

**Monday
12 October 2026**

**Volume 791
No. 46**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Monday 12 October 2026

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

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

*The term “Independent” may denote—

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

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

HIS MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

MEMBERS OF THE CABINET

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

ALSO ATTENDS CABINET

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

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

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

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

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

DEPARTMENTS OF STATE AND MINISTERS

Business, Innovation, Science and Trade—

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

MINISTERS OF STATE—

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

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

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

Lord Sarwar (Minister for Trade)

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Blair McDougall, MP §

Baroness Lloyd of Effra CBE §

Lord Leong CBE

Cabinet Office—

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

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

MINISTERS OF STATE—

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

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

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

PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARIES—

Sally Jameson, MP §

Dan Tomlinson, MP §

Mark Ferguson, MP

Baroness Twycross §

Defence—

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

MINISTERS OF STATE—

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

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

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

Digital, Culture, Media and Sport—

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

MINISTER OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Ian Murray, MP (Minister for Creative Industries, Media and Online Safety)

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

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

Education—

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

MINISTERS OF STATE—

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

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Josh MacAlister OBE, MP
Paul Waugh, MP

Energy Security and Net Zero—

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

MINISTERS OF STATE—

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

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

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

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs—

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

MINISTER OF STATE—Emma Hardy, MP

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

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

Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office—

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

MINISTERS OF STATE—

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

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

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

Health and Social Care—

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

MINISTERS OF STATE—

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

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

James Frith, MP
Baroness Merron

Home Office—

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

MINISTERS OF STATE—

The Rt Hon. Dan Jarvis MBE, MP (Minister for Security) §
 Sarah Jones, MP (Minister for Policing and Crime)
 The Rt Hon. Anna Turley, MP (Minister for Border Security and Asylum)
 The Rt Hon. Lord Hanson of Flint

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Satvir Kaur, MP §
 Lord Collins of Highbury §
 Jo White, MP

Housing, Communities and Local Government—

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

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

MINISTERS OF STATE—

The Rt Hon. Matthew Pennycook, MP (Minister for Housing and Planning)
 Florence Eshalomi, MP (Minister for Homelessness, Democracy, Communities and Faith)
 The Rt Hon. Sir Stephen Timms, MP (Minister for Equalities)

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Sally Jameson, MP §
 Jim McMahon OBE, MP
 Baroness Taylor of Stevenage OBE
 Baroness Blake of Leeds CBE §
 Satvir Kaur, MP (Minister for Equalities) §
 Simon Lightwood, MP (Minister for Equalities) §
 Lord Collins of Highbury (Minister for Equalities) §

Justice—

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

MINISTERS OF STATE—

Catherine McKinnell, MP (Minister for Prisons, Probation and Reducing Reoffending)
 Sarah Sackman, KC, MP (Minister for Courts and Legal Services)

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Lord Lemos CMG CBE
 Alex Davies-Jones, MP
 Jake Richards, MP

Law Officers—

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

SOLICITOR GENERAL—Andy Slaughter, KC, MP

ADVOCATE GENERAL FOR SCOTLAND—Baroness Smith of Cluny, KC

Leader of the House of Commons—

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

Leader of the House of Lords—

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

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

Northern Ireland Office—

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

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Sarah Owen, MP
 Baroness Anderson of Stoke-on-Trent §

Scotland Office—

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

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE—Melanie Ward, MP

Transport—

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

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

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Justin Madders, MP
 Simon Lightwood, MP §
 Keir Mather, MP

Treasury—

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

CHIEF SECRETARY—The Rt Hon. Emma Reynolds, MP

FINANCIAL SECRETARY AND PAYMASTER GENERAL—The Rt Hon. James Murray, MP

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

EXCHEQUER SECRETARY—Dan Tomlinson, MP §

PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARIES—

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

LORDS COMMISSIONERS—

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

ASSISTANT WHIPS—

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

UK Export Finance—

PRESIDENT OF THE BOARD OF TRADE—The Rt Hon. Jonathan Reynolds, MP
 MINISTER FOR TRADE—Lord Sarwar

Wales Office—

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

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Anna McMorrin, MP
 Claire Hughes, MP §

Work and Pensions—

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

MINISTERS OF STATE—

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

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Torsten Bell, MP §
 Lilian Greenwood, MP

His Majesty's Household—

LORD CHAMBERLAIN—The Rt Hon. Lord Benyon GCVO
 LORD STEWARD—The Earl of Rosslyn
 MASTER OF THE HORSE—The Rt Hon. Lord Ashton of Hyde
 TREASURER—The Rt Hon. Sir Mark Tami, MP (Deputy Chief Whip)
 VICE-CHAMBERLAIN—Emma Foody, MP
 COMPTROLLER—Gen Kitchen, MP
 CAPTAIN OF THE HONOURABLE CORPS OF GENTLEMEN-AT-ARMS—The Rt Hon. Lord Kennedy of Southwark (Lords Chief Whip)
 CAPTAIN OF THE KING'S BODYGUARD OF THE YEOMEN OF THE GUARD—Baroness Anderson of Stoke-on-Trent (Lords Deputy Chief Whip) §
 LORDS IN WAITING—
 The Rt Hon. Lord Wilson of Sedgefield
 Lord Katz MBE
 BARONESSSES IN WAITING—
 Baroness Blake of Leeds CBE §
 Baroness Ramsey of Wall Heath
 Baroness Antrobus MBE
 Baroness Dacres of Lewisham OBE
 Baroness Hyde of Bemerton

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

SECOND CHURCH ESTATES COMMISSIONER, REPRESENTING THE CHURCH COMMISSIONERS—Marsha De Cordova, MP
 REPRESENTING THE SPEAKER'S COMMITTEE ON THE ELECTORAL COMMISSION —The Rt Hon. Sir Jeremy Wright, KC, MP
 REPRESENTING THE HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION—Nick Smith, MP
 REPRESENTING THE RESTORATION AND RENEWAL CLIENT BOARD—Nick Smith, MP



HOUSE OF COMMONS

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

CHAIRMAN OF WAYS AND MEANS—Ms Nusrat Ghani, MP

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

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

PANEL OF CHAIRS—

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

SECRETARY—Lynn Gardner

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION—

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

SECRETARY TO THE COMMISSION—Lloyd Owen

ASSISTANT SECRETARY—Edward Potton

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

Nick Ong-Seng, Elizabeth Honer, Luke Akehurst, MP, Nick Smith, MP

SECRETARY TO THE COMMITTEES—Edward Potton

COMMONS EXECUTIVE BOARD—

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

SECRETARY TO THE BOARD—Hannah Bryce

SPEAKER'S SECRETARY AND CHIEF OF STAFF—Helen Wood

SPEAKER'S COUNSEL—Saira Salimi

SPEAKER'S CHAPLAIN—The Venerable Andrew Hillier

PARLIAMENTARY COMMISSIONER FOR STANDARDS—Daniel Greenberg CB

THE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

OFFICIAL REPORT

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

FIFTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HIS MAJESTY KING CHARLES III

SIXTH SERIES

VOLUME 791

FIFTY ONE VOLUME OF SESSION 2026-2027

House of Commons

Monday 12 October 2026

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

NEW MEMBER

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

Sagal Abdi-Wali, for Holborn and St Pancras.

Oral Answers to Questions

WORK AND PENSIONS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Youth Guarantee Trailblazer Areas

1. **Andrew Pakes** (Peterborough) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of the youth guarantee trailblazer areas on young people's life prospects. [901444]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Pat McFadden): It has been some time since we had one of these sessions, and there have been some political developments. We have a new Prime Minister in place. The shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately), has survived a reshuffle—I know what that feels like, so I welcome

her back to her place—and of course, we have just welcomed my hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Sagal Abdi-Wali), the new MP for her seat. I should say that if her opponent ever needs any help with employment security, we have a number of work experience and training programmes that I am happy to make available to him.

Turning to the question, youth guarantee trailblazers are a flexible, locally delivered way to help more young people into work. The early evidence is encouraging, showing more participation and getting young people work-ready. There will be a full evaluation next year. Delivering employment support more locally through mayors and local authorities is the direction of travel, and we will do more of this in the future.

Andrew Pakes: Too many young people in Peterborough are starting adult life without the skills, support or training they need to get on, so I am incredibly proud that Peterborough was chosen as one of the first pilots for the youth guarantee trailblazer. However, we do not just have high levels of people not in education, employment or training; according to our chambers of commerce, we have high levels of businesses unable to recruit the staff they need because of skills shortages. This highlights one of the big mismatches—that between young people who do not have the skills, and employers who cannot find people to train and support in developing those skills. What more can my right hon. Friend's Department do to ensure that young people and businesses can find each other as we invest in apprenticeships?

Pat McFadden: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his tireless and constant campaigning on the issue of youth opportunity. He asks specifically about skills. From 1 August this year, we are fully funding apprenticeship training for all eligible under-25s. We have brought the National Careers Service into the Department for Work and Pensions, meaning that around 500 qualified careers advisers are now helping people of all ages to access careers support regardless of benefit status, and doing that skills matching that my hon. Friend spoke about so eloquently.

Suella Braverman (Fareham and Waterlooville) (Reform): We have more than 1 million young people who are not in education, employment or training. This is simply a crisis, and one of the reasons for it is that businesses—particularly small and medium-sized ones—are not taking on apprentices. Will the Secretary of State take this chance to support Reform UK's apprenticeship wage credit, which will provide direct support to small and medium-sized businesses when they take on a young apprentice?

Pat McFadden: I am grateful to the right hon. and learned Lady for her question, and I agree that more youth apprenticeship starts are desirable. She may not know this, but we are introducing a hiring incentive of £2,000 for a small business that takes on a young apprentice, and if that young person has been out of work and on universal credit for six months or more, that incentive goes up to £5,000. We are helping small businesses to do exactly what she has called for.

State Pension Changes: Women Born in the 1950s

2. **Brian Leishman** (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help support women born in the 1950s who have been affected by state pension changes. [901445]

The Minister for Pensions (Torsten Bell): We want all pensioners, including women born in the 1950s, to have the comfortable retirements they deserve. That is why we are delivering on our twin priorities for pensioners: raising the state pension, and rescuing the NHS. We are also delivering the largest ever pension credit take-up campaign, which is particularly important for low-income pensioners, a disproportionate number of whom are women.

Brian Leishman: More than 3.5 million WASPI women were affected by the change to the state pension age. Time is of the essence, because another WASPI woman dies every 13 minutes on average, without receiving fairness or justice. The Prime Minister personally assured the WASPI campaigners during the Makerfield by-election that he would meet them to discuss potential routes to redress. Can the Minister confirm what actions the Department is taking to support the Prime Minister in those discussions? Crucially, when will the meeting happen?

Torsten Bell: The Prime Minister and I opposed the 2011 acceleration of the state pension age by the coalition Government of the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives, in particular because it gave some women as little as five years' notice of changes to their state pension age. Those same women have faced disadvantage in the workplace and very uneven burdens of caring responsibilities. I have recently written to WASPI representatives to set out the Government's position. With legal proceedings ongoing, further comment is not appropriate, but I continue to hear from and to speak to women affected by the accelerated increases in the state pension age.

Sir Roger Gale (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): It is several years since the ombudsman reported on this matter. As I recall, the last Government agreed to accept the recommendations of the ombudsman. To echo the

point made by the hon. Member for Alloa and Grangemouth (**Brian Leishman**), many of these ladies will be dead before they see any money at all. When will the Government stop messing around and do something?

Torsten Bell: I thank the right hon. Member for his question; I just do not agree with the tone in which he asked it. This Government have considered the case set out by the ombudsman and provided a detailed response. I am afraid that the previous Government did nothing of the sort—they did not say they would proceed with a compensation scheme. In fact, the reason the ombudsman laid their report before Parliament, rather than to the Government, is that it was clear where the last Government were going with this.

Statutory Paternity Pay

3. **Sarah Russell** (Congleton) (Lab): What assessment his Department has made of the potential impact of the rate of statutory paternity pay on household financial resilience. [901446]

The Minister for Social Security and Disability (Sir Stephen Timms): Parents should be able, without undue financial pressure, to spend time off work in their child's vital early months. Our review of parental leave and pay, which is due to report early in the new year, is considering how working families can best be supported, including through statutory paternity pay.

Sarah Russell: My constituent got in touch with me after she had had an emergency caesarean section with twins. It was a traumatic experience. Her husband had to go back to work when she had been out of hospital for only a week. Does the Minister agree that this is not how we should be looking after parents in a civilised society, and that both the mother and the father in that situation would have been better served by longer periods of paid leave?

Sir Stephen Timms: I am concerned to hear about that experience. The Government recognise the vital role of fathers in supporting mothers and new-born children, particularly after difficult births, such as the one to which my hon. Friend has referred. Our parental leave and pay system is complicated. The review that is under way is looking at how paternity leave and pay and all the current entitlements are supporting working families. Across Government, families' experiences, such as the one that she has brought to the House, are informing our future policy.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Statutory paternity pay and paternity leave are important things for the Government to be looking at, and I support them in what they are seeking to achieve. In the investigation that the Minister is undertaking, will he look carefully at the status of those who are self-employed? One in four people in the workforce in Westmorland and Lonsdale works for themselves, including the 1,600 people who farm. It is so important that those families too are protected, is it not? How will the brief be extended to ensure that those who work for themselves, or indeed for small employers, are protected too?

Sir Stephen Timms: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and I am pleased to be able to confirm to him that self-employed parents are explicitly covered in the terms of reference of the current review.

Welfare Budget

4. **John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): What estimate he has made of what the total welfare budget will be at the end of this Parliament. [901447]

The Minister for Social Security and Disability (Sir Stephen Timms): In March, the Office for Budget Responsibility published its official forecast, predicting that at the end of the current Parliament, in 2029-30, UK welfare spending will be about £390 billion. The OBR will update that forecast in the Budget, which will take place on Wednesday fortnight.

John Lamont: The Minister has just confirmed that the benefits bill will continue to grow. He also seems to have confirmed the Prime Minister's position that national security

"cannot come at the expense of social security."—[*Official Report*, 9 September 2026; Vol. 790, c. 1036.]

Is that correct?

Sir Stephen Timms: The hon. Member will be relieved to know that spending on working-age adults' and children's welfare is forecast to be 4.9% of GDP at the end of the current Parliament, as it is now. Overall welfare spending is forecast to rise by less than half as much in this Parliament as in the last, by just over 0.3 percentage points by 2030-31 compared with 0.7 percentage points in the last Parliament. This Government are putting right the problems that they inherited.

Deirdre Costigan (Ealing Southall) (Lab): According to a recent report from the Good Growth Foundation, 50% of disability claimants would swap up to £1,000 of benefits for help such as employment support, therapy and physical aids. Does the Minister agree that giving disabled people tailored support could both reduce the welfare bill and stop those who want to work being written off by the system?

Sir Stephen Timms: I do agree with my hon. Friend, and, as she has said, we inherited a system that wrote people off. We are pleased with the early results emerging from our Connect to Work programme, which is providing exactly that kind of tailored support for disabled people and others faced with complex barriers to work. We recently published the second set of quarterly outcome statistics, and the news is very encouraging.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): The number of children between the ages of six and 11 with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder has grown sixfold, which means that in the years ahead there will be a surge in the number of applications for personal independence payment as children become adults. Even the Secretary of State accepts that owing to the growing number of children receiving disability living allowance, most will be transferred to PIP. Does the Minister agree that it is time to end a

cash payments benefit system for people with more minor conditions, and ensure that those with genuine needs receive the therapeutic support that will enable them to learn, work and contribute to the economy?

Sir Stephen Timms: The hon. Gentleman will have seen Professor Peter Fonagy's recent report about the incidence of ADHD, autism and other conditions. He will also know that I am co-chairing a review of PIP which is looking into how we can ensure that the system meets the very real needs of many disabled people, and that the benefit is on a sustainable financial footing for the future. The report of my review will be published before the end of the year.

Employment: Rural Areas

5. **Torcuil Crichton** (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support employment in rural areas. [901448]

The Minister for Employment (Andrew Western): The Government are supporting employment in rural areas through local Get Britain Working plans, a reformed jobs and careers service with expanded digital, phone and in-person support, and increased outreach through the flexible delivery network.

Torcuil Crichton: The Minister has been to my constituency and seen it for himself, so he knows about the challenges of administering and delivering benefits in the Western Isles, or Na h-Eileanan an Iar. The process could be made simpler if the verification of identity could be done virtually in some cases rather than requiring a home visit, which, for DWP staff, could involve travelling to other islands. The Minister also knows about the challenges posed by weather and the failed ferry system that we have inherited from the SNP. Will he consider changing the one-size-fits-all system of verifying claims and identities to take account of the rurality and the insularity of constituencies such as mine?

Andrew Western: I hope that I can give my hon. Friend some welcome news. The DWP does have several different ways to carry out identity verification for customers accessing our services in rural locations, including customers who are unable to access a jobcentre. It offers verification through our digital service, over the telephone or by postal delivery. If, as my hon. Friend says, that is not happening in his locality, I can tell him that there is an excellent team working out of the jobcentre in Stornoway, whom I have met. If they, or he, will let me know what is happening, I shall be happy to look into it for him.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): Rural areas could create and support more jobs if they had the right transport infrastructure. Now that the Government have cancelled the A12 widening scheme, paused the dualling of the A120 and scrapped the A127 economic corridor in Essex, what will the Minister do to lobby his colleagues across Government to help support more rural job creation in Essex?

Andrew Western: The right hon. Lady will be aware that this Government are delivering an additional £120 billion of public spending to support improved infrastructure

across the country. On her question about jobs in rural locations, this Government are taking the steps needed to support people into work—take the example of the agricultural sector, where there are over 22,000 more jobs than there were when her party left office.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): Meur ras, Mr Speaker. The number of young people claiming unemployment benefit in my Camborne, Redruth and Hayle constituency has risen by 26% in the last year alone—far higher than the national average. Can the Minister outline what employment action the Government are taking—particularly in remote coastal areas like mine, which has seen such a dramatic increase—to deal with the issue of young people claiming unemployment benefit?

Andrew Western: My hon. Friend raises a very important issue, which affects not just his constituency but the entire country. I recognise the specific concerns that he has about his locality, but also that these challenges are faced more broadly. I am delighted that the Government have brought forward the youth jobs grant, introduced the new £2,000 incentive for small and medium-sized enterprises that hire apprentices under the age of 25, and rolled out youth hubs across our country, but if there is more that he feels we could be doing in his area, I would be very happy to discuss that with him.

Mr Speaker: I call Jamie Stone—welcome back. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”]

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. I thank right hon. and hon. Members for the kind sentiments that I have received recently.

I am sure the Minister recognises that the lack of available or affordable housing is critical when it comes to rural employment. Indeed, on the west coast of my constituency—opposite the constituency of the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Torcuil Crichton)—we have almost none at all. Of course, housing is devolved to the Scottish Government, but could the Minister share best practice in England and Wales with those north of the border to see if we can do something about this problem?

Andrew Western: May I, too, welcome the hon. Gentleman back to his place?

I would be very happy to ask colleagues in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to share any best practice with their Scottish counterparts. This Government are investing £39 billion in the delivery of social and affordable homes because we recognise the issues that the hon. Gentleman sets out. The fundamental starting point for any good life is access to a good-quality, safe and secure home, and that is something we are committed to delivering.

Employment Support: Young People

6. **Danny Beales** (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support young people into employment. [901449]

14. **Liz Twist** (Blaydon and Consett) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support young people into employment. [901458]

18. **Maureen Burke** (Glasgow North East) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support young people into employment. [901462]

21. **Luke Murphy** (Basingstoke) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support young people into employment. [901466]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Pat McFadden): We have announced an additional £2.5 billion, as part of the youth guarantee, to create up to 500,000 opportunities to earn and learn over the next few years, and we have begun to roll this out across Great Britain. The gateway to the youth guarantee is available in jobcentres. We are expanding youth hubs, we have launched the £3,000 youth jobs grant, and we are rolling out the jobs guarantee for young people who are long-term unemployed. I recently met the first beneficiaries of the jobs guarantee at Boots headquarters in Nottingham and saw the huge difference that having a job made to the young people taking part.

Danny Beales: I thank the Minister for Employment for joining me to mark the opening of the Uxbridge job hub a few weeks ago, and I am sure he will join me in thanking the college, the jobcentre, the chamber of commerce and the many others who made it a reality.

One group who still experience the biggest employment gap are young people with special educational needs. What steps are the Government taking to ensure that the job hubs, and the youth guarantee offer more broadly, are inclusive of young people with SEND and that they also see the benefits?

Pat McFadden: I thank my hon. Friend for the campaigning that he has done on this issue, and the Minister for Employment enjoyed cutting the ribbon at the Future Start youth hub a few weeks ago. My hon. Friend is absolutely right in what he says. We need to end the culture of “signed off and written off”, and we want all young people, including those with special educational needs, to benefit from the youth guarantee. That is why youth hubs work closely with our work coaches and disability employment advisers, as well as local partners. The idea is that whatever condition people have, we try to give them the opportunities that are available and help them to live the fullest life.

Liz Twist: Just last week, I had the privilege of visiting Derwentside college in my constituency to see the amazing work it does in linking to employers in a range of sectors across the region, ensuring that every qualification offered can lead to real employment opportunities across Durham and the region. From care to construction, there are real opportunities to tackle the issues for young people currently not in education, employment or training. Will the Secretary of State join me in congratulating the college on the work it does, and will he join me on a visit to see that incredible work in practice?

Pat McFadden: I am very happy to echo my hon. Friend’s congratulations to Derwentside college on all the work it is doing. With regard to a visit, I will do the

best I can. I know that she is a passionate advocate for the college, and if I get an opportunity to visit, I most certainly will.

Maureen Burke: The Prime Minister hit the nail on the head when he said that too many young people have been failed by a schools system that focused too much “on the university route, and not enough on technical education.”

It is not surprising that the number of young people on benefits has grown so significantly when the education system has failed to equip them with the skills they need for today’s jobs market. When I speak to unemployed young people in my constituency, they tell me that they are desperate to find work not just for the pay, but for a sense of purpose and the independence to shape their own future. The choice before us is clear: invest in young people’s success or create a lifetime of dependency, carrying a huge price for the taxpayer. Does the Secretary of State agree with me that we need to invest in young people’s success rather than leave them to languish on benefits?

Pat McFadden: Yes, I do agree with my hon. Friend. She is absolutely right to say that we need to invest in opportunity and success, and she has spoken admirably about her own life experiences in this House. As I have said, we are putting forward an additional £2.5 billion of investment in the youth guarantee and the growth and skills levy. We have recently announced that we are expanding the jobs guarantee to help eligible young people receiving health-related benefits. They should not be signed off and written off. Another point raised in her question is that too often in these debates, young people are attacked in a negative narrative in which they are described as “snowflakes” and “shirkers”. She is right to say that, given the chance, young people want to work, want to have a full life and do not want to spend it on benefits.

Luke Murphy: Youth hubs such as that based in Inclusion Education in Basingstoke provide fantastic opportunities for young people, including those with special educational needs and disabilities, to learn and to work. Could the Secretary of State say a bit more about how youth hubs are helping to deliver the youth guarantee so that young people can realise their potential? Having heard that the Minister for Employment opened the youth hub in Uxbridge, may I ask whether the Secretary of State or the Minister might consider a visit to Basingstoke youth hub to discuss young people’s challenges and opportunities?

Pat McFadden: When I get back from Derwentside, I will see whether a visit to Basingstoke is popular. Youth hubs are a crucial part of the youth guarantee. They bring together employment and skills, with wider support that often involves housing and health advice. They are an important feature of the Dutch system, where the NEET rate is one third of ours. We are expanding the network to over 360 locations across Great Britain, and the whole idea is to get the help that a jobcentre can provide out of the jobcentre and into the community. There are also other important parts of the youth guarantee, such as hiring bonuses, an extra 300,000 work experience places and a jobs guarantee for the long-term young unemployed.

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): I recently visited Portugal to observe a NATO exercise using maritime uncrewed systems, and the young man who drove our safety boat had done his apprenticeship at SeaRegs in Plymouth. However, it came to light over the recess that Skills England is consulting to axe the small commercial vessel crewmember level 3 apprenticeship. This 18-year-old did that apprenticeship for the Plymouth Cattewater harbour authority, but he would not have been able to qualify if it had been scrapped. The small enrolment numbers for this course reflect the specialist nature of the industry, not a lack of value. The apprenticeship gives young people in coastal communities such as mine a direct route into skilled jobs that support our national defence. So will the Secretary of State step in and stop this apprenticeship, and others like it that are also being consulted on, being scrapped?

Pat McFadden: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her question. Skills England plays an important role in accrediting approved apprenticeships, looking at demand and quality, and I am sure it has heard the representations she has made. The overall direction of travel that we have given to Skills England is intended to ensure that we have more youth apprenticeship starts in future, because that is where the need is greatest and where the public expect us to be investing the growth and skills levy to create the most opportunity that can change the most lives.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): Last week I visited several successful marine businesses at Noss on Dart. They are struggling to find the crew needed for work boats that support the wider maritime sector. Following on from the question by my neighbour, the hon. Member for South West Devon (Rebecca Smith), with the funding for commercial vessel apprenticeships now threatened, the route for young people to enter this sector and find well-paid, year-round permanent employment in coastal communities will potentially be closed off. Will the Secretary of State commit to continue that funding? These specialised apprenticeships may not have the same take-up as nationwide apprenticeships, but they are vital to economic growth in coastal communities such as South Devon.

Pat McFadden: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her question. As I said to the hon. Member for South West Devon (Rebecca Smith) a moment ago, Skills England will always look at the range of courses available and will always consider accreditation. I am sure it will have heard the representations that she has made.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): The Secretary of State talks about jobs hubs. May I gently say to him that the best jobs hub of all is a business that is expanding and that the best youth hub of all is a business taking on apprentices? He mentions a wide range of schemes to try to get young people back into work. In The Wrekin, youth unemployment has risen by 27.8% in the last 12 months alone. A lot of the schemes are in urban areas. What is he going to do for my young constituents who live in rural and semi-rural counties such as Shropshire?

Pat McFadden: The right hon. Gentleman is right to emphasise the importance of jobs. That is why he will be pleased to know that there are 243,000 more people

in work than at this time last year. He will also be pleased to know that the employment rate in the UK is higher today than in all but one of the 14 years when his party was in power. He will be pleased a third time to know that economic inactivity is down by 367,000 since the last election.

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): If we want to support young people into employment, we must address the barriers they face long before they enter the workplace. One is child poverty, which is why the Plaid Cymru Government will pilot the Cynnal payment. Will the Secretary of State confirm that the £10 a week payment for children in households receiving universal credit will be disregarded for benefit purposes?

Pat McFadden: We made a major change on this front last year, when we abolished the two-child limit. That, together with other elements in the child poverty strategy, is estimated to bring down child poverty by about half a million over the course of this Parliament. That is an important step towards children being able to live the fullest life possible. Children who are poor can also suffer from worse education results and worse mental health later in life, so this is not just an anti-poverty measure; it is a pro-opportunity measure too.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Every DWP Question Time, Labour Members dutifully line up to give the welfare Secretary a chance to make it look like he is doing something about the youth unemployment crisis—a crisis of their own making. Their jobs tax and their unemployment Act have killed 300,000 jobs, hitting young people hardest. We have had enough talk about hubs and schemes. Young people tell me they want real jobs. That is why we will halve national insurance for 21 to 24-year-olds, so it is cheaper for businesses to hire them. Under the Conservatives, there will be thousands more jobs for young people. Will the Secretary of State get the Chancellor to use his Budget to do the same?

Pat McFadden: I remind the hon. Lady that, under her Government, the number of young people not in employment, education or training went up by a quarter of a million in the two years before the last election. As I said to the right hon. Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard), there are now 243,000 more people in work than at this time last year. The employment rate in the UK today is higher than in every year but one of the Conservatives' 14 years in power. The UK had the fastest growing economy in the G7 in the first half of this year. I will tell the hon. Lady what could threaten that: a bunch of unfunded tax cuts from the Opposition. We know where that ends up—we saw the movie a few years ago—so I advise her not to repeat it.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): The Government recently announced funding for apprenticeships through areas where there are elected mayors. However, almost half of England does not have an elected mayor. Will the Secretary of State acknowledge that young people in

communities such as Torbay, and across Devon and Cornwall, will feel that the Government have turned their backs on them?

Pat McFadden: The hon. Member is right to say that the devolution map in England is uneven. I urge him to wait for the White Paper later this year, when we will have more to say about that. However, we believe that locally delivered services in employment support can break down the departmental barriers that have too often dogged getting the right help to people at the right time. People are human beings, not departmental clients, and it is time we treated them as such. Delivering more services locally can help us do that.

Milburn Report

7. **Alex McIntyre** (Gloucester) (Lab): What recent progress Alan Milburn has made on producing the final "Young People and Work" report. [901450]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Pat McFadden): Alan Milburn delivered his interim report a few months ago and will deliver his final report in a few weeks' time. I thank Alan Milburn for his tremendous work highlighting the issue of youth inactivity. I look forward to his final report.

Alex McIntyre: Ahead of Alan Milburn's report, in Gloucester there are over 2,500 young people not in employment, education or training. I have spoken with many of them across the last two years who want an opportunity but have been let down by the system. Something needs to change. At the end of November, I am hosting the Gloucestershire Futures summit with Gloucestershire county council. We have invited schools and colleges, local employers, healthcare providers, local government and the third sector in an effort to get everyone in the room to discuss how we can solve the problem together. I know the Secretary of State has a long list of constituencies to visit after today's questions, but he also shares my determination to give every young person the opportunity to fulfil their potential, so will he or one of his team join us for the summit at the end of November?

Pat McFadden: I will add the summit to the list of places to go. I would dearly love to visit my hon. Friend's constituency, and if I cannot, I will ensure that one of my colleagues does. On the point of substance that he raises, the problem of youth inactivity in the country has built up over many years, and not enough has been done about it in the past. We now have the youth guarantee, which is investing in the issue. We know that there is more that we must do, which is why we are looking forward to the final report from Alan Milburn in a few weeks' time.

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): When it comes to youth unemployment, it sounds like the Secretary of State has his head very firmly in the sand. Did he not hear Member after Member from across this House stand up and quote how the number of young people who are not in education, employment or training has gone up under this Government? The Secretary of State quotes back to us the national figures for people in employment overall, but that is because the population

has gone up. What are the NEET figures? In Gosport, the number of young people not in education, employment or training has gone up by 23% under this Government. That is all because of the number of taxes that are being put on the businesses there to employ them, particularly the small businesses that provide the Saturday jobs and apprenticeships: hair and beauty, adult social care and care. What will Alan Milburn's report say, and what is the Secretary of State actually going to do about it?

Pat McFadden: The truth is that it has been a problem for a long time. I repeat what I said to the shadow Secretary of State: under the Government that the hon. Lady supported, the number of NEETs went up by a quarter of a million between 2021 and 2024. She asks me what we will do, and in addition to the programmes I have announced, we recently announced a partnership with the British Retail Consortium to hire 100,000 young people not in education, employment or training over the next few years. The hon. Lady will be pleased to know that the latest Recruitment and Employment Confederation survey showed the strongest hiring sentiment in four years.

Mr Speaker: We welcome the new shadow Minister, Andrew Snowden.

Mr Andrew Snowden (Fylde) (Con): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker.

Labour has been talking up the Milburn report for months, and the Treasury is so pleased with the report that it has delayed it until after the Budget, which means it is not going to be good news for taxpayers or the bond market. While the Government dither and delay, we have published our plan for tough love on youth unemployment: support from day one to get back into work, and after six months, those who can work but won't work will have their benefits cut. I am sure the Chancellor of the Exchequer would welcome our cost-cutting plan in the Budget, so can the Secretary of State explain why the Treasury does not want his plan in the Budget?

Pat McFadden: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the Chancellor's speech at our party conference a couple of weeks ago, in which he was quite clear that we owe young people not just an income, but a future too. That is why the Government are behind the agenda I am setting out. I look forward to reading Alan Milburn's final report in a few weeks' time, and I remind the shadow Minister and everyone on the Opposition Benches that Alan Milburn was clear in his interim report that the problems we are talking about are deep-seated, long-term and have existed in this country for a great many years.

Beauty Industry Employment and Training: Young People

8. **Dan Aldridge** (Weston-super-Mare) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking with the beauty industry to help provide accessible routes into employment and training for young people. [901451]

The Minister for Employment (Andrew Western): The Government are determined to help more young people to build careers in sectors such as hair and beauty by

investing an additional £2.5 billion through the youth guarantee and the growth and skills levy. Whether a young person chooses hair and beauty or another sector, we want them to have the skills, training and support they need to succeed, including through the funding of apprenticeship training costs for eligible under-25s who have started their apprenticeships since August this year.

Dan Aldridge: This week is British Beauty Week, a great opportunity to celebrate the fantastic and fast-growing beauty and wellness businesses that we have in this country, especially in towns such as Weston-super-Mare, where businesses like Sacred Willow, founded by Kerry and Simon Lamerton, and Luceo Lounge, founded by Lisa de-Laune, keep our high streets alive and our economies going, and generally make people feel much better about themselves. Will the Minister give some more information about the support his Department is providing, especially for young people through the youth guarantee, to ensure that small businesses in areas like mine benefit as much as possible?

Andrew Western: I welcome my hon. Friend's support for British Beauty Week and join him in celebrating the local beauty and wellness businesses that are helping to drive growth and create opportunities for young people, particularly the two he has highlighted in his constituency. I encourage his local businesses to look at the incentives offered by not just the jobs component of the youth guarantee, but the youth jobs grant and the £2,000 payment to small and medium-sized enterprises that hire a young apprentice, all of which can support them in giving opportunities to young people in Weston-super-Mare and beyond.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): There has been a 30% reduction in the number of apprenticeships in the hair and beauty sector over the past five years, one reason being that the number of people employed has plummeted, with many people being forced into false self-employment due to increased costs. In addition, the number of providers working in the sector is at a critical level. My constituent Mike, who owns Mike Taylor Education with his wife Emily, told me of a young man travelling from Kent to Dorset every week to follow his level 2 barbering course, because there were no courses anywhere else. Will the Minister meet me and sector representatives to talk about how we could reverse this decline?

Andrew Western: Clearly, I would be very happy to meet the hon. Lady. That sort of distance is unfortunate, and I am sorry if that is the experience of her constituent or, indeed, their apprentice. As I say, I am very happy to meet her to discuss it further.

Pension Scheme Surpluses

9. **Clive Jones** (Wokingham) (LD): What assessment he has made of the potential merits of requiring pension scheme surpluses in defined-benefit schemes to be used to improve pensions for members before surplus funds can be released to sponsoring employers. [901452]

The Minister for Pensions (Torsten Bell): The Government's reforms provide greater flexibility for well-funded defined-benefit pension schemes to share

surplus with employers and to benefit members. Scheme trustees, who must act in the interests of scheme beneficiaries, are best placed to determine the appropriate use of any surplus for their individual scheme. Trustees will agree how members can benefit, working with sponsoring employers.

Clive Jones: Is it not the case that nothing in law stops the Government requiring pre-1997 pensions to be restored before surplus goes back to employers, and that the only reason it is not happening is that the Minister has decided that it should not?

Torsten Bell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question; he and I have met and discussed this issue on many occasions. Around three quarters of schemes already provide some pre-1997 indexation, but the hon. Gentleman is right to point out the strength of feeling on this. I have met with many MPs and scheme members, including those in south Wales who have been affected by lack of pre-1997 indexation on their defined benefit schemes. It is separate from the changes that we have already introduced for the Pension Protection Fund's indexation.

Trustees need to be in the driving seat. Employers will have no direct access to a scheme's surplus. The flexibilities we have put in place through the Pension Schemes Act 2026 and the guidance being provided by the Pensions Regulator are already changing the nature of the discussion between trustees and employers, and will lead to a step change in this area.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mr Peter Bedford (Mid Leicestershire) (Con): It did not sound as though the Minister could commit to improving outcomes for pensioners. That is no surprise given this Government's record: they cut the winter fuel payments, undermined incentives to save into pensions through the salary sacrifice scheme, and dragged pensions into the scope of inheritance tax. The Prime Minister's announcement at the Labour party conference created yet more uncertainty for those in or approaching retirement. Will the Minister give a commitment to the House that there will be no further policies undermining pensioners' prospects and damaging their retirement?

Torsten Bell: Although I listened closely to much of the Conservative party's conference—not quite all of it, but lots of it—I am still not clear what its policy is on the triple lock or on many other things in the pensions space. I have been paying a lot of attention, and what I have learned is that the shadow Foreign Secretary calls the triple lock a Ponzi scheme and the previous shadow Chancellor calls it completely unsustainable.

The shadow Secretary of State knows she has a ridiculous position on reform of the state pension. This Government will put the state pension on a sustainable basis and address the other big challenge of ensuring an adequate private pension system. That is what the Pensions Commission will do.

Youth Hubs

10. **Euan Stainbank** (Falkirk) (Lab): What recent progress he has made on the expansion of youth hubs. [901453]

19. **Andrew Ranger** (Wrexham) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help support the establishment of youth hubs. [901463]

The Minister for Employment (Andrew Western): We are making strong progress expanding youth hubs across Great Britain, with delivery ahead of schedule, bringing the total number of youth hubs to 160. These hubs provide a single, community-based front door to joined-up employment, skills and wider support for young people. We continue to work closely with local authorities and partners to maintain momentum and support further expansion.

Euan Stainbank: In August, Falkirk became one of the first towns in Scotland to have a youth hub. Opened at the Falkirk campus of Forth Valley college—our primary local further education institute—it is visible evidence of our Labour Government's investment in young people's futures. Will the Minister join me on a visit to the youth hub and Forth Valley college, and will the Department re-engage with the Falkirk-based local training provider Powering Futures, whose model could deliver a preventive solution to youth unemployment but currently falls between the cracks of reserved and devolved competency?

Andrew Western: I thank my hon. Friend for his invitation and for highlighting the work of the Falkirk youth hub and its partners. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has met with Powering Futures and is aware of the issues that he raises. My hon. Friend has been relentless in seeking support for this organisation, and I hope that the Scottish Government will think again and consider supporting the good work of Powering Futures with funding.

Andrew Ranger: For many of our young people, the hardest step towards obtaining work is the first one: walking into a jobcentre or youth hub and asking for support. Does the Minister agree that part of the approach of youth hubs, including the new hub in Wrexham, must be to reach those young people where they are, rather than waiting for them to come through the door?

Andrew Western: My hon. Friend is right. The whole purpose of youth hubs is to take support out of traditional settings and into communities, meeting young people where they are rather than expecting them to come to us. Through partnerships with local authorities, charities, colleges and other organisations, youth hubs such as the upcoming Wrexham youth hub will help us reach young people in their local communities who might otherwise miss out on support. We will continue to encourage all youth hubs to undertake proactive outreach and work with local partners to reach young people. I have seen excellent examples of that in the hubs I have visited thus far.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): Over the last two years, the Government have increased the cost of employing young people with higher national insurance charges on employers and imposed the 350 pages of additional regulation contained in their "unemployment rights Act". Does the Minister agree that the best way of reducing youth unemployment is to cut the cost of employing young people rather than an endless array of hubs, grants, schemes and guarantees?

Andrew Western: I would agree with the hon. Gentleman, but then we would both be wrong. I attended a recent parliamentary event hosted by the Resolution Foundation, chaired by the former Tory Minister Lord Willetts, and the research it had undertaken was clear that cutting taxes was not as effective in delivering opportunities to get young people into work—[*Interruption.*] It was very clear that the targeting of employment support was much more effective than the approach the hon. Gentleman is suggesting. The shadow Secretary of State was there; she saw that. She may not have agreed with it—maybe that was because she did not stay until the end of the event—but none the less it was very clear that the best way to support young people into work is through employment support schemes, youth hubs and the routes that we are taking.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Every local area should have a youth hub—the benefits are so very clear. The Minister is promising an expansion of youth hubs, so when can we see one in Bath?

Andrew Western: I would be happy to write to the hon. Lady to confirm specific timings in individual localities. We are ahead of projected delivery at the moment, having already hit more than 160 youth hubs, but we have a target of reaching more than 300 in the coming months and years. I will set out to her in writing plans for the youth hub that will serve her local area.

Topical Questions

T1. [901469] **Gregory Stafford** (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Pat McFadden): Since our last oral questions session, we have announced an agreement with the British Retail Consortium to hire 100,000 young people not in education, employment or training over the next few years; we have announced an extension of disability bus pass usage to cover peak hours; we have rolled out more of the youth guarantee; and, as has been referred to, we have announced our intention to adjust the triple lock, ensuring rising and sustainable pensions for the future and also releasing funds for a new national care service, which is a matter of huge importance to pensioners and their families.

Gregory Stafford: This morning, *The Times* has reported that over two thirds of those on sickness benefits are awaiting their reassessment and remain unchecked, with average waits being over two years. What is the Secretary of State's Department doing to meet its moral duty to help those who can work back into employment and its economic duty to save the taxpayer billions of pounds, with only those who genuinely need help receiving it?

Pat McFadden: I am glad that the hon. Member has given me the opportunity to point out what we inherited—exactly what was set out in *The Times* this morning—which was a backlog of 2 million people awaiting reassessment. As he knows, the Tories left a system with almost no face-to-face assessments. Since then, we announced at the Budget last year a plan to tackle the backlog in work capability assessments and reassessments. The Office for Budget Responsibility has costed that activity at saving over—

Mr Speaker: Order. Secretary of State, please, I am trying to get your Back Benchers in. Obviously, you do not want to get the questions in, even if I do.

T2. [901471] **Alex Baker** (Aldershot) (Lab): Parents of neurodivergent young people in my community readily tell me about the barriers their children face in accessing work opportunities. I am delighted that a youth hub is opening in Aldershot and Farnborough this year, but how will the Government ensure that every young person in my community receives all the support they need as that hub opens?

The Minister for Employment (Andrew Western): I welcome the plans for a youth hub in my hon. Friend's constituency and thank her for the work she has done on campaigning for it. The core blueprint for youth hubs ensures that every hub provides access to employment support alongside mental health, housing skills and employer engagement, and aims to support all young people in a locality to address their barriers to work on an individual basis, including those with neurodivergent conditions.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): The working-age welfare bill is set to reach £170 billion by the end of this Parliament, up £45 billion on the welfare party's watch. All around the country, the residents of "Benefits Street" are doing better under Labour. The welfare Secretary is always across his brief, so can he tell me the benefits bill for his constituency?

Pat McFadden: The welfare budget rose twice as fast during the hon. Lady's party's last Parliament in power as it is during this Parliament. We are reforming the system through changes to universal credit, more personalised employment support and the youth guarantee that we have referred to a number of times during this session.

Helen Whately: I am surprised that the right hon. Gentleman did not know the answer, but I can help him. It is £400 million a year. That is why he is dragging his heels on welfare reform. The number of personal independence payment claimants in his constituency exceeds his majority, and the same can be said for 203 of his fellow Labour MPs. It is no wonder all his colleagues ask him who they can tax in order to spend more on benefits. Will this month's Budget just be more of the same—hiking taxes on working families to pay for "Benefits Street"?

Pat McFadden: I remind the hon. Lady that the system she criticises is the one designed, created and legislated for by her Government and her party. We are changing the system through the changes in universal credit announced in April this year, through more personalised support for the people with long-term health conditions who were signed off and written off by her party, and through more intervention on youth opportunity for the young people who were neglected while the NEET numbers went through the roof on their watch.

T3. [901472] **Paul Davies** (Colne Valley) (Lab): Earlier this year, I met Benenden Health, a healthcare provider that offers support to women going through the menopause. Its research shows that 17% of women in Yorkshire who have experienced menopause symptoms

have reduced their working hours, and that 7% have left their jobs due to these symptoms and a lack of support. In the light of this, will the Minister commit to assessing whether the menopause aspects of employer action plans are improving retention and reducing workforce exits among women experiencing menopause?

Andrew Western: We recognise the significant impact that menopause symptoms can have on retaining women in the workforce. That is why we launched evidence-informed action plans to help employers provide effective menopause support. We have published guidance to help employers monitor their progress, and we are committed to evaluating the impact of action plans, including through a post-implementation review.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): Whether it is processing access to work claims or reassessing sickness benefits, the Department for Work and Pensions has a culture of dither and delay when processing such matters. Can the Secretary of State advise us when the Department will get a grip on this?

The Minister for Social Security and Disability (Sir Stephen Timms): We are getting a grip. The hon. Gentleman will be pleased to know that we are recruiting 500 extra staff to process access to work applications. Those staff are being recruited and trained at the moment and as a result of that, we will eliminate the access to work backlog that we inherited from the previous Government by September next year.

T5. [901474] **Joe Powell** (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): I am delighted that North Kensington will soon be opening a youth hub to support young people back into work. One challenge that people tell me we have locally is hidden NEETs—those who might be enrolled in college and not attending, or not claiming universal credit—so can the Minister explain what expectation there will be for the youth hubs to reach this hard-to-reach cohort of young people?

Andrew Western: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the challenge of hidden NEETs. Youth hubs are open to all young people aged 16 to 24, regardless of benefit status, and we expect them to work closely with local authorities, schools, colleges and community organisations to identify and engage young people who may be missing out on support. There is a particular challenge with hidden NEETs, and I expect that we will be able to bear down on that problem through such place-based intelligence sharing.

T4. [901473] **Lisa Smart** (Hazel Grove) (LD): In answer to the earlier question from my hon. Friend the Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron), the Minister confirmed that his ongoing review into parental leave and pay explicitly includes self-employed people. He will be aware of the gap whereby self-employed adopters are not eligible for the support for which birth parents and employed adopters are eligible. Is his review looking at closing that gap, so that potential future adopters are not prevented from growing their families and giving some of our most vulnerable young people the families they deserve?

Sir Stephen Timms: I am happy to check that point with the team doing the work, and will drop the hon. Lady a line to confirm.

T8. [901478] **Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): The Government's recent investment in Connect to Work and the youth hub in Newport is welcome. Will the Minister assure my constituent, who raised with me the struggle her son, who is neurodiverse, has had in finding support into work, that these initiatives will be long-term, meaningful commitments?

Andrew Western: I can give my hon. Friend that reassurance. The Government are investing an additional £2.5 billion in the youth guarantee, which includes funding for youth hubs and the growth and skills levy by 2029, supporting almost 1 million young people and creating up to 500,000 opportunities to earn and learn. Connect to Work, which will support around 300,000 people, is intended to run until March 2030, with multi-year grant agreements to support long-term local planning and delivery.

T6. [901475] **Aphra Brandreth** (Chester South and Eddisbury) (Con): I recently met Lesley and her adult daughter Alice, who has profound disabilities and requires two carers around the clock. Lesley loves caring for her daughter, but she is finding it increasingly difficult to recruit skilled carers, leaving her filling exhausting gaps and unable to earn a living. What is the Minister doing to ensure that families like Lesley's receive the support that they desperately need?

Sir Stephen Timms: We owe an enormous debt to carers right across the country who carry the kind of burden that the hon. Lady describes. We are doing some important work at the moment on carer's allowance, which is the benefit that provides support in these circumstances, and have consulted on some ideas for change. We particularly want to make it easier for people to combine work and caring. That may well help in the situation the hon. Lady describes.

Tom Rutland (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Lab): Young workers are facing real challenges in their living standards, particularly because their housing costs dwarf those faced by the generations that came before them. That is leading many to reduce the contributions they make to their workplace pensions, or even to forgo making them entirely, at the risk of having inadequate pensions when they retire. Will the Pensions Commission make recommendations on how to address those challenges?

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury (Torsten Bell): My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise the challenges facing younger workers. They face exactly the same cost of living challenges as the rest of society, but often with added pressure when it comes to housing. The good news is that between 2012 and 2025, participation among employees aged 22 to 25 who are eligible for automatic enrolment increased from 28% to 85%. He is completely right that there is much more to do, and I can confirm that the Pensions Commission is exploring exactly these long-term questions.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): My constituents are facing extremely large delays in getting a response from the DWP. One of my constituents has now been waiting for two months for a response with regard to his

dispute with the Child Maintenance Service, despite receiving a final letter before action. Another constituent has been waiting for four months for a response to his PIP review claim. Why are we seeing such long delays, what is the Minister doing to resolve them, and why have my constituents not had a response in months?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Lilian Greenwood): We know that increased volumes and more complex cases have led to increased response times, and we are working hard to bring those down by deploying additional resources, strengthening oversight and improving case management. I agree that this is not acceptable. We are working to improve the situation.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Highgate) (Lab): It took the DWP hotline 29 working days to respond to me about a constituent's PIP arrears, and 39 working days to reply to a email about a reduction in state pension for one of my constituents. Can the Minister help me with this, please?

Lilian Greenwood: As I have said, we recognise that response times are not good enough, and I am putting extra resources in to improve them. Of course, if my hon. Friend wants to raise particular cases with me, I will look into them and ensure that she gets a speedy outcome.

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): In Scotland, benefit crime has effectively been decriminalised, and the Scottish Conservatives have raised the case of people being coached on how to fiddle the system. When I have asked the DWP about it, the reply has basically been, "Nothing to do with us, guv." Is there not a moral imperative to do something about that issue?

Sir Stephen Timms: Yes, there is. We are looking at some of the developments in social media and at the kinds of coaching, including where people are being charged for advice that they could obtain for free and without difficulty. We are looking at all of that at the moment.

Al Carns (Birmingham Selly Oak) (Lab): Birmingham has been piloting a jobs guarantee scheme since April. An employment roundtable that I ran in Selly Oak saw lots of young people who lack confidence in their communication skills to enable them get back into work after being on universal credit for 18 months. Will the Secretary of State commit to publishing how many pilot participants are still in work once the six months is over?

Pat McFadden: I am grateful to my hon. Friend; I enjoyed the visit to his constituency a few weeks ago to support young disabled people. He is right in what he says about long-term youth unemployment. That is why we have the jobs guarantee, and we will publish a full evaluation of its effects.

Lara Bird (Arbroath and Broughty Ferry) (SNP): It is always very obvious when a Labour Government are in place, because the first thing a Labour Prime Minister will do is take a swing at pensioners—so it is not at all surprising that the Prime Minister is already abandoning his promises to WASPI women. How can pensioners, WASPI women and the public in general trust the DWP when the Prime Minister seems to find it so easy to say yes and make grand promises, when there are no consequences and those promises seem to have absolutely no meaning in practice?

Torsten Bell: This Government promised in our 2024 manifesto to ensure that the state pension in Scotland, England and Wales would rise every single year, and that is exactly what this Government are getting on with doing.

Sarah Smith (Hyndburn) (Lab): I established the "Get Hyndburn Working" group, and together we are looking at how we can bring our youth hub into a town centre location and also bring health, training and education services all under one roof. Will the Minister meet me to discuss how the Government can support us to make that a reality?

Pat McFadden: We should all be behind "Get Hyndburn Working". I am certainly behind it, and I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend.

International Update

3.38 pm

The Prime Minister (Andy Burnham): With permission, I wish to make a statement on the United Nations General Assembly and related international events that have occurred since the House last met.

Before I do so, let me first welcome my hon. Friend the new Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Sagal Abdi-Wali) to her place. What a journey, from child refugee to Parliament, and what a country—that this story of hope could happen here. I know my hon. Friend will enhance this House in so many ways, and I look forward to working with her.

I took a clear message to the United Nations: after a decade of turbulence, Britain is back and can be relied upon as a consistent and stable partner in an uncertain world, always upholding the shared values set out in the UN charter, rejecting aggression wherever we see it, and always steadfast in our support for Ukraine, as I assured President Zelensky at our meeting in New York.

In the three weeks since that meeting, Russian strikes have intensified even further, with more attacks on civilians: on apartment blocks housing innocent families; on buses carrying innocent children. When I spoke to President Zelensky on Saturday, he described the step change from Russia, including daylight attacks intended to break the will of Ukraine and ours. I can tell you, Mr Speaker, that that will never happen. In recent days, we have announced new funding to help Ukraine get through its fifth winter under Russian bombardment and a new sanctions package so that over 90% of Russia's oil-producing capacity is now covered by UK sanctions.

The quickest way to get diesel back on to world markets without rewarding the aggressor is an energy ceasefire, with both sides stopping their attacks. I raised this with President Trump in New York. It is what Ukraine wants to see, so I welcome President Trump's announcement yesterday of a reciprocal energy ceasefire. President Zelensky has assured me that Ukraine would immediately implement it when a start date is confirmed, and I will be discussing this further with him in the coming days.

NATO is a defensive alliance. We do not seek confrontation, but our resolve to defend our allies and ourselves is absolute, and I was clear in all of my meetings, including with the NATO Secretary-General in Oxfordshire, that we will meet our NATO commitments in full.

We know that Russia is conducting a campaign of hybrid attacks and sabotage across Europe. In Berlin last week, Chancellor Merz and I agreed a new partnership to tackle these hybrid threats. We must be clear-eyed about attempts to destabilise our democracies. It is why, in my speech to the UN General Assembly, I confirmed our commitment to establish a new centre for information defence, as recommended by the Foreign Affairs Select Committee. More broadly, this is a moment to deepen collaboration with our partners, which is why in Berlin I indicated Britain's openness to Germany joining the global combat air programme alongside Italy and Japan.

In my meeting with President Trump, we discussed the situation in the middle east. I confirmed Britain's decision to send air defence and a Voyager aircraft to

Saudi Arabia to provide air-to-air refuelling support. I can confirm today that it has already completed 14 operational missions. This support is needed to protect civilians. I condemn the appalling attacks on the King Khalid International airport. We will continue to stand with Saudi Arabia against the Houthis.

Since UNGA, we have been in close contact with the US about protective security at our shared bases. I thank our police and military personnel for their swift response to the incidents at RAF Fairford and RAF Molesworth. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will update the House on the incident at RAF Fairford, but I can confirm our assessment that it is highly likely to have been co-ordinated in Iran, almost certainly directed by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. We will not tolerate these threats on our soil. We will crack down on Iran's use of criminal networks, using our full range of powers to target them and their funding streams, and we will bring further sanctions to restrict the capacity of Iran and the IRGC to do us harm.

In my meeting with the President, I also raised the Falkland Islands and the clear and declared will of the islanders to remain British. I emphasised that point in my speech to the General Assembly and that we will also always do whatever it takes to uphold their will.

In New York, I also had a positive meeting with the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, about the forthcoming UK-EU summit. I can confirm to the House today that it will take place in Brussels on 20 November. This summit presents an opportunity to make progress on two crucial issues: boosting UK growth and controlling illegal immigration. On the table is a trade deal on food and drink products, a deal on emissions trading, progress towards linking our energy systems, a new youth experience scheme, and deeper co-operation on immigration.

This summit presents an opportunity to make progress on two crucial issues: boosting UK growth and controlling illegal immigration. On the table is a trade deal on food and drink products, a deal on emissions trading, progress towards linking our energy systems, a new youth experience scheme and deeper co-operation on immigration. The summit will also be an opportunity to raise our concerns about "Made in Europe", and it is clear to me that there is an opportunity to make progress in all of these areas. Together, these deals will add the equivalent of over £10 billion per year to the UK economy by 2040, with the potential to add significantly more. We should not turn our backs on this opportunity, and I hope Members from all sides of this House will get behind the Government's efforts to land a positive outcome. It is a chance to cut costs and bureaucracy for sectors like farming.

At present, entire truckloads of plants or fresh produce can be destroyed because of a single missing stamp or a minor paperwork delay. Fresh meat and fish spoil while waiting in trucks, and tonnes of exports have to be written off. Our largest food export, Scottish salmon, faces a 100% rate of document checks at the border, costing us around £100 million in lost exports. British burgers and other fresh meat products cannot be sold in the EU. Seed potatoes from Scotland and shellfish from Wales are banned. This is having a real impact on businesses, and the agreement on the table could reverse some of that damage. For farmers and food producers, it would lift a burden that can reach £1,400 on a single

shipment. For our small businesses, it would mean no more export health certificates, which can cost up to £200 each time. For households, it would ease the pressure on prices in the supermarket. It could help lower energy costs for households and businesses alike.

In Northern Ireland, the proposed energy deal could cut wholesale energy costs by 20%. On immigration, we could link up our law enforcement efforts once again, sharing more data and criminal records of foreign nationals, as well as ensuring faster electronic evidence from the phones of those behind the gangs. It is in Britain's interests to secure a deal along these lines, and I will work hard over the next five weeks to achieve that. I believe that our chances of doing so will be enhanced by being open to a discussion about our relationship with the EU in the longer term. If we are serious about promoting growth, controlling immigration, upholding our values and security, it is a conversation that we must have. Sticking with the status quo is not good enough for Britain. Worse, it would be a major dereliction of duty to turn away. We need to take a calm, clear-eyed, rational look at the world as it is today, to consider what is best for our country.

Our immediate priority is securing a successful outcome at the summit, and I believe we should then set up a serious dialogue about the different options for our relationship in the long term. At every stage, the British public will be the boss, and I am clear that public opinion currently supports a pragmatic approach, like the one I am suggesting, but if we go into this further phase, we will proceed with care and complete transparency. This is the leadership we need to draw a line under a decade of drift and division, and to take the country forward.

Beyond Europe, a confident Britain is ready to play our part on the global stage as we take up the presidency of the G20 in 2027. I confirmed in New York that we will place artificial intelligence centre stage in our presidency, to capture the incredible opportunities it presents while guarding against the risks. Leading voices like the president of Microsoft are saying Britain is the world leader on AI safety, so we are well placed to take on this role, and to work towards agreeing a single set of global principles and standards on AI, in our G20 presidency year.

The message to the world is clear: Britain is back. On so many fronts, we are playing our part and looking confidently to the future. We are leading again, so our country can hope again. I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the Leader of the Opposition.

3.49 pm

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (North West Essex) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for advance sight of his statement. Since we last met, Iran has sponsored an attempted terror attack on a British military base; President Trump has withdrawn support from President Zelensky; and Saudi Arabia has been bombarded with Houthi missiles and asked Britain to come to her aid. UK household energy bills are set to rise by nearly £300 in January, and diesel prices have hit £2 a litre for the first time ever. Against that backdrop, the Chancellor will deliver a Budget in two weeks.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies has said that there is a £35 billion black hole in the public finances. More borrowing or more taxes are on the way, because we know that the Prime Minister will not cut spending. This is at a time when families and businesses are already suffering under the weight of £70 billion in Labour's tax rises. So what has the Prime Minister chosen to focus on today? Brexit. His exact words earlier this year were that

"the last thing we should do right now is rerun those arguments",

yet here he is, unpicking the deal that this country signed with the EU, a decade after the referendum. He is not going to get a better deal. Not only are the EU tough negotiators, but he has already revealed his entire negotiating hand. He has just blurted out everything he wants in this statement. I will tell him now, as a former Trade Secretary, that that is not how you conduct negotiations. He has told them everything, and negotiations have not even started—unbelievable!

Over the weekend, on "The Rest is Politics" podcast, the Prime Minister implied that the referendum result was illegitimate because of Russian interference. Where has that come from? We all remember that in 2018, the head of MI5 said that there was no evidence that Russia had influenced the EU referendum result. Even this morning, the Prime Minister's own Foreign Minister could not say if the evidence existed. Will the Prime Minister confirm, here and now, whether he believes that the referendum result was legitimate? If he does not, will he publish the evidence that Russia swung the result of the 2016 referendum? From my perspective, this is just another example of him trying to distract the country, rather than solving the immediate challenges we face.

Just as some people thought that all Britain's problems would be solved by leaving the EU, some now think that all our problems will be solved by rejoining it. Neither of those are serious positions; they are lazy thinking from people who do not have solutions to the real problems that we face, such as on defence. The Prime Minister told us that he would set out a target date for spending 3% of GDP on defence at the spending review in the spring. That spending review has now been delayed until next autumn. Labour delayed procurement by a year to hold the strategic defence review, then the defence investment plan took another 18 months. The armed forces now have to wait at least another 12 months to find out what they are getting. The defence of the realm is the first duty of any Government, and kicking it into the long grass is a dereliction of duty.

I welcome the support that the Prime Minister has set out for our allies in Saudi Arabia and Ukraine, but they will require money, and serious questions on defence still need to be answered. The United States has withdrawn its bombers from RAF Fairford. Can the Prime Minister tell us why? What does that mean for the safety of our British aircraft and, more importantly, British personnel at that base?

The Prime Minister said in his statement that we will not tolerate threats from Iran on our soil, so were he and his Foreign Secretary aware of those threats before the Foreign Secretary met and shook hands with the Iranian Foreign Minister at the UN? Does the Prime Minister now think that the Foreign Secretary was wrong to do that?

[Mrs Kemi Badenoch]

On 18 July, we were told that the Prime Minister would grant licences for the Jackdaw gas field and Rosebank oilfield. We are still waiting for a decision nearly three months later, as a global energy crisis is looming. Can the Prime Minister now confirm exactly when he will approve those licences? Britain cannot afford to wait until the end of the decade for him to act—he is the Prime Minister for today. Rather than promising things on the never-never, here are some things that he could do right now: cut welfare, fund our defence, drill in the North sea, bring down people's taxes, get young people into work, build new prison places and put more police on our streets. He could do all those things today if he cut spending. That is what I would do. Instead, he is trying to reopen yesterday's arguments to avoid today's decisions. What this statement shows is the difference between Labour and the Conservatives. We have answers to today's problems; they are living in the past.

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Lady. She started on the right point, which is the situation in the middle east, and the extent to which it is affecting cost of living pressures here at home—the cost of filling up at the pump, and the costs that people are feeling more broadly. She is absolutely right to say that that is where our focus should be. It is where my focus was when I had all my meetings in New York, and it is why I have taken action to remove VAT from electricity bills this month. We are acting quickly on the cost of living, and we will continue to do that.

I was listening carefully to what the right hon. Lady said about the European Union. One could only conclude from what she said about unpicking the deal—the deal that is supposedly so good for Britain—that she will be defending the status quo. I am sure that I heard her say at her conference that increasing growth would be the operating principle of any Government that she leads, so how can she justify turning her back on a deal, which is potentially on the table now, to add billions to the UK economy? How can the Conservatives justify turning their backs on farmers and the food industry, who are finding it hard to export to Europe? I think they need to reflect on that. She says that I have revealed what I want to do, and that this is no way to negotiate—because the Tories were so good at negotiating deals with our partners, weren't they?

To address the right hon. Lady's point, I implied no such thing in my comments on "The Rest Is Politics" podcast. I think she should go back and look again. It is a matter of record that Russian actors sought to interfere in the 2019 general election, and we think it is inconceivable that this was the first time. I have a question for her. I listened carefully to what she said at her conference last week. Twice, she was asked directly whether she thought Brexit had been good for London. Twice, she could not answer—she could not even address the question. That is not going to be good enough for a party that wishes to lead this country once again. It is not leadership to turn your back on growth and on building the British economy.

On defence, this Government are already spending £14 billion more every year than the Conservatives did in their last year in government. We will continue to work with our US counterparts on RAF Fairford. Can

I say to the right hon. Lady that every single Foreign Secretary, including David Cameron as the last Conservative Foreign Secretary, met representatives of the Iranian Government? She should look back at that, as well as at her own record in government.

The Leader of the Opposition stands there today and says that she will build new prison places. Why is there a crisis in our prisons? It is because the Conservatives did not build those places when they were in office. We are dealing with the issues that she left behind. We are the ones providing leadership in difficult times. It is about time that she faced up to some of those realities about the mess they left behind.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): I am grateful to the Prime Minister for treating concerted attempts to undermine our democracy with the seriousness they deserve. While it is always difficult to measure the success of such campaigns, it is also difficult to believe that Russia would bother if there was not at least a chance it might succeed. One thing is for sure: over the past 10 years, Russia has certainly got better at it, while at the same time, elements of the British state have been far too complacent about it. To hear the Prime Minister announce a new centre for information defence was encouraging. Can he assure the House that this centre will be publicly accountable and scrutinised by Parliament, and in particular by the Foreign Affairs Committee?

The Prime Minister: I can indeed give those assurances to my right hon. Friend, the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee. I thank her for the work that she has done in making that recommendation. She is right to say that the wrong approach was taken in the past. The Intelligence and Security Committee report in 2020 said that the last Government failed to seek evidence of any potential interference in our democratic processes. We will not make the same mistakes in the next decade as were made in the last. The new national centre for information defence is about putting Britain in a strong place to face the challenges in a difficult world, and that is what we will do.

Mr Speaker: I call the Father of the House.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Will the Prime Minister forgive me if I put some words in his mouth? Does he think this is a reasonable statement: "Look, I have been elected by my MPs to serve a full term of government. I am going to get on with bread-and-butter issues, such as the care system, pensions and asylum. Of course, we like a good, close relationship with our partners on security in Europe, but"—this is the Prime Minister speaking—"I say this to the people: I am very wary about reopening the whole Brexit wars. There were years of harrowing negotiations and an even worse deal. I give an absolute commitment that I will not seek to join the EU unless there is a general election first and I offer the British people a full referendum"?

The Prime Minister: May I say to the Father of the House that I stand by every single one of those words? I am not reopening the referendum; I respect the referendum result, as I just said a moment ago. What I will do is take a pragmatic approach when I can boost growth in the British economy and when I can increase co-operation

to get a grip on boat crossings across the channel. I will do those things where I believe they can be in the country's best interests. The deal that I have inherited coming into office represents an opportunity to secure progress on both those things. The case I am putting to the House this afternoon is that it is a dereliction of duty for any Member to turn away from that possibility, when we can support the food industry, we can support farmers, and we can get Britain growing more strongly again. Our responsibility in this House is to serve this country's best interests, and that is what I will do.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Defence Committee.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister's statement and in particular his efforts to assist our allies, to forge closer ties and to help de-escalate the situation in the middle east. It is clear that President Trump's efforts to lift sanctions on Russian diesel and then buy it are a real kick in the teeth for our Ukrainian friends and will allow Vladimir Putin to further fuel his deadly war machine. Nations such as India, which was slapped with tariffs for buying Russian fuel, will no doubt decry that move and be left bemused by these haphazard, hypocritical policies that prevent our long-term strategic aims from being achieved.

However, there have also been reports that United States officials have been contacting European counterparts to stop Ukrainian attacks on Russian refineries, and are also limiting the supply of weapons and intelligence. Has the Prime Minister had any such discussions with our US or European allies about why we need to continue to support our Ukrainian friends?

The Prime Minister: I will always support our Ukrainian friends, and I can say to my hon. Friend that I called President Zelensky on Saturday afternoon precisely because I recognised that he was in the middle of a very difficult 24 hours. I can also say to the House that the Chancellor of the Exchequer spoke to the United States Treasury Secretary at around the same time, and talked about the importance of an energy ceasefire. It was good to see that proposal emerge from the President yesterday. It is the best possible outcome in the circumstances that we are in: it will get fuel flowing into the market as well as protecting Ukraine throughout the winter ahead of us, and we will continue to make the case for it.

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

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Following the loss of his father, Roy, may I start by offering the Prime Minister's family my deepest sympathies? I am sure that we were all moved by his words about his dad, and his determination to fix social care and tackle the devastating impact of dementia on sufferers and their families. I hope that we can work across this House to make that happen.

Let me now turn to the Prime Minister's words about Europe. His predecessors turned a blind eye to the disastrous consequences of the Conservatives' Brexit deal, so it was welcome to hear him recognise that damage today. We on these Liberal Democrat Benches have consistently argued that their Brexit deal has made us all poorer, weaker and less safe, so I am glad that the Prime Minister has arrived at the same conclusion, but now it is time to do something about it.

The test of the Prime Minister's ambition is straightforward, if he wants growth and if he wants to cut the cost of living. Will he drop Labour's red lines now, and open negotiations on joining the single market and a customs union? It would be a real dereliction of duty to refuse now to fix a deal that we know is not working. Every day, every week, every month of delay means more unnecessary costs for British businesses, more pointless red tape, more pain for British families. Being outside negotiations on AI safety, "Made in Europe" regulations and migration agreements does this country real harm. Fixing our relationship with Europe is more important now than ever, especially at a time when President Trump is waging a trade war with Canada while signing a new trade deal with Putin. Never before have we seen a US President so hostile to the UK and our allies, and so friendly to our adversaries. We cannot afford to fudge or dodge on this issue, and especially on Ukraine, so will the Minister bring together a coalition of the willing behind a joint statement condemning Trump's diesel deal with Russia and calling on him to cancel it?

Let me finally refer to the Prime Minister's comments about Russian interference in the Brexit referendum. That took courage, after the Conservatives had spent so long suppressing the evidence. Will the Prime Minister now present it to the House in full, alongside any evidence of interference in other UK votes, so that we can understand the threat and make it a national security priority to protect our democracy from attacks such as that?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his kind words about my dad. They are much appreciated.

I agree with the right hon. Gentleman about the harm done to food and farming, and to other industries, by the Brexit deal. It would seem that the Conservative party is in denial about this, and not open to seeing how we can move forward to a better position for the country. Indeed, it is clear that British public opinion has moved, and I believe that the public would now favour that. We are not ideological but pragmatic in taking steps to support growth and improve our approach to tackling irregular migration. If we can secure a good deal, I hope that I can count on the right hon. Gentleman's support and that of his colleagues when it comes before the House. But as much as I want to improve growth in the UK, I also want to maintain trust in politics, and I am afraid I am not prepared to revisit the red lines in our manifesto.

On Ukraine, I have had discussions with Chancellor Merz about bringing forward a meeting of the coalition of the willing. I can update the House further as that proceeds.

Finally, on the Brexit referendum, I think it is really important to be open with people about everything that we have lived through in the last decade. I have been open, but I am also making sure that Britain is in a position where we do not face the same again. I hope that the right hon. Gentleman and his colleagues will support the new national centre for information defence, so that Britain never again faces the risk of interference in our democratic process.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham Hodge Hill and Solihull North) (Lab): I commend the Prime Minister on what has been a flying start on the world stage, and I welcome

[Liam Byrne]

news of a better, stronger deal with Europe that will cut costs and cut bills this winter. It is very clear to us, on the evidence that we have received, that the deal we inherited has left red tape strangling our businesses in general, and strangling small businesses in particular. The EU's "Made in Europe" proposals risk destroying any ambitions to reindustrialise our country. To avoid that peril, we will have to get serious with the EU in tackling unfair competition from China. Will the Prime Minister reserve the right to introduce new tariffs on unfairly subsidised imports from China, so that British and European businesses have a fair and level playing field on which to compete?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend—*[Interruption.]* My apologies—my right hon. Friend. I am still getting used to being back, Mr Speaker. I agree with him about the red tape that our businesses are facing. I have read out examples in the House this afternoon. The Conservatives used to be the first party to stand up and say, "Oh yes, let's remove red tape from our businesses." It sounded mightily like they were defending that red tape this afternoon. What has happened to them? They were meant to be the champions of free enterprise, but it falls to us to remove the red tape, and I will work hard to get that deal.

I agree with my right hon. Friend that "Made in Europe" presents risks to British manufacturing, and I know that he will have concerns about the automotive industry in the west midlands. I am raising those concerns with European partners. It is important that we get to an arrangement that works for both the UK and the EU. After all, we are both trying to deal with the same issue: the damaging effect that Chinese exports are having on our industries. The way to approach this is to do it together, and that is the case that we are making to the EU.

Sir Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): On the Prime Minister's international agenda, should he not also focus on the appalling humanitarian situation in Darfur, Sudan, and avoid making policy on Israel, the timing of which enhances Netanyahu's prospects of re-election? On Yemen, as well as defending Saudi Arabia from the outrageous Houthi attacks, should the Prime Minister not use Britain's deep historical links and connections to Yemen to support constitutional negotiations and prevent the situation from getting any worse?

The Prime Minister: I assure the right hon. Gentleman that ending the suffering in Sudan is very high on the Foreign Secretary's list of priorities, and that tackling the aggression from the Houthis is something that we are taking extremely seriously. Of course, we are providing support to Saudi Arabia, as I have mentioned this afternoon, and we will be prepared to consider further requests as and when they come in, but I cannot accept what the right hon. Gentleman said about Israel and Palestine. In this House, we have long supported a two-state solution. If we do nothing when a tender process to build on the west bank is moving forward, we will allow that two-state solution to die in front of our eyes. The Foreign Secretary is not prepared to allow that, I am not prepared to allow that, and we strongly defend the stance we have taken.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): In my negotiations with Commissioner Šefčovič, I agreed not only the re-accession of the United Kingdom to Erasmus+, but that at this year's summit we would deliver the food and drink agreement to bear down on costs in supermarkets and an emissions trading scheme linkage meaning that hundreds of millions of pounds in carbon taxes do not need to be paid by UK businesses, as well as opportunities for young people to work, travel and study in the UK. So can I say to Prime Minister that anyone who sets their face against the deal that I hope he pushes over the line on 20 November is in favour of adding costs to businesses and households?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is exactly right, and I commend him for the excellent work he did to lay the groundwork for this deal. He is right: in these circumstances and at this moment in time, it is incumbent on every Member of the House to do whatever we can to relieve pressure on British business, and that is what we will do. It is interesting that this afternoon the country will be able to see that we are prepared to do it, but the Opposition are not.

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): The Prime Minister opened today's statement with the words that he "took a clear message to the United Nations: that...Britain is back and can be relied upon as a consistent and stable partner". Is the same true of the Prime Minister? If so, can he tell me whether he plans to honour the Brexit referendum outcome, as he said in May when courting the Brexit voters of Makerfield, or is he planning to overturn it either partially or fully?

The Prime Minister: I say to the right hon. Lady that I am always a stable and consistent partner. Indeed, I will honour the result of the referendum, as I always have for the last 10 years—that is a clear commitment, as is the commitment to our manifesto, as I explained just a moment ago—but I am also going to lead and will be prepared to set out options that I think Britain should consider. If she is saying that she is happy with the status quo, she is in a minority in this country. People know that Britain can do better than this. I am determined to secure better for Britain. I am just surprised that the Opposition are setting their ambitions for our country so low.

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I for one am really relieved that the Prime Minister is not going to take any lessons from any member of the previous Conservative Government on negotiating with Europe, given what a mess they made of it. Their irrational hatred of anything to do with Europe meant they took us out of the biofood security alert, meaning British farmers do not get told when there is foot and mouth, and took us out of the Eurodac system—*[Interruption.]* You took us out. I am watching the right hon. Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins) say, "What?" She might want to look at some of the details that she helped negotiate. They took us out of the Eurodac system, meaning we do not get the asylum data, which makes protecting our borders harder. So will the Prime Minister assure me and my constituents that he will not let Tory mistakes make border control and British farming harder to do, but will put the national interest first, seek that data and ensure that we have a future of working with Europe, not hating it?

Mr Speaker: Order. I just remind Members to please address the Chair, so we do not get into attacks on each other.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right to raise the loss of immigration control that has come with the inability to access data across the European Union. It is something that the people who promoted this idea need to take on board and be held to account for, because the reality is that we are in a weaker position when it comes to controlling immigration than we were just over 10 years ago. It is really important, as we go into this next phase, that those on all sides of the House support the British position in this negotiation. Is any Member of this House truly saying to me this afternoon that they do not want to have access again to that European immigration information? If they are saying that, they need to be honest about it.

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): I welcomed the Foreign Secretary's speech on Sudan at the UN General Assembly. The Prime Minister recently said that he would be "really concerned" to lose Sheikh Mansour, vice-president of the United Arab Emirates and owner of Manchester City FC, from Manchester, but does he recognise that the same individual is reported by outlets including *The New York Times* to have a "central role" not only in Man City's contested success but in the genocide, famine and forced displacements happening across Sudan because of the Rapid Support Forces? When will the Prime Minister stand up to Sheikh Mansour and the UAE, and call out their dishonest roles in Manchester and in fanning the flames of conflict, leading to the world's biggest humanitarian disaster in Sudan?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary is clear that we want a humanitarian solution in Sudan without fear or favour, and we will make that case very clearly to the UAE. On the wider issue, I can confirm, Mr Speaker, that all my dealings will be published this afternoon in relation to any meetings with the owners of Manchester City.

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. He may be aware that the Ukraine Solidarity Campaign is today protesting outside the US embassy in London against President Trump's diesel deal, which will directly fund Putin's war machine: a war machine that broke its promise to stop targeting Ukraine's energy infrastructure less than 24 hours after it was committed to; a war machine that continues to bombard Oleshky, a city in the grip of a humanitarian crisis where people are being starved to death; and a war machine that is complicit in the forcible deportation and abduction of at least 20,651 Ukrainian children. Will the Prime Minister impress upon the President of the United States that his diesel deal will cost his own voters, my constituents and the people of Ukraine their safety?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for the powerful way in which she puts her question. I assure her that Britain will always take the strongest possible approach towards sanctions on Russia. The Foreign Secretary recently announced new sanctions on the shadow fleet, crypto and oil companies in Russia. We will continue to take that action and, we hope, set a lead that others will follow.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): As the Chairman of the Intelligence and Security Committee who oversaw the publication of the Russia report as soon as the Committee was reconstituted, may I ask the Prime Minister to explain to the House exactly how he thinks Russia was able to alter the result of the referendum?

The Prime Minister: I have great respect for the right hon. Gentleman, but I did not say that. I did not at any point say that it altered the result. I simply come back to what I said earlier: it is a matter of record that Russia has sought to interfere in elections—the 2019 general election—and we think it is inconceivable that this was the first time.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): The Prime Minister quite rightly mentioned in his statement the fact that 90% of Russian oil production is covered by UK sanctions. I very much welcome what he had to say about joining international calls for a ceasefire on attacks on energy installations. When he is discussing this matter with President Trump, will he remind him that the biggest reason for high diesel prices here and in the United States is not the war between Russia and Ukraine, but what is going on in the strait of Hormuz and in Iran? Will he remind the President that the action he is taking will not cut the diesel price and that all it will do is fuel the Russian war machine?

The Prime Minister: I assure my hon. Friend that we are using our good offices on every front to ensure that we get a solution on the cost of energy. As I said before, in Ukraine an energy ceasefire is the best way to get fuel flowing into the market, and that has to be a reciprocal ceasefire. We are also doing whatever we can to support the bringing forward of a solution in the middle east. I discussed both those matters with President Trump in New York, and Britain stands ready to play its part on both fronts.

Sir Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): Iran clearly views this country as its enemy, and I fear that it smells weakness. It has attempted to attack Diego Garcia, Akrotiri and now Fairford. Does the Prime Minister agree that this demands a robust response, and will he confirm that if Iran is successful in attacking one of our bases, we will use direct action against it in legitimate self-defence? Will he provide enhanced support and assistance to our friends and allies who are under constant attack from Iran and its proxies—not just Saudi Arabia, but the United Arab Emirates and Israel?

The Prime Minister: I assure the right hon. Gentleman that we are providing the most robust response to the situation. We have introduced a tough sanctions regime. We are taking every step that needs to be taken in close consultation with our counterparts in the United States. There is no suggestion at all that Britain is not playing its part.

Baggy Shanker (Derby South) (Lab/Co-op): Derby has the manufacturing talent and capabilities to help Britain succeed on the international stage, and with a brilliant £1 billion order for 29 new battery-electric trains at Alstom in Litchurch Lane, we are on a roll in our city. Does the Prime Minister agree that by championing British manufacturing on the international stage we can secure more of that work, and the jobs our communities desperately need?

The Prime Minister: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the work he has done with colleagues in Derby to secure that investment and those new jobs. The great city of Derby will be a big beneficiary of this Government's drive to reindustrialise the country. I was at Alstom with my hon. Friend and saw what is being done and the apprenticeships there. We are proud of what is going on in the city. I will ask the Chancellor and the First Secretary of State to do everything they can to drive the maximum value for British jobs from every pound of public procurement in this country.

Victoria Collins (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): As Liberal Democrats, we have long been calling for global leadership on AI from the UK, so I am pleased to hear the Prime Minister talk of that. We cannot get the best out of AI if we cannot protect people from the worst, and the UK should be leading on that. We also need to learn from online safety, and it needs to be Governments that lead the charge, not big tech. Will the Prime Minister listen to the Lib Dem call for an international AI safety institute, based on the International Atomic Energy Agency, based here in the UK?

The Prime Minister: We already have the AI Security Institute, and to be fair, I pay tribute to the previous Conservative Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak), who was instrumental in the establishment of that institute. It is because of that that the president of Microsoft was on the radio this morning saying that Britain is now regarded as the world leader in AI safety. What we must not be, however, is complacent, which is why I am putting AI at the top of the agenda for Britain's presidency of the G20. I look forward to working with the hon. Lady and Members from across the House to ensure that Britain brings together a global code of standards and principles that can capture the benefits of AI while guarding against the risks it poses.

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): First, I thank my right hon. Friend for his speech at UNGA, in which he committed, or recommitted, the United Kingdom to be a consistent and stable partner in upholding the shared values of the UN charter. That will be increasingly important as we enter the G20 presidency.

I spent last week with the chairs of the Ukrainian Parliament's British friendship group, Deputy Speaker Korniyenko and Lesia Vasylenko, and they talked to me about how this El Niño winter is going to be the hardest ever winter in Ukraine. Just this week, Kyiv's sewerage system broke due to electricity outages because of Russian attacks. What additional support can we give, particularly to Kyiv, in terms of generators, solar panels, thermal batteries and other humanitarian support to ensure that they can get through the exceedingly hard and difficult winter that is coming to Ukraine?

The Prime Minister: I do not think any Member of this House has done more than my hon. Friend to support Ukraine through its darkest hour. On the issue of protecting Ukraine's energy infrastructure, as well as helping it with renewable and sustainable energy systems, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary was in Ukraine last week and talked about these very issues. He also visited the site of one of the bomb attacks that

killed children—people may have seen the photos. We are as engaged as my hon. Friend, and we will not waver in any way, shape or form. We will be there till the end, as I know will be.

Sir Roger Gale (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): I am quite sure that the whole House will applaud the Prime Minister's reaffirmation of this country's support for Ukraine and will support the additional sanctions that we are seeking to impose.

President Trump has effectively driven a coach and horses through those sanctions, has torn up the bill that he himself signed in the White House and, for the sake of his domestic audience, is seeking to blame President Zelensky and Ukraine for the oil shortages that the United States is now facing, rather than placing that blame where it truly lies, which is with his disastrous expedition in Iran.

The Prime Minister did not answer the question from the leader of the Liberal Democrats. Will he answer it now? Will he join my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition in unequivocally condemning this act of treachery by the President of the United States?

The Prime Minister: I made it clear in my statement that, when I heard the news, I was immediately on the phone to President Zelensky to offer any help that I could provide. I think that where Britain can best provide help is in trying to bring people back together to get a solution that works for Ukraine. More than anything in these circumstances, we have to think about what will be most helpful. Of course, it is critical to get the US, as we discussed in New York with President Trump, back to the concept of an energy ceasefire, and that is what he announced yesterday.

Jonathan Hinder (Pendle and Clitheroe) (Lab): My constituents in Pendle and Clitheroe want immigration to be controlled and managed in the best interests of the country, and I know that the Prime Minister's constituents in Wigan feel the same. Can he confirm that, as long as he is Prime Minister, there will be no return to freedom of movement?

The Prime Minister: I take my responsibilities to my constituents very seriously, which is why I have said consistently that the manifesto upon which Labour Members were elected will be fully respected. What we have to look at are the options that are available for the long-term relationship. In the next decade, this country needs to know where it is going. There are no assumptions here, and as I said in my opening comments, the British public will be the boss of whatever is decided.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): The Prime Minister says that, when it comes to the relationship with the EU, the British public will be the boss. Given that Scotland last had a vote on whether or not to stay in broken Brexit Britain before Brexit was even on the cards, does he not think it is a wee bit cheeky to give the UK public the choice, the driving seat and the reins on whether or not to have a different future with the EU while refusing that same choice to Scotland on its future with the UK?

The Prime Minister: I am sure that, like me, the hon. Lady looks at opinion polls from all parts of the country, including Scotland. No one in this House today is proposing a referendum.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): I also was pleased to hear what the Prime Minister had to say about AI, both in New York and this afternoon in the Chamber. Can he confirm that it remains his view that decisions about global principles and standards for AI should be taken by democratically elected Governments representing working people and not by industry alone?

The Prime Minister: I agree with my right hon. Friend very forcefully. I am setting up a process under the banner of the G20 presidency that mirrors what this country did in 2008, when international agreement was needed about how to handle the financial crisis. The Canadian Prime Minister, who was very much involved at that time, has been in discussions with me about how we could create a process to mirror that for AI so that individual countries could go back and embed those principles in their own laws and statutes. That is what we are trying to achieve. I would be really pleased if the whole House would get behind this endeavour, as the UK is in the global spotlight.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Stamford) (Con): The so-called energy ceasefire is a farce. All but one of Ukraine's oil refineries has already been destroyed. It is about protecting Russia's oil refineries while Russia bombs Ukraine's power grid into obliteration and it results in a health disaster. Will the Prime Minister commit to sending large-scale generators to Ukraine now, and will he stand by our Saudi allies at the UN Security Council and under chapter VII designate the Houthis as a terrorist organisation—yes or no?

The Prime Minister: On the first part of the hon. Lady's question, I heard her strong view on the energy ceasefire, but I heard from the President on Saturday afternoon and he was asking the UK Government to press for such a ceasefire. I think it is right that we hear him and do everything within our power. As I said, there has been some progress on that front in the last 24 hours. On the second matter, I will reflect on what the hon. Lady said and come back to her.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): Traders at Grimsby Seafood Village will welcome any action to reduce the Brexit red tape and bring down their energy bills. I think that they would also want to hear the Prime Minister say explicitly—he danced around in his response to my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle and Clitheroe (Jonathan Hinder) earlier—that there will not be a return to freedom of movement and that in these negotiations we will not have to capitulate and join the euro?

The Prime Minister: As I have said many times this afternoon, we will honour the manifesto in full. The red lines are in place and they will remain in place. The seafood purveyors of Grimsby will probably have noticed, when I was talking about their plight and the difficulties they face, the lack of support for them from the Conservative Benches. I think the Conservatives need to have a period of reflection on their approach on this whole matter and do something to help British businesses that are struggling right now.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): The Prime Minister confirmed that the incident at RAF Fairford was likely to have been co-ordinated in Iran. Can he comment on the serious suggestions that some of those who have been arrested and then bailed had Iranian diplomatic immunity?

The Prime Minister: I hope the hon. Gentleman will understand that I am not going to get into those matters on the Floor of the House. The Home Secretary will make a statement later today and provide more detail.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): From catching “Pride” at the National Theatre to jamming the Smiths with Ukrainian troops, we know that this Prime Minister gets culture. Can he revisit pragmatically the Tory mess that has left the Really Useful Group, a theatre group, touring a production of “Phantom of the Opera” in Europe with a Chinese cast because of all the red tape and musicians crippled by costs with no cabotage agreements, because it is killing gigs and venues?

The Prime Minister: I say to my hon. Friend that those are precisely the issues that we believe need a second look. We need to take a more pragmatic approach, and my right hon. Friend the Minister for Intergovernmental Relations and European Relations is having those discussions with Europe. We do want to see better arrangements for our British creative industries, because they deserve it. They are the best in the world and Europe wants to see and hear more from them.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Irrespective of how we voted in the referendum, I hope the Prime Minister will agree that if one wants to be called a democrat, one has to abide by that decision and make it work, but the Windsor framework illustrates that no deal is ever cast into tablets of stone and that things are capable of sensible evolution. Will the Prime Minister accept that at this time, as always, businesses large and small, urban and rural, need certainty? They need to know the regulatory regime in which they are trading, the opportunities that exist and the barriers that they may need to overcome. Will he commit that, whatever evolution he is envisaging, it will be delivered speedily to be able to give confidence, certainty and clarity to North Dorset businesses and those across the country?

The Prime Minister: I commend the hon. Gentleman on his pragmatic tone. He is absolutely right to approach it in that way. When I visit Northern Ireland, as I do, I hear a call for things to be changed and improved—evolved, as he said—and that is exactly right. I said in my statement that the energy cost-benefit for Northern Ireland could be significant: there could be up to a 20% reduction in wholesale energy costs. Why would I not do everything I could to deliver that for the people of Northern Ireland? He mentioned speed. If the whole House gets behind the drive to improve the deal, we will get it through more quickly.

Torcuil Crichton (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for his statement and for highlighting the effect of Brexit on the salmon farming industry. Salmon farming is worth £189 million to the Western Isles, with £34 million of that direct, and over 200 jobs. Similarly, fishing is worth £16 million, with most of that

[Torcuil Crichton]

prawn exports to Spain and France. We are physically furthest from that EU market, but we need that deal—we need to get our fish and our produce in. While we are at it, let us get a deal for our young people to get them studying and working again in Europe.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend puts it so well, because he knows these issues so well—because of the travel times to market. If only Opposition Members had the level of understanding he has just demonstrated, we would be in a better place.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): I note the Prime Minister's remarks concerning Russian interference in some recent and not so recent elections, which raise serious questions for all of us who worry about the integrity of our democracy. Will the Prime Minister commit to reviewing whether campaign finance rules—both those in place at the moment and the welcome but limited steps being introduced in the Representation of the People Bill—sufficiently guard against foreign interference through political donations? In particular, may I encourage him to look at a cap on political donations to limit the influence of ultra-wealthy individuals and potential foreign interests?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend the First Secretary of State is leading a task and finish group on cleaning up politics, and I am sure that she would be very pleased to hear from the hon. Member on her proposals.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Wyre) (Lab): On 26 October 2021, when the Conservative Government's Elections Bill was going through its Public Bill Committee, I was the shadow Minister, and I tabled a new clause relating to foreign interference in politics. The Minister then responsible for keeping our democracy safe replied in Committee that she had not read the Russia report and asked me to explain it to her. Does the Prime Minister share my concern that the Minister, now Leader of the Opposition, may not be fully across the details?

The Prime Minister: I was not aware of that, but I am aware that the Russia report says that

“written evidence provided to us appeared to suggest that HMG”—I think that was Her Majesty's Government at the time—

“had not seen or sought evidence of successful interference in UK democratic processes”.

That is indefensible. This Government will not make that mistake. We will ensure that we defend British democracy in the next decade as it was not defended in the last.

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): On illegal immigration, the Prime Minister will be aware that in the last month, three boats have left Normandy bound for the Solent and the south coast. The Government are giving France £662 million, yet the smugglers have simply moved down the coast. On 4 October, nearly 150 people landed in Gosport, against the will of local people and of the local council and against the safety advice of the police and crime commissioner. This sends a message to

these evil people-smuggling gangs that this is now a viable new route. Given that no one from the Home Office had the courtesy to contact me before, during or after those 150 people were landed on the shores of my constituency, could the Prime Minister let me know what conversations are happening with France to try to shut down these routes from Normandy?

The Prime Minister: I will look into what the hon. Lady just said about not being informed, because if—well, I am sure it is true, and it is not good enough. We will seek to ensure that the Home Office improve on that, because these are difficult issues and I know that they were difficult issues as they were presented in her constituency. The answer is almost in what she said: we are working closely with the French, and it is precisely because of the success of that co-operation that the gangs are changing their tactics—obviously, she has seen the effect of that—but we will be relentless in changing ours to make sure they do not succeed. We will look at the issues that she mentioned and we will endeavour to ensure there is no repeat, but it is precisely because we are succeeding in reducing the number of boat crossings that they are having to try different routes.

Helena Doolimore (Hastings and Rye) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Prime Minister's commitment to strengthening relations with our European neighbours. Can I give him one example of how he can boost economic growth by doing just that on the south coast? Thousands of the people I represent have called for international trains to come back to Ashford International. It would boost our economy by £2.7 billion and bring half a million more visitors to Sussex and Kent every year, and we have an international terminal sitting there ready to be used. It is a no-brainer, so will the Prime Minister give me his commitment that he will support this, like the Transport Secretary?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes an excellent case. She and I will ask the Transport Secretary to look into it and get back to her.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): I welcome the Prime Minister's commitment to the new national centre for information defence. It is a critical factor in preserving the integrity of our democracy, but he will be aware that the US State Department intends to spend tens of millions of pounds promoting ideological propaganda and supporting far-right parties in western Europe, potentially including the UK. Will he give the House the assurance that the new national centre will be free to go where it needs to go, without fear or favour, in investigating misinformation and disinformation, and that, where necessary, that will include the activities of the United States?

The Prime Minister: Indeed; I will give the hon. Gentleman that assurance here and now. That is exactly the point: it should be free to do that, and with independent oversight, as the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry), said. Let us remember, the Russian Government spend over £1 billion every year on misinformation and disinformation, and we have to be open-eyed about that and start to respond accordingly. It is not about a ministry of truth, or whatever people

want to say; it is about ensuring people are aware of what is being done, and where there is interference in our democratic process. It will be more successful if it carries the full support of all sides of the House, with the requisite independence and oversight.

Catherine Fookes (Monmouthshire) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for his statement. It is an absolute no-brainer that we move closer to our closest trading partner, the EU, and I know that thousands of businesses in my constituency of Monmouthshire will welcome the reduction in costs. I am sure that Monmouthshire farmers, too, will be delighted that they were at the centre of his statement, as they will be by the prospect of less red tape and lower costs when dealing with the EU. They were sold a lie by the Conservatives about Brexit. Can the PM confirm that Welsh lamb and Welsh beef exports will increase as a result of his statement and of the renegotiation with the EU?

The Prime Minister: Not as a result of the statement—if only I had that power—but yes, if we can secure the deal that I talked about in the statement. This is a really important moment for British farmers, who have had a very difficult year, and it is incumbent on me to do everything that I can. I can assure them—and my hon. Friend can assure them, because she heard it from me—that I will do everything that I possibly can to get this deal over the line in the next five weeks.

Nigel Huddleston (Droitwich and Evesham) (Con): The Prime Minister has adopted a fascinating negotiating strategy by revealing his hand and goals in advance of any discussions with the EU. Is he aware that the price of any deal therefore went up with every word that he said? As a former Trade Minister, may I also advise the Prime Minister—because his officials and Ministers clearly have not—that it may not be so easy after all, because of some of the clauses in the 70-plus other trade deals that we did with other countries to unwind all the things that he would like to do? It may not be as simple as he thinks.

The Prime Minister: May I just reflect on the negotiating geniuses on the other side of the House, whose main strategy, as far as I recall, was insulting every member of the European Commission and every member state? That went well, didn't it?

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): I congratulate the Prime Minister on his strong leadership at the UN and in preparing to host the G20. As a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee, I welcome the national centre for information defence. On the EU, we need to boost opportunities for our hospitality, accommodation and tech sectors; they are the ones that talk about the great opportunities for young people to study, work and live here and—for people in my constituency—to travel to Europe as well. I therefore welcome talk of a work experience scheme being discussed at the EU summit. Will the Prime Minister say more about whether that scheme will lead to a youth mobility scheme, which would boost growth in this country?

The Prime Minister: That will be very much part of the discussion at the summit, and I believe that that, too, is in our interests. If young people come here to

study, they develop an attachment to the country, which often bodes well for us, for the rest of their lives, as do British students going the other way. These are the things that worked in the past, and there is no reason why this generation should not be able to take advantage of them. I welcome my hon. Friend's generous support for what we are trying to do.

Dr Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): I congratulate the hon. Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Sagal Abdi-Wali), who was with us here earlier, and warmly welcome her to her place in this House. I also warmly welcome much of what the Prime Minister's international update contained, particularly his recognition of Brexit's disastrous effects on our country—as far as I am concerned, the faster we move to rejoin, the better—but there was no mention of the climate crisis. Does he not recognise that the climate crisis is one of the biggest international challenges facing us, that it requires us to keep fossil fuels in the ground, and that therefore—given that COP31 is coming up next month—the Government must rule out Jackdaw and Rosebank, and move with all speed to the future of clean, green, renewable energy on which this country's future prosperity depends?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Lady for welcoming what I had to say. On the climate crisis, I can assure her that I was not silent in my speech to the UN General Assembly; indeed, the Foreign Secretary convened climate crisis-related events in New York. As I have said before, we will be pragmatic on oil and gas, given that the country will continue to need to use them in the future, but where we agree is that it is essential that this country builds the strongest possible bridge to a renewable future.

Katrina Murray (Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch) (Lab): Last week, one of the food production companies in my constituency contacted my office regarding an import of fish from the European Union which has been held at Suffolk Coastal Port Health Authority because of a labelling discrepancy. Delay and potential refusal of entry have significant financial implications for the business, with storage and associated costs continuing to accumulate while the container remains at port with the increasing likelihood that the stock will have to be destroyed as time goes on. May I ask for the Prime Minister's reassurance that closer ties with Europe will make it easier for local businesses to import and export to the European Union?

The Prime Minister: One can only imagine the frustration of the businesses that are trying to get that produce released. The Minister for Europe just said to me, "We get calls like this all the time." Why was there such indifference on the other side of the House to this situation? Why are we not working towards a pragmatic solution to get British goods flowing to market? I do not think the other side's position is sustainable, and the example my hon. Friend has just given, speaking up for businesses in her constituency, is one that the vast majority of people would say, "Right, get that fixed" and we will.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for his statement, to which I listened carefully. In it, he said, "our resolve to defend...ourselves is absolute".

[*Lincoln Jopp*]

However, at that Dispatch Box on another occasion, he said that national security

“cannot come at the expense of social security.”—[*Official Report*, 9 September 2026; Vol. 790, c. 1036.]

Bearing in mind that our allies and our enemies are listening to our proceedings, could he make it crystal clear to the world that he has no higher priority than the national security of the United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister: I can make it abundantly clear that national security is my highest priority and the Government’s highest priority, and we will set out how we will meet our NATO commitments in due course. But resilience builds from the community level up, and we also have to have an eye to the resilience of our communities in a very changing world, so I was talking about social security in the broadest sense. They go together. I want a resilient and strong Britain in the 21st century.

Chris Webb (Blackpool South) (Lab): The Prime Minister knows from our discussion that the cost of living is the No. 1 issue that my constituents raise with me and are struggling with right now in Blackpool South. With the UK-EU summit now confirmed, does the Prime Minister believe that this is the perfect opportunity to deliver real benefits for Blackpool businesses and families, including lowering food prices, more opportunities for young people, stronger defence and, most importantly for many of my constituents, further immigration controls which we lost under the previous Government?

The Prime Minister: One of the most positive aspects of my meeting with President von der Leyen in New York was her openness to the conversation about restoring data sharing on immigration across Europe. That is something that Britain has long sought in the decade since Brexit. It is the control that we lost, actually, at the time of the referendum. It is one issue that does not get enough attention and it should get more. I say to my hon. Friend that I will work hard to see if we can get a practical arrangement on that very issue at the summit in November.

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): There are only just over five weeks to go until the European summit that the Prime Minister has announced. The Prime Minister makes reference to our farmers, but the agricultural sector is putting out huge warnings at the moment. I wonder if the Prime Minister could specifically reference and refer to CropLife UK’s detailed report, which outlines that aligning the UK’s crop protection rules with the EU would slash farming income by up to £810 million in the first year alone, trigger steep falls in UK crop protection, and significantly negatively impact the progress made through the Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Act 2023. Can the Prime Minister comment on those concerns that are being made right now?

The Prime Minister: Where I can comment is in saying to the hon. Member that the National Farmers Union is very strongly in support of this proposed deal. Obviously, we need to get the details on the table, and I will listen to what he has got to say. If he sends me the

report that he referenced, I will take a look at it. But there is strong support for what we are trying to do to support British food and farming.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. I want to call as many Members as possible, so please can we quicken the pace?

Mark Swards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): In August I had the privilege of visiting the Falkland Islands, an amazing place, where Government representatives told me all about the opportunities presented by the Sea Lion oilfield development fund. Whatever one’s opinion of the Sea Lion development, it is clear that the Government of Argentina cannot threaten those who choose to get involved in that project and cannot try to scupper it with external actions that do not match our ambitions. I ask the Prime Minister today to set out his view on that. Will he also unambiguously state that it is the Falkland Islanders’ right to determine where their resources go?

The Prime Minister: We have consistently demonstrated our unwavering support for the Falkland Islanders and indeed for the Sea Lion project. I made that very clear in New York. The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office is working hard on this issue and we will say more in due course.

Ian Roome (North Devon) (LD): I fully recognise the need not to prejudice an ongoing investigation, but will the Prime Minister differentiate between the criminal investigations into the recent incidents at RAF bases and say what measures the Government are taking to establish whether other military bases face similar vulnerabilities, both at home and abroad, to protect our armed forces?

The Prime Minister: I assure the House that British police and security services have done everything that they should have done and have conducted the investigation in relation to RAF Fairford with the utmost rigour; that needs to be put on the record. The hon. Gentleman is right to press on base security more broadly, and I can assure him that I am working with the Defence Secretary to ensure that we are doing everything we can. We are confident in the way that we are managing the security of our bases, but we are not complacent and we will do everything necessary to secure them. I pay tribute to those who apprehended the trespassers at RAF Molesworth recently; that shows that we are being very vigilant when it comes to the security of our bases.

Alex Baker (Aldershot) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister’s statement. To deter our adversaries, we are not only going to have to increase defence spending; we are also going to have to mobilise our financial markets. I welcome the many good conversations between the UK and Canada, but the founding of the defence, security and resilience bank will take political leadership. Will the Prime Minister take that step, stand with Prime Minister Carney, and ensure that Britain is at the forefront of building the financial power needed to deter our adversaries?

The Prime Minister: I have had discussions with the Canadian Prime Minister at a certain football ground on that very subject; I assure my hon. Friend of that. We are looking at how we can pursue procurement co-operation more broadly, and we will say more in due course.

David Reed (Exmouth and Exeter East) (Con): For the avoidance of doubt, will the Prime Minister confirm which country was responsible for the Jaguar Land Rover hack and, more importantly, whether there have been any repercussions?

The Prime Minister: I will write to the hon. Gentleman.

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): It is estimated that Scotland is some £30 billion a year worse off as a result of Brexit. We have already heard this afternoon about the problems faced by the fishing and agriculture sectors, but in addition, the creative industries, financial services, architectural firms, engineering companies and tourism have all identified problems arising for them and the people who work in those areas because of Brexit. In the EU summit to come, will the Prime Minister consider the opportunities there may be to advance the cause of those industries, particularly as they are so important to my home city of Glasgow?

The Prime Minister: I am looking forward to visiting Scotland later this week and I hope to have those discussions. We cannot accept the status quo—it is not good enough for Scotland or for Britain. I was encouraged by the pragmatic approach taken by the hon. Member for one of the Dorset seats—

Simon Hoare: North!

The Prime Minister: No. 10 North or Dorset North? *[Laughter.]* In the weeks ahead, I hope that we can encourage that same spirit of pragmatism among the rest of the Opposition Members.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for his steadfast support for Ukraine and his early visit. However, next year there may be a potential problem for Europe—I see the Europe Minister and the Defence Secretary are in their places—because the rise of National Rally in France and Alternative für Deutschland in Germany might mean that support for NATO starts to fragment in some European nations. Will the Prime Minister work with the Defence Secretary and the Chancellor on defence planning and a defence budget should the United Kingdom need to do more for Ukraine in those circumstances?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman is right to point to the changing picture in Europe. Obviously, we will have to be mindful of how that picture might change. I was pleased to welcome the NATO Secretary-General to Oxfordshire—we had an excellent discussion. Britain will remain at the heart of NATO and we will continue to do whatever we need to do. It is right that Opposition Members challenge the Government about our commitments to defence, but we are still the third biggest contributor to NATO and sometimes that point is missed. We are spending billions of pounds more as a Government than we were, and we will continue to spend more as we go forward.

Sarah Russell (Congleton) (Lab): Younger generations in this country sacrificed a great deal during covid to protect older generations, and we all owe them our thanks for that. With the youth jobs grant and the Your First Home scheme, the Government are taking concrete steps to try to improve opportunities for young people. Of course the Prime Minister must prioritise economic growth in his discussions with the EU, but will he confirm that long-term commitment to Erasmus and the youth mobility scheme will be prioritised as well, so that younger generations can have the same opportunities that benefited my generation?

The Prime Minister: I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. The youth mobility component of the deal matters as much to me as the other parts.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Your Party): I thank the Prime Minister for his statement—I hope that making an international statement in the House will become a regular feature for him. He has just come from the UN: what discussions took place about the future of the UN, the proper funding of the UN, the funding of the agencies of the UN and the reform of the Security Council and the General Assembly, so that the UN can play a real role in trying to bring about an end to the conflicts that are going on around the world? The world spent \$2.7 trillion on arms last year, and it will be more this year. There is a role for international peace institutions to try to bring about ceasefires where possible and peace wherever it can be assured, so surely that needs to be on the agenda. Finally, in his reply to the hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Dr Chowns), he said that there were concerns about the environment—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. I think the Prime Minister has got the gist.

The Prime Minister: I met the Secretary-General of the United Nations in New York. Of course Britain will play its part in providing the support that the UN needs, ensuring that the UN's standing rises in these times, because we need it more now than we have in recent times. I assure the right hon. Gentleman that we will always be open to reform of the UN.

Graeme Downie (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): The Putin tax—the cost of Russian cyber and physical attacks on the UK—is costing the British taxpayer about £2.5 billion each year. My office conducted research over the summer, but we were unable to find a great deal of information about the true cost of Russian hostile activity because the Government do not collect that information. Will the Prime Minister commit the Government to collecting more of that information and to publishing it on a regular basis, so that the public know the true cost to the UK taxpayer of Vladimir Putin's aggression?

The Prime Minister: That was a topic of conversation with Chancellor Merz in our meeting in Berlin last week. The cyber-attacks that both Germany and the UK face are multiple and pose serious risks for British businesses. That is why we have launched a new partnership on hybrid attacks. I agree with my hon. Friend about the importance of monitoring the data, and I will see what more we can do on that.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for his statement and his commitment to being more straightforward with the House than perhaps has always been the case over the last couple of years. In the light of that, will he give the House an unequivocal assurance that he believes that the Brexit referendum was legitimate? Will he say so on the record?

The Prime Minister: I will very much say so on the record: it was legitimate. I have always respected the result, and I have never questioned its legitimacy, but I am within my rights to point out where foreign actors are looking to interfere in British democracy.

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): The last 10 years of poor Brexit deals have taken a toll on our businesses and economy, including on a lot of small and medium-sized enterprises in my constituency that are looking to grow. We all want less red tape for business and frictionless trade with our largest trading partners, so can the Prime Minister seek a deal that opens up possibilities for my breweries, farmers and manufacturers to help them grow?

The Prime Minister: If we get to a deal and it does not do all the things that my hon. Friend just mentioned, it will not be the right deal. I know that I will be in a stronger position the more that people in all parties in the House get behind what I am saying. That will put Britain in the strongest place to negotiate a deal. That would be a good negotiating strategy, and maybe the Opposition will consider it.

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): The whole House will have noted that when the Prime Minister was asked about freedom of movement, he evaded the question. May I ask him directly—it is a simple yes or no—to say that in any future negotiation on rejoining the EU, freedom of movement will not be on the table?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is getting way ahead of himself. There is no proposal for a referendum; there is no deal on the table. All I have said is that, as we go towards this negotiation, it makes sense to consider also our longer-term options, because it helps our European partners if they know where Britain wants to go in the future. That is all that is being said at this moment in time.

Gordon McKee (Glasgow South) (Lab): Britain has enormous strengths in AI. We attracted almost as much private investment as the EU 27 combined last year, but in an industry dominated by the United States and China, it is only by co-operating with our friends in Europe that we can achieve the scale necessary to keep ourselves safe and to thrive. Does the Prime Minister agree that a technology partnership is one of the ways in which we could rebuild our relationship with the EU?

The Prime Minister: That is an excellent thought, and that is exactly what we may be able to strengthen as part of our G20 presidency year. I point my hon. Friend towards the actions of the AI Minister, who has regained access to US AI frontier models for the AI Security Institute. That shows that we are in a good position to broker new standards on AI across the world and make arrangements with all our partners.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion Preseli) (PC): I commend the Prime Minister for his statement and specifically for his acknowledgment of the significant harm that Brexit has wrought on our communities. I welcome his desire for a serious conversation about the long-term relationship with the European Union. Does he agree that for any dialogue to be serious, it has to include a the full range of options, including membership of the customs union, the single market and possibly the European Union?

The Prime Minister: I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman is taking an open-minded approach. At this stage, as we look to move beyond the decade that was not the best for Britain—let us be honest about that—it is right that we have a discussion in the House about where we want to go and where we want to take this country in the next decade. Let us be clearer about our direction in the next decade than we were in the last. That is what I will try to bring as Prime Minister for this country. I am not going to turn away from questions just because they might be awkward or difficult. That is what has got us into this position. We have turned away from things that we should have dealt with. I am not going to do that. I appreciate the spirit that the hon. Gentleman is showing today. That is what the country needs as we go forward.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I remind Members that they need to speed up, please, because we are finishing this statement at around 5.30 pm.

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): I congratulate the Prime Minister on the work that he is doing with allies to promote resolution to conflicts around the world, particularly in the middle east and Ukraine. Nevertheless, my constituents remain extremely anxious about the effect of the situation in the strait of Hormuz on their fuel bills, going into what will probably be a difficult winter. Can the Prime Minister provide reassurance that he will try to protect the most vulnerable from increases in energy bills going forward, and will also continue our acceleration away from dependence on fossil fuels and further towards renewables, so that we are less open to energy price shocks in the future?

The Prime Minister: I can assure my hon. Friend that reducing the cost of energy is a core priority of this Government, as I said at the conference in Liverpool just over a week ago. I have already removed VAT from electricity bills; there is more to come, and we will set that out soon.

Sarah Bool (South Northamptonshire) (Con): If the Prime Minister is so keen to support our farmers, there is one step he could take that is entirely within his control, which is to scrap the family farm tax. Will he do so, and show a genuine commitment to our farmers?

The Prime Minister: As the hon. Lady knows, changes have been made, but that is not the only issue affecting British farming, which is why I have made the statement I have made today.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): The Prime Minister loves his music, as does Rob, a constituent of mine who is a member of the Musicians' Union. He welcomed the Government's plan for music, "Turn It Up", and its

support for local venues, but that plan is quiet about what the future relationship with Europe will look like when it comes to touring. With 59% of musicians saying that EU touring is no longer viable, will the Prime Minister commit to putting visa waivers for this specific purpose on the table on 20 November?

The Prime Minister: Let me be plain: I would like to see the return of visa-free access to Europe for British musicians and performers.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): On 28 September, Javier Milei initiated annex VII arbitration proceedings against the United Kingdom in relation to halting activities at the Sea Lion oilfield. That deadline expired yesterday, and I assume that we have not complied. The Government have already said that they would robustly defend the Falkland Islands against this, which is great. Javier Milei will now initiate proceedings under the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea. I agree that we should push back against this. However, last May, the former Defence Secretary, the right hon. Member for Rawmarsh and Conisbrough (John Healey), said from the Dispatch Box that the

“most proximate, and the most potentially serious”

legal challenge facing us about the Chagos islands was “the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea.”—[*Official Report*, 22 May 2025; Vol. 767, c. 1291.]

Why are we prepared to defend the Falkland Islands against ITLOS, but not the Chagos islands?

The Prime Minister: I have been very clear this afternoon that we will defend the Falkland Islands, and I reiterated that to the Falkland Islands’ Government at our recent conference. I did discuss the matter of the Chagos islands in New York, and particularly the crucial need to secure the future of our base at Diego Garcia. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that that is what we will do.

Tom Rutland (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Lab): Many of my younger constituents feel that their horizons have been shortened and their opportunities limited by the restrictions on their ability to travel, study and work in Europe, post Brexit. They simply want the same opportunities that were available to the generations before them. Does the Prime Minister agree that, through a new youth experience scheme, they should get those opportunities?

The Prime Minister: I believe that this generation, which has so much potential and so much promise, deserves the same thing that so many of us took for granted, which is the ability to travel and study in Europe with ease. That is why, as I said a moment ago, the youth mobility component of the proposed deal matters greatly to me.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Reform): We now know that Iran has targeted bases on our soil. We already knew that Iranian agents who had been charged with terrorism offences entered the United Kingdom on small boats, so will the Prime Minister do what Reform UK would do—declare a national security emergency, because we have a gaping hole in our borders right now, send the Royal Navy into the channel, and shut down the entire asylum farce, once and for all—to truly fulfil his duty as Prime Minister, which is to keep the British people safe?

The Prime Minister: I can remember a time when the right hon. Gentleman stood up in this House and made serious proposals—sadly, not today. If he had checked the facts recently, he would have seen that small boat crossings are coming down under this Government. When he was Immigration Minister, what did they do? They went up and up. Those are the facts; he should engage with them.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): Madam Deputy Speaker, you will be aware that I absolutely love my town of Harlow. [*Interruption.*] Somebody who loved it even more than me, and apparently my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Peter Swallow), was the late, great Jean Clark, a former Harlow councillor who sadly passed away during the recess. She will be dearly missed, and I would love the Prime Minister to pay tribute to a real Harlow legend.

The Prime Minister will be aware that many small and medium-sized businesses in Harlow depend on trade with the EU. They have been pressured by the increased red tape that we have seen since Brexit. Will he confirm to those businesses that he is not talking about a rerun of the Brexit referendum, or a rerun of those negotiations, but about ensuring that we get the best deal for businesses in Harlow?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has paid a touching tribute to Jean, and I am pleased to reiterate that from the Dispatch Box. I know that she will be much missed in Harlow. He is exactly right: this is not about rerunning anything, but about getting a pragmatic arrangement that improves the position. I think most of the common-sense people of Harlow will fully understand what I am trying to do.

Patrick Spencer (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): Can I just get clarity? The Prime Minister said that he wanted to increase defence spending, but then he backtracked. He then said he would prioritise welfare—sorry, he promised to cut welfare, before prioritising it over defence. Despite his making a commitment to not reopen the Brexit debate, that is exactly what he has now done. He said here in the Chamber that there would be no referendum. Does that mean he would consider taking Britain back into Europe unilaterally?

The Prime Minister: I was trying to follow that question, but it was going on. The answer is no, full stop.

Peter Swallow: The Prime Minister is right to be honest with the British public. Brexit has made us economically and socially poorer; it has made it harder to tackle illegal immigration; and it is driving a cost of living crisis for my constituents. That is why the Prime Minister is also right to say that the status quo cannot hold. Can I urge him to take a position of maximum pragmatism ahead of the EU summit in November, so that we can make sure we get a closer relationship with Europe and a better deal for the British people?

The Prime Minister: I will absolutely do that. The quality of the conversations is already improving, and I am confident that we can steer things to a successful conclusion.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): In Bath, we led the rebellion against Brexit, and I have raised time and again here in Parliament how the Conservatives' botched Brexit deal has harmed hundreds of small businesses in my constituency. We have already heard this afternoon that endless paperwork and red tape harms not just the food and drinks industry, but all business sectors, and small businesses in particular. While I recognise that the Prime Minister is focusing on the next six weeks, can he outline his ambition for negotiating cuts to the red tape and endless paperwork for businesses across the board, to support small businesses like those in Bath?

The Prime Minister: That is the deal that is on the table. It is not for the whole economy, but for those sectors that I mentioned today. If we can land that, it points to our going further in the future. I appreciate that the hon. Lady has been a consistent voice on this matter. If only her pragmatism was mirrored by those on the Conservative Benches.

Euan Stainbank (Falkirk) (Lab): The Prime Minister will be aware of the concerns of our vehicle manufacturers about the consequences if the UK does not secure exemptions from "Made in Europe" as drafted, and I welcome his assurances that the Government are prepared to act to harmonise our approach on Chinese imports in order to achieve that. Does he agree that if there are any changes to tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles, there is no reason for a different approach to be taken to Chinese electric bus imports?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend will remember that we visited Alexander Dennis in his constituency when Greater Manchester was buying buses from it. I have the strongest commitment to Scottish manufacturing, and indeed to manufacturing across the UK. We need to make common cause with Europe on the whole question of tackling Chinese exports and the damaging effect that they can have in undercutting British industry.

Aphra Brandreth (Chester South and Eddisbury) (Con): In recent weeks, we have seen once again that Iran poses a grave threat to the British people and our allies. Our intelligence relationships are our first line of defence, and Israel is among our most valuable partners in countering that threat. Given the fallout from his decision to sanction Israeli settlements and the deteriorating relationship that has followed, will the Prime Minister give the House a clear assurance today that intelligence co-operation with Israel is continuing in full—or is he putting at risk the safety and security of the British people?

The Prime Minister: It is possible to have differences on one issue, but then to co-operate on others. Of course we co-operate on intelligence and security with many international partners, including Israel. We have also been in discussions about the British presence in East Jerusalem, and we work to secure British interests all the time.

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): I would be very interested to hear what the Prime Minister has to say, in this international update, about companies in foreign ownership yet again closing down vital Scottish industries. This time, it is Syngenta's Chinese

owners in Grangemouth who will make 377 people redundant on site, and we all know that this means that thousands will be affected in the wider supply chain. The Prime Minister is right to talk about the pressing need to reindustrialise vast parts of the country. Will he come to Grangemouth and listen to local people who have had the heart ripped out of their community, and will he commit to spending the £200 million from the National Wealth Fund to save jobs and build the industrial future that Grangemouth and Scotland need?

The Prime Minister: I do want to visit Grangemouth, as soon as my diary allows, because I recognise some of the very difficult issues that my hon. Friend is dealing with, and we have to secure a good transition for industry in his constituency. I cannot give him a date today, but I give him a commitment that I will as soon as I can.

Sorcha Eastwood (Lagan Valley) (Alliance): Northern Ireland voted to remain, and believe you me, no part of the UK has suffered more through Brexit than Northern Ireland. If there is a chance to make sure that my constituents in Lagan Valley have cheaper electricity, we are there. What assurance can the Prime Minister give me today that he is in live discussions with my colleagues in the Northern Ireland Executive to ensure that Northern Ireland gets the best out of any possible deal?

The Prime Minister: That is my intent, stated from this Dispatch Box. I hope that we can work with the hon. Lady and her colleagues to deliver what could be a very real change, felt by her constituents and many more.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): For the fourth time of asking, in any negotiations with the EU, will the Prime Minister rule out a return to freedom of movement?

The Prime Minister: It is not on the table, and it is not up for discussion. I am sorry that that does not suit the hon. Gentleman's political purpose.

May I clarify something, Mr Speaker? The National Farmers Union is waiting to see the terms of any deal, so it is neutral at the moment. I thought that I had better correct the record before the end of this statement.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): Does the Prime Minister view himself as the Prime Minister of Britain, or the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom? I ask because the sanitary and phytosanitary deal that he seeks to negotiate with the EU is exclusively a GB-EU SPS deal, which means that Northern Ireland remains under the colonial rule of the EU on all SPS matters, whereas if it were a UK-EU deal, the UK could take back control in Northern Ireland of EU laws in which we currently have no say whatsoever.

The Prime Minister: I can say to the hon. and learned Gentleman that this will also have the effect of reducing checks in the Irish sea, which will bring a benefit for his constituents. Of course, the bigger benefits for Northern Ireland are in relation to energy, and I think that is something that his constituents would want me to pursue.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): The Prime Minister likes to present himself as a straight-talking kind of guy, but again and again he has been asked a straight question and not given a straight answer. Can he rule out—yes or no—taking Britain back into freedom of movement while he is Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister: I do not know how many times I need to remind the hon. Gentleman of the commitment that I made to the red lines in our manifesto, which include freedom of movement. I do not know if he has just not been listening, even though he has been sat there all afternoon. It is simply not on the table in these discussions.

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): The Prime Minister has spoken encouragingly about closer ties with the EU. Between this and the renewed appetite for electoral reform, I welcome the Labour party's recent adoption of Liberal Democrat policy priorities. The leader of the Conservatives was right to say that the Opposition have won the argument—it just was not her.

On international relations, Britain has always straddled two global alliances: our European neighbours and our global Commonwealth brothers and sisters. With that in mind, in order to build a more comprehensive global security network, to unlock future growth and to add to the closer links with the EU to which the Prime Minister has committed, could he inform the House about the Government's position on strengthening integration with Canada, New Zealand and Australia? Will he also meet the newly formed CANZUK all-party parliamentary group to discuss this important issue further?

The Prime Minister: I will at some point—I will come back to the hon. Gentleman on precisely when. I had an excellent conversation with the Prime Minister of Canada, as I mentioned a moment ago. I think there is huge importance in the English-speaking world uniting in this moment, working together and navigating a difficult climate, but also in forging new partnerships to do so.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): The Falklands have to get explicit permission from this country to have new oil and gas licences, so will the Prime Minister consent to them? If the answer is yes, why is it okay to drill in the South Pacific but not in the North sea? If it is no, how does that figure with self-determination of the Falklands Islands?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is jumping to the conclusion that I have made decisions on matters in relation to the North sea, but I have been very clear that we support the Falkland Islanders' right to self-determination. We will defend it resolutely in the face of hostility from Argentina, and the Foreign Secretary will say more on that in due course.

Chris Law (Dundee Central) (SNP): The Prime Minister, as a proud Unionist, will be acutely aware that despite Scotland voting overwhelmingly to remain in the EU, it was dragged out against its will because it is part of the United Kingdom. Since then, support for Scottish independence has only risen. Two thirds of the last 22 independent polls show support for independence, the Scottish Parliament has the highest majority ever of pro-independence MSPs, and it voted 72 to 55 in favour of a section 30 agreement for a referendum on Scotland's

future. In the Prime Minister's own words to me last month, a "clear consensus" has now been met, so I ask him a simple question: what steps is he now taking with the Scottish Government to secure a legal pathway so that Scotland can decide its own future and rejoin the EU?

The Prime Minister: The discussions that I am having with the Scottish Government and will have later this month are on a model of deeper devolution for Scotland that can get growth going in all parts of the country. That is where my priority lies and that is what I will do.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): I welcome the Prime Minister's clarification that he believes that the UK referendum was legitimate. The Intelligence and Security Committee recommended six years ago that the UK intelligence community should produce an assessment of Russian interference in the EU referendum, and that an unclassified summary be published. That did not happen. Why does the Prime Minister think that his predecessors have been so reluctant to speak about Russian attempts to interfere in the referendum?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman might want to ask the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), sitting to his left, because the Russia report from the ISC found that Her Majesty's Government had not sought evidence. Those are the facts as found by the Committee, and those are matters and questions for that Government rather than this one.

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): The Prime Minister has told this House repeatedly about the involvement of Russian authorities in our democratic process, and the fact that they are willing to spend millions and millions of pounds to interfere in our democratic process. Given that, does the Prime Minister concur with me that photo identification at polling stations during elections is not just important, but an absolute necessity?

The Prime Minister: I would say that we do want to uphold the highest standards of security in our voting system, but the Bill before the House does that, as well as allowing more people the ability to vote.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): Today was a very sad day for my residents in Mid Dorset and North Poole, with the very last sailing of the Barfleur from Poole to her twin town of Cherbourg in France after 34 years of continuous trade, and this is blamed on Brexit red tape, food export restrictions and travel limitations on people who can travel only for 90 in 180 days. Will the Prime Minister please ask his officials to do all they can to keep open the window of opportunity to keep this going, and make sure that the issue of UK ports and their role is included in the UK-EU summit?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady raises a really important point, and the Minister for Europe has just said that he is willing to meet her to discuss it, because it is a real shame, given that level of history. But again, that is why we are trying to negotiate a better arrangement. We will do exactly as she says, and look at how what we are trying to achieve could benefit British ports.

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): Talk of an energy ceasefire shows once again how central energy security is to national security, so will the Prime Minister reassure the House that the rumoured cuts to the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero budget will not undermine his Government's ability to protect our critical energy infrastructure, or indeed to protect our constituents from the high energy bills that undermine society's cohesion?

The Prime Minister: I say to the hon. Lady that protecting our critical national infrastructure and our energy infrastructure is a crucial part of national security. It is the essence of the deal—the partnership—we struck with Germany last week, and we will ensure that there is sufficient funding to achieve that via the Ministry of Defence and, indeed, DESNZ.

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): The EU asylum and migration pact ticks all the Prime Minister's boxes in bringing control and safety to the asylum system, and it is cheaper than the bilateral agreements that his Government are making with France and Belgium, so why is it not on the agenda for his Government?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to look at what the hon. Gentleman is saying if he writes to me in detail on that very matter.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): During the last couple of hours, I have heard the Prime Minister talk about three of the four pillars of our national defence—our military, our resilience and our alliances—but he has yet to mention the crucial fourth pillar, which is the importance of the international rules-based order and the institutions that underpin it. Is he going to take any active steps to defend the International Criminal Court and the UK citizens who work there against the American sanctions that have been placed on it?

The Prime Minister: Obviously, we are looking at the decisions that have been reached in relation to that very issue, and we will of course defend any British citizens who have been unfairly treated.

Dr Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): I have listened carefully to what the Prime Minister has had to say, and I am very grateful to him. Would he agree with me that in our international affairs we must do all we can to support the BBC World Service, which is the voice of this country to the world—the voice of truth and facts?

The Prime Minister: Indeed. I am a very big supporter of the World Service, and indeed of the BBC as a whole.

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): Will the Prime Minister state categorically that he is in no way considering a May 2027 general election?

The Prime Minister: Yes.

Ben Maguire (North Cornwall) (LD): The US President's disastrous war in the middle east has massively driven up the price of liquified petroleum gas and heating oil in my rural constituency. Pensioners and struggling families will be forced to leave their heating off, risking their health. As reducing bills is the Prime Minister's

stated priority, will he please consider removing VAT from heating oil and LPG, and include them in the energy price cap?

The Prime Minister: I understand the point the hon. Gentleman is making. Obviously, different parts of the UK are more dependent on heating oil and that issue has really come to the fore throughout the course of this year, so I will consider what he has to say.

Just to clarify in relation to the previous question: yes, in no way am I considering a May 2027 general election.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Reform): I know that the people of the Falkland Islands will be reassured by the Prime Minister telling President Trump and the UN General Assembly that the clear and declared will of the islands is to remain British, but will he please afford the same rights to the people of the Chagos islands? Surely, all citizens of overseas territories should have the right of self-determination and the right to stay British.

The Prime Minister: We will certainly uphold our obligations in respect of the Falklands Islands. As the hon. Gentleman knows, the issues related to the Chagos islands are different—they are not strictly comparable—but we will always take the right and fair approach.

Mr Adnan Hussain (Blackburn) (Ind): The Prime Minister is confident that close ties with the EU will deliver growth, but what evidence can he provide to this House that this will translate into tangible improvements for the communities that felt left behind by globalisation and then voted for Brexit? Does he accept that we have a duty to respect that democratic decision, and that reopening this deeply divisive debate must be justified by clear measurable benefits that could not be achieved otherwise outside the European Union?

The Prime Minister: The clear measurable benefits are containers and lorries full of fresh produce not sitting at ports and going off. That is a clear and measurable benefit to a business, as is extra several billion pound-sized growth in the UK economy. I would not be pursuing this were there not tangible differences for British business at the end of it. The figures are from the Treasury. They quantify an increase of at least 0.2% in UK GDP if we get the right deal, possibly more, and that is worth pursuing at this moment in time.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): For the final question, I call Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker—my legs are the strongest in the Chamber, without a doubt.

Closer alignment with Brussels has caused great alarm in Strangford and across Northern Ireland. If the Government's idea of a reset with Europe involves further alignment, will the Prime Minister explicitly state today whether he intends permanently to lock Northern Ireland into foreign laws under an unelected European court, or will he finally take a hard line to fully restore the Acts of Union and the internal market of the United Kingdom, as we should have had from the start? "All together or not at all" must be the message.

The Prime Minister: I understand what the hon. Gentleman is saying, but I did not negotiate the arrangement that is currently in place. What I am trying to do is make things better for the people of Northern Ireland. I am confident in saying to him that if we get the right deal on energy connection, that could make an appreciable difference for his constituents, as could the paperwork on Irish sea crossings as well. There are real benefits that I can achieve here that will improve things for Northern Ireland—possibly not to his complete satisfaction, but they are steps forward.

National Security

Mr Speaker: Before we come to the Home Secretary's statement, I note that Joshua Kerry has been charged with a number of offences, including the murder of Ann Widdecombe and engaging in conduct in preparation of acts of terrorism, including against the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage). Those cases are therefore sub judice. I am granting a limited waiver so that Members can refer to the fact that those charges have been brought, and the way in which related matters have been handled by the police. However, Members should not discuss the details of those cases or speculate on the guilt or innocence of the individual while it is rightly being dealt with in the courts.

I also say to the House that I have not been told which Members were on the list—I have had no information. I only know when Members personally contact me, which means I find it difficult to help and support. I think that this is not being handled well, and I wonder what we are going to do in the future. If Members have concerns, please let me know privately. Obviously, it is very hard to know without the list.

5.45 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Shabana Mahmood): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement on national security. Since the House last sat, we have received a reminder of the threats ranged against this country. That has included the danger posed not only by extremists and terrorists, but by foreign powers seeking to undermine our nation's security. Those threats have targeted people, businesses and critical infrastructure, but above all else, they are attacks on our values and way of life. The first duty of Government is the security of the nation, so I will update the House on our response to those threats, and how we are acting to keep our country and citizens safe.

I start with the threat posed by terrorists and extremists, and I know one case will be on the minds of many in this House today. It is now three months since the murder of Ann Widdecombe at her home in Devon. We continue to mourn her loss. On 2 October, the suspect was charged with a terrorism offence, including preparing an act of terror against the leader of Reform UK, the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage). I know that this news will have been deeply distressing for the hon. Member, so I say to him and his family that they have my profoundest sympathies at what must be an awful time. As I have said before, an attack on any one of us is an attack on us all.

I know other Members, as well as people outside of this House, have recently been contacted by the police in connection with that case. To all those affected, I offer the same sympathies and solidarity as I do to the hon. Member for Clacton. At times like these, we must stand together as one House. For those who serve, politics is a calling. Robust debate and criticism are part of this job; threats, abuse and violence are not.

Today, as on so many other days, we remember Ann Widdecombe, Sir David Amess and Jo Cox—three beloved colleagues, and three champions of our democracy. We owe it to them, and to everyone who believes in a fair and open country, to ensure that those who serve, at all levels, receive the protection they deserve.

[Shabana Mahmood]

We must first ensure that every opportunity was taken in this particular case to stop the attacker. The Independent Office for Police Conduct is investigating the response to an attempted break-in at the hon. Member for Clacton's home last year. I have asked it to conduct that investigation both thoroughly and swiftly, and we expect it to conclude early next year. I would caution everyone not to pre-empt that investigation.

Regardless of the outcome, it is clear that there is insufficient protection for those who serve. I can therefore announce that I will expand, with immediate effect, police support to political figures who are not currently Members of Parliament. This will include former Members of Parliament, peers and party spokespeople, giving them access to a named police officer, as well as help with wider security measures.

However, we must go further. Today, I also announce an independent, root-and-branch review of the protective security provided by the state to those in public life. The review will be led by Sir Stephen Lovegrove, the former National Security Adviser. It will examine protective security from every angle, including physical threats, online risks, and the dangers posed within our more polarised society. It will hear directly from Ministers, Members of Parliament and other high-profile people in public life, and it will report within six months. It will complement Sir Robert Buckland's ongoing review into the killing of Sir David Amess. It is rightly an independent review, but my commitment is that its findings must and will lead to tangible change, and that the state's resources will be rebalanced to protect those people and places that need it most.

The terrorist threat is not only ranged at those who serve in public life. In recent days, we marked the first anniversary of the terror attack at the Heaton Park synagogue. On that awful day in October last year, as our Jewish community celebrated Yom Kippur, two brave men, Melvin Cravitz and Adrian Daulby, lost their lives and three others were seriously injured. What happened that day must be fully understood so, as requested by the coroner, I can today announce a public inquiry into the deaths of Mr Cravitz and Mr Daulby. This will ensure that all evidence can be heard, including any sensitive national security material that could not otherwise be fully heard in the coroner's court.

Tragically, Heaton Park is just one of a series of attacks on our Jewish community that, in the year since, have included: the stabbing of two Jewish men in Golders Green, north London, with a trial now set for March 2027; a failed attack on the Israeli embassy, for which the attacker was jailed last week for 20 years; a spate of arson attacks across north London; and last month, just hours before Yom Kippur began, a foiled but potentially lethal plot on the Jewish community in Manchester. In that case, two men, both Iranian nationals, have now been charged with terrorism offences. I pay tribute to the police and the security services for what was a long-running investigation conducted with their customary professionalism and skill.

Faced with the threat posed to our Jewish community, we have increased funding to the police by an additional £250 million to boost police presence in key Jewish areas and to tackle antisemitism on our streets, but I know we cannot simply build higher walls around our

Jewish community and expect them to live in fear. We must root out the evil of antisemitism wherever it lurks in society, and this Government are committed to that effort and are tackling antisemitism wherever it is found, be it online, in our schools and universities, in our public services or on our streets.

The threat posed to our Jewish community shows us how the lines are increasingly blurring between extremism and state threats. We know that the Iranian state is targeting our Jewish community. Earlier this year, the Islamic Movement of Companions of the Right claimed responsibility for the arson attacks in north London. We know that members of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps were behind that group and most certainly directed its other attacks across Europe. This speaks to a wider trend. States like Iran are using proxies to conduct hostile activity here in Britain. They pay criminals or exploit naive volunteers to attack our country and its citizens while maintaining an air of plausible deniability.

It is a brazen threat, but it is one that we are alert to and will not tolerate. That is why, this summer, we fast-tracked the National Security (State Threats) Act 2026 through Parliament, which created stronger powers and tougher punishments to deal with state-backed threats to domestic security. Under these new powers, we have designated both the IMCR and the IRGC.

That brings us to the recent events at RAF Fairford. As the Prime Minister has said, our assessment is that it is highly likely to have been co-ordinated by a known individual based in Iran, and almost certainly directed by Iran's IRGC. The Foreign Secretary has today summoned the Iranian ambassador, and he will condemn Iran's continued attempts to undermine our safety. We are also sanctioning two individuals involved in conducting espionage and attacks in Europe and the US on behalf of the Government of Iran, and we will not hesitate to take further action to restrict Iran's capacity to threaten international security.

The threat is not contained to Iran, of course. As the invasion of Ukraine enters its fifth winter, the Kremlin continues to lash out at European countries. Together with the EU, we attributed to Russia an attack on Poland's energy grid last December that could have caused half a million citizens to lose electricity. Similarly, we are acting against the threat on our shores. Last month, a British man was charged under the National Security Act 2023 over alleged contact with Russia's military intelligence agency, and in recent days a Royal Navy sailor, accused of spying on behalf of Russia, has been charged under the same Act.

We remain vigilant to the threats posed by China, too. MI5 recently warned universities and academics to cut ties with the China General Technology Research Institute, which had been funding research in the UK with the "primary purpose" of improving China's espionage operations. Those who continue to work with this group will face criminal charges for aiding a foreign state, and lengthy prison sentences as a result.

The threats we face today are complex and often interconnected. They target communities and citizens, the critical infrastructure that we depend on, and the institutions and individuals that make up our democracy. Our response to this growing threat is rightly multifaceted. We are tackling extremism in our communities and in the online world. In "Protecting What Matters", our social cohesion plan, we set out a range of measures to

tackle this threat, including banning those who seek to come to this country to spread hatred, and committing to publishing an annual “State of Extremism” report, which will identify the threats we face and, crucially, equip frontline professionals to counter them.

We are also adapting to the changing nature of the violent threats we face. Following the horrors of Southport, we have taken action to curb the threat posed by individuals fixated on violence. This has included strengthening the handling of repeat Prevent referrals, and making it clear that referrals can be made to Prevent without a clearly identifiable ideology. The Online Safety Act 2023 has also ensured that thousands of services now have stronger age checks and safety measures.

In addressing the threat posed by states, make no mistake: our police and security services are on permanent watch. Since 2023, more than 23 people have been charged under the National Security Act, leading to five convictions and sentences totalling more than 48 years’ imprisonment so far, including 18 years for two men convicted of spying for China. We have imposed more than 4,000 sanctions linked to Russia and Iran, and we have placed both on the enhanced tier of the foreign influence registration scheme, which means that anyone conducting activity on their behalf must register it or face the prospect of prison. But more is required, and as I have noted already, the National Security (State Threats) Act has given us powerful new tools to tackle state threats. We are also building a specialist mission in Counter Terrorism Policing to disrupt state threats, and we are tightening security around military bases.

Of course, resilience is about more than our physical defences. We are also establishing a national centre for information defence to tackle disinformation from states. Our Cyber Security and Resilience (Network and Information Systems) Bill will protect everyday services by strengthening national defences against cyber-attacks. We will go further with our upcoming national security Bill and give intelligence agencies and the police stronger powers to bear down on cyber-criminals.

Mr Speaker, let me say this to the public: if you are ever worried about someone you know, tell a teacher, a doctor or someone else you trust. Institutions like Prevent exist to stop people following a dark path from which there may be no return. If ever you see something suspicious, report it immediately to the police or a relevant authority. To businesses, in an increasingly online world, consider the cyber-threats that you face and strengthen your defences. Finally, to those responsible for some part of our critical infrastructure, we will work with you. The National Protective Security Authority and the National Cyber Security Centre stand ready to help. We can defeat those who mean us harm, but we are strongest when we act together.

In a more dangerous world, we are faced by threats from without and within that target our democracy and our way of life. In response, we are adapting and strengthening our defences. As ever, I commend the work of the police and our security services who labour in silence to keep us safe, and I am sure the whole House joins me in offering thanks to them for that vital, lifesaving work.

This Government are taking action in support of that effort, but as I have set out in this statement, I know there is more that we must do to protect this country, to protect our citizens and to protect our democracy.

I hope the whole House can join together in that vital work, which is so much greater than any of our differences, because I know that those of us who choose to serve all share a belief: we will never be defeated by those who mean us harm.

Mr Speaker, with my thanks to you for allowing it to run a little longer than would usually be the case, I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Home Secretary.

5.59 pm

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): I thank the Home Secretary for advance sight of her statement. The whole House supports the security services and the police for their work. I pay tribute to the brave men and women who serve our country in that way.

On RAF Fairford, seven suspects were arrested, one a dual UK-Iranian national. These men were all released quickly on bail, about which senior US officials have expressed surprise. Can the Home Secretary tell the House whether she thinks it was reasonable to release those men so quickly, and whether she believes they pose any risk? Will she also tell the House whether the Government were aware in advance of any threat to RAF Fairford and, if so, what action they took?

As the Prime Minister and, just now, the Home Secretary have said, it is highly likely that the Iranian state directed this. It is not acceptable for a state like Iran to organise hostile activity on our soil. After the Salisbury attacks by Russia, then Prime Minister Theresa May expelled 23 Russian diplomats. Will the Government now take similar action and expel Iranian diplomats, especially those thought to be involved in hostile activity or espionage? Does she agree that in these circumstances it was unwise of the Foreign Secretary to publicly shake hands with the Iranian Foreign Minister on 24 September, in contravention of long-standing Foreign Office policy?

I note that on 4 October the US withdrew all its B-1 bombers from RAF Fairford, and both the President and vice-president of the US ascribed this to security concerns. Will the Home Secretary confirm that that is indeed why the B-1s left, and does she have any concerns about the safety of US military assets here in the UK? Shortly after the RAF incident, two Latvian men were arrested inside RAF Molesworth, which also hosts US forces? Can she comment on whether any foreign state may also have been involved in that incident?

I thank the Home Secretary for her update on the police response to the terrible murder of Ann Widdecombe. The whole House mourns her, and those who knew Ann will miss her. This comes on the heels of the tragic murders of our dear colleagues Jo Cox and David Amess not that long ago. The threat against current and former Members of Parliament is clearly a very real one.

Joshua Kerry, the man accused of murdering Ann, is said by prosecutors to have an “extreme left-wing mindset”, suggesting that this was a politically motivated murder. He is also accused of conducting online reconnaissance on over 100 public figures and trying to break into the home of the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) last year. It has been reported that despite recovering substantial amounts of CCTV, that case was closed. It was then reopened—

Mr Speaker: Order. We need to be very careful about where we are going on motivation. We are creeping into what a court might decide, and we are not the court. Please can we steer a little bit away from that? We all want a prosecution. I want nothing to risk this case, because she was a friend to all.

Chris Philp: I was quoting what the prosecutor said, Mr Speaker, but I will of course take your advice, as always. I was going to ask whether the Home Secretary shares my concern, which she alluded to in her statement, that the cancellation of the earlier investigation may have meant that opportunities to prevent the later tragedy were missed.

I understand that a number of current and former MPs have very recently been contacted to be told that they appeared on a list made by Kerry. Kerry was arrested on 11 July, but it was not until last week—nearly three months later—that some on that list, including current and former MPs, were notified. Can the Home Secretary tell the House when she knew about that list? Does she agree that it would be wrong if those on it had had that information withheld from them for a period of time, potentially as long as three months?

Threats to democratically elected representatives are threats to democracy itself, so I welcome the Home Secretary's announcement on protective security, including for those outside Parliament—recognising, of course, that it is Mr Speaker who plays the leading role in protecting Members of Parliament.

I would also like to mark the anniversary of the terrible deaths of Melvin Cravitz and Adrian Daulby at Heaton Park synagogue in an antisemitic attack perpetrated by an Islamist extremist. In the year since, I have twice visited Golders Green in the aftermath of antisemitic attacks. As the Home Secretary said, in the last 10 days two Iranian small boat illegal immigrants have been charged with plotting a further antisemitic terror attack in Manchester. It is more important than ever that we redouble our efforts to fight antisemitism and Islamist extremism with all our might.

On that topic, I wrote to the Home Secretary on 27 September asking her to deny an entry visa to Randa Abdel-Fattah, who praised the appalling terrorist massacre on 7 October as “exhilarating”. But the Home Secretary allowed her into our country anyway. Why did the Home Secretary do that, given the obvious risk that Abdel-Fattah might radicalise others with her antisemitic and pro-terror views? I really think that demands a specific answer.

There are clearly a wide range of serious threats to the safety of our country, political leaders across the political spectrum and our Jewish community. I know that the whole House will be united in wanting to fight those threats. I thank again those serving in the security services and the police, who work tirelessly to keep us safe. The whole House supports them in their vital work.

Shabana Mahmood: I thank the shadow Home Secretary for his comments and questions, though much of what he has asked, as I believe he knows full well, relates to ongoing investigations. As such, there are limits to what I can share with the House today. I also observe that there are limits to what is appropriate to be said publicly while investigations are ongoing. That is not just a restriction that we impose on ourselves for the sake of

it; it is an important part of ensuring the integrity of our criminal justice system and the independence of police investigations.

I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will therefore understand, even if his questions do not suggest so, that in relation to RAF Fairford and the decision to bail suspects, that was entirely an operational decision for the police, who are solely responsible for that investigation. I have full confidence in the police as they carry out that investigation. Because it is ongoing, more facts will be established, and I am sure that the police will take appropriate action when they come to light.

Those suspects are bailed under strict conditions, and no one—certainly no one in our legal jurisdiction—should be commenting on the rightness or wrongness of that, because it is in our jurisdiction and we have a responsibility to ensure that the investigation has full integrity. If there are criminal proceedings to follow, those proceedings must not be prejudiced by commentary beforehand. I hope that the right hon. Gentleman understands why I will not go further than what I have said in my statement on that point. I think that a more responsible approach from all Members of this House on this matter is required.

I would not comment on intelligence briefings, and nor have other Home Secretaries. I will not compromise an ongoing investigation. As more facts are established, they will be public when it is appropriate for them to be made so.

The right hon. Gentleman made a point about action taken by the previous Government after the Salisbury attack and laid out his suggested actions against the Iranians at this stage. I set out the actions that the Foreign Secretary is already taking, but we will not take anything off the table as the investigation matures, more facts are established, and more detail is known on exactly what happened. The Government will always keep under review all the methods we have at our disposal for responding to any hostile state carrying out activity in our country.

On RAF Molesworth, again, I suspect that the right hon. Gentleman knows this, but the police have said that their investigation is at a very early stage. At the moment, there is nothing to suggest that this incident is connected to the events at RAF Fairford. The police are continuing to investigate. It would not be appropriate to provide a wider running commentary on that investigation while it is still in its early stages.

The shadow Home Secretary moved on to the circumstances relating to the murder of Ann Widdecombe and the recent charging decisions against Joshua Kerry on terror charges. Again, it would not be appropriate for me to comment on conversations between me and counter-terror policing, but I do not believe that information has been withheld from anybody at any point in an inappropriate manner. This is a thorough investigation whereby the police have been checking devices and other material at the property of that individual to establish a fuller picture. As that fuller picture has emerged, they have been sharing information; they have sought to do so appropriately, in my view.

I know that people have been contacted by the police. That is a matter for the police to pursue. I think the implication of the shadow Home Secretary's questions was that potentially there was a withholding of information

or that it had taken too long for it to be shared with individuals—both Members of Parliament and former Members of Parliament. I do not believe that anything has happened in this investigation that is inappropriate; that is how I will respond.

The shadow Home Secretary went on to ask questions relating to attacks on our Jewish community. In relation to the Home Secretary's powers for excluding individuals from entering our country—we have had these exchanges on a number of occasions across the Dispatch Box—I will always use my powers appropriately by looking at both threat and risk as well as the wider impact on communities. I have used those powers in some instances where that threshold has been met. I have not used them in every single one—it would not be appropriate to do so—but let me tell him that I take a robust approach to the exercise of my powers and will always use them in an appropriate way to limit the threat to our communities here at home.

I think that I have covered everything that the shadow Home Secretary said. I will ensure that I respond to his letter as soon as I finish the statement.

Mr Speaker: I gently say to the Home Secretary that it is much harder to read in a newspaper about which MPs have been targeted and named when we have no knowledge of that. That puts us all at a disadvantage, especially as we give health and wellbeing support as well as security. I think there is a gap that has not been closed.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Home Secretary for her statement and recognise the dignified way in which she, as a woman of colour, carries out her duties in trying to help and support all of us, having been at the receiving end of quite a lot of this stuff herself over many years. I say that because in the two years that I have been back here, I have lost count of how many times we have stood here to discuss the activities and antics of people in this country who want to come after MPs, peers and minority communities. Whether those are the so-called patriots who do their patrols around the streets targeting migrant communities or the virulent antisemites who go after the Jewish community, they do so seemingly because they fear very little. I agree with the Home Secretary that we can put up walls to protect those communities—but at some point the state is going to have to say: “Enough of this; we are coming after them.” As well as all the welcome protections that the Home Secretary is putting in place for the victims, what more can we all do collectively to bring the perpetrators to the place they deserve to be, which is probably in front of a judge and then in jail?

Shabana Mahmood: Mr Speaker, before I answer my hon. Friend's question, may I say that, on sharing of information, you will know that that is a matter for counter-terror policing? They are in charge of the investigation and they have got to ensure that all their actions can survive future contact with a court of law. Nobody wants to do anything that might be prejudicial in any way.

I hear the case made by you, Mr Speaker, and by other Members of the House. Let me assure you that I will pick up those conversations with counter-terror

policing and wider criminal justice system partners to ensure that we have stress-tested the robustness of our arrangements in such cases. I will come back to you directly, Mr Speaker, as well as updating the House in the future.

Mr Speaker: And the Lord Speaker.

Shabana Mahmood: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I will also ensure that I update the Lord Speaker.

My hon. Friend will know that the Government have announced substantial new additional funding for the protection of our Jewish community: about £250 million of additional money committed over a three-year period to ensure an enhanced policing posture in key Jewish community sites. That is an important step forward and a recognition of the ongoing nature of the threat that our community faces.

My hon. Friend is right on the issue of putting up ever higher walls: we have got to ensure that the security system is robust and can respond effectively. Let me say again to him that, as we can see from the sheer number of cases now appearing before the courts, the police and our security services are working around the clock to bring people to justice and to foil plots—they have done so on many occasions and will continue to do so—but we must have a wider national conversation about the cultural changes we have seen. We need a wider societal response against antisemitism, because we cannot simply put security guards everywhere. We need our citizens to be able to live together in harmony and respect, for the betterment of everyone.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): I start by sharing my support for the police and security services. As the MP for GCHQ, that means a great deal to me, given that so many of my constituents work there.

The murder of Ann Widdecombe shocked us all, and the revelations about the suspect's plans apparently to attack other MPs are deeply concerning to all of us in the House. Those of us who want protection for politicians must demand it for all, no matter the political persuasion of those politicians; that needs to be said on the record. In return, we must hope that all politicians on all sides moderate their language when necessary to lower the temperature of debate and reduce the threat against us all. That is an important part of the debate that must not be lost.

Those who target politicians must not be allowed to impose their intended chilling effect on our democracy. My thoughts remain with Ann's family, including my constituent Rev. Roger Widdecombe who leads the congregation at St Paul's in Cheltenham.

Sadly, the public discourse aimed at politicians has coarsened in the last decade, which has resulted in increased hatred, abuse and offences against politicians and retired politicians at all levels, and politically motivated killings. We must never forget what happened to Sir David Amess and Jo Cox. It is important that we can all do our jobs without intimidation, fear or worse. I know that the Speaker takes that seriously. We therefore welcome the review into the protective security provided to those in public life. It is right that it will be done swiftly.

[Max Wilkinson]

On another of the many elements of the statement, we must be clearly ever more mindful of the threat to this country from our enemies on the global stage—and those at home, too. We must do all we can to prevent those threats: especially, as we have seen in recent months, those that have wickedly targeted the Jewish community in this country. It is right that today we remember Melvin Kravitz and Adrian Daulby. We welcome the Home Secretary's comments on an inquiry for the Heaton Park attacks. Let us all remain vigilant to antisemitism and supportive of our Jewish communities—that goes for all political parties.

In April, I wrote to Ministers seeking additional support for the police to account for the added strain on their resources in areas around military bases. Ministers told me that the police should work within their existing budgets without extra support, but given what has recently happened will Ministers look again at how they can support the police forces responsible for the areas around RAF Fairford and other bases? Will the Home Secretary push Ministers to accelerate the previously announced security review and set out what she will do to strengthen the security of all bases in general?

Earlier, the Prime Minister stated that Iran and the IRGC were “highly likely” to have been behind the incident at RAF Fairford. So, finally, what action is being taken against Iranian operatives involved in that activity? Is the expulsion of diplomats being considered?

Shabana Mahmood: I thank the hon. Member for his comments and questions. On the issues relating to the murder of Ann Widdecombe, he made a point about our responsibility to lower the temperature. I observe that it is possible to have very robust debate and a thorough contest of ideas without having to cross a line and call into question our collective security. I urge all Members as ever to reflect on their own behaviour to ensure that we are modelling the right behaviour, which we expect our citizens to see. We lead the national discourse and we should seek to do it in an appropriate way without losing all of the political contestation that is a hallmark of a thriving democracy.

I welcome the hon. Gentleman's comments on remaining vigilant on antisemitism as a collective, whole of society response. All political parties have a responsibility to ensure that they are active partners in the fight against antisemitism, which is a pernicious form of hatred. We know that it has increased substantially in recent years, and we all have a responsibility there.

The hon. Gentleman will know that the issue of military bases is primarily one for the Ministry of Defence, but of course it works closely with the police and with us at the Home Office. Let me assure him that I am in good discussions with the Defence Secretary to ensure that all appropriate measures are being taken at our military bases, that we are aware of all the risks and that there are good security measures. It is my belief that there are, but of course we are never going to be complacent on that matter and will always review and ensure that our response is appropriate. I would be happy to discuss that with the hon. Gentleman as well, if needed. If he writes to me again, I can make sure that he gets an updated response that reflects the current and recent events.

Dr Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): British Jews like me find the vote by the Greens to declare Zionism racism deeply disturbing. Perhaps some Greens were misled, for Zionism is simply the belief that Jewish people have a right to self-determination in their ancestral homeland. So I am a Zionist, and who here is not a Zionist? British Jews, some of whom live in areas controlled by Green councils, are worried. How can they be reassured that they will not be the subject of political prejudice?

Shabana Mahmood: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. The policies of another political party are a matter primarily for that political party, and I would expect it to have to explain the impact of its motion on the safety and security of Jews. I believe that there are questions for the Green party leadership to look at and to answer. On the issue of Green councils, every council, regardless of which political party is running it, has to follow the law, and the law will not allow any prejudicial treatment of any of our citizens based on their protected characteristics, whether that is their race or their religion. That applies with as much fervour to the Jewish community as it does to any other community in this country, and I would expect all councils to ensure that they comply with the law. Nobody has the right to freelance on equality policy. It is set by the Government. There is a clear legal framework and every council has to follow it.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the Chair of the Home Affairs Select Committee.

Dame Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): I cannot be alone in having had many colleagues over the years report to me instances where they have received threats and the police have simply not taken them seriously. It is only when those threats have escalated and further action has been taken that the police have finally intervened, and that is simply not good enough. We have also seen in this recent case that the police communications are not appropriate and that Mr Speaker and Mr Lord Speaker are unable to offer the necessary support to those Members who have been victims. What conversation is the Home Secretary having with the police about their attitude to threats to Members of Parliament? These threats need to be taken seriously. We do not want to see another plaque put up in this Chamber for another murdered colleague.

Shabana Mahmood: I absolutely agree with the final remarks of the Chair of the Select Committee. None of us wants to be mourning another of our colleagues, either current or former, and that is why I believe that change is needed. The right hon. Lady will know that the responsibilities for the protective security system as it stands today are shared across multiple Departments, including the Parliamentary Security Department, individual local police forces, the Home Office and RAVEC—the Royal and VIP Executive Committee. It is a fragmented system and I am acknowledging today that, while everybody works hard within that system to provide a good security response for individuals in public life, it needs to be looked at again because of the range of threats that we now see, and the complexity of the changing environment.

When the system was first set up, nobody had in mind that we would have high-profile political leaders who were not in Parliament. That was not how our

political culture used to work, but things have changed and the system has not been able to keep up in the way that it needs to do so. That is why I have announced the expansion of Operation Ford to cover more people, so that at least they have some contact with police, can access advice and, where necessary, can have an assessment of their risk with other security measures attached to it. However, the system needs an overhaul, and that is why the review is an important step forward. I will be finalising official terms of reference with Stephen Lovegrove, the independent reviewer, and I will obviously ensure that the House is updated. As I say, I want this done within six months because I recognise the urgency of the situation.

Andrew Pakes (Peterborough) (Lab/Co-op): Faith matters in this country, and nothing strikes our shared British values more than attacks on places of worship. It is absolutely right that this Government call out the attacks on synagogues and other Jewish communal organisations, and it is right that Members of this House push the Government to do more to tackle antisemitism and make the resources available. There is also a wider hatred against other faiths in this country, and I am aware that in my gurdwaras, mosques and places of other religious faiths, people are worried about attacks on their communal spaces and their sacred ability to worship freely as part of modern Britain. What more can my right hon. Friend do to focus not just on antisemitism, which it is right to do, but on what support and funding are available to other places of worship, to ensure that modern Britain is a place where all our faiths have a place and are represented and protected?

Shabana Mahmood: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is a sacred ability of all our citizens who have a faith to practise their faith freely in their places of worship—a freedom that I have availed myself of on many occasions—but I understand people's fear whenever they hear of an attack, whether on a synagogue, a mosque, a gurdwara or any other place of worship. My hon. Friend might be aware that the Government have already allocated record funding of over £70 million for the protective security schemes for faith communities. That includes all faith communities. Of that money, £40 million is for the protective security for mosques scheme. I have already updated Members on the money made available to the Jewish community, given the particular range of threats to our Jewish community, but there is funding for which other faith groups can apply, for assistance with security measures.

At the Home Office, we are obviously downstream of many of these issues. We are involved when things are about to go wrong or have gone wrong, and what we can offer in terms of policy are things like security measures. My hon. Friend is right to say that we need a wider societal conversation on how we change our culture, so that we can stop the descent into a more polarised society that we have seen in recent years, and do more to build a cohesive society that is confident and where citizens can live freely alongside one another.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): I thank the Home Secretary for her statement. My colleagues will ask questions about MPs' security, but I want to touch on RAF Fairford. The Government's own terrorism tsar, Jonathan Hall KC, has said that in incidents of

serious terrorism, more information should be put out faster, sooner and in more detail to prevent misinformation. I asked the Prime Minister earlier whether there was any truth in the suggestion that some of those arrested and then bailed had Iranian diplomatic immunity. He gave the hospital pass to the Home Secretary, so let me repeat the question. Can any more be said about that, and about whether those arrested could be not only British nationals but dual Iranian-British nationals?

Shabana Mahmood: No one had or has diplomatic immunity—I can put that on the record immediately. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about the Jonathan Hall recommendations that followed the horrific attacks in Southport. We always seek to work with partners in the criminal justice system to make sure that information is shared as quickly as possible in order to prevent disinformation from spreading and to prevent people from succeeding in sowing fear in our communities. The hon. Gentleman will also understand, I hope, that the investigation is live, and how an investigation starts is not always how it ultimately ends. There are many developments along the way. If we think that the police should always have an open mind about an investigation, and if we want to protect the integrity of future court proceedings, it is important that we proceed with care. Let me assure him that I will always ensure that we put accurate information into the public domain as soon as we are able to do so, in a way that does not compromise an investigation. This investigation is still at an early stage.

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her statement. Recently, constituents have been contacting me with concerns about self-appointed uniformed groups, sometimes masked, patrolling our local area. This is becoming a nationwide phenomenon. They tell me that it is frightening and that it is stopping them going about their daily lives. Does the Home Secretary feel that the national guidance and legislation around these self-appointed patrol groups is sufficient, given that such behaviour falls outside normal protest?

Shabana Mahmood: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that the behaviour of some of these groups, and particularly of masked individuals, is causing fear across communities. It is designed to do that. We expect the police to use all the powers at their disposal, including, where appropriate, powers to require the removal of face coverings. I assure her that as groups develop their approach to protest-like activity, I will always keep these matters under review.

It is important that we respect the right to protest and to political dissent, and that we take an active approach to allowing people to show their political dissent, which is a key hallmark of our democracy, but it is important that it does not happen in a way that has a chilling effect on the freedoms of others. I am committed to ensuring that this Government get that balance right. I am happy to discuss with my hon. Friend the experiences in her constituency and region to ensure that our response is appropriate.

Dr Roz Savage (South Cotswolds) (LD): RAF Fairford is in my constituency. On the night of the incident, the residents of Whelford, a nearby village, were woken in the wee small hours by police hammering at the door and were given just a few minutes to leave their home, in

[Dr Roz Savage]

many cases, leaving behind pets and medication. That was obviously a very unsettling experience, and many of them still feel quite deep anxiety. What assessment has been made of the ongoing risks? Will the Home Secretary meet me and local parish councils to discuss lessons learned, and to ensure that residents' concerns are addressed before US bombers return to RAF Fairford?

Shabana Mahmood: Of course, I recognise the deep anxiety that will have been felt by the residents of Whelford; it must have been a terrifying experience for them. The hon. Lady will understand that the police have to act quickly to safeguard life and have to take every risk seriously, and I am sure that that is what they sought to do in this case, but there is no getting away from the fact that, although they were doing their jobs, this would still have been unsettling for residents. I am happy to ensure that residents' concerns are listened to. I will arrange a meeting for her with the Security Minister, in the first instance, to go through those concerns, and will ensure that I am also kept updated.

Markus Campbell-Savours (Penrith and Solway) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for her statement. Adults in the UK seeking to access pornographic material online are now required to upload identification to pass age verification checks, yet those choosing to share extremist material or incite hate and terrorism on social media can enjoy anonymity. What consideration has the Home Office given to ensuring that social media users can be identified? My constituents, some of whom have been victims of online harassment, simply do not understand why anonymity is allowed.

Shabana Mahmood: I understand the concern raised by my hon. Friend. He will know that this is a matter of policy for colleagues in the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, and the Secretary of State has made it clear that she believes there is further work to do on ensuring online safety for everyone. More generally, age verification has had a good impact in relation to the viewing of pornographic material. When it comes to material that is in the more contested space of cultural issues, we would still have the issue of where we draw the line between content that, although it might be horrible, is lawful; content that is lawful but harmful; and content that slips into illegality. Those questions remain, regardless of whether we have age verification.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I put on record my thanks to Counter Terrorism Policing West Midlands and West Mercia police's special branch for all they are doing in their regions and areas for all Members, across parties. In reply to the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Dame Karen Bradley), who is no longer in her place, the Home Secretary mentioned that the system was "fragmented". In her statement, she also said, "We are also building a specialist mission in Counter Terrorism Policing to disrupt state threats". The Home Secretary will know that the Security Service—she knows what branch—plays a major part in counter-espionage and counter-terrorism. We also have counter-terror police and the National Crime Agency. Given that, as she said, more deniable proxy attacks are happening

through criminal gangs, is this not creating another silo, at a time when we need to break down the silos and have all these agencies and forces working together?

Shabana Mahmood: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his comments on supporting the work of counter-terror police. So much of that work is not public, but it is crucial to the safety and security of our nation; it is right that we place on record our thanks to them. He makes a good point about silos. That is one of the reasons why I am setting up the national police service, which will bring together the National Crime Agency and Counter Terrorism Policing into one service. I am doing so because I recognise that placing those two agencies together puts us in the best possible place to face these growing and complex threats, which are changing all the time.

I believe that the National Crime Agency and Counter Terrorism Policing work very effectively together. They have built up good arrangements over the years to ensure that when allegedly criminal activity strays across the boundaries into what their organisations look at, they work closely together. I meet all of them, alongside other partners, weekly, as does the Security Minister. We work very hard to ensure that there are not silos.

The reason for setting up the new state threats mission is that the nature of state threats has changed so significantly. We see this, and other Five Eyes partner countries see the same trend. It is important to be at the cutting edge of understanding how our enemies want to do us harm, so that we can meet that challenge. I commit to the right hon. Gentleman that I will not allow any silos to exist. The national police service will have a key role in ensuring that that never happens.

Steve Race (Exeter) (Lab): I join the House in expressing my sympathies to the family of Ann Widdecombe, as a fellow Devon resident.

The number of antisemitic and other hate crimes has risen in recent years. When I talk to young Jewish people in my constituency, they are fearful and unable to live their full Jewish lives freely. I am particularly worried about new self-appointed groups who are door-knocking in Jewish communities under the guise of, for example, being anti-apartheid. That strikes me as being a bit closer to harassment than anything else. Is the Home Secretary satisfied that she, the security services and the police have the right tools to combat this new activity, which is increasing across the country?

Shabana Mahmood: I thank my hon. Friend, who raises a similar point to that made by my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Leigh Ingham). The self-appointed groups are showing a new form of protest-type activity, which is not quite the same as traditional protest. Whether they come from the far right or the far left, no one is allowed to break the law of our land, harass people, threaten or intimidate. Wherever a crime has taken place, I expect the police to respond robustly and to ensure that communities and individuals are not living in fear. I reassure him that I am discussing the emerging picture of this type of activity with all appropriate partners. I am happy to discuss with him the experience in his area, and to work with hon. Members to ensure that the legitimate expression of the freedom to protest,

freedom of conscience, freedom of political speech and so on does not chill the freedoms, or indeed the safety, of anyone else.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): It is not always the most high-profile or senior politicians who are targeted; we know that in this House, to our cost. The Speaker's Conference on security looked at the views of Members and candidates from all parts of these islands, and it specifically sought evidence from Northern Irish, Scottish and Welsh candidates and MPs, who may not have the same jurisdictional or geographical issues as English MPs. Can the Home Secretary reassure me that Sir Stephen Lovegrove will listen to a range of voices and experiences, from different jurisdictions and geographies, so that appropriate recommendations can be made?

Shabana Mahmood: Let me give that assurance immediately to the hon. Lady. The Government already recognise that there is a different picture for devolved Administrations. Op Ford is extended to all devolved Administrations, and the review will take into account the many different ways in which democracy is expressed in our country, whether in metro mayoralties or devolved Administrations, including by current and former Members of those Administrations and local councillors, of whom there are many thousands across the country. I can give her that reassurance. The review will be a full, end-to-end look at the whole picture of protective security for those in public life.

Chris Webb (Blackpool South) (Lab): This follows on from hon. Friends' questions. We are seeing more masked gangs and people who seek to intimidate our communities, but often following them are the new self-proclaimed auditors, who are there to film them, and who often fund these gangs. Unfortunately, this trend has grown dramatically in Blackpool. People recently entered the council chamber during a full council meeting to intimidate councillors of all parties, screaming and demanding that councillors identified what political party they were from. During the recent by-election campaign in Claremont, people harassed and intimidated local activists of all parties as they went about. What measures are in place to allow councils to ban these "auditors" from certain areas of towns, and especially town centres? We also see this trend growing in the night-time economy; these people often prey on vulnerable individuals. This is becoming a real problem, and it has been highlighted by the leader of Blackpool council as well. What more can we do, or what new powers need to be implemented, to stop this wave of "auditors"?

Shabana Mahmood: I am sorry to hear of the experiences of people in my hon. Friend's local community. I restate that we expect the police to use the full range of their powers. People have the right to show their political dissent in this country—that is an important freedom that everybody has—but nobody has the right to break the law, threaten or harass individuals, or otherwise engage in criminal acts. I encourage his local council leaders to work with their local police, but I will also meet all colleagues who have raised similar concerns to talk through the current policy environment, and to ensure, as I said in response to previous questions, that we get the balance right, and maintain the freedoms that make our country great without chilling the freedoms of others in our society.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): RAF Molesworth is in my constituency, and the break-in last week has caused concern locally, it being next to a very small village. People are rightly concerned that the base is vulnerable, whether this was criminal activity or a foreign actor intervening. We have three bases in my constituency, two for US visiting forces, and one UK base. Two of them are among the most strategically sensitive sites in western Europe, and we have a small and quite underfunded police force. I appreciate that the situation is complicated, because it mixes Cambridgeshire constabulary, Ministry of Defence police, Counter Terrorism Policing and US visiting forces. I went out with Ministry of Defence police the other day on Project Servator, which acts as a deterrent locally, but it was not something that I had heard of, and it certainly is not something that local people are aware of. There is a real opportunity for briefings or encouragement in areas like mine, to make people more vigilant about this type of activity and the vulnerability of those military bases.

Shabana Mahmood: I thank the hon. Member and, if he is amenable, I would be happy to ensure that he can meet the Security Minister. I will also personally pick up those issues with the Defence Secretary. The hon. Member is right to note that many different organisations are involved in the security of bases across the country and in his constituency. I will follow up to ensure that everything is happening as it should in his constituency, and to ensure better sharing of information, where that is appropriate.

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): The Government have reported that there are 20 active terror plots, just recently two Iranians have been arrested, and now the Prime Minister is telling us that there are Iranian links to the Fairford incident. I think it is safe to say that there is a systematic Iranian campaign on British soil. The measures that the Home Secretary has announced today and recently are really welcome, but they are largely defensive in nature. Sometimes offence is the best form of defence. Has the Home Secretary considered whether we perhaps need to increase the costs on the Iranians for their actions? Has she considered signalling that fact to the Iranians to deter them from future activity?

Shabana Mahmood: Let me simply say to the hon. Member that we work very closely with all our allies. These are threats that are shared and are felt by many of our allies and colleagues in other countries. We will always ensure that we take both collective action to deal with the threats we all face, but also ensure that we are always protecting the British national interest. I will not give a running commentary on wider discussions, but let me say that this Government will always take every appropriate measure to keep our people safe.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Reform): Last week I got a telephone call from Nottinghamshire police to tell me that I was on a kill list of 100 MPs, former MPs and VIPs. I strongly believe that it took a leak to the press before the police actually contacted me and my Reform colleagues sitting here. Can the Home Secretary tell me when she first became aware of that list?

Shabana Mahmood: I do not believe, as I said in answer to previous questions, that anything inappropriate has happened in relation to the list. I am not going to

[*Shabana Mahmood*]

give a running commentary on intelligence discussions, but nothing inappropriate has happened, in my view. I will ensure that I am able to share more information with the House, as I referenced in my earlier answer to Mr Speaker, and the concerns that have been raised about who has knowledge of those names, but the investigation is led by the police—I do not get a running commentary or an update, and it would be inappropriate for that to happen. The police are operationally independent, they must go where the evidence takes them, and no politician should ever have a directive hand in such proceedings.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): I welcome the Home Secretary's announcement of the independent review of protective security provided by the state to those in public life. The statement mentions former MPs and party spokespeople, and I am glad that she said from the Dispatch Box that it will also include elected councillors, because it cannot be the case that good people are being put off from standing to represent their community because of a fear of violence, intimidation and abuse. The reality for too many councillors, though, is that Operation Ford is inconsistent and is not rising to the moment. I welcome her widening the scope of Operation Ford, but could she explain how she plans to strengthen the operation itself, so that elected councillors and candidates get the support and protection they deserve?

Shabana Mahmood: I am happy to pick up any specific concerns that the hon. Lady has, or with councillors whom she has been discussing the problems of Operation Ford with, to ensure that those are dealt with. I would observe that when Operation Bridger first started—I say this as a Member of Parliament rather than as the Home Secretary—it maybe was not as effective. Each time it has done anything, Members have been able to shape how it works based on their own lived experience. That engagement between Members, the parliamentary authorities and the police themselves has been crucial in improving Operation Bridger. It has been an iterative process. The nature of these threats is very complex—it varies from place to place, from person to person—so it is right that it adapts as circumstances change and that it is responsive. I expect Operation Ford to respond in the same way to the threats faced by other elected officials. I say to the hon. Lady that I will ensure that is the case and that there is good learning across all the Operation Ford network to ensure that there is a consistent standard. It is not unusual for MPs still to say that Operation Bridger can be inconsistent, so it is a work in progress, but I do believe that the wider review gives us the best opportunity to have a single system with a clear approach, based on threat and risk management, which is crucial for everyone.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): On the National Protective Security Authority and the national centre for information defence, may I seek an assurance from the Home Secretary that infrastructure in Northern Ireland and the misinformation that is portrayed into Northern Ireland politics are also a focus of this Government's work?

Shabana Mahmood: Let me absolutely assure the hon. Gentleman that infrastructure in Northern Ireland is just as important as infrastructure in any other part

of the United Kingdom, and, whether the work we do is through the new national centre or our current arrangements, there will be no discrepancy in the way the Government approach the safety and security of the people of Northern Ireland, or indeed critical national infrastructure in Northern Ireland, compared with any other part of the United Kingdom.

Ian Roome (North Devon) (LD): One of the greatest strengths of British democracy is that constituents can meet their Member of Parliament face to face. Does the Secretary of State agree that although we must keep elected representatives safe from violence, the basic right of people to speak to their Member of Parliament must always be championed?

Shabana Mahmood: I agree that it is a really important way in which this country and our democracy function. I do not think of it as a right so much, but it is part of our political culture. It has always been the case that people can freely turn up to this, the nation's House, themselves and that they can meet their local Member of Parliament and also their councillors. It is also normal in our country for MPs to offer advice surgeries and to go out door-knocking. Those are important parts of our political culture that I do not wish to see change. But we must also be mindful of the new risks posed to elected officials. As a Member noted earlier, we do not want people to be put off from entering public life, so it is important that our arrangements adapt in a way that protects our political culture.

James MacCleary (Lewes) (LD): The Home Secretary rightly asks that the public play their part in national security, but we have no serious national framework for civilian resilience. Finland and other countries have demonstrated the value of preparing the civilian population before a crisis. So will the Government seriously consider the Liberal Democrat proposal to establish a dedicated civil defence office and civil volunteer reserve, which would bring together volunteers trained in cyber-security, emergency response and protection of critical national infrastructure?

Shabana Mahmood: The Government take very seriously the need to be prepared for all the threats we face across a whole range of public policy concerns, whether national security matters or those related to the environment, and other issues as well. I am sure that I and colleagues across government will always look at all proposals designed to help us be more resilient as a nation, and I know the Prime Minister will have more to say on this in due course.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Reform): It is abundantly clear to me that if the attack on the home of my hon. Friend the Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) had been properly investigated, instead of brushed aside in some combination of incompetence and political bias, Ann Widdecombe would still be alive today. Instead, she was brutally murdered because of two-tier Britain. Let that sink in to everyone in this place. Why did it take the death of Ann Widdecombe for people to begin at least to wake up to what is happening in this country?

Shabana Mahmood: I appreciate that the circumstances of Ann Widdecombe's murder and also the additional information that has come to light are very distressing,

and I have offered sympathy and support from this Dispatch Box before, and I do so again. But I do not think that the distressing nature of these events justifies the charge that the right hon. Member makes, and I do reject that charge. He, as a former Minister, knows how these things work. The Independent Office for Police Conduct is investigating. It is independent of Government and of the police. It will go where the facts take it on the additional incident that is being investigated in relation to the property of the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage), and it is important that it is able to get on with the job. It is also important that we do not pre-empt the findings of that IOPC investigation. It is working swiftly and will have answers for us quickly, and I know those answers will be debated in this Chamber, but it is important that we do not make findings of fact before the facts are known.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): The RAF Fairford plot was reported in the press as having been foiled by a local resident. She described parked vans as having “strange signage” on them. She said: “I looked at it and thought, ‘That is not real.’” Will the Home Secretary credit this alertness from a member of the public, and will the Government be doing more to encourage this whole-of-society approach to security?

Shabana Mahmood: I repeat what I said to all members of the public in my statement: if they see anything suspicious, they should contact the police, as residents did in relation to the incident at RAF Fairford. The hon. Gentleman will know that, as the Defence Secretary has said, there is more to the investigation and how the incident unfolded than is known or said publicly at the moment. That is because the investigation has to be able to continue in the normal way—so there is more to

those circumstances. But let me commend the resident in question and all others for doing their civic duty in spotting something suspicious and making sure they call the police. I would urge everybody else, if the same ever happens again, to do the same.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Home Secretary for her statement. My constituents are deeply proud of Northern Ireland’s unmatched cyber-security and resilience, but they are also deeply worried about the modern, multi-layered threats confronting our nation. We are seeing unprecedented levels of foreign interference, state-sponsored cyber-warfare, and trans-national repression from hostile states such as China, Iran and Russia, targeting democratic institutions and communities on our own soil. At a time when global instability is worsening, will the Home Secretary reassure the House that this Government will stand firmly behind our intelligence-sharing networks with key democratic allies such as Israel, rather than risking them through short-sighted, one-sided trade or diplomatic restrictions, such as those against Israel?

Shabana Mahmood: I assure the hon. Member, as I assured the hon. Member for South Antrim (Robin Swann) earlier, that the Government approach in relation to our people and our places in Northern Ireland is no different from our approach anywhere else in the United Kingdom. Let me also say that the Government value our defence and security and intelligence relationships with all of our allies and partners, and those relationships are important and strong, and they continue. That is also the case in relation to Israel, and we will continue working with our allies and partners to make sure that we are collectively doing everything we can to keep our people safe.

Drumcree

6.57 pm

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Chris Bryant): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement on Drumcree.

I should first alert Members to the fact that the decision that I will lay out in this statement is subject to legal challenge. I respect the court's role and will not anticipate its conclusions. I wanted to update the House as soon as possible, but I hope that hon. Members will understand that this may limit some of what I can say. I also note that this afternoon the Court of Appeal, sitting in Belfast, refused leave to appeal to the Garvaghy Road residents coalition. The court therefore confirmed the Parades Commission's determination as it was made at the time on 25 September, as did I. My exercise of powers under section 11 of the Public Processions (Northern Ireland) Act 1998, however, considered the situation as it stood on Friday 9 October.

The repeated stand-offs at Drumcree in the 1990s saw disorder, violence and horrific deaths, and they represent a particularly painful chapter in Northern Ireland's history. At the heart of the matter is the return route of the Orange Order Portadown district's parade from Drumcree church. Members of the Orange Order attach great importance to completing their route down the mainly nationalist Garvaghy Road, while residents of the road have long opposed its passage through their community.

For 28 years the independent Parades Commission had determined that the route should not pass down the Garvaghy Road, but on 25 September a Parades Commission determination allowed for 35 members of Portadown lodge to walk along the Garvaghy Road without the accompaniment of music on Sunday 27 September. To some, this was a legal victory that recognised the religious, cultural and personal significance of this procession. To others, it was a profound shock and a reopening of wounds they long thought closed.

On Saturday 26 September, following a challenge brought on behalf of the residents, a temporary injunction was granted, then appealed and overturned, before permission to seek judicial review was refused in the early hours of Sunday 27 September. The parade, lawfully determined, was due to take place at 8 am that same morning. However, the Orange Order was unable to complete that route due to an unlawful, unnotified protest by residents of the Garvaghy Road and their supporters, who blocked the road. For much of the two weeks since, Drumcree has once again been the scene of a stand-off. This is a deeply emotive and hurtful issue for many of those who have been involved in this dispute, either now or in the past.

I have spent the past fortnight in extensive conversations with all affected parties, trying to get a mutually acceptable agreement between the two sides. I hosted several rounds of negotiations at Hillsborough castle over five days and maintained frequent contact with those involved, including Members of this House. During those discussions, we explored multiple options for ending the impasse. These included options such as the Portadown Lodge completing one final march along the Garvaghy Road on the condition that it would not apply to march that route again, and an option that would have seen Portadown Lodge accept that it had won the right to march but

agree not to exercise that right. Other options included the residents accepting that the lodge had established the legal right and would not challenge other parts of the route. Unfortunately, we could not secure agreement.

I want to thank the members of the Portadown Lodge for their time and constructive engagement. Their commitment to upholding the law and their co-operation with the police has been absolutely vital in maintaining calm and order. Having received a determination permitting them to march after 28 years, I recognise that they will feel bitter disappointment at its prohibition. I also want to thank members of the Garvaghy Road Residents Coalition for their engagement. They made clear to me the profound anxiety this dispute has brought, relighting painful memories. I deeply regret that we were not able to reach a compromise on a way forward. Although I was still keen to establish a local agreement, I did not want to see the stand-off continue into another weekend, with the consequent risk of protests spreading to other parts of Northern Ireland and the further deterioration of community relations. I therefore intensively considered all options for bringing this dispute to an end.

On Friday 9 October, the Chief Constable of the Police Service of Northern Ireland made an application to me under section 9 of the Public Processions (Northern Ireland) Act 1998. As required by law, I reviewed the initial determination made by the Parades Commission relating to the application made by the Portadown district for 27 September 2026. I consulted the Chief Constable and the Parades Commission. The Chief Constable advised me that it would not be possible to enable the procession to happen without a major intervention, which would carry

"an unacceptable risk of serious injury, disorder and a wider contagion affect across Northern Ireland."

The Parades Commission also advised me that while ultimately a matter for the courts to determine, the Commission was of the view that in the light of this current assessment by the Chief Constable, the original determination does not now have enduring legal effect. As a result, given that the circumstances under which that decision was made have now changed considerably and in the interests of wider public interest and safety, I came to the conclusion that the procession should not go ahead as it was originally determined.

I did not take that decision lightly. I had tried to get a locally agreed solution and, as the Court of Appeal has held today, the Portadown district had a lawful determination from the Parades Commission allowing the procession. I have also not criticised the original determination made by the Parades Commission in good faith and based on the information it had at the time. Indeed, as part of my decision on Friday, I confirmed that original determination, which has also been upheld as lawful by the court, as anybody who criticises the Parades Commission should bear in mind. However, I must acknowledge that the situation has changed considerably, which is why I used my powers under section 11 of the Act to prohibit the procession.

Respect for the rule of law is fundamental to our society. I am grateful to those who have behaved peacefully and legally, and sought to ease tensions in their respective communities. It is right to say that the Orange Order obtained a legal right to parade, but I agree with the Chief Constable, who has said

"upholding of the Parades Commission determination does not come at any cost."

Upholding the law also entails judiciously preventing serious disorder, and that is why I am glad that, despite the manifest tension, events have passed peacefully in Portadown. That is in itself a significant achievement.

I thank the PSNI officers who have carried the burden of policing this difficult situation. However, nobody is able to grant themselves immunity from the law, and those who have acted unlawfully must face the consequences of their actions. It is not for me to determine how the police exercise their duties, but I am glad that the PSNI operation in relation to unlawful protesting on the Garvaghy Road is under way.

I am grateful to all those who have engaged with me in good faith and to those within this House who have worked diligently to reduce tensions. I particularly thank those who have sought to moderate their language. It is easy to stir up a grievance, but it is much harder to calm it down. I appeal now to everyone to help reduce tensions, and for all political and community leaders to consider carefully the effect of their words. I urge people to let the courts do their work, and to co-operate fully with the police and the Parades Commission.

The community in Portadown has been on the sharp end of intense attention for a number of weeks. It will take time to rebuild relations. Sometimes leadership is extremely difficult, but it is vital that at this time the political parties in Northern Ireland offer stability. That can be a challenge when loud voices dominate. However, in my conversations with both sides and with political leaders from different parties and traditions, I have met many extraordinary people of good faith who want to rebuild trust and co-operation based on mutual respect. I hope all Members will want to share in that ambition. I commend this statement to the House.

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

7.5 pm

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement and for his call over the weekend. I do not envy him the position in which he has been placed in these past few weeks.

The scenes that we have witnessed on the streets of Drumcree are all too reminiscent of previous times—times that we had all hoped were past, and times that we must still hope are past. The willingness of communities nearly 30 years ago to submit to independent adjudication processes was one of the pillars of the peace. It is consequently at best irresponsible and at worst dangerous for people to ignore those processes when they do not go their way. Further, it is inexcusable for anyone, but particularly politicians, to decide that they will only obey the law when it suits them. That is the road to a very dark place.

As the Secretary of State has set out, the planned march was legal, subject to the detailed restrictions placed upon it by the Parades Commission. It follows that under section 14 of the Public Processions (Northern Ireland) Act 1998, those who prevented this lawful march would seem to have broken the law. The stand-off that they caused ultimately led to Chief Constable Boutcher asking the Secretary of State to review the Parades Commission's determination and stop the march.

The Chief Constable said that facilitating it would have

“required a substantial public order intervention that was not assessed to be proportionate, and which would have carried an unacceptable risk of serious injury, disorder and a wider contagion effect across Northern Ireland.”

I hope that the Secretary of State can be clear with the House about what is behind this statement and what the nature of that risk was. Was the Secretary of State at any stage made aware of a possibility of terrorism? Was he at any stage made aware that firearms or explosives were likely to be deployed? I very much hope he was not, but the House should know.

I know that the Secretary of State was placed in a desperately invidious position, but the consequence of the march not going ahead is that those who have broken the law have won. The consequence is that those who threaten the

“serious injury, disorder and wider contagion”,

of which the Chief Constable warned, have won. Unless remedy is made, the message being sent to Northern Ireland is that people can pick and choose which laws they obey, and that those who threaten violence and disorder will get their way. I know that that is not what the Secretary of State wants, but he needs to tell the House what he intends to do to prevent that terrible message being the legacy of these past few weeks. I know that it is not for him to determine how the police exercise their duties following this incident, but I hope he can tell the House how the Government now intend to prevent the law from being openly flouted again and again and again.

Chris Bryant: I am grateful for the tone in which the shadow Secretary of State has entered the conversation and for him taking my call over the weekend. We have not faced each other across the Dispatch Box as Secretary of State and shadow Secretary of State until today, and I hope that we can work co-operatively together.

To those who flouted the law and to those who are considering doing so again, I say nobody is above the law: you will face the consequences of your actions. To those who have co-operated with the police, I say an enormous, “Thank you.” To those who are considering ending co-operation with the police, I say please, please, please think again.

The hon. Gentleman asks me specifically about the advice that I have received and quotes in precise terms the words that I was given by the Chief Constable. I have publicly set out the advice that I received, which said that facilitating the procession would require a major police intervention carrying unacceptable risks, as the hon. Gentleman said. He will understand that I will not comment on specific intelligence that I did or did not receive, for obvious reasons, but in the end I am accountable for the decision that I made. It was my responsibility to weigh the police advice and the consequences of proceeding, which is precisely what I did.

The hon. Gentleman asks how we will ensure that we build respect for the rule of law. That is a matter for all communities into the future. He also made a point about politicians. I will point out that we politicians have a particular responsibility to abide by not just the

[Chris Bryant]

letter of the law, but the spirit of the law. Schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998 requires Ministers to pledge

“to uphold the rule of law based as it is on the fundamental principles of fairness, impartiality and democratic accountability, including support for policing and the courts”.

Those should not just be words that are spoken for one moment; they should be things that we embody in everything we do.

Hilary Benn (Leeds South) (Lab): My right hon. Friend was clearly faced with a very difficult decision, but I think he took the right decision in the light of the advice he was given by the Chief Constable, which he has reported to the House, and I thank him for it. Given the enormous progress that Northern Ireland has made since the signing of the Good Friday agreement, who would want to go back? What does he think is now required to restore confidence in an independent process for determining parades?

Chris Bryant: I am very grateful to my predecessor, to whom I pay tribute, for his kind words. We need to do several things. This moment has shown that the veneer of peace is sometimes remarkably thin, and we need to strengthen the relationship between different communities. One of the things I found most moving was when people said to me how cross-community organisations in Portadown had been completely discombobulated and thrown up into confusion over these last two weeks. That is one of the reasons why I wanted us to be able to get to a successful conclusion that works for everybody.

My right hon. Friend is right about the parades. I note that some people who, a few weeks ago, were passionately opposed to the Parades Commission are now passionately in support of it, and vice versa. The truth is that we had problems earlier on this year, and that is why I have set up an inquiry, led by Justice O'Hara, who has been warmly supported by everybody in that process. We need to ensure that the Parades Commission works for the future, and I hope that everybody in this House at least would want to urge people to work closely with the police, rather than undermine them.

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

Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. This is a complicated and sensitive issue, and my party supports all those, from every community, who are focused on de-escalation and working together on a shared future. The Secretary of State's decision was based on unambiguous police advice, and I do not think that any real alternative was available to him. I know how hard he and others sought to achieve compromise, and I share his deep regret that that was not possible. As he recognised in his statement, respect for the rule of law is fundamental to any democratic society. It is consequently imperative that the legitimate concerns of many with regard to what message this decision conveys must be recognised and taken into account as we seek to move forward.

The impact that events such as this have on local people in Portadown must be our first concern. People living side by side and getting on with their lives suffer by this replaying of the worst chapters of the past. Our task on all sides of the House is to support those who want to move forward, protect the institutions, respect the rule of law and ensure that this dispute does not undermine the hard-won progress of the last 30 years.

I have three questions for the Secretary of State. What discussions has he had with the Executive and political leaders in Northern Ireland about ensuring that the institutions remain stable throughout this period? What more does he think can be done to ensure that the rule of law is upheld and respected by all political leaders across Northern Ireland? Finally, what support is being provided to the communities in Portadown, particularly young people, who have lived through three weeks of escalating tension?

Chris Bryant: I am grateful for the way in which the hon. Gentleman has approached this issue. My attempts to have discussions with the Executive have focused partly on trying to get a budget. Six months in, we still do not have a settled budget. That is going to provide very significant problems in the very near future for the whole of the operation of the Executive if we are not very careful and very keen to work with the Executive to get to a good outcome. We have made an offer of £1.5 billion and more over three years, which is a good settlement considering the difficult situation that we have. Everybody has been predicting the collapse of the Executive for some time, but it seems to be much more resilient than people suggest. That is a good thing.

In terms of the rule of law, it is not for me to tell the police whom they should speak to about unlawful actions or how to determine what the punishment should be. I will merely point out that an offence under the Public Processions (Northern Ireland) Act carries an imprisonment of up to six months and a level 5 fine. That is for the prosecuting authorities to consider.

Let me turn to the young people in Portadown. One of the phrases frequently used on both sides was that people wanted a breathing space, and we have that breathing space now. Once the dust has settled a little bit, it will be important for us to consider and work out how we can strengthen the cross-community relationships that have undoubtedly been tested over the last couple of weeks, as the hon. Gentleman says, and I want to do that with local representatives.

Colum Eastwood (Foyle) (SDLP): Sometimes you would be forgiven for forgetting that in the late '90s, 21 Catholics were murdered as a result of this dispute. Three of them were children—the Quinn boys—who were burned to death in their home. Why anybody thought it was a good idea to try to force this parade down that street is frankly beyond me and beyond any right-thinking person. This wound should never, ever have been opened up again. The Garvaghy Road residents have had this done to them and on them. This chaos has been visited to their door. Will the Secretary of State work with the Irish Government to ensure that proper investment is now put into Portadown to rebuild relationships that took a long, long time to build back up?

Chris Bryant: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his comments. We were here only a few weeks ago having had the report on Robert Hamill, whose murder occurred

against the background of the problems in Portadown back in the day. This issue is still very live and very raw for a large number of people in the community. I have to push back, though, and say that the Parades Commission decision has been upheld by the courts on repeated occasions. I did not revoke the decision, but, given the situation when the section 9 letter came to me from the police the other day, it was absolutely apparent that I had to deal with this matter.

My hon. Friend asks me to get the Irish Government to be engaged. I always want to work as co-operatively as I possibly can with the Irish Government, and I have spoken to them several times, but in the end, security in Northern Ireland is the responsibility of the UK Government. We need to ensure that community relations in Northern Ireland are enhanced.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): The Secretary of State is right to indicate that the Parades Commission considered and approved the parade, but how sad is it that on Friday evening, and in his statement this evening, he did not conclude by saying that he is determined to uphold the rule of law, which would include the completion of a parade? He also did not say that he would welcome a fresh application to be considered on its own merits or, whether now or in the future, that he will ensure that no lawful application will succumb to threats of violence. In the past 28 years, the police—the Royal Ulster Constabulary and then the Police Service of Northern Ireland—have always maintained the position that they will police whatever the determination is. They cannot say that any more. For the past 28 years, no Secretary of State has ever used section 11 powers, even when there was actual violence, actual disorder and guns on the street. People in Northern Ireland know that this is about more than obstruction on a road. They know that it is a threat of violence from terrorists, and they know that this British Government have bent the knee to them.

We need to see the rule of law upheld, but we also need to see political accountability. The Secretary of State mentioned schedule 4 of the Northern Ireland Act. He knows that there is no consequence for breach of the pledge of office. Will he meet my colleagues and me to ensure that there is?

Chris Bryant: The right hon. Gentleman and I have had many discussions about this issue over the past fortnight, and I am grateful to him for the way in which he has conducted those conversations. I do, however, utterly reject the charge that I have in any way succumbed to mob rule. The truth is that things have actually passed remarkably peacefully—there has been no major disorder. Lots of people lobbied me or provided advice over the airwaves on how to deal with the situation, but I do not think anybody seriously proposed that the police should drag people off the street, and I say gently to the right hon. Gentleman that the rule of law is not just a single headline; it is equality before the law, transparent laws, the separation of powers, an independent judiciary and access to justice. All of those things are in remarkably fine fettle in Northern Ireland.

As I have said previously, there are some abnormalities about the way in which the Executive and power sharing work in Northern Ireland. I am very happy to sit down with the right hon. Gentleman and work through ways

in which we can make them function better. As I have said to him before, that may require some reform of the institutions at Stormont.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): In 2010, Tom Bingham, who had been Lord Chief Justice, published his book “The Rule of Law”, which we often cite in this House. He said about Ministers’ decisions that

“ministers and public officers at all levels must exercise the powers conferred on them in good faith, fairly, for the purpose for which the powers were conferred, without exceeding the limits of such powers and not unreasonably.”

I believe that in making this decision, which I know was a difficult one, the Secretary of State has excellently upheld the principles set out by Tom Bingham all those years ago. As he knows, this summer at the Belfast Fleadh, all traditions of music came together—including many Unionist bands and singers—and were welcomed and enjoyed together. Is that not the spirit in which we want to go forward in building unity?

Chris Bryant: I am grateful for my right hon. Friend’s comments. This was certainly a difficult decision, but a decision that I was in law required to make, having been written to by the Chief Constable under section 9 of the Public Processions (Northern Ireland) Act. I chose to make the eventual decision based on the advice he had given.

More generally, though, mutual respect between different communities is often hard-won, and moments like this can rapidly descend into greater disorder and problems. That is why I was very keen not to let this situation run on at great length, which is why I responded in the way I did, but we still have a job of work to do in Northern Ireland to enhance mutual respect between people. Some of the language that has been used from one community to the other and back again has been utterly vile, and it is incumbent on all of us in particular, as Members of Parliament, to moderate our language.

Sorcha Eastwood (Lagan Valley) (Alliance): I never thought that in my lifetime, I would see again Land Rovers lined up outside Drumcree church. The people of Northern Ireland did not clamour for this, and that includes people who are Unionist, nationalist or other. They did not want to revisit this incredibly dark chapter in our history. While the cost of living bites, this operation cost around £5 million at the time of conclusion.

What we have now is picking up the pieces. The Secretary of State has referred to the language that we use. In the past week, Members of this House have referred to people of the Garvaghy Road as rabble and have referred to the Garvaghy Road as needing “sanitisation”. Does the Secretary of State agree that in the mouth of this crisis, it is incumbent on all Members of this House and everybody across Northern Ireland to engage respectfully across all communities, all of which have suffered in the past few weeks?

Chris Bryant: One difficulty I sometimes found when trying to reach consensus between the two sides when we gathered everybody in Hillsborough—when, I have to say, both sides were immensely respectful—was that the moment they spoke to somebody outside the room, louder voices prevailed and dragged them away from compromise. That is a problem that we have regularly,

[Chris Bryant]

and social media amplifies some of that as well, which makes it more difficult. I should also say that there are Members of this House who have been vilified just for standing up for their constituents, and that is not appropriate either.

David Smith (North Northumberland) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement, and for the tone he has taken. He is in an invidious position, as we can see from this debate. Does he agree that ultimately, if we take one step back from these events, what we are really talking about is the lack of societal reconciliation in Northern Ireland over the 30 years since the Good Friday agreement? Does he agree that we in this House and politicians in Northern Ireland have a role to try to foster that reconciliation wherever we can—whether it is through the Northern Ireland Troubles Bill or in another way—by resourcing it, funding it, and taking a lead on it?

Chris Bryant: The most important thing we have to realise is that the job of work of the Good Friday agreement is not complete. Many elements of it were parked at the time, and we need to complete that work. That is one reason why it is important that we get the troubles Bill right. I have met so many people who still bear not just bruises, but deep scars, from the troubles, and they want answers. That is precisely what we are trying to legislate for at the moment.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): The parade was lawful; the protest was unlawful. What we are hearing in Northern Ireland in response to that protest is in stark contrast to what we heard from the Home Secretary in the statement prior to this one. The Secretary of State said in his statement, “Let the courts do their work.” When he knew that the court was to rule today, why did he move from section 9 to making a section 11 decision on Friday night, rather than waiting on the court’s ruling today?

Chris Bryant: When I received the section 9 letter on Friday morning, I had no idea when the court was going to come to its conclusions, and obviously I had been asked—and am required by law—to consult with the Parades Commission and the Chief Constable, as I did. That is the process I followed. I do not want to stray further into that process, simply because all of this is subject to legal challenge.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The Secretary of State has outlined the issues relating to the Drumcree parade, and has said in his statement that those who have acted unlawfully must face the consequences of their actions. If that process is allowed to proceed—and I hope it will—the police must do their job, and the prosecution service must do its job. Beyond that, though, people in Northern Ireland need to know that if political leaders and others break the law, there are consequences beyond the court proceedings, consequences that will preclude their holding office. Is the Secretary of State prepared to discuss what sanctions can be taken to prevent somebody who breaks the criminal law from holding public office, and to issue and declare such sanctions?

Chris Bryant: I think the hon. Member is asking me to introduce primary legislation to change the Northern Ireland Act, which is not my intention at the moment. I am not sure what other process he is considering, but I am very happy to consider it with him.

I noted one thing the hon. Member said earlier, or maybe yesterday on the television: the last thing we want is Chris Bryant running Northern Ireland.

Mr Campbell indicated assent.

Chris Bryant: The hon. Member is nodding, so I got that right. Maybe we can agree with each other, because I want the Northern Ireland Executive to continue in operation. I certainly do not want to be in a position where I am running all of Northern Ireland.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): I begin by paying tribute to Portadown district, which abided by the law to the letter and yet had the response of being kicked in the teeth while those who broke the law were rewarded. I also commend the hon. Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart), who represents the district of Portadown, on her stand, her leadership and her courage. I utterly condemn the shocking demonisation and abuse to which she has been subjected.

As for the Secretary of State, it is sad to say it, but his shameful surrender to mob rule and the threat of violence has trampled the rule of law into the gutter in Northern Ireland. Tonight, we still have not only a First Minister of lawlessness—because of the inaction of the DUP—but a Secretary of State who chose to back the lawbreakers. What a travesty. My question is this: how can the rule of law recover when the Secretary of State undermines it so spectacularly?

Chris Bryant: I am fond of the hon. and learned Gentleman, although he does remind me of the John Lewis line, “Never knowingly undersold”, because his arguments are never knowingly undersold. He called me pathetic on the television yesterday and he keeps on referring to mob rule. Every time people use this term “mob” about people on the other side of the argument, it makes it more difficult. I would also say that the use of the word “sanitising” was particularly inappropriate. It behoves us all to moderate our language, because people look to us to provide leadership. In a situation where compromise is normally the best outcome for everybody—for all communities—it is best if we double down on compromise ourselves.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): I thank all hon. Members who have reached out with regards to the level of abuse that has been received.

I find it absolutely incredible that I am standing in this House where we make the law, confronting a Secretary of State who has wilted before those who have defied the law. For 28 years, Portadown district obeyed the determinations that it opposed. When it secured a legal determination to return, this Government and the PSNI bowed to those IRA commanders, dissidents and a First Minister who broke the law on the Garvaghy Road. Mob rule won, whether the Secretary of State likes to admit it or not. At Hillsborough castle, the Secretary of State treated law-abiding citizens as equals to Brendan McKenna, whose record is very clear: he held

a family hostage and was involved in the blowing up of Portadown royal British legion, he has impeded the police doing their duty over the past two weeks, and he thinks we are all F-ers.

Lawbreaking has been rewarded by this sovereign Parliament, and that shameful surrender has serious consequences for the rule of law in Northern Ireland. The Secretary of State has joined Michelle O'Neill and the Chief Constable in thumbing their noses at law-abiding citizens and laughed and smirked while doing it. Their positions are becoming more untenable with every passing moment. Does the rule of law apply only to law-abiding citizens in Northern Ireland, while the self-titled "First Minister for all" seems to be immune?

Chris Bryant: When I referred earlier to those who have been vilified, I was going to refer to the hon. Lady, because I have seen some of the foul comments that have been made about her, online and elsewhere, and I completely abhor that. As she knows, I have spoken to her regularly throughout this whole process. We have tried to maintain a very civil conversation between us.

I want to clear up one other thing that the hon. Lady asked. She did not ask it in the House, but said I would have to answer it this evening. Earlier in the day, she said that I had to clear up whether I became aware of today's judgment before or after I made my ruling. I think she was suggesting that in some way or other I knew before anybody else what the court was going to decide today. I want to make it absolutely clear that I did not. At the time I started my determination, I did not even know when the court was going to come up with its ruling, so I very much hope that she will withdraw that semi-allegation. More importantly, I had to respond to the section 9 request from the Chief Constable. I am afraid that sometimes the hon. Lady resorts to extravagant and erring language, and I am not sure that helps secure an outcome for the Orange lodge.

The final point I would make to the hon. Lady is that she is absolutely right that everybody needs to uphold the law. I very much hope that she would urge everybody she knows who is now saying that they should not co-operate with the police to co-operate with the police. Otherwise, I am afraid it is a question of what is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart) for her determination, her courage and her leadership and for standing strong against the threats that have been made—physical threats, verbal threats and all sorts of threats—to her and her family. We in this House should stand strong with her. In the previous statement, the Home Secretary referred to

security for individuals. My hon. Friend is one Member of this House who deserves that, and everyone in this House should back her as she makes her stand.

My constituents are asking me this question: why did the Secretary of State take the extraordinary step of intervening before the Court of Appeal had delivered its scheduled legal ruling today? In pre-empting the highest courts in the land, what message does this catastrophic surrender send to extremist factions active across the entire United Kingdom? If they descend upon a community in great numbers, refuse to obey the law and threaten violence, the Government will grant them their aims. If I had blocked Frances Street in Newtownards along with my constituents, we would have been in Bangor custody within 30 minutes. Will the Secretary of State admit that this decision sets a devastating national precedent? This is a policy of short-sighted appeasement that buys peace for today at the expense of our future. Why should law-abiding citizens continue to trust the democratic process when the Government signal to extremists of every stripe that street-level intimidation trumps the rule of law and that the British ideology of upholding law and justice as a foundation has now crumbled?

Chris Bryant: First, to be clear, the Court of Appeal was looking in its decision today at a completely different matter from the one that was before me. The court was looking at the decision made by the Parades Commission on 25 September; I was looking at the situation on 9 October. Those are two different matters, and that is why it was not material to me whether the court was going to be ruling today. As a matter of fact, when the letter came in from the Chief Constable, I did not know when the court would be ruling.

More importantly, under section 9 of the Public Processions (Northern Ireland) Act 1998, I am required by law to respond to the Chief Constable's request, and that is what I did. I decided, as the courts did, to uphold the original determination of the Parades Commission, but to consider the situation as it pertains now and the advice given to me by the Parades Commission and the Chief Constable.

On the final point, I know there are people arguing that this is the end of the rule of law in Northern Ireland in some way. I just want to say that in the past few weeks, yes, people have said very cross things to one another and have shouted at one another—they have mostly done so in the Assembly, here in Parliament today or on the airwaves—but they have not been throwing things at each other. It has been peaceful in Portadown, and that is an achievement, not the opposite of an achievement. In the end, policing is about not just ensuring that a determination can be upheld, but judiciously preserving the peace.

Point of Order

7.39 pm

Ian Roome (North Devon) (LD): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I wrote to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care four times between 27 July and 7 October to request an urgent meeting to discuss the maternity crisis at North Devon district hospital, and have yet even to receive a response. The Prime Minister promised my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey) an update on the crisis on 2 September, and said that the Health Secretary would respond. This is an urgent health emergency for expectant mums across Devon and Cornwall. May I ask you, Madam Deputy Speaker, what remedy is available to Members of this House?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I thank the hon. Member for his point of order. He will know—as, indeed, will the whole House—how important it is for Ministers to provide timely responses to correspondence from Members. Those on the Treasury Bench will have heard his concerns, and I note that it is the Leader of the House who is listening to this. He takes these matters very seriously, and will, I am sure, report to the relevant Health Minister to ensure that the hon. Member's concerns are addressed.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (TODAY)

Ordered,

That, at this day's sitting,

(i) the business determined by the Backbench Business Committee shall be treated as being taken on an allotted day provided under paragraph (4) of Standing Order No. 14 and, notwithstanding the provisions of paragraphs (1) and (2) of Standing Order No. 22D relating to the scheduling of select committee statements, select committee statements on the First Report of the Procedure Committee and the Second Report of the International Development Committee may be made after the conclusion of proceedings on this Motion;

(ii) proceedings on the Motion in the name of Andy MacNae relating to Baby Loss Awareness Week may be proceeded with for up to three hours after their commencement, or until 10.00pm, whichever is the later, and shall then lapse if not previously disposed of; those proceedings may be entered upon and may continue, though opposed, after the moment of interruption; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.—
(*Sir Alan Campbell.*)

Written Parliamentary Questions

PROCEDURE COMMITTEE

Select Committee statement

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): We now come to the first Select Committee statement. The Chair of the Procedure Committee, the hon. Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Cat Smith), will speak for up to 10 minutes, during which time no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of her statement, Members may ask questions on the subject of the statement. They must be brief questions, not full speeches.

7.41 pm

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Wyre) (Lab): The Procedure Committee has concluded its in-depth review of the written parliamentary questions system, and we were pleased to be able to publish our report just before the conference recess. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting time for this statement, and I also thank current and former members of the Procedure Committee for their thoughtful consideration throughout the inquiry.

My Committee regularly reviews the performance of Departments in answering written parliamentary questions, but there was a sense that a wider review was needed, because the written parliamentary questions system really was not working for Members. The number of questions had risen drastically, and the responses were not keeping pace or, indeed, meeting our expectations in terms of quality. Equally, we knew that the Government and the House administration were under pressure to deliver in a system that was at risk of being overwhelmed. We launched our inquiry in November 2025; we organised a survey of MPs, received written evidence, and heard in person from Opposition Front Benchers and groups of Back Benchers. I thank the many Members on both sides of the House who gave evidence to the Committee.

We know that our colleagues are not always satisfied with Government responses to WPQs, and we also know that that feeling has increased as the number of WPQs has also increased sharply. We heard that there were frustrations among colleagues about a small number of MPs submitting a disproportionate number of questions, which could be construed as an abuse of the system. Members who make restrained and focused use of the WPQs system for their parliamentary work are, effectively, being adversely affected. The system, overall, needs to be based on a lower volume of input but a higher quality of output when it comes to responses from the Government. The flip side of our efforts is to alleviate some of the pressures in the system, but we think that MPs should expect better responses from the Government.

We heard of concern about the tabling of some WPQs with limited Member involvement. We are clear about the fact that WPQs are a proceeding in Parliament, and should therefore always be initiated by elected Members. We cannot send our staff to speak in oral questions for us; nor should we expect our staff to table WPQs without our seeing them. At present, that is reflected by the need for our wet signatures on the hard-copy WPQs if we are to table them in that way at the Table Office. We believe that this should be reflected in the modern e-tabling system, and we recommend that Members be required to approve personally, in MemberHub, questions

submitted by their staff. The fundamental e-tabling limit should remain at 20 per Member per sitting day, but limits should be introduced for recesses.

It is, in our view, an anomaly that this limit applies in sitting times but not in recesses. Members will understandably wish to scrutinise developing events during a recess, but as WPQs submitted during recesses cannot be answered until the House returns, there is often a better way of doing this, such as corresponding directly with Ministers. We recommended a limit in recesses of 20 WPQs per Member for the first calendar week, and a further 10 for each additional full calendar week. In other words, the longer the recess, the more questions a Member will get. We remind Members that these are very much maximums, not targets to be hit, and that when we increase quantity, we may see a decline in quality. Moreover, looking busy by tabling more WPQs than the neighbouring MP is not an indication of how well someone is working as an MP.

We also heard concerns about “carding”. We found that the process generally works well, but the terminology could be modernised. A card is not a red card, and it is not a block; it is merely a query that can generally be resolved very quickly if a Member nips into the Table Office. We recommended that carding be renamed “querying” to reflect that. When a Member accumulates a large number of unresolved queries—in old money, cards—at any one time, it creates a blockage in the system, and reduces the Table Office’s ability to advise other Members. When Members have 20 live unaddressed queries at any one time, they should be required to address those before submitting further WPQs.

At present there is a cut-off time for same-day e-tabling of WPQs, but it is different on different days of the week, and it falls outside the normal working day. The Committee believes that a uniform time of 4 pm should be set between Mondays and Thursdays. That would be more straightforward for Members, and it would also mean that the focus of Table Office staff in the evenings, when far fewer staff are available, would rightly be on advising Members on matters such as motions and amendments for the following day, rather than marshalling WPQs. It would also allow questions to be considered over more time, thus supporting our goal of improving the consistency of colleagues’ experiences. Given the Friday sitting hours, we recommend that we retain the 2.30 pm cut-off on Fridays.

Having an exceptional route to an urgent answer is very useful to Members, but we found that “named day” was a very confusing term for some. We thought that for the sake of modernisation, we could replace it with “priority questions”, which would better reflect the core purpose of a named-day question and would probably be simpler and easier for colleagues to understand. However, we recommend that the deadline for answers to priority questions be set automatically at three working days after tabling, which is the earliest that a Member can receive an answer to a named-day question. The limit for priority questions should remain unchanged at five per Member per sitting day. Colleagues should consider using an ordinary question to receive a detailed response, and using priority questions when speed is of the essence.

We heard of a range of concerns about Government responses to WPQs from Members on both sides of the House. The Government should address those concerns, particularly by ensuring that questions are grouped sparingly and always individually addressed within a combined response. We recommend that references to information published elsewhere be used sparingly—there should be relevant extracts, not just hyperlinks—and that the Government communicate with Members and the Table Office when there is a block on questions on a particular topic. There should also be more transparency and accountability in the Government’s performance in answering WPQs. To that end, we have recommended that a public-facing dashboard be introduced on the parliamentary website, to be updated monthly, showing the performance of each Department in answering WPQs on time. That will empower Members, the public and even the press to pursue inadequate performance, and we hope that it will also help the Government to drive forward improvements.

We recommend that Members consider how we use WPQs. We are best placed to decide, as individual elected representatives, when we need to ask a particular question, but we should also consider the cost to the public purse. There are many alternatives, including other parliamentary proceedings, ministerial correspondence, and the excellent services provided by the House of Commons Library, and sometimes we might actually obtain a better outcome from those.

Artificial intelligence was an emerging theme in our inquiry, and we appreciate the concerns raised by Members. We are a forward-thinking Committee, and we see the benefit of AI in improving the processes, but we are more cautious about its use for content. It is most important for Members to check and remain responsible for their questions, and for Ministers to check and remain responsible for their answers.

Ultimately, as we set out in the report, we recognise the importance of bringing the House with us, given the importance of WPQs to Members across the House. For that reason, we have recommended that the Government bring forward a motion endorsing the report as a whole. This would allow the House to endorse the report’s findings, recommendations and statements of principle, and allow the House administration, the Government and all of us to get on with implementing it. We hope that colleagues will support that motion when it comes before the House.

We have overhauled the WPQ system in a modernising direction. Although we have not been able to take up every suggestion that was made to us, we have sought to give colleagues a better experience of WPQs and to make them a more valuable tool, including for the important function of scrutinising Government. Our Committee will review its findings and the implementation of the recommendations as we continue our regular work of monitoring departmental performance in answering WPQs. I commend this report to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): The hon. Lady has got off very lightly, since it seems that nobody wishes to ask her a question on that.

International Climate Finance

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Select Committee statement

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): We come to the second Select Committee statement, on behalf of the International Development Committee. Sarah Champion will speak for up to 10 minutes, during which there will be no interventions. At the conclusion of her statement, Members may ask questions on the subject of the statement.

7.50 pm

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): Climate change is not a distant threat; it is already reshaping lives and livelihoods around the world. The Earth is warming, and rainfall patterns are becoming increasingly unpredictable. Sea levels are rising, and extreme weather events are now more frequent and more severe. The impacts of climate change are being felt more than ever, both at home in the UK and, even more acutely, in the world's poorest and most climate-vulnerable countries.

Climate change is often discussed in terms of emission targets, financial commitments and international agreements, but behind these debates there is a humanitarian crisis unfolding—a crisis of homes destroyed, crops failing, livelihoods lost and communities struggling to rebuild in the wake of disasters that they did little to cause. We witnessed such a reality most recently in Nepal. In a matter of hours, devastating floods washed away entire cities, leaving thousands of people dead or missing, and forcing many more to face an uncertain future, in a country where a quarter of the population already live in poverty. But Nepal is not an isolated case, and with a “super El Niño” in prospect, such disasters are set to become the norm, if countries are unable to mitigate and adapt to climate change.

It is against this backdrop that the International Development Committee has published its report examining the UK's international climate finance commitments. Our inquiry focused on three overarching themes. First, the Government's successive reductions to official development assistance have made it difficult to deliver on their climate finance commitments to lower and middle-income countries in a transparent, meaningful and credible way. Frustratingly, rather than striving to deliver genuine climate and nature outcomes, the Government have been cutting corners to maintain headline spending commitments, and this is impacting on our international credibility.

Our report highlights that the Government have also substantially reduced the ODA portion of the UK's climate finance commitment for the next three years. This comes at a time when climate finance needs are growing and sustained international leadership is more important than ever. To that end, I welcome the new Foreign Secretary, who, I would argue, is uniquely qualified to meet this challenge, but let me be clear: it is an enormous challenge. Recent policy shifts in the US, alongside signalling from major multilateral institutions that they may scale back or abandon climate finance targets, have created an increasingly uncertain landscape for climate action. In that context, the case for strong and consistent UK leadership has never been clearer.

Secondly, UK climate finance is not simply about how much money is spent; it is about who can access it, who benefits from it and who has a voice in how it is used. In a period of constrained public finances, the quality, accessibility and effectiveness of the UK's climate finance is vital. Throughout our inquiry, we repeatedly heard that climate finance is most effective when local organisations, communities and sub-national Governments can access high-quality funding directly and play a meaningful role in designing and delivering climate solutions.

We also heard compelling evidence about the importance of inclusion. For example, women and girls disproportionately bear the brunt of climate impacts yet receive less than 1% of climate finance globally. However, women and girls are often agents of change in their communities, and are capable of driving long-lasting climate outcomes. It is clear that, too often, those most affected by climate challenges face the greatest barriers to accessing the UK's climate finance. That is why the Committee's report argues that the UK's climate finance—regardless of whether it is delivered through its own programmes, multilateral institutions or partners—must be more accessible, inclusive and responsive to the needs and priorities of the most climate-vulnerable countries.

Thirdly, we considered the Government's evolving approach to mobilising private finance for climate adaptation and mitigation. We recognise that, in a resource-constrained environment, the Government are increasingly seeking to mobilise private capital to help them meet their climate finance obligations. We acknowledge that the pathway to addressing climate change must include the private sector. However, our Government have a critical role in creating an enabling environment that allows finance to flow to where it is needed most. That means using the UK's development finance institutions, guarantees, partnerships and diplomatic influence strategically to reduce risk, strengthen local capacity, support investable projects, and direct investments towards climate and nature outcomes.

However, the shift from donor to investor must not come at the expense of poverty reduction. Public climate finance has a unique role to play in supporting the poorest and most climate-vulnerable countries—particularly those to which private finance investment is least likely to go. The Government must therefore ensure that their efforts to mobilise private finance complement, rather than replace, grant-based solutions, so that we can support those communities that need it most.

Let me be blunt: climate change threatens to reverse decades of hard-won progress towards meeting the sustainable development goals. That not only risks perpetuating a vicious cycle of poverty, instability and humanitarian need in the most climate-vulnerable countries, but will have downstream implications for the UK's prosperity and security. The question facing the Government is not simply how much climate finance can be provided; the real test is whether the UK can demonstrate that every pound spent delivers genuine climate and nature outcomes. That means being more transparent, focusing on evidence, targeting our limited ODA climate finance where it is needed most, and ensuring that it strengthens, rather than undermines, broader development objectives.

The Committee's report should serve as a reminder that climate finance should not be treated as an optional extra to ODA. It should not be reprioritised or repurposed in the face of competing priorities; rather, it should be treated as an essential part of how the UK meets its global responsibilities under the Paris agreement and meaningfully contributes to tackling the defining challenge of our times.

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): I thank the Chair of the International Development Committee for giving a very powerful speech. As she pointed out, Nepal was hit by another flood yesterday, after 1,400 people were killed by those earlier in the year. These extreme weather events are having a huge impact on biodiversity, and I urge every Member to read the Government's national security assessment of global biodiversity loss and ecosystem collapse. There is a threat to our national security, and the challenges can be met only if public money is available. That means a return to spending 0.7% of GDP on ODA. Does the hon. Lady think that is important, and how does public funding marry with the private investment that she talks of?

Sarah Champion: I thank my fellow Committee member for her question. She well knows that in some of the places we visit, farmers have not been able to plant crops for years. Those are areas that we expect the food in our supermarkets to come from. Unless we recognise this as an international catastrophe with which we are all connected, we will never get to the resolution that we need.

Dr Sam Rushworth (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): It is true, as we know, that those bearing the brunt of climate disasters are those least responsible for causing them. The reality is that the cuts being implemented—not just by this Government, but by all Governments—risk global food insecurity and increased poverty, conflict, and refugee and migration flows. I have previously called for the Government to properly assess the impact

of this, and to publish it so that we, as British taxpayers, can understand what those impacts are. Would my hon. Friend join me in that call?

Sarah Champion: I thank my hon. Friend and Committee member, who has consistently made this argument. The Government need to give us that transparency so that we can see what does and does not work, and then replicate that on a global scale. Without that clear information being presented to this House, it becomes impossible to see the impact we are having.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First, I thank the Chair of the Committee for her statement and all the Committee members for their work. I do not care what anybody says: none of us can ignore the fact that the ice caps are melting, the rainforests have been decimated, bird and animal life across the world has been reduced dramatically, and fires, floods and pestilence—to use a biblical term—seem to be everyday occurrences.

In particular, the hon. Lady mentioned women and girls, and I wish to focus on and ask her a question about them. I think it is really important that they have the chance to thrive, to be educated and to have the health they should have, and then that they have the opportunity to find a job. What more can our Government do to ensure that women and girls across the world have a chance to thrive?

Sarah Champion: The hon. Member makes a powerful point, which I have heard him make for decades, about trying to support women and girls to flourish wherever they find themselves. I would say that the most straightforward thing the Government could do right now is to publish the data about who the money goes to and how it impacts positively on their lives. The Committee has been calling for that for as long as I have chaired it, and I think the Government really need to act on it.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I thank both Select Committee Chairs for their statements.

Backbench Business

Baby Loss Awareness Week

8.2 pm

Andy MacNae (Rossendale and Darwen) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Baby Loss Awareness Week.

It is a privilege to open this debate again during Baby Loss Awareness Week. I want to start by recognising the bereaved parents participating in the debate today, whether by watching at home, having shared their story with their MP, or even by speaking in this Chamber. To lose a child is one of the most painful things a parent can experience. I know today will bring back difficult and deeply upsetting memories for many, but we are here today in our children's memory.

Since our debate last October, the all-party parliamentary group on baby loss has heard from countless families, charities and support groups. They have trusted us with heartbreaking stories of babies who have died, concerns that were dismissed, parents left without answers and families having to fight the very systems that should have supported them. We have also heard from dedicated healthcare professionals, representative of tens of thousands across the country who are working incredibly hard to deliver great care despite the system, not because of it.

Last year I shared my experience of losing my daughter Mallorie. This year I have been spurred on by the stories that others have entrusted to us. Each is different, but the message running through them is the same. We know more than enough about the failures and the problems. We know what good should look like, and families and professionals now urgently need us to deliver change. To everyone who has spoken at the APPG, often at great personal cost, I say, "Thank you. Your testimony must not simply become part of another report; it must shape what happens next."

When I opened last year's debate, I focused on the national investigation into maternity and neonatal services. Since then, Baroness Amos has published her findings, and a national maternity and neonatal taskforce has begun developing a national action plan. That is progress, but it is not yet delivery. Time and again, families have seen inquiries established, reports published and recommendations accepted, only for the same failures to recur again and again. We must break this cycle, and make this national action plan a watershed moment. The test will not be the quality of the plan when it is published, but whether care improves, families are listened to, staff are supported to provide care and, ultimately, fewer babies die.

Today, I want to focus on some key areas in which action is urgently needed. First, to underpin the action plan, we need new national targets to reduce baby deaths and eliminate inequalities. Black and Asian babies continue to experience substantially higher rates of stillbirth and neonatal death, while babies born to the most deprived communities also face worse outcomes. We do not need another decade of evidence to know that this demands action.

The previous national maternity safety ambitions expired last year and have not yet been replaced, so the Sands and Tommy's joint policy unit is calling for new targets to take us to 2035. These targets must be ambitious, transparent and measurable. The policy unit's recommendations include national targets for stillbirth, neonatal mortality and preterm birth, alongside an explicit commitment to eliminating the inequalities in these outcomes based on ethnicity and deprivation.

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for his eloquent and moving speech, with lots of practical proposals. On maternity service failures, in April 2021, my constituents Phoebe and Jim Brooks tragically lost their much-wanted and loved son Jasper at Darent Valley hospital a few hours after he was born. The coroner's report found there had been serious failings in his care, including a lack of resuscitation expertise on hand during the birth and premature withdrawal of neonatal care from Jasper. The family were sent to a bereavement room while Jasper was still alive. Does my hon. Friend agree with me that tragedies such as this indicate strongly that we must, as a matter of urgency, implement the recommendations of the Amos review, and then look at the need for a full statutory public inquiry into UK maternity safety?

Andy MacNae: Unfortunately, the tragic case my hon. Friend describes is just too common, as is reflected in so many accounts I have heard from families at our all-party group. Yet again, it just adds to the weight of evidence showing that we need urgent and immediate action. We cannot wait. We cannot let those families down.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): My hon. Friend has brought forward an incredibly important debate, which will allow many such stories, like the one we have just heard, to be shared. I want to share the story of my constituents whose son Jesse died in their arms just six days after he was born. His parents are now bravely campaigning for placental cord insertion to be routinely assessed as part of a 20-week scan to reduce preventable stillbirths and neonatal deaths. Will he take this opportunity to pay tribute, as I do, to the bravery of Jesse's parents in launching this campaign?

Andy MacNae: I pay tribute to those parents, and to so many parents who have launched campaigns in their children's names. I hope and believe that that particular measure will be considered alongside many other methods and actions that could prevent the tragedies we see all too often. I thank my hon. Friend for bringing that to our attention.

The national maternity targets are vital, because without these clear targets, it is harder to maintain focus, measure progress or hold the system to account. The Government should adopt this call. Progress must be published regularly, and the data must show not only the national picture, but which communities are being failed and where. We must understand where babies are dying, which families are experiencing the poorest outcomes, where learning is taking place and, ultimately, whether changes in policy are actually making a difference.

This must include better data on miscarriage. At present, we do not routinely collect the information needed to understand fully how many families experience miscarriage, how those experiences differ between communities and whether outcomes are improving.

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for generously giving way. As he rightly says, the system is currently failing so many mothers, babies and families, and there is often a lack of care, support and compassion. Last year, my constituent Rachel suffered two devastating miscarriages, and she mentioned the insensitivity towards her of both the doctor, who asked why she was crying, and the midwife, who told her to calm down and have a glass of wine. Does the hon. Member agree with me that things such as guarantees for bereavement and perinatal mental health specialists in every maternity service are really important, and that we could strive for that?

Andy MacNae: I agree wholeheartedly, and as the hon. Member will see, I will focus on that significantly later in my speech.

On miscarriage data, Scotland is expecting to begin routine data collection on miscarriage from this year. England should match that ambition. Linked to that, we also need to address anomalies in how stillbirth is defined and recorded. However, targets and data are only meaningful if someone is responsible for monitoring progress and challenging failure.

That brings me to my second point. The maternity and neonatal commissioner, as recommended by Baroness Amos, must be independent, empowered and properly resourced. The commissioner could provide a strong national voice for women, babies and families, monitoring whether recommendations are implemented, holding the system to account and ultimately helping to rebuild trust. The commissioner should report regularly to Parliament on progress against national targets, identify where improvement has stalled and require public bodies to explain what corrective action they will take. That must include being able to challenge the regulators. Long-term issues with the Care Quality Commission and the General Medical Council are well recognised, but effective, trusted and fit-for-purpose regulators are a crucial element of any maternity safety system and a maternity commissioner should be able to demand better of them.

The commissioner's potential will be realised only if they can act independently of the system being scrutinised. The system cannot be allowed to mark its own homework. The commissioner should have a statutory basis, independent publication rights, the power to obtain information and make formal recommendations, and a duty to monitor their implementation. The office will also need protected funding and a dedicated team. The Government must explain how the commissioner will work alongside the taskforce and other bodies, what powers the office will possess and how its independence will be protected. That will be particularly important if the role is to be based within the Department of Health and Social Care. If that is the case, the Government should present a clear rationale as to why it is the best option and provide specific assurances around independence. Ultimately, families will judge the maternity commissioner role by whether it can ask difficult questions, publish uncomfortable findings and demand proof that change has occurred.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I was hoping the hon. Member would mention this point. When there is a tragedy, a loss, a heart aching and a family grieving a

child they have lost, that really hurts. Does he, and ultimately the Government, feel that there should be access to a person of faith—perhaps a chaplain, a man or woman of the cloth—who could come forward to provide succour and support whenever they need it?

Andy MacNae: I think this connects to the issue of personalised care. When it comes to bereavement support, it is the care and support that works for that individual. I will talk later about personalised care plans and personalised support plans during bereavement, but it is about reflecting on what the individual needs, not what the system says someone needs.

Dr Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a very powerful speech. Does he agree that charitable organisations such as Sands—we have Suffolk Sands in my constituency and today the red pillar boxes throughout Bury St Edmunds are covered in crocheted hats that have come from Sands—and the peer group support they are able to make available is absolutely crucial to supporting families who have lost babies? There can be few families in the land who are not affected.

Andy MacNae: I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to Sands—indeed, we are joined today by staff from Sands in the Gallery. There are so many charities, such as Tommy's and others, that are vital. It is a fact that so many parents rely on voluntary services and voluntary support to get through what is one of the most difficult times in their lives. Those charities are indispensable, but at the same time they are often plugging gaps that exist in the system that maybe should be providing that support.

The third point I want to focus on is on the question about personalised family-centred care. Every pregnancy and every family is different. Good care depends on seeing the person in front of you, listening carefully, and understanding their history, circumstances, concerns and individual risks. Too many families have described being dismissed or treated as a category rather than as a person. A safe service cannot be one in which parents are not heard. Nor can it be called safe if assumptions about ethnicity or background influence the care someone receives.

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): I am here to represent the views of my constituents John and Holly Osman. Holly and John lost two babies and have had a catastrophic history, but that has driven Holly to work in this area. She asked me to point out that the NHS maternity survey says that 18% of parents reported that their concerns during labour and birth were not taken seriously. The hon. Gentleman has already referred to Sands and Tommy's. I wondered whether he had some ideas about whether it would be right for staff to ensure that the concerns of parents are listened to and acted on. Does he agree?

Andy MacNae: I thank John and Holly for raising that question. Of course, I agree that listening to parents, listening to families and listening to mothers is crucial to a good service. To me, it is the thing that defines a good service: the personalisation and individualisation of care.

[*Andy MacNae*]

Building on that, families must be genuinely involved in decisions. Information must be clear and accessible. Risk must be assessed individually. When a mother or parent says that something is wrong, that concern must be taken seriously. The national action plan should establish what every family is entitled to expect throughout the maternity and neonatal pathway: physical and psychological safety, dignity, informed choice, and compassionate care and communication.

In designing this change, we should recognise that there are midwives, doctors, nurses, support workers and bereavement specialists throughout the country delivering extraordinary care every day, often under immense pressure. We must learn from that and build on it. To give just one local example, we have the Lancashire Women and Newborn Centre in Burnley. Speaking with staff and patients there, we can see what good practice looks like. It is a high-quality environment, with a triage unit to catch early issues. There is mutual respect among staff and personalised care for patients. They take time to listen and to provide compassionate bereavement support when needed. This same high standard of care is replicated in many units throughout the country, so reform must not simply identify what has gone wrong. We must recognise, celebrate and share what works. We must have structures that identify best practice and effectively propagate it throughout maternity services.

That brings me to my fourth point. Supporting and empowering staff must be central to reform. Throughout the all-party parliamentary group's work, we have heard from healthcare professionals who care deeply about families and take great pride in their work, but goodwill cannot compensate for a lack of time, training, capacity or appropriate facilities. Safe care requires the right staff with the right mix of skills and the right resources and facilities needed to deliver it. Staff need time to listen properly to families, undertake training, reflect on difficult cases and learn from colleagues.

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for leading the debate so admirably. One thing we heard at the APPG on patient safety is the need for staff to feel confident to speak out if they see things going wrong and the importance of a safe culture, yet in the NHS staff survey only four in 10 midwives say that their organisation would address concerns if they were raised. Does he agree that we need to do more to build a safe staff culture within the NHS and maternity units?

Andy MacNae: I fully agree. I am so glad my hon. Friend raised that point, because she has, wonderfully, set up the next passage of my speech. Staff must be able to raise concerns without fearing damage to their careers. The figure in the NHS staff survey is, I believe, that 43.5% of midwifery staff felt confident that concerns would be addressed. Staff are often the first to recognise when a system is becoming unsafe. If they believe speaking up will make no difference, an opportunity to prevent harm may be lost.

Improving culture must therefore mean more than asking staff to attend another programme or complete another exercise. It must mean creating an environment with time to listen and time to care. Speaking up should be welcomed, concerns taken seriously and those who

raise them protected. Boards and senior leaders must hear what staff are telling them. They must be able to trace concerns from the ward to the boardroom, demonstrate what action has been taken and report back to those who spoke up. Whistleblowers must be protected from retaliation or isolation. No healthcare professional should be forced to choose between remaining silent about unsafe care and risking their livelihood by raising it. If staff are trusted, supported and heard, they are far better placed to listen to families in turn. Fundamentally, we should empower staff to provide the standard of care they entered the NHS to deliver.

Finally, we must deliver compassionate and equitable bereavement care. Our daughter Mallorie died at five days old. Nothing could have been done to prevent that, and we received exceptional care throughout our time in hospital. We also received good emotional support in the immediate aftermath from hospital staff, but trauma can take time to kick in. The impacts of losing a child do not end after a week or a month or a year. They stay with us. My wife, Vanessa, suffered depression and post-traumatic stress disorder in the years following Mallorie's death. For 11 years now, she has had consistent difficulties accessing specialist and sustained mental health support. Instead, she has been bounced between short-term interventions and generalists, and often reliant on limited voluntary services. At no point was she able to get support from a mental health professional who actually specialised in birth trauma. She was never able to return to her role as a senior health visitor. She has now had her NHS career terminated on ill health grounds and she is back on another waiting list for therapy.

Vanessa's experience is far from unique. Time and again, I have heard from mothers and fathers about how the system was incapable of responding to their individual circumstance, and the timing and depth of trauma.

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): I refer to a case from my constituency surgery. I have heard that for mothers who suffer from bipolar, the birth process is very triggering, and support is rarely available at that point—a critical point in their lives. What needs to be provided for those patients?

Andy MacNae: I will come on to the full package of support that is needed, but what the hon. Member raises is indicative of how care is not available when people need it most—we hear that time and again.

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is incredibly generous in giving way and is making an excellent speech. When there is a gap with therapeutic care, there are charities, such as the Lily Mae Foundation in my constituency, that fill it. We have also talked about Sands and Tommy's—there are lots of charities out there that need support as they do that important work. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we should consider more support for them as well?

Andy MacNae: Supporting charities is vital; they do so much incredible and brilliant work, and I would encourage any support that could be given. I will now attempt wrapping up and not take any more interventions—my eye has been caught by Madam Deputy Speaker.

The care received after losing a baby stays with a family forever. Kindness, dignity and privacy cannot remove grief, but poor and absent care after loss will deepen trauma and cause long-term harm. To be clear, good bereavement support must include fathers. Only 29% of services offered basic assessments to fathers in 2024—that is simply not good enough. Services must recognise that fathers and partners will also grieve.

We need to do better, and we can. We know what needs to be done. The national bereavement care pathway already exists and covers miscarriage, termination of pregnancy for foetal anomaly, stillbirth, neonatal death and sudden unexpected death in infancy. Every NHS trust in England has voluntarily adopted it, but implementation remains inconsistent because services have not always received the resources or prioritisation needed to deliver it. We must address that and require that all bereavement pathways are considered within NHS planning and resourcing.

Effective bereavement support should be integral to all maternity services, with identified bereavement leads. All staff who may care for bereaved families should have access to appropriate bereavement training during working hours, and they must themselves receive the support they need in dealing with the losses they have seen. When loss has occurred, every family should have a private space to spend time with their baby, make memories and begin to process what has happened. Specialist bereavement support services should be there to support them through personalised support plans, and in the longer term they need to have specialist mental health support available to respond as trauma manifests, even if that is years later.

The question is no longer whether maternity and neonatal services require fundamental change—report after report has answered that. The question is whether we have the determination to deliver it. We need targets to reduce baby deaths and eliminate inequalities by 2035, supported by good data to show that policy is working. We need a commissioner with the independence and authority to hold the system to account. We need care that sees and listens to every family as individuals. We need to give staff the training, time, capacity and protection they need to provide safe care and to speak up when something is wrong. And when a baby dies, we need compassionate, high-quality bereavement care for every family.

Last year, I said that we had the opportunity and obligation to act. That obligation is now greater, because the actions we must take have been laid before us. Families have heard promises before, they have watched recommendations accepted, and they have been assured that lessons would be learned, only to see another family experience the same failures. We owe them something different now, not another expression of good intent, but evidence that care is changing and lives are being saved.

Bereaved families have given us their testimony, time and trust. They should not be asked to return in another year—or in another decade—to tell us that the same failures continue. We cannot bring back the babies who have died, but we can honour their short lives through what we do next.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. Members will know that there is protected time, so we have until 11.02 pm, but it would be helpful if they could keep their remarks to seven or eight minutes.

8.23 pm

Sir Jeremy Hunt (Godalming and Ash) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Andy MacNae) for that excellent opening speech. I also thank him and the hon. Member for Sherwood Forest (Michelle Welsh) for co-sponsoring the debate with me.

Most of all, however, I thank the parents who have lost children, and who took me on a journey on this issue when I was Health Secretary. I am thinking of James Titcombe, who lost his son Joshua at Morecambe Bay; of Carl Hendrickson, who lost his wife Nittaya and his son Chester at Morecambe Bay; of Richard Stanton and Rhiannon Davies, who lost their daughter Kate at Shrewsbury and Telford; of Derek Richford, who lost his grandson Harry at East Kent. They, and many others, are watching this debate and can see that the Health Secretary is here. I thank her for being here for this Backbench Business debate; it means an awful lot, and I know that she cares about the issue.

I start by recognising that some progress has been made. Since I first stood at the Dispatch Box in 2014 with the Morecambe Bay inquiry, which was the first of many maternity safety inquiries, the neonatal death rate has fallen by 21%—about 700 fewer deaths a year—but that is not good enough. The fall in death rates plateaued in 2020 and has not got much better, and since then we have had a worrying rise in maternal deaths. The 2025 target to halve neonatal deaths that I set in 2017 was missed.

There are three problems behind our lack of progress. First—and this is something for which I am partially responsible—there are too many recommendations. Earlier this year, Baroness Amos counted 748 maternity safety recommendations, mainly since 2015. The NHS is a world champion at doing reports into maternity safety, but sadly not a world champion at implementing the recommendations made.

It is encouraging that the Health Secretary says that there will be a recommendations hub, but could she give it real teeth, so that there is a timescale within which the NHS will decide if it is going to adopt a recommendation and, if it is going to, a person responsible for implementing it within the vast labyrinth that is the NHS? Could she give a timescale so that we and our constituents all know that something really is going to happen?

Jim Shannon: I know the right hon. Gentleman will be aware of the research that suggests that giving women access to specialised care after their first miscarriage can help prevent baby loss. Currently, specialist care is only offered after three miscarriages. It is estimated that supporting early intervention could prevent around 10,000 baby losses a year—that is one thing that could be done right now.

Sir Jeremy Hunt: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman, and his point closely links to the second of my three reasons, which is that we have still not, after all this time, implemented proper continuity of care. That should mean that every mother, from the moment she is told that she is pregnant, is assigned one team of doctors and midwives to be with her throughout pregnancy,

[Sir Jeremy Hunt]

birth and even after the birth. Clinical teams that know their patients are much more likely to identify risk when it happens and to avoid tragedies. That lack of continuity of care sits behind the feeling that we heard about in the speech by the hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen: parents saying time after time that they feel forgotten in the system.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Stamford) (Con): We hear quite often when women have high-risk pregnancies, “Don’t worry, contingency care is there.” I had placenta accreta last year, which is one of the few pregnancy conditions that still kill women in birth. I remember turning up for scans, having been told there was an 11% chance that I might die on the day I gave birth, and the high-risk team saying, “So it’s just a normal pregnancy, right? Everything’s going really great. We will get this done really quickly, find out how things are.” That is the lack of care taken with women who are carrying everything that matters at that time. Many people say, “Don’t worry, high-risk is fine. It is dealt with really well; it is only standard pregnancies” but I want to stress the point that there is still a comprehensive issue.

Sir Jeremy Hunt: I thank my hon. Friend for that very powerful personal experience. I am concerned about this idea of women being moved from having no team to a high-risk team, because it cannot always be known in advance if someone is high risk. It is knowing every woman’s situation continuously that enables a team to understand whether she is deteriorating and whether, therefore, she is in need of specialist help.

The third reason we still have this problem after all this time is the one I really want to focus on: the ideological obsession that still exists in some parts of the NHS with so-called natural or normal birth. That leads to the promotion of vaginal birth over and above C-sections in a way that, all too often, sees interventions and escalations happen too late, and mothers and babies die.

I do not ask the House to take my word for it, as some of the reports have commented on this issue. Bill Kirkup, who did the Morecambe Bay report, said that maternity services at Furness general hospital

“became strongly influenced by a small number of dominant individuals whose over-zealous pursuit of the natural childbirth approach led at times to inappropriate and unsafe care.”

Donna Ockenden told the Select Committee about Shrewsbury and Telford:

“We have spoken to hundreds of women who said to us that they felt pressured to have a normal birth. My clinical team said they have seen examples, even in situations where a normal birth in their own hospital would be contraindicated, of women being pressured”.

She said there was

“a multi-professional...focus on normal birth at pretty much any cost.”

Again, at the launch of the Nottingham inquiry, Donna Ockenden said there were hundreds of cases where

“the quest for normal birth continued. And avoidance of intervention persisted”.

Finally, in Leeds, Fiona Winser-Ramm told *The Times* she was convinced that “normal birth” ideology played a part in the death of her daughter, Aliona.

Dr Prinsley: I am very impressed to see both a former Health Secretary and the present Health Secretary here late in the evening for this debate, which is a sign of the subject’s importance.

Does the right hon. Gentleman feel that fundamental to the third problem he describes is the breakdown in relationships between the profession of midwifery and the profession of obstetrics, and that there is, in some instances, what appears to be a competition between these two crucial professions, and that one answer may be to find some way of getting the two professions closer together?

Sir Jeremy Hunt: I defer to the hon. Gentleman’s clinical experience, but I absolutely agree with him. He has hit the nail on the head.

Before I come on to my solutions, I want to say why I think this is still a problem. Very senior voices are still promoting “normal birth” ideology, including a former president of the Royal College of Midwives who told LBC in June:

“Doctors have taken over maternity, and they’re not doing it very well.”

It really is time to stop denying the problem and start solving it. Never again should the promotion of an ideology about a so-called preferable type of birth lead to a mother or baby being put at risk.

Alicia Kearns: I want to unite those points by drawing again on personal experience. My son reacted badly to being induced, and his heart rate stopped. We were rushed to the emergency room: “We have to get him out! We have to get him out!” Just before they cut, somebody screamed, “Stop! His heart rate has gone back to normal. He’s fine. You don’t need a C-section.”

Stood at the end of the bed were an obstetrician and a midwife, and the midwife said, “Great, you don’t need a C-section any more.” The surgeon said, “Yes, she does. She needs to have it now. She needs to have it.” They said to me, “You need to decide.” They refused to come to an agreement about what was safer for my baby, and they said that I had to make that decision.

That is exactly the problem, and my right hon. Friend is so brave to make the point, because he will come under criticism for saying that there is such a thing as an obsession with natural birth. A safe birth is the best birth, and I am thankful to him for his bravery in making that point tonight.

Sir Jeremy Hunt: I thank my hon. Friend for her courage in talking about her personal experience, which says it better than I ever could.

That leads me to my conclusion and what I think are the solutions. First, bringing together the points made by my hon. Friend and the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Dr Prinsley), we need a total overhaul of midwifery education to make it clear that there has to be teamwork around every birth. It is not midwives versus doctors; it is midwives and doctors working together for the safe delivery of every single child.

Secondly, we need a shared agreement across both professions about what risk is, and about when escalation is required—total agreement about the moment for intervention—so that something such as my hon. Friend describes never happens again.

Finally, we need to rehumanise the whole process through which the NHS takes care of pregnant mothers and newly born babies so that from the moment of pregnancy, every mother is assigned one team of doctors and midwives who are responsible for that mother and child right the way through pregnancy and after birth. No one should ever be turned into a number or a type of care. Everyone is a human being and should always be treated that way by the NHS.

This week we are here to remember the babies and mothers who should be here but are not. We recognise the progress that has been made in their name, but we also have a duty to the families to be humble about the failures as well.

8.35 pm

Michelle Welsh (Sherwood Forest) (Lab): I want to start by thanking the Secretary of State for making maternity and neonatal safety a priority and for publicly stating that as her priority from the outset. Personally, it felt like a relief, especially after the uncertainty there has been. I wish to personally thank her for that.

Baby Loss Awareness Week is a time to remember the babies we have lost, stand alongside bereaved families and recognise that pregnancy and baby loss can change a life forever. Behind every case discussed in this House is a baby who is loved, a family who imagined a future, and a life that will always be part of theirs. In preparing for this debate I watched last year's debate again, and what saddened me was how much of what we raised then remains painfully familiar today—families still fighting for answers, women still describing concerns that were dismissed, staff still frightened to speak up.

Last year I said that grief must be the engine for change. Today I want to go further. Families have carried the grief. It is time that the system carried the responsibility.

There has been an important change over the past year. Baby loss, maternity safety and neonatal care are being discussed openly and treated as Government priorities. The work of Donna Ockenden, Baroness Amos and Lady Justice Thirlwall has brought devastating failings into sharp focus. I thank them, their teams and, above all, the families whose courage made that work possible.

For the last six-and-a-half years I have fought for change and listened to over 1,000 families and organisations, my own experience of miscarriages and birth leaving me with both physical and mental scars. I am so proud to serve as the Government's national maternity and neonatal adviser and contribute to the national taskforce.

The taskforce brings together families, clinicians and others with the experience and expertise to shape reform. Bringing those voices together in this way is a significant step forward, and I welcome the determination to work together. I also wish to thank the civil servants working behind the scenes, often to demanding deadlines, to turn that determination into action.

The measure of our success will be what changes for women arriving at hospital frightened, the midwife trying to keep them safe and the families who sadly leave without their baby. Our goal must be clear: safe care, informed choice and compassionate births, with support that continues when things go wrong. That must be the standard that every family can expect.

That includes families experiencing early pregnancy loss. We must never confuse an early loss with a small loss. A woman may have known she was pregnant for only a short time. She may have already imagined a name, a face, a future. She may be grieving privately before she has told anyone that she is pregnant. Whatever her circumstances, she deserves compassion.

We must think about where care takes place. A woman who has just been told that her pregnancy ended should not have to sit beside someone celebrating a reassuring scan. A woman losing her baby should not be placed on a ward where she must listen to other babies crying and families celebrating their arrival. We should not ask people to endure avoidable distress because the service has failed to consider their needs. We need appropriate private spaces, timely assessment and scans, sensitive explanations and clear information about what happens next.

Women need to understand their treatment choices. They need pain relief, follow-up and someone to contact when they are frightened or unsure. Partners need support too. A woman should never be left feeling that because miscarriage happens relatively often, her own loss somehow matters less. The care we provide cannot remove that grief, but it can make the difference between being supported through it and being traumatised further.

That brings me to something very simple: time to care. In Nottinghamshire, when someone is struggling we often say, "Come on, let's have a cuppa." We put the kettle on and make a brew, but what we really mean is, "Stop for a moment. Take a breath and sit down. I'm here and I'm listening." In maternity care, time matters: time to hear a woman say something feels wrong, time to explain a scan result, time to answer a father's question and time to sit with parents after devastating news. A hurried conversation can leave someone frightened and confused. A compassionate conversation can help them understand, feel heard and know what support is available.

We cannot ask staff to provide that care while giving them neither the time nor the staffing to do it. Time to care must be built into the service. That means a properly funded, ring-fenced perinatal workforce plan and enough midwives, obstetricians, neonatal staff, sonographers and bereavement specialists with the training and support they need. It means continuity whenever possible so that women are supported by professionals who understand their history, their fears and their circumstances. Compassion must be supported by the way in which we organise and resource care. Listening must also lead to the right action. We need timely access to the right scans, skilled interpretation of the results and prompt referral when concerns are identified. Safe, informed choice depends on having that information and the opportunity to discuss it.

We must also confront the inequalities in whose concerns are heard. Black, Asian and ethnic minority mothers continue to face an unacceptable disparity in maternal outcomes. Racism, assumptions about pain and failures to listen must be addressed directly. We need services that take women's symptoms seriously, provide appropriate interpretation and examine outcomes honestly. A national improvement in safety cannot be judged a success while some women remain much less safe than others. Where you live, the colour of your skin and your ability to make yourself heard must never determine whether you receive compassionate, safe care.

[Michelle Welsh]

It would be an omission on my part if I did not speak about responsibility and accountability, because I know how deeply this hurts in Nottinghamshire. Women were left traumatised. Families described fathers sleeping on windowsills only hours after their precious baby had died because there was not even a chair available. Some of those who held senior responsibility during those years did not engage with Donna Ockenden's review. For families who have revisited the worst moments of their lives to help establish the truth, that refusal hurts. It runs deep. It stings. Families have answered the difficult questions. They have shared intimate details. They have found the strength to speak when speaking has cost them so much. They deserve answers from those who held responsibility.

For far too long, we have had a system in which excellent midwives are frightened to speak up and families must fight for answers—and some explanations they have been given are clearly untrue. Women have been made to feel that what happened was their fault. We have to address that.

A culture that supports honest learning must protect staff who raise concerns and distinguish between human error and reckless or dishonest conduct. It must also ensure that failures of leadership have consequences. Protecting staff who speak the truth and holding people accountable for concealing it are both essential to safer care. That is why the maternity and neonatal commissioner must have teeth. The commissioner must have the independence, authority and resources to listen to families and staff, identify patterns, obtain information and challenge failures. There must be clear routes to require a response and escalate concerns when organisations fail to act. Families should not have to wait for another major inquiry before someone in authority listens. National oversight must be matched by accountability in every trust. Every trust board should be able to say who is responsible for maternity safety, what concerns have been raised, what action is being taken and how progress will be demonstrated. Improvement plans should have named owners, deadlines and evidence that care has changed and improved.

We also need consistent national data that helps us identify warning signs early, and accountability must reach the ward, the boardroom and the organisations overseeing them. We must therefore review our regulatory bodies and how they are fulfilling their purpose. The GMC, the CQC and the Nursing and Midwifery Council have different responsibilities, but all have a role in protecting patients. We need to examine how they respond to concerns, share information and act when warning signs emerge. We have those three regulators, yet families still need large-scale investigations to establish what happened and secure change.

The question is simple: how could serious concerns at Nottingham University hospital trust have persisted for over 20 years while bereaved families had to stand up, organise and fight before meaningful change began? That is a broken system. A system that leaves grieving parents to expose its failures is unfit for purpose, and when it forces those parents to fight for the truth while carrying the loss of their baby, it is cruel. We should call out that cruelty. We should reject it, and we should change it. Bereaved parents should never have to become the safety net for a system that failed their children.

I know that there are exceptional midwives and obstetricians working every day across this country. They listen, they care, they save lives and many have themselves fought to raise concerns. They too deserve a system that supports them, protects them when they speak up and acts on what they say. It is for those staff, for the future of our services and, above all, for babies, mothers and families that we must make change happen. I welcome the Health Bill's proposal to extend the time limit for bringing relevant prosecutions from three years to five, but we must go further. Families facing bereavement can spend months simply trying to survive, and understanding a complex regulatory system should not fall entirely on them. They need clear information about where to raise concerns, what each organisation can do and how to access support.

Anna Dixon: I thank my hon. Friend for her amazing work on this issue over many years, campaigning for families in her area who have been harmed. Families often face long and lonely legal battles after the grieving and damage that has been done during the child's care. Clinicians and organisations can often become defensive and risk-averse, particularly in this environment. Does she agree that, as part of the changes she is calling for, we also need to look at NHS Resolution, the clinical negligence scheme, and stop making it a fight for parents to get answers to their questions?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. This is a very powerful debate, but it is limited to three hours. I will not be able to get all the Members in if speeches are long, but I appreciate the sensitivity.

Michelle Welsh: I agree with my hon. Friend.

Bereavement care also needs proper scrutiny. A poster on a wall cannot demonstrate that a family has received compassionate care. Families need appropriate spaces, trained staff, sensitive communication and support after they leave hospital. Where families wish, equipment such as cuddle cots can allow them precious times with their baby. Parents should be supported to make their own choices about holding their baby, creating memories and saying goodbye. Nobody should be rushed, and nobody should be made to feel there is a correct way to grieve. The quality of that care should never depend on which hospital door a family walks through.

I also want to raise the No Breath Required campaign. In England and Wales, coroners generally cannot investigate a stillbirth. Their jurisdiction depends on whether a baby was born showing signs of life. That distinction can leave families in very similar circumstances with different routes to independent scrutiny. The need for answers does not disappear because a baby was stillborn. We should give coroners the power to investigate stillbirths, with appropriate safeguards, expertise and resources. We have seen the harm caused when inadequate reviews fail to identify what went wrong or prevent it from happening again. An extension of coroners' powers must sit within wider reform, with sufficient capacity, specialist understanding and compassionate support for families.

We must also recognise that some losses occur despite good care. Every family deserves an honest explanation, support and the opportunity to ask questions, and that support must continue beyond discharge. Grief does

not end when a hospital episode closes; it follows people home into work, relationships and, sometimes, subsequent pregnancy. Families must have access to bereavement and mental health support for as long as they need it. They should not have to prove that they are struggling badly enough to deserve help.

Bereaved and harmed families have already given us so much. Their testimony has exposed failures, their persistence has driven reviews and their determination has brought us to this point. They should never have needed to become campaigners to make the system listen. As the Government and the taskforce move forward, those families' voices must remain central, and our promises must be tested against their experience. We need time to care, power to act and responsibility to answer.

Last year I said, "Let grief be the engine of change." This year, we must show families where that change is happening. Families have carried the grief; it is time that the system carried the responsibility. Baby Wynter, baby Harriet, baby Sebastian, baby Koupar, baby Teddy, baby Quinn, baby Aubrey, baby Grace, baby Poppy, baby Dexter, baby Luna and baby Ladybird—we must remember every baby, support every family, and do everything in our power to prevent avoidable loss.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. We now have a speaking limit of seven minutes.

8.51 pm

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): I thank the hon. Members for Rossendale and Darwen (Andy MacNae) and for Sherwood Forest (Michelle Welsh), and the right hon. Member for Godalming and Ash (Sir Jeremy Hunt), for their advocacy for better maternity care and for their opening speeches.

I want to begin by talking about an extraordinary woman, my constituent Jane Plumb, from Haywards Heath, and her son Oliver, and the work that they have done with their colleagues in running a charity called Group B Strep Support. They visited Parliament in the summer, and some hon. Members came along to learn more about their campaign, which calls for all expectant mothers to be offered GBS-specific tests late in pregnancy as part of their antenatal care. If that test were offered, more babies could be protected from a life-threatening infection.

I spent some time this afternoon looking at the Group B Strep Support website, and found the history of the charity. I knew that Jane set up the charity after her baby, Theo, died from the infection, and that she had been working on it for decades since then. The first time I saw a photograph of her at Parliament was outside this building with David Cameron; then, a few years later, she met my predecessor, Sir Nicholas Soames, and Theresa May, again while campaigning. That gives hon. Members a sense of the decades that she has put into fighting for babies not to have the same outcome as baby Theo.

The second set of constituents I want to reflect on are the families in Mid Sussex who are part of the Truth for Our Babies campaign. Since last year's debate to mark Baby Loss Awareness Week, progress has been made for the families in Sussex who lost their babies, the families whose babies were harmed and the mums who were

harmed themselves. In last October's debate, I called for the then Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the right hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), to listen to the calls from those families and the Truth for Our Babies campaign. Their ask was quite clear: an independent review into maternity services at the University Hospitals Sussex NHS Foundation Trust led, critically, by Donna Ockenden. It was not until April, six months later, that their requests were met.

In the intervening months, the meetings that those families convened with the right hon. Member for Ilford North were raw, emotional and stark. They are meetings I will not forget. I wish the bereaved parents from Truth for Our Babies had not been put in the position where they felt they had no choice but to lay out their babies' stories again and again in order to be heard.

As so many hon. Members can attest, the distress, pain and exhaustion felt by parents and families tragically stretches on beyond the loss of the baby. It is right and proper that these families receive reviews to better understand what went wrong and to stop things going wrong in the future. I am of course glad that the Sussex maternity review is now under way, but when I receive extremely concerning correspondence from my constituents, such as that which I will briefly go on to quote, I have serious doubts about the way in which reviews are being conducted.

My constituent tells me that

"there is currently no funding available to cover families' travel expenses to review meetings and that no remuneration arrangements are in place for our time, expertise and emotional labour."

My constituent rightly notes that this is

"particularly concerning given the review's commitment to being inclusive and non-discriminatory."

That is despite the fact that National Institute for Health and Care Research guidance is clear about the importance of properly resourcing public involvement. It recommends payment for public contributors' time, skills and expertise, alongside reimbursement of reasonable expenses such as for travel. The guidance recognises that financial barriers can prevent people from participating and that appropriate payment and expenses are important to ensuring that involvement is accessible and inclusive.

If families cannot afford the cost of travel or to take time away from work or caring responsibilities, and if they repeatedly revisit traumatic experiences without appropriate recognition and support, the evidence gathered will inevitably be incomplete and potentially fuel the inequalities already in place. I hope that Department of Health and Social Care officials and the Secretary of State will reflect on that. I would be happy to engage with them further as a matter of urgency. I also ask the Secretary of State whether she will heed Group B Strep Support's calls for screening to be put in place for all expectant women.

8.56 pm

Deirdre Costigan (Ealing Southall) (Lab): Every single baby loss is a tragedy of almost incomprehensible magnitude, but I welcome the Amos report commissioned by this Government, which I believe will prove to be a watershed moment for those families.

The report highlights that black, Asian and economically deprived families face significantly higher risks of death and complications in maternity and neonatal care. Babies of

[Deirdre Costigan]

black and Asian ethnicity face higher rates of dying shortly after birth compared with white babies, and black mothers face up to a 40% higher risk of miscarriage than white mothers. For many of my constituents in Ealing Southall, which is one of the most ethnically diverse constituencies in the country, that brings an added level of risk when using maternity services.

I recently met a family from Southall who had lost their newborn shortly after birth. Mum and dad did not have good English, so their 13-year-old daughter had to translate for them and explain that they were being asked to agree to turn off their new baby's life support machine. This 13-year-old girl then ended up standing in front of a judge, arguing on behalf of her family. She showed me the heartbreaking letter the judge sent her, explaining the decision to end life support—a decision which she and her parents still cannot accept or even understand.

We rightly focus on the parents when a child dies, but brothers and sisters are too often overlooked when it comes to support after a family bereavement. My 13-year-old constituent found that some of the medical professionals struggled to communicate with her about what had happened to her newborn baby sister. She told me that she felt there was not enough help available for her, both as a child experiencing the loss of a sibling and as a child carrying all the burden of communicating with officialdom on behalf of her family. No 13-year-old child should have to go through what my constituent experienced, so I welcome the Government's commitment to more compassionate and individualised care for every bereaved family, but I hope that the Secretary of State will work on the design of this, to ensure that there are measures in place to support families for whom English is a second or even third language, and support for siblings who act as the family translator.

Every woman should feel safe and looked after in the NHS. It is important that all women are listened to, including black and Asian women. I welcome the new task and finish group on miscarriage and baby loss care, but I urge it to look closely at the way that black and Asian women often face double jeopardy when accessing maternity and neonatal services, and to find ways of removing this inequality once and for all.

9 pm

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Stamford) (Con): I thank the hon. Members who secured this debate, and all the families who have, in their darkest moments, raised their voices so that we can support them and, it is to be hoped, prevent future tragedies. I welcome the Health Secretary's promise to publish a national action plan, and I want to focus on a few issues that I hope will be reflected in it. The first follows on from the comments of my right hon. Friend the Member for Godalming and Ash (Sir Jeremy Hunt). We must stop pushing women towards a normal birth. When my friends tell me that they are pregnant, I say to them, "You need to have the confidence to challenge the NHS." We are taught to say, "Thank you; of course, whatever you say." This is the one time in life when we should say, "Why? Stop. What are the other options? I want a different opinion. I need some time." We must teach women to listen to their body, and to trust what it says.

We cannot say there is no obsession with normal births. When I was pregnant with my second, the hospital forced me to go on a one-hour online course, to convince me to have a vaginal birth, though I had an emergency C-section previously. At the end of the course, the hospital asked all of us on it, "Which of you are now ready to accept that you should go for vaginal birth?". All the women said that they were, apart from me. The hospital said, "Why won't you say yes?". I said, "Well, on slide 20-something, you said that it was x% safer for me and my baby to have a second C-section, so that's what I want." They said, "It does say that, but let's go for a natural birth. You can do it!" This is an obsession, and we have to challenge it.

Mr Luke Charters (York Outer) (Lab): The hon. Lady's comments remind me of our family's experience. We had a traumatic first birth, and the second birth was an elective C-section. That was the only game in town; that is for sure. We said to the registrar—I will never forget it—"Do you tell women about the clinical risks of a vaginal birth—the same clinical risks that you have talked to us about for half an hour? Do you give women and families that data, so that they can make an informed choice?". The registrar said, "No one's asked me that in my entire career." That is the precise point that the hon. Lady is making, and I thank her for making it.

Alicia Kearns: I am afraid that I will be drawing on a lot of personal experiences, but I scrapped at least nine further examples. I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman.

The next thing I want to impress on the Health Secretary is that it should be mandatory to teach cardiopulmonary resuscitation, or CPR, for babies before they are discharged, particularly if they have been in a neonatal intensive care unit. During most pregnancies, we study what to do if our baby needs CPR, but we all know, even if we have had a baby before, the difference between the pregnancy course and how things are once we have held that baby in our arms. It is so different.

I praise Addenbrooke's hospital, because it forced my husband to do a CPR course before I was discharged, as my daughter had to go into NICU for a brief period. When we came home, only about two weeks after she had been born, and when she finally reached her due date, she suddenly stopped breathing. It happened out of nowhere. We were sitting in bed. I remember screaming for my husband, and I think of the poor person on the phone when we dialled 999. I am normally quite good in an emergency, but not then. I lost the plot. I was screaming down the phone, "My baby's dying! My baby's dying! You have to save her." Because my husband had done that CPR course, he was able to save this tiny baby's life; it took them too long to get an ambulance to us. Her temperature had fallen below 34°C by the time the ambulance arrived. He saved her life at a time when I could not. I was not in a place where I could save my baby. Yet we let people go home from hospital without being retaught CPR, once they know what it is to hold a baby. I genuinely believe that it would save so many lives if we did what Addenbrooke's did and forced people to spend 20 minutes doing a CPR course before they went home.

The next issue I will touch on is maternal death, because as my right hon. Friend the Member for Godalming and Ash said, the numbers are rising. The leading direct

cause of maternal death in this country is blood clots, but no friend who is pregnant or has gone through a pregnancy will say that that is the No. 1 cause. Instead, they will talk about diabetes, bleeding out during birth and all sorts of other things. I have gone back and looked through all three of my NHS trust books—I kept mine, although people are not meant to keep them after birth, because the NHS does not like them having all that evidence that they could use if there were ever an issue—and there is nothing about blood clots. NHS staff do not provide education about blood clots to women when they are pregnant, yet they are the No. 1 cause of maternal death.

The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists is responsible for guidance, which is meant to be republished every few years, on how to prevent, diagnose and treat blood clots, but it has not updated that guidance since 2015. That means midwives and obstetricians have had no updated guidelines on how to handle the most common cause of death in women in pregnancy and after birth. Reviews were missed in 2018, 2021 and 2024. I have started to fight with the college to get it to do something about this, but even now, it says that it will not get updated guidance out until at least 2027. How many more women will die before then? I have met representatives from Thrombosis UK, and there would be no negative outcome from giving all women anticoagulants throughout their pregnancy; it poses no risk to them.

Unfortunately, last year, I was one of the people affected by this. I have had a real few years of it. I went to the doctor and said, “There is something wrong with me. My only symptom is a slight catch in my chest.” I was not grabbing my chest and screaming, like everyone else does. I was dismissed, sent home, and told that there was nothing wrong with me. A lady wrote to me and said that she went to the doctor three times, worried about blood clots. She knew there was something not right in her leg, but each time, she was told she just needed to do some yoga and get moving. On the fourth time, the blood clots were finally diagnosed. In my case, I went back to the doctor and said, “There is something really wrong.” Luckily, the doctor did a D-dimer test, and then rang me to say that I needed to go to Addenbrooke’s immediately. The doctors found five clots that had passed through my heart and into my lungs. I was lucky to be alive. Addenbrooke’s said that I clearly had an exceptional doctor. I am so grateful to Dr Laura Stephens for saving my life.

The average woman has no idea that blood clots are the No. 1 maternal killer. Some 25% of those deaths happen in the first 12 weeks of pregnancy, during which women probably do not go to the doctor, because they have done a pregnancy test and know that they are pregnant. The Department of Health and Social Care needs to do a mass awareness campaign. GPs need to be aware of the risks, and obstetricians and midwives need to be taught about not just “normal” birth, but all births. Tomorrow is World Thrombosis Day. I am calling for maternal blood clot prevention to be a priority in the new national strategy, because we can prevent them; almost all deaths of women from blood clots could have been prevented.

It may seem odd, but I briefly want to talk about a real cruelty that has been inflicted on mothers. The former Prime Minister apologised for the horrendous

forced adoption scandal that took place in this country, but some babies never left those mother-and-baby homes. ITV found that 200 infants from eight homes were buried in mass plots in 10 cemeteries across the UK. As part of this work, will the Health Secretary ensure that the Government force local authorities, churches and charities to open up their records? The mums who were forced into those cruel mother-and-baby centres, and then lost their baby or had a stillbirth, do not know to this day where their baby is buried, and the graves are unmarked.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. Lady for her speech. Without giving too much away—my wife would not forgive me—some of the experiences that she has spoken about resonate with me, and remind me of the birth of my son a year ago. On historical forced adoption, I was on the Select Committee that discussed the issue, and I am proud that the previous Prime Minister gave that apology. I found it shocking that when those mothers tried to get the records about their children, they were treated appallingly. As the hon. Lady will be aware, one of them was a Parliamentary Private Secretary to a former Prime Minister, but she was treated like a child when she was asking for her own information. Does the hon. Lady agree that that is not acceptable and should not have been allowed to happen, and that there should be an apology?

Alicia Kearns: I thank the hon. Gentleman. Our little ones must be very close in age; I hope that his is doing very well. The Prime Minister said, “We are sorry,” but opening up the records would show that we meant it. It would release those mothers from the shame that was forced on them, and allow them to finally find their baby, name them, and lay them to rest.

Often in this place, we talk about what should be done, or what we could do, so I will end very briefly on a positive note. We cannot undo a family’s heartache, or the loss that they will carry for all their lives, but what drives most of us to come here is a determination to stop the same thing happening to someone else. I made that promise to my best friend in 2022, when she lost her baby Siena at nine months. I took my promise and secured £1.8 million in funding from the then Conservative Health Secretary to roll out a new technology designed to reduce stillbirths and premature births. The Tommy’s app—or Siena app—is a clinical decision support tool that accurately assesses women’s chance of having a premature birth, or developing complications with the placenta that can lead to stillbirth, and it is proven that it is saving lives. The trial began in 2024 and is running in 26 NHS maternity units, involving 39,000 women a year.

My request to the Health Secretary is to roll out the app across every single hospital. We have proven that it works. It essentially gives midwives an artificial intelligence equivalent. It gives them all the information that they may not know or understand about someone because they come from a different heritage, have a different background or have a complicated medical history. This tool can save lives, and can save more families from the heartache that too many suffer.

We must do better. We are failing women on too many accounts. Almost all of us in this room can probably share a trauma, or a time when something went wrong in the NHS because we were not listened to, and we

[Alicia Kearns]

must do more. I thank everyone for their frankness, and for sharing their stories this evening, and I thank the Health Secretary for agreeing to meet me in a few days; I am really grateful.

9.10 pm

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Wyre) (Lab): I have never spoken in a Baby Loss Awareness Week debate before, but that does not mean that I do not care. I watched last year's debate on the television, and I see that many of the faces that were there last year are here this year.

For the benefit of those watching, if an MP is not here and you have asked them to be here, let me say that it can often be quite difficult to talk about issues on which you feel that you have skin in the game, and that is certainly the case for me. When my local hospital, the Royal Lancaster infirmary, invited me to the opening of the new bereavement suite in the maternity unit earlier this year, I found a reason not to go. That was not because I was not glad that the room was there, but because I never wanted to see the inside of it. Unfortunately, in June this year, I did get to see the inside of it—not as an MP cutting the ribbon, but as a grieving parent.

The thing about miscarriage is that when you leave hospital, you do not have anything, apart from maybe some leaflets from the Miscarriage Association. Today I want to talk about baby loss certificates, because they are one thing that we can have and hold when we have nothing else of our babies. I will keep this quite tight. I want to set out some real issues with baby loss certificates. I believe that we can make policy changes that could make the situation better for parents. The eligibility criteria for the certificates in England are far stricter than those in Scotland and Northern Ireland. In England, people are required to have experienced the loss in England, and to be living in England when they apply, whereas in Scotland and Northern Ireland, people can apply if they live there or lived there at the time of the loss. That variation creates an inconsistency in what is available to parents across the UK.

There is another issue with cross-border access to certificates. Since the English scheme was launched, I have been made aware by Sands that families with bereaved parents who live in Wales, but who experienced their loss in an English hospital, have found that they were not eligible for the certificates. The charity's concern is that once the Welsh certificate scheme finally launches, if the verification criteria are the same as the English criteria, it would require the parents to both live in Wales and have experienced the loss in Wales, so some parents would fall between the cracks, and would never be eligible for a baby loss certificate under either scheme.

There is also an inconsistency when parents do not live in the same part of the UK. That issue was raised in the Scottish Parliament's debate on baby loss last week by my partner, David Linden MSP. The issue stems from the verification process, which uses NHS numbers and postcodes to confirm eligibility. However, that results in a problem whereby my baby loss certificates just have my name on them, as the mother; there is a blank where the father's name should be—not because he does not want to be on the certificate, but because the system says no, as his postcode is “wrong”. We cannot have both parents' names on a baby loss certificate when they

live in different parts of the United Kingdom. David raised that issue last week in the Scottish Parliament, and the Scottish Health Minister Maree Todd said that she would take that forward with the Department of Health and Social Care. My only ask today is that the Secretary of State receives that request warmly. While it is not typical for a family to live across different nations in the United Kingdom, I hope that the Secretary of State will perhaps even reach out to Ministers in all the nations of the United Kingdom to ensure that where that is the case, families are eligible for baby loss certificates. When you are walking out of a hospital and the only thing you wanted was your baby, but all you have is loss, having that certificate is something tangible to hold on to and offers a huge amount of comfort. This is a “computer says no” administrative error, and fixing it would offer a lot of comfort to many families.

9.14 pm

Sorcha Eastwood (Lagan Valley) (Alliance): It is at incredible moments like this that people across this House come together to share their testimony. I really want to thank the hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Andy MacNae) for opening today's debate, and the hon. Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Cat Smith)—you absolutely broke my heart, but the strength you have shared is incredible. I know that so many people watching this debate will be absolutely moved and feel the power and strength of your testimony. Obviously, I am from Northern Ireland. We introduced baby loss certificates—it is a devolved matter for us—but I know that so many of my constituents will feel really seen by what the hon. Member has said. I encourage the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care for England to do what we have done in Northern Ireland, because it has made such a difference.

I want to talk briefly about a number of charities in my constituency of Lagan Valley, including Zach's Wish and the Little Forget Me Nots Trust. Northern Ireland is one of those parts of the world where we do some things really well, and other things not very well. The hon. Member for Rutland and Stamford (Alicia Kearns) talked about the issue of forced adoption and mother and baby homes. Across the island of Ireland, we have a long and shameful heritage of a number of mass graves. That has really impacted women and families throughout the centuries, because they have never been able to get closure. The Northern Ireland Assembly is doing a big public health piece of work at the minute, trying to trace some of those babies to their mother, or maybe their brother, their sister or another family member. I pay tribute to my colleague in the Northern Ireland Assembly, Nuala McAllister—MLA for North Belfast—who has been incredible in trying to bring churches to deal with their shame for not allowing families to have a burial, or even just an acknowledgment of their loved one.

Another huge issue that I feel is yet to be named in this debate is that of maternal mental health. Whenever you experience baby loss, no one can name that for you and tell you how to feel or what to do, but I do know that for women who have experienced that incredible, crushing hollow in the centre of their stomach, sometimes the one thing they need is somebody to be there. Other Members have touched on the fact that there needs to be continuity of care throughout a pregnancy, which includes whenever that journey comes to an end and the person does not have a baby in their arms.

I want to pay tribute to one of my constituents, Lynette Glen from Lagan Valley, and the maternal advocacy and support project at the Atlas Women's Centre. I do not want to betray any confidences, but I know that one of the women involved in another project with Women's Aid lost her daughter after she gave birth, and in Northern Ireland, shamefully, we still do not have a proper programme for women who are experiencing post-natal depression and anxiety, or issues during the pregnancy. That is deeply troubling—I cannot even begin to imagine how much it compounds the loss of a child when you were already potentially in deep distress.

Another issue that we have come across in Northern Ireland and other parts of the United Kingdom is the lack of paediatric pathology services. We now have a situation where babies are being taken from Northern Ireland to other parts of the UK. Earlier this year, I met representatives of some of the pathology departments at the Royal Victoria Hospital in Belfast. That team is second to none, but that does not mean that it is not going to hurt mums, dads and other people who have lost their baby when their baby is taken away from them. That is really difficult, but we have a staff shortage across the pathologist workforce, which is incredibly difficult. As we think our way through this issue, we need to give thought to how we are going to help families who are undergoing that loss.

Earlier this year, we experienced the passage of the Hillsborough law, and so many people have already made reference to the Ockenden report, which is important in terms of the culture, sometimes, of secrecy and cover-up and is key whenever we are discussing baby loss. I am so heartened by the number of MPs who are already doing incredible work in this space, but we need to do so much more. Northern Ireland currently has the highest infant mortality rate in the UK, and I am sure that many people will find that as troubling as I do.

I pay tribute to a charity called Mummy's Star, founded by a lovely man called Pete, who lost his wife when she had cancer and she was pregnant. There are so many women who go through cancer when pregnant, and sometimes they are left with no other option than to terminate a much-loved and much-wanted pregnancy. We need to do so much more to support those women. Incredible clinicians are already doing work in this space to support those women and their babies, but there is so much more to be done.

Lastly, if you will spare me an indulgence, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will talk about IVF. Whenever you go through IVF, sometimes you are left with nothing in your arms. For many women in Northern Ireland, they only have one funded cycle of IVF at the minute. For those women who do not have many eggs during the egg collection, you only have one shot at a fresh egg transfer. If that is not successful, you walk away with nothing. You are one shot and done. I call on Members across this House to help our campaign to ensure that Northern Ireland gets three fully funded cycles of IVF or ICSI—intracytoplasmic sperm injection—because those women experience that loss and potentially never gain that baby in their arms. I ask Members to be mindful and to help me in that cause for women in Northern Ireland. Lastly, I thank everyone who is sharing their experiences tonight—you are incredible.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. The speaking limit has dropped to six minutes. I do not want to interrupt anyone's speeches, but using "you" and "your" is not good form. You are speaking through the Chair, and please remember that.

9.21 pm

Mr Luke Charters (York Outer) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the debate. I am reminded of the words of Jo Cox that we have more in common. In sharing experiences tonight, I hope that the public and my constituents will see that there is more in common between us in this House.

We all recognise that baby loss brings an unimaginable grief. No family should have to face that loss in isolation. This is the 24th Baby Loss Awareness Week, and I pay tribute to Tommy's, Sands and the many charities, NHS staff and volunteers in York who are supporting families through their darkest moments. Through their compassion, they help to ensure that bereaved families know that they are never alone.

For too many families, baby loss could have been preventable. Too often, families have said that they were not listened to when they raised concerns. Although my own family's experience is different from that of families who experienced a loss, this debate is personal. When my wife and I welcomed our first child, we experienced a traumatic birth. We are fortunate, blessed and lucky, but it was traumatic none the less. It left a profound mark on our family, particularly on my own mental health from witnessing it all. I pay tribute to the Sky journalist Sarah-Jane Mee who, with her empathy, gave me the confidence to share my story.

The findings of Baroness Amos's independent review into maternity and neonatal services are important, but in the short time I have, I would say that they are insufficient in terms of non-birthing partners. I warmly welcome the new Health Secretary to her place, and I am appreciative of her predecessors who met me and showed me empathy in sharing my experiences. I know that many other Members feel the same and share her view that there is a national crisis around the standards of maternity care.

I will touch on what my hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood Forest (Michelle Welsh) said. Given the time limit, I will focus on just one of her remarks, which was around the GMC, professionals and holding people to account. As one of those families affected, too few professionals seem to have been struck off or held to account. That is echoed through some of the work in the Ockenden review and the other investigations at Nottingham. I am now working with her in her review of maternity services at Leeds Teaching Hospitals NHS trust, where ours was one of the families involved. I will just say on record that Donna has been respectful, kind and empathetic, and I thank her for that. At the heart of every recommendation must be one simple principle: that families must be listened to, that no non-birthing partner should feel helpless as their warnings go unheard, and that no bereaved family should be left wondering whether a different response could have changed the outcome for their baby.

I pay tribute to Hayley Patrick-Copeland and the two daughters that she lost: Alya and Aleah. She is a powerhouse of a northern mum, and her knit and natter groups, which I have visited in my constituency, have been

[Mr Luke Charters]

knitting hats and gowns for stillborn children. She texted me to say that awareness was important so that people feel less alone and can more openly share their wonderful babies' stories. She has channelled her grief into helping others, creating ribbon displays across York that offer remembrance, comfort and solidarity to families affected by baby loss. I pay tribute to Hayley, and to the local organisations supporting her. I thank Huntington working men's club and the Joseph Rowntree Housing Trust, and I say, "Hayley, you are amazing—you really are."

I will end my speech now, because I want to let other Members in, but I will first speak with some candour. The test of every review, recommendation and action plan is whether families' experiences actually improve, not only in the immediate aftermath of loss but in the months and years that follow. I was immensely grateful to the team at York hospital who were there for us during the second birth. On Thursday evening, the global "Wave of Light" will bring people together to remember those who have been lost too soon. However, I must say that the overwhelming message I receive from families in York is that sympathy is never enough, and I hope that tonight's debate is a clamouring call for action. We owe those families the action that they deserve, and we owe it to the babies we remember this week to learn every possible lesson from their loss.

9.25 pm

Ian Roome (North Devon) (LD): I thank Members on both sides of the House for initiating the debate. It comes at a very important moment for many of my constituents. Owing to a serious staffing crisis, all births at North Devon district hospital have been suspended for more than eight weeks, which has forced more than 180 expectant mothers to travel for at least two hours to Exeter to give birth since 11 August. Many fear that the journey is not safe, and have experienced weeks of stress and anxiety, picturing unexpected complications, the trauma of a difficult birth or the loss of a little one. This is a fear that cuts through the whole community, down every street and across every class and background. I that know I am not the only Member who receives private emails from constituents with heartfelt or even heartbreaking stories, shared only in complete confidence.

There are estimated to be 120,000 miscarriages in the UK each year, although the NHS does not know the true figure and some estimates are far higher. Losing a child is something that no one should ever have to suffer, and many families are left grieving for what might have been. Reading their accounts, one is struck by how much small acts of kindness matter. We read about how trusts go about investigating a tragedy, about whether overworked NHS staff took time to listen to parents, and about whether or not public bodies use their child's name.

In North Devon we are blessed with the hard work of a wonderful local charity called Families in Grief, which gave me a simple glimpse into how complex bereavement support can be. The loss of a child has an impact not only on parents but on siblings and extended family, and for a long time. People experience grief very differently, and a death can shatter whole families. Speaking as a father and, now, a grandfather, I can say that the national health service is a modern miracle for some families. According to the Office for National Statistics,

the infant mortality rate has fallen by more than 90% since 1900, and by more than 35% in just the past 25 years, and yet in some ways we seem to have gone backwards. According to the pregnancy and baby loss charity Sands, the proportion of parents waiting six months or more for post-mortem results has trebled to more than one in five. That is especially painful when it stops parents planning for another child.

Bereavement support is still only offered to parents after they have experienced a third miscarriage. The Liberal Democrats have argued for bereavement care after every miscarriage, which has also been proposed by the national pregnancy charity Tommy's. They advocate basic counselling and advice after the first miscarriage, then blood tests and more advanced scans after each successive miscarriage. Those are important for those experiencing bereavement, but also in respect of the underlying health risks that need to be identified for a future pregnancy.

In North Devon, our local hospital is desperately trying to fill the two consultant spaces for the rota so that births can resume locally, but hundreds of families in our community also deserve a full independent review into what has happened. We need accountability, so that it never happens again. No parent should have this major milestone in life ruined by inadequate access to services, poor-quality care or insensitive treatment.

In December, the Government's neonatal and maternity taskforce is due to put together a new national action plan to strengthen maternity units in the hospitals across the country. The desperate case of North Devon district hospital, and the peril of young parents in my constituency, should be front and centre in the taskforce's thinking. I have met many families who struggle even to get to Exeter because of a lack of transport in my rural constituency.

Dr Prinsley: I am aware of the problem in the hon. Member's hospital, and I would just like to say something quite shocking. We are talking about baby loss tonight, but we must also consider those babies who have been damaged by obstetric catastrophes. I will share a simple fact: the cost of the NHS obstetric service is about £3 billion per year, but we spend £1.3 billion per year on negligence compensation, with a total liability of £37 billion. The average claim for a damaged baby is £11 million. Although we are talking about baby loss and the problems affecting the obstetric service, we must also consider those babies who have been damaged because of obstetric disasters.

Ian Roome: I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing his experience as a clinician to the House, and I totally agree with him.

After writing to the Secretary of State four times since July and not receiving one reply, I would welcome an urgent meeting with her to discuss the issues around maternity and how the closure of North Devon district hospital is affecting my constituents in North Devon.

9.32 pm

Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab): I commend so many colleagues for their powerful contributions to this debate. I want to talk briefly about three things: first, awareness, which is such an essential first step; secondly, the significant uplift and support that we need to see for bereaved parents; and thirdly, mental health support,

which should always be there when people are trying for a baby, or when they lose a baby during pregnancy or during or after birth.

I speak with a bit of relevant personal experience: I now have three beautiful children, but before I got pregnant with my eldest, I had three miscarriages. Three times my husband and I went through a surge of hope, excitement and nerves, the early planning for life with a baby, and sharing the news with a few close friends and family, only for it to end in disappointment. I was really knocked by it each time and was really unsettled, as there was no explanation for why it had happened. I was really frustrated by all the people who just said, “Don’t worry, you’ll be fine,” because I did not believe that I would be fine. I did not understand what had happened, and I did not know whether I would be able to have a baby or not, but I suppose I was lucky, because the NHS did get to the bottom of it, and I was then able to have my children.

More importantly, I am here today on behalf of all my constituents in Aylesbury and the villages, an estimated half of whom will have been affected by some form of baby loss, either directly or through someone they know. I bet that many of them will not have shared those experiences, or will not have felt supported if they did.

My first point is about awareness, because until I looked into it, I had no idea that half of all adults living in the UK are affected by baby loss. Before I had my own miscarriages, I had no idea that one in five pregnancies ends that way. I thank the organisations that are working nationally to change that, such as Sands and Tommy’s, and I thank the groups in my constituency who are doing the same. I want to give a special shout-out to Aylesbury Yarn Bombing, which has covered post boxes across Aylesbury with incredibly beautiful and moving toppers featuring hand-stitched sleeping babies, candles, teddy bears, hearts and little notes asking passersby to take a moment to show support and remember the babies we have lost and the families who have been affected. That is so important, because it is on all of us to educate ourselves, to speak more openly about baby loss, and to reach out and rally around people who are struggling as a result of it.

That takes me to my second point, which is about improving the support. I would like to make one specific point about miscarriage, because when I had mine it turned out to be quite a common and treatable issue, but it was not until the third miscarriage that I was eligible for the tests to discover that. If that miscarriage support had kicked in sooner, I could have avoided the trauma of multiple miscarriages. So I really support the graded model of miscarriage care developed by Tommy’s, which would allow at least those limited tests to start sooner. I ask the Secretary of State to look into that.

More broadly, we must end the lottery of care that exists for baby loss. I do hear from people who receive compassionate support—that midwife or bereavement counsellor who makes all the difference—but there is far too much of the opposite. I will quote one lady from my constituency who got in touch before this debate:

“I am a mother of a stillborn baby, I was full term. 41 weeks and six days overdue with my first born. She was born sleeping. I received very little support afterwards. I was given a leaflet and told don’t worry, you’re healthy, you’ll have a baby soon.”

That was that, and it is not good enough. She is one of too many people being dismissed in this way.

As we have heard, we need the national framework to set out what high-quality support for baby loss should look like. We need better data behind it, and clear ambitions and accountability for maternity safety more broadly. As always when it comes to maternity care, we need a sustained focus on reducing the pervasive inequalities in access and outcomes. We need dedicated space in hospitals, too. Another constituent told me about going through surgery for ectopic pregnancy, being put straight back into a public waiting area, and then being told there was no bed to stay overnight. That has to change, and I know we are making good strides towards that, but there is so much more to do.

My third point is specifically about the mental health support that should surround baby loss. Of course, it is not only a physical experience or a bereavement; it can have a profound and lasting effect on mental health. Research published by Miscarriage UK in March this year found that more than two thirds—68%—of respondents reported mental health problems following pregnancy loss, including anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress. Research supported by the National Institute for Health and Care Research has broken that down for early pregnancy loss, finding that one month afterwards 29% of women experienced post-traumatic stress symptoms, 24% experienced anxiety and 11% experienced depression severely. This continues for many months and years, and of course includes people with no history of mental illness. According to the baby loss charity Sands, only one in six bereaved parents are able to access any mental health care through the NHS.

Mental health support must be an integral part of the support after baby loss, and I would love to see national standards for mental health services for bereaved parents, as well as national guidance for the local commissioning of these services to help end the postcode lottery that I have spoken about. We of course also need the staff, training and resources to be able to deliver these services, which we struggle with across the NHS, particularly for mental health. This is the only way to ensure that every parent experiencing baby loss will have access not just to compassionate clinical care and bereavement support, but to appropriate mental health support, including a clear pathway for referral to specialist services, where that is needed.

Ultimately, for every parent and family experiencing baby loss, the response from the NHS and from society has to be one of dignity and compassion, and it has to result in the right support. I hope today’s debate will be a step in that direction.

9.38 pm

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): I start by paying tribute to all the excellent speakers who have shared their story with the utmost bravery. This debate is one I have attended since I was first elected, and it is the only debate I know during which the Doorkeepers, quite rightly, distribute tissues. I am the vice-chair of the APPG on baby loss, and I pay tribute to everyone who has contributed to this debate and to the inquiry that the APPG has carried out.

I will start with a slightly more positive story, which is a personal one, but while the outcome is positive, this is relevant to some of the experiences we have heard about. We have just welcomed our third baby—he is about seven months old—and we had the good fortune

[Saqib Bhatti]

to attend the midwifery unit at Warwick hospital. It is not in my constituency, but I would still encourage the Secretary of State to go to visit it, which I am sure the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) would welcome.

We had a very positive experience in the sense that the midwives were really good in their communication. I am going to protect my baby's identity, but he has crazy hair, so I am going to call him baby Elvis. However, when baby Elvis came out, he was not breathing. I remember the moment, because the midwife had pressed the panic alarm and he came out and he was grey. I suppose I am speaking about it today because my wife has been trying to get me to talk about it for about seven months and I haven't. And now I will do it in front of the TV cameras; she is a very patient woman.

What I remember in those moments—my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Stamford (Alicia Kearns) talked about CPR—was that the midwife just went straight into action. I did not realise that the room had filled up with health professionals from across the hospital. It was quite a sight to see when I turned around, once everything had settled down. In the moment I thought, "Oh my god, we're about to become another statistic," but the midwives worked their magic.

The support needed by non-birthing partners has come up in the debate. I do not want to take away anything from mothers and what they go through—clearly, they go through everything, as we have heard—but there is a call that whatever support is provided takes into account partners and parents too. I admit that I have thought about that moment many, many times in the past seven months and I still do—those images do not leave you—so I hope that, in anything the Secretary of State can do and will do, they are taken into account.

In the limited time I have, I am going to make a few calls and recognise some of the charities I have worked with in my locality. There is work on a national framework to ensure that standards are put in place. Of course, any standards that are put in place will need key performance indicators and accountability along with them. I am sure the Secretary of State is looking at that and I welcome her being in her place today.

Many parents go through the NCT—National Childbirth Trust—training, but we went through a private provider called Bump to Baby. One key thing that came up was the training to be able to challenge what was given to us—my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Stamford spoke about this—and to have the confidence to be able to say no or to ask why. That really helped us as a family to talk about our baby. The midwives, recognising that there were questions that needed to be answered, spent a lot of time answering questions afterwards—they really went over and above. The training during pregnancy is really important because it gives parents the power in their arsenal to be able to ask those questions.

The point about data and miscarriages has been made. It has also been made to me by my constituents, so I hope the Secretary of State can clarify what thought process she is going through around collecting data on miscarriages.

In my intervention earlier on the hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Andy MacNae), I mentioned the Lily Mae Foundation. I met Amy and Ryan, who set

up the foundation over a decade ago and who have recently received the British Empire Medal. It is a smallish charity that punches way above its weight and they are incredibly strong in what they do. They have given therapy to over 1,000 parents grieving baby loss. They have supported professionals by giving them training, too. They pointed out the postcode lottery that does occur. Smaller charities do not always get the support and they are being asked to do more with less, so that is an important point that I wanted to stress. They see first-hand that increased load.

I want to pay tribute to a couple of friends of mine. Baby loss can touch anybody and they have gone through it in the past couple of months. They experienced it at Musgrove Park hospital. They were really keen for me to stress how great the labour team were, but they did see grieving bereaved parents next to families who were celebrating a birth. Clearly, that disparity still continues and it is one I have seen in other hospitals, too. Perhaps the Secretary of State could reflect on that, pay tribute to the staff of Musgrove Park and recognise baby Merlin, who they sadly lost.

Finally, on Thursday at St Philip's church in Dorridge, many of my constituents will be gathering for the "Wave of Light" service and the windmill dedication set up by the TeddyRose Foundation.

9.44 pm

Lizzi Collinge (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab): I represent a large chunk of Morecambe Bay, and I will never forget the 2015 Kirkup report into maternity safety, published just one year after the birth of my first child. I am speaking in this debate because too many babies are still dying. I have met too many bereaved families, whether that is baby Ida's parents, the constituents who had a medical termination due to a fatal foetal abnormality, the twins who lost their mum in childbirth, or the women who I speak to regularly who have lost pregnancies at all stages.

I support my colleagues' comments on the Amos review, the Ockenden reports and the national maternity and neonatal taskforce. In her closing remarks, I would like to hear how the Secretary of State will drive the changes needed, as outlined in those reports. I would first direct her to the submission from all-party parliamentary group on patient safety to the Amos review. I would particularly direct the Secretary of State to the Japanese system of no-fault compensation for cerebral palsy, which gives automatic compensation to parents whose baby gets a brain injury, but does not prevent them taking further legal action. That has reduced costs, but more importantly, it has reduced the number of cases of profound cerebral palsy, because it has standardised reporting and learning processes.

I briefly flag that health is much wider than the healthcare we receive. The truth is that right now racism and poverty are killing babies and mums, and we need to do something about it. Those of us who are interested in patient safety talk a lot about culture. Culture is simply the way that we do things around here, but it can have a profound impact on safety, particularly the psychological safety of staff in raising concerns, which in turn affects the safety of services. Senior leaders and ward managers need to be able to welcome concerns and act swiftly on them, but unfortunately we too often

see a culture that makes life difficult for staff when they speak out, and managers and leaders who do not take responsibility. One of the reasons that I welcome the Hillsborough law—the Public Office (Accountability) Bill—is that it changes the legal risk from one where honesty is seen as legally risky, to one where honesty in the event of a tragedy is now legally enforceable.

Further on culture, I highlight my worries that midwifery education and culture in some instances still promote normal birth ideology—I have seen that too often. In no other area do we expect bodies to work perfectly, and yet there are still some sections that think people can think their way to a natural birth, and I have seen the harm of that too often.

I will speak about miscarriages—I have left this until the end because, to be honest, even after nine years a pregnancy loss can still sting. Miscarriage is the most common complication in early pregnancy. There are about a quarter of a million miscarriages every year, but even that number is not exact; we do not know the true prevalence of miscarriage, which means that we are missing opportunities for data-led service planning and vital research.

Miscarriage is really common, and I hope that the openness that we are developing as a nation can help women to recover, while also recognising that it can have a severe impact on their mental health. Data from Tommy's shows us that months after a loss many women have symptoms of anxiety, depression and even PTSD. Women who have experienced a miscarriage are 3.8 times more likely to die by suicide. I am not saying that there is a direct causal link, but there is an association that needs to be looked at. I am proud of what we have done as a Government by recognising baby loss and the toll that a miscarriage can take. We have heard about some of the problems with baby loss certificates, and I hope that that is addressed.

It is wrong that—most of the time—women still have to go through three miscarriages before they get care and support, so I urge the Secretary of State to fully roll out the Tommy's-graded model of miscarriage care. It is essential that women get an appropriate level of support, information and treatment when miscarriage happens to them.

I want to give people some hope as well—I know that some very recent experiences have been cited in the Chamber today. Last week, I was reading a novel by Katharine Schellman. She has a line about the loss of a spouse, but it perfectly reflects my feelings a decade after pregnancy loss:

"It was still there, but quieter, a sad memory instead of a broken heart."

I want to reassure colleagues that they can go some way to mending that broken heart.

Finally, I thank the people supporting families who lose a baby. I especially thank Matilda's Mission, a baby loss charity that works in my constituency and that every year remembers baby Collinge. It supports so many families at the absolute worst time. It gives them a community who understand them and support them, and that is what we should have for every family.

9.50 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Lizzi Collinge). I thank her for sharing her personal

story, as many others have in this Chamber. Those personal stories remind us all of the grief, the loss and the pain. Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for allowing this important debate to be brought forward.

Baby Loss Awareness Week provides an important opportunity to raise awareness and to reflect on loss. Everyone who has spoken tonight has reflected on loss, whether directly or through friends and family. However, we must recognise that the impact of baby loss extends beyond this week. It is not just this week; it is every other week of the year. Families continue to carry their grief long after this campaign ends.

Losing a baby, both before and after term, is devastating. Parents speak of the potential of what could have been, of the hopes and dreams they had for their child and the milestones that they believed they would celebrate, but that were not to be. With this loss comes immense grief and anxiety, and the impact, not only on the mother but on the wider family circle, cannot be overestimated.

I know that the mums, the dads and the siblings will probably feel the pain more, but the grandparents, aunties, uncles, sisters and brothers all feel it as well, because they are all living through their family member, hoping that the new life will be something they can enjoy as well. For many families, this continues to affect future pregnancies. Parents report feeling constant fear and anxiety, waiting with grim anticipation for this tragic event to happen again. Sadly, for some families it does.

My mother had four children, but she also lost four. My speechwriter Naomi, who is a very busy girl, also lost her first baby. Many of my constituents tell me of their loss, and this debate allows me to express, on their behalf, their sorrow and the fact that it means so much to them.

Supporting women through and after this loss should be a priority. We must advocate for open communication among friends and family, as many women have shared that talking about their loss has helped their healing and made them realise that they are not alone in this experience—and they are not alone in this experience. They have their family, and many others have been through the same pain.

Supporting women in this loss is essential, but we must also do everything we can to prevent loss, where possible. I drew attention in an earlier intervention to the research suggesting that giving women access to specialised care after their first miscarriage could help to prevent baby loss.

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): My daughter is a rainbow baby. It is amazing that we managed to have her, but the hurt and the pain to get to that position, when you have lost children in between, is absolutely unbelievable. Does the hon. Gentleman agree with me, based on what he has just said, that it is so important that after that first loss, as Tommy's has suggested, intervention and professional support is given immediately, both in terms of investigating and understanding the cause and in terms of mental health support?

Jim Shannon: I totally agree with the hon. Gentleman, as I think does everybody in the Chamber. Currently, specialist care is offered only after three miscarriages. Estimates suggest that if early intervention were offered

[Jim Shannon]

after one miscarriage, potentially around 10,000 losses could be prevented each year in the UK. That is the magnitude of just one step in the right direction. I look forward to the Minister's response, and I hope that she can give us some encouragement. She is compassionate, and she understands how all of us in the Chamber feel about this issue, so I hope we can get that reassurance.

I want to speak about Northern Ireland, as the hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sorcha Eastwood) already has done. I sincerely welcome the recent changes in Northern Ireland. We became the first region in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to provide paid leave to both parents affected by miscarriage. It is really important that our Minister took that step in the right direction. Maybe it is something that the Secretary of State would consider implementing here on the mainland where it would help many people. It is estimated that around 9,000 people per year in Northern Ireland are affected by miscarriage, which leaves me in no doubt that the change will have a real impact on families in Northern Ireland.

Further efforts have been made in Northern Ireland, including through the baby loss certificate scheme—perhaps a small thing but it has a big effect. Certificates are now available to anyone who has experienced a pregnancy loss before the end of the 24th week of pregnancy. The formal recognition of the loss offers families, who previously went unrecognised, a degree of comfort and closure.

In an intervention on the hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Andy MacNae), I spoke about the importance of having a chaplain or minister available to give the succour and care that is sometimes needed. There is a spiritual dimension to loss. As a Christian, it would mean a whole lot to me, but I think it would mean a whole lot to others as well if they had that opportunity. Perhaps the Secretary of State can provide some reassurance on that as well.

We must ensure that the impact of these schemes is properly evaluated so that we can understand how effective they are in supporting bereaved families. If the evidence shows that measures are making a meaningful difference, this House must consider how similar support can be implemented across the UK.

It is clear that baby loss has a lasting impact. Every baby lost represents a life that could have been lived and a future that might have been. We must show compassion and understanding to those affected, not only during Baby Loss Awareness Week but every day of the year.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. With colleagues withdrawing, we have a few more minutes on the clock, so Back Benchers are now on an eight-minute speaking limit.

9.57 pm

Katrina Murray (Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch) (Lab): I want to begin by telling the House about Rita Grace Ghazala, the daughter of my constituents Fadi and Liz. I consider myself very privileged that Fadi and Liz have asked me to share Rita's story today. Not only have they shared her story with me, but they have allowed me to share her story with the House.

During pregnancy, Fadi and Liz learned that Rita had Edwards' syndrome, a life-limiting condition. They knew that the time they might have with their daughter could be desperately short. Rita was born in December 2024 and spent nine days with her mum and dad at the Royal hospital for children in Glasgow. Fadi and Liz describe those nine days quite simply as

"the best nine days of our lives".

Nine days is a heartbreakingly short life, but Rita's life was filled with love and has left an extraordinary legacy.

In the months since Rita's death, Fadi and Liz have channelled their grief into making things better for other babies with expected short lives and their families. Through Rita's Legacy of Hope, thousands of people have supported their fundraising. They have funded Rita's Room at Crossbasket House, providing a dedicated space for bereaved families so that no other family has to go through counselling sessions in an office. The funding has also provided two portable incubators, allowing parents to keep their babies close and make the most of their precious time together, and a cuddle cot and blanket system for Scotland's tertiary paediatric palliative care service.

It is an extraordinary legacy for one little girl. Through that work, Fadi and Liz also identified something that they believe needs to change. Fadi and Liz knew long before Rita was born that she had a life-limiting condition, so that pregnancy was full of hospital appointments, treatment, worry and uncertainty—for months. They have been clear to me that they were fortunate, as they were financially able to take time away from work, and had employers who would support them, but they know that many families receiving the same devastating news will not be in that position. No parent who learns that their time with their child could be measured in hours or days should have to worry about whether they can afford to take time away from work.

Fadi and Liz believe that families whose baby has been diagnosed with a life-limiting condition should have a statutory right to paid leave during pregnancy. They call that proposal Rita's law. The Government have already taken important steps to strengthen the rights of parents, including through the Employment Rights Act 2025, and I particularly welcome the review that is under way of the parental leave and pay system, but Fadi and Liz's experience highlights a gap. The support available following the birth or death of a baby does not address the particular circumstances of parents who are told during pregnancy that their baby is expected to have a very short life. I therefore ask the Secretary of State to work with the Department for Business, Innovation, Science and Trade to ensure that the needs of those families are explicitly considered in the parental leave and pay review, and to take a serious look at Fadi and Liz's proposal for Rita's law.

Rita's life was heartbreakingly short, but it mattered enormously. Fadi and Liz have ensured that Rita's name will be associated with compassion, dignity and giving families precious time together. I hope that by listening to their call for change, we can help that legacy reach even further.

10.1 pm

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): It is an honour to speak in this debate, which is always so powerful. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Andy MacNae) for leading it so sensitively.

There are few things that compare to the joy of knowing that you are about to become a parent—you consider names and imagine the future, and those little things in life suddenly take on a whole new meaning—but for some families, there is a moment when all of that changes, and a future that was so full of possibility is filled with uncertainty and grief.

My constituents Phil and Emma were brave and generous in sharing their experiences with me and my team. Emma's story is one of repeated pregnancy loss, difficult childbirth experiences, and not receiving the care and support she needed. I will share Emma's story in her own words. I warn hon. Members that Emma describes her experience of miscarriage in harrowing detail. She told me this:

"Our story of pregnancy loss started back in March 2019. I booked a GP appointment after continually bleeding for three weeks. No pregnancy test was offered, and I was told to monitor the bleeding. After fainting at work from persistent blood loss, I visited the Samuel Johnson walk-in centre and I was given a routine pregnancy test, which came back positive."

Emma's first miscarriage was followed by another pregnancy in February 2020, during the pandemic. She described the anxiety of attending appointments alone, without her husband, after her previous experience of loss. She went on to give birth to her daughter Alice, but the difficulties did not end there. Following Emma's discharge, she developed an infection and was passed between three hospitals. She described being physically weak, emotionally struggling, and without the support she needed.

After experiencing birth trauma, Emma and Phil were understandably nervous about having another child, but in March this year, they discovered that they were expecting again, and were excited about the possibility of a positive experience. Emma wrote:

"I had an in-person eight-week midwife check on 19 March and was advised I needed birth trauma counselling, which I welcomed as it finally felt as though somebody was listening and cared about my past experiences."

But, at 11 weeks, Emma began spotting. She knew that she needed help quickly. She called the early pregnancy unit at New Cross hospital eight times before her call was answered. Despite her concerns, she was offered an appointment several days later. A private scan confirmed that the pregnancy was no longer viable, but the hospital could not bring her appointment forward. Emma described what happened next:

"When we attended New Cross EPU on 14th April, we had to sit in the same scan room as pregnant women and ironically were taken into the same room where my first pregnancy was confirmed as a miscarriage."

Despite the findings, Emma was told she needed another scan in 10 days. She was sent home without pain relief, follow-up appointments or even a number to call for help.

Just three days later, Emma experienced a devastating medical emergency at home. She said:

"I went to the toilet, and found I had haemorrhaged completely through my clothing. I was scared and alone."

Emma passed out and was found in a pool of blood by her mother, who called 999. After waiting for 45 minutes, the ambulance service called back to say that Emma would have to make her own way to hospital. Her husband struggled to get her into the car and drive her to New Cross. When they arrived, the staff had not been informed of her situation. Emma describes the experience:

"My husband at this point pleaded with the staff for me to be seen. He had to explain multiple times what had happened, all whilst I was bleeding heavily."

Eventually, Emma was taken into a treatment room, where her blood pressure dropped dramatically low and she lost consciousness. She was taken to intensive care, where staff discussed blood transfusions and emergency treatment.

Emma is clear that the staff who cared for her that day were wonderful, but her experience leading up to that point raises questions about the support available to women experiencing pregnancy loss and medical emergencies. Emma was discharged with blood-thinning injections but no emotional support or follow-up appointments. She sought help for her mental health, only to be told that miscarriage was "just something that happens", and was given an NHS talking therapies leaflet. She eventually contacted Tommy's, where she finally felt listened to and supported. Emma also raised a wider concern about how pregnancy loss is counted and recognised. She said:

"Despite the fact I have had two miscarriages, because I had a healthy pregnancy in the middle of these, my count will reset to one, almost rendering my first miscarriage as forgotten and pointless."

Emma's story highlights the physical and emotional impact of pregnancy loss, the importance of timely and compassionate care and the need to consider the experiences of partners and families alongside those of women themselves.

I want to finish by returning to Emma's words:

"Emotionally, it is an incredibly difficult time, but physically the pain women go through is totally underestimated. We want change for women's health, change for partners' support, and change for all families that have had to experience any maternity issues or baby loss."

It was so encouraging to see the Government introduce two weeks of unpaid leave for those who experience pregnancy loss, in any form and at any stage, and I am proud of the ambition set out in the women's health strategy, but we now need to move as quickly as we can to ensure that every woman has access to high-quality miscarriage care and bereavement support, regardless of whether she lives in Cannock Chase, rural Northumberland or central London. No family should have to find out that the support available to them depends on their postcode. We have made important progress, and now we need to make sure that that progress is felt by every woman and every family who experience the heartbreak of losing their baby.

10.7 pm

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): My constituent, little Bran Tunnicliffe, was born on 11 December 2024. He suffered a severe head injury during his birth and died on 17 December 2024. On 7 February, he had his funeral. He was born at the Royal Cornwall hospital in Cornwall and was transferred to Southmead after that. I am here to make some of the

[Jayne Kirkham]

points that his parents have made to me about the care that he had, and to make some other points that have not been made yet about the system of post mortems and coroners' inquests.

It was a struggle, after what happened, to get mental health support for Bran's mum, and there was very little support for the other parent. The point has been raised across the House that the other parent is often left to feel that they are just there, and that what they think and feel is not taken into consideration and often does not really matter. Helen and Phil have asked me to say that the bereavement team at Treliske have been very good throughout their experience. They also wanted me to say that although many recommendations have been made following reports and investigations, it is difficult to see, as the right hon. Member for Godalming and Ash (Sir Jeremy Hunt) mentioned, whether they are acted on, and how parents can ensure that care improves.

I spoke about Bran last year. The previous Health Secretary met Helen and Phil, who fed into the Government's review. Some of the points made were also relevant to the Ministry of Justice, so a Minister from the MOJ was there, too. There was a very long wait for a pathologist's report in Bran's case; the lack of pathologists is a common issue, and the Minister did take that away. Bran's inquest is still being delayed, and is scheduled to take place in the new year—more than two years since Bran died, which is an extremely long time. The family also said that they have had a number of dealings with the coroner's court, and thought that perhaps improved training for coroners' courts in dealing with parents who have undergone this kind of thing would be helpful. They found the whole process extremely difficult.

Some charities that really helped Bran's family, and that are local to us in Cornwall, are Luna's Fund, which supports parents in Devon and Cornwall, and 2wish, which is a child bereavement charity. Helen and Phil set up their own charity for Bran, Bran's Library, which gifts picture books to parents in similar situations.

I want to mention my predecessor in this place, Cheryl Mackrory, who spoke movingly in this House about her experiences and her daughter Lily. She chaired the APPG on baby loss with the right hon. Member for Godalming and Ash.

So many families are affected by baby loss, and mine is no exception. We learn from the experiences of our constituents and our own families; hopefully the Health Secretary—it is fantastic that she has been here throughout this debate—can take away those stories and make improvements for the future.

10.11 pm

Matt Turmaine (Watford) (Lab): It is an honour to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Jayne Kirkham). I pay tribute to all Members who have made such emotional, moving and powerful contributions this evening.

A number of hon. Members have mentioned continuity of care. I must confess to experiencing something of a thrill when, quite soon after being elected to this place in July 2024, I found myself in a Committee Room in Portcullis House next to Professor Chris Whitty, discussing continuity of care. It may not surprise you, Madam Deputy

Speaker, to hear that he also thinks continuity of care is a good idea, as do many people in the Chamber. The right hon. Member for Godalming and Ash (Sir Jeremy Hunt) mentioned the importance of a well-functioning NHS team to ensuring decent outcomes. I saw this last week, when I visited my local hospital to see a team of surgeons and other staff delivering really good outcomes by operating a robot to remove a gall bladder from a patient. Having a well-integrated team is absolutely vital.

This is an important debate. Those experiencing baby loss have an especially tragic bereavement. The loss of a loved one or friend is always tragic, and something to be sympathised with in solidarity, but those experiencing the loss of a baby are particularly deserving of our kindness, sympathy and support. There is the life cut short; there is the potential that has disappeared; and the joy of growing and living together—of shared love and laughter—is relegated to the imagination, and the hopes of what might have been.

The Secretary of State's intention is clear: to support women and families let down by maternity services. I am glad to see that early loss is being recognised through the baby loss certificate scheme, which covers pregnancy loss before 24 weeks. The Government are investing in services to support families who are dealing with the tragedy of baby loss, so that every integrated care board can fund specialist bereavement midwives and bereavement services. In Hertfordshire, where my Watford constituency is located, many organisations are doing amazing work to support those grieving a miscarriage or the loss of a baby, including Alternatives Watford, West Herts Hospitals Charity, Petals, CHUMS, Sands and Tommy's, as well as GP practices and the county council, which has a network for staff who have experienced baby loss; it provides much-needed support.

In a former career, I worked in health and social care, including for the Hertfordshire safeguarding children's board. From my experience of supporting serious case reviews into the death of a child, or the child death overview panel, it is important to recognise the engagement of health staff in determining what has gone wrong, and we should acknowledge that. I welcome the efforts of the Government and those supporting this work to minimise the incidence of baby loss and to ensure that nobody goes unsupported when experiencing it.

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

10.15 pm

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): I start by declaring my interests as a member and former co-chair of both the baby loss and maternity APPGs and a member of the birth trauma APPG, and by thanking the hon. Members for Sherwood Forest (Michelle Welsh) and for Rossendale and Darwen (Andy MacNae) and the right hon. Member for Godalming and Ash (Sir Jeremy Hunt) for securing this important debate to mark Baby Loss Awareness Week. It has been an emotional evening listening to the contributions of Members across the House, who have either bravely shared their own stories and those of their constituents, or have worked incredibly hard to bring about improvements in maternity and neonatal care and in bereavement care for those families who face the loss of a baby and, in some cases, both those things.

Since I was elected in December 2021, far too many reports have come to Parliament that detail the unimaginable pain of families who have lost or had injured babies or mums. From Shrewsbury and Telford, which impacted families in my community, some of whom were my close friends, and which I have spoken about on a number of occasions in this place, through East Kent, Nottingham and the many hospitals included in the Amos review, and new inquiries into Leeds and Sussex, there have been many reports and far too little action. The silent scandal of this country's maternity crisis has unfolded in plain sight. Maternal deaths are higher than at any point in the last decade, and 65% of maternity units are not rated as adequately safe by the CQC, which has warned that there is a risk of normalising serious harm in maternity care.

The latest Embrace UK report shows that women from black ethnic backgrounds are nearly three times as likely to die during or up to six weeks after pregnancy compared with women from white ethnic backgrounds, with women from Asian ethnic backgrounds also facing a slightly increased risk. Stillbirth rates for babies born to mothers living in the most deprived areas remain significantly higher than those in the least deprived areas. Women in the most deprived areas are also twice as likely to die during or shortly after pregnancy compared with those in the least deprived areas.

The 2015 national maternity safety ambition aimed to halve the 2010 rates of stillbirth, neonatal and maternal deaths, and brain injuries occurring during or soon after birth by 2025. We have missed the target on that, and targets for the future have not been set, and they must be. Every year, £1.3 billion is spent on medical negligence payments. We are spending the equivalent of a third of the whole maternity budget on the price of failure, rather than keeping mums and babies safe in the first place. We know that many experienced clinicians are leaving the profession, burnt out by exhaustion, the crumbling units they work in and the lack of time for training for the increasingly complex pregnancies and births that they must deal with.

I welcome the fact that the Government, despite there having been three Secretaries of State this year, have shown commitment to improving maternity services. Their agreement to create the statutory role of a maternity commissioner and to legislate for that in the Health Bill as it makes its way through the other place is undoubtedly a good step, and I thank the Secretary of State and the Minister for Secondary Care, the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth), for their constructive and collaborative approach to making that happen.

The Government have also established a maternity taskforce and commissioned Baroness Amos's review—all welcome acknowledgment that improvement in maternity services should be of the highest priority. But there have unfortunately been missteps, too. Removing the ringfence from service development funding—the very fund designed to support enhanced care for complex pregnancies, multiple births and bereavement care and support—is incomprehensible in the light of the concerns that have been so widely raised, and I call on the Secretary of State to reinstate it.

Liberal Democrats have put improvements in maternity care at the heart of our work in this Parliament and have proposed a package to tackle the crisis, starting with safe staffing on every ward. Often, things go

wrong at night or at weekends when the on-call consultant is at home—because, as we all know, babies have famously not grasped the importance of respecting normal working hours. We would ensure that a consultant obstetrician is present 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and that one-to-one midwifery care for every woman in labour is available, so that the early signs of complication are recognised quickly.

Many pregnancies and births are more complex now. Training teams to deal with that is essential, and we call on the Government to introduce mandatory, regularly updated salaried training for all staff. For those in leadership roles, we would work on a culture of openness, learning from mistakes and speaking up when it is obvious that things are going wrong.

Many Members this evening have talked about better support throughout pregnancy, ensuring that high-risk mums have the right team around them from the start and that, crucially, women are listened to throughout their pregnancy. We would tackle the huge disparities in outcomes for black, Asian and disabled women and those from deprived backgrounds through better training to understand risk, alongside investment in the public health measures that are so critical to tackle some of the drivers of these disparities.

Finally, we urge the Government to recognise that, tragically, not every pregnancy goes to plan. We urge them to record all miscarriages so that the issue is no longer hidden, to support every woman who has had a miscarriage, not make them wait for their third one, and to invest in ensuring there is bereavement care for every family who needs it. There is, of course, undoubtedly a cost to all this, but it is less than half of that eye-watering medical negligence bill.

The Thirlwall inquiry highlights the failure of the NHS to learn from mistakes and implement recommendations from detailed investigations undertaken when things go wrong. It has highlighted how constant top-down reorganisations of the NHS have prevented progress and obscured the monitoring of improvements, and it says that a lack of political will has led to a failure to overcome the barriers to change for the better.

I have heard colleagues from all parties on both sides of the House agree on the urgent need to improve maternity services this evening, and I am encouraged by the steps that the Government have taken so far, but now it is time for action. I am ready to work with colleagues from all parties to tackle this crisis, and to ensure that no other family has to endure the pain of the avoidable loss of their beloved baby. I look forward to hearing from the Secretary of State that the Government have the political will to do the same.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call shadow Minister Dr Caroline Johnson.

10.22 pm

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): First, I must declare an interest as a consultant NHS paediatrician and a member of the British Medical Association and of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, and also that I have worked in neonatal intensive care in a number of different hospitals, including Nottingham University Hospitals NHS Trust, where I worked as a junior doctor, briefly overlapping with the initial period of the Ockenden review.

[Dr Caroline Johnson]

I congratulate the hon. Members for Rossendale and Darwen (Andy MacNae) and for Sherwood Forest (Michelle Welsh) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Godalming and Ash (Sir Jeremy Hunt) for securing this important debate, and also charities such as Bliss, Tommy's and Sands for their important work.

As has been said, this has become somewhat of an annual debate, and it follows the same pattern. We hear many stories—we have heard many emotional stories this evening from very brave Members who have put forward their words or the words of their brave constituents. We reflect on the babies that have been lost—their first words, when they would have taken their first steps, who they would have grown up to become. We talk in sorrow and in memory. But there is also some frustration, because 13 babies every day will die shortly before, during or after their birth. So although it is important to reflect, I firmly believe that families would like us also to focus on prevention and service improvements. I shall therefore focus in the rest of my remarks on the question of whether the Government are doing all they can to tackle baby loss, and are doing so as quickly as possible.

As a children's doctor, I have been privileged to attend hundreds of births. Politics offers the opportunity to save more lives than doctors can across the whole country, because it has the power to make impactful change and save lives, and the Government must use it.

Just over a decade ago, my right hon. Friend the Member for Godalming and Ash, then the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, set a target to halve the rate of stillbirths and neonatal and maternal deaths by 2030. He did not succeed completely but made encouraging progress. Stillbirths fell by 20%, neonatal deaths fell by 20% and maternal deaths fell by a third. As my right hon. Friend himself said earlier, that means that 700 additional babies a year are waking up today and tomorrow, loving their parents and being loved by their parents, and bringing great joy.

The new Health Secretary came into post last month and I welcome her to her place. She is right when said that

“it is time to put maternity and neonatal care and safety at the top of the NHS agenda, where they belong.”—[*Official Report*, 15 September 2026; Vol. 790, c. 1616.]

I know that this issue is important to her and we acknowledge that the Government have made progress in some areas. They have built on Conservative work by expanding baby loss certificates—we heard from the hon. Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Cat Smith) just how important and vital those certificates can be—and they have implemented Martha's rule, so that people can have a second opinion.

I appreciate the Secretary of State is new in post, but her predecessors have acted too slowly. The Government came to power in July 2024 saying that they had a plan for the NHS, but it took them a year, until July 2025, to bring forward their 10-year plan. They said that they will bring forward a neonatal task force, but they took seven months to decide who was going to be on it. They said that a maternity and neonatal plan was going to be produced, and that a rapid review would produce a plan by December 2025, but it came in June 2026, almost two years after their election.

The national maternity investigation brought forward two key recommendations. The first recommendation is to appoint a maternity and neonatal commissioner, which the Government have promised to do. That promise was announced over three months ago, so will the Secretary of State tell us when that appointment will be made? Will it be delayed by putting it on a statutory footing or will she be able to make the appointment anyway? The second recommendation is to develop a modern service framework to establish minimum standards for maternity care. The Government announced that they were developing a national action plan on that, but it will not be ready until December 2026. Will the Secretary of State guarantee that it will be ready by December 2026, which is now very soon?

In the meantime, the Government have promised £41 million for maternity and neonatal buildings. Will the Secretary of State tell us how and where this money will be spent, and which hospitals will benefit? My hon. Friend the Member for Meriden and Solihull East (Saqib Bhatti) talked about people experiencing baby loss or who had babies on the neonatal unit being placed on a ward next to people who were celebrating the births of healthy children, who were beside them. Will the Secretary of State say how she is going to manage that so it does not happen any more?

The Government have spoken about the black and Asian maternal mortality gap. In their manifesto, they committed to a target to close that gap. Will the Secretary of State tell us when that target will be published and how she will close that gap?

The workforce is key to delivering these outcomes. The last Conservative Government created a long-term workforce plan for the NHS, but this Government decided that they wanted to create their own workforce plan, which is absolutely their right to do so. We were promised that plan by the end of 2025. We are now deep into autumn 2026, and we are being told they will provide an update on the workforce plan “in due course”. Having previously been told it was imminent, that is somewhat disappointing.

The Government need to know and say how many midwives they are going to need, as well as how many obstetricians, gynaecologists and paediatricians. How will all those people be trained? How many more medical school places may be required? The Government promised time and again that they would double the number of medical school places, yet they have rowed back on that promise like it never existed. Will the Secretary of State tell us once and for all if the Government will be doubling the number of medical school places, or if that was just a 2024 general election promise? On what date will the workforce plan be ready and published? The manifesto also promised to train thousands of additional midwives. Will the Secretary of State tell us how many have been trained so far?

My right hon. Friend the Member for Godalming and Ash and my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Stamford (Alicia Kearns) spoke about the importance of listening to women and not having an ideological fixation on a normal birth or particular type of delivery, but instead looking for a good outcome. On training, will the Secretary of State elaborate on how she intends to encourage midwives and obstetricians to see themselves as one team? I know in some places they do, but in other places, tragically they do not. Will she set out how

they can work together with the wider team of anaesthetists, paediatricians and other professionals to achieve the best outcomes for women, rather than a particular ideological outcome?

Some have talked this evening about the complexity of pregnancies in modern times. Can the Secretary of State talk about whether she feels nursing skills are required in midwifery, and to what extent? How does she intend to ensure that they are delivered? I know that the Government have their three shifts, one of which is prevention. Will she talk about vaccination and chronic disease optimisation before pregnancy and how they could help to reduce the number of babies lost?

On a wider level, the NHS is being reorganised. I appreciate that that was announced before the Secretary of State became the Secretary of State, but the abolition of NHS England and the shaking up of ICBs is causing disruption to health services. The abolition of Healthwatch, which she still has time to do something about, is removing the independent voice—the listening to women that we have heard about so much this evening.

There are many, many fantastic NHS staff, and many women—most women, in fact—get great care, but some do not, and the findings of recent investigations and investigations over many years have been hugely disturbing. I know that the Secretary of State cares very deeply about this topic, so I would like her reassurance that these plans will be published, the staff will be trained and the taskforce and commissioner will be effective, and that she will deliver on the maternity safety that everybody right across the House wants to see.

10.31 pm

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Yvette Cooper): May I say a huge thank you to everybody who has spoken in the debate this evening for the personal stories they have told, the tributes they have given to their constituents and the personal stories of constituents that they have told? This is a moment for the whole House to come together and reflect on the babies lost and on our responsibility to do everything we can to support families who go through the unimaginable and lose a baby or child, and to do everything we possibly can to prevent it happening to more families in the future.

I thank the Members who secured the debate today. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Andy MacNae) for the work that I know he has done on the APPG and for his courage in talking about his own experiences and his determined focus on the action that is needed. I also thank the right hon. Member for Godalming and Ash (Sir Jeremy Hunt), one of my predecessors, who I know championed patient safety and maternity safety in particular. It is hugely welcome that he is still speaking out so strongly and has sat here throughout the entire debate this evening.

I particularly thank my hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood Forest (Michelle Welsh), who is doing such an incredible and invaluable job as our national maternity and neonatal adviser. I thank her for her work and the incredible job she is doing in ensuring that parents' voices are heard, that babies are remembered and that change is driven forward for families in the future. Her work has been hugely powerful. I have seen the work that she has been doing with parents across the country and with the maternity taskforce.

I thank everyone, because no one should underestimate the courage that it takes to talk about some of the most devastating personal experiences in such a public forum and in a way that is all about helping and giving comfort to others. They have brought an empathy and humanity that, if we are honest, we do not always show in this place, but we have come together to show them this evening.

In particular, let me say that this debate is about Mallorie, Jasper, Jesse, Joshua, Nittaya, Chester, Kate, Harry, Alya, Aleah, Theo, Ida, Bran, Wynter, Harriet, Sebastian, Koupar, Teddy, Quinn, Aubrey, Grace, Poppy, Dexter, Luna, Theo, Siena, Rita, baby Ladybird and baby Collinge. We remember them all.

As my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer (Mr Charters) said, on this Thursday evening at 7 pm, hundreds of parents in every one of our constituencies will light candles at home to remember babies who they have lost. It is something that spreads across the world, from one time zone to the next, as a global wave of light to unite parents from every continent in an act of collective grief. We will go on social media and see the pictures of burning candles posted by mums and dads. For those families, the sense of loss does not go away and it does not grow lighter or less painful, but on that day of 15 October, there is at least the knowledge that it is shared and that together, we hold a candle up to an issue that for too long has been hidden, ignored or dismissed. We are saying to every family who have faced the pain of losing a baby, "You are not alone, and you deserve support."

The hon. Member for Rutland and Stamford (Alicia Kearns) and the hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sorcha Eastwood) raised an issue that I want to refer to. Earlier this evening, I had a conversation with Gina Jacobs, who lost her stillborn son Robert 57 years ago. At the hospital, he was taken away, and she never saw his face. Only years later did she discover that he had been buried in a mass grave without her knowledge. Just imagine the heartbreak of losing a child, followed by the pain of realising that something so important and personal had been kept from her. Across the decades, many bereaved parents have lost babies in NHS hospitals and been denied any say in, or any information about, what would happen to their remains. On behalf of the Government, I issue a profound apology to those parents—I have issued that apology to Gina today, but I issue it to so many more like Gina who have sought answers over many years. I am sorry for the unthinkable pain caused by those historic practices, because what happened to those parents should never have happened, and we need to ensure it can never happen again.

While I have the time to do so, I want to also recognise the parents of baby Dexter from my constituency, because Dexter's mum Sophie is in the Gallery this evening. I spoke to Sophie and Dale some months ago, before I became Health Secretary. Their story and Dexter's story had a profound impact on me, and it is one of the reasons I am so determined to make maternity and neonatal care a priority for the NHS and for the Government. Dexter died in 2018, less than 24 hours after his birth, following hospital failures that were admitted years later. I have listened to Sophie talk about the concerns they had not being listened to and about failures in diagnosis, early intervention and treatment. They went through the unimaginable and were then

[Yvette Cooper]

unable to get answers, and eight years later, they are still navigating NHS complaints, regulators, legal processes, the coronial system and the parliamentary ombudsman, trying to get answers and accountability. I want to acknowledge Sophie's determination and the courage it takes to be here today, and the commitment of so many parents who have been through the unimaginable and through that trauma, but who keep campaigning for others.

All of us in this Chamber have a responsibility to Dexter's family and to every family represented in this debate—a responsibility to listen, to learn and to act. As Sophie said to me earlier, trust begins with truth, and if you cannot get answers about what has happened, that compounds the anguish and the distress. That is why I have made maternity and neonatal care a priority; it is also why I want to recognise the wonderful care that so many midwives, consultants, support staff and health visitors in our NHS provide when families need it most, right across the country. However, we also know the devastating stories where things have gone wrong, where families did not get answers, and where so much more needs to be done. As part of our new maternity and neonatal taskforce, we need to ensure that we have a new national action plan drawn up, but also that work is done to establish a new modern services framework of proper standards across maternity and neonatal care. That is crucial because 25 years ago, when I was a junior Health Minister, I had responsibility for maternity services. That was a full quarter of a century ago. I was pregnant at the time, so Members can imagine that I had a particular interest in maternity services.

One of the things that I announced at that time was that there should be a new set of standards, with a national services framework for maternity and child health. When I arrived in the Department as Secretary of State, I said, "What do we need to do to address the Amos report, the Ockenden reviews, the Kirkup review of Morecambe Bay and the many different reviews that we have had?" One of the responses I got was, "We need a modern services framework." I asked how different that would be from the old framework, given that we would need to modernise the standards from the existing one. They said that the existing one does not exist, because it had just been allowed to lapse. We therefore did not have a set of national standards in place. We have to put that right, and I think there is collective determination on that. The hon. Member for Meriden and Solihull East (Saqib Bhatti) referred to the importance of national standards, and that is one of the things that needs to be done as part of the work of the taskforce, alongside the action plan.

Right at the heart of this has to be listening to parents and in particular to mothers. The hon. Member for Rutland and Stamford (Alicia Kearns) spoke powerfully about her personal experience of feeling that she was left having to make choices or that she had to fight to be listened to. Nobody—no parent, no mother—should be in that situation. One reason that it is so important that we legislate for and appoint a new independent maternity and neonatal commissioner is that this issue cannot simply be something where a spotlight is shone when we have a debate in this House, when a new review comes out or when particular Health Secretaries say, "This is a

priority." It has to always be a priority for our health service, because it is about the very start of a family's life. It is about some of the most important things that our national health service does.

Many Members have talked about miscarriage, and I pay tribute to my hon. Friends, including my hon. Friends the Members for Aylesbury (Laura Kyrke-Smith) and for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Lizzi Collinge), who have talked about the importance of miscarriage care. We are working with Tommy's to assess its findings in its miscarriage study, which is hugely important. It is important that miscarriage care is included as part of the modern services framework that we are drawing up. My hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Josh Newbury) importantly talked about the impact that miscarriage care had on his constituent. That needs to be a central part of those standards and how we provide support for families in those circumstances. We should never underestimate the impact that miscarriage can have at different stages in a pregnancy, and the deep distress that can come from miscarriage through to stillbirth through to loss in neonatal care. At every stage, we must be aware of the long-lasting impact that loss can have on the family and the trauma that can be caused, too.

Many Members referred to the importance of bereavement care and services. We are already putting additional investment of £9 million into bereavement suites. Seven-day-a-week bereavement services need to be the standard across maternity and neonatal settings. All trusts are reporting compliance with that, but we need to ensure that it is happening in practice. They have also been funded to provide specialist bereavement midwives. Those services are crucial, because every family needs time to grieve after losing a baby, and needs immediate support and care.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch (Katrina Murray) spoke of the importance of the employment law reforms, and the fact that bereavement leave is now allowed for pregnancy loss before 24 weeks. We know of the impact that such losses can have on families, and the importance of being able to provide support at that time. We are currently drawing up a new mental health strategy, and that needs to include not just post-natal depression but bereavement, and the distress and trauma that can be experienced as part of maternity.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Southall (Deirdre Costigan) spoke about inequality issues, such as the fact that black women have an increased risk of miscarriage, stillbirth and maternal mortality. It is shocking and deeply distressing that in the 2020s we are seeing inequalities of that kind, as well as seeing periods during which maternal mortality among some groups and in some areas has increased. That must be central to the work done by the maternity and neonatal taskforce. We will be setting out the targets and the progress that are needed and the action that we must take to address such inequalities, particularly those relating to ethnicity—we need to challenge racism—but also those involving deprivation.

The right hon. Member for Godalming and Ash (Sir Jeremy Hunt) and my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale referred to the normal birth ideology. There is no place for any ideology in childbirth: childbirth has to be about the mums and the babies and safety, and about what is right for the family. As my hon.

Friend said, it has to be about safety. It has to be about informed choice, and it has to be about compassion. No mother should ever feel the pressure to live up to a particular kind of ideal birth. As we know, we are all different, and services need to reflect and support that.

The hon. Member for North Devon (Ian Roome) spoke of the challenges that he has been facing, and the challenges that mothers and families have been facing, in his constituency. I know that later this week he will meet my hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood Forest, the national maternity and neonatal adviser. I have spoken several times to the NHS chief executive exactly about what is happening in North Devon. I know that, because this is a workforce challenge, the hospital is taking action to increase recruitment, and that is crucial. It is unfair for families to be worrying, at a time when they should be looking forward to the birth of a new baby, about having to travel for two hours because local services are not open. We are looking into ways of ensuring that there is appropriate support for getting those services open in North Devon, but we are also looking at the workforce issues in other rural areas where more remote services are crucial and need to be provided and sustained, and we will continue to consider maternity issues in that context.

The hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Alison Bennett) raised the important subject of Group B strep. We have a trial under way. There will be a report within the next 12 months, and the information and evidence will go to the UK National Screening Committee, which will examine the issue of testing. I thank the hon. Lady's constituent, who I understand has been campaigning for a long time.

Let me also give a personal undertaking to my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Cat Smith) to follow up the issue of the baby loss certificates directly with the Scottish Government. It is unthinkable that she could be left in such a distressing situation, and that others will be in a similar distressing situation, because of a lack of co-ordination between Governments with which we should be able to deal.

I hope the House forgives me if I have not covered the other points that have been made. I am keen to follow up on the important points about CPR training, maternity triage, regulation and a series of other things, but I want to come back to a broader issue. It feels to me as though maternity services and neonatal services have not been taken seriously enough by the NHS and the Government for too long, and have too often been treated as a sidecar. Hospitals and acute trusts have a lot of things happening, but my sense is that the maternity unit has often been treated as a bit of a sidecar to the main hospital. Although there may be some brilliant work and support being done within a maternity unit, it is not always seen by the rest of the hospital and the rest of the trust, so when things go wrong, too often too little is done. When parents are not listened to and something goes awry with the support, care and compassion that are needed, often strong enough action is not taken to make sure that something is done.

In those cases, it has meant that we have had mothers and babies treated as second-class patients. Mothers and babies should never be treated as second-class patients, because one of the most important things that our NHS does is to be there at the very start of a new family's life. If we get that right for a new family, it supports them for the rest of their lives. I recognise the

remarkable and wonderful care provided in many places, but I still have a strong sense that, overall, our NHS has not been giving start of life, maternity and neonatal services the priority that they really need to be given.

Alicia Kearns: When the Secretary of State meets her officials and has this discussion, I urge her to cite what happened during the pandemic. Despite the fact that it was medically illogical, what did middle managers do in NHS hospitals? They said that women who were coming to give birth or to miscarry had to do so without their partners. People told me, "This is a nonsense, Alicia. Stop saying that women are being treated badly by the NHS. Women have given birth for thousands of years." Women were mistreated during the pandemic and we were shown the maternity sidecar, exactly as the Secretary of State said. I say to anyone who stands in her way on this issue that she is absolutely right. We have the evidence of the last few years, and I urge her to use it.

Yvette Cooper: I take very seriously the points that the hon. Member makes, and I look forward to talking to her in more detail very soon.

The wider point that I want to make is that we are trying to implement many changes, and we are looking at different rules and different services. We are expanding Martha's rule to all maternity and neonatal services so that there is a clear way—not just for women in labour and their families, but for staff in maternity services and neonatal services—to raise concerns, to ask for a second opinion and to make sure that we are building in the need to listen to families. However, all of this works only if it is part of a wider recognition that we have to give much greater priority to maternal and neonatal care.

The final thought that I will leave with people is that tonight's debate has been about baby loss and the most distressing of circumstances, but we know that if support is really to be about giving every family and child the best start in life, it cannot just be about childbirth. It is about what happens throughout maternity and in those first few years as well. That is why I think one of the other most important things we are doing is restoring the Sure Start health services to family hubs right across the country and going back to co-ordinated support—every service coming together to support families and babies at the very start of their life. I again thank everyone who has spoken in this debate.

10.55 pm

Andy MacNae: I thank everyone who has spoken and shared their experience, which is not easy. In that regard, I would just reflect on the comment made by my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Cat Smith). There are Members who could not be here today because their losses are too recent and too painful. As many others have reflected, baby loss affects far more of us than we actually realise. I thank all Members present, and I thank the Secretary of State for being here throughout—it means a lot; it really does matter. Her commitment and passion for getting this right shine through.

There has been clear consensus across the House about what needs to be done. We should all be very clear that in a year's time—and we will be back here in a year's time—we need to be talking about what has been done and real, tangible, concrete actions. To deliver that, we

[Andy MacNae]

need the resource, the institutional capacity and the leadership to drive through that change with urgency and practicality. So next year, let us be celebrating what we have done, not talking about what needs to be done.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Baby Loss Awareness Week.

PETITION

Highway safety measures at Cubert Crossroads

10.57 pm

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): I am not the first to talk about the issue of Cubert crossroads, which has defeated many people. Over 1,000 people in two small villages have signed this petition. The problem is becoming worse, because over the summer months traffic volumes have increased significantly, and we have far more seasonal visitors and far more new houses around the area.

The petition states:

“The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to support the campaign to ensure that Cubert Crossroads has appropriate highway safety measures in place, recognising the importance of having a safe crossroads that does not put road users at risk.”

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of Cubert, St Newlyn East and the surrounding areas,

Declares that visibility at Cubert Crossroads falls below national standards for a 60mph road, putting road users at risk of accidents and fatalities; further declares that during the summer months traffic volumes increase significantly due to seasonal visitors who are unfamiliar with the junction, increasing the risk; further declares that current cost-benefit approaches to road safety infrastructure undervalue the risks faced on rural roads and junctions; and further declares that the urgent implementation of highway safety measures, such as average speed cameras, a restriction on turning, traffic lights, or a roundabout, is needed to protect local communities and visitors using this junction.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to support the campaign to ensure that Cubert Crossroads has appropriate highway safety measures in place, recognising the importance of having a safe crossroads that does not put road users at risk.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003243]

High Streets: Amber Valley

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Laurence Turner.)

10.58 pm

Linsey Farnsworth (Amber Valley) (Lab): There are few occasions in this place when Members universally agree, but recognising the importance of town centres to our communities is one such occasion. That is why I am pleased to bring forward this debate, and why I am glad that the Government are prioritising high street regeneration. The sad truth is that successive Governments have overseen the managed decline of high streets in former industrial and mining towns such as mine. My constituents are fed up with it, and so am I.

I recently conducted a high-streets survey in my three towns of Alfreton, Heanor and Ripley. The results echoed what I hear time and again on the doorstep: residents are frustrated by high streets they describe as “run down”, “untidy”, “drab” and “unloved”. Many respondents felt that there were too many gambling shops, barbers and vape shops, and not enough of the businesses that help to create vibrant town centres, such as clothes shops, restaurants, chemists, greengrocers, children’s activity centres, farm shops and, in particular, independent local businesses.

The Minister will be pleased to know that my constituents also proposed solutions to these issues: stronger measures to allow them to take over empty or derelict buildings; measures that equip small businesses to compete on a level playing field against big multinationals; reductions in business rates; crackdowns on unlawful business; measures to encourage variety and competition; increased pedestrianised areas; requirements for shopfronts to be cleaned up, repainted and repaired; and of course the famous one—free parking in the town centres.

From my side, I am partnering with local business leaders to set up an Alfreton town centre taskforce, and I am working with Ripley Trader’s Association and Heanor Vision to discuss how we can address those concerns and implement some of my constituents’ ideas. I would be grateful if the Minister could address those ideas in his remarks and outline the very welcome steps that I know he is taking to tackle some of these persistent issues.

The Government’s commitment to giving communities the powers and resources that they need to drive this change forward is welcome. It builds on the excellent work of my town and parish councils, including the beautiful flower displays that bring pride and colour to our high streets in Amber Valley, but civic pride alone cannot undo years of neglect. Successive Governments have overlooked former industrial towns and left the east midlands facing an estimated £11.4 billion investment gap. Amber Valley needs meaningful investment to modernise our high streets and ensure that they are not just more attractive, but sustainable for the future.

Last night, my youngest son and I went to the cinema to see “The Uprising”, a film that I would highly recommend. In Amber Valley, the real uprising took place in 1817, when men left Pentrich village in what became the last armed uprising in England, driven by a feeling of being overlooked and taken for granted. Nearly a century later, fed-up miners at Alfreton colliery led the national coal strike of 1912, helping to secure the first minimum wage for coalminers. Those defining

moments are still commemorated on information boards and in our town centres at Ripley's fish and chip shop and Alfreton's Moot Bar.

Why, Madam Deputy Speaker, do I recount those events this evening? Because the people of Amber Valley still feel that our communities are overlooked—not for lack of ambition, effort or ideas, but because investment has too often gone elsewhere. The determination to turn things around is clear. Our borough council, town and parish councils, businesses and community groups have devised projects that can create jobs, strengthen our town centres and grow the local economy. I will champion them every step of the way, but they need investment to become a reality. Let me turn to some of them now.

First, as the Minister will be well aware, I have been pressing for Government funding to support the borough in delivering an ambitious regeneration of Alfreton town centre. The vision is of a revamped pedestrianised area around Institute Lane, outside seating in Severn Square, and a lively daytime and night-time offering. The potential of this was brought home to me recently, when I was lucky enough to be invited to Alfreton Town football club to meet some of the brilliant volunteers who keep the club running. If my club, Everton, is the “people's club”, then Alfreton Town FC should certainly be known as the community's club. The atmosphere, players, volunteers, staff and fans were phenomenal, and I came away in awe of them and their sense of togetherness. As I travelled home, I reflected on how a revitalised town centre could become an integral part of the matchday experience: people could have breakfast at the Naughty But Nice café before kick-off, celebrate a victory in Severn Square, or warm up over a coffee with Dominique at the Hive Lounge after a cold winter's match. I hope the Minister will outline the support and investment that the Government can provide to bring that project to life. It would make a tangible difference to my constituents, and would show that Amber Valley's future is worth investing in.

A second project I am supporting is the regeneration of the Premier Electric theatre in Somercotes. Built in 1912, it has served as a theatre, cinema and bingo hall, but after many years, it stands empty and decaying. However, its potential remains enormous. With the right support, it could once again provide a home for local theatre, live music, cinema screenings, and arts activities. It could become a hub for community life and a catalyst for regeneration. Somercotes parish council and Save the Premier community group deserve great credit for developing that vision. However, as a planning application that seeks permission to demolish the building is due to be considered in the coming months, time is short. The immediate priority is securing £21,000 for a feasibility study to assess the building's future and unlock access to larger funding streams. I say gently to the Minister that if there is £21,000 to be found down the back of the green Benches this evening, it could make all the difference. For Whitehall, it is a modest sum; for Somercotes, it could determine whether a valued part of our community's heritage is preserved or lost forever.

In a similar vein, there is a project in Heanor that I have discussed with the Minister. Amber Valley borough council brought forward an ambitious vision for the regeneration of Heanor town centre, but that vision had to be scaled back when funding from the previous Government fell significantly short of what was required.

Rather than abandon the project altogether, the borough adapted, contributed £1 million of council resources, and ensured that regeneration could still proceed. The result is a transformed marketplace, and the beautiful restoration of the historic grammar school building. The overall project, however, remains unfinished. The borough council still owns the adjacent science block, which was originally intended to be transformed into a cinema. Crucially, that cinema would have generated the revenue needed to cover the running costs and long-term maintenance of the grammar. Instead, the science block remains vacant and derelict, standing as an ugly reminder of the gap between what the community expected and what could ultimately be delivered.

I know that some people in Heanor are angry, and I understand why. They were presented with a bold vision for their town, including extensive community use of the grammar, but when the funding was reduced and the science block regeneration could not proceed, the income stream that would have sustained the grammar was lost. As a result, difficult decisions had to be made. To secure the future of the building, a substantial proportion of the grammar is now to be occupied by a long-term tenant, whose rental income will safeguard this important heritage asset for generations to come. That is a sensible and responsible solution, but it is not the outcome that residents were initially led to expect, and it means the degree of community usage is more limited than was originally envisaged.

I am angry too—not at Amber Valley borough council, which did everything possible to save the project, nor at those who have made difficult but necessary decisions to secure the building's future. I am angry that a community with ambition, a credible plan and strong local support was forced to accept a diminished version of its vision because the funding required to deliver it was cut by the last Government. I am angry that local people were left with a restored building, but without the fully realised community asset that they expected. I am angry that the council was forced to choose between scrapping part of the vision or risking losing it altogether.

However, we now have an opportunity to put that right. Heanor is exactly the kind of place the newly announced derelict buildings fund was created to help. The borough council owns the building; the plans exist; the local support is there; the need is clear. Like my son and I, families have to travel outside of Amber Valley to see films, because there is not a single cinema in the three towns in the constituency. What is required now is the investment to bring the science block back into use, complete the regeneration of the site and finally deliver the full potential that the people of Heanor deserve. I ask the Minister: how can communities access the derelict buildings fund or similar support? And what will he do to ensure that places that have too often been overlooked, like Amber Valley, are prioritised for investment?

As the Minister is aware, the recent closure of Denby Pottery, which had operated in my constituency for over 200 years, has caused a significant economic shock, with the loss of 350 jobs in the constituency and the loss of around 250,000 visitors a year to the pottery village. Its closure has been deeply felt by my constituents, and investment in our high streets would go a long way. It would support Amber Valley communities and businesses and help us to rebuild from this social and economic scarring.

[Linsey Farnsworth]

Now is the time for the Government to step in and show my constituents that Amber Valley matters. I know that the Prime Minister understands areas like mine and wants to put them at the heart of his agenda. With the high street strategy imminent, I therefore hope that Amber Valley will finally receive the long overdue investment that it deserves.

11.11 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jim McMahon):

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Linsey Farnsworth) for securing this important debate and for the passionate way that she continues to champion the community that she represents. I believe that she was a fantastic champion on the Denby issue, and all of us who care about our heritage and about good, skilled working-class jobs mourn its loss. The way that she continues to fight, to say that it is not the end of the community and to secure investment in the future, is really important.

I welcome this opportunity to set out the Government's approach to supporting high streets, both in Amber Valley and across the country. High streets matter because they are far more than just places to shop. They are where people meet friends, visit local businesses, access services and spend time together. When a high street succeeds, it can lift confidence in a place and support local economic growth, but when it struggles, the impact is felt across the whole community. That is why the Government have made this a priority.

I know that Amber Valley's towns and communities have felt many of the same pressures seen across the country. Changes in shopping habits, vacant premises, crime and antisocial behaviour and the increasing challenge of attracting investment have all had an impact on our town centres, yet there are also real strengths to build on, including proud local businesses, active communities and a strong sense of local identity.

Amber Valley has been a recipient of regeneration funding, and the Heanor area received £8.59 million through the future high streets fund. That supported the improvements that my hon. Friend referenced in her speech, including to the marketplace, the restoration of the former grammar school and plans for new town centre housing. Those investments demonstrate the role that regeneration can play in preserving heritage, improving places and encouraging future growth, but it is quite clear that her ambition goes even further, into Alfreton and beyond. She mentioned the Somercotes theatre, which is a fantastic example. Hopefully I can give her some routes to which she might be able to apply.

The Government are making high streets a priority. On 27 September, we announced £210 million to bring derelict buildings back into use, to tackle vacancy and to support community ownership and control. We are introducing reforms that will benefit high streets across the country, and we are tackling long-term vacancies through the high street rental auctions. These powers enable councils to bring persistently vacant properties back into use and to make town centre premises more accessible to businesses and the community. More than 40 authorities are already using these new powers and have brought over 80 properties back into use. To accelerate

delivery, we have announced a further £10 million to support councils, and we are reviewing new burdens funding payments to ensure that councils have the resources they need to implement these powers quickly.

We are also empowering communities to take a greater role in shaping their local high streets. Through the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act 2026, we have introduced a new community right to buy, helping local people take ownership of valued community assets such as pubs, shops and community buildings when they are at risk of being lost. We are also acting to tackle the issues that too often undermine confidence in our town centres. Through a £30 million crackdown on high street organised crime, stronger closure powers and the creation of a dedicated high street organised crime unit, we are supporting legitimate businesses and helping communities take back control of their high streets.

Retail crime remains a significant concern for local businesses. That is why, in addition to other measures, through the Crime and Policing Act 2026 we introduced a new offence of assaulting a retail worker and we have removed the £200 threshold for shop theft, making it clear that all shop theft is unacceptable and will be treated seriously.

We are also supporting businesses directly and have introduced permanently lower business rates multipliers for eligible retail, hospitality and leisure properties alongside additional support for pubs and live music venues. We have also legislated to ban upwards-only rent reviews in commercial leases, helping to create a fairer and more flexible commercial property market that supports investment and reduces the risk of properties being empty long term.

Alongside that, the business growth service is helping small and medium-sized businesses to access advice and finance and support to start, grow and invest, ensuring that local businesses can continue to play their vital role at the heart of our town centres.

We recognise that communities want attractive high streets that reflect local character. That is why we are giving councils stronger powers to address the clustering of vape shops and gambling premises and supporting better standards for shopfronts and public open spaces.

However, we know that there is more to do. Later this year we will publish a new high streets strategy, setting out our longer-term plan for supporting businesses, bringing life back into our town centres and helping communities to shape the future of their high streets. The strategy is being developed in partnership with businesses, civic leaders and local communities, because we know that thriving high streets cannot be delivered by central Government alone.

Our ambition is clear: we want high streets that are safe, vibrant and economically successful, that are places where people want to invest, and, importantly, that are places that local people can be proud of. I know that my hon. Friend will continue to make the case for Amber Valley as that work progresses. I welcome her contribution to this conversation and all her hard work. I hope that we can meet soon to discuss the future success of the projects that she has mentioned.

Question put and agreed to.

11.17 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 12 October 2026

[SIR EDWARD LEIGH *in the Chair*]

Rejoining the EU

4.30 pm

Tony Vaughan (Folkestone and Hythe) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 749128 relating to the UK applying to rejoin the EU.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Edward.

I thank Robert McMaster from Reading Central, who started the petition and is in the Gallery, as well as the 111,687 people who signed it, including 199 of my constituents. One of Mr McMaster's biggest frustrations with Brexit is that it was never defined. It was not about what our future relationship would look like; it was simply about leaving the treaties on the European Union, and our post-Brexit relationship with the EU has left Britain worse off than if we had remained a member. People can feel that, and polling shows that most of the British public now regard Brexit as a mistake.

In whose interest was Brexit? It was certainly in the interest of countries such as Russia that want to see Britain's influence weakened and Europe fractured. With Brexit, that is what they got. With Russia doing everything it can to provoke further division and war in Europe, this petition is a good opportunity to ask ourselves not just whether we should rejoin the EU, but the much bigger questions of what relationship we want with Europe, why, and how we get there.

Deirdre Costigan (Ealing Southall) (Lab): Many of my constituents voted to leave the EU because they were bombarded with lies, from the mythical £350 million a week for the NHS that never appeared to the lie that immigration would come down when it actually trebled. Does my hon. and learned Friend agree that the Prime Minister's announcement of the new national centre for information defence will help protect our constituents from foreign state influence as we consider our relationship with the EU again?

Tony Vaughan: My hon. Friend raises a fundamental point. These are very real things that have been known for a long time, but we have not moved quickly enough to address them. I welcome the Prime Minister's announcement about that threat centre, because it is the only way that we can drill down beneath the surface of what is being said online and understand who is influencing our politics.

The answers to those questions about what our future relationship should look like will determine how we secure our prosperity for the future.

Dr Zubir Ahmed (Glasgow South West) (Lab): Two thirds of my constituents recognise the folly of Brexit, because they realised that 20,000 jobs in Glasgow city depended on the EU, and now they realise that there is an additional £250 on their food bill. Does my hon. and learned Friend agree that solidarity is always better than separation, that the unintended consequences of

smashing apart our union are evident in the Brexit conversation, and that the optimal arrangement for my constituents in Glasgow South West and for Scotland is to be part of a strong United Kingdom inside a better settlement with the European Union?

Tony Vaughan: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is not what just his constituents think; the polling shows it is what most people across the country think.

My hon. Friend alludes to not just an economic argument but a much wider one about where we belong. I will dwell on the economics, because it is important to start with that. My constituency of Folkestone and Hythe is a good place to look at where things have gone wrong. We are home to the channel tunnel, which is one of the main gateways to Europe; for us, the relationship with Europe directly affects whether lorries move, whether businesses can recruit and whether exports reach customers, as well as whether our young people can seize opportunities abroad.

It is fair to say that Mr McMaster's case is, above all, an economic one. He argues that our relationship with the EU has made our economy smaller and our trading relationship with our nearest and largest markets more difficult.

Afzal Khan (Manchester Rusholme) (Lab): As a former MEP and as MP for one of the youngest constituencies in the country, it is important for me to say on the record that Brexit has been a disaster for young people. Opportunities that the EU offered, such as the ability to live, work and learn alongside our friends in Europe, are now gone, and Brexit's devastating economic impact has been felt mostly by young people. Does my hon. and learned Friend agree that a closer relationship with the EU would positively impact our young people, including those in Manchester Rusholme?

Tony Vaughan: I completely agree, and that is why it is so vital that progress is made immediately on the youth experience scheme, about which I would be grateful to hear from the Minister later.

Every single economist agrees with Mr McMaster's assessment that we have been left in a much worse economic position, and the experience of businesses in my constituency is proof that he is right. Alcaline, a major local employer, is an international haulage company that serves customers across Europe. Nearly a quarter of its fleet is currently off the road, not because it lacks work, but because its British drivers can only spend 90 in every 180 days in the Schengen area due to post-Brexit rules and EU drivers are hard to find because they need a work visa and have to deal with all the friction at the UK border. This is a major local business that should be expanding but, because of Brexit rules, is struggling to survive. It is a travesty that haulage firms across the country are going bust because of these kinds of post-Brexit rules.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Highgate) (Lab): Will my hon. and learned Friend give way?

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): Order. Mr Vaughan, a very large number of people want to take part in the debate, and I am endeavouring to get in everybody who wants to give a speech. Perhaps you might bear that in mind before taking too many interventions.

Tony Vaughan: I am grateful, Sir Edward. I will bear that in mind. I will take a very brief intervention from my hon. Friend and will be sparing thereafter.

Tulip Siddiq: On the topic of local businesses, 87% of my constituents voted to remain in the EU, but kitchen designer Neil Lerner told me that he had to close the doors on a family business that had lasted for more than 30 years because of a severe downturn in sales caused by Brexit, a local bakery told me that its paperwork nearly doubled before it closed because of Brexit, and—this is my personal favourite—John Atkins, who ran a flower stall next to the Royal Free hospital for nearly 40 years, said that, because of post-Brexit bureaucracy, the cost of tulips has gone up by 50% since 2020. Does my hon. and learned Friend agree that Brexit has made our high streets significantly worse?

Tony Vaughan: I completely agree with my hon. Friend, and I will give her a further example—it will be my last. I have a sole trader in my constituency who has for three decades hand-made stringed instruments and exported his craftsmanship across the world. In some years, most of his sales went to the EU, but under post-Brexit rules, one Italian customer had to be charged around €1,000 in import costs on an instrument worth €3,200. That business faces post-Brexit red tape that is making it extremely difficult for him to compete. He describes it as

“nail after nail being hammered into a coffin”

for his business.

We have heard of three different businesses that are in quite different environments but tell the same story: these post-Brexit trading arrangements have added cost, delay and uncertainty to British businesses that should be focusing on investment and growing. How can we be serious about reindustrialising our country while our British manufacturers are being hammered day after day by trading rules that are purely a creature of Brexit? In 2026 we cannot accept that status quo any longer.

I fully support what the Labour Government have been doing to strengthen our ties with Europe—the work on the agrifood agreement, a youth experience scheme, Erasmus+ and a security and defence partnership are useful steps—but the measures that would make the most difference to our country are not in those draft agreements, at least as it appears so far.

Given the need to reindustrialise our nation, the economic challenges that we face, the need to address irregular migration and, most fundamentally, the need for democratic and rule-of-law-respecting states to pull together and stand up for our values against Russia's vile war of aggression in Ukraine, we cannot, as a country, afford to keep taking small steps away from the disastrous Brexit settlement that we have now. Instead, we should be looking at all the options for fundamentally refreshing our relationship with Europe, which I believe is strongly in the interests of British people, and the Prime Minister is absolutely right to be calling for a more ambitious approach.

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): Will the hon. and learned Member give way?

Tony Vaughan: I will take interventions a bit later. I will make some progress.

Many of my constituents who voted to leave the EU, whose decision I respect, agree with me that, 10 years on, the world is changing. Technology is changing, migration flows are changing, our climate is changing, and wars start, spread and are fought differently. All that leaves us as a nation far more exposed to external shocks. I think that most people are pragmatic enough to see that when the world changes it is a good idea to ask ourselves how we should change with it.

As a country, we have formidable strengths: the English language, the rule of law, a trusted legal system, world-class universities, financial and professional services, and leading science and research. Our future economic model should be to combine all those strengths and be the best place in Europe to invent, make, finance and export, but we will not achieve that by keeping rules that make it difficult for manufacturers to access their nearest market, for exporters to sell their goods or for companies to operate across borders.

I want very quickly to say something about asylum and immigration, because it is an important element of why we must have closer relations with Europe. When we left the EU, we lost the returns agreement that we had with it and were left with no returns agreement at all. Small boat crossings then shot up. Today we are left negotiating one-off, ad hoc arrangements with individual countries—most recently with France—which are hard-won but too limited in scope to tackle the problem fully.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): Will my hon. and learned Friend give way?

Tony Vaughan: I need to press on, because of the time.

We now have no access to the Eurodac fingerprint database, so we do not know how a person has travelled through Europe or whether they have already claimed asylum elsewhere. Despite all those constraints, the Government are making huge strides to reduce irregular crossings, but we could be making infinitely more progress if we were working inside the EU or more closely with it. We need practical co-operation with all our European partners, including action against people-smuggling networks, intelligence sharing and stronger enforcement, all of which will drive a faster, fairer asylum system here at home.

In conclusion, I strongly welcome the Prime Minister's commitment to investigate and set out the long-term options for our relationship with Europe, and I urge the Minister to make sure that membership is on the list of possible options. I am also keen to hear from him on the following points. First, what progress are the Government making in securing the agrifood agreement, access to the SAFE—Security Action for Europe—defence loans programme and the youth experience scheme? Secondly, what action are we taking to ensure that British manufacturing does not suffer as a result of the EU's “Made in Europe” scheme? Thirdly, do the Government see any way forward based on our current—or even future—arrangements to negotiate away the 90/180 rule that has been so devastating to hauliers? Finally, what consideration are the Government giving to levying tariffs on imports of Chinese electric vehicles so that we can have alignment with the EU and protect our domestic car industry?

Mr McMaster, the petitioners, businesses and many people in Folkestone and Hythe who want a closer relationship with Europe are not asking us to turn back wistfully; they are asking for hope again. They are asking for recognition that we are all paying a Brexit bill: our manufacturers, our farmers, our universities, our young people, our hospitality sector—I could go on. Brexit has not served our national interest. The world we now find ourselves in demands new choices about how we can prosper in the years ahead. I thank the petitioner and those who signed the petition and look forward to hearing from colleagues and the Minister about how we move forward.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): Order. A large number of colleagues wish to take part in the debate—I see very many Labour MPs—and I want to accommodate you all, so I am afraid that I will have to impose a four-minute limit on speeches. I remind you that we have worked that out so that everybody can get in, so the more interventions you take, the more likely you are to be stopping a colleague getting in and giving a speech that they have written so carefully.

4.44 pm

Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Edward. Brexit weakened the UK economically and politically. That is why it was supported by Putin, Trump and the Member for Mar-a-Lago and Moscow. I expected little else from them but remain bemused that the Conservative party went along with that folly despite the views of many of its MPs, including my honourable predecessor in Wimbledon, Stephen Hammond. But we are where we are. It falls to us in Parliament now to repair the damage that Brexit has done.

I was consequently encouraged to hear the Prime Minister's more positive words today. He was, however, markedly more ambivalent when he campaigned in Makerfield, and even now he remains wedded to his predecessor's red lines on the customs union and single market, which necessarily means that any progress in the much-delayed EU summit will be severely limited. But at least he is doing better than the Tories, who are still in denial. Just last week, their deputy leader vowed to reverse any progress made in re-engaging with Europe. I tell my Conservative colleagues to wake up and stop digging, as all they are doing is burying our one real chance to swiftly grow the UK economy.

Speak to any business owner trading with Europe and their verdict is the same: more paperwork, more checks, more delays. That the true cost of Brexit.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): It is not just business owners who can see the cost, but the workers. I was struck when a constituent who works in the Mini plant in Oxford wrote to me. He supported Brexit at the time, but he has since seen how the racist rhetoric is making it harder for him to be in his community, and his job feels precarious. He now says he would happily rejoin. Does my hon. Friend agree that workers as well as owners are seeing what has happened to their jobs after that disastrous deal?

Mr Kohler: It is damaging to our businesses, workers, communities and relations—and to the EU, of course. It is damaging to everybody. That is what Putin and Trump knew.

In south Wimbledon, a local Italian bakery La Bottega del Pane faces endless form filling. In Wimbledon village, the florist Gardenia of London faces similar hurdles. A small error in complex documentation can leave crucial deliveries tangled in red tape. Stale bread and dead flowers—a fitting epitaph to Brexit. It is not only businesses that are being harmed. A generation of young people is set to miss out on the life-changing opportunity of working abroad, from a winter season in the French Alps to a summer in Greece. Those are the formative experiences that our young people are currently being denied.

The time has come for a clear and pragmatic road map to rebuild our ties with the EU, as the Lib Dems have been calling for since the last election.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): May I take my hon. Friend to the far north of Scotland, which I have the honour to represent? The EU helped to pay for harbours, roads and all sorts of infrastructure. We have the signs still—they are fading, but they have all the stars on them, and we were damned grateful for it. We do not have that money any more. What does that mean? Opportunities are going and young people will start to think about moving away—the old curse of highland depopulation.

Mr Kohler: I agree entirely. Sadly, the EU did not shout enough about all it did. It was forgotten or not seen by many. Those were crucial things that we should have shouted about more, and we must shout them about now.

I urge the Prime Minister to go to the forthcoming EU summit with a plan to not only agree a youth mobility scheme but begin negotiating a growth and defence partnership, a customs union and the terms under which we might join the single market. The negotiations will not be easy, but the UK has much to offer and even more to gain. Let us proclaim loudly that the aim of this re-engagement is to one day, in my lifetime, become full and active members of the EU once more.

4.48 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): York for Europe's consistent polling in York shows a clear aspiration from my constituents to rejoin the EU, which I support, with 262 of them signing the petition.

How we progress our relationship is as important as the relationship itself. The geopolitical landscape has changed. In this new world order, we have leaders of core nations who assume dominance and build disruption, volatility and protectionism rather than bridges. That neither builds stability nor advances our collective interests as progressive nations interested in providing optimised opportunities for our families and communities in our countries.

Mark Carney has delivered two significant statements. The first was at Davos highlighting the importance of the new world order, with the power sat in the hands of the middle states to determine economic opportunity, national security and a union of nations working for

[*Rachael Maskell*]

the advancement of society against the headwinds of global challenge. Then, at the European Parliament in September, he set out a new model of associate EU membership.

As we have just heard, on 20 November, our Prime Minister will lead the discussions for a £10 billion opportunity to advance our economy. Nations of common interest will join together to address the destabilising pressures of Trump, Putin and Xi, to protect our economy base and to ensure border and national security. That is progressive politics, and it is our opportunity to ensure that we put forward an alliance for the future. The question then follows: to what extent? The EU has signalled its willingness to work with our Government to secure the best possible relationship.

Warinder Juss: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Rachael Maskell: I won't have time today.

I recognise that in 2016 people did not know that they were going to be £3,000 worse off. They did not know that the cost of living crisis was going to bear down on them as a result of that. Businesses and agriculture did not know how bad the barriers would be. People did not expect the economy to be 6% smaller and our financial industries to look to Frankfurt and Ireland rather than remain in the City. I also recognise that people were not informed that migration issues would get worse as a result of coming out of the Dublin agreement. They were not told the cost of that. People did not know that their public services would have huge backlogs because they were not told.

Now evidence has come to the fore about the crisis that has been created by being outside of the EU. Therefore, it is appropriate that we look at how we move forward. People are poorer, have fewer prospects and feel insecure, services are failing and the UK is disempowered, so it is right that the Prime Minister looks at how to advance this.

How we conduct our discussions to form a new relationship with the EU over the next couple of years will really matter. Can we build an in-depth, deliberative process where citizens from all our communities help to shape the next manifesto commitment and what the relationship with the EU should look like? Can we call for participation from all our communities so that every resident can have a say? Can we ensure that verified material is accessible to all so that people can consider all the options available to them?

Only if our residents are at the heart of shaping our future relationship with the EU will it succeed. The Prime Minister has opened up a tremendous opportunity, as we heard in the House this afternoon. I hope the Minister will be willing to work with MPs and our communities to deliver this.

4.52 pm

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Listening to this debate is amusing, but rather depressing in other ways. There is a heartfelt hope among a great many people here that rejoining the EU would somehow be transformative for the British economy, which they

think has done much worse as a result of being outside the EU. [*Interruption.*] That is the thesis, isn't it? Let's look at the facts.

The UK economy has outgrown France and Germany since we left the EU in 2021. In fact, some of our economic growth is a direct result of leaving the EU. We have not over-regulated our tech sector in the way that the EU has, so we are getting the lion's share of inward investment and far greater gross value added in that sector than France or Germany. Interestingly, the tech sector has been excluded from the EU reset talks.

Before covid, the City of London employed some 500,000 people. Today, over 680,000 people are employed in the City. The financial services sector is booming outside the EU because we have scrapped MiFID II, the bonus cap and regulations on derivatives trading, and all the people who left because of the fear campaign are coming back.

What is the basis for saying the EU has damaged our economy except for these two forecasts, which are conjectural projections and not things that have happened? They are not facts. They are quoted by the OBR and the Treasury and the Prime Minister believes them, and I am sure there is sincere belief in those figures across Westminster Hall today, but they are not facts. The only facts are that the UK economy has grown by 7.9% over that period, while France's economy has grown by 6.8% and Germany's economy has grown by only 1.1%. I was not aware that Germany or France had left the EU and that their economies had been damaged by their leaving, but that is the basis on which we are being told that we have damaged our economy.

Tony Vaughan: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Bernard Jenkin: No, I will not give way; I am going to be very brief.

Services exports to the EU have rocketed, because there is no single market in services and we export a huge amount to the EU, as we do to the rest of the world. Overall, our trade has boomed since Brexit; our trade with the EU and the rest of the world combined has grown very substantially.

Does anybody know what proportion of GDP is represented by goods exports to the EU? Hon. Members are quoting all these businesses from their constituencies, but how representative are they of the economy as a whole? The EU may be our single biggest export market, but it represents only 6% of our GDP. Hon. Members are looking very puzzled, because people have brainwashed themselves. They think that trade is the entire economy, but it is not; trade is only a proportion of the economy.

Our trade with the rest of the world has expanded much more in comparison with our period in the single market. For example, between 1997 and 2019, when we were in the single market, goods exports to non-EU countries grew by 85%, but goods exports to the EU fell from 10% to 7.8%. Our exports to the EU were already declining. Why was that? It was because the internal market is a failure. The countries that form the internal market today represented 30% of global GDP when we joined the single market in 1992. These are Library figures that I am citing, by the way; Members can go and check them out. Today, the EU represents 17.3% of global GDP. It is declining; it is losing global share.

The United States had 25% of global GDP in 1992 and it still has 25% of global GDP. Why is that? It is because its economy is much less regulated, it has much lower taxes, it rewards enterprise and risk, and it is not mired in the Code Napoléon and the way of cautiously regulating everything that the EU is. If the EU could deregulate, it would possibly be in our economic interests to join it, but it is incapable of deregulating. Therefore, the case for joining the single market has collapsed in the few minutes in which I have been speaking.

4.57 pm

Ben Coleman (Chelsea and Fulham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward.

I hate to bring real people into this argument and into the statistics. However, there is a Spanish-Italian delicatessen in my constituency—I am sorry that for some people it has no importance—and it has gaps on its shelves. I asked the staff why, because their customers are there and the owner is there. What they told me is missing is the food, and that is because the small supplier of this Spanish-Italian deli has had enough of the reams of EU red tape that he has had to deal with since we left. The gaps on that deli's shelves are what leaving looks like to its owner and to me.

As we have heard, more than 111,000 people have signed this petition to say that it does not have to be this way, and many of my constituents have urged me to support it. I agree with them. Since attending my first Prime Minister's questions I have made one case and I will continue to do so: the fastest way for this country to grow is to lift the barriers that came down on British firms when we left the European Union.

Consequently, I welcome the Prime Minister's readiness to look at every option: a customs union, a single market and full membership. All these things should be looked at in an honest way. The closer we get back to the EU, the quicker the shelves in my local deli will fill up again.

Some people worry about the considerable cost of rejoining the EU. A chunk of that money will come straight back to farmers, regions and our scientists. In addition, the boost to trade—despite what is being claimed about GDP growing internationally—would bring in billions more in tax for our NHS, our police, our schools and our defence. Those are all the things that we need to spend money on, but we in Labour found the cupboard was bare when we came in after 10 or 12 years of Tory misrule.

The return would comfortably outweigh the investment. However, EU membership would also mean more than money. One area where I have to declare a personal interest—

Sir Bernard Jenkin: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Ben Coleman: No, I am sorry, I am not giving way. I have been encouraged by our Chair to move on, so that everyone gets a chance to speak and not just the hon. Gentleman.

One area where I have to declare a personal interest is in enabling our musicians and performers to tour freely again. They are people like my nephew Freddy and his

band, Caroline. British acts played 21% fewer shows in Europe in 2024 than in 2019—and that is because we left the EU.

Some worry that free movement means that anybody could come here, stay and claim benefits—well, it does not. In the past, we applied too lightly the rules that say it does not. Belgium and Spain insist on the rules, and so can we if we rejoin. Some worry about sovereignty. Well, our exporters have to follow EU rules, but we have no say in setting them. Membership would give us a seat and a vote—that is more control, not less.

Our partners will want to know that our return is for keeps, and so should we. A decision this big must be the settled will of the British people. That is why I believe we need a manifesto pledge to negotiate joining the European Union and then a referendum on the deal. I realise that other people may have other views, but I think that would be the best thing.

In 2016, people voted on an idea—an ephemeral thought. Next time, they would vote on a deal: they would know what being in the European Union costs and what it buys. Before any of that, of course, I hope that the delayed UK-EU summit, which is now happening on 20 November, will finalise the deal on the table. That will keep down costs on food and drink and energy; it will let young Brits and young Europeans work in each other's countries, for a limited time; and it will build trust.

Martin Wrigley (Newton Abbot) (LD): We have heard about the impact on small businesses and, indeed, on bands, but there is a side impact on zoos. I have visited Shaldon zoo in my constituency. The loss of the sanitary and phytosanitary agreement means that we cannot move breeding animals from zoo to zoo, so we are losing species because of Brexit as well. Does the hon. Member agree?

Ben Coleman: I have absolutely no reason to doubt what the hon. Member says. This does not just come down to GDP; it comes down to the detail—the minutiae—of the pain that we are going through as a country in all sorts of areas as a result of not being in the European Union.

For years, we were a problem for the EU and it used to think about us, but the EU has moved on and we need to recognise that. Its problems now are Russia, China and an unpredictable United States. Too many people in Brussels simply do not know us the way they used to, so I would suggest to the Minister that we need to think now about ways we can become part of the furniture there again, starting as soon as possible. For me, the logic points inexorably towards joining, but I can assure my constituents that I will listen, as well as arguing that case.

If I may, I will end on a personal note. As a student, I lived in divided Berlin—before the wall came down. I crossed into the communist east through Checkpoint Charlie; I saw the watchtowers in no man's land. From there, I went to Brussels: I was a trainee at the European Commission and I worked every day alongside people from every European country. What I could see was that, in Berlin, Britain was helping to keep half a city free; in Brussels, Britain was at the table. We were not just looking on; we were part of it. I want us to be that again, and this time for keeps.

5.2 pm

Pippa Heylings (South Cambridgeshire) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Edward. I thank the petitioners for bringing forward the petition. In the referendum, South Cambridgeshire was one of the strongest remain-voting constituencies in the country, and many of my constituents have signed this petition. We all respect the result, but 10 years on, we have a responsibility to look honestly at the consequences and costs of Brexit and the relationship that we do want with Europe, so that we can strengthen our economy, security, immigration, energy independence, climate and nature recovery.

In South Cambridgeshire, we see the impacts and consequences clearly. Our farmers have faced costs and red tape because the UK lost alignment with EU sanitary and phytosanitary rules, leading to additional, burdensome checks on animal and plant shipments. Our universities and life science research have faced barriers to world-class collaboration, particularly in relation to our exclusion from Horizon until 2024. Our young people have lost the right to live, work and travel across Europe, and I ask the Minister to confirm that we will rejoin the Erasmus scheme. Cambridgeshire chamber of commerce told me that in its latest survey, one in five businesses reported falling overseas sales, alongside increased paperwork and higher export costs.

On the cost of living, by taking the UK out of the EU's energy market, the Conservatives created barriers to trading electricity with our nearest neighbours. According to Energy UK, that has increased the cost of electricity imports by up to £370 million a year, with cumulative costs potentially reaching £10 billion by 2030. Will the Minister confirm that the upcoming UK-EU summit will enable the UK to rejoin the EU internal electricity market?

Brexit has also had an environmental cost. Many Brexiteers wanted environmental deregulation, and since Brexit, we have seen Britain diverge from European standards, including in areas such as tackling deforestation and saving primary tropical forests, on which we have been far outpaced by the EU.

The lesson of the last decade is clear: Britain benefits when it works closely with its closest European neighbours. Will the Minister confirm that he will scrap the red lines and join the Liberal Democrats in calling for a new growth and defence partnership with the EU? By joining the customs union, the single market and the internal electricity market, we can collectively boost growth, create jobs, strengthen immigration, raise living standards and make Britain safer, as well as recover our nature and tackle climate change together.

5.5 pm

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): None of us wants to go back to the Brexit debates we had in this place. Looking around, I see that most Members present for this debate were spared the horrors of 27 votes in one night and the fisticuffs that took place—*[Interruption.]* Yes, not all Members here were spared that. I am grateful that nobody else has to go through that horror, but we do need to look again at Brexit. When we look at the real GDP per capita growth since the vote and see that the eurozone countries—Italy, France and Spain—have all outpaced us, I can only

ask the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin): are these Brexit benefits in the room with us now? Can anybody else see them?

Sir Bernard Jenkin: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Creasy: I will not give way; we have already had to listen to the hon. Gentleman. It would be easy to be angry about our performance in Brexit, but these debates are too often fuelled by blind beliefs rather than careful consideration—witness the hon. Gentleman.

Do we really understand how bad the Tory hard Brexit has been for this country and the scale of the challenge we face? The challenge is not just about the economic impact of leaving the largest trade bloc in the world. I was just shocked by Tory shadow Ministers in the Chamber being surprised to realise that their hard Brexit means that we do not get information in real time from our European counterparts to help British farmers with bio and food security alerts. We also left Eurodac—for all the people who are concerned about stopping the boats and who might want that asylum data—because, again, they hated the term “Europe”. Countless bands will never get the chance to be the Beatles or Oasis because of the 90-day rule, and 20,000 businesses have given up on trading with Europe altogether, because the only Brexit “benefit” that anyone can quantify is the amount of paperwork it created.

The second blind belief, however, is that it would be simple just to go back. We have to be honest. The British problem is that we too often think that the difficult bit is us deciding what our future relationship with Europe should be, and then we tell the Europeans, as if they do not read our newspapers. Some humility is needed, to say the least. In the last 10 years, the continent has faced war and the antics of President Putin and President Trump. It now has new deals on migration and asylum, a new green deal, and trade deals of its own with Canada and the South American Mercosur nations. It has challenged Chinese exports so that “Made in Europe” is now a serious prospect. We are simply an afterthought and casualty of that process.

None of that is an argument against looking to the future, but if the status quo is not acceptable, we have to be honest with our constituents about what is and what we should be fighting for. Frankly, we should look at how others have approached Europe. To go into a negotiation and saying what we do not want—“No, no, no”—is to act like a toddler, yet that is too often what the red line approach has been for this country. Let us contrast that with the approach of Mark Carney, who has talked about the shared challenges and the issues facing all of us in the world today. Perhaps the biggest lie of all those told to us in this place was about cakeism and cherry-picking, as if Europe is not flexible and does not want to find ways forward, when it is very clear that it does.

The truth that must now be told is that we need to do more than repeat the mistakes of the past. We left the European Union without knowing what leaving would entail. We must not make that mistake again. We must seek the consent of the British people and ask them what rejoin would be and about our future relationship with Europe. That is exactly what the Prime Minister is talking about doing. Twenty-one nations have been through accession, taking an average of nine years to

do so. This country deserves better. We need to take the Brexit blinkers off and look to our future—a future that is clearly with Europe.

5.9 pm

Danny Kruger (East Wiltshire) (Reform): As ever, it is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Ms Creasy). I congratulate the petitioners, but I am afraid the heart sinks in this debate. I think it took less than three minutes before we heard about the 350 million quid on the side of the bus, which is one of the great canards. Of course, that was paid; one of the few things that Theresa May actually did for Brexit was make that very significant increase in the NHS budget. We have heard about the migrant return scheme under the EU, which was never used and never actually returned any migrants.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Danny Kruger: I am just going to keep going. I do not think we are actually having a debate; we are just exchanging our speeches, so I will not give way.

I sympathise with the points we have heard, such as those made about zoos, Spanish delis or Freddy and his band. It is clearly very frustrating how the EU has treated its close friend, the UK, after Brexit, and that has had very unfortunate consequences for those businesses.

We need to look at this issue from a much bigger perspective, and here the facts are much more contested about the overall benefits and costs of Brexit. When we talk about these always cited statistics on the decline in GDP since 2026, we are comparing an unknowable counterfactual with what has actually happened in the real European Union and the UK. Here, as the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) said, the UK has done better than our European competitors.

Let us just be straightforward about this: the whole of Europe, including the United Kingdom, has suffered economically over the last decade. Different sectors have prospered and suffered in different ways. Although we have not suffered in services exports, we have suffered in goods exports, and I recognise that. However, those goods losses overlap with stupid political choices made by our sovereign United Kingdom, particularly in respect of energy policy.

Where we have also suffered and struggled is where our regulations have remained aligned with the EU. The fact is that European regulations have caused Europe to decline, and where we have also declined, it is because we have remained aligned with them. Mario Draghi, the former Italian Prime Minister and chairman of the European Central Bank, wrote a brilliant report that conclusively demonstrated how much it is the EU itself that holds back European growth, and why it is so regrettable that Britain has remained aligned in so many sectors.

Let me quickly state what actually works for prosperity and what drives economic growth. Last year's Nobel prize winners won for their brilliant work demonstrating why there has been sustained growth in the world for the last 200 years. It is not because of market share or market access, as valuable as that is; it is because of innovation and technology. It is because of a regulatory system, largely derived from the United Kingdom, that enables businesses to prosper.

The key aspects of that system are light-touch regulation and legal certainty, which are features of common law and the United Kingdom's economy. Legal systems matter, and the civil law system that the EU operates and applied to the UK is different, as it involves heavy regulation and legal uncertainty. Where we have remained constrained by EU law, such as in electric or self-driving cars, we do just as badly as the EU. However, where we have diverged—where we have used our Brexit freedoms—that is where we are prospering. Of course, AI technology is the key evidence of that.

Ms Creasy: Are the benefits in the room with us?

Danny Kruger: The AI that the hon. Lady used to write her speech is the benefit of Brexit, and we all benefit enormously from the UK's leadership in this enormous sector. We attract as much investment in our AI sector as the whole EU27 combined. That is what divergence looks like, and that is what growth looks like.

What is happening is that the EU—and I am afraid the Government—is deliberately locking the United Kingdom into its regulatory system, so that it becomes increasingly apparent that there will be no opportunity to leave. *[Interruption.]* I am very unclear about the speech times, Sir Edward. Have I gone over?

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): There is something wrong with the clock.

Danny Kruger: I have pages and pages to go, but I will end on this point. The opportunity remains for the United Kingdom to prosper from the tremendous decision that the British people took 10 years ago. Because of poor Government choices, made under the Conservatives and Labour, the United Kingdom is suffering. However, the answer is not to take a step back into the EU.

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): I hope we do not have a Brexit clock.

5.14 pm

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I thank the many tens of thousands of people, including hundreds of my constituents, who signed the petition to rejoin the EU. Today's debate is timely and important. In my constituency we are proud Europeans, and during the referendum that took place 10 years ago, Battersea voted overwhelmingly to remain, with 78% of voters choosing to stay.

The UK's relationship with Europe is essential, and the Prime Minister was right when he said he believed leaving the European Union had done “more harm than good” in the UK. Many people voted for Brexit because they were promised greater prosperity and opportunity. However, those promises have simply not been realised. In my opinion, the UK leaving the EU has been an unmitigated disaster and has left us poorer as a result.

If we are serious about growth, prosperity and opportunity, we must look at our relationship with Europe. The economic case is clear, despite what many Members have already said. Rejoining the EU would significantly boost the UK's GDP. Indeed, much research has shown that, including research from Best for Britain on UK-EU integration, which found that full membership

[Marsha De Cordova]

would unlock between 2.5% and 3.6% growth in UK GDP. Moreover, rejoining the EU is an issue that many constituents, including mine, continue to raise with their parliamentarians.

As the co-chair of the UK-EU Parliamentary Partnership Assembly, I work closely with colleagues here in Parliament and with Members of the European Parliament. Those conversations demonstrate our shared values and our steadfast commitment to work closely and constructively. They also show how much effort has gone into managing many of the unnecessary barriers and complications that did not exist before Brexit.

Steve Race (Exeter) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. In my Exeter constituency, we were heavily reliant on exports to the EU. Many businesses have simply stopped exporting or shut up shop completely. English language schools have also really struggled. We were a centre for English language schools, which bring children and young people from across Europe to Exeter to learn the English language. That is drying up quite significantly.

My hon. Friend mentioned the other ways in which we lose out from being outside the EU. The previous Government specifically pulled us out of the European Geostationary Navigation Overlay Service, which means that our air ambulances face challenges and delays in their missions. This issue is not just economic; it is social and affects the way our society is organised. Does my hon. Friend agree that some of those things could be fixed at the upcoming summit?

Marsha De Cordova: Absolutely. My hon. Friend is right that there are so many areas where we could benefit. It is not just the economy.

Those conversations with our colleagues across Europe have also reinforced my belief that, as our close neighbours and historical allies, we are stronger when we work together. When the PPA meets in London next month, which again is timely, ahead of the UK-EU summit, we will continue to call for deeper co-operation between the UK and EU and for practical agreements that support growth—agreements on food and drink, emissions trading and creating opportunities for young people. That will support growth, security and resilience.

In an increasingly volatile geopolitical environment, strong relationships with our oldest neighbours and closest allies matter even more. We have seen that through our collaborative work on the issues facing Ukraine. The Prime Minister has opened the door to a national conversation about our future relationship with Europe and we must seize that opportunity. It is not an opportunity to revisit what happened more than 10 years ago, but we must be honest about the lessons of the last decade and ambitious about the decades to come. What will that look like? If we want growth, prosperity, security and resilience, we must choose a future that brings us closer with the European Union once again.

5.19 pm

Pete Wishart (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship today, Sir Edward. I congratulate all the petitioners on the efforts they have made to secure such a number of signatures for this petition.

After 10 years, I thought that maybe, just maybe, we might be getting somewhere. The Government are starting to talk positively about the EU, and they correctly describe the carnage, chaos and disaster that was the Brexit deal, and even at his conference speech, I thought I heard the Prime Minister talking positively about actually rejoining the EU. However, as with everything from this Government, we need to be cautious. From that heady talk about rejoining only a couple of weeks ago, we are now back to the familiar territory of a deal and an arrangement with the EU.

I have just come from the Chamber, as many hon. Members have, and I listened very carefully to what the Prime Minister had to say about the EU. He described a perfectly reasonable deal. I quite liked what I heard from him on that—he is going to try to ensure a number of positive developments for the UK—but what he did not talk about was rejoining the EU. If I am not mistaken, that is what the petition asks for: it asks for the UK to renegotiate its terms and rejoin the EU. I am okay with what the Prime Minister is going to do on work experience, immigration and all the other things, but what we need after the disaster of the last 10 years is to get back to the territory of rejoining the European Union.

Warinder Juss: Will the hon. Member give way?

Pete Wishart: Sorry, I cannot give way.

Labour have not so much opened the door on ending the chaos and disaster of Brexit; it is more like they have one tentative hand on the handle, unsure whether to wander through, and they are a little bit terrified of what they might find on the other side. We know that Brexit has been a disaster. The Prime Minister does not have to tell us that or explain it in detail; all of us have been seeing it for the last eight years. We are just grateful that this Labour party and Government are now listening.

I secured a debate a few weeks ago to “celebrate” the referendum on the EU. The House of Commons Library briefing for this debate is roughly the same as the one for my debate. The overwhelming economic evidence, the consensus, about what has happened since Brexit could not be clearer—I say to my friends on the right wing of the Conservative party. It is absolutely clear that we have lost opportunity, diminished growth, and limited opportunities and relationships for our young people, and that will continue to happen with this Brexit.

Where does the frenetic talk of the past few weeks leave us? What should we look at from now? The Government’s response to this petition—I am sorry to once again disappoint the petitioners—was to simply restate the failed Keir Starmer lines that they “will not be rejoining the EU”.

They went on to restate that nothing will be done about the Government’s red lines: no freedom of movement and no rejoining of the single market. That position seems to be totally at odds with what we heard at the Labour party conference. I wish that they would revisit what was said there and give us all hope that we will somehow get back. If they start to get some ambition and aspiration and make that a real strategy, I will be right behind them. I will cheer them to the rafters: “Get us back into the European Union and you will be heroes—not just in your party or your constituencies, but across the United Kingdom.”

However, from what I have heard today and been looking at, I am not seeing that commitment. I have to say that I am very disappointed. I know that Labour Members are all encouraged and excited by what they have heard, but I did not hear anything about rejoining the EU, which is what we and the petitioners want to hear.

5.23 pm

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): Meur ras, Sir Edward. It is an honour to serve under your chairship.

I thank the 239 constituents of Camborne, Redruth and Hayle who signed the petition following the debate here in September. In that debate, I set out how disastrous Brexit has been for Cornwall. Thanks to the late Member for Falmouth and Camborne, Candy Atherton, Cornwall was awarded more than £100 million a year in European objective 1 funding, which supported the Eden Project, Newquay airport and our universities.

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Perran Moon: As my hon. Friend is a Cornish MP, I will give way.

Jayne Kirkham: As a Cornish MP, I want to reinforce that. It supported the airport, the trains, United Downs geothermal, and businesses in Cornwall. We did so well from being, ironically, one of poorest regions in western Europe. I want to make a particular point about our farmers and fishers and the upcoming SPS agreement, which we hope will get across the line by 2027. Does my hon. Friend agree that the agreement will be so important for our farmers and fishers, and that we must make sure that we push it through?

Perran Moon: I wholeheartedly agree: for our farmers and our fishers, Brexit has been a disaster—I will come on to that.

We were promised in Cornwall that the funding would be replaced like for like, but it never was. The Brexit benefits were all smoke and mirrors. As my hon. Friend says, our farmers now compete with cheap imports, our fishermen face more bureaucracy, and our businesses face new trade barriers. Across Britain, 20,000 small businesses have stopped exporting to the EU. Farm exports to the EU fell 37% in the five years following the referendum. Brexit has been a tragic failure and Britain is infinitely weaker—economically, socially and culturally—because of it. It is interesting to listen to the hon. Members for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) and for East Wiltshire (Danny Kruger), who sound like two King Cnuts shouting at the sea while the waves of evidence that Brexit has been a failure crash over them.

I reiterate what I said in September: there were virtually no small boat crossings before the Brexit referendum. Why the increase? It is because we took the disastrous decision to leave the Dublin agreement and the Eurodac database without replacements. It is only since this Labour Government have started working collaboratively with our friends and colleagues in France that the number of people crossing the channel in small boats is down, year on year, by 44%. I therefore welcome the Prime Minister's willingness to hold an honest conversation about our long-term relationship with Europe with all

options on the table. As chair of the electric vehicle all-party parliamentary group, I am particularly concerned by the “Made in Europe” policy. I am delighted that the Prime Minister has just raised that issue at the Dispatch Box. Without an agreement, British-built electric vehicles could be excluded from subsidies available to EU-produced vehicles, placing UK manufacturers at a systemic disadvantage. I therefore urge Ministers to ensure that an agreement there remains a priority.

The question the Prime Minister has posed is: how can we contemplate another 10 years of failure? If we are not prepared to commit to the status quo, what are the alternatives? I hope that in coming weeks and months we can engage constructively, cross party, for the sake of our constituents and our country.

5.27 pm

Manuela Perteghella (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Edward. I thank the petitioners, including hundreds of my constituents in Stratford-on-Avon, for bringing the important issue of EU membership to Parliament for discussion. As someone who came to the United Kingdom from Italy as a student and who has benefited personally from European co-operation and the UK's ties with Europe, I know at first hand the opportunities that being in the EU gave us, our country and our young people. It pains me to see how poorer and worse off our country has become since leaving the EU. As I have argued before, for our prosperity, our young people and our place in the world, it is important that, in an increasingly hostile environment, where Governments around the world attack the rules-based international order and allow democratic backsliding and repression, the EU has always been a beacon of rights, co-operation and defence.

The economic evidence for rejoining is becoming increasingly clear. The Office for Budget Responsibility estimates that post-Brexit trading arrangements will leave the UK economy about 4% smaller in the long run. Research by the Centre for European Reform suggests that the impact may already be even greater; it estimates that UK GDP is around 5% to 5.5% lower and investment more than 10% lower due to Brexit. That weaker growth is costing the Exchequer tens of billions of pounds in lost tax revenues every year.

That matters to our communities because there is less money to spend on our public services, our NHS, our armed forces, our creative sector and our high streets. Stratford-on-Avon is home to hundreds of small and medium-sized businesses, many of which depend directly or indirectly on exports or on European supply chains, manufacturing, agriculture, food production, hospitality and tourism. When trade barriers increase, it means more paperwork, higher costs and reduced competitiveness for local firms. Frankly, my constituents would be horrified to hear what the Conservative Benches come out with. The economic and political damage of Brexit is plain to see, but my deepest upset is with politicians who in 2016 enabled a hard Brexit and the loss of life-changing opportunities for our young British people. I made the case that our schools, university researchers and businesses all benefit when we work closely with our European partners. We now must act in the national interest. That means rebuilding trust with our European neighbours and reducing barriers to trade, whether that is via a customs union or access to the single market.

[*Manuela Perteghella*]

Bold Liberal Democrat policies have been announced: restoring opportunities for young people, maybe through a youth experience scheme, and strengthening research and innovation. That also means making a positive, evidence-based case for joining the EU again—the biggest trading bloc in the world here on our continent. We must be brave and bold, and we must give the British people the option, once the terms are known, to shape their future once again.

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): I call Dr Zubir Ahmed. Not here. Is Daniel Zeichner here?

5.31 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): Yes. It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Sir Edward.

This feels like old times for some of us here. I remember leading two Petitions Committee debates and speaking in the legendary 2019 debate, when some 6 million people had signed the petition, including over 28,000 in Cambridge. Today I am grateful to the 323 in Cambridge who have done so. I doubt very much whether many of those 28,000 have changed their minds, but I think quite a few others possibly have.

I agree with the petitioners: we should be in the EU. We should never have left. Sadly, there is not a simple on/off switch. Coming out was long, painful and costly, and I fear that going back in will be equally so. I remember being asked by people—sometimes people who had fallen for that ridiculous slogan, “Get Brexit done”—“When will Brexit be over?” They looked pained when I told them the answer was never, because leaving the EU did not and could not solve the shared problems that we will always have to tackle with our neighbours. It just took away a long-established, albeit far from perfect, mechanism for dealing with them, which means we need other mechanisms: the cumbersome and opaque EU-UK trade and co-operation agreement and the shadowy joint committees. As was famously observed about democracy in general, it might not be good, but it is better than all the alternatives. I think it is much better than the worst alternative. I was fiercely proud to be a citizen of Europe, and I was furious at having my rights torn away.

Sir Edward, you require short speeches, so here are two reflections from my ministerial experience. First, in my many encounters with ministerial colleagues across the European Union, I was always struck by the warmth and generosity and the lack of rancour. They want us back, as many now openly say. Secondly, I would also reflect that the EU has not stood still. It has changed to meet changing circumstances, which creates some serious challenges for us. But it could also offer opportunities even for the talismanic fishing sector, which was promised so much and gained so little from Brexit. Current discussion in Europe around reform of the common fisheries policy, as well as the offers made to Iceland, offer potential new opportunities. Even on precision breeding, an area of particular concern to the food sector, the European Union is moving closer to our position. How frustrating that we are on the very fringe of such discussions because we chose to exclude ourselves.

In conclusion, I am pleased that the Prime Minister has opened up the debate, but our first priority must be to secure a closer relationship. The phytosanitary agreement

is a really important step, not least to help tackle the grievous treatment of Northern Ireland. There never was and never can be a solution to that border conundrum without close alignment. Whether it is customs union or single market, Switzerland or Norway, the truth is that every version has advantages and disadvantages, and they need to be assessed calmly because 2016 did not do anyone credit. Some said, “Apocalypse Now”; some said, “Heaven on earth”. Frankly, both were wide of the mark. The best deal was the one we had, and it was thrown away. Now we should support the Minister and the Government in trying to salvage the best we can. But, in the end, we are Europeans, and we should be in.

5.34 pm

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Sir Edward. Ten years ago, the British public voted to leave the EU by a wafer-thin margin in a referendum marred by mistruths, deception and Russian interference. Our exit was then badly planned, badly executed and damaged the UK’s economic prospects and political reputation. I thank the 319 people from South Devon who got us into the top 10 constituencies with the most signatures on this petition, which calls for us to seek to rejoin the EU as soon as possible. It is time that we all recognise that Brexit has catastrophically failed to deliver what was promised.

Let me be clear: I will never blame anyone for voting leave. I understand why they did. They were promised higher living standards, control over our borders and freedom from laws imposed by Brussels. But those promises were misleading. The Vote Leave campaign exploited people’s fears through targeted social media, false claims about Turkey joining the EU and the infamous lie that £350 million a week would go to the NHS.

What Brexiteers did not explain was the cost to businesses trading with Europe, the mountain of additional paperwork and the crippling red tape that has pushed South Devon’s fishers, shellfish exporters and farmers to the brink. They did not talk about the billions of pounds of EU investment supporting projects across the UK, from Cornwall’s Eden Project and Newquay airport to Welsh infrastructure, Yorkshire regeneration and university research programmes. Nor did they explain that British homeowners in Europe would face a 90-day stay limit or that young people would lose opportunities to work, study and build friendships across Europe.

Brexiteers also failed to explain that Britain already had a seat at the table helping shape European legislation. I know that because I was fortunate enough to have a seat at that table, serving in the European Parliament and being directly involved in designing and implementing legislation that affected the UK. We were not simply dictated to by Brussels; we helped make the rules. Indeed, our representation was only as effective as the people we sent, and unfortunately, we sent the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) before he was the hon. Member for Clacton. He attended just one of 42 European Fisheries Committee meetings over three years, so our fishers were literally not represented while legislation affecting them was drawn up.

Yes, EU membership cost money, but leaving has cost us considerably more. The OBR’s March 2025 forecasts, as we have heard, estimate that Brexit will reduce long-run

productivity by 4%, largely because of additional barriers to trade. Research has estimated cumulative losses to the UK economy of £180 billion to £240 billion, while other studies point to falls in economic activity, productivity and business investment. The precise estimates vary, but their assessment is clear: Brexit has lowered investment and dampened our economy.

The hon. Member for East Wiltshire (Danny Kruger) argued that our economy has grown since Brexit, but it could have grown by so much more if we had not left. The promised sunlit uplands remain a fantasy. Our new trade deals cannot compensate for what we lost. The agreements with India, Australia and Japan are collectively forecast to deliver around 0.25% of GDP—a pathetic substitute for the frictionless trade with our 27 nearest neighbours.

Whatever the views are on Brexit, we cannot change geography. I welcome the Prime Minister's recognition that we must face up to the reality that Brexit has done more harm than good and that the status quo is definitely not good enough. The Liberal Democrats have been saying that for a long time, and we will continue to do so. We need a growth and security partnership with the EU that helps rebuild our economy while enabling us to tackle shared challenges: immigration, defence, security, the climate crisis and online harms. In today's interconnected world, isolationism simply does not work. It is time to move beyond the politics of grievance and focus on the art of the possible. For me, that means the possibility of rejoining the EU as a full and active member.

5.39 pm

Mr Luke Charters (York Outer) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Edward. I thank the nearly 200 of my constituents who put their signatures to the petition.

I will start on familiar territory. This year, I took two of my boys to Spain. On the trip, my eldest, who turns four this week—he is an inquisitive fella—looked at the border queues and asked me bluntly, “Daddy, why aren't we in that empty one?” My youngest, who is one, and clearly not ready for a debate about sovereignty, took a rather different approach, instead choosing to run underneath the barriers altogether. That story is just a reminder that all the children of Britain know is a Britain standing apart from its closest neighbours. Let's unpack that.

A fortnight ago in Liverpool, I heard the Prime Minister make a clarion call about something that many of us have felt for years: our present relationship with the European Union is not good enough. He did not stop at diagnosis; he actually had the courage to say that he would set out options for Britain's long-term relationship with our nearest partners. He carried that message to Berlin last week—schöne Arbeit indeed.

Clear-eyed pragmatism about our relationship with Europe is what my constituents in York Outer expect. As the Prime Minister outlined today, we have a great opportunity on 20 November to take steps forward on agrifood, energy and immigration, and to build a new long-term strategic direction that is not based on just slogans and soundbites. My own family see it the way that millions do, and many of them voted to leave. If I ask them about Brexit today, I do not get a lecture about the referendum a decade ago; I get a shrug and a

modest dose of “Bregret”. That is because in West Yorkshire, North Yorkshire or wherever, they are paying the price in their weekly shop or standing in endless passport queues.

By working with our European partners on an agrifood deal, as the Prime Minister set out today, it does not have to be this way. By reducing red tape in the food sector, we can lower the cost of the weekly shop for millions of working-class families. By co-operating on immigration and working on other issues of mutual interest, such as immigration and energy, we can get control back. The Prime Minister, however, said that the British public are the boss, and that is why this conversation must not be held just in Westminster Hall. In a fortnight, I will be holding a town hall for my constituents about the relationship they want Britain to have with Europe.

York has always been outward looking. In fact, it voted nearly 60:40 to remain—the strongest remain vote in Yorkshire and the Humber. I believe that the proportion is far higher for those who now want a stronger relationship. I always end up coming back to the fact that I am the youngest parent in Parliament. Rebuilding this relationship means restoring opportunity for young people like my children. A young person from York should find it no harder to study or work in Barcelona, Amsterdam or Copenhagen than they do in Sydney or Toronto.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff East) (Lab): Many of my constituents work in Cardiff's three universities. Before Brexit, EU students in Wales contributed £83 million off campus, but new EU enrolments halved within a year of them losing home fee status. Does my hon. Friend agree that much closer ties to the EU are essential for making our universities attractive to EU students again?

Mr Charters: I absolutely do. My right hon. Friend is a great advocate for universities in her constituency, as is my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell), my constituency neighbour.

I think about the first day that my boys will go on the Eurostar on their own to go adventuring or even to study. As they set off, I will tell them how proud I am of them for the fact that, with every friendship they make along the journey, they are helping to make our continent more peaceful and more prosperous in the process. I welcome the Prime Minister's boldness in daring to get things done. We should be honest: Brexit has not worked. As a nation, we have a collective case of “Bregret”. It is time to get on with the job and build on the Prime Minister's bold honesty about our future relationship with Europe.

5.43 pm

Lara Bird (Arbroath and Broughty Ferry) (SNP): We cannot have this debate without making it explicitly clear that the situation in Scotland is different. Many Members have noted the disagreements in their constituencies, but England and Wales voted to leave while Scotland voted to remain by more than 60%. Given the consequences of what has happened since, that fact cannot be overstated. The context for people in Scotland was that two years earlier we were told by Westminster that, by choosing to remain within the Union, our future within Europe was secure and could

[Lara Bird]

be guaranteed. That turned out very much not to be the case. The fundamental promise for Scotland of remaining in the Union changed against our will, despite 60% of people in Scotland having voted to remain in the EU.

It is no wonder that people in Scotland increasingly see their future not only within the EU but within the EU in an independent Scotland. As many have said today, what we have seen since 2016 because of Brexit is our economy suffering, our young people being limited, our agricultural businesses being strangled and our cost of living increasing year on year. That has been a clear consequence of a future that Scotland, unlike many Members' constituencies, did not vote for.

Scotland did not need to wait and see the consequences that we have discussed today; we knew that this would be a disaster.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): Will the hon. Member give way?

Lara Bird: I will not; sorry.

Now the Prime Minister has acknowledged that economic and social situations have changed. So many of the promises made ahead of the Brexit referendum turned out to be false, aimed at pursuing the agenda of those who did not truly have the interests of the people at heart but were operating in the pursuit of their own objectives. The PM has recently stated that the realities of that decision have not benefited the people who voted for it and that many regretted their decision. That is a feeling that so many in Scotland understand, because the promises that those claims were based on turned out to be based on false realities.

Warinder Juss: Will the hon. Member give way?

Lara Bird: I will not give way, in the interests of time.

Yet although the decision made in Westminster and by Westminster in 2016 is apparently now up for relitigation—in what form seems as yet unclear—Scotland has been told that that same democratic privilege does not apply to us. But we cannot have a dual standard of democracy when it comes to reconsidering the consequences of referendums. We SNP Members have aspirations to be an equal and contributing member of the EU in our own right. What we are sure of in the SNP is that when Scotland does inevitably rejoin the EU, it will be on our own two feet—not as part of a Union begging and clawing its way back through different deals and trying to renegotiate and relitigate. It will be as a state in our own right, completely clear that our future has always been there.

If the Government's position is now that the outcome of a referendum can be reopened for discussion, then that same democratic principle must apply to Scotland. If the Prime Minister is prepared to set out the mechanisms for a clear and closer relationship with the EU, then he must also set out the mechanisms for an independent Scotland.

5.48 pm

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): It is, as always, a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Sir Edward. I want to thank my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan) for how he

introduced the debate. It is customary for the mover of the motion to present a balanced argument, but in this case it is so difficult to find any benefits of leaving the EU. He had a really difficult job and I am only glad that he did not mention bendy bananas.

This debate is timely because the Prime Minister has just this afternoon outlined his vision for a closer relationship with the EU. The important point to remember in all of this, and absolutely fundamental, is the need to work with other political parties to make that happen, because it is in the national interest and we find ourselves in a difficult time. That requires honesty. If all political parties are going into this debate, they have to be honest about the impact of Brexit. We must also be honest that rejoining the EU is not an easy proposition. I say gently to the hon. Member for Perth and Kinross-shire (Pete Wishart) that it would take years to re-enter. It is right that we look for benefits in the interim; I would be surprised if there was a referendum on rejoining within a decade.

[PAULA BARKER *in the Chair*]

I want to make four or five observations. People in my constituency are finding life difficult now because of five things: the financial crash, Brexit, covid, the Ukraine war and Iran. Some of that damage can be undone if we look again at Brexit. It is right that people have been asking who benefits from Brexit. Certainly, no business in my constituency has said that they have, and no student or academic says that they feel the benefit from Brexit—I cannot even think of a resident who would say that. We have heard that the Russians may have benefited; perhaps politicians who take bribes from Russia have as well, but I think that that person is in jail so we cannot speak to him.

What infuriates me most is how immigration was weaponised by the right during the Brexit debate: they told us that we would get control of immigration again. In fact, we lost control of immigration. Now the same right-wing politicians are back, trying to weaponise immigration when perhaps they should be apologising for what happened. As the world moves towards becoming more isolationist through Trump's tariffs and the European "Made in Europe" agenda, the UK is exposed more than ever as an island in the middle of the Atlantic without being part of that bigger trade bloc to negotiate with other nations. I say gently to my Scottish nationalist colleagues who talk about the impact of Brexit that it would have been so different if the SNP had not blocked a customs union for the UK when it had the chance. It chose to abstain, and that abstention swung the vote. They should own that and apologise. I have got that off my chest—[*Interruption.*] Feel free to intervene.

We have to think carefully about what any future realignment might look like. We must acknowledge that the toxicity and fake news during the Brexit referendum mean that many people will feel uncertain about reopening the debate. Many will feel very uncertain about the prospect of a referendum as well, if one is to come. That is why incrementally getting closer to the EU makes sense—we have to win the argument one step at a time. We should start with trade, defence, security and student mobility. But we cannot talk about those as abstract concepts; we need to talk about what they will mean for people in our constituencies, particularly young people.

5.52 pm

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Barker. I am a democrat, and I respect the will of the people. But to be blunt, Brexit has been the biggest fraud in the history of Britain. Ten years ago, the British people were sold a fantasy. They were told that Brexit would make us richer, but almost every person in my constituency is worse off today than they were before 2016. They were told that it would reduce red tape, but we have heard from across this Chamber that many businesses have stopped trading with the EU. Dewsbury and Batley, the bed capital of the UK, has seen trade reduced. People were told that Brexit would restore national sovereignty and allow Britain to take back control. Instead of taking back control, we lost the control we already had.

Instead, Brexit has been an unmitigated disaster. The British public were deceived and failed by their politicians. Charlatans peddled falsehoods masquerading as truisms. The former Prime Minister Boris Johnson toured the country on a red bus promising an extra £350 million per week for the NHS—where is he? What about the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage), who spent decades insisting that Brexit would transform Britain's financial fortunes? Liam Fox, the former International Trade Secretary, said that the Brexit trade negotiation “would be one of the easiest in human history.”

How did that work out?

We were told by various leave campaigners, including Michael Gove, that the UK would retain essentially frictionless trade access to the EU market while escaping EU rules, and that Brexit would produce a large fiscal dividend—we are still looking for that money behind the sofa. We were also promised that new trade deals would more than compensate for any loss of EU trade, but we have heard about the miniscule benefits of the trade deals we signed.

Some would say that we should not reopen old wounds or that the referendum was a once-in-a-generation event and disregarding its outcome undermines the legitimacy of the democratic process. But in this instance, I fundamentally disagree. When a referendum is decided on the back of half-truths, lies and downright deceit, we must be willing to look at the evidence again.

This is not just a matter of economics; it is about the kind of geopolitical world we now find ourselves in. Across the Atlantic, the United States no longer provides the political, economic, and strategic certainty that Britain has relied on since the end of the second world war. We are living in an age of unprecedented global instability. At the same time, transnational challenges such as frontier AI systems and climate change demand co-operation. In this brave new world, fragmentation is a weakness. Unity brings strength.

Europe's nations face the same challenges as us. We share the same democratic values, security interests and economic future. The question that faces us, then, is simple: will we be honest enough to say that Britain's long-term future lies inside the European family of nations? Britain would be stronger, safer and more prosperous inside the EU. The sooner we have that national conversation, the better.

5.55 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mrs Barker. In 2016, my constituency was among the most pro-remain voting constituencies in the country. The result of the referendum was devastating for the vast majority of my constituents, most of whom continue to feel exactly the same way a decade on. I hear from businesses in my constituency about the harm that they have suffered. Perhaps when it is not just one deli in one constituency, but every deli in every constituency, and every manufacturing company across the country, we need to listen to what small businesses are saying. I hear from parents of my generation who regret that their children find it so much harder to access the opportunities that we had to travel, make friends and build community across the English channel with our friends in Europe.

For 10 years, we have been acutely aware of the ways in which the Brexit referendum and its aftermath have continued to divide our country. We disagreed democratically, but did so quite narrowly and with profound consequences. Because of the depth of division caused by the Brexit referendum, many people felt that it was important not to do anything that might reopen the wounds. No one likes to be told that they were wrong, whichever way they voted in 2016. No one likes the person who says, “I told you so.”

But 10 years on, there is a growing number of electors who were too young to vote in 2016, alongside a growing number of people who voted to leave but can see that the vote did not allow the country to take back control and has in reality made trade with our European partners more difficult and held back our economic growth at a time when we needed the opposite. There is clear evidence of a shift in public opinion and of foreign interference in the referendum.

For many years, there has been a focus on what improvements and changes can be made to our relationships with our European partners without consideration of a more ambitious rethink or any suggestion of going back in. The time for that is over, and I am glad that our new Prime Minister recognises it. Brexit has been genuinely devastating for our country. It has harmed our economy. The promised money for the NHS has not materialised. The opportunities for our young people are diminished. It has deepened the divisions in our country on immigration, because the absence of agreements with our European neighbours has made it harder to tackle perilous channel crossings. At a time when we face the threat of Putin on Europe's edge in Ukraine and an increasingly erratic and unreliable ally in the US, it has also made us less secure.

Most people across our country want to see it prosper and thrive. They want to see our economy growing, opportunities for our young people and investment in our public services. They want to feel secure and to know that our Government can work in the most effective ways to keep them safe, and they want to be friends with their neighbours, local and international. Now is the time to put aside the awkwardness of having picked a side in 2016, forget what we felt was right or wrong in that debate and look objectively and clear-sightedly at what our country needs right now.

[Helen Hayes]

Our country needs to be able to co-operate with our European neighbours on trade and security. That is the way we can prosper. I support our Prime Minister in exploring every possible option for achieving that, including the potential for us to rejoin the European Union.

I also support our Prime Minister's agenda of increased devolution. It is important to consider these two things together. Devolution offers people the opportunity to have more agency and more control over the decisions that affect their lives at a local level, closer to where they live. That is the opposite of giving away power and control. We can only benefit from a stronger UK, bolstered by devolution, more confident in our local, regional and national identities, and fully engaged in building closer ties with our nearest neighbours and friends. I look forward to our Prime Minister setting out how it will be achieved in due course.

6 pm

Carla Denyer (Bristol Central) (Green): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mrs Barker. It was and remains a tragedy that we threw away the right to work, study, live and love in 27 countries. That is something felt deeply in my constituency, which a recent YouGov poll found demonstrates the strongest support in the country for rejoining the EU. Nationally, too, support for rejoining the EU is at an all-time high, with 61% of the country in favour—and no wonder, when all of us in the room today can think of and provide many examples of the economic disasters visited on our own communities as a result of Brexit.

It bears repeating that Brexit has led to a 4% long-run productivity loss and, as we recently learned, has cost upwards of £208 million to the creative sector, which we particularly treasure in Bristol. To give an example, the owner of a music venue in my constituency recently said to *The Guardian* that the consequences are still “being felt in cancelled tours, lost work...and fewer opportunities for audiences on both sides of the Channel.”

Add to that the millions of EU citizens living in the UK who are in limbo over their citizenship position, and all the opportunities that are lost because it is harder for UK citizens to travel, work and study in the EU.

In a multitude of ways, the UK has been left worse off after Brexit, as we have heard in speech after speech today. It is more vulnerable to food prices, less safe from harmful chemicals and lagging behind on air quality standards in the face of an air pollution scandal that is killing tens of thousands of people every year. What we have heard recently from the Prime Minister is a welcome start: Brexit has indeed

“done more harm than good”.

Now we need the Prime Minister to be unequivocal and clear, drop his party's red lines, and prioritise our future prosperity and wellbeing by working to rejoin in full.

There are forces that continue to try to create fear and division. We have now heard the PM confirm that there was Russian interference in the referendum, so we must have robust leadership from the Government on rejoining to build a better, more equal, outward-looking society. The Green party has been clear that we should rejoin the EU as soon as there is a settled majority in favour of doing so. We have long since met that threshold. We need to be back at Europe's decision-making table.

6.2 pm

Susan Murray (Mid Dunbartonshire) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Barker. I thank the petitioners for bringing forward the petition, and every single person in the UK who signed it.

Brexit was sold as a boost to growth. The Trade Secretary at the time told the public that a trade deal “should be one of the easiest in human history.”

What we got was no deal and an economic hit that saw productivity fall and trade shrink. Brexit was sold as taking back control of our borders, and voters were promised that migration would be reduced. Instead, it has hit record levels, and by leaving we lost the EU arrangements that let us send people who had arrived illegally back to the EU. The Government know what Europe is worth for both trade and security. Their response to the petition boasts of two deals, on food standards and carbon trading, which will add nearly £9 billion a year to the economy by 2040. They can see the potential, but their own red lines are holding them back.

We have all heard from businesses in our constituencies that are being strangled by red tape. They talk about the paperwork, the checks and the delays at the border. They know what the issue is and we know how to fix it, but look at what they are being offered. On one side, Reform and the Conservatives insist that Brexit is working. On the other, the Government can see the damage but have drawn red lines around a solution. Neither gets a single lorry through customs any faster, but a customs union would.

The Government will soon sit down with the EU at the second UK-EU summit in Brussels. They will talk about food standards, carbon trading and youth visas. The new Prime Minister appears to be looking seriously at resetting the UK-EU relationship and taking the first steps towards a new alliance with the EU. I therefore urge the Minister to listen to the petitioners, to businesses and to the British people, and remove the red lines that are holding back growth.

6.5 pm

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Barker. In the 2016 Brexit referendum, there were many who argued that our future must involve aligning with the USA—a stable and reliable partner that shared our values—and those who thought that the days of Russian aggression were over. Now we are in the world of Trump and war in Europe. The US is waging its own war that is hurting all our wallets, and Brexit has made the UK economy smaller.

The world in which we voted in 2016 has changed, and we must make decisions based on the world as it is. But even in 2016, we were promised that voting for Brexit would usher in an economic boom, open the funding floodgates for our NHS and other cash-strapped services, and put an end to immigration. The then Prime Minister hoped that the referendum would settle the issue of EU membership for a generation, yet here we are, 10 years on, still debating this very subject at the public's request. Let us look at the impact that Brexit has had on the country—and on constituencies such as my own, Esher and Walton—on its own terms, as it was sold to us.

On the economy, one recent publication argued that:

“We left the European Union without the economic plan that should have gone with it.”

That would have been a damning indictment coming from my side of the argument, but it came from the right hon. Member for North West Essex (Mrs Badenoch), the leader of the party that delivered Brexit. By ripping us out of the single market and customs union, the Conservatives blew an enormous hole in the UK economy, costing us roughly £90 billion in lost tax revenue in 2025 alone. That is money that could otherwise have been used to lower the tax burden on workers and fund our public services.

The Office for Budget Responsibility estimates that Brexit “will reduce long-run productivity by 4 per cent relative to remaining in the EU”, and that

“Both exports and imports will be around 15 per cent lower in the long run”.

Brexit has stifled investment and job creation. It is handicapping our economy and failing British businesses and workers. The funding windfall for our NHS and other public services has not materialised; we would have more money to fund our public services had we not embarked on this failed experiment.

On the question of immigration, which was so central to the Brexiters’ case for leaving the EU, after Brexit—and under a Government run by the very people who had pushed for Brexit—net migration reached a record level of nearly 1 million people in the year to June 2023. As we have heard, we also left the Dublin agreement.

Brexit has failed on its own terms. I know from the many conversations I have had over the last decade that many of my constituents, the majority of whom voted to remain, foresaw those problems and take no pleasure in being proved right. Brexit has failed on its own terms.

What is the case for the EU, then, as we stand here today? The challenges we face today are not confined to national borders, and our solutions must reflect that. I could point to our strength in numbers in tackling climate change, terrorism and people smugglers, or in regulating the risks from AI and taking on the tech giants. Cross-border problems need cross-border solutions and strength in numbers. The EU is far from perfect, but it represents an important ideal: it is worth working together to find common solutions that benefit all of us.

Secondly, there is the economic case. We recognise that, when it comes to economics, geography matters. The EU is our largest trading partner for a good reason. Trade deals with countries on the other side of the world cannot replace a market of millions of people right here on our doorstep.

Lastly, as the Prime Minister says, let us give the next generation real hope. The last decade has been a difficult one for young people, so let us give them back their ski seasons or their right to tour Europe. I have just come from the Chamber where the Prime Minister talked in positive terms about Europe. It is good, at last, to hear a Labour leader making the case for Europe. It has been a long decade.

6.9 pm

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): It is a pleasure, Mrs Barker, to serve under your chairship; I believe that it is for the first time, so it is a particular pleasure.

I thank the hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan) for so expertly opening this debate, and I thank the petitioners for bringing this issue to our collective attention today. It is wonderful to see so many of them here in the Public Gallery.

The petition asks whether Britain should seek to return to being a member of the European Union at the earliest opportunity. I am very proud to say that the Liberal Democrats have been clear about our long-term ambition. We believe that Britain’s future lies at the heart of Europe, helping to shape its institutions and decisions rather than watching from the sidelines. However, we must also be serious about how we get there.

Britain desperately needs growth to raise living standards, rebuild public services, support businesses and strengthen our defences. Can a family afford their weekly shop? Can a small business take on another employee? Can a manufacturer invest in a new production line? After years of weak growth, stagnant productivity and squeezed living standards, those questions demand serious answers and any serious answer must involve our having a better relationship with Europe.

Before entering Parliament, I spent more than 20 years researching and teaching geopolitics—studying borders, territorial disputes and international crises. If those years taught me one thing, it is that geography matters. Just 21 miles separate Britain from mainland Europe and no referendum can change that; our economies, history and security remain deeply connected. The European Union remains our largest trading partner, taking more than 40% of all British exports. Our factories depend on European supply chains, our farmers sell into European markets and our businesses compete for European customers. Yet for the past decade we have made trading with our largest market harder.

Brexit has happened and Brexit has failed. Those who campaigned to leave promised less red tape, but businesses got more; they promised new opportunities, but instead they erected barriers. Of course Brexit does not explain every weakness in our economy, and nor have our European neighbours escaped weak growth and productivity, but the question is not whether Britain has grown faster than France or Germany in any particular year; the question is how much stronger our economy could be today without the barriers that we have imposed upon ourselves.

Research published by the National Bureau of Economic Research estimates that Brexit had reduced Britain’s GDP by between 6% and 8% by the end of 2025, and business investment by as much as 13%.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: That is a projection.

Dr Pinkerton: Not for the first time today, the hon. Gentleman has intervened from a sedentary position, and he says that that figure is a projection.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: It is a fiction.

Dr Pinkerton: Well, it is not, because that information is based on two methodologies: first, a doppelganger economy; and secondly, 11,000 businesses reporting their direct experiences to the Bank of England. It is not a fiction.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: That reporting was from a self-selecting group of businesses. The doppelganger model included the United States, which is not a comparable economy to the United Kingdom. It also included eastern European states like Estonia that are growing very fast, which is not a sensible comparison. But in any case, those figures were just projections.

The facts show that we have grown faster than our two main competitors in the European Union and the hon. Gentleman cannot accept that. He thinks that our economy would have been between 4% and 8% bigger by 2025 than it would have been without Brexit, so we would have been growing even faster than we have grown—that is what he is saying—and very considerably faster than we did when we were in the European Union.

Dr Pinkerton: As ever, I am incredibly grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his interventions. He speaks with passion and with some alacrity.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: With frustration.

Paula Barker (in the Chair): Order. Is that an intervention again, Sir Bernard?

Sir Bernard Jenkin *indicated dissent.*

Paula Barker (in the Chair): I call Al Pinkerton to resume his speech.

Dr Pinkerton: Thank you, Mrs Barker.

As I say, those are the experiences of 11,000 businesses, which the hon. Gentleman would dismiss with ease—he should really reflect on that. The model that I think he is adopting here is that an athlete could win a race with weights tied around their ankles. He would credit those weights with boosting the athlete to the finish line, whereas we would all recognise that the athlete was perhaps a little bit slower than they might otherwise have been.

Ben Coleman: I must apologise, Mrs Barker, if we look as if we are having a debate just with the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex. However, does the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Dr Pinkerton) not find it strange how picky the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex is being in the facts that he chooses to employ? Last year, Poland grew by 3.75% and Spain by 2.8%; their growth outstripped ours. Of course there will always be some in the European Union who grow less quickly than we do and others who grow more. That is just the nature of things. It is not a fundamental basis on which to make an anti-European Union argument. Would the hon. Member for Surrey Heath not agree?

Dr Pinkerton: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I would think that representatives from the Conservative party would be particularly well informed about the historic teachings of Adam Smith, who 250 years ago, in 1776, recognised that economic growth comes when we increase the size of the market. That is precisely what the European Union so successfully does.

The figures that I announced just before the interventions are not fictitious, but they are extraordinary. They represent lost investment, lost productivity and billions lost in forgone tax revenues that could have supported the NHS, schools and our armed forces. For small exporters, Brexit means paperwork, delays and costs

that can determine whether an order is worth taking. For manufacturers, it means more expensive supply chains and greater uncertainty. For our economy, it means competing with one hand tied behind our back.

However, the consequences run far deeper than economics. A stronger economy can also mean a stronger and more united country. When living standards rise, when people have a sense of hope that they may be better off tomorrow than they are today and when opportunities expand and communities feel more secure, the politics of resentment and division, which so often characterises our modern political scene, has less fertile ground in which those sentiments can take root. Growth can help to starve Reform and other parties of that ilk of the oxygen of perma-grievance that they so desire and which they would have us long term committed to. Closer European integration offers a route towards resolving the awkward trading and constitutional compromises imposed on Northern Ireland by Brexit. A better relationship with Europe can strengthen the United Kingdom's cohesion and secure its future.

Let us consider British manufacturing. From Nissan in Sunderland to Jaguar Land Rover in Solihull, our automotive industry sustains skilled employment, innovation and entire communities. More than half of all British car exports go to the European Union, yet Patrick Minford, one of Brexit's most prominent economic advocates, argued that Brexit would require Britain to run down its car industry. We reject the suggestion that British manufacturing is expendable, but the risks are today growing. Europe's proposed "Made in Europe" measures could disadvantage British manufacturers, particularly in automotive production and steel. We can lobby, negotiate and ask for concessions, but we no longer have a vote; we are no longer in the club. The Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders highlighted the importance of predictable rules, integrated supply chains and access to export markets. If investment goes elsewhere, British workers pay the price. The same organisation has now said that the British car industry is facing an existential crisis if this cannot be resolved.

In addition, economic strength and national security are increasingly inseparable. Russia's war against Ukraine, China's growing economic coercion and President Trump's challenge to long-standing assumptions have changed the strategic landscape. The world has changed. Europe in 2026 faces profoundly different challenges from the ones that it faced in 2016. Our politics has to catch up. Our security depends on industrial capacity, resilient supply chains, technological innovation and trusted allies. A country that cannot sustain its industries will struggle to sustain its defences, and economic isolation makes strategic independence harder to achieve.

That is why the Liberal Democrats have proposed a growth and defence partnership with the European Union—a partnership bringing Britain back into the single market and establishing a bespoke UK-EU customs union, removing trade barriers, restoring confidence and unlocking investment. It would restore freedom of movement, renewing opportunities for British citizens to live, work and study across Europe, and it would deepen security co-operation through a defence pact underpinned by a European security council. We should deepen co-operation on defence, energy, critical technologies and supply chains, and Britain should seek access to the EU's SAFE programme, supporting our defence industries

and skilled jobs. That is the partnership demanded by the geopolitical realities of the 21st century. It would mean a more prosperous, resilient and secure Britain, and be the foundations of something much more ambitious.

We believe that Britain's long-term future lies within the European Union. We want Britain to shape Europe's future, contributing to its collective strength and prosperity. But that future depends on our European partners' consent, confidence in Britain's intentions and a willingness on both sides to make lasting commitments.

After the turbulence of the past decade, trust must be rebuilt. Therefore, our immediate priority is a growth and defence partnership that delivers economic benefits now while demonstrating that Britain is, once again, a serious, dependable European partner. Our destination is clear; a growth and defence partnership is how we get moving.

The Prime Minister has indicated a willingness to reconsider the Government's self-imposed red lines. I welcome that, but a willingness to reconsider will not revive British manufacturing, and tinkering at the edges of an inadequate trade arrangement will not transform our economic prospects. I urge the Minister to match that rhetoric with ambition: begin negotiations on a customs union, open the door to the single market and build the defence partnership that this changing world demands. The question facing Britain is no longer whether Brexit was a success; it is whether we have the political courage to confront its consequences.

Our neighbours will remain our neighbours and our prosperity and security will remain bound up with Europe's. We cannot change our geography, but we can change our politics. We can rebuild trust, remove barriers and restore Britain's place as a confident, influential European nation. We should begin now.

6.21 pm

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mrs Barker, and to respond on behalf of His Majesty's official Opposition. I warmly congratulate the petitioner and the people who added their names to the e-petition. In our parliamentary democracy, petitioning the Crown and Parliament is a cherished right, whether campaigning to save a beloved community hospital, to crack down on illegal fly-tipping or, as in this case, to casually ask the House of Commons to overturn the largest democratic vote in British history on a Monday afternoon. It is entirely right that those arguments are heard and debated in Parliament.

Listening to the contributions today from the Liberal Democrats, the Scottish National party and, indeed, some on the Government Benches, one might easily get the impression that rejoining the European Union is treated a bit like renewing an expired gym membership: we simply pop back down to reception, set up the direct debit and immediately pick up where we left off. Some hon. Members genuinely appear to believe that our European neighbours have spent the past decade sitting by the phone in the Berlaymont, tearfully gazing at an empty chair, desperate for the United Kingdom to saunter back in and instantly reclaim our rebate, opt-outs and front row seat at the summit table. I must gently break it to those hon. Members: Brussels does not accept refunds.

I may have disagreed with almost everything that the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Ms Creasy) said, but she was right that the process of rejoining the European Union would not be simple, short or straightforward. We have to be brutally honest about what applying to rejoin under article 49 actually involves in the cold light of day. The petitioners do not merely ask for warm words or polite co-operation; they ask this Parliament to formally trigger accession negotiations. That does not mean stepping into a time machine back to 2015; it means starting the accession process as a brand-new candidate country alongside countries such as Albania and North Macedonia. The European Commission has made the house rules for new joiners crystal clear. Under chapter 17 of the accession acquis, there is no bespoke menu where we can pick the bits we like and leave the rest.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): I am listening to the shadow Minister's speech with incredulity and watching the faces of the wonderful people in the Gallery who have come but are not able to speak. I wonder whether he has actually had those discussions. I think we are the only country to have ever left, and there have been significant comments from Ursula von der Leyen and others that we are not going to be treated exactly the same. Unless the shadow Minister has actually had those meetings, it would be very unwise to say that is fact.

Mike Wood: Yes I have, as a member of the Parliamentary Partnership Assembly and as someone who spent seven very happy years working in the European Parliament and still has many friends who work there and in the institutions. There is no question of there being a speed line route back to full membership reserved for the United Kingdom; we would have to go through the full accession process. Joining means a binding treaty obligation to scrap pound sterling and adopt the euro, and to abolish our national border controls and join the Schengen area.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): Could the shadow Minister clarify what he said to my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Vikki Slade)? Is he saying that he has exclusive access to the terms on which we would be allowed to re-enter the EU? That is what he appears to be saying.

Mike Wood: The question was whether I had had the conversations, and I certainly have had them with MEPs and people in the European institutions. We can see what anyone who reads the publicly available opinion polls can see: if asked, "Would you be in favour of the United Kingdom rejoining the European Union?", a majority in France and Germany may say that they would support it, but if asked, "Would you support the United Kingdom joining the European Union with the opt-outs that it previously enjoyed?", support goes from about 50% to just over 30%. It is not politically viable in those countries.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the polls. When people are asked about whether particular areas of policy in the United Kingdom should be controlled by the EU, the result is always a negative. Farming, trade policy or financial services—whatever the question, it is a negative. When it comes to

[Sir Bernard Jenkin]

the money, if we rejoined, we would probably have to join without any of the rebates that Margaret Thatcher negotiated, so our gross contribution would be something like £30 billion a year—about 0.5% of GDP. The British people would never vote to rejoin the European Union if they thought they would have to prop up the EU budget and subsidise other EU countries.

Mike Wood: My hon. Friend is right. The same polls that show that citizens in France and Germany would support British membership only if it came without those previous opt-outs show that, among British voters, support for rejoining collapses if we do not have those previous opt-outs. If those previous opt-outs and derogations are removed, support again dips to barely 30%.

I wonder how many of the people who signed this petition did so in the eager anticipation of trading His Majesty the King on our banknotes for a fistful of euro cents. Did they sign up to surrender our borders or did they imagine that, if we asked very politely, the European Union would grant us all the privileges of membership while demanding none of the obligations? As the independent economist Julian Jessop recently pointed out, public enthusiasm for rejoining has a funny habit of evaporating the precise moment that voters are confronted with the small print. That is why I am confident that, if the Government were to take up the petitioners' proposal, and if they had the courage to put that question to the British people, it would be comprehensively rejected.

Dr Arthur: Will the hon. Member give way?

Mike Wood: I have given way three times. I will for a fourth, but this may be the last.

Dr Arthur: Some of the hon. Gentleman's constituents will have signed this petition. Just to be clear, is he doubting the intelligence and commitment of the people who signed it? He seems to be saying that they have not done their homework.

Mike Wood: No, not at all. I am not somebody who questions people's motives or intelligence just because of the way they have approached the question of Europe; I very much leave that to others. I will say that approaching 70% of my constituents voted to leave in 2016, and if there was a referendum on rejoining, I would expect a larger proportion than that to vote no.

When people realise that an accession bid means ditching our currency, tearing down our independent border controls and signing an annual membership cheque that independent analysts estimate would comfortably clear £25 billion a year, the rosy glow fades fast. We would be asking British taxpayers already feeling the squeeze from this Government's domestic tax hikes to subsidise regional infrastructure funds across the continent while our own local roads are crying out for repair.

Ms Creasy: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mike Wood: I will continue for a bit. I have given way four times; I think I have been more than generous.

Ms Creasy: You quoted me!

Mike Wood: I quoted you an awfully long time ago on something fairly sympathetic, I think. [Interruption.]

Paula Barker (in the Chair): Order. If the hon. Gentleman does not wish to give way, then the hon. Gentleman does not wish to give way.

Mike Wood: Is that parliamentary language, Mrs Barker? I do not know how long it takes for the cogs to turn, but it has been a while.

What sort of economic club are the petitioners urging us to re-enter? Thirty years ago, the European Union accounted for more than a quarter of the global economy; today, that share has fallen to around 18%; within a generation, it is projected to drop below 10%. Applying to rejoin would mean surrendering our independent seat at the global top table. It would also mean being legally forced to tear up our membership of the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership dynamic trading pact—

Ms Creasy: On that point, will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mike Wood: Go on—just this once.

Ms Creasy: I am pleased to hear the hon. Gentleman talk about the CPTPP, because that is the first time he has designed to defend anything that has happened since we took this country out of the European Union, and I notice he has not defended the status quo. The Conservative Government's own impact assessment found that the CPTPP added 0.08% to GDP. That is 50 times smaller than the impact of Brexit. What does he want to say to the 20,000 businesses that have given up trading with Europe altogether because of the Brexit that his Government negotiated? Does he really think that the CPTPP makes up for that?

Mike Wood: I think that having control of an independent trade policy where we can get those deals in the interests of the British economy—whether the CPTPP or the trade agreements with India or the Gulf Co-operation Council—is an advantage of being outside the customs union and having taken back that control. Tying ourselves to an economic bloc that is fast declining as a proportion of world trade and locking ourselves back behind the common tariff walls of the most sluggish economic continent on earth would come with a cost. Why on earth would a proud global maritime trading nation choose to jump off the international express train just to squeeze on to a continental stopping service that is running at least 40 minutes late? [Interruption.]

Paula Barker (in the Chair): Order. I want to hear the Opposition spokesperson.

Mike Wood: We are constantly told by the doom-mongers that Brexit is somehow the sole author of our national economic woes, but the empirical evidence tells a vastly different story. Recent analysis by the Centre for Policy Studies shows that, while the initial realignment did involve transition friction, our private sector has shown remarkable dynamism, with productivity increasing by roughly 30% over the past decade. The real drag anchoring

British growth is inside our own state apparatus. Public sector productivity has flatlined, an affliction that is manufactured right here in Westminster and Whitehall that has nothing at all to do with whether we sit within the European Union.

While the petitioners are at least refreshingly transparent about wanting full membership, the Government's approach seems to depend on the audience. Ministers stand at the Dispatch Box with hands on hearts repeating their mantra that they respect the referendum, but that is not the message that we have heard from Labour Back Benchers today. Ministers promise us that there will be no membership of the single market and no freedom of movement, yet watch what they actually do. They tiptoe around European capitals, hoping that if they quietly sign us up to dynamic alignment across agriculture, energy and carbon standards, nobody on the street will notice that they have signed away our national autonomy. That is not a coherent foreign policy. It is surrender on an instalment plan.

Alongside the burdens and restrictions, being a full member of the EU did give us a vote, a voice and a veto. Being an independent sovereign state gives speed, regulatory agility and democratic accountability. But the Government's strategy delivers the worst of all worlds: total regulatory submission with none of the say. It flips William Hague's famous slogan; it is to be not in Europe but still run by Europe. It is the political equivalent of paying full price for an all-inclusive hotel and choosing to sleep on a bench in the car park.

Ben Coleman: Will the hon. Member give way?

Mike Wood: No, I am finishing.

The British people did not vote in 2016 for half measures, or to put their democracy into reverse gear. The fundamental principle at stake was entirely straightforward: the laws governing the people of this country should be made and unmade by representatives who the British public can elect—and, crucially, fire—at the ballot box. The duty of this House is not to resurrect the bitter constitutional gridlock of the past, or to indulge the fantasy of a cost-free return to Brussels. Our duty is to use our hard-won independence to cut unnecessary bureaucracy, to back British innovation and to trade freely with all corners of the globe. His Majesty's official Opposition will not support the petition and will fiercely resist any attempt to pull this country back into the European Union, whether through the front door or the back.

6.36 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Mark Ferguson): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship for the first time, Mrs Barker. You have certainly caught yourself a lively one early on a Monday evening. I thank my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan) for moving the motion on behalf of the signatories of the e-petition relating to the UK applying to rejoin the EU.

Some 10 years ago, the people of the UK voted to leave the EU. That decision was made on the promise that leaving the EU would boost UK growth and reduce immigration. During this debate the clock appeared to turn backwards. That was probably a bit of a heavy

metaphor even for this place, but we have had a lot of legacy language. We have had lies and truth, rancour and dispute over facts. Everyone has brought their own version of the polls. We have had surrender, small print and even the odd straw man.

At one point, the hon. Member for East Wiltshire (Danny Kruger) said that we were not having a debate, but exchanging our speeches. If I am honest, that took me back to the way this debate has been conducted for much of the last decade. When my hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (Perran Moon) described Opposition Members I was worried we had strayed into the realm of unparliamentary language, but I am glad to hear that he in fact said "Cnuts". It is important always to enunciate that word as my hon. Friend did.

In all seriousness, this debate was called because the British people know that the current arrangements with the EU are not working. Brexit has not given us control. We have lost some of the control we had over our economy. Last year, goods trade with the EU was down 7% on 2018. The hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) said that such trade is 6% of UK GDP. It is 5.96%, so we will allow that 0.04%, but the use of the figure 6% belies its size. According to the ONS, that is £181.4 billion of goods; if we include services, it is £384.4 billion. As the saying goes, if you start adding up the hundreds of billions of pounds, you start talking about real money pretty quickly. The research suggests that more than 16,000 UK exporters stopped exporting to the EU as a result of Brexit.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: On the 6% share of GDP in exports of goods to the EU, what the Government are recommending is that we let the tail wag the dog. For the sake of trying to expand that share of our economic activity, which actually declined while we were in the single market, we are going to regulate the other 94% of the British economy that does not export goods to the EU. Does the Minister not get the point? We expanded our trade with the rest of the world by 85%—that was in the figures I gave earlier—without any free trade deals, or any agreements to abolish tariff barriers or to stop paying tariffs. In share of GDP, the rest of the world is growing and the single market is shrinking. Why are we shackling ourselves to a regulatory regime that crushes innovation and crushes economic growth when the world is our oyster outside the EU? Yes, we have failed to exploit those opportunities, but that is what the Government should be doing and that is what the next Conservative Government will do.

Mark Ferguson: I thank the hon. Member for his optimism about the next Conservative Government. To be serious—and we must be, because this is a serious issue—research suggests that 16,000 UK exporters stopped exporting to the EU as a result of Brexit. That represents businesses in every single one of the constituencies represented in this room today, and across the whole House. Those trading with Europe are paying for the privilege. Since 2023, British businesses have had to obtain over 1 million multi-page export health certificates to trade with the EU and Northern Ireland, at a cost of anywhere between £90 million and £210 million. When it comes to security, opportunities to work more closely together were lost.

[Mark Ferguson]

This Government are choosing to take another path. The previous Administration made significant progress in strengthening relations with the EU, announcing a new common understanding at the first ever UK-EU summit in May last year. At the summit, the UK secured a new security and defence partnership agreement with the EU—a partnership that represents our joint commitment to the important issue of European security, which has been mentioned many times today. That is built on the long-standing commitment by the UK to support Ukraine, which is shared, I think, by all those in this House today and complements our cross-continent work to protect our NATO allies.

That co-operation has been further strengthened by the recent agreement for the UK to join the EU's Ukraine support loan initiative, which will bolster Ukraine's defence while creating new opportunities for British defence firms, jobs and investment. The UK and the EU also agreed to work towards a sanitary and phytosanitary deal—what a tongue-twister that is! It is nearly as difficult as CPTPP, which I have managed to get out in one go.

Pete Wishart: This debate is about applying to rejoin the European Union. There was nothing about that in the Prime Minister's statement this afternoon. I am confused about the Government's position. Is it an ambition and an aspiration? Is it an option to rejoin the European Union? If it is an option, how will it be considered? And if it is considered positively, how do we rejoin?

Mark Ferguson: The hon. Gentleman does me an honour if he imagines I will go beyond what the Prime Minister said this afternoon. I refer him to what the Prime Minister said, but—[*Interruption.*] I am coming to the point made by the hon. Member and others.

The sanitary and phytosanitary deal will make food and agriculture trade with the EU cheaper and easier, something that I hope we would all welcome. That agreement, combined with the emissions trading systems linking measures, is set to add £9 billion a year to the UK economy by 2040, in a significant boost to growth.

Finally, the UK and EU committed to working towards UK association to Erasmus+, which was asked about earlier, with a deal being struck on association less than a year later, opening up world-class opportunities for learners, educators, young people and communities from 2027. We are committed to building that process. As the Prime Minister announced earlier today, we will hold the next UK-EU summit on 20 November, when we want to strike important deals that will boost our economy, cut red tape, help our businesses grow and provide opportunities to young people denied since Brexit. These are important, concrete steps.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): In the Chamber earlier today the Prime Minister committed to me that he is in favour of a visa waiver when it comes to touring artists who want to go into Europe. Will the Minister reiterate that and also look into the issue of cabotage—the internal movement of goods and people by a carrier registered in a different country? Will he put that on the agenda for discussion at the summit on 20 November?

Mark Ferguson: I will come on to touring musicians. If my hon. Friend wishes to write to me on the second matter, I would appreciate that.

What is planned is the floor, not the ceiling, of our ambition. We must go further to restore a higher level of growth and prosperity for Britain. As the Prime Minister recently announced, he will lay out options for Britain's long-term relationship with our European partners around the summit in November and find consensus on what is best for Britain. The views of Members of this House will be crucial as part of that process.

The youth experience scheme was mentioned by my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe, who I commend for the way in which he introduced the debate today. At the last summit the UK agreed to work towards a balanced youth experience scheme, with the UK creating new opportunities for cultural exchange between the UK and the EU. That will give young people the opportunity to broaden their horizons through travelling, experiencing other cultures and learning languages, as well as working and studying abroad, as it did for me when I briefly lived in France—although the less said about my French ability, the better.

A question was raised about Chinese EVs. Europe and the UK face many of the same challenges, which is why it is vital to protect trade between us. On haulage, all UK nationals are bound by the 90/180-day Schengen area rule. The Government will of course continue to listen to the sectors impacted and advocate for UK nationals. I particularly enjoyed the well-made point from my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Tulip Siddiq) about the price of tulips—an impressive way of referring to her name in the Chamber. There are clear economic benefits of upcoming EU-UK deals that may bear some benefit there.

I also enjoyed the reference by my hon. Friend the Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Ben Coleman) to his nephew Freddy. This Government are committed to exploring how best to improve arrangements for touring artists across the EU and EU member states. However, challenges remain, as touring artists need to navigate visa requirements across EU member states and hauliers that transport equipment face stricter limitations on their type of movement within the EU. I also commend the hon. Member for Bristol Central (Carla Denyer); it is good to see her back in her place speaking up on behalf of her constituents. She referred to music venues in her constituency that are affected.

The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Pippa Heylings) asked about Erasmus. The UK will associate to Erasmus+ from January 1 and contribute around £570 million to the programme, which is down from the approximately £810 million that we would have paid under devolved terms. Reference was also made to the “Made in Europe” initiative, and we are listening to industry and actively engaging EU partners on it. We face the same global challenges, and we are clear that we should work together to bolster UK-EU supply chains and growth, rather than putting up barriers to trade in Europe.

On a future relationship, the Prime Minister will say more about the path ahead for the UK and the EU around the summit, as I have said. He has been open about the fact that there are a range of options, and he intends to establish consensus around which option is

best for Britain. He is clear that Brexit has damaged our economy and that, as we face a more dangerous world, we need a closer, stronger relationship with the EU. It is right to open up that discussion because, a decade on from Brexit, the country is not where it could be. In 2016, the people of Britain voted for change and full control, but Brexit has done more harm than good. As the PM said,

“Sticking with the status quo is not good enough for Britain.”

We must ensure that our relationship with the EU is fit for the challenges we face now and in the future.

Rachael Maskell: In my speech, I mentioned ensuring that we have a proper deliberative process so that everyone in our communities can be engaged in shaping the future of Europe, to ensure that the people can co-create it with Government. Will the Minister support such a methodology?

Mark Ferguson: My hon. Friend makes a compelling point. I will not commit to anything of that nature today, but I urge her to continue making the argument for that, as I am sure she will.

Ms Creasy *rose—*

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab) *rose—*

Mark Ferguson: I am incredibly close to bringing this debate to an end, but I will give way.

Ms Creasy: Perhaps we can find a point of consensus in this debate in that one of the things lacking in Parliament over the last couple of years is a European Scrutiny Committee where all of us as parliamentarians could be a part of the debate about what the future with Europe might be. Perhaps the Minister will take the merits of such a proposal back to his colleagues in the Cabinet Office, given the nature of the debate today and the concerns about facts. [Hon. Members: “Hear, hear.”]

Mark Ferguson: It is always worth taking something seriously when such divergent Members of this place agree. I am sure that that will be recorded in *Hansard* and was heard by those of us in the Cabinet Office.

Peter Swallow: Will the Minister give way?

Mark Ferguson: As has been pointed out, I have 42 minutes, so why not take one more intervention?

Peter Swallow: It is only because I rose at the same time as my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Ms Creasy). The points we are coming to at the end of this debate show that, as the Prime Minister has recognised, although debates in this place may have fallen away, there has never been a settled opinion in the country on the path forward following Brexit. It has remained a conversation among our constituents, on the doorstep and around the dinner table, and that is what this petition demonstrates. I ask the Minister to reflect in the final part of his speech on the fact that this is not about us reopening a debate, but us in this place catching up to the conversations that have never gone away in the country. It is really important to acknowledge that.

Mark Ferguson: I think it is clear to anyone who has listened to the debate over the last couple of hours that there is no lack of debate in this place or, in fact, anywhere else, on this important matter. That is why we are rightly looking at options for the future relationship to strengthen the country's prosperity and security.

Vikki Slade *rose—*

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD) *rose—*

Mark Ferguson: This is my final sentence: Europe is our neighbourhood—

Vikki Slade: The Minister has 40-odd minutes.

Mark Ferguson: I do, but I only have one sentence left, so I will give way.

Vikki Slade: I am very grateful to the Minister for giving way. This struck me earlier when the Prime Minister talked about the importance of the British public being the boss throughout this. The Minister has been clear about all the available options, but if the British public are to have their say, which presumably would require a general election, referendum or something similar, is there not a risk that we end up pushing all of this into the long grass again when we know that the longer it takes, the worse the situation becomes? Is there any opportunity for short-term changes that can move this closer?

Mark Ferguson: The hon. Lady invites me to speculate; I think that the Prime Minister was quite clear this afternoon.

I will finish by referring to something that the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Dr Pinkerton), said, which is that Europe is our neighbourhood. As he said, geography matters: the EU is our closest partner and largest market—there are only 21 miles between France and England, and we share land borders as well. A stronger, deeper relationship is in Britain's best interests.

6.51 pm

Tony Vaughan: I thank all hon. Members for turning up today and speaking in this debate. It is interesting that we have had one Conservative MP, the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin), a Reform MP—the hon. Member for East Wiltshire (Danny Kruger) is almost out the door, but I am going to acknowledge him all the same; he has left his colleague the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) in his place—and the shadow Minister speak up to defend the status quo. Their defence of the current Brexit rules referred to evidence that, I think it is fair to say, was selectively referenced and in denial of where the weight of the evidence is.

I will start with the remarks of the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex, who challenged the idea that Brexit has damaged our economy and referred to the fact that the GDP of other countries is lower than ours. But that is not the point: the comparison is with the situation that we would have had if we had not left the European Union. That point was made earlier. The National Bureau of Economic Research has found that

[Tony Vaughan]

our GDP was 6% to 8% lower by the end of 2025 than it would have been if we had not left the EU. It also found that investment in the UK was 12% to 13% lower, employment was 3% to 4% lower and productivity was 3% to 4% lower; the OBR agrees.

The hon. Member also minimised the significance of individual examples given by numerous hon. Members in this room about Brexit-related red tape and British exporters. But the evidence is clear: our trade volumes are billions less than before Brexit. For example, a study by the LSE found that in 2022, there was £27 billion less in goods exports, which is a 6% reduction compared with the no-Brexit counterfactual, and 14% of firms stopped exporting to the EU altogether after post-Brexit trading arrangements came into force. That research found that smaller firms were particularly affected by those arrangements, whereas larger firms were able to absorb the additional costs. That is what hon. Members are seeing all over the country.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tony Vaughan: I fear that the hon. Member's points have not moved with the evidence, but I will give him a chance to respond.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: The logic of the Government's position is that because Canada sends 75% of its exports to the United States of America, they had better join the United States and give up their sovereignty in order to get rid of barriers to trade. The idea that Canada will become an associate member of the EU and that the EU is going to be able to get a grip of Canada seems rather fanciful, but can the hon. Gentleman explain why the Carney logic about the UK being in the single market does not apply to his own country?

Tony Vaughan: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention but as far as I can see, none of what he said is relevant to the question of whether any of his points are well founded. The evidence is as I have read out. He needs to engage with the weight of the evidence, not the selective examples that those who oppose a closer relationship with Europe ultimately rely on.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tony Vaughan: I will not. The hon. Member for East Wiltshire, who is not here any more, at least accepted that our exports have been hit by Brexit, but his point was different. He said that where we have used our Brexit freedoms, we are better off. He seemed to be saying that where we do not have alignment, we are doing better. I am afraid that is not correct. UK firms that have to comply with multiple regulatory regimes will obviously incur greater costs to be able to trade with multiple markets. I have heard consistently from businesses that, as all hon. Members have said today, it is where we have no alignment that there have been disastrous consequences for businesses. The 90/180 rule the Minister referred to as being a fixity for now, which was negotiated by the Opposition, is just one example of those problems. Even if there were some benefits from regulatory divergence, they pale in comparison to the damage done to our economy by Brexit, so the thesis of the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex is wholly unsupported by the weight of the evidence.

The hon. Member also doubted whether the asylum returns agreement we had with the EU was ever used. The fact is that we sent back more people than we took under that agreement until 2016, the year of the Brexit vote, so it was a useful tool for addressing irregular migration. In any event, its absence was relied on and manipulated by smugglers to drum up business. The consequence of that was the boat numbers going up.

I accept that this debate will not end today. It has been a lively debate. I thank the Minister for his remarks and clarifications. I thank the petitioner, Mr McMaster, for creating this opportunity for Parliament to debate this important issue. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Peter Swallow) said, these are conversations that have never gone away. They are constantly brought back to me in my constituency work, as they are for other hon. Members. I hope that, as the Prime Minister said, these conversations will lead to progress on a matter that is at the heart of how to build a prosperous nation for the future.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 749128 relating to the UK applying to rejoin the EU.

6.57 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 12 October 2026

CABINET OFFICE

Artificial Intelligence Policy

The Minister for Artificial Intelligence (Kanishka Narayan): I am today updating the House on the action the Government are taking to strengthen the UK's resilience against the risks posed by increasingly powerful artificial intelligence.

Artificial intelligence is becoming increasingly capable and autonomous, creating new risks for individuals, businesses and national security. Deepfakes are being used to defraud people out of their money; modification tools are being used to humiliate and blackmail them; and AI-enabled cyber-attacks threaten our businesses and public institutions.

As I set out to the House on 7 September, frontier AI agents are increasingly able to act on their own. As these systems become more powerful, we must also prepare for the possibility of serious incidents in which they behave unexpectedly or act beyond their instructions.

The Government's first responsibility is to protect the British public. That requires the independent expertise to understand the risks posed by advanced AI, the capabilities to strengthen our defences and the ability to respond effectively when things go wrong. We cannot rely solely on the companies developing these technologies to assess and manage the risks they may pose.

I am therefore setting out further action to strengthen Government cyber-defences using frontier AI, establish a specialist capability to respond to major incidents involving agentic AI, and consider how the Cyber Security and Resilience (Network and Information Systems) Bill can better protect essential services against emerging threats.

As artificial intelligence becomes more capable, Britain must become more capable of protecting its people.

Independent testing of advanced AI

Britain is home to the world's leading AI Security Institute, bringing together more than 100 technical specialists to independently test the capabilities and risks of the most advanced AI systems.

Its work has established the UK as a world leader in AI security and demonstrated why independent scrutiny matters. As these systems become more powerful, it is essential that Government retain the expertise to understand their risks for itself, rather than relying solely on the companies developing them.

So, over the last few weeks, we have been working closely with the labs and the US Government—from His Majesty's gathering of leading AI developers at Dumfries House in Scotland to discussions at the United Nations General Assembly in New York—to retain access for Britain's AI Security Institute to the most powerful AI models before they are released. I can confirm that AISI scientists are now conducting rigorous

evaluations of the latest generation of models, including Gemini 4 Argon, to identify risks early, test safeguards and help keep people safe.

Frontier AI hardening across Government

Over the past months, experts in the Government Cyber Unit have been working across the public sector to test the use of frontier AI on real-world Government cyber-security problems. Two pilot programmes have used AI to find and address 1,352 vulnerabilities across 548 code repositories in 18 participating departments, alongside helping organisations detect advanced cyber-threats. I can today announce an urgent extension of our frontier AI hardening programme, putting the most advanced AI technology to work strengthening defences across Government and making our vital public services harder to attack. We will continue to work with Government Departments to address weaknesses in the highest risk systems. This marks an important step towards a broader UK Government capability for use of AI to support cyber-defence and resilience.

Agentic AI incident response

As AI agents are used more widely and with less human oversight, the risk of serious incidents in which they act beyond their instructions is growing. When such incidents occur, Government must be able to establish quickly what has gone wrong, contain the risks and support those affected. I can confirm today that the Government are taking the first steps to meet this challenge. Working with the National Cyber Security Centre, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and the AI Security Institute, we are developing our plans for how Government should respond when AI agents cause serious harm, and we will build on this work in the weeks and months ahead.

Cyber Security and Resilience (Network and Information Systems) Bill

The Cyber Security and Resilience (Network and Information Systems) Bill currently making its way through the House of Lords will do a great deal to protect our essential services, such as in health, energy and drinking water. Given how fast AI capabilities are advancing, we are considering how the regime can be strengthened so that AI cyber and loss of control risks are better understood and protected against—for instance, how near misses can be identified and reported, how AI-driven risk across organisations is reduced, and how AI incidents can be properly understood, so lessons are shared and future harm prevented. We will consider proposals with parliamentarians, as well as technical experts and the operators who would need to deliver them, and continue to update Parliament during the passage of the Bill.

Verification

As AI systems become more capable, effective risk mitigation may increasingly depend on whether important claims about their development and operation can be independently verified. The UK has a rich history of hardware innovation, and I can confirm today that we will explore how that British expertise can help strengthen this central challenge in AI security.

The Prime Minister's AI Taskforce

These are just the first steps on a longer journey Britain needs to take to seize AI's potential as a driver for good growth and better public services, while at the

same time being resilient to its potential risks. That wider scheme of work is being spearheaded by the AI taskforce, reporting directly to the Prime Minister and chaired by Lord Vallance.

A shared responsibility

Government cannot do this alone. AI is increasing the speed, scale and efficiency of attacks, and every business has a responsibility to stay secure against them. The damage to brands, reputations and revenues means cyber-security must be a matter for every boardroom in Britain.

The Security Minister will be outlining this Government's approach to cyber-security for the age of AI in the upcoming national cyber action plan, with a national call to action for all organisations and businesses on this shared responsibility.

AI will be as consequential as the steam engine or internet. It could be more consequential than those technologies. It can help those who seek to do us harm, but it can also help keep us safe. This Government are determined that the UK stays at the forefront of AI innovation, so that we can seize the opportunities it brings and protect the public from its risks. I will keep the House updated.

[HCWS357]

Procurement Reform: UK Jobs and Opportunities

The First Secretary of State (Louise Haigh): I wish to inform the House of a number of public procurement measures announced over the conference recess. These build directly upon our commitments to use public procurement as a strategic lever to back British industry, reindustrialise Britain, and ensure communities across the country benefit from growth and good jobs.

Central insourcing unit

To support our manifesto commitment to deliver the biggest wave of insourcing in a generation, the Office for the Prime Minister and Cabinet is establishing a dedicated central insourcing unit. This unit will serve as a centre of excellence co-ordinating departmental insourcing activity, unblocking practical delivery barriers, and identifying cross-Government opportunities to improve public services, restore direct operational accountability and deliver value for money. The unit will consider insourcing critical service contracts, complementing the recently announced public interest test which applies to most central Government service contracts valued above £1 million. It will work with Departments to halve consultancy spending and save over £700 million annually by 2028-29.

To support this whole-of-Government approach, Departments will also publish insourcing strategies, exploring how to deliver in-house capability and rebuild state capacity.

Cross-Government ship procurement and the National Shipbuilding Office

To streamline vessel procurement and support sovereign UK shipbuilding capabilities, responsibility for cross-Government ship procurement and maintenance will be centralised under the National Shipbuilding Office based in the Ministry of Defence.

The NSO will exercise oversight across civil vessel acquisitions, providing a strategic centre to support the UK shipbuilding industry through a clearer and more predictable pipeline of demand, and enabling a simpler route for ship procurement, including working with our European allies to do so. Full details and timelines will be formally published in the upcoming shipbuilding and marine technology action plan later this autumn.

In addition, the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science, an executive agency of DEFRA, intends to procure a "future delivery at sea" marine research vessel to replace the RV Cefas Endeavour. DEFRA is applying the national security exemption in the Procurement Act 2023 to restrict the contract exclusively to UK shipyards to help sustain sovereign UK shipbuilding capability, which the Government have identified as critical to national security.

Backing British jobs and skills through procurement by private utilities

Private utility companies operating with special or exclusive rights—such as electricity, gas, water, and transport networks—benefit from essential monopolies and operate in sectors critical to daily lives. The Government are clear that these organisations, which together procure billions of pounds-worth of goods and services, must use their substantial purchasing power to support good British jobs and skills opportunities in manufacturing. We expect these private utilities to follow the Government's lead and apply social value criteria in their procurements, and the Government are engaging with them over the coming period on how they will achieve this.

Together, these reforms will ensure public spending actively backs British industry, strengthens supply chains, creates good jobs and opportunities and supports growth in every postcode.

[HCWS356]

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Telecommunications Services: Continuity of Supply

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Lisa Nandy): On Monday 5 October 2026, BT Group PLC announced it had acquired TalkTalk Telecom Group out of administration in a rescue deal. As has been widely reported, TalkTalk had been seeking a buyer for its consumer and wholesale businesses following a period of financial difficulty. After an extensive open commercial bidding process there was no agreement on the sale of both these businesses.

My officials closely monitored this process, given that disconnections of TalkTalk's customers would create risks to life and the continuity of the supply of telecommunications. The network supports critical infrastructure and services that people and public bodies rely on every day—including calls to emergency services, ambulance and hospital communications and medical alarms. A sudden disruption would also impact businesses across the country that depend on reliable telecoms networks.

Following BT's announcement and in light of the unprecedented circumstances, I intervened using my powers under the Enterprise Act 2002 and have issued a public interest intervention notice as I have reasonable

grounds to suspect that there is a relevant merger situation and that there are public interest considerations under the Act, or that ought to be specified in the Act, which are or may be relevant.

The PIIN specifies:

An existing public interest consideration specified under section 58(2E) of the Act, namely the need to maintain in the United Kingdom the capability to combat, and to mitigate the effects of, public health emergencies; and

A new public interest consideration, which I will specify under section 58 of the Act, namely the need to maintain in the United Kingdom the continuity of the supply of telecommunications services for the purposes of preventing disruption to the economy and society of the United Kingdom, including disruption to:

- public services
- critical national infrastructure
- supply to customers who are or may be vulnerable.

At the earliest possible opportunity, I will lay an order which specifies this new public interest consideration. The order will need to be approved by both Houses of Parliament.

My Department has written to the Competition and Markets Authority and to the relevant parties to set this out. The PIIN and the letters are available on gov.uk.

The PIIN requires the CMA to deliver its report by 5 pm on 19 October 2026. I will then decide whether or not to refer the merger back to the CMA for detailed investigation of the competition and/or public interest issues.

I will update Parliament on any further developments.
[HCWS358]

National Museums: Free Entry

The Minister for Creative Industries, Media and Online Safety (Ian Murray): I am repeating the following written ministerial statement made today in the other place by my noble Friend, the Minister for Arts and Museums, Baroness Mackenzie of Sherwood CBE:

Museums and galleries tell the story of who we are as a country and foster pride in the places we come from. They educate, inspire and entertain people and drive growth in our towns and cities. This Government are committed to ensuring that everyone, no matter their background or geographic location, can enjoy our national and regional museums.

DCMS has worked with the museums sector to explore options for charging overseas visitors admission to the national museums, to support financial resilience and underpin our commitment to ensuring art and culture is accessible to all. A full list of national museum sites with free admission can be seen in annex A.

I wish to update the House on this work.

First, I would like to thank everyone involved in this work for giving their expertise and time.

To introduce charging for overseas visitors would be a complex decision with far-reaching implications. The national museums are among our most treasured national assets, and visitors from all over the world cite our museums and galleries as a reason for their visit. National museums also add more than £1 billion a year to the economy. Seven of the UK's 10 most visited museums are national museums. In 2025, 7.1 million people visited the Natural History Museum and 6.4 million visited the British Museum.

There is a long-standing principle of universal free admission to our world-class museums, which sets us apart from other countries around the world. No matter who you are, or where you are from, you can come to learn and be entertained and inspired.

We will not be pursuing a change in policy to universal free entry, but our findings more broadly will help inform the upcoming museums plan. As the Government confirmed earlier this year, a 10-year plan for museums in England will support a thriving and sustainable sector that supports growth in every postcode and opportunity for all. This work will be led by the museums sector and will cover museums across the country, including the DCMS sponsored museums. Further details will be announced later this autumn.

Annex A: National Museum Sites with Free Admission

British Museum—London
Horniman Museum—London
Imperial War Museum
Imperial War Museum (London)
Imperial War Museum North (Manchester)
Museum of the Home—London
National Gallery—London
National Museums Liverpool
World Museum
Museum of Liverpool
Walker Art Gallery
International Slavery Museum and Maritime Museum
Lady Lever Art Gallery
Sudley House
National Portrait Gallery—London
Natural History Museum
Natural History Museum (London)
Natural History Museum at Tring
Royal Armouries
Royal Armouries Leeds
Fort Nelson (Portsmouth)
Royal Museums Greenwich
National Maritime Museum (London)
Queen's House (London)
Sir John Soane's Museum—London
Science Museum Group
Science Museum (London)
Science and Industry Museum (Manchester)
National Science and Media Museum (Bradford)
National Railway Museum (York)
Locomotion (Shildon)
Tate
Tate Britain (London)
Tate Modern (London)
Tate Liverpool
Victoria and Albert Museum
Victoria and Albert Museum (London)
Young V&A (London)
V&A East (London)
V&A Wedgwood Collection (Stoke-on-Trent)
Wallace Collection—London

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

DEFRA Update

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dame Angela Eagle): I wish to update the House on the key announcements and activity undertaken by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs during the conference recess.

Fisheries and Seafood Scheme

On 15 September, support under the fisheries and seafood scheme was expanded to include grants towards new engines and gearboxes for fishing vessels, including electric and hybrid technologies. The scheme forms part of the £132 million allocated to England through the fishing and coastal growth fund over the next five years.

Marine Research Vessel

On 28 September, the Government announced funding for a new research vessel for the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science. This 85-metre-long vessel is expected to enter service in the early 2030s and to be built in a United Kingdom shipyard. The vessel will support fish stock assessment, seabed mapping, pollution monitoring and response to marine incidents. It is a vital investment in long-term at-sea science capability to protect our ocean and support the fisheries sector, helping position the UK as a global leader in marine science while reducing environmental impact.

Sustainable farming incentive 2026

The second application window for the sustainable farming incentive 2026 opened on 22 September to farmers and land managers with at least three hectares of agricultural land. Demand was high and the window closed later that day when its budget had been allocated. I recognise that farmers who wanted to apply but could not do so will be disappointed.

In anticipation of demand, we allocated a further £20 million to this window, in addition to the £50 million announced by the Prime Minister in August. Across both application windows, £310 million has been allocated to new agreements, including £253 million through the second window. These agreements will provide £930 million over three years for environmentally sustainable farming.

The Rural Payments Agency is processing applications. It will also continue to deal with eligible farmers who made contact before the second window closed because they needed assisted digital support or were prevented from applying by a technical issue.

We plan to offer the scheme again in 2027 and will look to open it as early as possible. We will work with farmers and stakeholders to learn from this year's application windows, including exploring alternatives to a first-come, first-served process.

SFI is one part of the Government's £11.8 billion of farming funding across this Parliament. Farmers can also seek support through the countryside stewardship higher tier, including the "expression of interest" route for woodland improvement, agroforestry, species-rich grassland and scheduled monument management. This year's capital grants offer has a budget of £225 million. The Government have also extended farming in protected landscapes to March 2029, committed at least £200 million to the Farming Innovation Programme up to 2030, and launched the £30 million Farmer Collaboration Fund.

Water reform

The Prime Minister announced on 29 September that the strengthened Water Bill will remove the current limits on Government ownership of shares in the major water and sewerage companies in England.

This change will remove an historical restriction on Government share ownership, which does not exist in other sectors, so the Government can act where water companies let down customers and the environment.

The Government recognise that securing the long-term future of England's water sector relies on continued private sector investment. Removing the investment limits does not change that. We will continue to work with investors, regulators and companies to secure the best outcomes for consumers and the environment.

Later this year, our 10-year plan for Britain will set out plans for stronger public control in the water sector, making the sector work for people and places again.

Food—good food neighbourhoods

On 30 September, I announced the good food neighbourhoods programme. This will provide almost £10 million to 45 local authorities identified as having the greatest levels of deprivation and childhood obesity, to improve access to healthy and affordable food. Each authority will receive £222,000 to develop solutions that meet local needs, putting decision making and resources directly in the hands of local leaders who know their communities best.

The good food neighbourhoods funding could support initiatives such as community food shops, mobile greengrocers, lunch clubs, community kitchens, and cooking and nutrition programmes, as well as helping local authorities to strengthen local food system resilience.

Nature

On 30 September I announced a £53 million community trees fund to fund urban and rural tree planting and establishment in streets, parks and places close to where people live and work, cooling towns and cities and boosting biodiversity. Through this fund, up to 500,000 new trees outside woodlands will be planted between April 2027 and March 2030.

The community trees fund will run over three years and will be available to strategic authorities and local authorities, as well as other organisations, including environmental organisations, farm clusters and national park authorities.

A further £26 million will support the delivery of local nature recovery strategies over the next three years across the 48 responsible authorities in England. These are locally led plans that identify priorities for environmental improvement, putting decisions in the hands of the people who know their landscapes best.

The strategies have been developed working closely with communities, farmers, businesses, planners, land managers and environmental groups to target action spatially for nature recovery and environmental improvement.

Through this funding, we are empowering local leaders to improve access to green spaces and shield their communities from the impacts of climate change, from restoring wetlands to reduce flood risk for homes and businesses, to tree planting to cool city streets during heatwaves, to increasing vegetation along rivers to improve water quality in local rivers.

Forty-five of the 48 local nature recovery strategies have now been published, with the remaining three expected later this year.

Delivery updates and departmental publications

On 17 September, Natural England launched a consultation on the first environmental delivery plan, addressing nutrient pollution from new houses in Norfolk as part of this Government's win-win approach to housebuilding and nature restoration.

Under the proposed plan, rather than site-specific mitigation measures, levy payments from housing developers will be pooled by Natural England to fund large-scale conservation measures. These include habitat creation, land use change and river restoration that will improve water quality, strengthen ecosystem resilience and support species recovery.

In total, up to 15,780 homes could be unlocked while delivering an overall improvement for nature. The consultation closes on 27 October.

Further to the Government's commitment to reduce and replace the use of animals in science wherever possible, the Veterinary Medicines Directorate published a report on animal use in quality control testing for the batch release of immunological veterinary medicinal products between 2013 and 2024. The report shows that the average number of animals used per vaccine batch released fell by 41% over the period, while overall animal use fell by 29%. The findings reflect advances in science and changes to testing requirements that have reduced the need for animal testing while maintaining the safety, quality and effectiveness of veterinary vaccines.

On 1 October 2026, the Report Receipt of Waste service became mandatory in England and Wales—it will become mandatory in Scotland and Northern Ireland on 1 January 2027. This is the first phase of the Government's move from paper-based waste record keeping to a modern digital system. The service is mandatory for permitted waste-receiving sites, which must submit waste receipt information digitally within two working days. This will provide more timely data, helping regulators to identify suspicious patterns earlier and take prompt, targeted enforcement action where criminal activity is suspected. Approximately 12,000 sites are expected to be within the scope of this first phase. The service will be expanded over time to cover more of the waste movement chain, including waste carriers, brokers, dealers and other operators.

Other ministerial and departmental activity

On 23 September, during the UN General Assembly, I announced that the United Kingdom would join the OceanEye International Alliance for the Global Ocean Observing System. I also confirmed the United Kingdom's intention to maintain its established ocean observing systems and strengthen international co-operation on marine monitoring.

This major new ocean science initiative, co-led by the European Union and Canada, will boost ocean observation and share data to enhance our ability to better forecast extreme weather and climate events, helping us to protect communities here at home.

On 6 October I announced the reappointment of Iain Coucher as chair of Ofwat. His second term commenced on 1 October 2026 and will run until the new integrated water regulator is established, and no later than 30 June 2029.

Drought

During the conference recess, 10 areas of England remained in drought, with the remainder in prolonged dry weather. Recent rainfall has slowed declines in some systems but has not delivered recovery. Drought is only over when rivers, groundwaters and reservoirs are back to normal levels—and most continue to recede. Recent assessments suggests that 120% of typical rainfall is required over the next seven months for all areas to be considered out of drought.

The national drought group continues to meet weekly to co-ordinate action across Government, regulators, water companies and key sectors such as farming, navigation and angling. We will ensure that water companies review and implement their drought plans and account from lessons learned in 2025 and 2026.

To address the projected water shortage in the next decade, there will be £8 billion of private investment for long-term water resource management, including the delivery of nine new reservoirs. Additional drought resilience measures include introducing mandatory water efficiency labelling, investing in nature-based solutions such as restoring peatlands, creating more wetlands and planting more trees.

A £65 million Government support package will help farmers impacted by drought, including funding of up to £15 million to build on-farm reservoirs, helping farmers to better store more water when it rains.

A joined-up, cross-Government approach is being taken to improve resilience to extreme weather, such as droughts, flooding and wildfires, £100 million has been allocated to strengthen the country's capacity to respond to such events.

[HCWS354]

Digital Waste Tracking: Mandatory Report Receipt of Waste Service

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy): Today I am pleased to update the House of continued progress with the implementation of digital waste tracking. On 1 October 2026 the report receipt of waste service, which represents the first phase of the Government's move from paper-based waste record keeping to a modern digital system, became mandatory in England and Wales—it will become mandatory in Scotland and Northern Ireland on 1 January 2027. Approximately 12,000 sites are expected to be within the scope of this first phase.

The Prime Minister has been clear that this Government will not stand by and allow our communities to be blighted by waste crime. But the waste systems we have inherited have been exploited by criminals and are not fit for purpose. The current paper-based approach to tracking waste creates significant information gaps, making it more difficult for regulators to identify poor practice and tackle waste crime effectively. Waste crime is estimated to cost the UK economy around £1 billion each year, while also damaging the environment, undermining legitimate businesses and creating risks to public health. Digital waste tracking has been developed to address these challenges by improving the quality, timeliness and accessibility of waste data across the United Kingdom.

Digital waste tracking is a UK-wide service being developed jointly by the UK Government and the Governments of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The service will replace paper-based recording of waste movements with digital records, providing a more transparent and efficient system for businesses, regulators and Government. The first phase focuses on waste received at permitted and licensed waste receiving sites, including facilities such as transfer stations, paper mills, incinerators and composting facilities.

The report receipt of waste service is now live and mandatory for permitted waste receiving sites to use. It enables operators of in-scope waste receiving sites to submit information digitally. Records must be submitted within two working days, beginning the day after waste is received. This will provide more timely data, helping regulators identify suspicious patterns earlier and take prompt, targeted enforcement action where criminal activity is suspected.

The service delivers significant benefits for Government, regulators, businesses and the public. By providing better-quality and more timely waste data, it will support regulators in identifying and responding to suspected waste crime and illegal waste activity. It will improve transparency throughout the waste management system and help create a more comprehensive picture of waste movements. In doing so, it will support environmental protection, public health and the transition towards a more circular economy.

For legitimate businesses, digital waste tracking will reduce reliance on paper records and support more efficient reporting processes as it directly integrates with commercially available software that businesses can use. Over time, it will provide greater consistency in the way waste information is captured and shared, helping businesses meet their regulatory obligations through modern digital systems and deliver a safe, effective service for the British people.

To support successful implementation, the report receipt of waste service has been available to test voluntarily since April this year. Affected organisations have been encouraged to register for the service, confirm their reporting route, test their systems and complete operational readiness activities ahead of the relevant mandatory date. Software providers, trade associations and regulators have also been working closely with Government to support awareness and preparedness across the sector.

This is the first stage of a wider transformation programme, and we will build on it. Digital waste tracking will be expanded in future phases to cover more of the waste movement chain, including waste carriers, brokers, dealers and other operators. We will continue working with regulators, businesses, software providers and the devolved Governments to prepare the sector for those changes, support compliance and make sure the service is introduced in a stable, practical and user-focused way.

This Government are committed to cracking down on waste crime, supporting compliant waste businesses and protecting our environment. Digital waste tracking is a major step towards a modern, transparent and more effective waste regulation system but this is just the start of the action this Government will take to stamp the scourge of waste crime out of our communities.

[HCWS361]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Health and Care Reviews, Improvement and Regulation

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): I would like to inform the House of several updates from the Department of Health and Social Care, following developments and announcements over the conference recess.

Adult Social Care

The Government are delivering a package of reforms to fulfil the Prime Minister's commitment to improve the strength and capability of those providing care. This includes plans to appoint the first unpaid carers champion to drive support for the millions of people who provide unpaid care for older or disabled people, and a new social care workforce action plan, to be published later this year, bringing together the steps the Government will take to support that workforce.

As part of the action plan, the Government will work with the care sector to expand sector-based work academy programmes, in order to help more young people and jobseekers access training, work experience and routes into care jobs; and to develop a national collective pension scheme, in order to improve care workers' retirement outcomes. Alongside the first fair pay agreement, these measures will support recruitment, retention and career development, while laying the foundations for a national care service.

Healthy Babies Programme Expansion

The Healthy Babies programme will be rolled out nationally to every Best Start family hub, extending support based on Sure Start principles during pregnancy and the first two years of life to families in every part of England. Building on delivery in 75 local authorities, Healthy Babies will help parents and carers access joined-up support with infant feeding, parental mental health and forming strong attachments with their baby. The expansion will help all families give their baby the best start in life and lay the foundations for the healthiest generation of children ever.

Violence against Women and Girls

As part of the Government's overall strategy to tackle violence against women and girls, the Department of Health and Social Care will adopt a public health approach to tackling VAWG, addressing the root causes, emphasising early intervention, and making sure no woman is turned away from the support she needs. A targeted consultation with stakeholders on the development of a national framework to support this approach will be launched. This will start with an investment of up to £34.4 million over three years to support 12 integrated care boards across England in delivering the first phase of a primary care referral pathway called Steps to Safety, which will make sure that women and girls experiencing violence and abuse can access specialist support through their GP. A further £15 million over three years will be invested in local victim support services through all integrated care boards in England.

A national clinical lead for violence against women and girls will also be appointed, combining clinical and public health expertise. They will cover prevention, early identification, partnership working and the health system's response to victims, survivors and people at risk of harm, including NHS staff.

Independent Review into Mental Health Conditions, Autism and ADHD

The independent review into mental health conditions, autism and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder published its final report on 9 October. It can be viewed online at the link below, and copies will be placed in both Libraries: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-review-into-mental-health-conditions-adhd-and-autism-final-report>

Chaired by Professors Peter Fonagy, Sir Simon Wessely and Gillian Baird, the review found that there has been a substantial rise in mental distress, particularly among children and young people, driven by a range of factors, such as financial pressures, social media and poorer sleep. For ADHD and autism, the review found diagnoses, referrals and waiting lists have risen dramatically. The report concludes that the balance of evidence suggests that underlying population prevalence has remained broadly stable, but it points to the need for more up-to-date population prevalence surveys. The review finds that the current system is overly focused on diagnosis as the gateway to support. The review recommends strengthening prevention, early help, wellbeing support and practical interventions for individuals facing mental distress, without waiting for a diagnosis, as well as improving access to high-quality specialist treatment and care for people with the most severe, complex and enduring needs.

The upcoming cross-Government mental health strategy will respond to the review's longer-term recommendations, including increasing early intervention and shifting from a diagnosis-led system towards a needs-led system. We will require stronger partnerships with the voluntary and community sector, redesign commissioning arrangements, improve integrated mental health and neurodevelopmental support, and work across Government to address areas where diagnosis is currently the only gateway to support.

In the immediate term, the Government have also announced a comprehensive package of reforms to improve ADHD and autism assessments. We will work to bring all diagnostic assessments under Care Quality Commission regulation, helping to ensure that people receive high-quality, clinically robust assessments regardless of how they access care, and we are also acting on concerns about the advertising of ADHD and autism assessment services. In future, we will ensure that NHS funding is only used for assessments delivered by CQC-registered providers, and will require integrated care boards to improve oversight of commissioned services.

Independent Review into Maternity and Neonatal Services at Leeds Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust

Terms of reference for the independent review into maternity and neonatal services at the Leeds teaching hospitals NHS trust were published on 29 September. The Government worked closely with the review's Chair, Donna Ockenden, and affected families to finalise the terms of reference, ensuring that families' experiences and priorities shaped the scope of the review.

The review is due to be published in 2029, and will therefore consider maternity and neonatal care from 1 January 2011 up to and including 31 March 2028, where mothers and babies have suffered severe harm or death while under the care of the trust. Affected families will receive further information about the commencement of case reviews in due course.

Public Inquiry into Mental Health Care at Tees, Esk and Wear Valleys NHS Foundation Trust

His Honour Judge John Potter was appointed chair of the statutory public inquiry into Tees, Esk and Wear Valleys NHS foundation trust on 17 September. The inquiry formally commenced on 21 September 2026. This inquiry has been established to investigate the circumstances and issues surrounding patient deaths associated with Tees, Esk and Wear Valleys NHS foundation trust, and to ensure that lessons are learned to help protect patient safety.

The inquiry's work will now be a matter for the judge. It is important that the voices of bereaved families, patients and carers are heard throughout the inquiry process, and that they are treated with compassion, dignity and respect.

Over the coming months, the chair will begin establishing the inquiry's operating arrangements and consulting on its terms of reference. The terms of reference will be announced in due course.

National Cancer Board

Anita Charlesworth has been appointed the National Cancer Board's independent co-chair, and Dr Robert Metcalf has been appointed national clinical lead for rare cancers. Ashley Ball-Gamble has also been announced as the representative for children and young people's cancers on the board and Dr Dianne Addei as the representative for inequalities.

The National Cancer Board held its first meeting on 21 September. This meeting brought together senior leaders from the Department of Health and Social Care and NHS England, as well as external stakeholders and patient representatives, to discuss the progress that had been made on the commitments set out in the national cancer plan.

Government Response to the National Commission into the Regulation of Artificial Intelligence in Healthcare

Finally, the Government have issued their formal response to the recommendations made by the national commission into the regulation of AI in healthcare. Through its response, the Government welcome the national commission's 44 recommendations, accept them in full, and will work with partners to implement them. This reflects the Government's commitment to ensuring that the UK plays a leading role in using AI effectively and safely to improve health care systems and health research, ensuring that innovation also maintains public confidence.

The response has been prepared as an initial action plan setting out how the Government will take forward the national commission's recommendations, and will provide stakeholders with certainty regarding direction of travel.

This publication is not the end of the process. It marks the next stage in an ongoing conversation that will support the work of the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency and the wider Government, who will publish a more detailed implementation plan next spring.

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Housing Availability and Affordability

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): Everyone deserves to live in a safe, secure, decent and affordable home. Our vision is for a housing market which allows families at all income levels to access good housing at rents they can afford and that expands opportunity to a new generation of homeowners. We will achieve it by expanding housing choice and availability and improving security and affordability across tenures. The Government are also determined to strengthen public control over the housing system so that it better serves the public interest and gives people and communities a greater say over local homes and neighbourhoods.

Over recent weeks, we have announced a series of measures to improve housing availability and affordability and bring housing back under stronger public control. These include new support for first-time buyers; enhanced powers to help councils bring long-term empty homes back into use; new legislative provisions to strengthen homelessness prevention and better protect social housing stock; and new rights and protections for leaseholders, homeowners and tenants. I am today updating the House on those measures.

Supporting first-time buyers

On 26 September, the Government announced that a new equity loan scheme, Your First Home, will be confirmed at this month's Budget, to support more people into home ownership. The scheme will enable prospective first-time buyers who cannot rely on help from the bank of mum and dad to purchase a new build home from a participating house builder with a 2.5% deposit, supported by a 20% Government-backed equity loan.

People will be able to access equity loans with an initial interest free period, meaning that those who use the scheme could save hundreds of pounds per month compared to a 95% mortgage. Household income and local house price caps will ensure support is targeted at those who most need it, and participating house builders will be expected to contribute towards the costs of the scheme. Further details, including costs and implementation timelines, will be announced by the Chancellor at the Budget later this month.

Empty dwelling management orders

On 27 September, the Government announced reforms to the empty dwelling management order regime to help councils bring more long-term empty homes back into use. EDMOs allow councils to take over the management of qualifying homes and return them to occupation for up to seven years, while ownership remains with the property owner. We will reduce the qualifying period from two years to six months and remove evidential requirements relating to matters such as antisocial behaviour or community support.

Together, these changes will simplify the EDMO process, empower local authority empty homes officers to act more decisively and with greater speed, and accelerate the return of empty homes to use. We are also exploring further changes to strengthen the regime and support councils to use these powers more effectively.

Homelessness prevention and social housing disposals

On 28 September, the Government confirmed that they would bring forward amendments to the Social Housing Bill to strengthen homelessness prevention and better protect much-needed social housing stock. A new duty to collaborate will be incorporated into the Bill that will require public services to work together to identify people at risk of homelessness and jointly consider what action they could take, within their existing responsibilities, to help to prevent it. Councils will also be given a new power to refer homeless households to private registered providers of social housing.

The Government also announced that they would amend the disposals notification requirement in the Bill to extend the period that must elapse between the notification being made and any sale being completed from four to eight weeks. This will maximise opportunities for councils and other social housing providers to buy and retain social homes to ensure that they stay within the social housing sector.

Strengthening leaseholder protections and the regulation of property agents

On 29 September, the Government announced further measures to provide leaseholders and homeowners on privately managed estates with greater rights and protections. We will legislate to give the Secretary of State powers to cap exorbitant permission fees and administration charges, with a public consultation to follow to help determine the scope and level of those caps.

We also announced our intention to legislate for the independent regulation of property agents. A regulator can set codes of practice, such as standards of conduct and proper complaint handling for those they regulate. Property agents will be required to obtain a licence to do the job, as well as appropriate qualifications to operate. If they fall foul of the required standards, a regulator would have the power to take their licences away. Further information will be set out in due course.

[HCWS363]

JUSTICE

Independent Review of the Criminal Courts: Government Response

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Norris): This Government inherited a criminal justice system in crisis—not just woefully underfunded, but unfit to deliver for our citizens in the 21st century.

The record and rising backlog we inherited now stands at almost 81,000 cases. Almost 24,000 of those cases have been open for more than a year, and the waits are getting longer. Behind each of those cases are people awaiting justice—victims and witnesses putting their lives on hold and defendants seeking to clear their name. This cannot be allowed to continue: justice delayed is justice denied and this Government will not stand by.

That is why the Government commissioned the right hon. the Lord Leveson of Liverpool to undertake an independent review and make recommendations for how to reform our criminal courts.

Today, we are laying before Parliament the full Government response to this review, and it will be made available on www.gov.uk.

We are grateful to Lord Leveson and his team of expert advisers—Shaun McNally, David Ormerod, Chris Mayer, Jay Bangle and Katie Atkinson—for their comprehensive reports. Supported by an expert panel, Lord Leveson gathered evidence over many months to make recommendations for the modernisation of the system and ways to tackle the Crown court backlog.

We are already acting on many of those recommendations. We accept the review's central conclusion—that fixing this crisis necessitates our pulling all levers—investment, modernisation, and structural court reform.

We are investing at record levels in maximising court capacity: removing the financial limit on the number of days the Crown court can sit, increasing the number of qualified magistrates by 50%, increasing the numbers of district judges and investing up to £34 million more a year for criminal legal aid advocates, alongside £116 million invested in criminal legal aid solicitors. Across all jurisdictions, £287 million is being invested in the court estate to make vital repairs and upgrade digital systems.

We are committed to improving efficiency in the courts and have already announced measures such as the expansion of the safe use of AI, including exploring how AI can support with listing decisions and case readiness issues, recruiting specialist case progression staff across all Crown court centres, and making greater use of efficient remote video hearings where appropriate.

The Courts and Tribunals Bill, currently before Parliament, introduces pragmatic structural reforms based on Lord Leveson's recommendations. Measures in the Bill are designed to reduce pressure on the Crown court, ensure proportionate use of limited court resources and redress the balance between victims and defendants.

Lord Leveson makes it clear that every part of the criminal justice system has a role to play. As we respond to each of his 180 recommendations, we reaffirm our commitment to working as one joined-up system to modernise and improve our criminal courts. We will work collectively across Government and with our agencies and criminal justice partners to transform the system.

The criminal justice system can only operate with the confidence and consent of the public it seeks to serve. Our responsibility is not simply to tackle the delays we face today, but to build that justice system ready for the demands of tomorrow: one that is resilient, responsive and capable of delivering justice and accountability when people need it. That is the system our citizens should be able to expect, and that is the system this Government are determined to deliver.

[HCWS360]

TRANSPORT

Rolling Stock and Infrastructure Strategy

The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander): I am pleased to inform the House of the joint publication by my Department and DfT Operator Limited, the Government's rail owning group, of Great British

Railways' rolling stock and infrastructure strategy on 28 September 2026. Since it was published during conference recess, I am notifying the House at the earliest opportunity today.

The strategy establishes a long-term framework for how Great British Railways will plan and deliver rolling stock and the infrastructure that supports it. Through integrated decision making, clearer priorities and a more co-ordinated pipeline of activity, it will help secure better outcomes for passengers and taxpayers while giving the rail supply chain greater confidence to invest, innovate and create skilled jobs across Great Britain.

The strategy sets out a new, whole-system approach to decisions about passenger trains and their supporting infrastructure, which is made possible by the creation of Great British Railways and the transition to a publicly owned passenger railway.

By bringing decisions about trains, infrastructure, depots and maintenance together under a single directing mind, Great British Railways will be able to plan over the long term and deliver better outcomes for passengers, taxpayers and the rail supply chain.

The strategy puts passengers at the centre of a modern railway. It sets a clear direction for more consistent fleet specifications that support a better passenger experience and improve train reliability. Specifically, future train procurements will be structured around a smaller number of nationally defined "fleet families", with more consistent levels of compatibility and capability across the network, while retaining flexibility to meet the needs of different markets and communities.

The strategy also accelerates progress towards more accessible trains, with clearer expectations for level boarding and alighting, where possible, as well as accessible toilets, consistent passenger information and reliable wi-fi. Spaces for wheelchairs, prams and buggies, luggage, and family-friendly spaces will be integral to the design of new Great British Railways trains.

Great British Railways will be better placed to make integrated decisions across fleet and infrastructure that support the transition to a lower-carbon railway, advance the Government's net zero objectives, improve local air quality and reduce noise, while ensuring future decisions are taken on a whole-life and whole-system value basis. The strategy sets out the practical steps needed to support this transition, through electrification, battery-electric trains and other solutions, which will be deployed to reduce emissions while maintaining reliable and affordable services for passengers.

Crucially, the strategy also sets out a new approach to fleet ownership and financing. GBR will assess direct ownership of new fleets, leasing, and other financing arrangements on a case-by-case basis, rather than relying on a single default model for financing rolling stock. This assessment will determine which approach offers the strongest overall outcome for passengers and taxpayers.

For UK-based manufacturers and suppliers, more clarity about future requirements and fewer unnecessary fleet variations will provide a stronger basis on which to invest, retain skills, plan capacity and compete for future work. The strategy will be underpinned by a fleet and infrastructure plan as the principal internal mechanism for co-ordinating rolling stock and related infrastructure activity across the integrated railway. While the FIP

itself will remain an internal planning tool, it will support the sharing of appropriate information with the market on forthcoming fleet and infrastructure requirements, helping give suppliers greater confidence to invest and plan.

Implementing the strategy will be central to ensuring Great British Railways delivers for communities across Great Britain. Continued engagement with devolved, regional and local government partners will help ensure that local priorities are appropriately considered in decisions on trains, infrastructure and services. This will help ensure that the national coherence set by the strategy supports regional connectivity and reflects local economic priorities, travel patterns and passenger demand.

[HCWS355]

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

National Taskforce for Tackling Misogyny

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Bridget Phillipson): Women and girls should not have to shrink their lives or limit their ambitions out of fear of misogyny. That is why today, I am writing to update the House on the launch of a new national taskforce for tackling

misogyny to combat the growing challenge of misogyny in our communities, workplaces, services and online spaces.

The taskforce, which I will chair in my capacity as Minister for Women and Equalities, will bring together Government, local and regional leaders and external experts to tackle misogyny, from building the evidence base on what drives misogynistic attitudes and behaviours to developing targeted action to address them.

It will complement existing cross-Government work, for example on tackling violence against women and girls, by focusing on prevention, culture change and harmful gender norms, while also considering the wider impact of misogyny on women's opportunities and outcomes across society.

Standing members include representatives from the Young Women's Trust, Equimundo, the End Violence Against Women Coalition and Girlguiding, as well as the Mayor of West Yorkshire, Tracy Brabin, and the academic, Dr Kaitlyn Regehr.

I have also begun partnering with major employers, including Arriva Bus, Centrica, Lime, Salesforce and Zurich, which will work with Government to tackle misogyny at every level. These businesses have committed to supporting the national taskforce for tackling misogyny and providing specific expertise where relevant—from public transport to workplaces.

[HCWS362]

Petitions

Monday 12 October 2026

OBSERVATIONS

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Food Security and Cosmetically Imperfect Food

The petition of residents of the constituency of Glastonbury and Somerton,

Declares that this summer's extreme heat has left cosmetically imperfect but safe, nutritious fruit and vegetables rejected at the farm gate, with one surplus food redistributor alone taking in 6,000 rejected cauliflower heads in a single week; further declares that rigid retailer cosmetic specifications are forcing farmers to destroy edible produce while shortfalls are filled by imports; further notes that new analysis by the Energy and Climate Intelligence Unit warns 2026 could be the worst UK harvest on record, with dairy farmers already losing 18.5 million litres in milk yields and growers facing water abstraction cessations; and further declares that food security is national security, and that this waste deepens the UK's reliance on imports at the exact moment self-sufficiency matters most.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to take urgent action to end the waste of cosmetically imperfect fruit and vegetables, by working with retailers to relax rigid cosmetic specifications and end unfair sourcing practices, introducing stronger powers for the Groceries Code Adjudicator to guarantee farmers a fair price, and bringing forward legislation to establish a national food strategy including creating statutory duties relating to food security and access to affordable, healthy food.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Sarah Dyke, Official Report, 02 September 2026; Vol. 790, c. 424.]

[P003234]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Stephen Morgan):

The Government recognise the importance of reducing avoidable food waste and ensuring that safe, nutritious food is used wherever possible. We also recognise the pressures that growers can face when produce is rejected on specification grounds, including where fruit and vegetables are cosmetically imperfect but remain suitable for consumption.

The Government have been developing proposals for fair dealings regulations for the fresh produce sector. These regulations are intended to improve fairness and transparency in contractual relationships between growers and their buyers, including by increasing clarity around supply terms, forecasting, variation, rejection processes and the grounds on which produce may be refused.

Greater clarity in these areas should help growers understand and plan for the specifications they are expected to meet and provide a clearer basis for discussion where produce is rejected. While commercial specifications are a matter for retailers and their suppliers, the Government

expect fair, transparent and responsible sourcing practices across the supply chain. As part of this work, DEFRA is also consulting on ways to create clearer expectations within contracts, so producers have a better understanding of how much to produce and minimise the risk of unsold produce.

To further strengthen fairness across the UK's food supply chain and better support farmers and food producers, responsibility for the Groceries Code Adjudicator transferred from the Department for Business and Trade to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs from 1 July 2026. This transfer will help promote policy alignment between the Groceries Code Adjudicator and Agricultural Supply Chain Adjudicator, support more coherent oversight of supply chain regulation, and streamline ministerial oversight and parliamentary accountability. Moving GCA sponsorship under DEFRA aligns the regulator's work with the Department's wider role.

This work sits alongside wider Government priorities to support British farmers and growers, strengthen domestic food production and improve the resilience of the food supply chain. Food security is national security, and reducing unnecessary waste of edible produce is an important part of making the best use of the food we grow.

The Government will continue to work with the fresh produce sector, retailers and representative bodies to encourage practical approaches that minimise waste, support growers and maintain consumer access to affordable, healthy food.

Royal Lime Trees in Walton-le-Dale

The petition of residents of the constituency of Ribble Valley,

Declares that the Royal Lime Trees on Victoria Road, Walton-le-Dale, Preston, which have stood for over 112 years and serve as a living memorial to the coronation of King George V and Queen Mary, form part of the community's identity and landscape but the Environment Agency's current plans within the Preston Flood Alleviation Scheme would see 18 trees cut down; further declares that specific modelling has not been carried out and appropriate steps not taken to gather sufficient structural or geotechnical evidence for these plans; and further declares that the current plans are intrusive on the community and natural landscape, while less disruptive alternatives have not been adequately explored.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to direct the Environment Agency to commit to an independent review of the Victoria Road design in the Preston and South Ribble Flood Risk Management Scheme, and to provide flood defences that are environmentally responsible, respect local heritage and reduce community disruption.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Maya Ellis, Official Report, 10 June 2026; Vol. 787, c. 425.]

[P003206]

Observations from the Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy):

The Environment Agency has considered several options and consulted thoroughly on the scheme, which will reduce flood risk to over 300 homes and businesses in

Walton-le-Dale. Financial approvals, budget allocation and planning permission are in place, and a construction contract has been awarded.

The consultation process for this scheme, which began in 2019, intensified during 2025 and 2026 as options were considered, designs developed and planning permission sought. Following planning permission being awarded in March 2026, a community action group has challenged the need to fell 18 of 21 lime trees on the riverbank along Victoria Road.

The Environment Agency removes mature trees only as a last resort and would retain the 18 trees if this could be achieved within environmental, technical, operational and economic constraints.

A wide range of engineering and environmental alternatives has been explored and discounted where they failed to meet requirements for flood risk reduction, affordability, deliverability or long-term resilience. The current proposal is the option that satisfies these criteria.

Relying on the existing Victoria Road defences would retain the trees but would not reduce flood risk to over 300 properties. The standard of protection will decline over time, with future overtopping and potential breach risk. The Environment Agency is already seeing evidence of movement in the existing defences.

Alternative foundation arrangements proposed to retain the trees were assessed by design specialists during optioneering. They were found either not to provide the necessary stability or to sever roots to the extent that the trees would not survive and could fall in an unmanaged way. The specialists could not certify that these alternatives would meet the required design standards for public infrastructure.

Options to build defences into the river to preserve the trees have also been discounted because of impacts on river habitat, protected species and increased flood levels elsewhere.

The proposed solution is a replacement flood wall along the line of the existing defence. This is deliverable but requires the loss of 18 of the 21 trees. It is also adaptable, allowing the wall to be raised in future without further major disruption to the community.

Reopening optioneering or revisiting discounted alternatives would cause significant programme delay, increase costs beyond the approved budget, and risk the scheme becoming unaffordable and undeliverable within current funding models.

The Environment Agency is confident that the scheme is evidence-based, proportionate and the best achievable outcome given the constraints.

Water Supply Resilience in Tunbridge Wells

The petition of residents of the constituency of Tunbridge Wells in Kent,

Declares that a local petition by pupils of sixteen primary schools calling on the Government to require South East Water to improve their water network in Tunbridge Wells has generated a lot of interest; notes that Tunbridge Wells recently experienced two severe water outages as a result of failures in South East Water's network; further declares that these outages caused significant hardship and that 23 schools were forced to close, depriving children of valuable learning time; and further declares that access to clean running

water is a basic necessity, and that South East Water must take urgent action to improve the resilience of its network to prevent such failures from recurring.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to take into account the concerns of the petitioners and take immediate action to require South East Water to improve the resilience of its network in Tunbridge Wells, so that families and pupils do not again face prolonged periods without access to clean running water.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Mike Martin, *Official Report*, 7 July 2026; Vol. 789, c. 280.]

[P003216]

Observations from the Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy):

I would like to thank the petitioners for raising this important issue. We particularly recognise the efforts of the pupils from St John's primary school and the other local primary schools who have helped bring attention to the importance of a reliable water supply for their communities. It is encouraging to see young people engaging with issues that affect their families, schools and local area.

I recognise the significant impact that recent water supply outages have had on residents, businesses and schools in Tunbridge Wells. Access to a reliable supply of clean drinking water is a basic necessity, and the disruption experienced by customers was unacceptable. DEFRA Ministers have made this clear to South East Water and have engaged directly with the company, local representatives and regulators throughout these incidents.

Following the recent incidents in Tunbridge Wells, affected customers may be entitled to compensation under the strengthened guaranteed standards scheme. We updated the scheme in 2025, increasing compensation levels and introducing new protections, including for customers affected by boil water notices. These reforms are intended to ensure that customers receive better protection and that water companies face stronger consequences when standards are not met.

Water companies have a statutory duty to provide a secure and resilient water supply for their customers. We expect all companies to deliver the reliable service that customers deserve. South East Water's performance has fallen below those expectations, with repeated supply disruptions and weaknesses in operational resilience raising serious concerns.

Regulators are taking robust action. Ofwat has opened investigations into South East Water's performance, including customer service and supply resilience matters, and has proposed a £22 million penalty following an investigation into historic resilience failures. The Drinking Water Inspectorate concluded that the Tunbridge Wells incident was foreseeable and preventable, identified systemic operational failings and placed the company into a formal transformation programme to drive improvement.

We are working closely with regulators to ensure South East Water is held to account and delivers the improvements needed to provide a reliable and resilient service. Through enhanced regulatory oversight and ongoing monitoring, we will continue to press the company to strengthen its network, improve operational performance and restore public confidence.

We take the concerns raised by the petitioners seriously and share their expectation that customers in Tunbridge Wells should not face further prolonged interruptions to their water supply.

I would like to thank the petitioners for raising this important issue. I recognise the hardship caused by the recent outages and fully expect South East Water to take the necessary action to improve the resilience of its network. We will continue to work with regulators to ensure that the company is held to account and that customers receive the reliable water service they are entitled to expect.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Copthorne Hotel

The petition of residents of the constituency of East Grinstead and Uckfield,

Declares that the Copthorne Hotel in Copthorne should be returned to its former use as a major local employer, valuable Gatwick Airport accommodation and a highly valued community hub, in line with the Mid Sussex District Council motion passed in September 2025.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to facilitate the return of the Copthorne Hotel—used as asylum accommodation for the last six years—to its original and proper use at the earliest possible opportunity and before the current planning permission expires.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Ann Davies, *Official Report*, 8 September 2026; Vol. 790, c. 1016.]

[P003236]

Observations from the Minister for Border Security and Asylum (Anna Turley):

Exiting all hotels used for asylum accommodation as soon as possible is one of the Government's top priorities, tackling one of the pull factors that is making the UK an attractive destination for irregular migration.

The Government promised they would return all such hotels to local communities by the end of this Parliament and are delivering on that promise. Progress has been made, with the number of hotels down from 213 in July 2024 to fewer than 160 today, meaning one in three hotels open at the election are closed now.

The Government are building an asylum system that is efficient, sustainable and flexible. A little over two years into office, the asylum backlog is down, the number of asylum seekers in hotels is falling, illegal working arrests are at record levels, small boat numbers are falling, and deportations and returns are up markedly. Since the election we have returned over 80,000 people with no right to be in UK.

Exiting all asylum hotels as soon as possible is a top priority as part of the restoring order and control programme, as it will contribute to tackling the pull factors that are making the UK a more attractive destination than other countries.

The Government are clear that hotels are not a good use of public money and act as a lightning rod for community tensions. As such the Government will close every hotel as soon as possible and by the end of this

Parliament. It is recognised that the asylum system is under significant pressure and the use of hotels and current arrangements to accommodate asylum seekers is not sustainable. We will exit hotels as part of a controlled, managed and orderly programme—not just by shifting individuals from hotels to other sites but by reducing the numbers in supported accommodation overall. The number of hotels in use as asylum accommodation remains significantly below hotel usage at its peak under the previous Government in summer 2023, when more than 400 hotels were in use, and costs reached almost £9 million per day. There are currently fewer than 160 in use.

We are working closely with local authorities, property partners and the local community as we transition away from using hotels. This will see a move towards the use of large sites, including ex-military sites, for asylum accommodation.

As we advance the process of closing all asylum hotels, the Home Office will continue to prioritise sites based on ongoing assessment against a comprehensive range of factors and giving consideration to the views of local partners. These factors include operational feasibility, financial implications, community cohesion, and geographical considerations, all of which will be assessed carefully.

It is long-standing policy that for the safety, security and wellbeing of those accommodated, we do not publicly comment on individual hotels which may or may not be utilised by the Home Office. Additionally, there are no plans to publish a list of hotels scheduled for closure. When a hotel has been identified for closure, it will be communicated to the local authority chief executive, the MP and statutory partners. However, once a hotel is empty it will be in the public domain.

Redditch Police and Fire Station

The petition of residents of the constituency of Redditch,

Declares that the lack of a publicly accessible front desk at Redditch Police and Fire Station prevents members of the community from accessing a vital public service.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to review the provision of a publicly accessible front desk at Redditch Police and Fire Station to ensure adequate and accessible policing is available to the people of Redditch.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Chris Bloore, *Official Report*, 3 September 2026; Vol. 790, c. 549.]

[P003229]

Observations from the Minister for Policing and Crime (Sarah Jones):

The Government recognise the importance of ensuring that the public can access policing services. Decisions on police stations and front desks are operational matters for chief constables and police and crime commissioners, who are best placed to determine how policing services are delivered locally.

The Government's priority is ensuring the public can access visible and responsive neighbourhood policing, regardless of how local forces organise their estates. Through the neighbourhood policing guarantee, we are reversing more than a decade of decline in visible

policing, with over 3,800 additional officers and police community support officers now in neighbourhood roles and named contactable officers in every community. As of 31 March 2026, West Mercia police had grown by 47 full time-equivalent neighbourhood officers since March 2025.

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Infrastructure Adoption

The petition of residents of the constituency of Mid Cheshire,

Declares that homeowners and tenants in newly built properties are waiting too long to see their streets and sewerage infrastructure adopted by the relevant authorities; and further declares that residents are living with years of uncertainty and potential financial liabilities.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to (a) develop a clear standards framework for infrastructure adoption; (b) ensure that housing developers, local authorities and water utilities work together to bring about the timely adoption of infrastructure; and (c) if necessary, legislate to ensure infrastructure is adopted.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Andrew Cooper, *Official Report*, 15 July 2026; Vol. 789, c. 1016.]

[P003219]

Observations from the Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook):

The Government recognise concerns about delays in the adoption of streets and sewerage infrastructure on new housing estates, and the wider issues that can arise where roads, drainage systems, green spaces and other shared amenities remain unadopted.

The Government are determined to reduce the prevalence of private estate management arrangements, which can leave homeowners and residents responsible for the cost and management of infrastructure and amenities that might otherwise be adopted and maintained by public authorities or utility companies.

On 18 December 2025, the Government published a consultation on reducing the prevalence of these arrangements in England. The consultation sought views on options to increase the adoption of estate amenities on new developments by public authorities, introduce common standards for adoptable amenities, consider mandatory adoption for certain public infrastructure, remove financial incentives that make non-adoption attractive to developers, and improve transparency and data on estate management arrangements.

Those proposals are directly relevant to the issues raised in the petition. The consultation sought views on how clearer and more consistent standards for adoptable roads, drainage systems, green spaces and other amenities could improve quality of amenities and certainty for residents, developers, public authorities and utility companies. It also seeks views on how greater certainty about adoption requirements, supported by better evidence on the impacts for developers, local authorities and other affected parties, could support more timely and consistent adoption of infrastructure on new estates.

In parallel, the Department for Transport has commissioned independent research by Ipsos UK into how the road adoption process operates in practice in England, with a particular focus on sections 37 and 38 of the Highways Act 1980. That work is gathering evidence from local highway authorities and other stakeholders on whether the current system remains fit for purpose.

In considering the case for further reform, the Government note the arrangements in Wales. Schedule 3 to the Flood and Water Management Act 2010 provides a framework for the approval and adoption of sustainable drainage systems. Section 42 of that Act amended the Water Industry Act 1991 to prevent new sewers and lateral drains from connecting to the public sewerage system unless an adoption agreement is in place, or the sewerage undertaker is otherwise required to adopt them. Those provisions demonstrate one possible legislative model for securing earlier consideration of standards, approval, and adoption responsibilities. The Government are considering the evidence received through the consultation before determining what further measures may be appropriate in England.

The Government are already taking action through the planning system to support better designed, more resilient sustainable drainage on new developments. The national planning policy framework requires all new development with drainage implications to incorporate sustainable drainage systems, appropriate to the nature and scale of the proposal, to control flow rates and reduce volumes of run-off. On 17 August the Government published a new NPPF that includes a new requirement for SUDS to be designed in accordance with the national standards for sustainable drainage, to provide a consistent basis for improving their design.

The Government will continue to consider how planning policy, technical standards, and wider reform to adoption arrangements can work together. The objective is to ensure that drainage and other shared infrastructure are planned, delivered, maintained and, where possible, adopted in a way that gives residents confidence and avoids leaving households with uncertain liabilities.

The Government will consider the consultation responses carefully and set out our next steps in due course. In doing so, we will continue to focus on reducing the prevalence of privately managed estates, improving the quality and consistency of adoptable infrastructure, and seeking to ensure that homeowners and residents on new estates are not left facing avoidable uncertainty or unfair costs.

Local government reorganisation in Staffordshire

The petition of residents of the constituency of Staffordshire Moorlands,

Declares that the Government has consulted on a proposal to create a new unitary council across north Staffordshire, encompassing Staffordshire Moorlands, Stoke-on-Trent and Newcastle-under-Lyme; further declares that this is despite continued fears of bankruptcy in Stoke-on-Trent, with the Government having to intervene in February 2024 with a £42.2 million bailout package; and further declares that a merger could leave Moorlands residents on the hook for future costs, and that it would place the unique identity and heritage of Moorlands towns and villages at risk.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government not to proceed with any plan to include Staffordshire Moorlands in a new combined or unitary authority or regional devolution deal without the clear consent of local people in Staffordshire Moorlands.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Dame Karen Bradley, Official Report, 07 July 2026; Vol. 789, c. 280.]

[P003215]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jim McMahon): On 7 September 2026, the Secretary of State announced a pause to the local government reorganisation programme. This will allow the Government to consider the programme afresh as part of its wider work to reform the state and devolve power to local communities, while ensuring that future decisions support effective and sustainable local government and commands broad support wherever possible.

As part of this announcement, local government reorganisation activity in Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent, together with a number of other areas across England, has been paused while the Government consider the next steps for the programme. Elections scheduled for May 2027 will go ahead on existing council boundaries.

The Government recognise the significant amount of work that councils, stakeholders and local communities have already invested in taking forward local government reorganisation proposals. The Department will continue to engage with councils and local partners as it considers the future of the programme and will share the outcome of those considerations at the earliest opportunity.

National Planning Policy Framework and Tring

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that Tring faces significant large-scale development proposals driven by top-down national planning policy, which is being imposed on local communities with insufficient regard for the views of residents or the detrimental impact on Tring's character, infrastructure, and environment.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to schedule a debate in the House of Commons on the Government's review of the National Planning Policy Framework and how communities like Tring can be better protected from inappropriate over-development, and how local residents can be given a genuine and effective voice in the planning decisions and infrastructure provision that shape their towns and affect their daily lives.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Victoria Collins, Official Report, 16 June 2026; Vol. 787, c. 804.]

[P003209]

Observations from the Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook):

In December 2024, the Government introduced a new standard method for assessing housing needs that better directs new homes to where they are most needed and least affordable.

To identify the minimum number of homes expected to be planned for, the new standard method uses a formula that incorporates a baseline of local housing

stock, which is adjusted upwards to reflect local affordability pressures. Areas where unaffordability is most acute see the largest adjustment.

The new method strikes a balance between meeting the scale of need right across the country and focusing additional growth on those places facing the biggest affordability pressures. It is based on a more objective assessment of need and supports a more strategic approach to housing, distributing growth across wider city regions, not just to the largest urban authority within our largest cities.

The standard method is used by local authorities to inform the preparation of their local plans. Once local housing need has been assessed, authorities should then calculate the number of new homes that can be provided in their area. This should be justified by evidence on land availability and constraints on development, such as national landscapes and areas at risk of flooding, and any other relevant matters.

It is for local authorities, in consultation with their communities, to set out the most appropriate strategy to meet their housing needs. The Government expect local authorities to explore all options to deliver the homes their communities need—maximising brownfield land, working with neighbouring authorities, and, where necessary, reviewing green belt.

Local plans are the best way for communities to shape decisions about how to deliver the housing and wider development their areas need. They enable local areas to set their strategy for future growth and their approach to protecting and enhancing the environment, and they provide the certainty and confidence required to bring development forward across the country. In the absence of an up-to-date plan, there is a high likelihood that development will come forward on a piecemeal and speculative basis, with reduced public engagement and fewer guarantees that it will make the most of an area's potential.

In developing a local plan, local planning authorities should carry out appropriate consultation with their local communities. Local authorities can only adopt a plan that is sound. Plans should be consistent with national policy, be supported by evidence and take the views of local people into account. Each plan is subject to a public examination in front of an independent inspector.

As the examination of the Dacorum local plan is ongoing, it is for the relevant independent inspector to assess whether the plan can be adopted by the local authority. Anyone who has submitted a representation during the consultation on the draft plan may make a request to be heard by the inspector during the examination.

In respect of the impact of development on local communities and infrastructure, an integrated approach should be taken to considering the location of housing, economic uses and community facilities and services.

On 17 August the Government published a new national planning policy framework, following extensive engagement with a wide range of stakeholders and careful consideration of responses to the consultation undertaken between 16 December 2025 and 10 March 2026. The full response and new NPPF can be found on gov.uk here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/national-planning-policy-framework-proposed-reforms-and-other-changes-to-the-planning-system>

Through this process we have made several changes to planning policy, including revisions to reflect local nature recovery strategies and align with current approaches to working with nature, including a stronger focus on green infrastructure and nature-based solutions.

The new NPPF is clear that to contribute positively to the natural environment, and support nature's recovery, development proposals should consider the environmental qualities of land proposed for development, including habitats, landscape character and the natural beauty of the countryside, and identify opportunities for those qualities to be conserved or enhanced. They should also use green infrastructure provided as part of the scheme and nature-based solutions to secure multiple benefits.

Green infrastructure is a network of multi-functional green and blue spaces and other natural features, urban and rural, which is capable of delivering a wide range of environmental, economic, health and wellbeing benefits for nature, climate, local and wider communities and prosperity.

The Government are also clear that the planning system should promote the creation of healthy and inclusive places and support the provision of appropriate public services.

The new NPPF provides greater clarity on how local authorities should plan for community facilities and public service infrastructure that local communities need. It is clear that in planning for community facilities and public service infrastructure, authorities should engage proactively with local communities and relevant service providers, taking into account relevant strategies to improve health, address inequalities and foster social and cultural wellbeing for all sections of the community.

The new NPPF also strengthens support for proposals that provide new or improved community facilities and public service infrastructure, including where they are required to support new development.

Proposed development of site AB2 in Newcastle-under-Lyme

The petition of residents of the constituency of Newcastle-under-Lyme,

Declares that the land to the south east of Junction 16 of the M6 should not be released from its green belt status for development as this would have a significantly detrimental impact on Audley residents; further declares that the proposed employment site represents a loss of 6% of the parish's green belt, which would devastate the rural character of the conservation area; further declares that the proposed development would likely favour commuters over local residents, increasing pressure on the A500/M6 roundabout and disrupting nearby rural lanes used by local people; further declares that the development is expected to cause poor air quality, noise, litter, 24-hour illumination and loss of habitat, while severely impacting views across the Cheshire plains and North Staffordshire; and further declares that, as the local planning authority tasked with producing the Local Plan, Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council has a responsibility to listen to the overwhelming concerns of its residents and ensure the long-term protection of the green belt by removing site allocation AB2.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to encourage Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council to remove site allocation AB2 from its Local Plan and not to permit the release of green belt land for this development.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Adam Jogee, *Official Report*, 24 June 2026; Vol. 788, c. 465.]

[P003213]

Observations from the Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook):

Due to their quasi-judicial role in the planning system, MHCLG Ministers are unable to comment on the details of specific planning applications or proposals.

The Government have a brownfield first approach to development. On 17 August 2026, the Government published a new national planning policy framework, which makes clear that authorities should plan to meet as much of their development needs as possible on brownfield land.

The Government are committed to preserving green belts that have served England's towns and cities well over many decades, not least in terms of checking the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas and preventing neighbouring towns from merging into one another.

However, we know that there are simply not enough sites on brownfield land registers to deliver the volume of homes that the country needs each year, let alone enough that are viable and in the right location. That is why we acted to replace the haphazard approach taken to green-belt designation and release by the previous Government with a strategic and targeted approach.

National policy maintains strong protections for the green belt, preserves the long-standing green belt purposes and does not weaken existing protections for the natural environment.

Where it is necessary to release green-belt land for development, local development plans should give priority to previously developed land and other lower quality grey-belt land. Under our revised approach, the sustainability of green-belt sites must also be prioritised, and local planning authorities must pay particular attention to transport connections when considering if grey belt is sustainably located. The definition of grey belt, for the purposes of plan making and decision making, is provided in the glossary of the NPPF.

These include providing strong support for development within settlements, supporting the intensification of urban and suburban locations, and setting clear expectations for minimum densities in locations with good transport connectivity. Brownfield sites vary greatly, and local authorities are ultimately best placed to assess the suitability of each for redevelopment.

Where green-belt land has to be released for major housing development, the Government golden rules apply to ensure that development delivers higher levels of affordable housing; the provision of new or improvements to existing green spaces that are accessible to the public; and the making of necessary improvements to local or national infrastructure.

The NPPF is clear that in exceptional circumstances, where a local authority is unable to meet its identified needs for essential development, it can propose to alter a green belt boundary using the development plan

process. This requires consultation with local people, followed by rigorous examination of the revised plan by the Planning Inspectorate.

At examination, the local authority will be expected to show that it has explored all reasonable options for meeting its identified development needs, and that it has been making as much use as possible of brownfield and underused land, optimising density in existing settlements, and considering whether another local authority could help meet its development needs. The Planning Inspectorate has examined the local plan and found it sound. It is now for the local authority to adopt the plan. Once adopted, the local plan will support decision making in the local area.

Each local authority determines planning applications in the light of the local plan and all other material considerations, including policies in the framework. It is for the decision-maker to consider which facts or circumstances are relevant, and how much weight to give them. Where inappropriate development is proposed in green belt, it is up to the decision-maker to judge whether very special circumstances outweigh the potential harm to the green belt.

Tenant Management Organisations and the Right to Manage

The petition of residents of the Loughborough Estate in Brixton,

Declares that the right to manage for residents of social housing is important and that tenant management organisations often deliver high quality services, but the Loughborough Estate is under the long-term control of a tenant management organisation which has lost its democratic mandate, and fails to deliver the essential services in respect of which it receives over £3 million per year of funds from the London Borough of Lambeth; and further declares that the current right to manage legislation is not fit for purpose, lacks essential safeguards, and enables rogue entities to retain control of council housing without democratic mandate and oversight.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons considers this issue, and urges the Government to: (i) produce regulations amending the Housing (Right to Manage) (England) Regulations 2012, introducing essential changes to safeguard the democratic integrity of tenant management organisations; and (ii) publish updated guidance in relation to the application of any such regulations, including a new Modular Management Agreement.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Helen Hayes, *Official Report*, 8 July 2026; Vol. 789, c. 422.]

[P003218]

Observations from the Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook):

The Government believe that social housing residents should have a strong voice in the management of their homes and communities. Tenant management organisations can play an important role in achieving this by enabling residents to take greater control of their housing services. Many TMOs deliver valuable services and achieve positive outcomes for residents.

The Government note the concerns raised by residents of the Loughborough estate. Organisations managing housing services on residents' behalf should provide a

good service. Responsibility for the oversight of a TMO rests with the relevant local authority that has entered into a management agreement with the TMO. The landlord remains accountable to the Regulator of Social Housing and must ensure the consumer standards are met.

The current modular management agreement includes provisions for the landlord to intervene where requirements are not being met, issuing supervision or breach notices. Once a notice is issued, if the problem is not remedied within a certain period of time, the functions will be removed from the TMO's responsibility and undertaken by the landlord.

The MMA also provides that if the council and TMO cannot resolve their dispute, they can refer the dispute to arbitration under the Arbitration Act 1996, giving notice in writing to the other party.

The Government have carried out a review of the right to manage framework. The review gathered evidence from residents, landlords, TMOs and representative organisations on how resident control can be strengthened while ensuring appropriate safeguards and oversight. This work included consideration of governance arrangements, accountability mechanisms and the operation of management agreements.

Following the conclusion of this review, the Government have been considering reforms to the right to manage framework to strengthen residents' rights, improve accountability, and modernise the framework governing resident management of social housing. Areas for exploration include strong enforcement action in the event of serious mismanagement where residents' safety is put at risk. The Government will continue to engage with residents, landlords and representative bodies and will provide further detail on reforms in due course.

TRANSPORT

Road Safety in the London Borough of Bromley

The petition of residents of the constituency of Beckenham and Penge,

Declares that road safety is a matter of serious and growing concern for residents of Beckenham and Penge with residents reporting that unsafe roads discourage children from playing outside, deter older people from using certain junctions, and blight streets with excessive traffic noise; and further declares that the London Borough of Bromley currently operates a reactive "wait-for-harm" approach, under which measures to improve road safety are only considered after multiple deaths or serious injuries have occurred, rather than in response to near-misses or the lived experience of residents.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to encourage the London Borough of Bromley to adopt a proactive, preventative approach to road safety, in line with the 'Vision Zero' principles adopted by comparable London boroughs, and to make full use of the record £7.3 billion of Government funding made available to local authorities for road repair, renewal, and safety improvements.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Liam Conlon, *Official Report*, 13 July 2026; Vol. 789, c. 733.]

[P003222]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Justin Madders):

The Government recognise the concerns raised by residents of Beckenham and Penge about road safety in the London borough of Bromley.

The safety of all road users, particularly children, older people, pedestrians and other vulnerable road users, is a priority for the Department. Traffic authorities should not need to wait for a specific number of casualties before considering appropriate interventions, although collision history, traffic speeds, road layout, pedestrian provision and community concerns will all be relevant factors in deciding what measures are appropriate.

In London, responsibility for managing the road network is shared between Transport for London and the London boroughs. Decisions on local road safety measures, including speed limits, traffic calming, pedestrian improvements and junction changes, are therefore matters for either Transport for London or the London borough of Bromley, depending on which body is responsible for the road.

The Department for Transport provides guidance to support traffic authorities in making these decisions, including guidance on setting local speed limits. Significant funding has also been made available to local authorities for local transport and highways, which can be used flexibly to support local priorities, including road repair, renewal and safety improvements. It is for local leaders to decide how best to use that funding to meet the needs of their communities.

I am grateful to the petitioners and to my hon. Friend for highlighting these important road safety concerns in Beckenham and Penge.

Safety of Wimborne Road

The petition of residents of the constituency of Mid Dorset and North Poole,

Declares that Wimborne Road is a bustling thoroughfare used by a mix of vehicles and a significant number of pedestrians each day; further declares that despite its heavy use, there is an insufficient number of zebra crossings and refuges along Wimborne Road; further declares that an insufficient provision of safety measures poses a daily risk to all pedestrians, including the hundreds of school children who traverse this road en route to one of the multiple schools that Wimborne Road connects.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to support the installation of one pedestrian crossing and one pedestrian refuge near Knobcrook Bridge and the BP garage on Wimborne Road.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Vikki Slade, *Official Report*, 15 July 2026; Vol. 789, c. 1017.]

[P003224]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Justin Madders):

The Government recognise the concerns raised by residents of Mid Dorset and North Poole about pedestrian safety on Wimborne Road.

The safety of all road users, particularly pedestrians and other vulnerable road users, is a priority for the Department. The Government support local authorities in considering measures such as pedestrian crossings, refuges and other traffic management improvements where they are appropriate for local conditions and likely to improve safety. Such measures can be particularly important in areas with significant pedestrian movement, including routes used by children travelling to and from school.

In England, responsibility for assessing the need for local road safety measures, including pedestrian crossings and refuges, rests with the relevant local traffic authority. For Wimborne Road, this is Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council, except for any roads managed by National Highways. Local authorities have powers to establish pedestrian crossings on roads for which they are the traffic authority, following the relevant statutory processes and consultation requirements.

The Department for Transport provides guidance to support these decisions. Local authorities are best placed to assess the specific circumstances on their roads, including pedestrian demand, traffic volumes and speeds, road layout, visibility, collision history, accessibility needs and community concerns.

While the Government cannot direct a local authority to install a specific pedestrian crossing or refuge, I would encourage the petitioners to continue engaging with Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council, so that the concerns raised can be considered as part of its local road safety responsibilities.

I am grateful to the petitioners, and to the hon. Lady, for highlighting these important road safety concerns on Wimborne Road.

Written Corrections

Monday 12 October 2026

Ministerial Corrections

BUSINESS, INNOVATION, SCIENCE AND TRADE

Steel Tariffs: Northern Ireland

The following extracts are from the urgent question on Steel Tariffs: Northern Ireland on 30 June 2026.

Jim Allister: I am grateful to the Minister for coming to the House...

Thirdly, last Thursday the Minister said that 74% of steel imports to Great Britain will not be covered by the UK trade measure. Can the same be said of Northern Ireland? Is it the same level of exemption—if we want to call it that—in respect of Northern Ireland, given the import of the EU governance? I ask those questions because in Northern Ireland we do not make steel; we rely exclusively on importing it. Many businesses in Northern Ireland depend very much on steel imports, yet here they are facing a new regime tomorrow and only hearing about it today.

Chris Bryant: I am sorry, but I think that the absurdity all lies with the hon. and learned Member...

Seventy-three per cent of steel imports into the whole of the UK, which includes Northern Ireland, are completely excluded from the measure, and the tariffs only apply above the quota levels.

[*Official Report*, 30 June 2026; Vol. 788, c. 765.]

Written correction submitted by the then Minister for Trade, the right hon. Member for Rhondda and Ogmore (Chris Bryant):

Chris Bryant: I am sorry, but I think that the absurdity all lies with the hon. and learned Member...

Seventy-four per cent of steel imports into the whole of the UK, which includes Northern Ireland, are completely excluded from the measure, and the tariffs only apply above the quota levels.

James Naish: I thank the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister) for bringing this important urgent question to the Chamber. I welcome the Government's ambition on British steel, but British Gypsum in my constituency has raised concerns about the short-term impact of tariffs and called for transitional arrangements for steel to avoid unintended consequences in the construction industry. Will the Minister comment on the idea of better, stronger transitional arrangements?

Chris Bryant: As I explained last Thursday, we have introduced transitional arrangements to make sure that for the first quarter, imports are possible where people already have contracts to bring stuff in. As I say, 73% of UK imports of steel will not be in scope of the measure at all and can come into the UK easily.

[*Official Report*, 30 June 2026; Vol. 788, c. 766.]

Written correction submitted by the then Minister for Trade, the right hon. Member for Rhondda and Ogmore (Chris Bryant):

Chris Bryant: As I explained last Thursday, we have introduced transitional arrangements to make sure that for the first quarter, imports are possible where people already have contracts to bring stuff in. As I say, 74% of UK imports of steel will not be in scope of the measure at all and can come into the UK easily.

EDUCATION

Topical Questions

The following extract is from Education questions on 14 September 2026.

Darren Paffey (Southampton Itchen) (Lab): A new report by the charity Become shows that personal advisers are in some cases supervising up to 46 young care leavers each. These are the people who can make the difference between young people setting out into adulthood well or feeling completely on their own. Will the Minister therefore commit not just to reviewing the support, but to a funded national strategy and a cap on caseloads, so that no care leaver in Southampton or anywhere in this country has to face adulthood alone?

Josh MacAlister: I welcome Become's report, which builds on the review into the early deaths of care leavers that I commissioned a few months ago. I would like to thank Ashley John-Baptiste and Clare Chamberlain for their important work in bringing to the country's attention the tragic number of young care leavers who die far too young. That transition to adulthood is an important moment to get right. PAs play a crucial role in that. We are looking at additional training for PAs and also at changing the regulation that sits around them, so we can set a higher expectation.

[*Official Report*, 14 September 2026; Vol. 790, c. 1434.]

Written correction submitted by the Under-Secretary of State for Education, the hon. Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister):

Josh MacAlister: I welcome Become's report, which builds on the review into the early deaths of care leavers that I commissioned a few months ago. I would like to thank Ashley John-Baptiste and Clare Chamberlain for their important work in bringing to the country's attention the tragic number of young care leavers who die far too young. That transition to adulthood is an important moment to get right. PAs play a crucial role in that. We are looking at additional training for PAs and also at changing the **guidance** that sits around them, so we can set a higher expectation.

Other Correction

AL CARNS

Topical Questions

The following extract is from topical questions to the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government on 7 September 2026.

Al Carns: Community-led housing plays a vital role in meeting our housing targets. In my constituency, the Storchley Co-operative Development has built 39 social

and affordable homes, but delays and cost overruns by the housing association have pretty much dropped everyone into despair. Will the Minister meet me to bring a resolution to the issue?

[*Official Report*, 7 September 2026; Vol. 790, c. 662.]

Written correction submitted by the hon. Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns):

Al Carns: Community-led housing plays a vital role in meeting our housing targets. In my constituency, the Stirchley Co-operative Development **would deliver** 39 social and affordable homes, but delays and cost overruns by the housing association **delivering the development** have pretty much dropped everyone into despair. Will the Minister meet me to bring a resolution to the issue?

ORAL ANSWERS

Monday 12 October 2026

	Col. No.		Col. No.
WORK AND PENSIONS	1	WORK AND PENSIONS—continued	
Beauty Industry Employment and Training: Young People	13	Statutory Paternity Pay	4
Employment: Rural Areas	6	Topical Questions	17
Employment Support: Young People	7	Welfare Budget	5
Milburn Report	12	Youth Guarantee Trailblazer Areas	1
Pension Scheme Surpluses	14	Youth Hubs	15
State Pension Changes: Women Born in the 1950s	3		

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Monday 12 October 2026

	Col. No.		Col. No.
CABINET OFFICE	1WS	HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE	12WS
Artificial Intelligence Policy	1WS	Health and Care Reviews, Improvement and Regulation	12WS
Procurement Reform: UK Jobs and Opportunities	3WS		
DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT	4WS	HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT	15WS
National Museums: Free Entry	5WS	Housing Availability and Affordability	15WS
Telecommunications Services: Continuity of Supply	4WS	JUSTICE	16WS
		Independent Review of the Criminal Courts: Government Response	16WS
ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS	7WS	TRANSPORT	17WS
DEFRA Update	7WS	Rolling Stock and Infrastructure Strategy	17WS
Digital Waste Tracking: Mandatory Report		WOMEN AND EQUALITIES	19WS
Receipt of Waste Service	10WS	National Taskforce for Tackling Misogyny	19WS

PETITIONS

Monday 12 October 2026

	Col. No.		Col. No.
ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS	1P	HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT—continued	
Food Security and Cosmetically Imperfect Food ..	1P	Local government reorganisation in Staffordshire ..	8P
Royal Lime Trees in Walton-le-Dale	2P	National Planning Policy Framework and Tring ...	9P
Water Supply Resilience in Tunbridge Wells	3P	Proposed development of site AB2 in Newcastle-under-Lyme	11P
HOME DEPARTMENT	5P	Tenant Management Organisations and the Right to Manage	13P
Copthorne Hotel	5P		
Redditch Police and Fire Station	6P	TRANSPORT	14P
HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT	7P	Road Safety in the London Borough of Bromley ..	14P
Infrastructure Adoption	7P	Safety of Wimborne Road	15P

WRITTEN CORRECTIONS

Monday 12 October 2026

	Col. No.		Col. No.
BUSINESS, INNOVATION, SCIENCE AND TRADE	1WC	AL CARNS	2WC
Steel Tariffs: Northern Ireland	1WC	Topical Questions	2WC
EDUCATION	2WC		
Topical Questions	2WC		

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons*,

**not later than
Monday 19 October 2026**

STRICT ADHERENCE TO THIS ARRANGEMENT GREATLY FACILITATES THE
PROMPT PUBLICATION OF BOUND VOLUMES

Members may obtain excerpts of their speeches from the Official Report (within one month from the date of publication), by applying to the Editor of the Official Report, House of Commons.

CONTENTS

Monday 12 October 2026

List of Government and Principal Officers of the House

Oral Answers to Questions [see index inside back page] [Col. 1]
Secretary of State for Work and Pensions

International Update [Col. 23]
Statement—(Prime Minister)

National Security [Col. 58]
Statement—(Shabana Mahmood)

Drumcree [Col. 79]
Statement—(Chris Bryant)

Point of Order [Col. 91]

Written Parliamentary Questions [Col. 92]
Select Committee Statement—(Cat Smith)

International Climate Finance [Col. 95]
Select Committee Statement—(Sarah Champion)

Backbench Business
Baby Loss Awareness Week [Col. 99]
Motion—(Andy MacNae)—agreed to

Petition [Col. 147]

High Streets: Amber Valley [Col. 148]
Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall
Rejoining the EU [Col. 1WH]
E-petition debate

Written Statements [Col. 1WMS]

Petitions [Col. 1P]
Observations

Written Corrections [Col. 1WC]
Ministerial corrections
Other correction
