate and for starting it so well. He is right to say that there has been recent progress in the delivery of SEND in Hertfordshire, but much of that has started only since the most recent damning Ofsted report. Back in 2021, I invited the then Conservative leader of Hertfordshire county council to attend a ministerial meeting with me to discuss the funding formula and he declined. In 2023, the Conservative group refused to invest an extra £1 million in SEND services at Hertfordshire county council, as the Lib Dems had proposed, and only backtracked after that Ofsted report. This year, the Conservative education portfolio holder apparently decided to join the f40 campaign, but only after I had written suggesting they do so. I am pleased to see that there has been some progress, but does the hon. Member agree that Hertfordshire children have been really let down, not only by the Conservatives in Government but by the Conservatives in county hall?

**Alistair Strathern:** I could not agree more. The way in which families and, crucially, young people in Hertfordshire have been let down typifies a challenge facing local authorities right across the country: in the context of a nationally failing system, how do we make sure our local leaders remain ambitious for our young people and do not become incredibly complacent about performance that cannot be justified? We saw that in Hertfordshire and, heartbreakingly, we see it today in other parts of the UK.



[Alistair Strathern]

It is clear that even with the early signs of improvement there are significant challenges to address. Local statistics, including those published today by ITV Anglia, lay bare some of the shocking challenges that families and young people are still facing. It is evident that far too many young people are waiting far too long for an assessment, for the support that follows that and, shamefully, even for the school places that are most appropriate for their needs. Alongside that, far too many families are having to battle an appeals system just to secure confirmation of the support their young persons are clearly in need of and clearly entitled to.

**Blake Stephenson** (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): I declare an interest as a Central Bedfordshire councillor, which puts me in a somewhat awkward position. I thank the hon. Member for securing the debate. As my predecessor in Mid Bedfordshire, he knows all too well the challenges across the constituency, and I thank him for his work on the matter.

It is important for all the parents and grandparents in our constituencies that children with special needs get the right support, and I absolutely want to deliver that for the people of Mid Bedfordshire. I know there have been failures in the past; we need to move forward and find solutions. I want to do that in a cross-party way and I hope I can work with the hon. Gentleman, who is my neighbour, and with the Minister to do that. I think that is the right way to go. This has been too partisan for too long and some cross-party working would be valuable. The hon. Member has my support.

**Alistair Strathern:** I thank the hon. Member for that intervention and for his commitment to working alongside everyone in the Chamber, whether in Central Bedfordshire or in Hertfordshire, to make sure our local authorities deliver the improvements in their gift and to make sure we support the new Government in finally getting a grip on the problems we have inherited.

I challenge anyone faced with the statistics we have been seeing over the past few months not to run the full gauntlet of emotions, all the way from despair to anger. For me, hearing the personal stories of the young people affected by the challenges has truly broken my heart.

**David Taylor** (Hemel Hempstead) (Lab): Many of us have heard countless stories of families feeling dire frustration. For this debate alone I received more than 25 stories, each more harrowing than the one before. I will pull out a good example of a woman called Jane who has two children, both with SEND needs. One of them needs one-on-one support to catch up in English and maths, but the local authority has refused that. The consequence is that her son is now 14 years old and has not had an academic education for six years. Does my hon. Friend agree that this is an all-too-regular example of the challenges we are facing?

**Alistair Strathern:** I absolutely agree and I thank my hon. Friend for rightly drawing attention to our collective shame for the shocking way in which that young person has been let down. My office has been blown away by the number of young people and their families who got in touch after our call for evidence ahead of this debate

to share their own personal testimonies about the struggles they have been facing and the way those struggles have impacted their lives.

As my hon. Friend alluded to, many children across my constituency have had a chaotic and uncertain time waiting for school places. Some of them—like James, who got in touch with my office—have been out of school for years while they wait for a place. Others, like Mary, had secured a place only to find in the last week of the summer holidays that it had been withdrawn. Just imagine how a child must feel to be out of school, week after week, month after month, and year after year. Just imagine how a young person must feel to be so excited about going to a school that has finally been allocated to them, because it is right for them, only to find out the week before they were due to go there that they did not want them. That shames us all.

We have also heard from parents such as Sophie, who have been driven to despair by a system that they feel all too often forces them to fight every step of the way just to secure the very basics of support that their young person needs. Often, they have to sink thousands of pounds that they can barely afford into private diagnosis, representation and support after completely losing faith that local provision will be able to meet their needs.

We have also heard devastating stories from young people who have been pushed to the brink by the lack of appropriate support, including stories of those young people whose mental health has spiralled to the point that many of them felt they could no longer be in day-to-day education. Devastatingly and particularly heartbreakingly, we heard from the parents of Alice who, after feeling isolated and alienated by the delays in getting the right support in place at school, felt that she had no option available other than to attempt to take her own life. What more damning indictment of our failure could there be?

I know that not one person in this room will consider any of these stories acceptable, and I want to reassure every young person and their family experiencing the sharp end of the failing system in my constituency that my office and I never will. It is truly impossible to do justice to all of the stories—there are over 100 in total—that I have received in the time that we have available to us today, but I want each and every one who has reached out and each and every one who is struggling at the moment to be assured that I will carry with me the pain and the urgency of their testimony every day as I champion the changes that we need to see locally and here in Parliament. To those elsewhere—whether in Central Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire or elsewhere; I am looking around the room—I can say that they will not be short of advocates either.

We all recognise that every day a child lacks the support they need to thrive at school is a day's potential that will forever have been wasted. When that support is lacking, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) pointed out, everyone loses. Every time a parent has had to give up work to take on extra responsibilities because the state has fallen short on our promise to them is a moment when their career and indeed their whole family's life has been forever narrowed by a systems failure. Every child who has given up hope that the system can ever work for them at all, and who has turned to despair or even worse, is a child we have all failed collectively to do right by.

I hope that colleagues here today will welcome Labour's commitment to making sure that we finally put in place some of the actions needed to address this issue. There have already been early actions in this Parliament to bring consideration of SEND back alongside schools; we have announced potential reform of Ofsted to improve its approach to assessing inclusion, particularly around admissions; and we have ensured that we have an underlying commitment to a community-wide and reinvigorated approach to SEND. All of these actions suggest to me that we finally have a Government who understand the nature of the challenge we are dealing with.

However, as we move forward to tackle the system, I want to make sure that our approach shows that we have learned from some of the failings that are evident in the stories that we have heard locally. It is clear that our local systems were allowed to get to a truly dire place before action was prompted by Ofsted. As the hon. Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper) pointed out, we have to do better. We have to make sure that our local partnerships are held accountable regarding the high ambitions we have for all of our young people regardless of the national context—that can never be an excuse for choosing to let people down day after day.

It is also clear in both the areas I have discussed that academisation has added to fragmentation locally and that we need to think through how we can resolve some of the challenges of creating a truly inclusive admissions system when the partnerships involved currently do not have the powers they need to compel all local stakeholders and all local schools to play their part. I am sure that there will be an important role for Ofsted to then hold schools accountable for delivering on their approach to inclusion.

In Central Bedfordshire, some of the challenges have been particularly exacerbated by the issues involved in the transition from a three-tier system to a two-tier system. This stalled transition has delayed the release of school capital sites, which are so important for us to be able to invest in localised specialist provision, meaning that sites that have been earmarked for much-needed special schools continue to be used in mainstream education for much longer than originally intended. I would welcome thoughts from the Department for Education about how it can potentially support Central Bedfordshire's efforts to finally get this transition over the line.

More fundamentally, there is a big underlying question about how we can make sure that the funding formulas to allocate resource to match need right across our country, particularly in the two areas that I am talking about today, truly match the evidence of need that exists and address the challenges of doing so in a rural context. It is especially noteworthy that, in spite of all of the challenges we have been discussing, Hertfordshire still has one of the lowest high-needs block allocations in the country.

However, all the funding in the world would not make a difference without a trained workforce to deliver. Alongside thinking through how we best support local authorities and local partnerships to answer these questions, we need a workforce strategy to ensure that we are properly addressing the issues that we have been talking about. From educational psychologists to speech and language therapists, we just do not have the trained professionals to take on some of these vacancies currently.

In our patch, these challenges are exacerbated by the fact that our near-London context makes it even harder to recruit and retain for these specialties. Thinking through how we can make sure that we have a national workforce strategy, but with an eye to the specific challenges of outer London and near-London authorities, will be an important part of truly resolving the system for the young people we have been talking about.

Crucially, we must make sure that the heartbreaking stories of families and their children, and the painful misery of the appeals system, can finally be brought to an end. All too often, cases are appealed at great cost to everyone involved. Both Central Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire have spent eyewatering amounts fighting appeals only to concede and often lose. How can we possibly see this as a good use of anyone's time and resource? We need to think through carefully how we can reform the system to ensure that incentives are there in the right place to address these at the earliest opportunity, and that mediation is used robustly, fully, in good faith and exhaustively to make sure that expensive appeals are only necessary as a last resort, rather than as the default, for managing demand in a broken system.

I know that this Government are very aware of the challenges they are inheriting. Along with so many others, SEND provision will fall to this new Government to put right. I want to thank the Minister in advance for the leadership I know she will show on this issue, and I want to thank colleagues across the House, too, for their attendance. Whatever party, whatever seat, I look forward to working with all of them to hold our local partnerships to account to deliver on what is within their gift, and to work with our new Minister nationally to deliver on Labour's commitments to finally get on top of SEND provision.

**Lewis Cocking (Broxbourne) (Con):** I declare an interest as a Hertfordshire county councillor. It is an honour to speak under your chairmanship, Dr Huq. Hertfordshire receives the third-lowest high needs funding in the country. I know that the hon. Gentleman mentioned the need to increase that funding. Will he join with us cross-party to lobby the new Government to increase that funding? Hertfordshire deserves the right funding to deal with the SEND issues, which will help us to increase our workforce to deal with capacity issues in Hertfordshire. I want to place it on the record that this issue is very important to me. I have a brother and a sister who have special educational needs, so I have grown up in a family on the frontline and am pleased to speak in this debate. I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on getting time to discuss this very important issue.

**Alistair Strathern:** I thank the hon. Member for that intervention and for sharing that personal aspect of his story. In me, he will absolutely find an ally in ensuring that we get a funding formula that truly meets the needs of every authority, particularly our authorities. Many other hon. Members have pointed out some of the challenges of where the current formula is indexed, at a point where it was pretty clear that the local authority was not managing the full use of that budget to deploy and meet the very real needs that were already starting to build up underneath the surface.

I want finally to thank every young person, every parent and every teacher who is battling to do their absolute best across those two areas in a system that

[Alistair Strathern]

just is not set up to back them to succeed. A system that is letting down children with additional needs is a system that is letting down children full stop, and it simply should not be a system that any of us tolerate any longer.

4.18 pm

**Kevin Bonavia** (Stevenage) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin (Alistair Strathern) for securing this debate on such a vital issue for all our residents. For the last few weeks, I have been running an online campaign to encourage residents in my constituency to tell me their SEND provision stories. One constituent told me:

“Despite constant concerns raised and referrals, I was left undiagnosed, unmonitored and untreated for ASC1 and ADHD for over two decades. In retrospect, I can see that many of the difficult experiences I had throughout school could’ve been so different.”

A local councillor told me:

“My constituent has a 10-year-old son with significant cognitive delay. He was placed in a comprehensive school with no SEND support capacity whilst stuck on a 90 child waiting list for a place at a suitable SEN school.”

A mother told me:

“My son with special needs was excluded before we were able to complete his EHCP application, then sent to a school an hour and a half away as the nearest option with capacity to meet his needs. Unable to cope with the daily taxis, we were then refused funding for a transition into a new school. He has been left without formal education for 5 years. I’ve been unable to make any contact to get help for years.”

Those harrowing accounts tell a clear story: the diagnosis and EHCP process is hard to navigate and too slow. It is easy to see such cases as just another piece of complex casework, but they are much more than that. There is clearly a systemic problem in Hertfordshire, as the recent Ofsted and Care Quality Commission report found. Every case is about the future of a child who deserves an education, just as much as anyone else, and all children are impacted by a failure to provide SEND support to those who need it. I hope these remarks have underlined the importance of fixing the fundamental flaws in SEND services to secure a dignified future for all affected. We must do better.

I am hopeful that Hertfordshire county council can turn things around. I ask the Minister to consider a fairer funding settlement for our county, so as to help deliver the support our young people need.

3.21 pm

**The Minister for School Standards (Catherine McKinnell):** It is a pleasure to serve under you as Chair, Dr Huq. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin (Alistair Strathern) on securing this debate on an incredibly important subject. His excellent speech set out in great detail the challenges that far too many face in his local area. He is a champion for children and families in his constituency, and he shares this Government’s vision of breaking down the barriers to opportunity and ensuring all children receive the best start in life and the right support, so that they succeed in their education and lead happy, healthy and productive lives. I thank him for his kind words in opening. I assure him that improving

the special educational needs and disabilities system across this country is a priority for this Government, and that includes improving services for children and young people with SEND in Central Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire.

More than 1.6 million children and young people in England have special educational needs. We know that for far too long, as hon. Members on both sides of the House have set out, they have been let down by a system that is not working. The former Secretary of State for Education said that the system was “lose, lose, lose”, and she was right: far too many families have been failed. Despite high needs funding for children and young people with complex special educational needs and disabilities rising to higher and higher levels, confidence in the SEND system is low, tribunal rates are increasing and there are increasingly long waits for support. Far too many children with special educational needs fall behind their peers, and they do not reach the fundamental expected level in reading, writing and maths. Just one in four pupils achieved the expected standard at the end of primary school. Families struggle to get their child the support they need and, more importantly, deserve. That really must change.

Parents have felt frustrated for years, and there have been constant delays to the reform programme; we see time and again that there is a lack of trust in the system. This Government want to be honest with families. We are committed to improving inclusivity and expertise in mainstream schools, and ensuring that special schools can cater to those with the most complex needs. Fundamentally, we want to restore parents’ trust that their child will get the support they need to flourish. Effective early identification and intervention can reduce the impact that a special educational need or disability may have in the long term. That is why, in July, the Government announced that the funded support for the 11,100 schools registered for the Nuffield early language intervention programme will continue for the year 2024-25. We know that extra support with speech and language is so important to help young people find their voice.

But there are no quick fixes for these deep-rooted issues. After 14 years, I have barely seen a system as broken. It is in desperate need of reform, so it is important that we fix it. I welcome the comments from the hon. Members for Mid Bedfordshire (Blake Stephenson) and for Broxbourne (Lewis Cocking), who recognise that this is an inherited challenge; so many of us in this House want to see it addressed.

Let me be clear: we have started work already. Fixing our SEND system is a priority for the Department, but I have to be clear that it will take time and Government cannot do it alone. We will work with our essential and valued partners in the sector to ensure that our approach is fully planned and delivered. We will work together with parents, schools, councils and expert staff who, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin rightly said, go above and beyond to support our children.

We are acting as quickly as we can to respond to the cost pressures in the SEND system because they are causing real financial problems in some local authorities, including in Hertfordshire and Central Bedfordshire. Before the parliamentary recess we announced a new core schools budget grant, which will provide special and alternative provision schools with over £140 million of extra funding in the 2024-25 financial year to help



with the extra costs of the teachers' pay award and the outcome of the negotiations for support staff. That is in addition to the high needs funding allocations for children and young people with complex special educational needs and disabilities.

Department for Education budgets have not yet been set for 2025-26. How much high needs funding is distributed to local authority schools and colleges next year will depend on the next stage of the Government spending review, due to be announced at the end of October. We are in listening mode to the challenges that are being set out today. That means that next year's allocations of high needs funding have not been published to the normal timescales, but we are working across Government to announce next year's allocations for Hertfordshire, Central Bedfordshire and other local authorities as soon as we possibly can.

We are acutely aware of the financial pressures that local authorities are facing, not just from supporting young people with complex needs, but from what we have inherited as a whole with the economic climate and the challenges around that. Resolving these problems will not be quick or easy, and it is important that we take the time to develop long-term solutions to ensure that we take a long-term approach to tackling these issues. I welcome the opportunity to hear Members' thoughts on how we can do that together as we go forward. We need to ensure that we get better outcomes from our investment for young people. It is important that we have a fair education funding system that directs funding to where it is needed and can make the most impact. One aspect of that is the national funding formula and the way in which the high needs funding allocated to local authorities is used. We need to take time, if there are any changes to that formula, to ensure that we consider the impact and get it right.

As we know, Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission jointly inspect local area SEND provision. Those inspections enable the Department to intervene in areas of significant concern, and work with local authorities and professional advisers to address weaknesses. I am concerned that the SEND inspections in Central Bedfordshire in

November 2019 and in Hertfordshire in July '23 found significant concerns about the experiences and outcomes of children with special educational needs and disabilities. Ofsted and the CQC revisited Central Bedfordshire in July '22, and found that three of the six initial areas of weakness had improved. Central Bedfordshire produced an accelerated progress plan to address the remaining areas of weakness, and the Department continues to monitor those areas. The issues raised in the inspection reports are serious. The Government need to be confident that the local area in Central Bedfordshire and the local area partnership in Hertfordshire are taking the right actions to secure rapid and sustainable improvement.

We work alongside NHS England advisers, we meet every six months with local leaders and representatives from schools and colleges, and we have a parent carer forum to review and challenge progress on the accelerated progress plan. In Hertfordshire, the local area appointed Dame Christine Lenehan to chair an independent board to bring about rapid improvement. DFE officials, an NHS England adviser and a SEND adviser meet monthly with local leaders and Dame Christine to scrutinise and challenge the improvement plan. It is so important that that work is undertaken.

I am conscious of time. I want to do justice to the excellent speech given by my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin, but I fear I will not have time to address all the concerns that he raised; he went into quite some detail. I am keen to write to him with more details of the ongoing work in order to reassure him that many of the issues he raised are being tackled, and that the Department for Education is working to ensure that the improvement programmes are delivered. I thank him again for bringing this matter forward. We are all passionate about the SEND outcomes in his local area and right across the country. We recognise that the system needs to improve, we recognise the hardship that many families are facing, and we are determined that that will change. Like my hon. Friend, I thank everyone working in the SEND system to deliver better outcomes for all our children across the country.

*Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).*

## Security in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

4.30 pm

**Jeremy Corbyn** (Islington North) (Ind): I beg to move,

That this House has considered security in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Dr Huq, and I am pleased to introduce this debate on the issue of security, in its widest sense, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. I am very grateful to many groups and people who have sent me information and advice ahead of it. I am delighted to see the Minister in her place; I congratulate her on her appointment and look forward to her reply. I am not totally aware of how many colleagues wish to speak, but I will try to ensure that my speech is sufficiently short so that everyone is able to get in.

**Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair):** I think we have a fair amount of time. Two Back Benchers wish to speak and then there are the Front Benchers.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** Okay.

First of all, the DRC is almost the largest country in Africa and it certainly has the largest amount of unexploited mineral resources. The sale of mineral wealth could have made it an incredibly wealthy place by now, but it is not. It is a desperately poor and divided country. It has been my pleasure to visit the DRC on two occasions: once as an election observer in 2006 and another time on a human rights delegation to Goma and elsewhere in the east of the country, where I met many women victims of rape, which was being used as a weapon of war.

The history of the Congo is long, brutal, sad and complicated. It was not taken as a European colony until the mid-nineteenth century, when Belgium—or rather King Leopold—took over in 1885 as a result of the Congress of Berlin, which divided up Africa in the interests of European powers. The Congolese people were not represented in any way there; they were merely chattels to be fought over by the rival European powers. For the next 20 years, Leopold ran the country as his own personal fiefdom in the most brutal manner possible, and there were the most appalling abuses of human rights, with enforced rubber collectors and enforced miners, as well as the continuation of the slave trade, which had gone on for certainly the previous two centuries.

The atrocities were eventually recognised globally, partly through the work of Sir Roger Casement, a British diplomat who was later executed for his part in the Easter Rising in Ireland, and of E. D. Morel, a shipping clerk in Liverpool who observed what was going on through his company Elder Dempster. The latter eventually became a Labour MP and a Minister in the Labour Government of 1922. Before that, the global objections to Leopold's excesses were such that the Belgian Parliament effectively nationalised the Congo and took it for itself, and it was then run as a Belgian colony until its independence in 1960. During that time, Belgian mining companies made an enormous amount of money out of the Congo and did not invest very much in its infrastructure other than in railways to take the minerals to the sea and in shipping lines to take

other minerals, timber and other products down the rivers. It was very much an exploitative and extractive economy.

On independence in 1960, Patrice Lumumba became the Prime Minister and made a very strong declaration of independence, including at the United Nations, but he was assassinated a few months later. The country then deteriorated into a degree of war, with the involvement of both big powers—the Soviet Union and the United States; it almost became a cold war by proxy. The background is pretty bad all around. There is not time to go into all of the history of the Congo, but I want to set the scene, with that as the background to all of the other Governments since 1961—Mobutu and others: the huge corruption that went with those and, all the time, the continuing poverty of many of the Congolese people.

The country now faces devastating levels of insecurity. Since 1996, some 6 million people have been killed in conflicts in the Congo. Just think about that figure again: 6 million have died since 1996. That is barely mentioned; we would have to dig hard to find any reference to the Congo in most of the world's media.

Issues of illegal mining and mass displacement continue, with more than 7 million people being displaced in the eastern region alone. There are also endemic diseases such as mpox, malaria, tuberculosis and cholera, and the limited hospitals and health services are overwhelmed. There is food insecurity, malnutrition, gender-based violence, and a lack of access to clean water and necessities. There are very large numbers of refugees, either internally displaced or in Angola or other neighbouring countries.

We are looking at a very serious situation. There are more than 100 armed groups fighting for control of natural resources in the eastern region, most notably the M23 movement—Mouvement du 23 mars—which is financially backed by and has received training from Rwanda and other Governments. More than a third of the children of the Congo have no school to go to.

That is the background, which I wanted to summarise before I go into more detail. I will take a quote from Adam Hochschild's brilliant book, "King Leopold's Ghost":

"On the whole continent, perhaps no nation has had a harder time than the Congo in emerging from the shadow of its past."

He wrote that some time ago, but it still applies today. We have issues to deal with, with the conflict that got worse and was heightened during the Rwanda genocide of 1994.

Basically, the DRC is both blessed and cursed with an abundance of natural resources. That includes cobalt, coltan, diamonds, copper, tin and gold, as well as the other, more obvious natural resource of vast amount of timber from one of the world's largest and most pristine rainforests. I once took a flight from Goma to Kinshasa, and we were flying seemingly for hours just over forest. It is incredibly beautiful—pristine and beautiful—but then we look underneath it and we see the levels of poverty and malnutrition. I think the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Dame Harriett Baldwin), has probably also taken the same journey and had the same experiences.

The minerals taken from the Congo are the main factor in the present conflict. Congo has 70% of the world's cobalt reserves. Cobalt is essential to almost every lithium-ion rechargeable battery, such as those used in phones

and laptops, as well as in innovations such as solar power, which we see as necessary to deal with climate change. Therefore, our mobile phones and so much else are actually run with minerals that come from the Congo. In fact, much of the western economy simply could not work without the minerals that the Congo is forced to export. The armed rebel groups that have terrorised much of the country are actually usually involved in the mineral trade in some way or another. We have to face up to these issues.

Only two days ago, for example, the Congolese Government buried 200 internally displaced people who had died in various camps around Goma in North Kivu. They died in different circumstances, usually from hunger and diseases, but sometimes from violence. There has been heavy fighting between the Congolese army and the armed groups and the World Health Organisation has now declared mpox an epidemic in Africa.

A brief ceasefire in the summer was extended until August. There are, however, allegations of violations, and the situation in North Kivu remains very volatile indeed. The continuation of the ceasefire agreement signed in Luanda under Angola's auspices, between the DRC and Rwanda, is significant. I hope the Minister will be able to shed some light on the possibility of that ceasefire being made permanent and of the establishment of an accountable force that could control what is at present a dangerous situation.

The resolution also authorised the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo to continue operating in the eastern DRC, where it has been for quite a long time. Although the UN missions in the Congo have a rather chequered history, and are not universally popular there, most people recognise that without a UN mission life would be even worse than it is at present. This is the country that has suffered the worst sexual violence in war of almost any country in the world—a terrible thing to have to say. The number of victims of sexual violence is absolutely huge.

I have never forgotten arriving in Goma on a human rights visit with a colleague from Parliament. We arrived in the evening; it was more or less dark when we got there. We went to a refugee centre that was entirely populated by women who were victims of rape. They said, "Thank you for coming. It is great you are here. You are welcome. Thank you for telling the world about the plight we are in. Can you now give a speech to us?" What on earth can a western European man say to a meeting of 500 or 1,000 women, all of whom were victims of rape and many of whom had been made pregnant because of the rape they had suffered? What can we say to them other than that we want to give them all the support and comfort possible and try to understand the horror of their situation? Rape is being used as a weapon of war.

The health concerns are serious and getting worse. As Ebola, mpox, covid and others have shown, health concerns are impossible to isolate. If one part of the world suffers from a serious contagious disease, every part of the world is at risk because of the levels of transport and communication we now have. It is in everybody's interest to provide healthcare and health support to the people of the Congo to get through the epidemics that they are facing. An act of charity it may be; an act of necessity it certainly is.

I turn to the future. Education in the Congo for most children is non-existent. For those who can get to schools, the schools are very limited. For many years the teachers have been paid sometimes, but sometimes not. Most of the education is done via the Church, but many children are simply not receiving any education at all. Again, that is in a country with vast mineral resources through which vast profits are being made all around the world. Those children are not getting an education, and too many become involved in the next thing I will talk about: illegal mining and the export of its products.

Conveniently, the products of the illicit and illegal mining in the Congo miraculously appear in another country, such as Rwanda or somewhere else. Those products are bought by global mining corporations, such as Glencore and others, and then appear on the world market, ending up in our mobile phones and batteries. Children as young as five are often forced to work in brutal conditions. In his very good book, "Cobalt Red: How the Blood of the Congo Powers Our Lives", Siddharth Kara writes:

"As of 2022, there is no such thing as a clean supply chain of cobalt from the Congo. All cobalt sourced from the DRC is tainted by various degrees of abuse, including slavery, child labour, forced labour, debt bondage, human trafficking, hazardous and toxic working conditions, pathetic wages, injury and death, and incalculable environmental harm."

I advise anyone interested in the Congo to read the two books I have mentioned: Hochschild's book "King Leopold's Ghost" and Kara's book on cobalt.

Al Jazeera recently published an article, "Blood and minerals: Who profits from conflict in DRC?" Its writers managed to speak to miners, a trafficker, an undertaker and a prostitute to understand the way of life in the mineral region. I will read from it. A 16-year-old miner called Innocence walked an hour to the largest coltan mine post in the country. As he was guiding the journalists to the mine post, they encountered several men carrying the body of a miner on a makeshift stretcher. Innocence told journalists,

"Sometimes the mountain caves in. The miners are buried for ever and people forget about them."

The trafficker later explained that many miners work for 14 hours a day and get paid only about \$1. The trafficker collects his merchandise from the miners by the river and goes on to sell the goods, earning around \$2,000 a month. Traffickers who buy already screened minerals at the foot of the mine end up multiplying its value when they leave it at the border with Rwanda and Uganda. By the time the coltan arrives in the manufacturing districts of Shanghai, Ciudad Juárez in Mexico or other places around the world, the market price is between \$470 and \$540 per kilo. So we can see the multiplier effect: a child gets almost nothing to mine those vital products, which end up on the world market where they sell for enormous amounts of money.

Mining companies such as Glencore, which is based in Switzerland, have exploited the conflict for their own benefit. It was recently found guilty under Swiss law of "inadequate organisation" that led to corrupt mining deals, which included the bribing of officials. Public Eye filed a criminal complaint with the Office of the Attorney General of Switzerland following the publication of the Paradise papers, which shed new light on the purchase of cobalt and copper mines in the DRC.



[Jeremy Corbyn]

Glencore commissioned the services of a businessman, Dan Gertler, who is on the US sanctions list, to secure favourable mining deals. He brought about a staggering price reduction on behalf of Glencore in 2008 during negotiations with Kabila's Government about the Katanga Mining company, and in 2011 acquired shares in the Mutanda and Kansuki mines from the Congolese state mining company at far below their market value. Four years of investigation by the OAG found that around \$26 million had been paid from Swiss bank accounts to a close associate of the then President of the DRC. Glencore ultimately benefited financially from the deals, as the OAG's judgment states.

Glencore had been ordered to pay \$150 million, which is nothing compared with the loss that the Congolese people have suffered. There needs to be much sterner action taken by all Governments globally concerning this horrifying supply chain of vital minerals, which are mined at the expense of the living conditions and poverty of many people in the Congo, and could provide so much in the way of education and so much more for other people in the Congo.

The purpose of my debate today is to try to draw attention to the history of the Congo and the plight that many people are suffering at present, and to try to hear what the new UK Government's view is on this and how we can take matters forward. The UN is involved, endorsing Security Council resolution 2717 in 2023, and experts are concerned that if MONUSCO withdraws, key components of early warning systems of human rights violations will no longer be operational, significantly limiting human rights monitoring, reporting and investigation. The UN has asked the Congolese Government to ensure the consolidation of the handover of security responsibilities in South Kivu. I hope those assurances will be forthcoming.

Lack of logistical and military support for troops and groups to defeat the M23 is hampering efforts. We have huge investment in groups in order to make other people very, very wealthy indeed. The role of the Rwandan Government, in facilitating M23 activities, has also been called into question. What action is going to be taken?

I will conclude with one point and a couple of questions. The UK ambassador to the Congo, James Kariuki, said in a statement to the UN Security Council only a few months ago in April,

"We also emphasise our commitment to a gradual, responsible and sustainable withdrawal. We call on the DRC government, through close coordination with MONUSCO, to assume its protection responsibilities for the civilian population in line with the joint disengagement plan."

Can the Government elaborate on how they will emphasise this commitment to a sustainable withdrawal? While we have condemned the continued advance of UN-sanctioned M23 forces, external actors must withdraw as well, because they are part of the problem.

**Dr Al Pinkerton** (Surrey Heath) (LD): The right hon. Gentleman has mentioned the destructive effects and consequences of commercial organisations such as Glencore, and I think that can be traced through other commercial interests in France, Romania, Bulgaria and elsewhere. Does he acknowledge the disruptive implications of other external military forces such as the Wagner Group,

which I recently encountered in north Sudan and which is prevalent in the Congo? It was once a proxy organisation of the Russian state but is of course now much more closely involved.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** It is to the bedevilment of the Congo that so many proxy groups turn up there to benefit from mineral exploitation, and it is the people of the Congo who suffer. Wherever they come from, they are wrong, they should not be there and they should go. I am absolutely clear about that.

I would like to ask some questions of the Government. What relationship do they have with the Rwandan Government, and what pressure are they putting on them? Are they able to increase humanitarian aid to the DRC, particularly in relation to education of both girls and boys? I know that priority was given to girls' education by the Department for International Development, which is now part of the Foreign Office. I supported that, but I also made the point that if we want the next generation of boys to grow up and not commit the appalling sexual violence of their parents' generation and previous male generations, they need education as well. It is not just girls who need to be educated but boys too. What support are we able to give to MONUSCO and the important work it does there?

I would like to finish by saying,

"The legacy of injustice can only be erased through the pursuit of truth and reconciliation."

That is another quote from Adam Hochschild. Volker Türk, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, has said:

"The insecurity is being fuelled by a seemingly impassable mountain of challenges: from large-scale corruption, to the unbridled race between multiple parties to take control and exploit the country's wealth of natural resources, to ongoing violent land disputes."

I will finish at this point, because I think I have taken up too much time, but I hope I managed to set out my concerns about the DRC.

**Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair):** It is not a question of time; the right hon. Gentleman was completely within his rights, but we do have at least one vote in the House—we think two.

4.53 pm

*Sitting suspended for Divisions in the House.*

5.24 pm

*On resuming—*

**Kate Osamor** (Edmonton and Winchmore Hill) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq, and I thank the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) for securing this important debate.

Today, I stand to discuss a crisis that has persisted for decades—a crisis that has devastated lives, including the lives of many of my constituents, destroyed communities, and destabilised an entire region. I am speaking, of course, about the conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

The DRC is a nation of immense potential, endowed with vast natural resources, including gold, diamond, tin, tantalum and cobalt, that are essential to the global economy. However, instead of being a blessing, these resources have fuelled conflict. Armed groups, both

domestic and foreign, have fought to control these resources, using the profits from illegal mining and trade to finance their operations and perpetuate violence.

The DRC has been described as a paradox—a country so rich in resources, yet so poor in terms of development and human security. For over two decades, the people of the DRC have faced unspeakable horrors, from the wars of the late 1990s and the early 2000s, which drew in multiple neighbouring countries and claimed millions of lives, to the ongoing conflicts that plague the eastern regions of North Kivu, South Kivu and Ituri.

The Congolese state has often been unable or unwilling to protect its citizens, maintain security or provide basic services, leaving communities vulnerable to violence and denying its people peace, stability and prosperity. We must confront the humanitarian consequences of this conflict. The human cost is staggering. Since the late 1990s, over 6 million people have died from conflict-related causes. Millions more have been displaced from their homes, with over 7.3 million people currently internally displaced. The violence has led to one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world today.

The conflict has also been marked by horrific human rights abuses. Women and children have borne the brunt of this violence, with systematic sexual violence used as a weapon of war. Entire communities have been traumatised, and the psychological scars will take generations to heal. The violence has disrupted access to education, healthcare and other basic services, deepening poverty and perpetuating cycles of suffering.

The international community must play a pivotal role in addressing the conflict in the DRC. MONUSCO has been present in the country for over two decades, working to protect civilians and support peace efforts. However, the challenges are immense and peace remains elusive. We must rethink our approach to peacebuilding in the DRC, because any solution to the conflict there must be inclusive and address the root causes of violence. That means bringing all stakeholders to the table—national and local leaders, civil society, women's groups, youth and marginalised communities. Peace cannot be achieved through top-down agreements alone; it must be built from the ground up.

As I draw my remarks to a close, I would like to ask the Minister to address the following four points when she winds up. What are the UK Government doing to address the economic drivers of conflict and the illegal exploitation of natural resources, which is a major cause of the conflict? How are the UK Government strengthening state institutions and governance in the DRC? Peace in the DRC requires a strong and accountable Government that can provide security, deliver services and uphold the rule of law. What talks have the UK Government undertaken to enhance regional co-operation and stability? The conflict in the DRC is deeply intertwined with regional dynamics. Lastly, what are the UK Government doing to protect human rights and ensure accountability? Impunity is a major obstacle to peace. We must support efforts to hold to account the perpetrators of violence, whether they are members of armed groups, Government forces or foreign actors.

In conclusion, the conflict in the DRC is one of the most challenging crises of our time, but it is not a hopeless one. The Congolese people have shown remarkable resilience in the face of adversity. They desire peace, stability and a chance to build a better future for

themselves and their children. It is our collective responsibility—Congolese leaders, regional partners and the international community—to stand with the people of the DRC in their quest for peace.

Let us be bold, united in our purpose and unwavering in our commitment to ending the conflict in the DRC. Together, we can help the DRC move from a cycle of violence to a cycle of peace, development and prosperity.

5.30 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship for the third time this afternoon, Dr Huq, and a real pleasure to be here. I genuinely commend the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) for leading today's debate. His insight, knowledge, direction and contribution in the Chamber today have been exceptional, and I say that with all honesty and graciousness. He and I have many things we do not agree on, but on this we are on the same page, and I want to put that on the record. It is also a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Edmonton and Winchmore Hill (Kate Osamor) and to have heard her contribution. I thank her for that.

It is of great significance that we are discussing the security situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. My goodness, when I listened to the introduction, I realised that not everybody will know about the minerals and how important they are for companies across the world, but they are. When we have more insight into the matter, we see that its significance from a financial and world stability point of view is really quite incredible.

The importance of addressing this crisis cannot be ignored from a humanitarian and a regional stability standpoint, so it is good to be here to discuss what more we can do to offer support. My interest will always be more in the human rights issues, as I am particularly interested in that subject matter. As you and others in the Chamber will know, Dr Huq, I am also chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief. As a Christian, I will speak up for those with Christian beliefs, those with other beliefs and those with no belief, because I believe that that is the right thing to do, and that drives me in my contributions.

I eagerly anticipate the contribution from the Minister. She is an esteemed colleague who is always insightful and who is respected by many, and I know she shares our concerns about this matter. I also look forward to hearing the contribution from the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Dame Harriett Baldwin), who has had a deep interest in this region for a long time. I know that her contribution will be of equal importance—I say that without disrespect to anybody else—and I look forward to hearing what she has to say.

The humanitarian crisis in the DRC is staggering. More than 7 million people have been displaced within the country and more than 13 million require urgent humanitarian assistance, a figure that includes millions of children at risk of starvation. In the eastern Congo, half a million people have had to flee their homes. The DRC has the highest number of internally displaced people in all of Africa, and we have to remember what that means. I think that 98 million people live in the DRC, so the fact that it has the highest numbers of displaced people gives us an idea of what those numbers are.

[Jim Shannon]

Just recently, on 30 August, terrorists shot and killed 57 people in Goma. The right hon. Member for Islington North referred to Goma and some of the things that have happened over the last period of time, and they are very difficult to listen to.

I mentioned the APPG, and research says that 95% of the DRC's population are Christian, 1.5% are Muslim and 1.8% have no religious affiliation. The churches that are combined to make up that 95% include evangelical Christians, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Greek and independent orthodox churches, other churches.

I give those figures because I find those terrorist attacks and the human rights abuses, such as the catalogue of sexual abuse to which the right hon. Member for Islington North referred, hard to contemplate. To tell the truth, I find them incredibly hard even to think about, and I know that the right hon. Gentleman, in his introduction, was finding them hard to contemplate and understand as well. His illustration of going to that camp—my goodness. If I were to speak with those people, I would have no idea what I could say that would be of any comfort—I would just feel inadequate. I know how he felt, because I would have felt exactly the same.

I also gave those figures because 30% of the human rights abuses—the rapes and sexual abuse, the killings, the looting and the desecration of churches—are carried out on the Christian population. In a population of 98 million, a figure of 30% gives us an idea of how many Christians have been persecuted during the conflict. That tells me this conflict is one of the worst terrorist conflicts that I could ever imagine across all of Africa, and I say that to have it on record.

Given the escalating violence in the region and the growing displacement of civilians, the support of our Government in the United Kingdom and the broader international community is more crucial than ever. The DRC has long been troubled by armed conflicts, yet it also holds tremendous potential due to its rich natural resources and strategic importance. However, those resources have often been a curse rather than a blessing, and I think those were the words used by the right hon. Member for Islington North at the beginning—that stood out in my mind because I put down the same thing. Those resources fuel corruption, violence and exploitation rather than the prosperity that they should. They could take all those people out of poverty and bring them up to a standard of living that is right.

I spoke about the sexual attacks on women and girls. For some of the monsters and vile people who carry those out, it does not matter what the age of the person may be—young, old or anything between. We have to address all these things. The international community, including the UK, must ask: what actions have been taken to alleviate the suffering in the DRC and have there have been any diplomatic efforts to encourage a peaceful transition of power in accordance with the DRC's constitution? I ask those questions constructively of the Minister, and they are always meant to be constructive. What measures are being implemented to address the widespread human rights abuses, including the extrajudicial killings that I understand have been carried out by state agents?

The DRC is not only a humanitarian disaster but a potential powder keg for the whole region's stability. Tens of thousands of refugees have already fled to neighbouring countries such as Uganda, Angola, Tanzania and Zambia, raising the risk of conflict spilling over into those regions. The South African Development Community, under South Africa's leadership, has a vital role to play in bringing about peace and stability in the DRC. There is a role for South Africa in this, and I am keen to hear how we can work with South Africa and others to bring security about—I apologise to the Minister, because I would rather have given her notice of these questions to give her a better chance to respond.

I have many churches in my constituency that are active in the DRC and across Africa. I believe there is a role that they can play with the non-governmental organisations in terms of how they can do things better. Is that something that could be considered? The UK's involvement in the DRC, whether through diplomatic efforts, humanitarian aid or support for the democratic process, is a matter of not just moral responsibility but strategic importance. A stable DRC could contribute significantly to regional stability and development, and benefit the broader African continent, as well as the global community.

In conclusion, what role can the UK play in supporting the DRC's transition to a stable and prosperous nation? How can we ensure that humanitarian aid reaches those most in need, and that it supports not only immediate relief but long-term development? There is also the pressing question of how we can support credible elections in the DRC. Those are constructive questions, and addressing them is essential for restoring democracy and preventing further violence. I very much look forward to the Minister's answer, as well as to the contribution from the shadow Minister.

5.39 pm

**Richard Foord** (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq. I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) for securing the debate. He came from exactly the right position at the outset: it is about seeing the context from the perspective of the most vulnerable people in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. We all have our own statistics on the horror of what is going on. I have read that in 2022 more than 38,000 attacks against women and girls were reported in North Kivu province alone, and most of the women and girls were reported to be attacked by armed men and displaced men in camps for IDPs. What has been going on there is tragic.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) spoke about British policy. We should think about UK policy and the difference it can make. In 2018, the Conservative Government said that more than 2 million people had been lifted out of poverty in the DRC since 2005, thanks to UK international development aid. It is good that DFID in particular had a positive effect on the Democratic Republic of the Congo, but we should also think about how sometimes our support is conditional. Aid conditionality is not always beneficial to people on the ground.

We also have to think about how we support the neighbouring countries. The sanctions imposed on Rwanda by the UK and US Governments in 2012 were very



effective in halting support by the Rwandan Government for the M23 militia group. Since 2021 we have seen the re-emergence of M23, but so far there does not seem to have been quite the same effort to put the brakes on Rwandan support for M23 in the DRC.

I am conscious that we should be thinking not just about international development, for which the Minister is responsible, but about joined-up government. In April this year, the then Government defended their so-called Rwanda plan: a transfer of £380 million to Rwanda for the so-called economic transformation and integration fund. No thought at all seems to have been given to what effect the Rwandan Government were having in the DRC with their alleged sponsorship of M23: if hon. Members want evidence of that, they need only watch the BBC “Question Time” clip in which the then Home Office Minister of State revealed that he was not even aware that Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo are different countries. Very plainly, some of the thinking in the Home Office was not joined up with the thinking in the FCDO or the thinking in relation to international development.

Finally, it is very positive to see that the new Government have already been thinking about peace in the DRC. I read that Lord Collins, the new Under-Secretary of State for Africa, went to Angola in August shortly after the signing of a ceasefire agreement between Rwanda and the DRC as part of the Luanda process, so we have seen some positive steps in UK policy and support in recent months.

5.43 pm

**Dame Harriett Baldwin** (West Worcestershire) (Con): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) on securing this debate. It is so important that this Parliament shines a light on situations like this one and the situation in Sudan that we debated yesterday. It was an honour to listen to the speeches of the hon. Members for Edmonton and Winchmore Hill (Kate Osamor), for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who spoke with such passion, and for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord), who certainly articulated why this is such an important issue.

As Minister for Africa in Theresa May’s Government, I had the privilege of going to the Democratic Republic of the Congo several times. My first visit was to Kalemie on Lake Tanganyika to see how UK aid was helping children who had fled terrible situations to stay in education. I saw how important it is to keep the focus on making sure that children are educated. In Kananga, I saw that UK aid had helped build a health clinic for newborns. On a later visit, I went through Goma and to Butembo during the Ebola outbreak to see how UK aid was helping with the vaccination of so many people. The city of Goma has had its freshwater system provided by UK aid over the years.

Over many, many decades, we have recognised how important it is that we try to help those fleeing the terrible conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. I do not need to repeat that it is very worrying, because we can see how much of the population is facing food shortages as a result and how many millions of people are being displaced by the conflict. It is very disheartening to hear that in recent months the conflict and the displacement have intensified, and it is particularly distressing to hear the further reports of sexual violence.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo has had a troubled history, as we heard from the right hon. Member for Islington North. It has suffered terribly. Nevertheless, it is an incredibly important place, not just for the people of the Democratic Republic of the Congo but for the whole planet. With its virgin forests, it is one of the great carbon sinks of our planet. We all want to see the important natural resources getting into the supply chains legally, and to see the people who mine them being fairly rewarded for their work.

It is concerning that the withdrawal of MONUSCO at the request of the Government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo appears to be throwing up unexpected challenges, including potentially exacerbating the terrible humanitarian situation. The work of peacekeeping troops remains very important. Attacks against them and against international non-governmental organisations operating in the region have reached almost triple figures since the start of the year. They are despicable, and I am sure that all colleagues here roundly condemn them.

I hope that the new Government will continue to support British NGOs in their important work. I want to single out the work of Tearfund, which lost two members of its team in July in an attack on a convoy arriving in Butembo from Lubero. Can we take a moment to remember those individuals, who are so brave, and their families and all those who risk their lives delivering all-important aid?

As the withdrawal of MONUSCO continues, I urge the new UK Government to continue encouraging the Government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo to step up their protection responsibilities for civilians against armed rebels and their engagement with the all-important political process in Luanda and elsewhere. The humanitarian truce and ceasefire earlier this summer appear to have somewhat lowered tensions, and any progress is to be applauded, but we are concerned to hear the suggestion that supply routes, including for food, continue to be disrupted. The UN Security Council resolution in August is warmly welcomed: it unanimously agreed to increase co-operation between MONUSCO and the Southern African Development Community mission, which will be tasked with much of the work of security and stabilisation of the country.

I want to touch briefly on the recent mpox outbreak, which is intimately linked to the conflict across the country. I put it on the record that the shadow Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), recently spoke to Dr Tedros, the director general of the World Health Organisation. He emphasised the importance of an international response to the virus so that we can contain it. During the time my party was in Government, we pledged \$126 million of funding for a three-year humanitarian project; I would be interested to hear what the new Government are planning to do in that area.

I will end by asking about British International Investment, which is one of the organisations that has been able to make really good investments and create jobs in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. I appreciate that things may have changed since 2018, so I would be interested in an update. Again, I urge the new Government in the UK to support the political solutions in Luanda and Nairobi that are really the only long-term solutions to advancing peace in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

5.50 pm

**The Minister for Development (Anneliese Dodds):** It is a real pleasure to take part in this important debate with you in the Chair, Dr Huq. I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) for securing what has been a very important and rich debate. I thank everybody who has taken part in it.

This debate has global significance, and it has direct significance for those living in our country whose family and friends have been impacted by the concerning situation. I know that that is particularly the case for my hon. Friend the Member for Edmonton and Winchmore Hill (Kate Osamor) and the right hon. Member for Islington North.

The security situation in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo is dire and deserves our attention. The right hon. Member for Islington North was absolutely right to say that it has received insufficient global attention. It is very rare that one sees coverage of this issue, unfortunately, in the UK media. When one looks at the figures, which many speakers have detailed, that is surprising. More than 7 million people have been displaced, and more than 23 million people are in need. Ultimately, the DRC is facing one of the world's most severe humanitarian crises.

The new Government are determined to ensure that the UK will play its part, and I am going to talk about how we are determined to do that in the remainder of my remarks. Of course, I acknowledge that that is against the backdrop of previous Government activity, as the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Dame Harriett Baldwin), rightly referred to. Overall, the UK has contributed a £114 million humanitarian programme for the eastern DRC that is delivering life-saving emergency assistance right now to people in need.

In the context of our commitment to building lasting partnerships with African countries, it is critical that we continue our engagement with the issues that we have been talking about in this debate. Some questions were asked about our ODA contribution and the continuation of that, as well as about the role of BII. That has been significant and there are some exciting developments that show the potential that was referred to. I am sure Members will understand that those decisions are kept under review. I very much heard Members' representations on this, but we have a spending review coming up, as I am sure Members will understand.

On the specific issues that were raised around conflict prevention, I underline that that is one of our top priorities as a new Government. That includes fostering peace and supporting mediation efforts in the DRC and the wider great lakes region. I was grateful to hear about the shadow Minister's visits to the DRC when she was in her previous role. She is clearly passionate about these issues. The new Government have been determined to engage as much as possible.

I am grateful to the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord), for acknowledging the fact that Lord Collins has been in the DRC. He has also been to Angola, and he is currently in Rwanda. I hope that demonstrates the significance of our commitment. While in Rwanda, Lord Collins met President João Lourenço to discuss Angola's pivotal role in mediating peace in the DRC.

He congratulated the President on his recent successful efforts to negotiate a ceasefire, which have been referred to by other Members. Across the region, Lord Collins has encouraged all parties not only to fulfil their obligations under that ceasefire agreement, but to respect it in spirit, not just in letter, and to continue to seek to find ways to build on that progress to bring lasting peace. He has conveyed that message right across the countries that he has been present in. That is the regional engagement that my hon. Friend the Member for Edmonton and Winchmore Hill also asked about.

I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for his kind words. He talked about the need for broader regional engagement, and he is right about a whole range of countries being involved. He mentioned South Africa, but other nations in Africa are deeply concerned about the situation. The instability is having a broader regional impact. There is also the African Union. I know that Lord Collins is keen to ensure that we use those relationships to, as I said, try to bring the lasting peace that is the right of the people of the DRC.

While recent steps have been encouraging, we cannot lose sight of the conflict's history. As has been mentioned, it has persisted for almost 30 years, but the escalations of violence that we have seen over the last two years have been particularly concerning. The UK Government strongly condemn the actions of all armed groups, including the UN-sanctioned M23 and the Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda—the FDLR—and I reiterate the UK's support for the regionally led Nairobi peace process and the Luanda peace process.

Peacekeeping was also referred to. It is a crucial part of international efforts to promote peace in the eastern DRC, and MONUSCO plays a vital role in protecting civilians. The UK has deployed three military staff officers to support MONUSCO's planning and performance, and contributed £48 million to its budget in the last financial year under the previous Government. However, MONUSCO is operating in very challenging circumstances. The shadow Minister referred to attacks on peacekeepers and UN property, which she described as despicable. We certainly share that assessment; they are unacceptable. To answer the question about what actions are being taken, the UK is continuing to push for accountability and responsibility for those who have conducted those despicable acts.

We also recognise the importance of regionally-led peacekeeping initiatives. As such, last month, the UK supported the adoption of a UN Security Council resolution that mandated limited targeted support from MONUSCO to the Southern African Development Community mission in the DRC. We will continue to work closely with MONUSCO and UN Security Council member states to alleviate the conflict and its appalling humanitarian consequences. On the issue of withdrawal, we will continue to work closely with the DRC Government towards a condition-based withdrawal that ensures a smooth transition and, above all, the protection of civilians.

I want to be absolutely clear: ultimately, it is a political response, not a military one, that will deliver the peace that is so desperately needed. As I said, Lord Collins has been urging all sides to engage particularly with the Luanda process and deliver on the commitments made already. The impacts of the conflict on civilians are widespread and devastating. The shadow Minister talked

about the impact on humanitarian workers, which indeed has been dreadful, including some particularly concerning recent instances. Our solidarity and sympathy go to the families of those affected. And, of course, conditions in the east increase the risk of sexual violence, malnutrition and disease.

The DRC has been hit by multiple life-threatening outbreaks in recent years. Ebola was mentioned, but there have also been outbreaks of cholera and measles. It is now also grappling with deeply concerning outbreaks of mpox across the country—particularly in the east, where the new strain emerged, and where displaced people, particularly children, as well as women and men, are living in appalling conditions. It is vital that the international community works together in this context to control the spread of the virus and save lives. That is why, while he was in the DRC, Lord Collins announced more than £3 million in funding to UNICEF to tackle the ongoing mpox and cholera outbreaks. I also assure hon. Members that the new Government have met with Dr Tedros—I have met him personally as the Minister for Development, as has the Foreign Secretary, and Lord Collins will be meeting him soon—including to talk about these issues.

The issue of those living in IDP camps was also mentioned. They have been subject to direct consequences of the conflict. The hon. Member for Honiton and Sidmouth rightly referred to the prevalence of sexual violence, which is very concerning for those in IDP camps. Disturbingly, we have also seen the bombing of IDP camps in May this year, which I condemn in the strongest terms. The UK has repeatedly raised the inviolability of camps in multilateral fora, and has consistently called for all parties to respect international humanitarian law, including by positioning heavy artillery away from camps.

I pay tribute to the invaluable work of humanitarian workers in this context, and I will briefly touch on their important role in delivering the food security that is so

desperately needed, which was rightly referred to by the hon. Member for Strangford in his powerful and compassionate speech. The UK is signing a new agreement with the World Food Programme, committing a further £7 million to tackle food insecurity in the DRC, because we are aware of that need.

The subject of women and girls was rightly referred to many times. The DRC is a priority country because women and girls there face some of the highest rates of sexual violence in the world. The right hon. Member for Islington North stated that he met some of the survivors; the vivid picture he painted is one that others referred to and that I will remember. As an important global south partner on this agenda, the UK and the DRC have collaborated on action to tackle conflict-related sexual violence, including as members of the International Alliance on Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict, and partners under the platform for action promoting rights and wellbeing of children born of conflict-related sexual violence. It is particularly difficult for those children who have been born, for example, out of conflict-related rape.

We are determined to boost the resilience of civil society partners, as was raised by many Members. That includes ensuring that we are providing support to NGOs that are supporting survivors of sexual violence, particularly TRIAL International.

**Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair):** Order. The Clerk is telling me we need to pull the plug.

**Anneliese Dodds:** I will write to Members about the other issues that they raised. I am sorry that we ran out of time; the Division disturbed this debate. I am grateful to everyone for their participation.

6.1 pm

*Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).*





# Written Statements

Wednesday 4 September 2024

## TREASURY

### Enterprise Investment Scheme and Venture Capital Trust Scheme: Extension

#### **The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (James Murray):**

On 3 September 2024, the Treasury made the Finance Act 2024, Section 11 (Extension of Enterprise Investment Scheme Relief and Venture Capital Trusts Relief) (Appointed Day) Regulations 2024 (S.I., 2024, no. 897). These regulations bring into effect the extension of the enterprise investment scheme and the venture capital trust scheme sunset clause to 2035. When this extension was legislated for in the Finance Act 2024, a tax information and impact note was published. This set out that there is no additional Exchequer impact from this measure, as the costs were already accounted for in the forecast. The schemes will continue to support early-stage companies to raise the financing they need to grow and succeed.

The attachment can be viewed online at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/extension-of-the-enterprise-investment-scheme-and-venture-capital-trust-scheme>.

[HCWS69]

## HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

### Gender Identity Services: Children and Young People

**The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting):** I am writing to update the House about the Government and NHS England's work to improve gender identity services, as well as implement the recommendations of the independent review into gender identity services for children and young people by Dr Hilary Cass.

During summer recess the Government and NHS England made progress toward these recommendations. The aim of this work is to ensure that children and young people who are experiencing gender incongruence or dysphoria receive a high standard of care that meets their needs and is safe, holistic and effective.

#### *Puberty blockers*

The Cass review made it clear that there is not enough evidence about the long-term effects of using puberty blockers to treat gender dysphoria and incongruence to know whether they are safe or beneficial.

The review recommended that puberty suppressing hormones should only be prescribed in the context of a clinical trial or under the guidance of the national multidisciplinary team. The report also recommended defining the dispensing responsibilities of pharmacists of private prescriptions of puberty blockers and considering other statutory solutions that would prevent inappropriate overseas prescribing.

The NHS has subsequently ceased the routine use of puberty blockers to treat gender incongruence in children. The former Secretary of State also issued an emergency order to extend restrictions to the private sector.

That emergency order came into force from 3 June 2024 in Great Britain and was due to expire on 2 September 2024. On 22 August, this Government renewed the order jointly with the Minister of Health in Northern Ireland. It commenced in Northern Ireland on 27 August 2024.

The Government recognise that the introduction of this order may cause concern to individuals and families who are impacted. If a young person has already taken these medicines or has been prescribed these medicines in the 6 months prior to 3 June 2024 (in Great Britain) or 27 August 2024 (in Northern Ireland), they can continue to do so, providing their prescription is now issued by a UK registered prescriber. They are strongly advised to meet with their prescribing clinician to fully understand the safety risks. For those patients accessing prescriptions from an EEA-registered prescriber, they can seek help from a UK private provider or see their GP.

The new order extends to Northern Ireland. The First Minister and Deputy First Minister gave their approval for the Minister of Health to co-sign the order. This will remain in place until the end of 26 November 2024 while we gather responses to a targeted consultation on a permanent banning order issued last month to representative organisations of those likely to be impacted by a permanent order. The proposed permanent order would continue the same restrictions and apply to the same medicines impacted by the emergency order, on a permanent basis. This would apply to private and overseas prescribing.

We do not yet know enough about the impacts of using puberty suppressing hormones at this critical stage in young people's lives. In partnership with the National Institute for Health and Care Research, NHS England is launching a clinical trial to assess the potential benefits and harms of puberty suppressing hormones.

Within this trial, the effects of puberty blockers can be safely monitored, and the research will give Government and the NHS the evidence we need to decide whether they can be used as a safe and effective treatment. The trial aims to begin recruiting participants early in the new year.

#### *New children's services*

In April, NHS England opened two new children and young person gender services in the north-west and London that offer a different clinical model, embedding multidisciplinary teams in specialist children's hospitals. This includes a nominated paediatrician or psychiatrist with overall clinical responsibility for patient safety in these services. A third new service will open in the south-west in the autumn, and a fourth in the east of England in spring of next year. NHS England is advancing towards meeting its commitment for there to be a specialist children's gender service in every region by 2026.

#### *Referral service specification*

NHS England has published a new service specification for the national referral support service for specialist services for children and young people with gender incongruence. A referral can only be made by an NHS-commissioned, secondary care-level paediatric service or a children and young person mental health service. This will ensure that healthcare professionals with the relevant expertise conduct the assessment and help determine any co-existing mental health or other health needs of these children and their onward care.

### *Adult services review*

Dr Cass also recommended a review of the adult service specification for gender services, given the changing demographic presenting to children and young people's services is reflected in a change of presentations to adult services. In response, NHS England has taken the decision to conduct a review of the operation and delivery of adult gender dysphoria clinics. The review will examine the model of care and operating procedures of each service, with the aim of producing an updated service specification for adult gender services. This will be led by Dr David Levy, medical director of Lancashire and South Cumbria integrated care board, and previously NHS England's north-west regional medical director. Dr Levy will act as the independent chair of the review, which will include an expert panel of professionals and patients.

### *Conclusion*

The trans community is disproportionately affected by issues of mental ill health, suicide and self-harm. We have a duty to them to lower the temperature and look for common ground away from the toxicity of the current debate.

The Government will not lose sight of the fundamental point that anyone accessing a gender identity service deserves the highest quality of care and support, and to be treated with dignity and respect, just as we would expect from any other service. This Government are determined that the public discourse about these issues does not lead to harm.

That is why this Government are absolutely committed to making sure every trans person feels fully part of our society. I believe the Cass review will deliver material improvements in the wellbeing, safety, and dignity of trans people of all ages and gender identities.

There is much to do in overhauling children's gender identity services, and I can assure the House that I will be working closely with NHS England to implement further changes as soon as possible to ensure that every child receives the best possible care.

We will proceed with caution at every step, always putting the evidence first, and putting people above politics.

[HCWS70]

## **PRIME MINISTER**

### **Grenfell Tower Inquiry Phase 2 Report**

**The Prime Minister (Keir Starmer):** The chair of the Grenfell Tower inquiry, Sir Martin Moore-Bick has today published the inquiry's phase 2 report.

The report examines how it came to be that the Grenfell Tower was in the condition whereby a fire could spread so quickly and fatally, as tragically happened on 14 June 2017. A copy has been laid before each House of Parliament and I will make a statement to the House following Prime Minister's questions.

The report finds substantial and widespread failings. The Government will carefully consider the report and its recommendations, to ensure that such a tragedy cannot occur again. I hope that those outside Government will do the same. Given the detailed and extensive nature of the report, a further and more in-depth debate will be held at a later date.

My thoughts today are wholly with those bereaved by, and survivors of, the Grenfell Tower tragedy and the residents in the immediate community. This day is for them. I hope that Sir Martin's report can provide the truth they have sought for so long, and that it is step towards the accountability and justice they deserve.

I would like to thank Sir Martin, his panel of Thouria Istephan and Ali Akbor, and the inquiry team for their thorough work on producing this report and for their years of work on this inquiry.

[HCWS68]











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