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HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Tuesday 9 December 2025

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

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

*The term "Independent" may denote—

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

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

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House of Commons

Tuesday 9 December 2025

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

TREASURY

The Chancellor of the Exchequer was asked—

Low-income Households

1. **David Williams** (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of her fiscal policies on low-income households. [906783]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rachel Reeves): The approach in the Budget provides significant support for low-income households, taking an average of £150 off people's energy bills from April next year, freezing rail fares and prescription fees for a year, and expanding the free childcare offer. The steps that I have taken as Chancellor, including the removal of the two-child limit and the expansion of free school meals, will also lift about 550,000 children out of poverty.

David Williams: Child poverty rates remain far too high in my constituency of Stoke-on-Trent North and Kidsgrove. What assessment has the Chancellor made of how the fair decisions taken in the Budget will address poverty among low-income working families in my constituency and across the country?

Rachel Reeves: My hon. Friend may know that about 4,000 children in his constituency will benefit from the removal of the two-child benefit limit. That means 4,000 more children being able to go to bed in houses that are not cold and damp and waking up in the morning and being able to have breakfast, and parents being able to afford things that they cannot currently afford. This Government are also providing funds for free school meals in England and delivering free breakfast clubs in every state-funded primary school in England, and extending the warm home discount to 3 million more children. I am proud to be the Chancellor whose actions have led to the largest expected reduction in child poverty over a Parliament since records began.

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): The biggest issue for those on low incomes is losing their jobs. Does the Chancellor believe that there is any link at all between her increase in employer national insurance contributions—her job tax—and employment levels slumping to a 14-year low?

Rachel Reeves: The number of jobs has increased by 329,000 this year. That is the record of this Government in getting people back into work. The youth guarantee is dealing with the fact that when we took office last year, one in eight young people were not in education, employment or training. That is the Conservatives' record; this Government are addressing it.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): I commend the steps that my right hon. Friend took to support those on low incomes, both in the Budget and through the recently published financial inclusion strategy, but may I encourage her to go further on the issue of savings, given that a quarter of the people in the UK have little by way of savings and, indeed, one in seven have no savings at all? Will she encourage employers to work with local credit unions to help those who want to save automatically, and to save even a small amount from their pay packets, to do so?

Rachel Reeves: Through the financial inclusion strategy led by the Economic Secretary to the Treasury, we are extending Help to Save within the universal credit system, and working with banks and building societies. I know that, as a Labour and Co-operative MP, my hon. Friend works closely with the co-operative movement and with building societies to ensure that more people from low-income backgrounds can save for the future.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Low-income families have been hit by being dragged into tax bands that they were not in before and by energy costs, and now the chief executive of Aldi has said that unless the Chancellor reviews her raid on farm inheritance tax, rising food prices will hit those families as well. If she will not listen to the farmers, will she at least show some concern for consumers, and look again at this tax?

Rachel Reeves: Since the Budget, the Co-op has cut or frozen the prices of 2,700 essential products at a cost of £1 billion, recognising the impact that the cost of living still has on families, but also reflecting the Budget package that supports our high streets, including our supermarkets.

EU Exit: Economic Growth

2. **Stephen Gethins** (Arbroath and Broughty Ferry) (SNP): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of leaving the EU on economic growth. [906785]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rachel Reeves): The Office for Budget Responsibility has estimated that productivity will be 4% lower than it would have been had the UK not withdrawn from the EU. However, alongside the trade deals struck with the US and India, the Government are resetting our relationship with the EU to get better deals on, for example, food and farming, as well as on electricity trading. The hon. Member's party talks about how leaving the European Union has been costly and disruptive, but somehow thinks that Scotland leaving the UK and its internal market would be magically effortless and cost free. I must say that the SNP is no better than those who promised the public an extra £350 million a week for the NHS. It is all talk, but no delivery.

Stephen Gethins: I will try to strike a note that is maybe a little better. We worked together with the Prime Minister, the Chancellor and others to overcome the Tories' secrecy about their analysis of what it would be like to be outside the single market and the customs union. If we can overcome Tory secrecy on an analysis of leaving the EU, with it now costing an estimated £250 million a day, when will the Labour party release its analysis?

Rachel Reeves: The Office for Budget Responsibility has produced an independent analysis and confirmed that it believes that 4% is the correct number, and the OBR continues to maintain that in its forecasts.

Torcuil Crichton (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): Has the Treasury made any assessment of the SNP's plans to separate Scotland from its main market, the rest of the UK, which accounts for 60% of its trade? While I am at it, may I thank the Chancellor for the £820 million extra for the Scottish budget?

Mr Speaker: Order. The good news for the Chancellor is that she has no responsibility for the SNP. I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): The botched Brexit deal has wrapped up British businesses in red tape and blown a hole in the public finances to the tune of £90 billion a year. The Chancellor insists that her No. 1 mission remains to get economic growth. If that is the case, will she and her Ministers vote with the Liberal Democrats this afternoon to make sure that we get rid of that red tape and deliver on a new UK-EU customs union?

Rachel Reeves: Since we came to office last year, we have reset our relationship with the EU, which is why last May we agreed with the EU an expansive set of changes to our relationship, including on food and farming, on electricity and energy trading, and on youth mobility and Erasmus. We are taking all that forward, but at the same time we are taking opportunities to trade more with fast-growing economies around the world, including India, and we also got the first, and the best, trade deal that anybody has secured with the US. That is how we are going for growth, alongside passing the Planning and Infrastructure Bill last night in this place.

Income Tax and National Insurance Threshold Freeze

3. **John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of extending the freeze on income tax thresholds on working people. [906786]

18. **Sir Ashley Fox** (Bridgwater) (Con): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of extending freezes on income tax and national insurance thresholds on working people. [906801]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Dan Tomlinson): The Chancellor was clear at the Budget that we are taking the fair and necessary decisions on tax to do all we can to ensure that the contribution of working people is kept as low as possible. We have reduced the

gap between taxes on income from assets and on income from work, stopped the unfairness that meant people could pay less council tax for a £10 million property than for a typical terraced house in much of England, and done much more.

John Lamont: There seems to be only one word that the Chancellor understands: tax. Her decision to continue the freeze on income tax thresholds is a hammer blow to working people. In fact, even one of the Chancellor's favourite unions, Unison, has said:

"Freezing personal income tax thresholds disproportionately impacts lower and middle-income workers."

Does the Chancellor agree with the Labour party's union paymaster?

Dan Tomlinson: I am a bit confused by that question. The hon. Member said there was one word that was important. Let me give him one figure: £150. That is the amount we are taking off energy bills next year to help people to deal with the cost of living in the here and now. We are supporting people because of the mistakes that previous Governments made by not investing in our energy infrastructure and not investing in our future. We are picking up the pieces after the Conservatives did not take the necessary decisions.

Sir Ashley Fox: Extending the freeze on income tax thresholds will cost working families £900 a year. It will also drag many pensioners into paying income tax for the first time. Why is the Minister hitting these low-income families to pay more for welfare?

Dan Tomlinson: I suggest the hon. Member asks his Front Benchers why 75% of the impact of people paying more tax at the lower end is the result of decisions made by the previous Government, who spent seven years freezing income tax thresholds. It is a bit rich for the Conservatives to talk about this Government doing it for three years when they did it for seven years.

Martin Rhodes (Glasgow North) (Lab): What assessment has the Minister made of the impact on working people of the historic increase in the living wage?

Dan Tomlinson: We have chosen to uplift the national living wage and the national minimum wage so that those on low incomes are properly rewarded for their hard work. It will benefit 2.7 million people, including many people in my hon. Friend's constituency and across the whole country. I thank him and Members—particularly those on this side of the House—for their support in making sure that we can make work pay up and down the country.

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): Pensioners in my constituency of Hartlepool who rely solely on the state pension have shared with me their concern that freezing the tax threshold will draw them into paying tax. Can the Minister confirm what the Chancellor has already said publicly, which is that pensioners who rely solely on the state pension will not be taxed during this Parliament?

Dan Tomlinson: Yes.

Mr Speaker: I call the Conservative spokesperson.

Richard Fuller (North Bedfordshire) (Con): The Minister said this was “fair”—no, no, no. Perhaps breaking the election promise on tax thresholds is the reason why, by two to one, the public view the Budget as unfair, just 3% think it will make them better off, and two out of three think things will get worse. Does the Minister want to tell the public they are wrong, or will he explain to the House why this Budget has been received so badly by the British people?

Dan Tomlinson: The Conservative spokesperson talks about fairness. Let me just identify one element of unfairness he left in the tax system that this Government is correcting, and it is a popular measure when we look at the views of the public up and down the country. We on this side of the House do not think it is fair that someone in a £10 million property can pay less council tax than someone in a typical terraced house in his constituency, my constituency and constituencies across the whole of England. We are making that change to make things fairer in this country.

Budget: Work Incentives

4. **Jack Rankin** (Windsor) (Con): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of the autumn Budget 2025 on levels of incentives to work. [906787]

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury (Torsten Bell): The forecasts accompanying the Budget set out that the Office for Budget Responsibility expects employment levels to rise in every year of this Parliament. They also set out that employment is forecast to be higher in every year than previously expected back in March.

Jack Rankin: Having 1 million young people not in work, education or training and 2.8 million people out of work on long-term sickness benefits is both a financial catastrophe and a moral failure. The Prime Minister has rightly said that it is his moral mission to get young people into work, but how does the Minister square that with two Budgets that have hiked taxes on working people by £66 billion while giving a pay rise to those on benefits?

Torsten Bell: The hon. Member is right to call those things a moral and economic disgrace. Does he know who created them? It was the Conservative party opposite. Who saw a 50% rise in the number of those not in education, employment or training? The party opposite. Who created the benefits system that is failing today? The party opposite. Who failed to reform the benefits system? The party opposite.

Financial Inclusion Strategy

5. **Katrina Murray** (Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch) (Lab): What progress she has made on the financial inclusion strategy. [R] [906788]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Lucy Rigby): We published the financial inclusion strategy last month, outlining ambitious measures that will improve financial inclusion right across the country. I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for her advocacy on this issue through the all-party parliamentary group on debt and financial

inclusion. In line with the priorities outlined by the APPG, the strategy champions inclusive design to make products more accessible, increases debt advice capacity and supports financial independence for survivors of economic abuse.

Katrina Murray: I welcome the Minister’s response. I am a long-standing member of the NHS credit union, which is one of the credit unions affected by the withdrawal of the family protection plan by CMutual on 30 November. Policyholders over the age of 70 who have paid premiums well in excess of what they would have expected to have paid out have been left in the lurch with no alternative provision given. I thank the Minister for what she has done so far in pursuing peace of mind for those who have tried to do the right thing and planned for their funerals, but in the interim, can she bring all the stakeholders to the table to try to reach a solution that benefits those policyholders in particular?

Lucy Rigby: As my hon. Friend knows, I have been very sorry to hear of the difficulties of those affected by the withdrawal of that product. I pay tribute to her for all her efforts and those of her colleagues. They are doing everything possible to assist constituents. My officials are monitoring the matter very closely. We encourage anyone with information relevant to the Financial Conduct Authority’s investigation to go straight to the FCA. However, I would be more than happy to do as she suggests and get the stakeholders together.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Access to banking is surely a key part of financial inclusion. The high street banks save £2 billion a year from having abandoned our high streets and town centres. Our post offices pick up the tab and we are glad that they do, but they are not funded by the banks anywhere near enough to be able to maintain their presence. In Westmorland, we have lost Hawkshead, Staveley and Grasmere post offices, and we are set to lose Shap and Tebay largely because the banks do not fund the post offices for doing their jobs properly. What is the Chancellor going to do to make them do that?

Lucy Rigby: I thank the hon. Member for his question. We very much understand the importance of in-person banking, including in beautiful, rural communities such as those that he represents. That is exactly why we are committed to rolling out 350 banking hubs right across the UK by the end of this Parliament. Over 240 hubs have been announced so far and more than 190 are already open.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): In the recently published financial inclusion strategy, the Government state:

“Our aim is to create a culture in which everyone is supported to build a savings habit, building their financial resilience in the long term.”

What is not to like about that, Mr Speaker? But that makes the Chancellor’s political decisions in the Budget even more confusing. Just look at what was announced: reducing the cash individual savings account limit to £12,000; scrapping the lifetime ISA; capping salary sacrifice schemes at £2,000; increasing tax on dividends

by two percentage points; increasing savings income tax by two percentage points; freezing the repayment thresholds for student loans; freezing income tax thresholds for working people; freezing personal allowance thresholds for pensioners—

Mr Speaker: Order. [*Interruption.*] No, please just sit down. Don't challenge me; it is not a good idea. We did quite a few days on the Budget. I think we can all remember every point you are making. Is there anything you would like to add? If you are carrying on the list, forget it. I call the Minister.

Lucy Rigby: The shadow Minister makes reference to a number of changes in the Budget that were pragmatic, responsible and fair. I contrast that with the Conservatives' approach, which would return us to austerity. That would be both irresponsible and unfair.

Hospitality Sector and SMEs

6. **Sir Julian Smith** (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of changes to business rates on the hospitality sector. [906789]

20. **Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): What steps she is taking through the tax system to help reduce costs for small and medium-sized businesses. [906803]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Dan Tomlinson): Small and medium-sized businesses are vital to our economy and our communities, and the Government's small business strategy, published in July this year, sets out our approach to supporting them. As temporary pandemic business rates relief ends and the new revaluation comes into effect, we are supporting the high street with £4 billion-worth of support through transitional relief and our supporting small business schemes, as well as through our long-term reforms to permanently lower the multipliers for eligible retail, hospitality and leisure properties, and support them with a significant package that will cap most of the increases this year for those who have seen large increases since the pandemic.

Sir Julian Smith: Last week, Skipton was voted the happiest town in Britain to live in. One of the reasons for that—[HON. MEMBERS: "Is you!"]—is its hospitality sector. Through covid, energy cost rises, national insurance rises and other challenges, that hospitality sector is facing massive challenges. I urge the Government to look again at reliefs and multipliers. Over the weekend, so many pubs and hotels raised with me the fact that they are not going to invest. We need the growth and we need the jobs. Will the Government look at how they can make things easier for the pub and hospitality industry?

Dan Tomlinson: If I had a such a charming Member of Parliament, I would also be as happy as his constituents in Skipton. I thank him for his question. We considered the support really carefully in advance of the Budget decisions announced last month. There is a challenge in that the revaluation, which was instigated by the previous Government and is carried out independently by the Valuation Office Agency, means that some businesses have seen their values increase significantly since the

pandemic. That is why the Government are putting in £4 billion of support over the coming years, with around half of that coming next year to support businesses. Many will see their increases capped at either £800 or 15%. We think that that support will provide significant help to those businesses, alongside the underlying reform we are making to rebalance the system in favour of the high street.

Wera Hobhouse: May I give the Minister another example in which the numbers simply do not stack up? Mr B's independent bookshop in Bath will see its business rates bill rise by more than 70% after factoring in changes to rateable value. The changes were packaged as a move away from short-term fixes, yet vital discounts have been scrapped and replaced with less-generous support and an unclear transitional relief system. How can he justify such a stark increase in business rates? It is a challenge for Bath's cherished bookshops—we have three—which we want to support.

Dan Tomlinson: It is important that we all communicate to the small businesses in our constituencies, as I was doing this weekend, that there is a difference when it comes to the increase in the rateable value. It may be that the business to which the hon. Lady refers—I like good small independent bookshops myself—has seen a large increase in its value since the pandemic, but precisely because that has happened in some cases, we are implementing a significant support package this year. That will mean that no business that has a rateable value of less than £100,000 will see an increase in its bills of more than either 15% or £800. There is a bit of a technical detail there, which I would be happy to go into with her, but the important thing is that there are significant protections on bills in place this year, even if rateable values have increased significantly since the pandemic.

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): In Norwich there is a saying: there is a church for every Sunday and a pub for every day of the week. After 14 years of austerity, the numbers are a lot lower. After this Budget, many pub landlords—small and medium-sized businesses—tell me that we are not going far enough, and that many of them will go under. They need more support, and they need it soon. If the changes go through, I fear that Norwich will not have that saying at all; we will have hardly any pubs. Can we not put more of the burden on the pub companies and big corporations, which should be paying their fair share, rather than on the small and medium-sized businesses and small pub landlords, who cannot pay what is coming at them?

Dan Tomlinson: One of the things we announced at the Budget is a rebalancing in the system away from properties that have large rateable values and towards the small businesses on our high streets. That shift from the large to the smaller properties is worth almost £1 billion and supports them in the business rates system, as part of our work to reform business rates and support our high streets.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I welcome the Government's support for our high streets and the consultation on the business rates system, which the Treasury launched on 25 November. But it is not just

high streets that are suffering. Under the current system, major transport infrastructure owners face crippling bills: Eurotunnel's business rates valuation has tripled from 2017, so it has cancelled investment in its international freight hubs, and Heathrow Airport's business rates bill will increase by millions of pounds. Will the Treasury's consultation on 25 November give transparency and predictability—

Mr Speaker: Order. The hospitality sector might use the rail industry, with freight, so I am sure we can get something on that.

Dan Tomlinson: I am sure that many of us do jump on the train to support our hospitality businesses. The consultation that my hon. Friend mentions, which we published on the day of the Budget, is an important piece of work. Chapter 4 of our call for evidence on how we can reform business rates to support investment will be important. We recognise that airports and other large infrastructure are valued in a different way from other business properties, and we want to look at the changes that we can make to support those businesses, which have seen very significant increases in their rateable values. Under the scheme that we have announced, they will of course be capped as well.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): The Chancellor promised a new golden era of hospitality, but the reality of her business rates raid, as the British Beer and Pub Association has said, is

“sleepless nights, pay cuts and staff layoffs”

for publicans, who will be paying an extra £13,000 on average. Why did the Chancellor tell businesses last week that their taxes were going down when they are going up, and will she think again and change the multipliers?

Dan Tomlinson: The multipliers are a product of the change in the valuation, and they did come down. We brought them down even further for retail, hospitality and leisure businesses. Without intervention this year, the bills paid by pubs would have increased by 45% as a result of the increase in value since the pandemic; because of this Government's significant intervention this year, bills are going up by 4%. That is the impact of the changes this Government have made.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): High street hospitality businesses are on a knife edge—this is a disaster in the making. The Government say that they have rebalanced business rates, but that is not the case. UK Hospitality says that the average increase for hospitality businesses will be 76% over the next three years, compared with warehouses, offices and large supermarkets, which will go up by only 16%, 7% and 4%. The reality is, the Government said repeatedly that they were going to introduce permanently lower business rates, and businesses heard that and made decisions based on that—and now their bills are going up. In the spirit of constructive opposition, I implore the Minister to look again, use powers to reduce the multiplier to minus 20p and look at an emergency VAT cut.

Dan Tomlinson: We have set out our plans to reduce the multipliers for retail, hospitality and leisure properties, which is a rebalancing in the system. It means that those businesses—particularly the smallest RHL properties—face the lowest tax rate in the system since 1991. At the same time, there is—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Lady shakes her head, but the tax rate is the lowest it has been since 1991. At the same time, there has been an unwinding of the reduction in values going into the pandemic, and because we are seeing a recovery and businesses are bouncing back, and their properties are worth more, there has been an increase in the values. We are spending £2 billion this year to cap those increases at either 5% or 15% for many of those businesses up and down the country.

Costs for Commuters

7. **Kevin Bonavia** (Stevenage) (Lab): What fiscal steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to reduce costs for commuters. [906790]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rachel Reeves): Transport costs represent 14% of household spending, so the Government took decisive action in the Budget to freeze all regulated rail fares in England for one year from March 2026—the first time that has happened in 30 years.

Kevin Bonavia: I thank the Chancellor and the Transport Secretary for freezing rail fares next month, which will help to ease commuting costs, especially for my constituents who use Stevenage and Knebworth stations. However, affordability alone is only part of the railway jigsaw; regeneration schemes like Stevenage station gateway, supported by the Government's towns fund, are part of a wider £1 billion regeneration programme for our town and provide a real opportunity to modernise transport hubs and improve connectivity, helping commuters get to work more easily. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that infrastructure investment for projects like the station gateway are prioritised, so that commuters can get to work—

Rachel Reeves *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry, Mr Bonavia, but the Chancellor is ready now—your season ticket has run out.

Rachel Reeves: I just want to talk about Stevenage, Mr Speaker. The Government's action is saving commuters in Stevenage £285 a year on the cost of a five-day season ticket. With the uplift of £120 billion in capital spending, the Government have also committed to the sorts of projects that my hon. Friend mentions, particularly around transport hubs. I will arrange for my hon. Friend to have a meeting with the relevant Transport Minister.

Mr Speaker: Let's try another ticket: Tom Tugendhat.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge) (Con): I very much welcome the statement that the Chancellor has just made. Can I take that as an assurance that she will speak to her right hon. Friend the Transport Secretary and make sure that rail fares in Tonbridge do not increase when a second peak-time service is introduced when contactless is rolled out as far as Tonbridge? That, of course, would be a sleight of hand, and she would never want to do that.

Rachel Reeves: In Tonbridge, as elsewhere, regulated fares will be frozen for a year from March next year. I know that many of the right hon. Gentleman's constituents commute into central London every day, and our rail fares freeze will mean that commuters in Tonbridge and all our constituencies have a bit more money in their pockets.

Support for Entrepreneurs

8. **Jack Abbott** (Ipswich) (Lab/Co-op): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to support entrepreneurs. [906791]

13. **John Slinger** (Rugby) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to support entrepreneurs. [906796]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Lucy Rigby): The recent Budget backed British innovation and aspiration by supporting businesses to start, scale and list in the UK. We have put in place a three-year listing tax relief for firms that list here, and we are expanding enterprise tax reliefs to incentivise investment in scaling firms. That means more jobs, more growth, and more British companies competing globally.

Jack Abbott: Over the last 18 months I have been working hard to drive investment into my town, county and region, and I was proud to unveil the east of England's £4 billion investment prospectus at the UK's Real Estate Investment and Infrastructure Forum earlier this year. I am also keen to encourage our own home-grown entrepreneurs in Ipswich and Suffolk so that we can better support innovative and high-growth businesses. Can the Minister outline how the three-year stamp duty exemption on shares, alongside other measures in the Budget, will seek to do that?

Lucy Rigby: At the Budget, we introduced the UK listing relief, which incentivises companies to list in the UK. The UK raised more equity capital in 2024 than was raised in the next three European exchanges combined. I look forward to seeing the brilliant entrepreneurs in my hon. Friend's constituency benefit from these deep pools of capital.

John Slinger: In my constituency, I can combine rugby and gin, so I am grateful to the Chancellor for the measures in her Budget to help the hospitality trade and small businesses. Following, my visit to the family-owned Rugby Distillery—branded and flavoured around the game—can I ask what steps her Department could try to level the playing field, such as by extending small producer relief to alcohol above the 8.5% ABV limit? Small-scale producers find it harder to compete fairly with big producers, and we must help them to tackle their challenges and convert their entrepreneurial spirit into greater success.

Lucy Rigby: As someone who enjoys both rugby and gin, sometimes at the same time, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend's support for the businesses in his constituency. To support spirits producers, the Government have put in place a range of measures. As for small producer relief, I know that the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury is open to evidence on the operation of the new system.

I should add that the Government plan to evaluate the reforms in late 2026, which will be three years after they took effect.

Mr Speaker: I presume you mean rugby league as well.

Sir Roger Gale (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): In east Kent, an entrepreneurial chain of 25 coffee bars employs young people who otherwise would probably be unemployable. The profit margin on those 25 coffee bars for the last year was £12. The hospitality industry is on its knees. Will the Chancellor recognise the need to cut VAT on hospitality to 10%?

Lucy Rigby: As has been covered by my colleagues, we are putting in a £4 billion support package and continuing to engage with the hospitality sector. I should also add that we are easing licensing to help venues offer pavement drinks and one-off events too.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): I welcome the changes to the listings review, but will the Minister look at what is happening with research and development tax credits and the efficiency of the delivery of those tax credits, because when the system does not work well enough, businesses are struggling before they get to listing?

Lucy Rigby: I am grateful to the right hon. Member for his question, as I always am. We are doing an awful lot to support R&D in this country, including through many of the measures announced at the Budget. That includes putting an additional £7 billion into specific areas within the industrial strategy.

Forth Valley: Industry

9. **Euan Stainbank** (Falkirk) (Lab): What fiscal steps she is taking to support industry in the Forth valley. [906792]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (James Murray): As my hon. Friend will know, last year the Government signed a £100 million Falkirk and Grangemouth growth deal with the Scottish Government. At the Budget this year, we further recognised Grangemouth's centuries of history as a key UK industrial site by announcing additional investment of up to £14.5 million to support industrial projects that can create jobs. Alongside that, the National Wealth Fund is ready to invest £200 million alongside the private sector to help unlock Grangemouth's full potential and secure our clean energy future.

Euan Stainbank: I welcome the additional £14 million-plus to get new industry delivered quickly in Grangemouth and the £25 million to finalise the freeport in the Budget two weeks ago. Forth Valley college is vital to giving local working-class kids the skills they need to grasp the new opportunities that must come to Grangemouth, but it has been failed by the SNP Scottish Government's staggering 20% cut to colleges since 2021. The Alloa campus now faces closure. Will the Minister consider stepping in with direct skills support for this vital college?

James Murray: Education and skills policy, including the funding and operation of colleges, is fully devolved to the Scottish Government. That means that it is for

Scottish Ministers to decide how to support Forth Valley college with the overall settlement. As my hon. Friend will know, the spending review provided the Scottish Government with their largest settlement in real terms since devolution in 1998, and the Budget provided an additional £820 million to Scotland through the Barnett formula. In the months ahead we will be campaigning to ensure that decisions about how to invest that funding in Scotland's future will be taken by Anas Sarwar and a Scottish Labour Government.

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): The challenges experienced by the businesses of Forth valley are the highest industrial energy prices in the G7, Labour's farm tax, Labour's family business tax, Labour's £26 billion raid on the cost of employing people, Labour's fiscal drag on everybody's earnings, the Potemkin support for Grangemouth, the ambivalence to Mossmorran and the defunding of the Acorn project. For how long does the Minister think Scotland should put up with this chaos from Westminster?

James Murray: The hon. Member is happy to criticise tax decisions taken by this Government, but where does he think the largest spending review settlement since devolution began came from? Where does he think the £820 million announced at the autumn Budget came from? He needs to support the tax decisions we take if he wants the investment to go into Scotland.

Support for NHS Patients

10. **Liam Conlon** (Beckenham and Penge) (Lab): What fiscal steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to support patients in the NHS. [906793]

19. **Dr Simon Opher** (Stroud) (Lab): What fiscal steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to support patients in the NHS. [906802]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (James Murray): The spending review 2025 provided record investment in the NHS, including the largest ever health capital budget. That investment has enabled a reduction in waiting lists of 230,000, with an extra 5.2 million NHS appointments. At autumn Budget 2025, the Chancellor protected NHS investment by allowing it to retain and reinvest efficiency savings in 2028-29, as well as making available up-front funding to abolish NHS England: a move that will unlock £1 billion in savings by the end of the Parliament, which can instead be used to support frontline care.

Liam Conlon: I thank the Minister for his response. When I was in sixth form at the end of the last Labour Government, I became one of the youngest people in Britain to have a hip replacement. I will always be grateful to the incredible NHS staff who cared for me. But between 2011 and 2024, because of savage Tory cuts, the waiting list for hip replacements at King's College hospital trust, which serves my constituency of Beckenham and Penge, more than doubled. The Tories left thousands of people waiting months on end, but thanks to record investment from this Labour Government, those waiting lists are starting to fall. Will the Minister commit to continuing that investment in the NHS?

James Murray: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. Like him, I will always be grateful to the incredible NHS staff who got me back fighting strong after I was diagnosed with a neuromuscular condition in my 20s. People across the country have stories like ours because we all depend on the NHS, and that is why it is such a priority for us as a Government to invest in our health service to get it back on its feet and build an NHS that is fit for the future.

Dr Opher: I thank the Chancellor for investing in our community care. In Stroud, the two beating hearts of our community—GP surgeries and our village pubs—reduce social isolation. Today, the publicans are meeting at Stroud Brewery to discuss the impacts of business rates. May I invite the Minister to discuss how we can help our pub landlords—perhaps over a pint?

James Murray: My hon. Friend is right to point to the role that pubs play at the heart of local communities—I assume that the pubs and GP surgeries in his example are separate. As my hon. Friend the Exchequer Secretary set out earlier, we are in a situation where the temporary pandemic business rates relief is coming to an end and the new revaluation, which is post pandemic, comes into effect. In that context, we are supporting the high street, including pubs, with permanently lower tax rates for eligible retail, hospitality and leisure, as well as a support package that means most properties seeing increases will see them capped next year at 15% or less, or £800 for the smallest properties.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): One of the challenges that the NHS faces is dealing with people who are street homeless and who have to go into hospital for treatment. They are then discharged, and it is almost like a rotating saw, unfortunately. What is needed now is targeted funding to ensure that the NHS discharges people to somewhere they have a safe place to live. Will the Minister take up that challenge, particularly at this time of year?

James Murray: The hon. Member is right to point to the fact that people showing up in hospital can often reflect other social issues, whether homelessness, child poverty or other challenges. As a Government, we take tackling homelessness—by which I mean temporary accommodation and rough sleeping—incredibly seriously and we will publish a homelessness strategy shortly.

Mr Will Forster (Woking) (LD): Ashford and St Peter's hospital, which serves my constituency, has an £80 million repair backlog. When will the Government allocate sufficient funding to fix our crumbling hospitals, including Ashford and St Peter's?

James Murray: As the hon. Gentleman will know, the coalition Government, of which his party was a part, slashed capital investment in our health service. We have restored capital investment in our health service, which is critical to getting it back on its feet. If he is requesting greater investment in the NHS, I hope that he will change his mind, correct the record and support the tax changes that we have made in order to make that possible.

Economic Growth: Rural Areas

11. **John Milne** (Horsham) (LD): What fiscal steps she is taking to help increase growth in rural areas.

[906794]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (James Murray): Growth is the No. 1 mission of this Government, and we are committed to unlocking growth in every corner of this country. We have committed £2.7 billion per year to supporting sustainable farming, £2.3 billion of transport funding for places beyond city regions through the local transport grant, and more than £1.9 billion for gigabit broadband and 4G connectivity. That funding will help to tackle key blockers to growth in rural areas, unlocking the opportunities and benefits of growth for people right across the UK.

John Milne: Later today I will chair a meeting of the all-party parliamentary group for rural business and the rural powerhouse, which focuses on generating rural growth. If we could push rural productivity closer to western European averages, it would fix the Government's budgetary black hole all by itself. Will the Minister agree to set a measurable target for increasing rural productivity so that we can hold the Government to account on progress?

James Murray: I welcome the hon. Gentleman drawing attention to the importance of productivity in the UK economy and our prospects for growth. As we know, the Office for Budget Responsibility reviewed the productivity impact of the previous Government's record in office and found that the decisions they had taken over those 14 years meant that we had a £16 billion revenue hit to the public finances in the target year of the scorecard. We know that means that productivity has been downgraded as a result of decisions taken by the previous Government, but that gives us an opportunity—an opportunity to not be held back by the failures of the previous Government and to exceed those forecasts in future.

Noah Law (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): Cornish communities and small and medium-sized enterprises in the supply chains of Cornwall's most promising industries alike will have been delighted by the Chancellor's announcement of the Kernow industrial growth fund in the recent Budget. Does the Chief Secretary to the Treasury agree that those funds should be invested prudently and sustainably and that the proceeds should be recouped for the Cornish public's coffers so they can be invested in future projects?

James Murray: My hon. Friend and many of his neighbouring MPs are excellent advocates for Cornwall and for the benefits that Cornwall can bring to growth, both in the region and right across the country. I know that, in the Budget, the Chancellor was keen to support investment in future industries in Cornwall. For the local council to deliver that, we will work closely with it to make sure that money is well spent. The key thing for us is to ensure that we enable people in Cornwall to be part of the economic growth mission of this Government.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Richard Fuller (North Bedfordshire) (Con): As this is my last question before Christmas, I want to ask my counterpart a nice and constructive one. As he will know, rural residents and businesses already pay more on fuel than their urban counterparts and there are fewer public transport options. Can he advise what were the results of his assessment of the relative impact of the Budget's introduction of road pricing on rural, compared with urban, areas?

James Murray: I think the hon. Gentleman is referring to the changes we announced in the Budget in relation to electric vehicles and their contribution towards public finances. If people drive electric vehicles, wherever in the country they drive them, they benefit from investment in roads and maintenance alongside those of us who drive petrol cars, so it is important to ensure that we make the tax system fit for the future. This is a decision that people have talked about for many years. The hon. Gentleman's party ducked it, alongside many other difficult decisions, but we are taking them head-on to ensure that we are fit and stable for the future.

Topical Questions

T1. [906808] **Lorraine Beavers** (Blackpool North and Fleetwood) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rachel Reeves): Covid fraud and error under the previous Government's mismanagement cost the taxpayer £10.9 billion. They played fast and loose with the public purse and left the front doors wide open to fraud. That is why I have appointed a covid corruption commissioner to carry out the independent review. This Government are doing everything to recover taxpayers' money. We have already got back around £400 million, with more to come. That money belongs to the British people in our communities and in our NHS. We welcome the publication of the commissioner's independent report and will respond fully in the new year.

Lorraine Beavers: The British people are paying the bill for criminal covid fraud. Under the Conservatives, waste and corruption exploded and taxpayers' money was stolen. Will the Chancellor make sure that the Labour Government continue to go after those who stole from the British taxpayer and make sure that we get every penny back?

Rachel Reeves: I could not agree more. The previous Government failed to protect public money, while this Government have generated around £400 million by getting money back. We all know what happened: the Tories dished out contracts to their friends and donors—money that never belonged to them. This Government will leave no stone unturned because that money belongs to taxpayers, not with cronies or crooks.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Chancellor.

Sir Mel Stride (Central Devon) (Con): The process surrounding the Budget was utterly chaotic. We had months of damaging speculation, fuelled by briefings and leaks from the Treasury itself. They included briefings on 14 November that moved markets and gave the appearance, at least, of being deliberately inaccurate, which is why we need the Financial Conduct Authority

to investigate. May I ask the Chancellor a simple question? Did she at any point authorise or allow confidential details of the Budget or the forecast to be briefed to the press—yes or no?

Rachel Reeves: No.

Sir Mel Stride: The Office for Budget Responsibility's own guidance states:

"The interim rounds are transmitted to the Chancellor in confidence".

Yet the Chancellor repeatedly stated before the Budget that the OBR had downgraded its productivity forecast. In her statement in Downing Street on 4 November, she said in relation to the OBR's forecast that

"it is already clear that the productivity performance...is weaker than previously thought."

Why did the Chancellor breach the confidentiality of the OBR?

Rachel Reeves: In its spring statement, the OBR was clear that productivity was coming in lower than forecast, and it was clear that it was reviewing that over the summer. The numbers that the OBR has since published showed that in the final pre-measures forecast the fiscal headroom was just over £4 billion. I was clear in my speech on 4 November that I did not want to reduce the headroom; I wanted to increase it. I increased it to bring back the stability that is much needed in our economy after 14 years of Conservative government.

T5. [906812] **Josh Fenton-Glynn** (Calder Valley) (Lab): Having worked on child poverty for over a decade, I have seen at first hand the damage to health, education prospects and life chances that poverty can cause, put at £40 billion a year by the Child Poverty Action Group. Can the Chancellor assure me that the child poverty strategy will build on the historic Budget announcement on the two-child cap, and do more to reverse the appalling rise in poverty that we saw under the Conservatives?

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (James Murray): The child poverty strategy published last week sets out the steps that we are taking to support families now, as well as the building blocks that we are putting in place for the long term. We will lift 550,000 children out of poverty by removing the two-child limit and through other measures, including the expansion of free school meals.

T2. [906809] **Sir Ashley Fox** (Bridgwater) (Con): Unemployment is higher today than it was on the day the Chancellor took office. Will she tell the House why that is the case?

Rachel Reeves: Employment is up since we took office, and part of the reason for the disparity between those numbers is the fact that people who were economically inactive are now seeking work. That is exactly what we want, for people to be seeking work and to get back into work, but there are more jobs in the economy today than when we took office.

T8. [906815] **Mrs Sureena Brackenridge** (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): As a former deputy headteacher, I and other school leaders knew of the pressures faced when having to turn libraries into classrooms due to underfunding by the Tories, which disproportionately

affected children in our deprived areas. Does the Chancellor agree that her £5 million commitment for libraries and books for secondary schools is an example of how increasing opportunity for all children is good for our future economy?

Rachel Reeves: My hon. Friend will know that when I was at secondary school, my school library was turned into a classroom because there were more students than there was space. We have put £10 million into primary schools to get a library in every single primary school in this Parliament, and next year, to celebrate the national year of reading, we are putting £5 million into having more books at secondary schools, and I am really proud to be doing that.

T3. [906810] **Matt Vickers** (Stockton West) (Con): Since this Government came to office, 110,000 jobs have been lost in the hospitality sector and eight pubs are closing every week, but the Chancellor has made it worse. Jonathan at The Devonport has told me that his business rates are set to treble. Does the Chancellor realise that her Budget will cost people their jobs, landlords their businesses and communities their pubs?

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Dan Tomlinson): Let us be clear: nobody's business rate bills are trebling. If businesses come to talk to us about increases in their rateable values because of the unwinding of the effect of the pandemic, it is important that all of us, on both sides of the House, are clear that the Government have put in support to ensure that pubs and those that have seen their values go up will not see increases next year. If the pubs rateable value is more than £100,000, they will be capped at a 30% increase. If it is less, they will be capped at 15% or £800. That is £4 billion of support that this Government are providing.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): An independent and effective OBR is critical for our country, but it needs to do better. Why can the OBR not count? Why can it not forecast accurately, given that the economy grew 50% faster than it had predicted in March? Why can it not even publish the Budget document without making a dog's breakfast of it? Is it not time for the OBR to properly price pro-growth measures and get behind our growth mindset?

James Murray: I can be clear that we are committed to the OBR's independence as a forecaster and to the core role it plays within our fiscal framework. The Chancellor has also been clear, however, that forecasts are not our destiny. We will not let Britain be held back by the failures of the previous Government. At the Budget, the OBR revised upward its growth estimate for this year, and we are determined to exceed forecasts again.

T4. [906811] **Chris Coghlan** (Dorking and Horley) (LD): Public research and development is so powerful for economic growth that US patents funded by it generate 12 times more growth than those that are not. But does the Chancellor accept the judgment of the OBR that UK public R&D will generate no additional incremental growth because we are not increasing it enough?

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Lucy Rigby):

The Government of course recognise that innovation is key to our long-term economic growth and to higher productivity, and indeed to living standards. That is exactly why we are investing more in R&D, and we have made other incentives available too.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): It has been a rocky week for the Office for Budget Responsibility, so I am glad that the Chief Secretary to the Treasury recognises and has reiterated the value of an independent regulator in this space. Nevertheless, a lot of criticism of the OBR is swirling around. Would the Chief Secretary or the Chancellor like to remind people about the role of the fiscal risks and sustainability report, which does look longer term at the economy, and the importance that this has in planning? As the Chancellor said, it is not destiny just because of the figures, but that report is particularly useful in that respect.

Rachel Reeves: I have huge respect for the Office for Budget Responsibility, and I reappointed Richard Hughes for a second term earlier this year. We deeply regret the publication of the Budget document ahead of the Budget. Richard Hughes has apologised for that and has resigned, but I thanked him for his leadership of the OBR. My hon. Friend is right to point to the longer-term risks that the OBR also points out. That is why at the Budget we took measures on electric vehicles and on high-value properties, because we need to reform the tax system so that it works for the future.

T6. [906813] **Edward Morello** (West Dorset) (LD): The cost of delivering public services in rural Britain is higher than in urban areas. The cost to access services is higher for communities in rural places like West Dorset than it is for those in urban Britain. Will the Treasury commit to reviewing the funding formula, so that local government, integrated care boards, fire services and all our vital community services get the funding that rural communities deserve?

James Murray: The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government recently published “English indices of deprivation 2025”, which included the supplementary report on how deprivation manifests in rural areas. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that the Government will further consider those assessments of deprivation, as well as other inputs, when deciding funding models for local areas.

Dave Robertson (Lichfield) (Lab): Constituents across Lichfield, Burntwood and the villages will be pleased to see the Government taking action on the cost of living by reducing energy bills, but they want the benefits to be fair and felt by all bill payers. What steps will the Chancellor take with Cabinet colleagues to ensure that reductions in energy bills are reflected in standing charges, not just in unit prices?

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury (Torsten Bell): Energy bills are too high. The Conservatives left Britain dependent on the rollercoaster of gas prices, and left families paying almost £2 billion on bills for their failed energy efficiency scheme, the energy company obligation. We are scrapping ECO and taking some of

the expensive levies off bills. My hon. Friend makes an important point about standing charges. He will know that Ofgem continues to consider low standing charge tariffs for exactly the reason that he raises. More generally, reducing energy bills is so important precisely because they are typically a higher share of disposable income for low-income households.

T7. [906814] **Wendy Chamberlain** (North East Fife) (LD): There is agreement across the House on the importance of access to cash, as well as on the importance of access to banking services, which are critical for high streets in areas such as Cupar and Letham in my constituency. When will the Government agree to have the Financial Conduct Authority review the criteria for access to banking services? There are to be 350 banking hubs, but that is a meaningless number if communities continue to lose face-to-face services.

Lucy Rigby: I am afraid that I must disagree with the hon. Lady when she says that 350 is a meaningless number, but of course we understand the importance of in-person banking for rural communities. The location of banking hubs is determined independently by Link, and the criteria are a matter for the FCA, but I regularly meet MPs to discuss the adequacy and the application of those rules. In fact, there will be a banking hub surgery for Members of Parliament tomorrow, and she is more than welcome to join it.

Gill German (Clwyd North) (Lab): I warmly welcome the second rise in the national minimum wage under this Government. Some 160,000 workers in Wales have already benefited since the rise in April. Many of them are younger workers, particularly in the retail and hospitality sector, which is so important to my constituency at Christmas and beyond. What assessment has been made of the impact of the national minimum wage rise on younger workers, and what progress has been made on equalising the national minimum wage with the national minimum wage for under-21s?

James Murray: About 300,000 young workers are expected to benefit from the national minimum wage increases in April 2026. The Low Pay Commission was given a remit to develop its preferred path and pace for the equalisation of the 18-to-20 national minimum wage and the national living wage. The 18-to-20 national minimum wage rate from April 2026 makes steps towards that commitment.

T9. [906816] **Alison Bennett** (Mid Sussex) (LD): The Government seem set on pushing on with the family farm tax, despite opposition from the Liberal Democrats—and indeed from Labour Members. Will the Minister at least revisit the forestalling clause, which would help older farmers in Mid Sussex and across the country to avoid the consequences of backdating the legislation?

Dan Tomlinson: At the Budget, we came forward with a revision to the policy to support people whose spouses have already passed away, and we made the allowance transferable between the spouses. That change will reduce the number of farms affected by the agricultural property relief changes from about 500—as was estimated at the previous Budget—to 375, when coupled with changes

to the underlying economic forecast. The policy raises money from those with the largest estates in a fair way, and I encourage Members in all parts of the House to consider whether or not—

Mr Speaker: Ahem.

Dan Tomlinson: I will stop there, Mr Speaker.

Alison Hume (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): Alexander Dennis is a British electric bus manufacturer employing more than 700 people in Scarborough. Major bus contracts are due to go live in early 2026. Will the Minister confirm that this Government are backing British-built buses over Chinese imports, and can he confirm that the changes to public procurement processes will be implemented in time for taxpayers' money to be spent on buying British buses?

James Murray: We have a proud history of manufacturing in this country, including in my hon. Friend's constituency, and we will capitalise on that history as we drive our future growth. The UK is a leader in bus manufacturing, and the Government are committed to supporting the sector, including through the Department for Transport's UK bus manufacturing expert panel. As a Government, we want to back British buses, unlike the SNP.

T10. [906817] **Olly Glover** (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): The Government created the National Wealth Fund to encourage investment in innovation in critical sectors, such as clean energy and sustainable aviation fuel. How will the Chancellor make sure that the wealth fund uses different, and maybe even better, risk criteria than commercial banks and financial entities?

James Murray: The National Wealth Fund is at the forefront of public investment, investing in early-stage companies and projects to support innovation, boost jobs and create growth. It will work closely and collaboratively with other public financial institutions such as the British Business Bank, Innovate UK and UK Research and Innovation to support innovative companies across the UK.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): Removing the two-child benefit cap means that 5,000 children in Luton North will be lifted out of poverty. Many live in households where parents work but ends still do not meet. Does the Chancellor agree that action like this and the youth guarantee scheme will end the vicious cycle of poverty for good?

Rachel Reeves: I thank my hon. Friend for this question and for all the campaigning work she has done on it. Removing the two-child limit, combined with the changes we are making around free school meals, the warm home discount, capping the cost of school uniform and rolling out more childcare to more families, will lift more families—more children—out of poverty. It is worth noting that around 70% of kids growing up in poverty are in a family where someone works.

Steve Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con): The Office for Budget Responsibility shows that welfare spending will be £32 billion a year more at the end of

this Parliament, just as a result of decisions in the last Budget. Why was the Chancellor not more honest in the Labour party manifesto about the choices she wanted to make?

Torsten Bell: The welfare state that the Conservative party created is failing, and we are changing it. Welfare spending rose three times as fast under the Conservative Government than it has under this one, because they created a broken welfare system, and I repeat: we will change it.

Antonia Bance (Tipton and Wednesbury) (Lab): Last week I went to Alucast in Wednesbury, one of our brilliant foundries. I have also been to Newby Foundries. Both told me of their relief that the landfill tax will not impose significant additional costs on them. I wonder whether the Chancellor would like to set out the action she is taking to support our brilliant manufacturing and automotive industries at this Budget.

Rachel Reeves: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. We are backing building and getting Britain building with the Planning and Infrastructure Bill, which passed yesterday—I think without the support of Conservative Members, but frankly, we do not need them. We are backing our automotive sector with changes to employee car ownership schemes, the electric car grant and so much more. We are backing the British manufacturing industry—automotives, buses, trains and everything else.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): Prior to the election, the *Daily Record* reported the Chancellor as having said that Labour will be as economically radical as Thatcher. With the closures at Grangemouth and Mossmorran, uncertainty over the Acorn project and 1,000 jobs being lost every month in the North sea, have I finally found a promise that this Chancellor has kept?

Rachel Reeves: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, we are backing Grangemouth and have put money into the Acorn carbon capture and storage project. We are taking £150 off people's energy bills in Scotland. In England and Wales, NHS waiting lists are falling. I wonder why they are still increasing in Scotland.

Rachel Blake (Cities of London and Westminster) (Lab/Co-op): Short-term lets—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. Dave Doogan, what is it about you always wanting to shout at the wrong time? Please be quiet.

Rachel Blake: Short-term lets account for up to 20% of homes in parts of my constituency. Not only are they eroding communities, but I am concerned that their owners are not fully paying their tax. What steps will the Chancellor take to address the fact that data from Airbnb suggests that as many as 6,000 homes are being let on short-term lets, but vanishingly few are registered to pay business rates? Will she meet me to discuss this issue, and how we can recover the tax, which could be up to hundreds of millions of pounds—

Mr Speaker: Minister, "Yes" will do.

Dan Tomlinson: I thank my hon. Friend for her question and her continued campaigning on this issue, which I know is important to her constituents. On those who seek to bend the rules, companies like Airbnb now send data to His Majesty's Revenue and Customs on all their hosts, and where hosts fail to provide the detail that HMRC requires, Airbnb stops payments until they do. However, we need to go further, and I will meet my hon. Friend to discuss this.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): In the hope that the Government had listened to the National Farmers' Union and others, a North Dorset farming family sat to watch the Chancellor's Budget statement, in expectation. They were disappointed with the announcement on the family farm tax. The farmer withdrew from his medical treatment, and three days later he died. That is how determined he was to keep the farm in his family. He knew the struggle that they would have had in meeting the tax bill after 1 April. I share that not to be inflammatory, but to ensure that Members on the Treasury Bench know that their decision on the family farm tax has direct consequences for people up and down the country.

Dan Tomlinson: Members on the Treasury Bench are fully aware of the fact that changes to inheritance tax have an effect on those who are older. In the changes to both agricultural and business property relief that we have put forward, we have ensured that there is a higher allowance, with an extra £1 million, and a tax rate that is half as low as everyone else pays. We think that these reforms, which raise money in a fair and sustainable way, will contribute to raising the revenue that we need, in a way that protects family farms. Of course, we understand that there will be impacts on people. That is why we have designed the policy in the way that we have, and why we came forward with the changes that we announced at the Budget just a few weeks ago.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Independent businesses in York are really struggling with the revaluation of business rates. In 2024 they were £6,200; in 2025 they are £15,000; and in 2026 they will be £19,100, after discounts. Will the Minister meet representatives from York High Street Forum to understand the challenge of those rates for my city?

Dan Tomlinson: I am happy to speak to my hon. Friend about the issues that she raises in her constituency.

Rupert Lowe (Great Yarmouth) (Ind): The Chancellor has embarked on a Fabian programme of brutal tax-and-spend economics that might please the dwindling number of Labour voters, but is hollowing out the nation's productive base. Those who take risks, invest long term

and create high-quality jobs are increasingly voting with their feet. Record numbers of top earners—the rain-makers who actually bankroll public services—are leaving the UK for good, taking their wealth and, more importantly, their brain power with them. Does the Chancellor even begin to understand the lasting and irreversible damage that she is causing to the British economy?

Torsten Bell: We have all watched the hon. Member voting with his feet by leaving the bunch of crazies that he was with before. Let us get back to what this Government are doing to drive growth: we are increasing public investment by £120 billion over this Parliament and making sure that things get built. We are building housing and giving a default "yes" to developments around train stations. We are building transport infrastructure, including the lower Thames crossing and expansion at Heathrow and Gatwick airports. We are expanding energy infrastructure at Wylfa and Sizewell. This Government are backing the builders, month after month.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent and Rhymney) (Lab): The Minister for pensions was brilliant at the Budget in helping our mining communities across the UK. Will he provide an update on plans for changing the surplus sharing arrangements for both the mineworkers' pension scheme and the British Coal staff superannuation scheme?

Torsten Bell: My hon. Friend has been a powerful campaigner for those surpluses to be shared with the members of those pension schemes. He knows that we made an announcement at the Budget to ensure that the British Coal staff superannuation scheme surplus is shared with its members, and I know that the trustees are bringing forward their proposals on the sharing of future surpluses.

Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): The Budget cut the venture capital trusts tax relief that allowed investors to back Britain's fastest-growing companies. How can the Chancellor claim to support our entrepreneurs when she is cutting off the funding that they rely on?

Rachel Reeves: I hosted an event last night for entrepreneurs. Speaking at it were the chief executives of Quantexa and Motorway, both of whom welcomed the changes that we made to support entrepreneurs at the Budget, particularly the changes we made around enterprise management incentives, the enterprise investment scheme, VCT, and the three-year stamp duty holiday for companies choosing to list here in Britain. We are backing entrepreneurs in Britain, and they are backing our changes.

Northern Ireland Troubles: Operation Kenova

Mr Speaker: Before we come to the urgent question on Operation Kenova, I remind the House that there is an ongoing waiver to allow limited reference to any active legal proceedings relating to the historical troubles-related deaths. Any references to such cases should be limited to the context and to the events that led to the cases, but not to the detail of the cases themselves or the names of those involved in them. Members should always take special care to avoid saying anything that might interfere with the course of justice.

May I say that I thought this would be done not as a written ministerial statement but as a statement to the House? When all the news channels are carrying such a major subject, I really think this House should have had that benefit. That is why I granted the UQ.

12.46 pm

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the latest publication from Operation Kenova and the Government's response to its findings.

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Hilary Benn): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his question. I inform the House that I will lay a written ministerial statement on this matter later today.

Operation Kenova has published its final report, which covers the activities of the alleged agent Stakeknife, as well as other investigations referred to it by the Police Service of Northern Ireland. Let me begin by commending the Kenova team, led by Sir Iain Livingstone and Jon Boutcher, for the exemplary way in which they carried out their work, built trust with families, put victims first and provided many answers about what happened to their loved ones.

Operation Turma, which was part of Operation Kenova, resulted in the prosecution of an individual now extradited from Ireland and awaiting trial for the murder of three Royal Ulster Constabulary officers in 1982. Operation Kenova has set a standard for future legacy investigations, and we have drawn on a number of those lessons in drafting the Northern Ireland Troubles Bill. I wish to express my heartfelt condolences to all the families who lost loved ones in the appalling circumstances described in this sobering report.

Operation Kenova was asked to establish whether there was evidence of criminal offences by the alleged agent known as Stakeknife or their alleged handlers. The behaviour described of the alleged agent and their role in the Provisional IRA is deeply disturbing, and it should not have happened. In recent decades, there have been significant reforms to agent handling practice, including through legislation. The use of agents is nowadays subject to strict regulation, overseen by the Investigatory Powers Commissioner and the Investigatory Powers Tribunal.

On Operation Kenova's request to the Government to name Stakeknife, I told Sir Iain Livingstone in August:

"Due to ongoing litigation relevant to the Neither Confirm Nor Deny [NCND] policy, namely the Thompson Supreme Court appeal, a substantive and final response to your request will be provided after judgment has issued in that case."

The Government's first duty is to protect national security, and identifying agents risks jeopardising that.

Today's report also makes public the high-level findings of Operation Denton, which looked at killings carried out by the Ulster Volunteer Force Glenanne gang. The behaviour reported on, including collusion by individual members of the security forces, is shocking. The Government will respond to the full Denton report when it is published, bearing in mind that related legal proceedings are ongoing in this case and in the case of Stakeknife.

The Government responded to a number of the other recommendations in the interim Kenova report in August. That is available in the Library and is also addressed in the written ministerial statement.

Gavin Robinson: I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. I thank the Secretary of State for his response, and for being in the Chamber this afternoon to discuss Operation Kenova. I know that since he was appointed, he has spent an inordinate amount of time on legacy, and I know he is committed to the principles of not rewriting the past and of ensuring that issues can be explored to the fullest degree. He knows that in Northern Ireland, peace was only secured because of the actions of our intelligence services, our armed forces and brave members of the RUC. He knows that the IRA were brought to their knees by the activities of our intelligence services, and he also knows that the IRA were riven by agents of the state—both Denis Donaldson, director of operations for Sinn Féin, and Freddie Scappaticci, head of the internal investigations unit, also known as Stakeknife.

Does the Secretary of State welcome the finding of Operation Kenova that there was no high-level state collusion between loyalist paramilitaries and members of the Army or the security forces? Does he recognise the important role that our intelligence services played in securing peace in Northern Ireland? Does he recognise that the IRA were riven by informers? Does he realise the absurdity of maintaining the position that Operation Kenova could not name Freddie Scappaticci as Stakeknife? Does he recognise that the findings relating to the Dublin and Monaghan bombings were that the UK state authorities had no information or intelligence that could have prevented those bombings?

Finally, in the context of the debate we are having about legacy, does the Secretary of State recognise that he is letting too many inquiries pass by without highlighting the lack of accountability of the Dublin Government—of the Republic of Ireland—for their role in supporting the IRA? We cannot wait until his legislative process concludes, or for inquiry after inquiry, for the Dublin Government to open their books, share their stories and, on the basis of truth and justice, indicate the role they played in our troubled past.

Hilary Benn: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for those points. I join him in recognising the huge contribution that was made by the intelligence services, the Army, the RUC and other security forces during the troubles to try to keep people safe and defeat those who were trying to destroy society through their terrorism. We all recognise that. The responsibility for the murder of around 1,700 people, often in the most brutal circumstances—in some cases killing people, burying

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them, and then for a long time providing no information as to where the remains of people's loved ones could be found—rests with the Provisional IRA. I echo the comments that were made in the interim report and the final report about what they did.

I also note what the report has to say about not finding any evidence of high-level collusion between the security forces and loyalist paramilitaries, in particular the UVF in respect of the work of the Glenanne gang, as they have been called. However, I do notice what it says about individual collusion. I used the word “shocking” deliberately, because it is shocking to learn now that—as Operation Kenova reports—serving police officers and serving members of the armed forces were colluding with those who were murdering a very large number of people. Over 120 people were murdered by that gang.

On the right hon. Gentleman's final point about us all wishing to learn from the past—and I think that in order to learn from the past, one has to try to tell the truth about it—I simply draw his attention to the framework agreement reached between the UK Government and the Irish Government in September. I draw his attention to the steps that have been taken by the Irish Government to co-operate with the Omagh inquiry, which he and I have debated many times before, as well as the commitment that the Irish Government have given to the fullest possible co-operation with a reformed legacy commission. The Government's troubles Bill is seeking to put that reformed commission in place, with the consent and will of the House. I hope all Members will welcome that, because the more information we can get about what happened, the more families will be able to find out exactly what happened to their loved ones.

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

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): As my Committee's report on legacy last week outlined, information disclosure has been, and remains, one of the biggest challenges with legacy investigations. The Kenova report outlines the failure of MI5 to disclose all relevant material pertaining to Stakeknife in a timely manner. The chief constable of the Police Service of Northern Ireland said today that he remains concerned that

“there continues to be an unhelpful, unnecessary and protectionist approach to the disclosure of official records.”

Given those comments and the significant concerns outlined in our report on the Government's new approach to disclosure, how can families have confidence in the new process?

Hilary Benn: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend, the Chair of the Select Committee, for what she has just said. She refers to the unfortunate episode in which MI5 discovered further files relating to the work of Operation Kenova that it had not previously been able to identify. The authors of the Kenova report say that they have no reason to believe that those files were withheld; MI5 was not able to find them, and the head of MI5 set up a process to review exactly what had occurred.

Under the current legacy Act, the Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Information Recovery, which will become the legacy commission under our legislation, has the ability to request and see all information.

That will remain the case for the reformed legacy commission, because the commission has the ability to deal with closed material; the coronial system does not, as the House is aware. Precisely as my hon. Friend has said, it is vital for the confidence of families that they know the bodies that are charged with investigating what happened in the past—the people who are trying to find out what happened to their loved ones—are able to see all the relevant material.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): Thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) on asking it, and on his excellent contribution.

This is a very significant and highly detailed report, which I know hon. Members will want to take some time to digest, but on behalf of the Conservative party, I thank all those who have contributed to it. I also want to remember all those who suffered during that very difficult time. The last Conservative Government apologised for collusion following the de Silva review of the murder of Patrick Finucane, and while it is sobering to read further accounts of collusion between a small number of agents of the British state and paramilitaries, it is important to set this alongside a number of findings in the Kenova report.

First, as the Secretary of State mentioned, there is an understanding that legislation has changed dramatically since the time in question, under both the last Labour Government and the last Conservative Government. Secondly, it is important to highlight that although the review found that there were a small number of rogue actors, it did not find “any evidence” that collusion occurred

“at a political or strategic level”,

and there was

“no evidence which indicates that the RUC at an organisational level was involved or complicit with the activities of extremists or terrorists.”

It is very important that those findings are not lost.

Thirdly, as the right hon. Member for Belfast East said, the review found that there was no specific intelligence that, if acted upon, could have prevented the 1974 Dublin and Monaghan bombings, and it did not manage to find any evidence indicating that British security forces colluded with the UVF in those attacks—again, these are historic findings.

I would be very interested to hear from the Secretary of State whether he would be prepared to come back at a later date and tell us more about the Government's future position on “neither confirm nor deny”. I understand that there is a case going on at the moment, but I believe that once that is done, it will be important for the Government to be clear with the House about how they see that policy going forward.

As has already been mentioned, there have been a number of detailed and necessary reviews of collusion between agents of the British state and paramilitaries, but as yet there have been no such reviews on the Irish side. Will the Secretary of State tell us whether the Irish Government have told him by when they intend to present their own legislation?

Hilary Benn: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his comments, and for the spirit and the tone in which he delivers them in relation to this extremely serious matter. I do indeed acknowledge—as I think I have already indicated—what he said about the nature of the collusion that has been discovered, and what it was and what it was not, for instance in respect of the Dublin and Monaghan bombings. Those are very, very important findings.

It is for the Irish Government to determine what information they reveal, but they have given commitments to me, to the UK Government and, indeed, to all of us about the co-operation that they will provide. The Tánaiste has said to me that the legislation to allow witness testimony to be given to the Omagh bombing inquiry will be in place by March, and we look forward to seeing, in due course, the outline of the Irish Government's legislation that will implement the rest of the commitments when it comes to co-operation with the new legacy commission that we are seeking to establish by means of the legislation currently before the House.

I am always happy to return to the House to provide further information and to answer further questions, but we are waiting for the Thompson judgment, which is absolutely about the “neither confirm nor deny” policy. That is why, when I wrote to Sir Iain Livingstone on, I think, 13 August, I said to him what I quoted in my original answer to the question from the right hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson).

Colum Eastwood (Foyle) (SDLP): Let me say first that the people responsible for the murder of innocent people in Northern Ireland over many decades were the people who carried out those murders, and the organisations of which they were members. However, it is also clear, from these reports and from previous investigations, that elements within the British state worked hand in glove with loyalist paramilitaries as they murdered scores, indeed hundreds, of innocent people in the north of Ireland, and also that the IRA were riddled with informers, including, clearly, at the very highest levels. Now that we know all that, has the Secretary of State made an assessment of how many lives could have been saved, and how much earlier we could have had peace in Ireland, if the British Government had acted properly?

Hilary Benn: I should say to my hon. Friend that I have not made such an assessment, but Operation Kenova itself had something to say in relation to the activities of the alleged agent Stakeknife. Its view was that the balance—I hate to use the term “balance sheet”—of lives lost and lives saved was not quite as it had been described by others. What I think is particularly important about the report published today is its confirmation of a point made by Jon Boucher when he published the interim report: he said that in the absence of information about what happened, people form a view about what they think happened, and as a result what is finally produced—there is an example of this in relation to the final Operation Kenova report—may turn out to be not quite what everybody thought it was, and that is the argument for trying to be as open as possible about what happened. However, I wanted to make clear in coming to the House today that what has been revealed is, as I have said, disturbing and deeply shocking and should not have happened, and it is really important that we learn the lessons.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD): I thank the right hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) for his question, and I thank the Secretary of State for his answer. I have three questions. First, do the Government accept the Operation Kenova report's findings of “serious organisational failure” on the part of MI5, and if so, what concrete steps will they take to address those failures? Secondly, is the Secretary of State satisfied that his proposed legacy legislation contains adequate safeguards to ensure that honourable former service personnel who served lawfully and with integrity and followed orders in good faith do not fear persecution on the basis of the unlawful actions of either rogue individuals or the state? Thirdly, does the Secretary of State agree that the “neither confirm nor deny” policy must be exercised in a proportionate and necessary manner, and should not be used to protect agents who commit gross serious crime or to hide any serious misdeeds of the state?

Hilary Benn: Our legislation contains a number of very specific safeguards, which are in the Bill because of our commitment to the veterans who served with such bravery in the most difficult circumstances. However, I have indicated to the House that, as the Bill progresses, I am open to a continuing conversation with Members in all parts of the House, and with the Royal British Legion and the other organisations representing veterans, so that we get this right.

The “neither confirm nor deny” policy is important for our national security. The ultimate responsibility of Governments is to protect national security, and the moment that the “neither confirm nor deny” policy starts to be eroded—although in a small number of cases it has been set aside for particular reasons—that undermines the confidence of those who are serving the state today to keep us safe. They may start to ask themselves, “Will the Government still uphold that lifelong commitment not to reveal anything about what I have done?” The “neither confirm nor deny” policy is a really important protection for those who do very dangerous things in order to try to protect all of us.

As for the hon. Gentleman's question about MI5, I responded to the Chair of the Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi), in respect of the information that was subsequently discovered, but, of course, the use of agents—covert human intelligence sources—is nowadays subject to regulation under the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 and the Covert Human Intelligence Sources (Criminal Conduct) Act 2021. Both those pieces of legislation show the determination of the House to learn from what has gone wrong in the past.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): We know that this was a brutal, murderous conflict, but, as we are reminded today, it was internecine as well at times. “There'll be days like this”, in the words of one of Northern Ireland's famous sons, but does the Secretary of State agree that, even on days like this, we should continue to keep victims and families at the forefront of our thoughts?

Hilary Benn: I strongly agree with my hon. Friend. In one sense, the great contribution that Operation Kenova has made to doing precisely that has been the way in which it has dealt with the families, keeping in touch

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with them, telling them what it was and was not able to discover. We have adopted the idea of a victims and survivors advisory group, because all the people I spoke to said that it had worked very well during Operation Kenova. We have included it in the Bill that the House is currently considering, because learning the lessons means not just reflecting on the horror that this report reveals, but learning from the way in which Operation Kenova went about dealing with families. It is important that the commission—and I know it is working hard to do this at the moment—is able to win the confidence of families, so that when people say to them, “I can tell you this, and I cannot tell you that, and I have not been able to find out the following”, the families will feel confident that they have done their darnedest to discover what really went on.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I am sure the Secretary of State will agree that running any double agent inside a murderous organisation is bound to be a moral nightmare. The justification for such action is always—as it should be—that many more lives will be saved as a result, even if the agent is implicated in illegal and, indeed, murderous activities. What is unusual about this case is that it appears that more lives were not saved by this particular operation. Can the Secretary of State say whether the agencies accept that this particular operation was counterproductive, even in its own terms, and if he cannot share that with us openly, could it at least be shared confidentially with the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament?

Hilary Benn: The Intelligence and Security Committee may well wish to look at the Operation Kenova report and ask questions. The right hon. Gentleman put an important hypothetical point about the difficulty of balancing the considerations, but there is no doubt that the contributions that agents make are very important to protecting our national security and, as several Members have indicated to the House, were very, very important in the fight against those who were trying to destroy society in Northern Ireland and who were responsible for killing so many people during the course of the troubles.

Katrina Murray (Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch) (Lab): I commend the right hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) for securing the urgent question. We have talked about the experiences of the Kenova families in terms of having confidence in the process, and we recognise the complexity of the 28 years of the troubles. The Secretary of State has highlighted how the lack of transparency and answers leaves a void for relatives that is filled by their worst fears. That makes the provisions on the grounds of disclosure in the troubles Bill, which is currently going through the legislative process, even more important. How will we make sure that the best experiences of Operation Kenova are built into the next stages of the legislation?

Hilary Benn: We are doing that in a number of respects, including through the advisory committee to represent victims and survivors, the fact that there will be a new oversight board, and the changes the Bill is making to the provisions relating to disclosure. My hon. Friend made such a powerful point when she said that

the lack of answers creates a void. It is a void that the families have had to live with for many, many years, which is why the whole House has an obligation to do everything we can to create a system that all families can have confidence in, so that it can look into all cases.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): On a day like today, it is important to remind ourselves that our security and intelligence forces saved hundreds of lives in the face of murderous terrorism. Terrorists, of course, kept no records to be pored over years later. Does the Secretary of State agree that Scappaticci was, first and foremost, a ruthless IRA murderer? Does he agree that the RUC and the Ulster Defence Regiment—whatever the renegade actions of a very tiny number of members, some of whom have rightly faced justice—were organisations of immense integrity, whose members’ service and bravery preserved many lives? Does he agree that the Denton report finally lays to rest the republican myth that the security forces were implicated in the Dublin and Monaghan bombings?

Hilary Benn: On the hon. and learned Gentleman’s latter point, that is indeed what the Kenova report says. That is one of many reasons why it is so important. I am not going to comment on the alleged agent with the name Stakeknife, for the reasons that I gave in answering the urgent question at the beginning. The Thompson judgment that we are currently awaiting is really important in respect of “neither confirm nor deny”. I have already indicated to the House that I join all right hon. and hon. Members in paying tribute to the work of the intelligence services and the security forces in trying to keep people safe in the face of murder and mayhem caused by many people—not only the republican movement, but the loyalist gangs who also killed a lot of people—during the troubles.

Adam Jooce (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) for securing his urgent question. Like him and others across the House, I think today about the victims of terrorism who lost their lives, and their families. I want to acknowledge and commend Sir Iain Livingstone and Chief Constable Boucher for their work, which is a demonstration of how important independence is.

The reports for families that Operation Kenova has produced demonstrate the value of independent and effective legacy investigations. With that in mind, I acknowledge the Secretary of State’s reference to his openness and urge him to think about appointments to the judicial panel of the new Legacy Commission. I believe that they should be made by the Northern Ireland Judicial Appointments Commission, rather than by any Secretary of State, because Operation Kenova demonstrates that independence is key if we are to effectively address the legacy of the past.

Hilary Benn: Independence is indeed extremely important to building a sense of confidence on the part of families that their cases will be properly looked into. I note my hon. Friend’s point about the appointment of judicial panel members for the commission, particularly in respect of the inquisitorial proceedings. I suspect that we may return to that when the Bill is in Committee.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): The Secretary of State needs to go further. Several Members have pressed him on this point, but he still has not explicitly told the House. Given the extensive scrutiny directed at alleged agents within the UK establishment, what demands has the Secretary of State made of the Irish Government to disclose the extent and details of agents operating within the republican movement, particularly in the light of the irrefutable evidence of collusion that enabled the murder of RUC officers, UDR members and Protestant civilians, particularly in the border areas? Unlike the Secretary of State, I am not prepared to accept their say-so when for decades they have covered up, housed and protected terrorists, and denied innocent victims truth and justice.

Hilary Benn: In the light of what the hon. Member has just said, I hope that she would welcome the commitments that the Irish Government have given—

Carla Lockhart *indicated dissent.*

Hilary Benn: She shakes her head, but she is saying—*[Interruption.]* Well, the past and what happened or did not happen in Ireland is a matter for the Irish state to deal with, but I hope the hon. Member would welcome the commitments that have been given to co-operate to the fullest possible extent with the new Legacy Commission, which is not the case in relation to the current commission established by the legacy Act, for reasons of which she and the whole House will be well aware. Whatever happened in the past, the most important thing is that we enable families who are still waiting for answers to get access to all the information that is available now. That is what the Irish Government are committed to.

Chris Coghlan (Dorking and Horley) (LD): On Kenova, I can express only the horror experienced by some of the victims, but the wider context of our security services is very important. I worked in counter-terrorism in the Foreign Office, on the anti-ISIS campaign. The Secretary of State speaks about strict regulation, and that resonates. He speaks about “neither confirm nor deny”, and I entirely agree with his points. Does the Secretary of State agree that the ethics around the handling, protection and recruitment of agents are incredibly complex? It is all too easy to criticise our security services, which in my experience do an outstanding—and at times simply unbelievable—job in saving lives.

Hilary Benn: I do agree with the hon. Member. From the contact that I have had with the security services since I took up this post, I know that the commitment, dedication, passion, ingenuity and determination to protect people today is quite something to behold. Some judgments are complex—there is no doubt about that—but it is also important that we learn from the past and what did not go right. Anyone who looks at the final Kenova report and sees what it reveals about what went on in some cases will recognise the importance of learning from the past. That is why the legislation that Governments have passed since has been so important: that legislation recognised the complexity, but reached the conclusion that we have to have a legal framework that governs it, with independent oversight. We now have that, but that was not the case in the 1970s and the 1980s.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): In the press conference this morning, the Chief Constable said that the

“investigation has demonstrated that murders that could and should have been prevented were allowed to take place”.

There was always an alternative to murder in Northern Ireland, so does the Secretary of State agree with me that it is now time for an inquiry to identify and hold to account those who directed terrorism and murder in Northern Ireland?

Hilary Benn: I say to the hon. Gentleman that we have the commission, established by the last Government in the legacy Act, which has the capacity to investigate all cases that are referred to it. When I came into office, I took the decision that we would retain but reform the commission, as opposed to abolishing it and starting again, as I was urged to do by some people in Northern Ireland. I think it was the right decision to take, not least because 100 investigations are currently taking place. However, we have to ensure that it is established and reformed in a way that gives all families confidence, and I would say that we are trying to achieve one mechanism to deal with finding answers to those questions. I have said to the House a number of times before that we are not going to be able to deal with legacy by a series of public inquiry after public inquiry. We need to establish the commission on the basis that it can do the job for everyone.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): The report makes quite clear the extent of IRA brutality and murder in Northern Ireland, including murders within their own republican community. Does the Secretary of State agree with me that the First Minister of Northern Ireland can no longer remain ambiguous in relation to, first, her acknowledgment of and, secondly, her apology for what her fellow travellers did to people within their own community and within the wider community in Northern Ireland? Does he also accept that the real state collusion occurred when successive Governments in the Irish Republic hid terrorists; allowed them to store arms, train and cross the border; and then refused to extradite them? Instead of giving the Irish Government a role in the arrangements for the legacy of the past, will he commit to holding them to account for their sins of the past?

Hilary Benn: I say to the right hon. Gentleman that I certainly intend to hold the Irish Government to account for the commitments they gave in the framework that I announced jointly with the Tánaiste in September. Of course, there was always an alternative to what went on—always—and Northern Ireland eventually got there through the Good Friday agreement and the peace that has been revealed and sustained since 1998. It is for each individual to decide how they deal with that.

I say to the right hon. Gentleman that what we need to focus on now, because clearly there are things in the past that cannot be undone, is to learn from what we have learned—today’s report about what went on in all sorts of respects is an extremely important contribution to that—but also to make sure, as I have said a number of times, that families get the answers they are still waiting for. Kenova did a lot to do that for the families with whom it worked, but lots of other families still do not know. That is why we must have a commission that works for everyone.

Sarah Pochin (Runcorn and Helsby) (Reform): This report covers the activities of one informer within the higher echelons of the Provisional IRA, but does the Secretary of State agree that there is a risk that the findings of this report, when taken in isolation, fail to fully recognise the contribution made by informants and agents inside the IRA in stopping countless killings?

Hilary Benn: I think it is very important that we take a balanced view, and that we acknowledge successes, bravery and determination—we saw that in abundance during the troubles—but where things happened that should not have happened, we need to acknowledge them, because how can we make progress now and in the future if we do not learn the lessons of the past?

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): In analysing the report and the Secretary of State's statement, people will be looking to the future as we try to ensure that no one rewrites the past. However, in trying to do that, does he agree that the murky world people such as Scappaticci inhabited brought about the consequences of 1994, when both the IRA and loyalists declared ceasefires, and that now is the time for the leaders of the political republican movement to say that what happened in the past was wrong and should not have happened, and to issue an unequivocal apology for the actions of the Provisional IRA?

Hilary Benn: I simply say to the hon. Gentleman, who raises a very important point, that we as a House are clear that there was always—always—an alternative to violence: it was not justified; it was never justified. When we look at the number of people on all sides who were killed in the troubles, we know the grief, the pain and the suffering that was caused. However, we also need to recognise that there was a process that led to the ceasefires and political power sharing, which has resulted in peace and stability in Northern Ireland ever since the signing of the Good Friday agreement. That is the most important thing we should hold on to while, as I have said, learning the lessons from the past and providing answers to the families who remain to find them.

I think this is the final question, so I will just share with the House that, about three and a half or four weeks ago, I went to Bragan bog with the two brothers and the sister of Columba McVeigh. He was 19 years of age when he was murdered by the Provisional IRA, and information suggests that his remains lie in that bog. It is a desolate place, and the search for his body has been going on for a very long time. The Independent Commission for the Location of Victims' Remains has done such an important job in helping to bring back the remains of people who were murdered in such circumstances, so they could be laid to rest with their families present. I, like I am sure all Members of the House, long for the day when the bodies of Columba McVeigh, Robert Nairac, Seamus Maguire and Joe Lynskey are finally

recovered, so all of the disappeared can rest where they should rest, with the knowledge of their families, so they can have some peace.

Mr Speaker: Final question—Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Mine is always the final, final question, Mr Speaker. I thank the Secretary of State very much for his answers. I also thank all of the security forces, the Army and the RUC for all they did to save lives. I think this House, the nation and Northern Ireland owe them a great debt for all they have done, and we should put that on the record.

When thinking of Kenova, my mind goes back to 1984 and the case of Jimmy Young, who lived in Portaferry in my constituency of Strangford. His case was part of the file sent to the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland that included a report on Stakeknife's involvement, but no prosecution was ever initiated. What steps will be taken to ensure that the family members who are still alive and mourning Jimmy's killing have access to as much information as legally possible and get some form of justice for his murder? I always ask for justice, and I am asking for justice for Jimmy Young and this family.

Hilary Benn: The hon. Gentleman—

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Cameron Thomas) should please not walk in front of the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) when the Secretary of State is answering his question.

Cameron Thomas (Tewkesbury) (LD): I apologise, Mr Speaker.

Hilary Benn: The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) always makes his contribution on matters such as finding answers for the families with real force and compassion. As he will be aware, Operation Kenova submitted a number of files to the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland. In only one case has a prosecution been taken forward, and I referred to that in my reply to the right hon. Member for Belfast East. In other cases, the PPS decided there was not a basis for a prosecution.

That is of course frustrating, but the independence of our prosecutorial system is an absolutely essential safeguard for all of us. It has to make a judgment that the two tests, of whether there is a reasonable prospect of a conviction and whether it is in the public interest to prosecute, are met. However, that does not mean that the family mentioned by the hon. Member for Strangford cannot still seek to get answers. That is what the commission is for: that is work it is undertaking currently and that it will do in the future, under the new arrangements that I hope the House will agree to put in place. We should leave no stone unturned in trying to give families what they have been looking for for such a long time, and I wish that for the family he mentioned.

Grooming Gangs: Independent Inquiry

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Before I call the Home Secretary to make the statement, I remind hon. Members that they should not refer to any specific cases currently before the courts, and that they should exercise caution with respect to any specific cases that might subsequently come before the courts, in order not to prejudice those proceedings.

1.30 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Shabana Mahmood): With your permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will make a statement on the independent inquiry into grooming gangs, the appointment of its chair and panel, and the inquiry's terms of reference.

I know that, for many, this day is long overdue. For years, the victims of these awful crimes were ignored. First abused by vile predators, they then found themselves belittled and even blamed, when it was justice they were owed.

In January, my predecessor asked Baroness Casey of Blackstock, who is here with us today, to conduct a national audit on group-based child sexual exploitation and abuse. With devastating clarity, Baroness Casey revealed the horror that lies behind that jargonistic term. It is vital that we, too, call these crimes what they were: multiple sexual assaults, committed by multiple men, on multiple occasions.

Children were submitted to beatings and gang rapes. Many contracted sexually transmitted infections. Some were forced to have abortions. Others had their children taken from them. But it was not just these awful crimes that now shame us. There was also an abject failure by the state, in its many forms, to fulfil its most basic duty: protecting the young and vulnerable.

Worse still, some in positions of power turned a blind eye to the horror, or even covered it up. Despite a shameful lack of national data, Baroness Casey was clear that in some local areas where data was available "disproportionate numbers of men from Asian ethnic backgrounds" were "amongst the suspects". Like every member of my community who I know, I am horrified by these acts. We must root out this evil, once and for all. The sickening acts of a minority of evil men, as well as those in positions of authority who looked the other way, must not be allowed to marginalise or demonise entire communities of law-abiding citizens.

What is required now is a moment of reckoning. We must cast fresh light on this darkness. In her audit, Baroness Casey called for a national inquiry. In June, the Government accepted that recommendation. Today, I can announce the chair and panel that will form the leadership of the inquiry, and a draft of the inquiry's terms of reference.

The inquiry will be chaired by Baroness Anne Longfield. As many in this place will know, Baroness Longfield was the Children's Commissioner from 2015 to 2021. She has devoted her life to children's rights, including running a charity supporting and protecting young people, and working for Prime Ministers of different political parties. In recognition of her service, Baroness Longfield was elevated to the Lords earlier this year. At that point, she took the Labour Whip, which she will now resign on taking up this appointment.

Alongside her, I can also announce her two fellow panellists. The first is Zoë Billingham CBE. Zoë is a former inspector at His Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary, and currently serves as chair of Norfolk and Suffolk NHS foundation trust. She brings deep expertise in safeguarding and policing, specifically in holding forces to account. The second panellist is Eleanor Kelly CBE. Eleanor is the former chief executive of Southwark council. In 2017, she supported the survivors of the London Bridge terrorist attacks, and the victims of the Grenfell Tower fire of the same year. Together, the chair and panel bring deep experience of championing children's rights, knowledge of policing and local government, and, crucially, a proven track record of holding powerful institutions to account. Each individual was recommended by Baroness Casey, and her recommendation follows recent engagement with victims. The first thing the chair and panel will do, alongside Baroness Casey, is meet victims later this week.

Today, we also publish the draft terms of reference, which I will place in the House of Commons Library. Baroness Casey was clear this inquiry must be time-limited to ensure justice is swift for those who have already waited too long. For that reason, it will be completed within three years, supported by a £65 million budget. The inquiry will be a series of local investigations, overseen by a national panel with full statutory powers. Baroness Longfield has confirmed that Oldham will have a local investigation. The chair and panel will determine the other locations in due course. No area will be able to resist a local investigation.

These terms of reference are clear on a number of vital issues. The inquiry is focused, specifically, on child sexual abuse committed by grooming gangs. It will consider, explicitly, the background of offenders, including their ethnicity and religion, and whether the authorities failed to properly investigate what happened out of a misplaced desire to protect community cohesion.

The inquiry will act without fear or favour, identifying individual, institutional and systemic failure, inadequate organisational responses, and failures of leadership. It will also work hand in hand with the police where new criminality comes to light, be that by the perpetrators or those who covered up their crimes. The inquiry will pass evidence to law enforcement, so they can take forward any further prosecutions and put more of these evil men behind bars.

The inquiry must, and will, place victims and survivors at the forefront, with a charter setting out how they will participate and how their views, experiences and testimony will shape the inquiry's work. As I have said already, the terms are in draft form. The chair will now consult on them with victims and other stakeholders. They will be confirmed no later than March, when the inquiry can begin its work in earnest.

Alongside launching this inquiry, Baroness Casey's audit contained a number of other recommendations, which the Government accepted in full. As the inquiry begins its work, we continue righting these wrongs. I can announce today that I have commissioned new research from UK Research and Innovation to rectify the unacceptable gaps in our understanding of perpetrators' backgrounds and motivations, including their ethnicity and religion. My predecessor wrote to all police forces calling on them to improve the collection of ethnicity data, and while the Home Secretary does

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not currently have the power to mandate that it is collected, I will rectify that by legislating at the earliest possible opportunity.

The Department for Education is currently interrogating gaps in “children in need” data identified in the audit, which seem to under-report the scale of this crisis. The Secretary of State for Education, my right hon. Friend the Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson), will soon publish the findings of an urgent review of that data conducted by her Department. Across Government, the audit identified that poor data sharing continues to put children at risk. As a result, we are introducing a legal duty for information sharing between safeguarding partners. We are creating a unique identifier for every child, linking all data across Government, and we are upgrading police technology to ensure data can be shared across agencies.

The audit also identified an absurdity in our legal system, which saw some child rapists convicted of lesser crimes. As a result, we are now changing the law to make clear that children cannot consent when they have been raped by an adult, so perpetrators are charged for the hideous crime they have, in fact, committed.

While the law has protected abusers from the consequences of their crimes, it has too often punished victims. Some survivors were convicted for crimes they had been coerced into, continuing their trauma to this day. We are already legislating in the Crime and Policing Bill to disregard offences related to prostitution, and the Ministry of Justice is now working with the Criminal Cases Review Commission to ensure that it is resourced to review applications from individuals who believe they were wrongly criminalised.

The national audit identified further weaknesses in relation to taxi licensing. Abusers were applying for licences in areas where controls were lax to circumvent protections put in place by local councils to tackle abuse. My right hon. Friend the Transport Secretary will soon be legislating to close that dangerous loophole in the regulation of taxis.

The audit was clear that justice has not been done. Baroness Casey requested a new national police investigation to bring offenders to justice. Last month, the National Crime Agency launched Operation Beaconport to review previously closed cases of child sexual exploitation. It has already flagged more than 1,200 cases for potential reinvestigation, more than 200 of which are high-priority cases of rape. The evil men who committed those crimes, and thought that they got away with them, will find they have nowhere to hide.

Finally, the audit called on the Government to fund the delivery of its recommendations. Alongside investment in the inquiry itself, I can announce today that a further £3.65 million will be committed this year to the policing operation, survivor support and research into grooming gangs.

That work is essential, but there can be no justice without truth. Today, I have announced the chair and panel of an inquiry that will shine a bright light on this dark moment in our history. They will do so alongside the victims of these awful crimes, who have waited too long to see justice done. This inquiry is theirs, not ours,

so I call on all those present to put politics aside for a moment and to support the chair and her panel in the pursuit of truth and justice. I commend this statement to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the shadow Home Secretary.

1.42 pm

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): Let us remember that victims are at the heart of this. Young girls, some only 10 years old, were groomed and gang raped by men of mainly Pakistani origin—girls like Jane, who was just 12 years old when she was raped by an illegal immigrant; when she was found by police, instead of arresting the rapist, they arrested Jane. Anna, only 15 years old, repeatedly told social workers that she had been gang raped, but instead of helping her, they allowed her to marry her main abuser in an Islamic ceremony that was attended by the very social worker who should have protected her.

Last week, sentencing remarks from several of these terrible cases were published. I warn the House that some of them are extremely graphic. One perpetrator, Mohammed Karrar, raped a 12-year-old girl, and when she tried to fight back, he hit her with a baseball bat and then inserted the handle into her vagina. He also injected her with heroin and forced her to take crack cocaine.

Another man, Arshid Hussain, viciously beat a young girl, stubbed out a cigarette on her chest and tied her up; she was then repeatedly raped by numerous Asian men. The same man, Arshid Hussain, also called a victim, who had been raped and abused since the age of just seven, “white trash”. He said that Asian girls would not do what he was forcing her to do. There was an explicit racial element to his crime; he was raping his victim because she was white.

The identity of the majority of the perpetrators is something that should not be hidden. A 2020 study by academics at the University of Southampton and the University of Reading reviewed 498 grooming gang convictions. They found that 83% of the perpetrators were of Muslim background, and specifically mainly of Pakistani heritage. The Casey and Telford reports made similar observations.

The fact is that these crimes were deliberately covered up by those in authority who were more interested in so-called community relations and in avoiding being called racist than they were in protecting young girls. I spoke to a retired police officer who was told by a serving chief superintendent to stop investigating abuse by Pakistani-origin taxi drivers in Bradford because the local police did not want to offend Bradford’s Muslim community. I have sent the name of that officer to the police for investigation. A former Labour MP, Simon Danczuk, was even told by the then chair of the parliamentary Labour party to stop asking questions, in order to avoid antagonising the Muslim community in his town.

Yet when the need for a national inquiry was raised in January, the Prime Minister disgracefully smeared those calling for an inquiry as “far right”. What the Prime Minister claimed in January was a far-right bandwagon had become Government policy by June, so will the Home Secretary apologise on behalf of the Prime Minister for what he said last January?

The truth is that it should not have taken several months and the threat of a vote in Parliament to agree to the inquiry in the first place, and it should not have taken another six months to appoint a chair. That is what the survivors and their families told me yesterday.

One of the most disturbing elements of this scandal is the deliberate cover-up of the crimes, as I have said, so will the Home Secretary assure the House that those in authority who covered up the crimes will be prosecuted for the offence of misconduct in public office? Will she also ensure that the inquiry refers such cases to the police for investigation? Can she confirm that the inquiry will formally start in March 2026, and that the final report will be published publicly three years later, in March 2029?

We have not yet seen the terms of reference. Survivors and their families, whom I met yesterday, are concerned that the scope of the inquiry may be too broad. Will the Home Secretary confirm that it will focus specifically on localised, group-based grooming gangs, and that it will analyse and report on the ethnicity and religious background of the perpetrators? She mentioned local inquiries sitting underneath the national inquiry. Can she specifically confirm that those local inquiries will be completely independent of the bodies they are investigating, particularly local councils and local police forces? They cannot be allowed to investigate themselves. Will the Home Secretary also confirm that the parents of survivors and victims will be able to serve on the panel? I spoke yesterday to two parents of survivors who felt that they had been excluded from the previous panels.

For many survivors and victims, the truth has been hidden for far too long. These crimes were covered up because those in authority were more concerned about so-called community relations and avoiding being called racist than they were about protecting young children. That was an abject moral failure. The truth, at last, must come out.

Shabana Mahmood: I thank the shadow Secretary of State for his remarks. He read out excerpts from some of the court transcripts that have been made public, and like other hon. Members, I have read some of them as well. They make for truly horrifying reading. They are the starkest reminder, for everyone in this House and beyond, that it is absolutely essential that we collectively do right by the victims, who have had such unimaginable horrors inflicted upon them. I hope that that is the spirit in which we can engage across this House as the inquiry gets up and running and continues its work.

Now that we have a chair and a panel in place, this is a moment to elevate the discussion beyond our usual trading of party political points across the Dispatch Boxes. The shadow Secretary of State has a critique of the Government, and I will robustly defend the Government of which I am a part. We have always been focused on the outcome of justice and truth for victims, and less so on the process itself, but it was this Government that asked Baroness Casey to do her national audit. She followed the evidence and recommended this national inquiry. That is what we are doing and what we have supported. Now that we have a chair and a panel, this is a moment to do right by the victims. They are a diverse cohort of people who will have different views and will all feel, regardless of where they stand on the inquiry itself, some degree of anxiety about what will happen

next. They will need some reassurance that we can rise above our usual political discourse and unite in support for the chair and the panel as they do this important work.

For most of the shadow Secretary of State's detailed questions, the answer is a straightforward yes. Let me just reassure him that there will be no dilution of the scope; the inquiry is very clearly focused on the exact problem that was named by Baroness Casey in her national audit.

To the extent that the inquiry finds evidence of potential misconduct in public office or other breaches of the law, it will of course work closely with our partners in law enforcement. The whole point of this inquiry is to ensure that actions result from the investigations and that people are properly held to account, including by facing the full force of the law. I am sure that the inquiry, once it reports, it will have other things to say—potentially even about strengthening the law. It is important that we let the inquiry do its work, but it will not be held back from making findings that lead to further investigations and accountability through the legal system.

On timings, I can confirm to the shadow Secretary of State that the draft terms of reference will be confirmed no later than March, although it could come a little earlier. We anticipate up to three months for the draft terms of reference and then up to three years for the inquiry to conclude, so no later than March 2029. The report will come then, too. That is the timetable that the chair and panel members have signed up to.

On the local investigations, it is of course right that they will not be investigating themselves. The work of the local investigations will be under the auspices of the chair and her panel, who will ensure that those investigations are held to the standard that they will set and follow themselves. They will also decide which other areas they wish to be included in the local investigations, and I am sure that Members will want to make representations to them. No area anywhere in England or Wales will be able to resist having a local investigation under the auspices of the inquiry, which of course has all the statutory powers that one would expect such an inquiry to have.

I think I have dealt with all the issues raised by the shadow Secretary of State. I look forward to a more constructive dialogue between us, hopefully, as the inquiry gets under way.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): As you know, Madam Deputy Speaker, I have spent 13 years researching this most evil of crimes. I do not know how or where to start, but let me boil it down to a couple of things. First, I still have no idea why those who were paid to protect children did not do that, so I hope the inquiry finds that out and ensures there is no way that can happen again. Secondly, I believe that the scale of this spans to literally every town, city and village in the United Kingdom, so I hope the inquiry and the NCA work is able to cover all of that.

That brings me to my substantive point, which is that this is going to cost a lot of money. Every case that is found will need an investigation, and local authorities will also have to put child protection measures in place. In Rotherham, all that money has come from the local

[Sarah Champion]

authority. Can the Home Secretary assure us that our local authorities will have child protection money and that our police forces will have the resources they need to get the prosecutions we have to see?

Shabana Mahmood: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for her long work exposing many of the issues herself in her area, which will now be the subject of the national inquiry. She is right: it is utterly shocking and defies comprehension that people whose only job was to look after vulnerable children failed in their duty to those children. The inquiry will ensure that those people face ultimate accountability for their failures.

I hear my hon. Friend's point about the inquiry covering every single area, and there is no doubt that child abuse occurs in every part of the country. One of Baroness Casey's recommendations was that the inquiry be time-limited, because so many of the victims and survivors have waited so long for a proper measure of justice in their cases. She recognised that there is a necessary trade-off between the inquiry being time-limited and it being able to go to every single area. I am sure, though, that the inquiry, the chair and the panel will engage constructively with Members across this House to ensure that they get to the right areas and can draw the lessons that will then lead to national recommendations. Even if the lessons come from a smaller cohort of areas, all the recommendations will apply absolutely everywhere.

The Government have invested billions in child protection measures already in this Parliament, but I recognise the call that my hon. Friend has made. I am sure that when the recommendations are made, the Government will respond on money in due course.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): The despicable, sickening crimes that we have heard about today were first reported in the press more than 20 years ago, and the victims have already waited far too long for justice, so we welcome today's announcement. We also welcome other details in the statement, including reforms to ensure that children cannot be considered to have consented to sexual activity with adults—the fact that that was the case is a shame on our nation—and moves to close loopholes in taxi licensing, as well as the points about data collection.

Some questions remain about the process. How will the Government ensure that the inquiry remains fully independent and free from political influence and pressures regardless of the strong pressures it will face, including from in this House, and that it runs to timetable? Are Ministers still in touch with the women who recently resigned from the previous panel to offer them the chance to rejoin the process now that it is gaining some pace? What steps will the inquiry take to maintain the trust of the victims and their families? Will the Home Secretary commit to implementing all the previous recommendations from the previous Casey and Jay reviews?

The national audit highlighted the incompleteness of data, but it was suggestive of concerning trends related to the modes of organisation and how they relate to ethnicity, particularly in the areas where police were

recording appropriate data. The Home Secretary rightly mentioned cohesion in her statement. How will this inquiry avoid stigmatising entire communities and undermining efforts to improve cohesion in this subject and in others adjacent while thoroughly investigating the matter and ensuring that victims get the justice they deserve?

Shabana Mahmood: I thank the Liberal Democrat spokesman for his remarks. Let me reassure him that the track records of the chair and the two panel members speak for themselves. These are three women who have a long track record of holding public authorities to account; and in the case of Baroness Longfield, the chair, they have done so under different political parties. They have shown in their work that they are unafraid of whoever the political masters might be when holding to account police forces, local authorities or other organisations, so I think we should take some encouragement from that. I know that Baroness Casey recommended these individuals because of their track record and their deep experience in holding authorities to account, and I am sure they will bring all that experience to bear as they conduct the work of the national inquiry.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the panel of victims and survivors. They have been written to by the chair and the panel today. The particular panel that was set up to help get the inquiry going will now necessarily disband, as the inquiry will now get up and running, but the inquiry itself will have a victims charter that will set out how the inquiry will ensure that victims and survivors are at the heart of this process and ensure that they feel a sense of confidence and trust in the inquiry's work.

On earlier recommendations from previous reports, the hon. Gentleman will know that we are commencing our work on all the recommendations made by Baroness Casey in her national audit and that we continue our work implementing the IICSA inquiry's recommendations. There will be more announcements to come later this week and next on that, which I will not pre-empt today.

The hon. Gentleman asked about avoiding stigmatising entire communities, and I totally hear and understand the point he is making. It is obviously of concern to many Members in this House, including myself. In my experience, every community wants these people locked up and these individuals—these vile rapists—to face the full force of the law. Those who feel stigmatised by the behaviour of these criminals might even feel that more strongly than others. It is in everyone's interests that we get to the truth. There is never anything to be afraid of with the truth; once we have established truth, justice can take place, and we as a society can learn lessons for the future.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West, Chadderton and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): The announcement of the chair, panel, terms of reference and timelines are welcome. Survivors have waited to engage in the formal process, and it is important for them and for others yet to come forward that the inquiry leaves no stone unturned, is not restricted by time and follows the evidence wherever it may lead. We have heard quite a lot about race being an important characteristic of the form of abuse that we are talking about here, but can we not lose sight of class? Of course, the perpetrators were by and large Pakistani men, but the social workers and police officers were not,

and they had a view of these girls that absolutely determined how they were treated. Can the Home Secretary confirm that the national inquiry format, together with deep dives, will ensure that cross-border offending, which transcended local authority and police boundaries, will be covered and not allowed to fall through the net?

Shabana Mahmood: On my hon. Friend's point about cross-border offending, I can absolutely reassure him that it will not be allowed to slip through the net. The chair and her panel members have already confirmed that.

My hon. Friend made an important point, which nobody in the House should lose sight of, about the view that many in society took of the girls who were raped and abused. They were seen in many parts of society, in some local authorities and in some policing essentially as white trash. There was the view that somehow they were not really children or victims of coercion and serious abuse, but were making decisions, as if they were in control of their lives. That is why this process is so essential. It must ensure that the moment of reckoning that is required because of this shocking scandal is fair and true to the victims in every way. That applies both to the vile perpetrators of the crimes, who the criminal justice response will go after, and those in our state institutions who thoroughly let these girls down.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee.

Dame Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): I thank the Home Secretary for her statement, and I welcome the appointment of the noble Baroness Longfield as chair of the panel. She has a great track record. I have worked with her over many years and am sure that she will do a very thorough job. I am very grateful that victims are being put at the centre of the inquiry. This is about the victims, and we cannot forget their terrible suffering. They must be front and centre of everything that the inquiry does. What would happen if, during one of the local inquiries, new evidence or a new issue arises? Will it be possible to go back and look at previous inquiries, including those that have already completed, if certain issues were not identified, but are raised through this new work?

Shabana Mahmood: I thank the Chair of the Committee for her comments and question. I assure her that victims and survivors will be at the heart of the inquiry; that is clear in the draft terms of reference. There will also be a charter created by the chair and panel, and I think that will give victims and survivors some comfort about how they can inform the work of the inquiry, and about the trust and confidence that they can place in the process, both of which are very much necessary.

On the question on evidence, in the end, the inquiry has to go where the evidence takes it. I am sure that it has the freedom to pursue that evidence wherever it may lead, and to then make recommendations. That could mean that new criminal cases are pursued. It could mean other action is taken against public authority figures. It could mean finding gaps in the law that need to be filled. The draft terms of reference will be consulted on, and if people feel that they need to be strengthened, I am sure that they can engage with the chair and panel to strengthen them. There will be a period of consultation,

but the intention is to make sure that the inquiry does the job that should always have been done, that the criminal justice system is fit for purpose, and that there is accountability for everyone who let these girls down.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): I strongly welcome the appointment of Anne Longfield as the chair of the new independent inquiry into national grooming gangs. As the Home Secretary said, the key is to find the facts and follow the evidence, wherever it leads. During the trial of some of the Rochdale child rapists earlier this year, the prosecution said that the abuse of the girls took place

"under the noses of social workers and others who should have done far more to protect them".

Does the Home Secretary agree that we must hold to account anyone who ignored these crimes, and that no council, police officer, social worker or racial group should ever be exempt from the scrutiny of this new inquiry?

Shabana Mahmood: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I strongly endorse every point he just made. There will be no place to hide for those who hurt these girls, those who let them down, and those who allowed them to be hurt. It is important that this inquiry finally provides us—all of us as a country—with the answers we need, so that we can learn lessons, bring a measure of justice to the victims in this case, and make sure that this never happens again.

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

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): The Home Secretary knows that I admire her personally. She is a devout Muslim lady, and I share many of her values. I think she is uniquely well placed to comment on this, explain and give us confidence. What is it about these Muslim men that meant that they felt that they could behave in this way, and can she explain that this is—if it is—a very small minority? Can she see what I am trying to get at? She can approach this, and explain this, in a way that some of us cannot, because nobody can ever accuse her of being racist, and nobody can ever accuse her of not wanting to get to the truth.

Shabana Mahmood: It is difficult to find oneself the spokesperson for billions of people around the world, but let me respond to the right hon. Gentleman from my personal perspective, based on my constituency experience, and the experience of my family and friends, and of the community I belong to back home in Birmingham. There is nothing Muslim or Islamic about the acts that these evil men have perpetrated. It is not behaviour that any of us would accept or tolerate. All these things are crimes, and I do not know anybody who does not believe that these people should be locked up for a very, very long time.

I also know about the anxiety and fear that members of the particular faith minority community that I belong to feel when these are the stories in the news. They feel that a collective view is taken of the whole community. That is why I made the point about making sure that we go after the perpetrators of these evil crimes, and not allowing the behaviour of this minority to affect the way that we relate to the rest of the law-abiding citizens of this community in our country. We are very lucky to

[*Shabana Mahmood*]

live in a very diverse country, and we largely do a good job of holding all the different peoples of our country together.

We should always pursue justice without fear or favour, because in the end, that is the only way to maintain confidence in our system of justice and ensure that we do not inadvertently harm community relations, which is what I think has happened because of the actions of those who looked the other way when the crimes were being committed.

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): I commend the Home Secretary for the tone in which she has approached this very sensitive subject. I met victims and survivors in West Yorkshire, including representatives of the Bradford survivor leadership group, brought together by West Yorkshire Mayor Tracy Brabin and the deputy mayor and police and crime commissioner Alison Lowe. The victims and survivors told the gathered group of MPs that they wanted action. They were very clear that they wanted to ensure the implementation of the findings of past inquiries, and I am glad that this Government have wasted no time in implementing the findings of the Jay review and, as the Home Secretary has confirmed today, the other recommendations in Baroness Casey's national audit. Secondly, victims and survivors want us to learn from good practice. I recommend that the incoming chair, Baroness Longfield, looks at some of what the West Yorkshire police are doing. Since 2016, Operation Dalesway has convicted many defendants, resulting in over 2,000 years of imprisonment. The third thing they asked for was ongoing engagement, so I would like to invite Baroness Longfield to come and listen to the victims and survivors in Bradford and West Yorkshire.

Shabana Mahmood: I am sure that the chair and panel have heard my hon. Friend's request that they visit the area. She will understand that I will not speak for the chair and the panel members, but I know that Members across the House will want to make representations about their areas, and I am sure that all of that will be taken into consideration. My hon. Friend will know that Baroness Longfield knows Bradford well, having gone there to help turn around children's services in the local authority in relation to a different matter.

I recognise that, already, improvements have been made and lessons have been learned by my hon. Friend's local police. The inquiry will make recommendations about what we need to do at national level to learn the lessons and make sure that such criminality cannot take place again, but it is important that the good practice already taking place be shared with authorities all over the country. I will talk to Baroness Longfield about how we can ensure that we do not lose current good practice while we wait for the final recommendations of the inquiry.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): I welcome the Home Secretary's statement and the appointment of Baroness Longfield, who will be an excellent chair. When I met Professor Jay at the start of the year to talk about her inquiry, she impressed two points on me: the importance of a child protection authority, and the

importance of data sharing. Earlier this year, the safeguarding Minister, the hon. Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips), announced the establishment of a child protection authority. Will the Home Secretary update the House on progress in establishing that authority?

On data sharing, the Liberal Democrats have supported the Government's legislation to create a single unique identifier. Unfortunately, people outside this place are suggesting that it is the precursor to digital identification for children, and that the Government use children's data inappropriately. Will the Home Secretary reassure parents and carers that the Government will guard children's data with the utmost security, and will use it only to keep children safe, and to improve services for them?

Shabana Mahmood: On the hon. Lady's second point, let me provide reassurance that the data is to keep children safe. We have a duty to children in our country, and the recommendation on data sharing was well made and absolutely the right thing to do. The unique identifier is there as a child safety measure, and not for anything else. Some people may have legitimate concerns in this area and may need that reassurance; I think others are seeking to make mischief, but in any case, I confirm that the unique identifier is there solely as a child protection measure.

On the child protection authority, the hon. Lady is tempting me to gazump imminent announcements. I will not do so, but let me assure her that there will be a progress update very soon.

Chris Murray (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): I welcome this significant set of announcements from the Home Secretary and the strong panel members appointed. The Home Secretary will be aware that the Scottish Government have finally announced a review of grooming gangs in Scotland. The chair, Alexis Jay, has said that Scotland does not grasp the scale of child sexual exploitation. I know from my previous experience of working to prevent trafficking that children are trafficked between Scotland and the rest of the UK for abuse. Will the Home Secretary confirm that the inquiry will liaise and collaborate with colleagues in Scotland, and that Home Office officials will do what is needed to support that? Abusers work across the border, so we must as well.

Shabana Mahmood: Matters pertaining to local authorities and police forces are, of course, devolved, so a large part of the inquiry is necessarily only on devolved territory, but it will make national recommendations. I note the work happening in Scotland in relation to grooming gangs. I am sure that the chair and the panel, while respecting the boundaries of devolution, will ensure discussion where there is best practice to be shared. Of course, this criminality does not respect borders, and I am sure that will be very much taken into account.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I welcome the Home Secretary's statement, and associate myself with her reply to the Father of the House. No community, whether ethnic or religious, should be stigmatised as a whole. She mentioned "British Asian" in her statement. May I say that some members of my British Asian Hindu and British Asian Sikh communities are rather fed up with remarks and statements made about generic

“British Asians”, both in the media and in this place? I hope that the inquiry will be more definitive and descriptive; she mentioned religion in her statement.

As the Home Secretary will know, Telford and Wrekin had its own local inquiry, led by Tom Crowther. Her predecessor, to paraphrase, said that there were still gaps to be filled, after that inquiry. Will she support me in calling for the national inquiry to come back to Telford and Wrekin, to ensure that everything that needs to be done is done? Finally, the Home Secretary mentioned a three-year timetable, taking us to March 2029. Will she give victims, the House and all our constituents a commitment that if there is an election in May 2029 and Prorogation in March 2029—she may be the Labour leader by then—the inquiry will still report?

Shabana Mahmood: I thank the right hon. Member for his questions. I have heard much the same complaint from Asian men in my constituency who are not Muslim or of Pakistani heritage but are of Asian heritage—that the descriptions confuse and stigmatise a wider group of people. I think we should all agree that we should not stigmatise innocent, law-abiding citizens in our country, no matter who they are, because that is wrong in every way. We should go after the criminals who have committed these atrocious crimes.

In the end, the best way to resolve these matters is to collect accurate ethnicity data. That was the gap that Baroness Casey found in her national audit. It is a gap that has existed for many years, and I intend to put that right. As I said in my statement, the Home Secretary does not have the power to mandate the collection of good-quality ethnicity data. I will legislate to change that, and will ensure that every Home Secretary in future has that power. It is my view that we should collect ethnicity data for all offences, because the best way to deal with suggestions of a conspiracy—people thinking that some communities are allowed to get away with certain types of behaviour, or that the state does not wish to know the full facts of any case—is to have transparency, and accurate data that put all those claims and counterclaims to bed. That is how the Government will seek to proceed.

On Telford, I heard the right hon. Member’s case. I will resist the temptation to tell the chair and the panel where they should go; where they go for their local investigations is a matter for them. They will set out the criteria for making those decisions, in accordance with the draft terms of reference. However, he made his case powerfully, and I am sure that will have been heard by the chair and the panel members.

On the three-year timetable, we have closely followed Baroness Casey’s recommendation. She said that three years was the right amount of time to do a good job, get the work done and make recommendations, and nothing—not even a general election—should get in the way of that.

Harpreet Uppal (Huddersfield) (Lab): I welcome the appointment of Baroness Longfield and the two panellists to the inquiry. The Home Secretary mentioned that victims and survivors will be at the heart of the inquiry. Can she set out a little more about what that participation will look like?

On the potential reinvestigation of 1,200 cases—that is really important; we must ensure that happens—we know that too many victims and survivors are already

facing unacceptable court delays. What discussions is the Home Secretary having with colleagues at the Ministry of Justice to ensure that progress happens at pace?

Shabana Mahmood: My hon. Friend is right about the need for victims and survivors to be at the heart of the process; that is clear from the draft terms of reference. To begin with, the chair and the panel alongside Baroness Casey will meet the current victims and survivors panel, who have been involved in getting the inquiry set up and running. They will then create the charter, which will set the framework by which the inquiry will ensure that victims and survivors are at the heart of the inquiry, to give those victims and survivors the confidence and trust in the process that they rightly ask for and need. I am sure that the chair will be strong in putting that across.

I used to be the Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice, so I know the issues of delays in the criminal justice system across the board well. We are working closely with our colleagues in the Ministry of Justice to ensure that the old adage “justice delayed is justice denied” does not come true for these victims.

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): I have an urgent plea for the Home Secretary and the new chair, Baroness Longfield, who I know will be watching. They will both know that, shockingly, Keighley and the wider Bradford district have never had a full independent inquiry despite Ann Cryer raising the alarm more than 20 years ago. I, leading child abuse solicitor David Greenwood and local survivor Fiona Goddard supported by more than 5,000 local residents have written to the incoming chair urging her to immediately launch a targeted inquiry across Keighley and the wider Bradford district. Will the Home Secretary ensure that Baroness Longfield sees our letter, understands the overwhelming public will across Keighley on this issue and meets Fiona, David and me at the earliest opportunity so that we can ensure that Bradford district is at the heart of the national inquiry?

Shabana Mahmood: The hon. Member has made a strong and powerful case for the inclusion of Bradford and Keighley in the inquiry as one of the areas for a local investigation. I hope he will understand why I will not make commitments on behalf of Baroness Longfield, but I know that she will see the debate and hear all these representations. She and the panel members will very soon set out the criteria by which they will make decisions about where they will go for local investigations. I know that she and the panel members will want to engage with Members of the House. I hope that the hon. Member will take reassurance from that. I know that he is a doughty campaigner for his local area, and I am sure that those representations will be heard.

Sam Carling (North West Cambridgeshire) (Lab): I hugely welcome the appointment today of the chair and panel members, all of whom are brilliant appointments and who will do a thorough job. I am also pleased to see religion referred to in the terms of reference. IICSA unveiled serious problems in religious groups of many different faiths, many of which also operate as charities. Will the Secretary of State outline what progress the Government have already made on implementing recommendations from that inquiry? Will she also ask

[*Sam Carling*]

the relevant Minister to meet me to discuss strengthening charity regulations so that any religious organisations operating as charities that are found to have played a part in this can face action?

Shabana Mahmood: I believe my hon. Friend has already met the Minister for Safeguarding, but she has just told me that she is happy to meet him again. I am sure that that meeting will take place as quickly as possible. He will know that we are pressing ahead with implementation of the IICSA recommendations, as well as with the Casey audit recommendations. If there are any gaps, we will seek to fill them. The first thing is to meet the test of the recommendations that have already been made, but I look forward to discussing those further with him in due course.

Sarah Pochin (Runcorn and Helsby) (Reform): We at Reform UK welcome the progress announced today by the Home Secretary into this long-overdue inquiry and welcome the reassurance she has given that the victims of predominantly British Pakistani rape gangs will be properly consulted and involved in the inquiry. Will she confirm that her Safeguarding Minister will be called as a witness in the inquiry, as someone who voted against an inquiry earlier this year and in whom victims lost all confidence?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Jess Phillips): I would be happy to give evidence.

Shabana Mahmood: First, the Minister for Safeguarding will happily talk to anyone, anywhere and under any auspices about the need for justice for victims and survivors of these heinous crimes. Let me just say to the hon. Lady that I hope the House can elevate beyond party political point scoring. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] The most important thing here is to deliver the measure of justice that is needed for the victims and survivors of these horrific crimes. They will be at the heart of this inquiry and the inquiry will go wherever the evidence takes it.

Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab): I welcome the Home Secretary’s focus on victims and survivors, and her commitment that they will remain at the forefront of the inquiry’s approach. Will she also ensure that the findings and recommendations of previous inquiries and investigations are implemented so that the voices of victims who have already shared their horrific stories are never forgotten?

Shabana Mahmood: Let me give her that reassurance, and I hope that the progress the Government are making on implementing previous recommendations gives her and others some more of that reassurance. In the end, we prove ourselves to victims and survivors by doing and by taking the action that is so desperately needed, both from older recommendations and from the new ones that will come.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Few of us here today were present in 2003 when the then MP for Keighley, Mrs Ann Cryer—a courageous Labour Member

on the left of her party—spoke out about the grooming gangs. For her troubles, she was smeared as a racist, she was shunned and she was threatened to the point at which she had to have safety devices and emergency alarms installed in her home. Will the Home Secretary join me in paying tribute to her courage belatedly—it has never received any recognition, of which I am aware? Does she not think that Ann Cryer might even now have some insights to share with an inquiry as to what it is like when those who are supposed to be protecting people close ranks to protect the offenders instead?

Shabana Mahmood: Let me immediately right the wrong of Ann not having the recognition that she deserves and pay fulsome tribute to the work that she did in exposing not just the crimes themselves but the state failure that meant that so many people who are supposed to keep young girls safe were looking the other way. The right hon. Gentleman is right; it took immense courage for Ann to speak out all those years ago. She has deep experience and expertise, which I am sure Baroness Longfield and others will want to avail themselves of.

It can be a lonely road when someone exposes this kind of criminality, as it can be when holding to account other parts of the state that might not want to face up to what they have done. Ann walked that lonely road and we are only here today, with the knowledge that we have, because of the work that she started.

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): There is a concerning tendency to view these issues as historical, when in all likelihood there are working-class children being failed by institutions right now all across our country. Will the Home Secretary confirm that the inquiry will be able to respond to new information as it comes forward? Will she confirm that the inquiry will be able to account for the behaviour of institutions as well and that actionable, clear recommendations will be included to stop the failings happening again?

Shabana Mahmood: Let me say yes to my hon. Friend on both those counts and give him the reassurance that he has sought. It is the case that as new information or evidence comes to light, the inquiry will be able to pursue that and work closely with law enforcement and others to make sure that happens. He is right; sadly and devastatingly, it is undoubtedly the case that working-class children are today, once again, being let down and being hurt because those who should have kept them safe are not doing so. That is why we will never stop in our work across Government to keep the children of our country safe.

Mr Will Forster (Woking) (LD): I welcome the Home Secretary’s statement and the progress on this inquiry. My local authority, Surrey county council, has at best been slow to acknowledge its failures in child abuse and child safeguarding in the case of Sara Sharif from Woking. How will the Government ensure that both police forces and local authorities fully co-operate with this inquiry, particularly in areas with a history of under-reporting, cover-up and a lack of openness and transparency?

Shabana Mahmood: Let me say to him first that no local authority, whichever one it is, will be able to resist a local investigation if that is what the chair and the panellists wish to occur. Once they are under way with their local investigations, they will in the end make national-level findings and recommendations, which the Government will then respond to. I envisage that, in the end, whether an area is part of a local investigation or not, every area across England and Wales will have lessons to learn and legal duties that they will have to fulfil. I am sure that once the inquiry reports, potentially further legislation or other action will be taken.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Secretary of State for her statements. I particularly welcome the part about closing the loophole on taxi regulations. In my first outing in this place, I spoke about the challenges and problems caused by the loophole for cross-border hiring. Will the Secretary of State work at pace with her colleagues in the Department for Transport—I see the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Selby (Keir Mather), is sitting on the Front Bench—to ensure that this legislation gets through and that most people who use taxis across the country feel safe?

Shabana Mahmood: Let me pay tribute to my hon. Friend and the work that he has done on taxi regulation. I will happily ensure that we keep discussing with him the measures that we are bringing forward. Let me also provide him with the reassurance that we are working closely with our colleagues in the Department for Transport to ensure that the legislation in the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill is fit for purpose and does exactly what he and I would want it to do.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): The Scottish Government have announced a review of the grooming gangs evidence in Scotland, but that falls short of a full inquiry and disappoints many of the victims. I have asked for this before. Please will this UK Government extend their inquiry to the whole of the UK so that the victims of these appalling crimes get the justice they deserve? Grooming gangs operate in all parts of the UK; so should this inquiry.

Shabana Mahmood: I hear the force with which the point is made. I have a lot of sympathy with what the hon. Member and my colleagues from Scotland have said on how grooming gangs do not respect boundaries. That is a point that I know the inquiry chair and panel will take on board. Many of the public authorities that have failed children sit within devolved Departments. This is necessarily and primarily an England and Wales inquiry, but I expect there to be discussions with colleagues in the Scottish Government to ensure that all the lessons are learned across the whole of the United Kingdom. In the end, these are all our children and we all have a responsibility to keep them safe.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement and the Minister for Safeguarding for the work that she has done in this area over many, many years. It should shame us that so many people have waited for many years for today's announcement. Indeed, the right hon. Member for New

Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) hinted at the fact that some MPs were actually born after some of these offences took place. It is an absolute disgrace that it has taken so long to get to this point and, as we have heard, it comes a week after the Scottish Government have been shamed into considering their own inquiry. I use the word “shamed” deliberately. We know that £65 million is a lot of money, but is it enough? Will more be made available if needed? How will the Secretary of State keep herself and Members in the Chamber updated on the progress of the inquiry, particularly from the perspective of the survivors?

Shabana Mahmood: It is an independent inquiry, so there should be, and will be, some necessary limits on my engagement with the chair and the panel. As it is an independent inquiry, they will go wherever the evidence takes them. I am sure I will receive updates on timescale and on making sure that we are within the three years that has been agreed for the inquiry. I reassure my hon. Friend that I am sure that the correct level of resources has been made available for the inquiry to undertake its incredibly important work. I hear his point on devolution. I will not repeat my earlier answers but I hope, given that the subject matter should be of interest to all Members in this House regardless of which part of the United Kingdom we come from, that we are all doing everything we can to keep children in our country safe and that these lessons are learned across the board by everyone.

Mr Joshua Reynolds (Maidenhead) (LD): What steps will be taken across Government while this inquiry is ongoing to ensure that the victims of these horrible crimes are given proper support during the process?

Shabana Mahmood: Let me provide the hon. Member with reassurance. First, Operation Beaconport is up and running, and that involves the National Crime Agency's work to take a fresh look at what have been closed cases and bring more perpetrators to justice. Separately, once the inquiry is up and running, a victims charter will set out the way in which the inquiry will engage with victims and survivors to give them the trust and confidence that they need and deserve.

Rupert Lowe (Great Yarmouth) (Ind): As the Minister may know, we have been running our own independent inquiry into the rape gang scandal, funded by over 20,000 concerned people. Our hearings are taking place in early February next year. We have made immense progress to date, with more to come. Will the Home Secretary meet me to discuss how our work might assist the national inquiry, which we all want and need to succeed without further delay, as the rapes are continuing today?

Shabana Mahmood: There is only one statutory inquiry, and that is the one that this Government have initiated, the chair and panel of which I have announced today. If the hon. Member has collected evidence under his own auspices that is relevant to either current or past criminal proceedings or other evidence of state failure, he should make it available to the statutory inquiry.

BILL PRESENTEDSPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS AND DISABILITIES
EDUCATION (PROFIT CAP) BILL*Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)*

Munira Wilson, supported by Ed Davey and Caroline Voaden, presented a Bill to provide for a cap of 8% on any profit made by providers of special educational needs and disabilities education from providing that education; to make provision about the role and powers of the Competition and Markets Authority in the operation of that cap; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the first time; to be read a Second time on Friday 16 January 2026, and to be printed (Bill 346).

**UK-EU Customs Union
(Duty to Negotiate)***Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)*

2.33 pm

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to place a duty on the Secretary of State to enter into negotiations with the European Union to agree a customs union between the United Kingdom and the European Union; and for connected purposes.

Up and down the country, businesses know it, the public feel it and it is time that this House found the courage to lift our whispered voices and admit it: Brexit has been an abject economic failure. It has choked business investment, shattered economic resilience, strangled trade, shrunk the economy and left every single one of us poorer. The economic benefits of Brexit were only ever illusory and a mirage—the kind of shimmering promise you see in the desert in the midday heat that lures you towards it, only to find it always agonisingly out of reach; a promise that dissipates altogether as the cool of the evening returns. Well, that chill has descended, and now we can see clearly that the promises of 2016 and the oven-ready deals of 2021 were nothing more than the lukewarm figments of political opportunists who sought, and in some cases still seek, advantage in populism, in fragmentation and in fear.

Far from “taking back control”, today our country feels more precarious than ever. We lurch from crisis to crisis, uncertain of who we are, what we stand for or whether our children will be better off tomorrow than those who came before. Far from becoming a buccaneering “global Britain”, the United Kingdom is today weaker and more isolated than at any point in our recent history. Far from lowering food and living costs or slashing regulation, British businesses are now buried under 2 billion bits of red tape that stretch 15 times around the circumference of the Earth, all while the cost of living spirals even higher. Far from securing the transformative trading arrangements they promised, the Government have delivered only Australia and New Zealand deals worth a combined 0.1% to UK GDP and exposed British farmers to tougher competition and diluted protections. The India deal would add just 0.13%, and the much-heralded US agreement has shrunk from a growth opportunity into damage limitation following Trump’s tariffs.

Meanwhile, we have erected new barriers to our largest market, the European Union, which continues to represent around half of our global trade. The result? Tiny wins at the margins and a massive permanent hit at the core. That is not “global Britain”, and nor was it ever going to be. It is economics by consolation prize, and the country is paying the price.

Just last month, the National Bureau of Economic Research, a leading US think-tank, published a decade-long analysis concluding that Brexit has reduced UK GDP by between 6% and 8%. The House of Commons Library shows that Brexit is now costing the Treasury up to £90 billion every single year in lost tax receipts—money that could be supporting our NHS, our defence spending and our public services. In practical terms, the average Briton today is between £2,700 and £3,700 worse

off than if we had remained in the European Union. That is the reality of the Conservatives' botched Brexit deal.

Let me put this plainly. The most dishonest campaign in modern British political history promised that Brexit would save £350 million a week. Instead, Brexit is now costing this country £250 million every single day—[HON. MEMBERS: "Rubbish!"] That is why we have the highest tax burden in 70 years. That is why families face sky-high bills. That is why we remain trapped in a cost of living crisis. This is the lived reality of the very working people the Government claim to champion, but for whom they show neither the resolve nor the political will to protect. Conservative Members and Reform Members behind me may chunter, but it is the former leader of the Conservative party and Prime Minister, Sir John Major, who has noted:

"Brexit is a flop. It will not leap up from its death bed."

The Liberal Democrats believe that the most effective route to sustainable economic growth in our country is to rebuild our relationship with the European Union, our single most important trading partner. Just last week, the Prime Minister himself said:

"The Brexit deal significantly hurt our economy...so for economic renewal we must keep reducing frictions and move towards a closer relationship with the EU."

That view was echoed by the Deputy Prime Minister, who described a customs union as an inevitable "journey of travel". My Bill would propel us along that journey. It proposes a UK-EU customs union covering most goods, with a formal mechanism for UK consultation on new EU trade deals that affect us. It would lift the man-made constraints that are strangling our small and medium-sized enterprises, many of which have stopped trading with Europe altogether. This Bill is on the side of British business.

The Federation of Small Businesses is clear that the greatest burdens fall on firms with the fewest resources to adapt. Crocus, one of the largest horticultural businesses in the UK based in my Surrey Heath constituency, tells me that trade barriers add friction, inflate supply chain costs and cause damaging delays at our borders. Others warn that British-developed innovations risk being lifted and relocated to the continent—British ideas nurtured by British universities lost because electoral expediency was placed above economic reality.

Even if the Government stayed within their own self-defeating red lines, which merely replicate, of course, Theresa May's failed framework, a better deal with Europe could generate £25 billion extra per year for the Treasury. But the British public and British businesses want this Government to go further and faster. At a time when Office for National Statistics data shows rising numbers of young Britons leaving to work overseas, we have a national duty to support growth, ease household pressure and give young people a compelling reason to build their futures here in the UK.

As my party's former Northern Ireland spokesperson, I worked across the political divide to consider the practical implications of the Windsor framework. Red lanes, green lanes, parcel movements across the Irish sea—these barriers still hamper our internal market. A bespoke customs union would cut costs, smooth trade and reduce daily frictions for businesses in Northern Ireland. Those who value the Union should see more clearly than anyone that co-operation strengthens it far more than isolation ever could.

We do not strengthen the British economy by raising barriers to the market that takes 41% of our exports. We strengthen it by removing the barriers that were created so that a weak Prime Minister could pretend to be tough. A survey by the British Chambers of Commerce shows that nearly half of exporters cite customs procedures as their biggest barrier and 39% cite documentation complexity. The message from businesses is unambiguous: reduce friction and unleash growth.

A closer economic partnership with Europe is also a matter of our national security. Russia is defined by military expansionism and destabilisation. China grows more coercive and authoritarian by the year. Under a second Trump Administration, the United States has demonstrated a willingness to threaten and coerce even its closest allies in pursuit of hemispheric pre-eminence. In its recent national security strategy, the US welcomes "the growing influence of patriotic European parties" and says its goal

"should be to help Europe correct its current trajectory"—

a clear signal of intent to interfere in allies' domestic politics. In an increasingly fractious multipolar world, we must stand closest with those who share our values, our trade and our common security.

If we are serious about lifting this country out of stagnation, we must get Britain growing again, get Britain exporting again and make Britain competitive again. A bespoke UK-EU customs union would cut red tape, unlock investment and restore certainty to British business. To sit on our hands is to choose stagnation. To oppose this Bill is to prolong the cost of living crisis. To reject it is to hold back the small and medium-sized businesses that form the backbone of our economy.

Today the House has a clear choice: we can remain on a path of managed decline, or we can choose a future built on growth, confidence and opportunity. We can unleash once again the resilience, creativity and innovation of British business. I commend this Bill to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call Simon Hoare to speak for no more than 10 minutes.

2.43 pm

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): I rise to oppose the Bill—for those who know me, yes, I did say "oppose", and smelling salts are available through the usual channels, I am sure.

I listened intently to what my friend the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Dr Pinkerton) had to say, and he said it with great passion and his typical eloquence. He and I have worked together on Northern Irish issues and other issues since he entered this place. It is a pleasure to do so, and I am sorry that we are on separate sides this afternoon.

It might be cheeky of me to remind the hon. Gentleman that, of course, his party was the first party in this place that actually suggested a referendum on Britain's continued membership of the European Union. That is something often missed off Liberal Democrat leaflets—maybe they are too busy "winning here" to remind themselves of that.

The hon. Gentleman also declared, as a matter of fact, that the United Kingdom, post its membership of the European Union, is weaker and isolated. I honestly cannot fathom how he can arrive at that conclusion. The convening powers of the scenes outside Downing

[Simon Hoare]

Street yesterday when we stood with allies in support of Ukraine, the recent state visits of the US President and the German President, and the fact that this country is head of a Commonwealth, a leading member of NATO and a permanent member of the Security Council do not suggest to me a country that is weaker or more isolated—far from it. The two are entirely separate things.

The proposal in the Bill deserves to be opposed for four reasons. I say that as somebody who voted to remain part of the European Union in the referendum and campaigned strongly to do so, but I accepted the result of the referendum, as most people on the Conservative Benches did. I say to the hon. Member, whom I woke up to in my ear—[*Interruption.*] Before anybody worries about that, I was in my bedroom and he was on Radio 4—at least that is the story I am telling everybody. He said that we could be like Turkey—that was the relationship he was suggesting to the listeners of the “Today” programme—but Turkey aligns trade policy and tariffs with the common external tariff for industrial goods. It has no say on EU trade decisions, agriculture or services. I say respectfully to him and his colleagues that that in no way can meet the fundamental question that the electors of this country gave to us through that referendum decision. They wanted us to forge our own destiny. Whether that was going to be a path that was without a ripple or stumble-stone, nobody knew, but that was the instruction which the British people gave, and democrats of good faith said, “We will abide by that decision.” The hon. Gentleman’s argument may be liberal with a small l, but democratic it certainly is not.

The first reason is that the proposal in the Bill would fundamentally undermine the welcome and energetic efforts of His Majesty’s Government, principally led by the right hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), to continue to grow that iterative process of a relationship with the European Union without being part of it. That endeavour deserves the united support of all right hon. and hon. Members in this House because it will deliver, as always intended through that organic process, identification of creases and an attempt to iron them out. We all want to see small, micro and medium-sized businesses flourish and prosper. We all want to see an increase in trade with the European Union and the uplifting benefit that that will have to all our citizens. But the proposal before us in the Bill is not the way to achieve it because, as I say, it would fundamentally undermine the good offices of the Government in trying to achieve what it seeks to achieve.

My second point is that business needs certainty. With the exception of about six who survived the 2015 cull, I am afraid that not many on the Liberal Democrat Benches served in this place when we were trying to deliver Brexit. But the one thing they would have taken away had they been here—and thankfully, they were not—was that business wanted certainty. Slowly but surely, but with a certain degree of typical UK energy, flare and élan, businesses are now meeting the new trading regimes, and businesses up and down the country—small, medium, large and micro—are making a decent fist of it. We wish them well.

The process that the Government have under way is designed to—[*Interruption.*] Madam Deputy Speaker, if the Liberal Democrats wish to shout like this is some

sort of Harrogate Lib Dem spring fair, they can feel free so to do. Quite what Harrogate has ever done to deserve them, I do not know, but I will leave that to the good folk of Harrogate—we wish them well. To embark upon a customs union approach analogous to that of Turkey would be a mistake, because it would engender more uncertainty in the minds of British businesses just as they are settling their trading patterns and getting their heads around things, with the hope and promise that those creases will be further ironed out in the work that the Government are doing, through the right hon. Member for Torfaen.

The third reason is that, unless they met the requirements of the European Union, the trade deals that we have already entered into would have to be rewritten or scrapped. We are in the foothills of trying to maximise the benefits of those trade deals. They were never easy to deliver, but to start to unpick them now would show a degree of bad faith and certainly uncertainty in the collected and settled mind of the political class of this country.

The fourth reason, which I would suggest is probably the most compelling to even the most ardent rejoinders in Parliament, is that the European Union does not want it. The European Union now sees us for what we are. Whether we like it or not, we are a third country. This motion is an enormous arrogance. I cannot speak for all of them, but I have had the lucky and favourable opportunity of talking to senior EU officials about this very proposal. There is neither interest in nor appetite for it. They want to engage with the UK Government, as they are doing, in the organic evolution of what we have.

However—this is where we must look at it from the other end of the telescope—as far as the political leadership of the European Union are concerned, they have spent quite enough time dealing with the needs of the United Kingdom. They are very happy to engage in the tidying-up exercise and the Government’s spreading-out proposals, but to start from scratch, in some sort of perverse groundhog day approach to our withdrawal from the European Union is an utter nonsense. They are not interested in that, they do not want to go back to day one, they are perfectly happy with how things are, and they want to see it evolve.

For those four clear and compelling reasons, I say to colleagues across the House—whether they were ardent Brexiteers, ardent remainers or maybe even the one or two who were not entirely sure—this Bill should command no support, it has no merit, and it should be voted against should a Division be called.

Question put (Standing Order No. 23).

The House divided: Ayes 100, Noes 100.

Division No. 386]

[2.53 pm

AYES

| | |
|---|----------------------------|
| Abbott, rh Ms Diane (<i>Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy</i>) | Babarinde, Josh |
| Adam, Shockat | Bennett, Alison |
| Al-Hassan, Sadik | Berry, Siân |
| Amos, Gideon | Blackman, Kirsty |
| Anderson, Fleur | Brown-Fuller, Jess |
| Antoniazzi, Tonia | Burgon, Richard |
| Aquarone, Steff | Butler, Dawn |
| | Cane, Charlotte |
| | Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair |

Chadwick, David
Chamberlain, Wendy
Chambers, Dr Danny
Chowns, Dr Ellie
Coghlan, Chris
Collins, Victoria
Cooper, Daisy
Dance, Adam
Darling, Steve
Davey, rh Ed
Davies, Ann
De Cordova, Marsha
Dean, Bobby
Denyer, Carla
Doogan, Dave
Dyke, Sarah
Eastwood, Colum
Eastwood, Sorcha
Farron, Tim
Flynn, rh Stephen
Forster, Mr Will
Franklin, Zöe
George, Andrew
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Sarah
Gilmour, Rachel
Glover, Olly
Goldman, Marie
Gordon, Tom
Green, Sarah
Hanna, Claire
Harding, Monica
Heylings, Pippa
Hillier, Dame Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hussain, Mr Adnan
Hussain, Imran
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Liz
Jones, Clive
Khan, Afzal
Khan, Ayoub
Kohler, Mr Paul
Lake, Ben
Lamb, Peter

Law, Chris
Logan, Seamus
MacCleary, James
Maguire, Ben
Maguire, Helen
Martin, Mike (*Proxy vote cast by Bobby Dean*)
Mathew, Brian
Maynard, Charlie
Medi, Linos
van Mierlo, Freddie
Miller, Calum
Milne, John
Moran, Layla
Morello, Edward
Morgan, Helen
Morrison, Mr Tom
Munt, Tessa
Naish, James
O'Hara, Brendan
Olney, Sarah
Opher, Dr Simon
Perteghella, Manuela
Pinkerton, Dr Al
Reynolds, Mr Joshua
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Roome, Ian
Sabine, Anna
Savage, Dr Roz
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Slade, Vikki
Smart, Lisa
Sollom, Ian
Taylor, Luke
Thomas, Cameron
Voaden, Caroline
Wilkinson, Max
Wilson, Munira
Wishart, Pete
Wrigley, Martin

Tellers for the Ayes:
Claire Young and
Susan Murray

NOES

Allister, Jim
Anderson, Lee
Andrew, rh Stuart
Argar, rh Edward
Bacon, Gareth
Baldwin, Dame Harriett
Barclay, rh Steve
Bedford, Mr Peter
Bhatti, Saqib
Blackman, Bob
Bool, Sarah

Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, rh Dame Karen
Brandreth, Aphra
Brash, Mr Jonathan
Burghart, Alex
Cartlidge, James
Cleverly, rh Sir James
Cocking, Lewis
Cooper, John
Costa, Alberto
Cross, Harriet

Davies, Mims
Dewhurst, Charlie
Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Duncan Smith, rh Sir
Iain
Evans, Dr Luke
Fortune, Peter
Fox, Sir Ashley
Francois, rh Mr Mark
French, Mr Louie
Fuller, Richard
Glen, rh John
Grant, Helen
Griffith, Andrew
Griffiths, Alison
Harris, Rebecca
Hayes, rh Sir John
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Holden, rh Mr Richard
Hollinrake, Kevin
Holmes, Paul
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenrick, rh Robert
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Jopp, Lincoln
Kruger, Danny
Lamont, John
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Lowe, Rupert
Mak, Alan
Mayhew, Jerome
McVey, rh Esther
Mitchell, rh Sir
Andrew
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Robbie
Morrissey, Joy (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
Morton, rh Wendy
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Mundell, rh David

Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Myer, Luke
Newbury, Josh
Norman, rh Jesse
Obese-Jecty, Ben
O'Brien, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Philp, rh Chris
Pochin, Sarah
Pritchard, rh Mark
Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
Rankin, Jack
Robertson, Joe
Rosindell, Andrew
Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
Smith, Greg
Smith, rh Sir
Julian
Smith, Rebecca
Spencer, Dr Ben
Spencer, Patrick (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
Stafford, Gregory
Stephenson, Blake
Stride, rh Sir Mel
Stuart, rh Graham
Swann, Robin
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Thomas, Bradley
Tice, Richard
Timothy, Nick
Trott, rh Laura
Tugendhat, rh Tom
Vickers, Martin
Vickers, Matt
Whately, Helen
Whittingdale, rh Sir
John
Wild, James

Tellers for the Noes:
David Simmonds and
Mr Andrew Snowden

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): In accordance with precedent, I will cast the casting vote Aye, to allow further debate. The Ayes have it, the Ayes have it.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Ordered.

That Dr Al Pinkerton, Ed Davey, Daisy Cooper, Wendy Chamberlain and Calum Miller present the Bill.

Dr Al Pinkerton accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 16 January 2026, and to be printed (Bill 345).

Railways Bill

Second Reading

[Relevant documents: Oral evidence taken before the Transport Committee on 26 November, on the Railways Bill, HC 1472; Written evidence to the Transport Committee, on the Railways Bill, reported to the House on 2 December, HC 1472; Correspondence from the Cabinet Secretary for Transport and North Wales to the Transport Committee, on the Railways Bill, reported to the House on 2 December.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): The reasoned amendment in the name of Mr Richard Holden has been selected.

3.8 pm

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

Two centuries ago, the first passenger railway services to run in the UK symbolised the hope and ambition of a confident nation, yet today that same railway symbolises something rather different. Every cancelled service, every cramped carriage and every dodgy wi-fi connection reflects not only a railway that has been beset by years of dysfunction, but a transport network, an economy and, indeed, a whole country in desperate need of renewal. It is therefore little wonder that at the last election millions of people voted for change, voting for a party that committed to bring train services back into public ownership—a service that would put passengers before profit.

No one should underestimate how seriously this Government take the instruction of the British people. The King's Speech set out no fewer than five transport Bills. Two have already received Royal Assent, and this Railways Bill is the third. After years of spiralling rail costs yet plummeting performance, years of promises of rail reform that never saw the light of day, and years of an industry run at the altar of private profit over the public good, today we kick-start the biggest shake-up of our railways in a generation. This landmark Bill means that Britain will finally have a railway owned by the public for the public—one that puts passengers first, that seizes the opportunities of freight, that offers a better deal for taxpayers and, above all, that is greater than the sum of its parts.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): The Secretary of State is extolling the virtues of nationalisation. South Western Railway, which serves my constituents across Teddington, Twickenham, Hampton and Whitton, was nationalised earlier this year. We have only seen the service get worse and worse, with delays, cancellations and short-form trains leading to overcrowding. When can my constituents expect a better service as a result of her policies?

Heidi Alexander: The hon. Lady is right to say that South Western Railway had a difficult few months after it came into public ownership, but the problems that it is experiencing were inherited from the private sector operator. The number of new Arterio trains on the South Western Railway network has quadrupled since the train operating company came into public ownership,

and there have been, on average, fewer cancellations in the directly operated service than there were in the privately run service.

Jessica Toale (Bournemouth West) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for joining me at Branksome depot in my constituency to launch Great British Railways. It was welcomed by engineers, passengers, railway operators and local schools. I have a very different experience from that of the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson), so will my right hon. Friend tell us how the Bill will benefit constituents and passengers across the rail network?

Heidi Alexander: We had a wonderful day in Bournemouth marking the first train operating company coming into public ownership under our new legislation. We will have a laser-like focus on building a railway that the public can be proud of and rely on.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): On that point, will the Secretary of State give way?

Heidi Alexander: I will make some progress and I will give way to the right hon. Gentleman later.

The Government's determination is to build a railway that is greater than the sum of its parts. It is not just about getting us from A to B; the railway is a route to aspiration, jobs and higher living standards right across this country. My message to passengers is simple: better times and better trains lie ahead.

Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab): The Railways Bill represents a promise made and a promise delivered to set up Great British Railways, with its headquarters in Derby. Will the Secretary of State tell us more about how GBR will work together with our UK rail supply chain to ensure that we have the jobs, skills and growth needed to deliver a railway fit for Britain's future?

Heidi Alexander: I am looking forward to working with my hon. Friend and her colleagues in Derby, pulling together the plans for the new headquarters in a city that I know is already brimming with railway talent. We will be publishing a rolling stock and infrastructure strategy next year to give confidence and certainty to the supply chain, and we will be able to perform longer-term planning precisely because we are bringing the management of track and train together.

Dr Murrison: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for allowing me to intervene. Her Wiltshire constituents and mine are not really interested in organisational change, but they are interested in railways that run on time, are reasonably comfortable and have interconnectivity. When will those passengers who use South Western Railway expect to see tangible improvements, rather than the 50% increase in cancellations that they have seen since May and the 29% increase in delays that they have seen during the time that the service has been renationalised?

Heidi Alexander: Next year the right hon. Gentleman's constituents will have their fares frozen for the first time in 30 years. Under the last Government, fares went up by 60% between 2010 and 2024. I can only assume that he was not listening to the reply I gave to the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson).

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Heidi Alexander: I will make some progress.

The Government have already begun the work of change. We passed the Passenger Railway Services (Public Ownership) Act last November, which began the process of simplifying an industry fractured into over a dozen different bodies. Seven operators are already in public hands, with seven more to follow. We are a step closer to saving up to £150 million a year in management fees, which previously went to private companies but can now be reinvested in our services.

I have said it before and I will say it again: like most of the public, I do not care who runs the railways; I just want them to work. Despite what some might claim, Labour Members are not possessed by some sort of ideological fever dream when it comes to rail. Instead, we are led by the facts and by what our constituents are telling us, and it is beyond doubt that the current model has failed passengers time and again. While public ownership alone cannot deliver the reform we need, let us be clear that reform would be hamstrung without public ownership.

We could wait for the wheels of legislation to turn before driving improvements, but I do not believe that passengers should wait any longer. That is why, last month, this Government froze rail fares for the first time in 30 years. That is an historic shot in the arm for millions of passengers, many of whom are struggling with the cost of living and could now save hundreds of pounds a year.

That is not all. We have expanded pay-as-you-go contactless ticketing in the south-east, with plans to launch further schemes in the west midlands and Greater Manchester. We are currently trialling digital pay-as-you-go in the east midlands and Yorkshire. Combined, this means that millions of journeys will benefit from a best price promise.

Finally, integrated leadership teams are in place on Southeastern and coming to South Western and Greater Anglia. One person will ultimately be in charge of both the tracks and the trains in those areas. That is a step closer to better decision making on our railways, and a move away from everyone blaming everyone else when things go wrong.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way—she knows I am a huge fan. In that spirit of solidarity, will she join me in supporting the Wrexham, Shropshire & Midlands Railway company's bid to the Office of Rail and Road for a new service into Shropshire, stopping at important market towns such as Wellington in my constituency? Does she accept that it is not just the big cities and urban centres but rural market towns that need to be included on timetables?

Heidi Alexander: Decisions about open access services, under the current model, are for the Office of Rail and Road to take. Network Rail supported the service that the right hon. Gentleman mentions, but the Office of Rail and Road took a different decision. If a new proposal comes forward, I am sure that Network Rail will look at it closely. We are keen to improve connectivity wherever we can. We are bringing forward this legislation

because Great British Railways needs to take the track access decisions, so that we can ensure that decisions are taken in the best interests of passengers overall.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for the huge ambition in this truly transformative Bill. For cities like Bradford, that ambition must translate into real delivery, because Bradford has been left behind for far too long. When will she announce the development of a new, modern train station for Bradford, which will finally give our city the fast, direct connections that we have been denied for far too long? Will she also set out a timetable for progressing full connectivity in the TransPennine route upgrade?

Heidi Alexander: My hon. Friend makes a compelling case, which has also been put to me by Mayor Tracy Brabin and the leader of Bradford council, Councillor Susan Hinchcliffe. I hope to say more about improving connectivity in the north of England in the weeks and months ahead.

Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab): The Secretary of State is making an excellent speech on a very important matter of policy. May I thank her for the outstanding work to reduce the cost of rail travel for my residents in Reading, and residents in many other parts of the country? Will she say a little more about the benefits of contactless, and the significant benefits for residents of smoothing out the very complicated ticketing regime?

Heidi Alexander: My hon. Friend is completely right to highlight that. The travelling public want their journeys to be convenient and easy, and the roll-out of pay-as-you-go and contactless ticketing removes some of the friction in the system. Through Great British Railways, we also want to simplify the ticketing structure, because we have a baffling array of millions of fares and ticket types. We need to sort that out, and we will, through this legislation, and through our ambition for the railways.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Heidi Alexander: I will make progress; I will give way some more in a minute.

We have to be honest about the state of our railways; they are still a bit of a mess. Underlying structural problems, fragmentation and complexity remain, and passengers still pay the price. That is why this Bill matters. It will sweep away the fragmentation and dysfunction that have plagued the railway for too long, and will bring the 17 organisations involved in running the railway together into one public body—Great British Railways, which is the directing mind that this industry has long called for.

GBR will co-ordinate much of the network, including track, train, and revenue and cost. Tickets will be simpler, costs will be reduced, growth will be prioritised, journeys will be made more reliable, and every decision will be taken in the interests of passengers, taxpayers and freight operators.

The railway will look and feel different, too. Passengers will no longer have to navigate the mind-bendingly complex system of organisations, which has been designed to benefit private companies, at the cost of decent services. We will wave goodbye to the blame factory that

[Heidi Alexander]

has come to define the industry, whether it is the armies of lawyers arguing over whose fault a delay is, or questions about whose responsibility it is to fix a broken lightbulb. Instead, we will see one railway and one team, with one mission: to deliver better public journeys.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Heidi Alexander: I give way to the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts), who has tried to get in a number of times.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): The Secretary of State has touched on the role of the Office of Rail and Road. In 2018, after the Croydon tram accident, the Light Rail Safety and Standards Board was set up; at the same time, the chief inspector of railways recommended that a similar body be set up for heritage rail, which is run mostly by volunteers. Can we take the opportunity presented by this Bill to look at whether we could set up that body for heritage rail?

Heidi Alexander: I am very keen to maintain the excellent standards of safety on the railways. If we do not, I will be failing in my responsibility as Secretary of State. I am aware of the recommendations that the right hon. Lady refers to. The ORR, as one regulator, provides coherence, but if she writes to me, setting out her case in more detail, I will look at the issue.

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): Decades of rail privatisation have failed my constituents. Between August 2024 and August 2025, 4.5% of trains from University railway station in my constituency were cancelled, and 60% of Avanti West Coast trains failed to arrive on time. Given that record of failure, how will the Secretary of State empower passengers and local communities to make decisions on how their local railways are run?

Heidi Alexander: There are two key points in this Bill that my hon. Friend will be interested in. First, there are the provisions relating to our partnership work with mayors and mayoral strategic authorities, which will ensure that we work with our devolved partners. Secondly, there is the really beefed-up passenger watchdog, which I will come to. It might help if I say something more on that.

We have a laser-like focus on improving the railways for passengers.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Heidi Alexander: I will make some progress.

For too long, the priorities of passengers and the industry have not been one and the same, and that has to change now. Alongside GBR, we will create the passenger watchdog—a strong, independent voice for the customer. It will set tough standards, independently monitor the experience of passengers, investigate persistent issues, and relentlessly push for a more accessible railway.

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): Almost 1,000 residents of Althorpe, Crowle, Thorne and Hatfield have signed a petition; all they want is one train per hour. At the moment, it is every two hours, and on Sundays there is hardly any service at all. GBR is streamlining matters; decisions will be made in one place. Does the Secretary of State foresee practical issues with the timetable being resolved quite quickly?

Heidi Alexander: My hon. Friend raises an important point. It is often said that he or she who controls the timetable controls the railway. That is why this Bill will put power into the hands of the integrated rail body, Great British Railways, which will take decisions about the best use of the rail network.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Heidi Alexander: I will give way to the hon. Member for Bicester and Woodstock (Calum Miller), then I will make some progress.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for her strong support for rail across the country. She talks about the passenger watchdog. I stood for 54 minutes on the train from Bicester to London yesterday, along with many other passengers. They want to know that the passenger voice will be heard. Will she clarify for the House whether the watchdog will look back at performance? If not, how will the passenger voice be heard, under the new governance arrangements that she describes?

Heidi Alexander: The passenger watchdog will be able to look at patterns, and will have the power to compel GBR and operators to provide information to it, and it can make recommendations to the ORR for enforcement. If our constituents have been failed by passenger assistants, if their trains are always delayed, or if they experience shoddy customer service, the passenger watchdog will be their champion.

I spoke briefly about devolution. Great British Railways will not be a British Rail mark 2; instead, it will be an agile organisation that embraces innovation and devolution. It will be rooted in the communities in which it operates, with local leaders finally getting a say in how their railways are run.

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): I salute the ambition of the Bill, and determination with which the Secretary of State is articulating that ambition. Does she agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey (Graham Leadbitter) that the way that the Bill has been discussed with Scottish Government partners is the exemplar that other Government Departments in Whitehall may wish to follow? What steps can she take to highlight to her colleagues in Government that there is the possibility of constructive dialogue between the two Governments, as she has ably demonstrated?

Heidi Alexander: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his remarks, and for the tone in which he has made them. I put on record my thanks to Scottish Minister Fiona Hyslop and the Welsh Transport Minister, Ken Skates, for the way in which they have engaged with me

and my officials during this process. I know that my colleagues across Government share that determination to do what is right for the country as a whole.

I was setting out how GBR will work closely with mayors. We will reach bespoke partnership agreements to match the specific transport needs of different communities, and we will of course continue to work with the devolved Governments in Scotland and Wales, who I am pleased have lent their full support to the aims of the Bill.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): The Bill makes clear that GBR and the Office of Rail and Road would be required to have regard to local transport plans produced by mayoral combined authorities. However, that requirement does not apply to local transport plans produced by single strategic authorities outside mayoral combined authorities. Within Cornwall, we cannot and will not join a mayoral combined authority, so will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss how Cornwall will not be left out and penalised because we cannot join a mayoral combined authority?

Heidi Alexander: I would be very happy to ask the rail Minister to meet my hon. Friend to have that discussion.

One of the other biggest concerns of passengers is the baffling array of fares and ticketing, which is why GBR will drag the current complex system into the 21st century. A new GBR website and app will allow passengers to buy tickets, check train times and access support, all in one place. There will be no booking fees and no confusion—just simple fares that offer the best value for money.

Alice Macdonald (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the fact that Greater Anglia was one of the first companies to move into public ownership, and the freeze in rail fares. On devolution, many of us in the east would like to see East West Rail—which will have a huge impact—extended to Norwich, so that we can maximise our economic growth. Will the Secretary of State help arrange a meeting between the rail Minister, the relevant MPs and other stakeholders in the region to discuss that issue, as well as the Ely and Haughley junctions?

Heidi Alexander: I would be happy to arrange that meeting. This issue was raised with me when I visited Norwich, on the day that Greater Anglia transferred into public ownership. As my hon. Friend is aware, the delivery of East West Rail will happen in three stages. We first need to get to Cambridge; after that, I would be happy to have that discussion, but it will take a huge amount of work to get us from where we are today to seeing trains running between Oxford and Cambridge, which has to be the priority.

Dr Mullan: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Heidi Alexander: I will give way, and then I will make some progress.

Dr Mullan: Understandably, the Secretary of State has been talking primarily about passengers so far, but of course, the railways also transport freight; for example, they are important suppliers to British Gypsum in my constituency, taking many lorries off the already congested

A21. Could she lay out what her ambitions are for increasing the use of freight on the railways, and how she will deliver those ambitions?

Heidi Alexander: I do think we need to move some of the freight that we currently move by road to the railways. The Bill will require the Secretary of State to set a freight growth target, and Great British Railways will have a duty to have regard to that target when it exercises its statutory functions, so that is at the heart of this Bill.

Finally, I will talk about access to the rail network. Great British Railways will be responsible for getting the best use out of the finite network capacity that we have, which is essential if we are going to improve performance, reduce disruption and allow more communities to be served by the railway. We want customers to be given the best choice of services and routes; this will be a core principle of Great British Railways, so it will work with open access and freight operators to harness the best of the private sector, taking access decisions across the whole network in a way the current regulator never could. We saw the urgent need for change only last week, with the ridiculous prospect of an empty 7 am train running from Manchester to London—a decision by the regulator that has now thankfully been reversed. However, let me be clear: GBR will not be allowed to act unchecked. The Office of Rail and Road will have robust powers to hold GBR to account, and all decisions GBR makes regarding access and charging will be appealable to the ORR. This will ensure that GBR's decision making is fair, considered and transparent across the board.

Before I finish, I draw the attention of the House to our accessibility road map, which was published alongside the Bill. My colleague Lord Hendy, the rail Minister, wrote in that publication that

“for too many people...the railway remains a system of barriers. That must change.”

I could not agree more. As far as I am concerned, a railway that fails to serve everyone is not fit for purpose—which is why the Bill also gives GBR and the passenger watchdog clear duties, ensuring that the needs of disabled people are at the heart of decision making.

Lloyd Hatton (South Dorset) (Lab): Despite serving a town of nearly 50,000 people, Weymouth station, in my constituency, does not have a working toilet, which presents disabled passengers with a huge barrier to travel. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this legislation, and action from the Government to bring our railways back into public hands, will help to make our railways and our stations far more accessible to those disabled passengers?

Heidi Alexander: I do agree. That needs to be a priority, and it will be at the heart of what GBR does.

For too long, the railways have been a source of national parody rather than national pride—a symbol of public services not working as they should, and of life unnecessarily made harder—but 200 years after the first railways transformed the country, we have a once-in-a-generation chance to restore, renew and reimagine the potential of the industry, and to place it at the centre of the Government's plans for national renewal. The rising living standards, greater opportunity and greener economy that we promised at the last election all rely on

[Heidi Alexander]

a growing, high-performing railway, a railway that connects us to the things that matter most, connecting people to jobs, businesses to growth, families to days out, and all of us to our loved ones; a railway with public service at its core and that is frankly obsessed with the needs and wishes of passengers, and one that we can finally be proud of again. That is the railway that Britain deserves, and the one that we will deliver. I commend the Bill to the House.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. There will be an immediate five-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches. I now call the shadow Secretary of State.

3.36 pm

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House declines to give a Second Reading to the Railways Bill because it prioritises putting the rail system under state control, rather than prioritising passengers and taxpayers, and the effective and efficient running of the railway; because it significantly reduces the role of the independent regulator, the Office of Rail and Road, whose duties it transfers in large part to Great British Railways, with limited rights of appeal against Great British Railways' decisions, so there will be no proper accountability for the state controlled operator, and this, along with the duty for Great British Railways to prioritise its own services for access to track, will squeeze out popular and well-regarded open access operators, who run services without taxpayer subsidy; because it allows ministers to interfere at will in the running of the railways, for example by setting fares, which will not create a stable environment for private sector investment, with the result that reliance on taxpayer subsidy will increase; and because it will do nothing to grow passenger numbers, or modernise or improve the rail network, and does not include provisions to grow rail freight, which means that the chance to create a thriving railway which delivers economic growth and relies less on taxpayer support will be lost.

Once again, just as with the “Unemployment Bill”, we are gathering to witness a throwback to the 1970s. Despite what the Secretary of State has said, ideology is clearly core to the legislation that she is presenting today, because otherwise she would not be ruling out concessionary schemes like those operated by Transport for London and Merseyrail. This time it is our railways that are about to become the latest victim of the Government's desire not for Government oversight, but for state control. So down the rabbit hole we go.

Despite the warm words of the Secretary of State, there is nothing in the Bill that guarantees growth in our rail network or cheaper fares—in fact, only this morning the Secretary of State refused to say that rail prices would continue to come down—and nothing to guarantee safer, more comfortable journeys on our railways. There are no plans for greater electrification, which is hardly surprising given that the last Conservative Government delivered 20 times as much electrification in our 14 years as Labour achieved in its 13 years. This Government have chosen to betray North Wales again, and have abandoned the midlands main line upgrade as well. Both were important electrification projects.

There is nothing in the Bill that promises better and more consistent internet connections on our trains. Instead, like the card soldiers in “Alice in Wonderland”,

the Secretary of State is busy covering up her blunders by painting the roses red. She claims that the new branding is

“not just a paint job”.

Well, what on earth is it? We on these Benches know the answer to that. The Secretary of State is trying to paint over the cracks in a rusting hulk of a Bill that picks the pockets of every other DfT budget, whether it involves our roads or bus users, air passengers and air travel. All of them will be hit with cuts, and also with higher taxes so that the Secretary of State and her civil servants can play trains in the Department of Transport.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): One of the first acts of this Labour Government was to hose money at striking train drivers to buy them off. Does my right hon. Friend share my fear that we will see the cost of a publicly run railway increase dramatically at the cost of taxpayers, and that we will also see services get worse?

Mr Holden: My hon. Friend makes an important point. It was interesting to hear Government Members saying, “Yes, yes,” while he spoke, because that is exactly what they did: they threw money at the transport unions. It is particularly interesting that the Secretary of State said today that the railways will face a £2 billion-a-year subsidy for the foreseeable future, because that is not what the Government have said in answers to written questions submitted by me or Opposition colleagues.

Let me be absolutely clear that when it comes to Britain's railways, we are not against the idea of uniting track and train. We would back a model that brings coherence to the system, but not one that weakens scrutiny and clamps down on competition. That is why we have supported a concessionary model, which the Secretary of State will no doubt recall from her time at Transport for London, as will Members from Merseyside and Greater Manchester, where such a model is being proposed. I do not think anybody has ever considered them to be on the far right.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Gentleman referred earlier to ideology; surely it was Tory ideology that privatised the railways in the first place. That ideology has not been copied anywhere else in the world precisely because it costs the taxpayer more and the passenger more.

Mr Holden: We can all see the ideology at play today. I think the hon. Gentleman's constituency is in Greater Manchester, where the mayor is calling for a concessionary model—a partnership between the state and the private sector that is directly opposed in the Bill that he will support this evening. The hon. Gentleman is quite far off the mark.

The number of passengers on our railways doubled in the 25 years after services were returned to the private sector after half a century of decline. We support the vital role of open access operators, which always give passengers brand-new routes with cheap, affordable fares, and often run direct services to London. The hon. Member for Rochdale (Paul Waugh) called for direct services recently, but I do not think that option will be available under the new system. Neither will a direct line from Cleethorpes to London, long campaigned for by

my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Immingham (Martin Vickers)—I visited his constituency a week ago—be on offer.

We back a joined-up approach that places passengers and taxpayers at the heart of our railway. We recognise that fragmentation held our railway back, and have long championed partnership with private sector involvement to drive innovation and growth. That is why we conducted the Williams-Shapps review.

What the Secretary of State has brought forward is not a coherent model at all; it is something altogether different, and ought to trouble Members throughout the House. Her Bill ignores the evidence, the experts, and the fervent cries of freight that growth has to be at the forefront of any rail reform. Instead, in keeping with the worst traditions of the 1970s, a return to state control runs throughout her Bill. It is not about the growth in passenger numbers that would reduce taxpayer subsidy; otherwise, why is that not on the front of the Bill? It is not about the growth in competition that would bring down prices for passengers, the growth of freight that would take more lorries off our roads, or the growth of new routes to serve the length and breadth of the country. Nowhere on the face of her Bill is there a target for passenger growth. The Bill actively works against open access, which, if the Secretary of State gets her way, will be left wholly, and deliberately, vulnerable.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): One area where we can all agree we want to see passenger growth is among those with disabilities and those who find steps incredibly difficult. On 24 May 2024, the previous Government announced that 50 stations, including my local station at Leagrave, would benefit from step-free access, but the funding never existed. How can the shadow Secretary of State criticise our plans, when he made promises about funds that never existed?

Mr Holden: The previous Government did a huge amount to improve access to stations throughout the country. I would like to see more of that.

Mark Pritchard: Whether it is in the private sector or the public sector, and whether it was under the last Government or this Government—by the way, the current Government have been in power for 18 months, so all that is wearing a bit thin—passengers, and particularly disabled passengers, just want a railway that works. On that I agree with the Secretary of State.

Does my right hon. Friend agree that more needs to be done on step-free access? There is currently very little in the Bill that suggests that more will be done, particularly for rural stations such as Cosford, Shifnal or Albrighton in Shropshire. If it cannot be done at every station, and there is no money for that, there at least needs to be step-free access and improved disability access somewhere along inter-county railway lines.

Mr Holden: I totally agree with my right hon. Friend on that issue. Earlier, he made the important point that people want to see through-trains running, because there is nothing that benefits disabled passengers more than the through-train services such as from his constituency, which would be available with open access. I believe that the Department for Transport has opposed that for the service he mentioned. The Transport Secretary

can correct me if she wishes, but it comes to something when this Government are actively working against new routes across the country. This Bill actively works against open access, which, if she gets her way, will be left wholly and, I suspect, deliberately vulnerable. GBR is mimicking some statist salami-style tactic that will cut it slice by slice until open access is dead.

Above all, this Bill does not put passengers or taxpayers first. Having been watered down beyond recognition, the passengers' council is a far cry from what the right hon. Member for Sheffield Heeley (Louise Haigh) envisaged. What remains is no watchdog at all, but a dog with no teeth or, as it has no enforcement powers, a dog that can barely bite. Even in the Government's own factsheet, this so-called watchdog is confined to advising and reporting. GBR must "listen", but nowhere does it have to comply. This is not accountability; it is blatant window dressing behind triple glazing.

If the council is not to be toothless, there have to be standards that GBR is expected to adhere to, so I ask the Secretary of State: where are the rigorous performance standards and the key performance indicators for the network that, in answer to parliamentary question after parliamentary question, she and her Ministers have promised will be released? She has taken operators into state control, but refuses to set out by which standards they should be judged. Does she have no standards—or perhaps she would rather let performance slip and then claim credit for any tiny improvements she can spin down the line?

We must contend instead with insufficient protections for ticket retailers, so passengers who use apps such as Trainline, which is incredibly popular, TrainPal or Uber will no doubt have to pay more for a shoddier service, as the Government push these growing businesses to the brink, as they are doing. From these depths, one inescapable conclusion emerges: the people who will benefit from this Bill are not passengers or taxpayers. The only ones who will benefit are the Secretary of State's union paymasters, who stand to cash in, with no commitments to modernisation, to increasing efficiency or to abolishing outdated working practices. Every possible incentive for increasing efficiency has been ignored or abandoned on the altar of ideology.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): The shadow Secretary of State talks about modernisation and his concerns about the Government's approach. In 2017, South Western Railway spent £1 billion on new trains to serve my constituents on the Reading to Waterloo line. Those trains sat in sidings, and it was not until SWR was brought back into public ownership that we saw a quadrupling in the number of those Arterio trains being rolled out. That is the real, demonstrable benefit of this Government's approach. Does he not agree that the model to which he proposes we return failed, and there is no clearer sign of that failing than those trains sitting in sidings?

Mr Holden: The hon. Gentleman, along with some of his colleagues, has not been listening to what I have been saying, because we put forward the Williams-Shapps review to deliver a new concessionary model. Some of the funding he mentioned was delivered through modernisation, and it was delivered under the last Government. Let us be clear about what is happening

[Mr Holden]

with SWR: under this Government, his constituents are seeing greater delays right across the network. They are seeing that month after month, despite the promises of the Secretary of State.

Despite the right hon. Lady's flagrant disregard of taxpayers' money and an "ain't bovvered" approach to passenger welfare, I had hoped that she would have ensured that this Bill contained the necessary safeguards—guard rails, perhaps—and a strong regulator with the statutory authority to intervene and set things straight. Are we going to have such a regulator? Oh, but we dare to dream! [Interruption.] If the hon. Member for Middlesbrough and Thornaby East (Andy McDonald) wishes to intervene, why does he not stand up?

Today, operators propose and the Office of Rail and Road decides, but under this Bill, GBR will propose and GBR will decide. We find ourselves in the most bizarre position of the Office of Rail and Road handing over its powers on deciding track access and access charges to GBR, which is the very entity that has the most to gain by acting in its own self-interest. In this Bill, that self-interest is unfettered and unperturbed by any genuine oversight.

Who, can I ask the Secretary of State, will be in charge of the railways in this new thrilling world of state control? According to the responses I have received to parliamentary questions, we are still not clear. Rail fares, apparently, will be decided by Ministers in the Department for Transport. Automation of train technology will be, according to the answers to written parliamentary questions I have received, the Government's collective responsibility. Working arrangements with unions will be managed by individual local train operators, and the guiding mind of it all will be GBR. This is not, as the Secretary of State and her Ministers have claimed, how any organisation ought to be run. It is an organisational mishmash—rudderless, directionless. It will not serve passengers, it will not serve freight and it certainly will not serve taxpayers.

Certainty, supposedly guaranteed to freight, industry and manufacturing, is entirely absent. In its place, we have the misfortune of funding mechanisms that can be changed and amended at any time, without any oversight whatsoever. We have a duty to freight, which, although clearly an afterthought, is obviously welcome, but once the reality kicks in, GBR's overlordship of the process of access, pricing and timetabling will leave freight operators permanently in the lurch. We have conflict of interest after conflict of interest permeating the Bill, with about as much credibility as the Secretary of State's promise a couple of weeks ago that the Government had no plans to introduce pay-per-mile on our roads. I wonder whether the right hon. Lady has corrected *Hansard* yet.

We desperately need an indication of purpose. What is this for? Who is this all for? It is pretty clear that we want to passengers to be put first with reliable, safe and accessible journeys that provide value for money, and open access routes protected, including those serving Hull, championed by the hon. Members for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner) and for Kingston upon Hull West and Haltemprice (Emma Hardy), and those serving Doncaster, which the right hon. Member for

Doncaster North (Ed Miliband), the hon. Member for Doncaster Central (Sally Jameson) and the hon. Member for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme (Lee Pitcher) know their constituents really depend on. Oversight must be accompanied by actual enforcement, and passengers and taxpayers must be at the forefront of the Bill. Currently, they are not.

Dr Neil Hudson (Epping Forest) (Con): The shadow Secretary of State talks about passengers being at the heart of the Bill. He earlier raised watchdogs and dogs not having teeth. As a veterinary surgeon, I am very conscious of a subset of dogs that we need to think about in relation to passenger access. Does he agree that people need to work together to ensure that people with assistance dogs and guide dogs have good access to the railway? In terms of modernisation and access, we need to keep those people in our mind.

Mr Holden: I totally agree with my hon. Friend. It is clear that when it comes to modernisation, access and new trains, that is exactly what we want to see delivered, and there is no mention of that in the Bill.

We have tabled our reasoned amendment today because a Bill with no independent regulator, no protection for competition or taxpayers' money, no passenger growth duty and no credible enforcement, cannot command our support. Throughout this murky and blinkered process, the Secretary of State has shown that she does not have the will to make sensible changes. Like the Prime Minister, the Chancellor and the right hon. Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall), she does not have the guts to face down her Back Benchers, who call for greater state control right across the system. She will not strengthen the Bill. She will not restore independence. She will not protect open access, embed growth or put passengers first. Instead, she presses on, convinced that centralising power will somehow solve the very problems that centralisation always creates. Let there be no shadow of a doubt: when, as is inevitable, things go wrong, leaving passengers without recourse or redress, she and she alone will face the consequences. She will own the cancellations, the overcrowding, the endless complaints about no internet signal, the strikes, the rising taxpayer subsidy and the fateful day when passengers learn she can no longer afford to use taxpayers' money to prop up her much-vaunted fare freeze.

We on the Opposition Benches will fight to deliver a railway that works for passengers, taxpayers, freight and the future. We will not sit idly by and allow the Government to turn GBR into judge, jury and executioner on the network it alone controls. I hope that Members from other parties will support our calls here and in the other place over the coming weeks and months.

3.53 pm

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, and in particular the donations from trade unions through my constituency Labour party, of which I am proud.

This landmark legislation will finally address the imbalance in the sector. Since Mrs Thatcher's privatisation of the railways, the taxpayer has been funding the huge cost of infrastructure, while private operators and shareholders have benefited by taking all the profits.

For too long, companies have been cashing in while passengers pay the price with poor service. It is time to put passengers first and profits second.

I have raised this issue with the Secretary of State a number of times: Reddish South station in my constituency has one train a week, and that is simply unacceptable. Friends of Reddish South Station, who I have met a number of times, have been campaigning for proper passenger rail services at the station for many years. I hope that, with GBR, proper rail services will be restored to Reddish South station. In the latest reporting period, the station recorded 102 passengers in an entire year. The recent increase in housing around Reddish South and changes in Reddish over recent years mean that we need proper rail services and connectivity.

Sadly, three out of five train stations in my constituency—Brinnington, Heaton Chapel and Reddish South—do not have step-free access. I want the Access for All scheme to be increased in size. Unfortunately, the scheme is very slow and the roll-out tends to involve a need to apply for funding. The north's rail stations have poor accessibility; fewer than half the stations have step-free access. Some stations in the north have benefited from Access for All, but progress has been slow, with an average of only three stations per year in the north benefiting from step-free access.

In response, the north's mayors and political leaders have been pressing for the devolution of Access for All funding to mayoral strategic authorities, to ensure that decisions on local stations are prioritised locally and taken locally. It is simply unacceptable that disabled people, people with mobility issues and people with health conditions are discouraged from using the railways by issues with step-free access. I pay tribute to Nathaniel Yates, a young local campaigner who has been campaigning for step-free access for a long time; Nathaniel was able to say hello to the Rail Minister during a recent visit to my constituency.

At Stockport station, which is one of the five stations in my constituency, and which recorded over 4 million entries and exits in the latest reporting period, the Passenger Assist scheme is not adequately staffed. Avanti is responsible for staffing at the station, and a number of staff members and passengers have told me that the coverage is simply not good enough. Davenport station is in a neighbouring constituency, but I also want to see step-free access there, because many people from my constituency use Davenport station. Local councillors Wendy Wild, Paul Wright and Dickie Davies have been campaigning for step-free access at the station for a long while.

Sunday services continue to be a significant issue with Northern Rail. I have met Friends of Heaton Chapel Station twice in recent weeks, and a number of passengers and members of the group tell me that Northern's Sunday services are simply not good enough. Northern is also failing to staff ticket offices adequately, in particular at Brinnington, in my patch. I raised that with the company in October; it is now December, and the station still does not seem to be staffed adequately. The ticket office needs to be staffed properly.

I have also raised this issue previously in the House: funding for British Transport police is quite concerning. We had the sad attack in Huntingdon, and I pay tribute to the rail workers and passengers on the train, but

British Transport police's coverage is not good enough. It needs more funding. Staff at Stockport station frequently tell me about the low presence of BTP officers. I met British Transport police recently, on 28 November. Unfortunately, crime is up by 5.4%, antisocial behaviour incidents are up by 9% and violent offences are up by 14%. BTP is facing an £8.5 million shortfall in the next financial year after receiving just a 4.6% uplift against the force's 9.8% request.

I have very limited time, so I will finish on the point of rolling stock companies, which are one aspect of the large-scale profiteering on the railways. The firms typically pay in excess of £200 million per annum in dividends, and Office of Rail and Road data tells us that they paid out £275 million last year. I would like to see more work on that. Thank you for allowing me to contribute to the debate, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

3.58 pm

Olly Glover (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): I thank those who have put so much work into the Bill, which has had a long gestation, with its roots in the multiple timetable change meltdowns across the network in May 2018. They and the Government are right to recognise that our railways need change. That should be our starting point.

I will start with the reasons why we need that change. Unfortunately, the British Railways Act 1994 framework introduced by the Conservative Government of that era has certainly been full of problems, and previous Conservative Governments have presided over above-inflation fare increases, overcrowded trains and frankly incomprehensible and totally baffling contract extensions awarded to failing train operators such as CrossCountry and Avanti West Coast. I think we can all agree in this House that the current structure and system is not putting passengers or freight users first, but we should also recognise that meddling and interference from central Government has increased since the pandemic and is at the heart of some of our problems—more of which anon.

Let us start with what is good about the Bill. It is certainly an honest and serious attempt to simplify the current convoluted industry structure and processes. It is quite right to focus on the need for accessibility improvements, and it is welcome that it introduces the idea of a long-term rail strategy, although the usefulness of that will depend on how “long-term” is defined. The creation of a passenger standards authority to build on the work of Transport Focus is welcome to ensure that the passenger really is put first.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): In constituencies such as North Shropshire, where access to the railway is very poor indeed, we have initiatives for step-free access at Whitechurch station and to connect Oswestry, which is the second largest town in Shropshire but has no rail connection, to the line at Gobowen. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Bill really needs to take up those types of opportunities? Otherwise, many people will fail to recognise the benefits of hopefully improving the rail system.

Olly Glover: My hon. Friend is quite right to point out that some of the more sparsely populated parts of our country have been neglected in their rail offer. It is important that the spending recognises that and does not just follow large towns or cities or inter-city routes.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Surely improving our railways should include the ambition of making our public transport cleaner and greener. In Bath, dirty diesel trains are still running through the city. Surely one of our first steps should be an ambitious electrification plan, reversing or addressing the years of failure of the previous Conservative Government.

Olly Glover: I shall have to ask my office to initiate an investigation into the leak of my speech—I will go on to say why we do indeed need a rolling electrification programme, which is something that has hitherto been missing under Governments of all colours.

Nevertheless, we Liberal Democrats have some concerns about the Bill in its current form. First of all, though, we certainly welcome the Government's recent embrace of a seven-year Lib Dem call for a freeze on rail fares. It is very welcome, but it would be entirely wrong to suggest—to be fair, the Secretary of State has not yet done so—that GBR is needed for such things. This is all about influence and persuasion with the Treasury and making sure we make coherent choices about fares and the cost of motoring, so that we encourage the transport choices we wish to see.

The legislation as drafted will not in and of itself bring better value for money for customers in the form of affordability, reliability and improved access to the network. It is not just me who thinks that; the Secretary of State herself stated in May that she could not promise lower fares under renationalisation. One of my biggest concerns is that GBR currently sounds like a railways version of NHS England—something that the Government themselves have decided to abolish—rather than an organisation given real autonomy, following a clear vision and long-term plan for the industry, that is likely to create customer focus and commercial flair, which is what our railways really need. What they do not need is even more state control and micromanagement, which, to date, has not produced good outcomes. The capacity duty for GBR laid out in the Bill is another big concern here; in just three short paragraphs, it sets out a very broad and draconian basis for rejecting applications to access the network that are not GBR.

Let me give some examples of how state control and micromanagement has hurt us to date. It was the Department for Transport, not any failing train operator, that specified the inter-city trains currently in service with LNER and GWR, which, as I am sure the Secretary of State will know from her own travels, have been replete with problems and concerns about suboptimal internal comfort and design. Indeed, the current significant rolling stock shortages—a result of problems that GWR is facing with those trains—were confounded by a DFT decision to withdraw high-speed train rolling stock from the west country after the pandemic without a replacement, which has led to frequent overcrowding on trains serving my Oxfordshire constituency of Didcot and Wantage, partly because five-car inter-city trains designed for journeys such as London to Bristol and London to Penzance are currently operating stopping services in Devon and Cornwall.

It was a Department for Transport decision to appoint Chiltern Railways to operate East West Rail phase 1 between Oxford and Milton Keynes. The new railway has been ready for more than a year and we still have no passenger services running on that line. We have had 20 years of Department for Transport-specified timetables, with relatively little improvement to connections between trains and non-London journey times. When I used to work at Southern, the timetable specification document given to us by the Department for Transport had 200 pages of detail as to exactly what should be followed.

There is a real lack of clarity on how open access passenger and freight will be effectively regulated and protected in the new structure. That is especially important for freight, which the Government have decided not to nationalise. There is no requirement in the Bill to set a target for passenger growth, which may suggest a lack of ambition. The Bill is very vague on the criteria for calculating things such as network access charges. The Bill gives GBR the power to apply discounted or elevated track charges, but it is totally unclear as to what criteria will be applied in deciding the charges. It is also unclear how the ORR will be able to police and enforce that effectively, given its reduced powers. The Bill seems to imply that appeals against GBR access decisions will require judicial review-level criteria, making them very inaccessible to most parties that may wish to make those challenges.

We hope that some of those concerns will be addressed through further scrutiny on the Bill Committee—in the miraculous event that the Bill passes later today. We hope that, with an open-minded approach from the Government, we will be able to set a specific time definition for “long-term rail strategy”. The Liberal Democrats believe that it should be 30 years rather than a short period of 10 years or 15 years. We hope to see a clearer definition and some bounds put in for the many references to the Secretary of State's powers to override, and we want to see greater ambition for both freight and passenger growth.

We need more recognition of the importance of competition and open access for both freight and long-distance passengers. Rail freight remains in the private sector and therefore needs protections, given the Government's clear preference for state ownership and operation. Open access has driven up ridership and customer satisfaction on the east coast main line but is now at risk. The real question for the Government is whether something as innovative as Hull Trains, which has transformed the inter-city passenger offer between Hull and London, would even be possible under GBR?

We desperately need competition on the west coast main line, given Avanti West Coast's outrageous fares and performance. There is no guarantee that when Avanti returns to the public sector those fares will come down. There are many positive examples of private sector tendering and operation—particularly the Spanish high-speed network, the original LGV Sud-Est in France, which is the busiest high-speed line in Europe, and French and German operating contracts procured by regional governments. Although the Passenger Standards Authority is welcome, we need an even stronger and louder passenger voice on it.

What would the Lib Dems do instead or additionally? [*Laughter.*] Well, I am going to address that in case anybody wanted to accuse us of being negative without articulating our positive vision. We need to make sure

that as well as making the structural changes it intends to, the Bill, and whatever follows, addresses the real problems on our network.

Successive Governments have failed to set out a clear, long-term vision and set of objectives for the railway that cover passenger and freight growth, customer satisfaction and punctuality. They have failed to accompany that with a long-term funding settlement and infrastructure plan, which should include incentives and rewards for contractors and suppliers for hitting quality, time and cost objectives when it comes to enhancements to the network. They should be based on a vision for a regional or national timetable designed around convenient and reliable connections between trains at well-designed major interchange stations, as is the case in Switzerland.

The Bill should limit future fare increases to no more than the rate of inflation, which would deal with the arbitrary approach that has been taken up until now. We need value for money and quality guarantees for passengers given the high fares we have. In particular, the Bill does not guarantee that my Oxfordshire constituency will get the improvements that we really want to see, such as electrification between Didcot and Oxford. The equivalent part of railway to Cambridge was electrified in 1986 under that hardly well-known pro-rail Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher. We need a clear, long-term rolling programme for rolling stock. We need accessibility improvements at stations, including Cholsey, and new stations such as one to serve Grove and Wantage. I am desperate to see that for my constituents.

Peter Swallow: I am listening carefully to all the hon. Gentleman's recommendations. Many of them sound wonderful, but I suspect that they come with something of a price tag. I hope he will get on to the part of his speech where he sets out how the Liberal Democrats would fund those investments.

Olly Glover: The hon. Gentleman might find that the Bill is also rather lacking in detail on how future rail improvements will be funded. However, he is right in the sense that we need to get costs down. That is why a rolling programme of electrification, new stations, rolling stock and so on would get costs down. It is not just me who thinks so; Andrew Haines, the former chief executive of Network Rail, said in testimony to the Transport Committee that the evidence is "incontrovertible" that a rolling programme of electrification would reduce costs.

I certainly agree with the hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (Perran Moon) that we need a greater voice not just for combined authorities but for local authorities. Only with those changes will we see a railway that is innovative, ambitious and aligned with the needs of our economy, passengers and freight end users. For now, the Bill, despite its good intentions, needs further work before it can move forward. Therefore, with some sadness, Liberal Democrat Members cannot support it.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the Chair of the Transport Committee.

4.10 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): It is interesting to follow the hon. Member for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover). I am still trying to work out what a Lib Dem Bill would include that this one does not.

I welcome the Bill, which is universally agreed to be long needed. It is the essential next step in ensuring that rail in Britain is more unified and that we deliver a rail system that is reliable and safe and provides value for money for passengers and the taxpayer.

The Railways Act 1993 led to 30 years of a poor deal for passengers, other customers and taxpayers, with 17 different organisations providing track and trains, multiple fare options and prices, hundreds of staff employed to attribute the cost of delays, staff shortages and no single voice to address individual systemic failures of service. Yet the railways have a workforce who are universally committed to delivering a high-quality service to passengers and customers.

I particularly welcome the proposal that the Secretary of State will issue a long-term rail strategy setting out objectives and the direction of travel for railways for the next 30 years. That will please so many stakeholders, including, in particular, investors in rail as well as mayoral authorities—in fact, all those who work in and use rail. I welcome that clause 18 includes duties on GBR to promote the interests of users and potential users of the railway, which specifically includes disabled passengers, and to run the railway in the public interest—in other words, to meet social, economic and environmental objectives.

Clause 18 sets out a series of significant duties for GBR, including the promotion the use of rail freight. But while clause 17 requires the Secretary of State for Transport to set out a target for growth in rail freight, there is no such target in the Bill for growth in passenger demand.

My Committee launched an inquiry on the Bill on 5 November—the day that the Bill was published—focusing in particular on three core aims of the reform: improving rail travel for passengers, network access, and devolution. We have published the evidence we have received so far, and the oral evidence taken on 26 November is tagged as a relevant document for this debate.

First, passenger experience is central to all our constituents who travel by rail—or who would do if it was more accessible, more reliable or cheaper. The passenger watchdog is a new voice providing advocacy and advice, sharing best practice and providing alternative dispute resolution. Clause 36 says that it will have a duty to have "particular regard" to the interests and needs of disabled passengers. It will set standards on how travel information is provided, including when there is a disruption. It will handle complaints and delay compensation, and it will require operators to make services accessible. Those powers in London and on Eurostar will be covered by an expanded London TravelWatch.

On the detail of enforcement powers, clauses 42 to 47 give the passenger watchdog powers to receive complaints. That is helpful, but I have a couple of questions for the Secretary of State. Will the Passengers' Council be sufficiently independent, powerful and resourced to challenge GBR to deliver meaningful change if needed? What will the governance relationship be between the watchdog, the ORR and the rail ombudsman? What remedy will passengers have if the passenger watchdog's recommendations are not adopted? Who will appoint the members of the council and the chair? Will passenger groups and disabled people be represented on the board?

[Ruth Cadbury]

Accessibility is a particular interest of the Transport Committee, following the publication of our report “Access denied” in February. I welcome the fact that clause 18 explicitly includes the needs of disabled passengers as a general duty, but that is only one of six duties that will have to be balanced. What guidance will be provided to GBR on balancing those needs, to ensure that disabled people do not lose out yet again? The wording in clause 18 on accessibility could also be said to be slightly objective. What safeguards are there against a future Secretary of State cutting costs and altering, diluting or even removing accessibility requirements?

On fares and ticketing, we welcome a unified system. On network access, there is slightly less clarity on the future role of passenger open access. If the Government want to end open access for passengers, do they have a plan for retaining its benefits, such as filling gaps, opening up new routes and promoting price competition? On freight, how will the targets be aligned?

Brian Mathew (Melksham and Devizes) (LD): Does the hon. Member agree that there is also a danger of a conflict of interest? At present, the ORR, an independent body, holds the power to grant track access rights. Under the Bill, those powers will transfer to GBR, while the ORR’s role is watered down. If GBR is able to block applications, it becomes judge and jury. Open access operators such as Go-op may struggle to get the access rights that they need to run new services, including through Melksham.

Ruth Cadbury: There are questions about the relationship between the Secretary of State, GBR, the ORR and the passenger watchdog, which we will certainly pursue—and so, I am sure, will others.

Devolution is central to the Government’s vision, so I welcome the fact that the Scottish and Welsh Governments and elected mayors will have greater control of their areas. Will there be an oversight role, so that local decisions do not conflict with national priorities, such as providing access to rail freight?

In conclusion, I really welcome the Bill, although the two Opposition amendments do not. The Bill will work if it relieves the Secretary of State of day-to-day operational decision making, and lets those who understand the rail system get on with delivering for the benefit of passengers, the economy and the environment.

4.17 pm

Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): I support some of the aims and intentions behind the Bill, and having listened to the Secretary of State’s opening speech, I certainly agree with her reasons for it, but I do not believe that what she is doing will deliver what she says.

Key parts of the Bill are taken from the previous Conservative Government’s 2023 plans to unite train and track, which were not realised due to the change of Government at the election. That does not inevitably have to be done by nationalisation; indeed, under the last Government’s detailed plans, it would have been done under a concessionary scheme. That is not ideology but pragmatism. It is using the state and the private sector to deliver better railways. That model is very

similar to the model used by Transport for London, which was designed by Labour and is run by Labour in London.

It is unfathomable why the Government will not look at that sort of pragmatic scheme for the rest of the UK through this Bill. I suspect that the only answer is the inevitable one offered by the shadow Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Holden): this is a matter of ideology. It is about satisfying Labour’s union paymasters and Back Benchers—those Back Benchers who fundamentally run this Government, who vetoed the Government’s attempt to cut the welfare bill last summer, and who ensured that the Budget two weeks ago increased taxes to allow more welfare spending. For the Secretary of State and the Government, this is about a politically prudent pay-off, but it is bad for passengers.

I did some market research earlier. I travelled on a publicly owned service on a publicly owned track from Portsmouth Harbour to London Waterloo, and it was delayed because of signal failure. In fact, I do market research on that route quite often. The track has been in the public sector for over a decade, and signal failure continues to be the most common reason for delays to the train. The issue is not the train company, which was historically private, but the publicly owned track. It is not inevitable that nationalisation will lead to improved services, and there are no guarantees in the Bill that prices will be held down long term, or that services will improve and more passengers will travel by rail. That is simply a matter of faith, driven by a belief in nationalisation.

Daniel Francis (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Lab): Southeastern was nationalised under the previous Government, and it remains nationalised under this Government, but this year, it has been brought into one organisation with Network Rail, and there has been the best customer satisfaction for my constituents in Bexleyheath and Crayford, and the best journey times you could see. Southeastern is at the forefront of this programme, so does the hon. Member agree that the proof is in Southeastern’s statistics?

Joe Robertson: The hon. Member obviously was not listening to what I said at the beginning, which was that I absolutely believe in uniting the trains and the track; that was the 2023 plan of the previous Conservative Government. If he is right about the improvements in his part of the world, I suspect that the reason is not nationalisation, but bringing the two together, so that they are subject to similar decision-making processes.

The Secretary of State opened her speech by saying that she wanted a railway system that was greater than the sum of its parts. I agree. If she were to buy a National Rail ticket in Shanklin on the Isle of Wight, get on a train there, and travel to London Waterloo or Guildford, she would, like me, use the ferry service that connects parts of the railway. Fares are not being frozen for that part of the rail route, because the Secretary of State has no powers to do that, and is not creating those powers. In fact, the cost of rail travel from Sandown, Shanklin or Ryde on the Isle of Wight through to Guildford or Waterloo will go up if the unregulated ferry companies put their fares up. The Secretary of State is doing nothing to deal with that part of the railway for people who live in my constituency.

In fact, the situation is worse than that, because the Government are extending the emissions trading system levy to Solent travel. The ferry company Wightlink, which connects the railways, will pay £1 million a year in extra charges because of that levy being extended to it. The Government talk about freezing fares for mainland rail travellers, but they are in fact putting up the costs for Isle of Wight train travellers. The use of fossil fuels cannot be avoided in crossing the Solent, because there is not the electric grid capacity in the mainland ports or the Isle of Wight ports to allow the ferry companies to go fully electric, as the trains have done. That grid capacity will not be there until the mid-2030s. The Government are putting that cost on Isle of Wight rail and road users, but they have exempted Scottish ferry companies, because they say that those provide a lifeline service. Isle of Wight ferries are every bit as much a lifeline service for my constituents, who use them to access education, NHS, friends and family and all the things that everyone else enjoys.

4.23 pm

Steve Race (Exeter) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for her work on this vital legislation, which will bring the railways back together into one cohesive system, which should allow better planning and use of capacity, and should increase passenger satisfaction. I am pleased to see this Labour Government making good on their manifesto commitment to take back our railways into public ownership and to establish Great British Railways, something that people in the great railway city of Exeter have long called for, after years of decay under the Tory Government. Putting passengers at the heart of every part of the rail industry was a promise on which I and many colleagues here stood for election last year, and I am proud to see that coming to fruition.

Since I was elected, I have been proud to see Exeter continue to grow in size and economic importance. It is one of the fastest growing cities in the country. Last year, our city was ranked sixth in the PwC's "Good Growth for Cities" index. We in Exeter can see what good, equitable growth looks like—in climate tech, in scientific research and in education—and public transport is a key driver of it. Indeed, Exeter and Devon folk are avid railway users. Our passenger numbers exceeded the pre-covid peak long before many other cities. However, rail performance has often been poor under the current system; all three major operators across the two main lines and the several branch lines have been affected by long-term delays and cancellations, and critical infrastructure has needed investment.

At a time when residents in Exeter want more frequent and reliable services, the opposite is being delivered under the current system. We want to continue to grow our economy and attract inward investment, and a fast, reliable and regular train network is needed more than ever. I very much hope that Great British Railways will take a better approach to operating our railways, in the interests of passengers. I welcome the fact that Great British Railways will have a whole-system view of investment, and will be able to judge where delivery will have significant impact, so that Exeter and Devon can deliver the sustainable economic growth that they need. That should mean backing the Devon metro proposal, increasing services into and out of Exeter to one service

every 15 minutes by implementing passing loops on the South Western line, and improving the signalling on the Barnstaple line to increase capacity and reliability. That will enable further modal shift in Exeter and our growing hinterland, incentivise people out of their cars, and reduce some of our chronic traffic problems.

We need to improve the resilience of the line past Exeter to our great city neighbour of Plymouth and on into Cornwall. While our famous main line is scenic, it occasionally falls into the sea or is buried by a landslide, as happened at Dawlish in 2014. Reopening a completed line between Exeter and Plymouth north of Dartmoor would add resilience to the network, and it would prevent the peninsula being cut off, should Dawlish happen again.

I welcome the provisions that continue to allow open access operators on the network. The experience of the Lumo Edinburgh-to-London service and the Hull Trains service between Hull and London suggests that competition on the lines increases capacity and passenger numbers, rather than cannibalising numbers from elsewhere. Further, devolution and local decision making are imperative to ensuring that regions like the south-west can have a proper say on their transport infrastructure, and I hope that Exeter and Devon will achieve the local government reorganisation and devolution that I believe will work for us.

I welcome the commitment to embedding the relationship between GBR and strategic mayors into the functionality of the organisation, and I look forward to exploring how that will work effectively. GBR should be a real powerhouse and driver of innovation, seeking out new innovation through its procurement, but also allowing the continued free use of data, so that start-ups can build businesses and thrive in the wider ecosystem.

In this debate and beyond, I look forward to hearing Ministers' vision for how GBR will look and feel. A nimble and strategic organisation with a defined mandate, working in partnership with the Department for Transport, will be more likely to deliver for passengers than a larger bureaucracy.

Finally, I welcome the provisions on accountability. As the Secretary of State and Ministers will know, I look forward to continuing to lobby them and GBR, as I have done on many occasions, on providing lifts at my St Thomas and Polsloe Bridge stations. I am proud to support the Bill, and I dedicate my words to the hard-working railwaymen of Exeter, who set up our local party in the 1950s, and who have played such significant roles, as elected politicians, in the development of my city and the county. They would be delighted by this return to a national railway system.

4.28 pm

Ian Roome (North Devon) (LD): As the Government move to create a publicly owned Great British Railways, I want to speak on behalf of several thousand rail passengers in my constituency, and to say what they have suffered in recent weeks. We all want a rail network that delivers a fantastic service, supports the economy and protects the environment. In 2026, the last thing we want is ever more cars crammed on to our roads. Last year, the North Devon Tarka line, which runs for 39 miles through my constituency and that of the right hon. Member for Central Devon (Sir Mel Stride),

[*Ian Roome*]

recorded a record 1 million journeys for the first time. It is among the busiest branch lines anywhere in the south-west. Office of Road and Rail figures show that footfall at Barnstaple station, which is heavily used by young people and college students, has skyrocketed by 63% since 2019—by far the biggest surge at any station in Devon and Cornwall. The Tarka line has again set new records for passenger numbers nearly every month this year—until November, when that success came to a grinding halt.

On 17 November, heavy rain closed three bridges and ceased all rail traffic between Barnstaple and Exeter. Since then, our line has been shut three times. On Friday afternoon, it was closed again because of signal faults, leaving hundreds of passengers stranded in Exeter. The operator was issuing fresh warnings of likely cancellations just yesterday afternoon. If we were to ask those passengers what needs to be in the Bill, few would argue the merits of public versus private ownership. Instead, many in North Devon put up with immense overcrowding, or worry that their train may not even turn up. Back in 2017, Network Rail committed £2.9 million to improvements on the north Devon line, but that is only a tiny fraction of the capital investment in other parts of the country, and hundreds of thousands more passenger journeys now rely on that infrastructure.

Greater accountability to the public will be important for our railways. However, public ownership will be doomed to fail if the Government do not use this window of opportunity, and the extra powers in the Bill, to make lines in rural areas like mine more resilient for the future.

Adam Dance (Yeovil) (LD): Too many rural railway stations are not accessible for disabled people. Without support staff, constituents in Yeovil have had serious accidents at railway stations. Although the Government's accessibility priorities, which we are debating today, are welcome, does my hon. Friend agree that we need a strengthened access-for-all programme?

Ian Roome: I agree. Disabled access is absolutely necessary at all stations, particularly in rural areas. My hon. Friend is a big advocate for accessibility for disabled people in Yeovil who need it.

As the network and operator are brought together, we need joined-up planning for increased capacity, and against bad weather. My party has supported freezing rail fares after years of price hikes, but, as many of my constituents can attest, it is no good buying a ticket for a train that is not running. I urge the Government to resist declaring victory once public ownership is achieved—it is only the first stop. The long-term planning will be the important part of this Bill.

We must give passengers in North Devon, and many places like it, good reason to have faith in their railway. That will require more than a new flag painted on the side of a train. What does the Minister plan to do next to make rural railway lines, such as the Tarka line, ready for the 2030s?

4.32 pm

Ben Goldsborough (South Norfolk) (Lab): The Railways Bill gives us the chance to deliver the biggest reset in a generation of how we run our railways. By bringing operators and infrastructure together under a single

guiding mind, we will be able to make decisions faster, cut through duplication and finally deliver improvements at the pace that passengers expect. A unified system means clearer accountability, quicker upgrades and railways designed for the people who rely on them every day. Crucially, it means ticketing that people can actually understand: simple, consistent and truly passenger-focused. For communities like mine in South Norfolk, that matters enormously.

I greatly appreciate clause 18, on accessibility for all. I would not be doing my job properly as the MP for South Norfolk if I did not talk about Wymondham station and its accessibility. Colleagues may know that Wymondham's station code is WMD. In South Norfolk, that stands not for "weapons of mass destruction", but for "we must deliver". In this case, we must deliver step-free access to platform 2. Wymondham has waited 180 years—since the station first opened—for step-free access to the southbound platform. That means that disabled people, those pushing buggies, or elderly passengers carrying heavy luggage simply cannot catch the southbound train. Instead, you must travel all the way north to Norwich, wait, turn around and come back again. That is half an hour wasted going in completely the wrong direction. A modern railway worthy of this country cannot leave passengers behind like that, so my first ask of the Minister today is to give the green light for step-free access improvements at Wymondham train station. With a single body overseeing both operators and track, there will finally be no excuse for this to be delayed any longer.

While I am speaking about rail in the East of England, I want to briefly highlight the long overdue upgrades to the Ely and Haughley junctions. Again, that is important in the context of the Bill, and I ask the Government to go further on freight. Those improvements have been talked about for decades and are essential. They would unlock nearly 3,000 additional freight paths from Felixstowe, take 98,000 HGVs off the roads, support 277,000 extra passenger journeys each year, reduce carbon emissions by 1.7 million tonnes over 60 years and generate almost £5 for every £1 invested. Quite simply, this is infrastructure that pays for itself many times over, so my second ask to the Minister is to give the go-ahead for the Ely area capacity enhancement scheme and the Haughley junction upgrade. The economic, environmental and connectivity benefits are too significant to ignore.

The right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts), who is no longer in her place, made an important point about heritage railways. Wymondham Abbey station is on the Mid-Norfolk Railway line, one of the longest heritage railway lines in the whole United Kingdom. I strongly ask the Minister to consider what we can do through the Bill to ensure that safety aspects are maintained on those lines.

This Bill is about creating a rail system that works—one that is accountable, accessible and built around the needs of passengers. It will deliver improvements more quickly, support regional growth and ensure that communities like mine are not left behind.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): With an immediate four-minute limit, I call Martin Vickers.

4.36 pm

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): I speak in my capacity as a constituency Member and also as chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on rail, which submitted a response to the Secretary of State on the changes she is bringing forward.

Will the proposals deliver improved rail freight and passenger services in my constituency and, indeed, across the network? There are lots of “buts”. Restructuring any industry can cause confusion and increase costs, and the billions invested by private companies will now disappear and have to be made up by the taxpayer. If we look back to the years before privatisation, when for much of the time the industry was in decline and desperate for additional resources, we see a vision of the future.

If the Government are to achieve one of their key aims of economic growth, improved transport infrastructure and a rail network that provides for the needs of the freight sector must be a priority. Ministers will have noted that the Rail Freight Group has suggested that the rail freight growth target of 75% by 2050 be put into law and that discounts to encourage use of spare capacity be introduced. Clause 17 of the Bill states that the Secretary of State must set a target and keep it under review. Setting targets is easy; delivering is much more challenging. Businesses in my constituency stress the urgent need for a new east-west freight corridor, and I would like to hear the Minister’s response to that when he sums up.

Rail freight is important, of course, but equally important is passenger traffic. There is nothing more parochial than Transport question time, and now that the Minister is going to take on even more responsibility, that will become much more prevalent. In my constituency, I have been pressing for a direct rail service to be restored between Grimsby and Cleethorpes and King’s Cross since 2011. British Rail withdrew the service in 1992. Local industry and passenger groups are pushing for it. There have been endless possibilities. Grand Central put forward an application to the rail regulator in 2015, which would have been accepted had it stood alone, but it was linked to extending services into North Yorkshire, and that would have taken revenue away from what was then the main franchise holder.

We desperately need the service. It will link Habrough and Barnetby stations in my constituency, which serve both Humberside airport and the port of Immingham, and it will then pass through the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) at Market Rasen.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): A direct train to London on this line is vital. Grimsby and Cleethorpes form a huge conurbation—probably much the biggest conurbation in the country not to be served by a direct train to London. We have been campaigning for this for so long, and I call on the Minister to just get moving with it. We do not need the Bill: we need action on a direct train from Grimsby and Cleethorpes, through Market Rasen and Lincoln, to London, in order to revive the whole area.

Martin Vickers: I thank the Father of the House for that intervention. LNER operates five or six services to Lincoln, and it would be easy to extend those services

the extra 30-odd miles to Grimsby and Cleethorpes. There is also the possibility of an open-access operator. Indeed, Grand Central Rail has made another application to provide a service from Cleethorpes through Scunthorpe and Doncaster to King’s Cross. However, judging by recent decisions, the open-access operators have cause for concern, as do those of us who want to see other lines improve as a result of competition. There is no doubt that the east coast main line has greatly benefited from competition, as was mentioned earlier, from Hull Trains and Grand Central Rail. They provide services to provincial towns that have been without a direct service for many years.

Returning to the demand from my own constituency, the Immingham area has two oil refineries, numerous power stations, petrochemical plants and logistics operations, and it is a vital hub for the renewable energy sector. The Minister must recognise that if we are to further develop the area, direct services to King’s Cross are a vital link. The proposals are supported by the Hull and Humber chamber of commerce and large businesses, such as Phillips 66. I can only urge the Minister to get on with it and to give it the okay. Under the new structure, he will be able to do that with just a signature; he should do so.

4.41 pm

Andrew Ranger (Wrexham) (Lab): I welcome the clear ambition for our railways, and therefore for our nation, that the Railways Bill brings. Rail runs in my family’s blood: my late grandad worked on the railways, first for London and North Western Railway and then for British Rail in Crewe, one of the homes of rail and where I spent the early part of my childhood.

My constituency sits on the border between north Wales and England. Our train services are vital for many people across Wrexham, but for too long they have simply had to accept that cancellations, delays and poor value for their money are just part of the deal. It is right that this Labour Government are following the Welsh Labour Government and taking our train services back into public ownership. We must be honest that privatisation has failed its users. They should not have to put up any longer with a service that is too often substandard and with ever-increasing prices.

Regardless of who oversees our railways, it is important that that the passenger experience remains the No. 1 priority. Therefore it is right that this Bill brings forward a simplified and unified ticket system, as we have already heard, alongside the freezing of rail fares for the first time in 30 years, as recently announced. Likewise, the creation of a new passenger watchdog will ensure that Great British Railways will be held accountable in a way that private services never truly have been. A truly independent body and organisation that will ensure that standards are met, the passenger watchdog will be able to demand data and investigate and resolve disputes.

The changes to the decision-making process around track usage and infrastructure will move us away from a system that prioritises profits over passenger experience, with track access based on demand and social value, not just revenue and profits. Timetables will be designed in one place, so different operators will stop working at cross purposes. Investment and engineering work will be co-ordinated to minimise disruption. There will be

[*Andrew Ranger*]

clear accountability when services fail, putting a stop to cases where popular routes are routinely packed or where people are often unable to even board them.

My constituency of Wrexham is a clear case study in the complexity of the current system, sitting within the Mersey-Dee cross-border functional economy, where key rail assets for the rail network serving the local economy sit in both England and Wales. Chester station is the gateway to north Wales, sitting on the junction of the north Wales cost mainline and the Marches line. Chester is key for access from north Wales and Wrexham to places like Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham, London and multiple airports, yet the Mersey-Dee economy is served by multiple Network Rail regions and train operators, all with competing interests.

The cross-party Growth Track 360 group campaigns for rail investment to improve economic growth and productivity, so we welcome the investment in the Padeswood sidings, which will enable direct services between Wrexham and Liverpool. Meanwhile, a new station at Deeside will improve access from Wrexham in north Wales to the many jobs on the Deeside industrial estate. That emphasis on integration and partnership working will help to simplify the system, improve accountability and improve the transparency of decision making.

David Burton-Sampson (Southend West and Leigh) (Lab): My hon. Friend is giving a very interesting speech. In my constituency, Chalkwell station has been waiting an age for further Access for All works to take place, and they are now taking place. Both of my train lines are now in public ownership and working closely with Network Rail. Does he agree that that integration will make this work so much easier moving forward? It will be quicker, slicker and easier for these projects to get going, to the benefit of the commuters.

Andrew Ranger: I completely agree. That will be crucial to improving services for everybody.

We have a renewed deal for Welsh customers as well. The inclusion of a memorandum of understanding means that there will be a shared understanding and shared objectives across funding, access and track integration. Crucially for Wrexham, it also means that there will be an aligned cross-border framework for governance and funding, reflecting how crucial these services are to our local communities and economies and their ability to succeed.

Alongside that, I am delighted that there will be a dedicated business unit in Great British Railways both obligated and empowered to work with Transport for Wales to deliver the best possible offering. That shows that it does not need to be an either/or when it comes to working relationships with partners. With the right structures and the shared ambition we are already seeing in Wales, we have two thirds of journeys on brand-new trains, a 20% rise in passenger journeys and a plan for Network North Wales, delivering outcomes that genuinely put passengers first.

This legislation captures the full spirit of devolution. As we have heard, it recognises not only devolved Governments, but mayoral authorities. The duty to consult them on major decisions gives local leaders the

ability to shape what they know works best for their areas. That builds on the success we have already seen through things such as the Bee Network, bus franchising in the midlands, and Merseytravel, moving us a step closer to a fully integrated transport system across the country.

Finally, I will reflect on the wider implications of what good rail means, particularly for our young people. It means opportunity to access experiences and chances to broaden horizons and career prospects which go on to make a huge difference in their lives and outcomes. I look forward to following the Bill as it progresses through the House and delivers for our constituents.

4.47 pm

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. In the 1800s, Britain's railways unlocked growth and opportunity across the country. A huge network grew, until the Beeching cuts closed roughly a third of it in the 1960s. As a result, many rural communities lost their rail links, forcing reliance on buses and private cars and creating transport deserts.

My constituency is home to only two railway stations: Templecombe in the south and Castle Cary in the east. That means that many towns and villages are left unconnected to the two railway lines that run through the constituency. Langport had two railway stations, while Somerton had its own station until the Beeching cuts, but like many rural towns they have simply lost connectivity.

Glastonbury and Street, the two largest towns in the constituency, are both completely unconnected to the railway. There is not even a direct or integrated bus service available from Glastonbury to connect to the railway station.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): My hon. Friend talks about accessibility, and we cannot forget about disabled people in that. If I may, I will share a perverse peculiarity at Radley station near Oxford, which is considered a rural station. Disabled people can go northbound, but not southbound, because there is no step-free access. How ridiculous is that? Is this Bill not an opportunity to address some of those discrepancies?

Sarah Dyke: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. It is absolutely essential that there are lifts at train stations to provide that step-free access for people with mobility issues, pushchairs or luggage. Indeed, Castle Cary station is the official station of the Glastonbury festival, so people might also be carrying camping gear, tents, or wet weather gear—plenty of it, usually.

The Railways Bill must not just manage decline; it must also restore connectivity and patronage. That means auditing underserved communities and delivering integrated rail and public transport links where they have been lost. The Langport Transport Group has run a campaign to bring a railway station back to the area, and put a strategic business outline case to the Government in February 2022. That was met with Tory inaction for nearly three years, and then sadly, the Restoring Your Railway fund was dropped by this Government. The fund needed improving, not removing.

The Government have claimed that GBR will be “responsive to both national and local ambitions”,

while the long-term rail strategy lists “reducing regional and national inequality”

as one of its priorities. However, more than half of small towns in the south-west are now transport deserts, and research by the Campaign for Better Transport shows that in Somerset, 14 out of 23 towns no longer have adequate public transport. More and more planning applications are being approved in south Somerset, so it is essential that GBR can expand the rail network to accommodate future growth and ensure that rural communities are not left behind.

I am pleased that Liberal Democrat-run Somerset council has committed to developing further plans to make the case for a new station in the Somerton and Langport area, as well as improving access and integration with the existing network. However, the long-term rail strategy could include a network expansion plan that covers an increased extent of the network, and new and upgraded stations should align with local transport and growth plans. I also believe that the long-term rail strategy should focus on how to boost access to railway stations when local people cannot access them in their own town. The Government pledged to release their integrated national transport strategy this year, but there is still no sight of it. There is therefore an opportunity to link the strategy with GBR to deliver truly integrated and accessible transport for people in rural areas, because rural areas should not be excluded from this opportunity any more—there is absolutely no reason why they should be.

I also wanted to touch on soil moisture deficit, which has been a huge problem on some of the tracks in the west this year, but I will leave that for another time. I will wait to see how this legislation will deliver for my constituents in Glastonbury and Somerton, who have been left unconnected for far too long by an unreliable and infrequent service. I also look forward to scrutinising the Bill as it progresses through the House—I am determined to ensure it delivers for my constituents.

4.52 pm

Mrs Elsie Blundell (Heywood and Middleton North) (Lab): The Railways Bill will be vital to delivering on this Government’s promise to revive our country’s railways and redefine what passengers should expect from their rail services. It is beyond doubt that the privatisation of the rail network has completely failed, and it is now the task of this Labour Government to rebuild the confidence that has been lost. That is why I wholly welcome the coming establishment of Great British Railways, which will deliver coherence where there has been chaos and a sense of strategic direction where there has been lethargy. The best place for our country’s rail network is in the hands of the public. Alongside a strengthened passenger watchdog, a new access regime and an enhanced role for our devolved authorities, I believe GBR will show passengers that things no longer have to be the way they have been. It is on the final point—the role of mayoral strategic authorities—that I will focus my remarks.

The Bill is the obvious next step in advancing the devolution agenda led by this Government and elected mayors. I am proud of our accomplishments in this space in Greater Manchester, which has already brought buses back under local control and built the UK’s largest ever light rail network. The next step is for us to bring local rail services into the Bee network, where

they belong. It is therefore crucial that the Bill is fully utilised and that we explicitly formalise ties between strategic authorities, national Government and GBR.

I believe that there are three areas in which we can and must give our strategic authorities more certainty through this landmark piece of legislation. First, we should consider the benefits of requiring GBR to go further than “consulting” our authorities. If we are truly to give local people and their transport authorities a key role in shaping their own rail networks, we must recognise the merits of establishing a clear statutory role for mayors in commissioning rail services too, and ensuring that those leading GBR are plugged into the needs of our regions. That means utilising the talents and knowledge of those who make up our local transport authorities. I express my sincere thanks to Laura Shoaf for her work across shadow Great British Railways in that regard, and I hope that her role is a sign that GBR will continue to draw on these exceptional regional leaders.

Secondly, we must address questions about funding certainty for our mayoral authorities and local transport authorities. We should ensure that GBR co-develops key functions, such as financial planning, in tandem with our mayoral authorities. I believe that by forging partnerships between GBR and our mayors on funding, we will see greater value for money in the long term, a return on investments, and a sustained increase in passengers’ confidence in the rail network. That could be done by agreeing statutory limits on mid-period funding reductions, and working to align enhancement pipelines, planning horizons and industry funding cycles.

Thirdly, I believe that the Bill must ensure that GBR has a duty to align its decision making with the priorities of local transport plans. Those plans, such as the Greater Manchester Transport Strategy 2040, have a statutory basis, and provide a long-term view of what it will take for rail to play a transformative and integrated role in our communities. I look forward to watching the Bill progress, and to further consideration being given to how GBR will work with our elected mayors and local transport authorities.

The Bill encapsulates the ambition of this Labour Government to undo a legacy of neglect that has left our rail network fractured and public trust eroded. Only the Labour party is serious about tackling the deep-rooted challenges facing track and train, and now the onus is on us to ensure that Great British Railways succeeds where successive Governments and arm’s length bodies have failed. To get this right, GBR must be aligned with the priorities of local people and those whom they elect to ensure that, once again, rail is a driver of opportunity rather than a cap on ambition.

4.56 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Great British Railways is not an entirely new concept, but what the Government present as a “modernisation of our railways” is, when we strip away the glossy language, a centralising piece of legislation that advances Labour’s drive towards nationalisation. It risks creating a structure that is powerful, sprawling and unaccountable.

In Aldridge, in my constituency, we had secured funding to deliver a railway station under the former mayor, Andy Street, and residents were told, after decades of waiting, that the project would finally go ahead. However,

[Wendy Morton]

the new Labour mayor chose to withdraw the funding in favour of his own pet projects. When questions are put to Ministers, every answer points back to the combined authority, with the vague suggestion that there would be funding “if the region chooses”. Well, Aldridge and the West Midlands Combined Authority did choose, and the funding was in place, but Labour removed it. Nothing in the Bill prevents such a unilateral political decision from being made again. It provides no guarantee of transparency, and no duty to consult affected communities.

As a former Rail Minister, I am very aware that we on this side of the House have long recognised that the old model needed updating. That is why, in government, we began the work for Great British Railways, through the Williams-Shapps plan. [Interruption.] Labour Members may laugh, but we set out the case for bringing track and train closer together, improving accountability, and delivering a more unified, passenger-focused system. We recognised the need for renewal of our railways, grounded in practicality and not in politics. What we have before us today, however, is something very different. This Bill offers too little detail, too little accountability, and far too many unanswered questions. It replaces a pragmatic, balanced approach with an ideological blueprint for nationalisation. Passengers across the country deserve better.

The Bill promises integration, but it delivers centralisation. It speaks of clarity, yet it blurs responsibilities. Great British Railways will control timetables, fares, access decisions, infrastructure planning and data, a concentration of authority that should concern anyone who believes in genuine public accountability.

Charlie Dewhirst (Bridlington and The Wolds) (Con): The east coast main line is a fantastic example of where privatisation has worked. Open access operators such as Hull Trains, Lumo and Grand Central are competing with the franchisee and keeping prices down and service levels up. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Bill does nothing to protect open access operators, and that there is a real danger that this centralised, Soviet-style monolith will squeeze them out in due course?

Wendy Morton: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. What is worse is that time after time I cannot get a straight answer out of Ministers as to whether they will support open access.

The Bill also weakens the independence of the ORR. When a body that runs services also shapes the rules against which those services are judged, the House should be deeply concerned. The Bill puts competition and innovation at risk, alongside the future of open access, which, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bridlington and The Wolds (Charlie Dewhirst) has highlighted, is incredibly uncertain. A railway that cannot accommodate competition is a railway that is destined to stagnate.

There is also the unresolved question of how GBR will interact with the Department for Transport. The Bill creates overlapping duties that risk friction and confusion. GBR will be required to consult, to produce strategies and to respond to ministerial direction, yet its operational independence is undefined. Will political

priorities override operational judgment? Will GBR operate as an arm’s length body, or as an extension of the Department?

How will we, as elected Members, hold Great British Rail, Ministers and mayors to account? Local decision making will not be stronger under the Bill. Ministers may talk the talk about devolution, but the Bill provides little evidence of it. Requiring GBR merely to “have regard to” local transport plans is a notably weak obligation. The Bill does not require GBR to follow them, and offers no protection to communities, such as Aldridge, where projects risk simply being cast aside when the political wind changes. If the Government are serious about devolving power to local leaders, they must allow us, the elected Members, to hold them to account.

The House should not mistake this railway reorganisation for renewal—far from it. The Bill simply rearranges structures while failing to address the issues that matter most to passengers: cancelled trains, inconsistent performance, reduced competition and decisions made far away from the communities they affect. This is a Bill that gives Labour more control, not passengers better railways. It is not a credible plan for the future of our railways and the Government should think again.

5.2 pm

Cat Eccles (Stourbridge) (Lab): As a long-time supporter of our railways and rail workers, I am proud to speak on a key Labour Government manifesto commitment. The Bill is about putting passengers, workers and the national interest back at the heart of our railways. For too long, a fragmented model has left the public with a patchwork quilt of competing interests, with tracks separated from trains, timetables misaligned and confusing incentives. Great British Railways offers a once-in-a-generation opportunity to stitch the network back together, with a single, publicly owned guiding mind with a 30-year horizon, stability in planning and clarity in purpose.

In 2023 I organised the country’s biggest campaign of its type to save the ticket office at Stourbridge Junction, alongside local rail users and Stourbridge’s favourite feline: George, the station cat. I heard at first hand how much our communities value an accessible, staffed railway. Passengers are not abstractions; they are neighbours, carers, shift workers and pensioners. They expect and deserve service, safety and support.

The Bill’s promise will be realised only by the people who deliver it: our railway workers. Our drivers, guards, signallers, engineers, station teams and cleaners are not a cost to be cut; they are an asset to be invested in.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I declare an interest as chair of the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers parliamentary group. There is currently no reference at all in the Bill to staffing. Who will be the staff’s employer? What will happen with their pensions? Will TUPE apply on transfer? Will their existing benefits apply? Will there be a mandate on the levels of staffing on stations and elsewhere? That is an agenda for constructive engagement with the Government. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is important that the Minister commits to that when he responds to the debate?

Cat Eccles: I thank my right hon. Friend for his valuable intervention. He makes the really important point that there is currently no mention of staff in the Bill. As I have said, there will be no Great British Railways without those staff and all the protections and assurances they need.

I welcome the move to bring track and train together, but we must also bring the workforce together with clear pathways on employment, pensions and facilities, as well as a strong voice for staff and their unions in governance. When passengers say they want confidence and care on the network, they are asking for people—present, trained and empowered. Let us ensure that the transition to GBR provides clarity and security for staff, underwrites safe staffing levels on trains and at stations, and ends the false economy of fragmented outsourcing that undermines both service quality and value for money.

Let us not forget that nothing moves without logistics. Rail freight is the green backbone of that system, moving goods predictably and efficiently with about three quarters fewer emissions per tonne-kilometre than road. The Bill's statutory freight growth target is the right signal, but that signal must be backed up with a firm plan. We need safeguards so that GBR's capacity duty does not allow passenger services to squeeze freight off the network, and that means transparency, fair charging and protection of strategic freight corridors.

To unlock genuinely transformative growth, we must match governance with infrastructure. We need targeted electrification, including infill schemes on freight critical routes, which will cut costs, carbon and journey times. In some corridors, dozens of miles of electrification have already unlocked thousands of net tonne-kilometres of cleaner freight every single day, and each additional electrically-hauled train means congestion avoided, carbon reduced and reliability improved. Put simply, the freight target and electrification must work together.

For more than three decades, the leasing model has extracted hundreds of millions from the railways in dividends and charges, which is money that could and should be reinvested in the frontline. If we believe in long-term public stewardship, we should procure rolling stock directly where it delivers better value, using public finance to reduce lifetime costs, standardise fleets and support the UK supply chain. Let us be ambitious about green technologies. Electric traction is the gold standard, and battery and hydrogen can play targeted roles. GBR should set a whole-system rolling stock strategy that is modern, modular and interoperable, as well as cleaner, so that when we renew fleets, we do so with purpose rather than with piecemeal leasing at a premium. Open access has sometimes brought welcome competition, but it has also cherry-picked the most profitable flows, complicating timetables and undermining network planning. In an integrated system, capacity should be allocated to maximise public value, not private extraction.

To conclude, this Bill is about integration, not ideology; about service, not shareholder return. Backed by a long-term strategy, safeguards for freight, a workforce treated as an asset and a modern plan for electrification, we can build a railway that is cleaner, simpler, fairer and proudly public. If we do so, we will deliver a railway for Britain that we can rely on and be proud of for the next 30 years.

5.8 pm

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): I am looking forward to serving on the Public Bill Committee, because this Bill is a long-awaited opportunity to reshape our rail network for the better. It is an opportunity to deliver real value, reliability and affordability for passengers across the whole of the country, but especially in underserved rural communities such as West Dorset. I welcome key provisions such as the commitment to a long-term strategy, a more integrated approach to track and train, the retention of the important regulatory role of the ORR, a strong focus on accessibility and the ambition to simplify a fragmented structure that, for too long and too often, has pushed infrastructure and operations in different directions.

My constituents repeatedly tell me that they want reliability and affordability above all, which is why we also welcome the freeze in rail fares—long campaigned for by the Liberal Democrats—that was announced in the Budget. West Dorset's rural rail network, including the Salisbury to Exeter line, is crucial for our communities, yet its infrastructure remains outdated and fragile. The recommendations of the "Connecting South West England" report are clear: electrification, upgrading single track sections and additional passing points such as the much-needed Tisbury loop would dramatically improve reliability and capacity, and reduce the delays that plague the line today. Too often, rural lines are left with old, uncomfortable and unreliable trains.

Victoria Collins (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): My hon. Friend talks about unreliable service. I have in my constituency Thameslink and London Northwestern Railway. Doreen, who is in her 80s, talks about cancellation after cancellation. In her mid-80s, she had to wait until past midnight. Then there is Katy, and others. For those cancelled services, the value is awful. They have to pay £30 for a 30-minute return journey. Does he agree that we need to know from the Government what mechanisms there are to hold operators accountable to make sure passengers get the service they pay for?

Edward Morello: I agree 100%. I very much hope that the Bill will give us the opportunity to improve that level of service.

End-of-the-line stopping services should not be defined by graffiti, broken heating, limited seating and high fares. What we want are modern trains with reliable wi-fi, working toilets, clear visual and audio information systems for disabled passengers, and safe, well-lit stations.

If the Bill delivers anything, I hope it will deliver the return of the buffet trolley. On rail journeys lasting over an hour, a guaranteed minimum level of food and drink provision should be a basic expectation of modern public transport. Whether it is a parent travelling with children, an older passenger managing a long trip, commuters trying to work on the move, or maybe a Member of Parliament hoping for a gin and tonic on the way home, access to refreshments is important.

I would also like the Bill to support our climate commitments. That means accelerating electrification, expanding battery and hydrogen use where appropriate, and setting clear standards for freight and passenger emissions. A long-term rail strategy must be transparent, regularly reviewed, subject to parliamentary scrutiny

[Edward Morello]

and designed with future climate pressures in mind, including the modelling of environmental impacts, such as the soil moisture deficit—already mentioned—that has severely disrupted services in Dorset.

There are elements of the Bill that cause concern. Many will rightly question whether Great British Railways, as currently proposed, risks becoming a rail version of NHS England: a large, centralised body with limited agility, limited parliamentary accountability, and simply an opportunity for ministerial micromanagement. If the Secretary of State wants more power, then accountability to Parliament must increase alongside it.

Passengers deserve clear, measurable outcomes on affordability, reliability and accessibility, not vague commitments that cannot be scrutinised. We need to be able to get answers and get change for our constituents if standards fall below acceptable levels, and not have to deal with arm's length bodies.

Passengers must be protected from excessive charges and hidden fees. The GBR app and website should never add unnecessary booking fees or administrative costs. Instead, we should push for open-source fare systems that allow passengers easily to find the best deal. Expanding discount schemes, especially for young people through “rail miles” systems, would help people travel more and reduce costs for families.

Finally, the Bill must lead to a railway where back-office systems are rationalised, data is used to improve passenger experience, and long-term planning is not sacrificed for short-term crisis management. Passengers deserve honesty about upcoming delays, clarity on long-term upgrades, and confidence that today's problems are not simply passed on to tomorrow's Parliament.

This is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to deliver a railway that works: for commuters, for rural communities, for disabled passengers, for young people seeking opportunity, and for the climate. I look forward to working with Ministers and colleagues from across the House to strengthen the Bill in Committee and deliver a railway worthy of the people we serve.

5.13 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford) (Lab): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

I thank my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Heeley (Louise Haigh) and my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough and Thornaby East (Andy McDonald) for all their hard work in getting us to this point.

I recognise the thousands of rail staff who keep our network moving every single day. Their skill, dedication and professionalism were impossible to miss during the pandemic, and once again during the recent tragedy in Huntingdon, when workers ran towards danger to protect others. If we are serious about creating a world-class rail system, then those workers must be at the centre of it.

A unified, publicly owned railway will be simpler, safer and more efficient. It will reverse the legacy of privatisation, which carved up the industry and prioritised share dividends over people and service quality. The Bill

is great, but I have some fundamental issues that need to be ironed out as the Bill makes its way through the House.

If Great British Railways is genuinely being built from dozens of separate organisations, then we need a clear description of its structure. We need clarity on who will actually employ all the people who keep our railways running.

More than 100,000 workers are employed by Network Rail and the train operating companies; tens of thousands more jobs are outsourced to security firms, cleaning contractors, catering companies and agencies supplying infrastructure labour. Many of those workers are on insecure, zero-hour terms. Altogether, well over 150,000 people form Britain's rail workforce, yet sadly those workers cannot say who their future employer will be, what will happen to their pension, or how they might transfer into the new organisation. Although today is a great day, that uncertainty is not fair on them, and it undermines the stability and confidence that the new system needs from day one.

We need to see some detail on how workers and their unions will be given a voice. Other public transport bodies, such as Transport for London, Transport Scotland and Transport for Wales, have built-in mechanisms for staff representation on their boards, but Great British Railways does not have any such route. If we want an organisation that benefits from the insights and expertise of the people who operate it, that has to be put in the Bill.

We must be honest that the pressures that fell on the workforce over 30 years of privatisation have left deep scars. We saw repeated attempts to hollow out staffing, driver-only operation, de-staffed stations, ticket office closures, aggressive outsourcing and the downgrading of essential roles. The Government's “Getting Britain Moving” promised to turn the page, and to recognise staff as an asset, not a cost. It pledged to make GBR a single employer that people would be proud to join. That vision was right, but it cannot be delivered if we keep the workforce scattered across a maze of private providers.

If GBR is to inherit the contracts of Network Rail and the train operating companies, we should not simply carry forward decades of outsourcing. Cleaning, security, station staff, catering and maintenance are vital parts of the railway. Bringing them back in house is not radical; it is already happening across parts of Scotland and Wales, where insourcing has improved accountability and service quality. Removing the web of contracts would cut the cost of the work that was created by privatisation.

I would welcome the Secretary of State's adopting, in a spirit of constructive partnership, the sensible and pragmatic proposals on such issues from the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers. They would strengthen the Bill, and help to deliver the railway that we all want to see.

5.17 pm

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): The arrival of the railway in Eastbourne in 1849 helped the seventh Duke of Devonshire to translate his plans for the town into reality. He was the architect of Eastbourne and helped build the town that became the resort that people across the country know and love—the sunniest town in the UK, with the largest marina in northern Europe.

Some may know that Eastbourne hosts one of the busiest level crossings in Europe: Hampden Park level crossing, in my home patch. Although I love my home patch to bits, the level crossing, at which the gates come down every four minutes, on average, so that trains can pass, is the bane of Hampden Parkers' lives in so many respects—a bane that we hope will be addressed in part by the Bill. The railways made Eastbourne, but the level crossing in Hampden Park literally breaks Eastbourne. People cannot cross from one part of town to another for much of the day because of the crossing. In fact, local resident James Rea, a software engineer, has created a website specifically dedicated to the Hampden Park level crossing, arethegatesup.com, to help residents. I can see lots of hon. Members googling “arethegatesup.com”—or not listening to my speech. [*Laughter.*] That's the one. We very much hope that the Bill, and the investment that it could bring to Eastbourne to address the issue with the level crossing, could preclude the need for James's website altogether.

A slightly more serious issue is access. Hampden Park station has no step-free access from one platform to another. That affects folks who have mobility needs. Folks with buggies or luggage—not the wet weather luggage that my hon. Friend the Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke) referred to, because it does not rain in Eastbourne, but the enormous parasols that people seek to take from platform one to platform two—could transport them much more easily if we had dedicated Access for All funding to invest in accessibility in our train station. The Bill does not go far enough. The passenger watchdog will be able to set certain regulations on accessibility, but there is no statutory requirement for accessibility, so the Bill needs to be strengthened in that respect.

I very much hope that the Bill will give passengers—whether commuters, tourists or others—the opportunity to have input into shaping the future of rail services. I am delighted to have led a campaign to restore the direct train from Eastbourne to London Bridge. That service launches next Monday, thanks to great folks like Christina Ewbank and Dave Cooper, the local businesses that got on board, and the many people who signed our petition. However, getting such an obvious service reinstated should not be like pulling teeth, so I hope that the Minister will ensure that the likes of Eastbourne can get back on track by giving people the opportunity to have input into the future of rail across the country.

5.21 pm

Julia Buckley (Shrewsbury) (Lab): I am surely the luckiest MP in this House, as I represent the charming, thriving border town of Shrewsbury. We are in a strategic location: we serve as a hub for Shropshire, we are on the edge of the industrial west midlands and we are the gateway to Wales. Our railway is a major transit point for Welsh services operated by Transport for Wales. With 2.2 million passengers, I am told that we are the second busiest station in Wales. There is also much latent demand for more services.

However, under privatisation, we have been on the edge of other people's maps for too long. We are the last stop on the west midlands line, and the last major station from Wales. It has held back our investment and limited our inter-city services, such as the much missed

direct train to London. While our railway station is a beautiful grade II listed building, with a fabulous team of staff, led by the wonderful, long-serving manager Shelley Hall, we need our station to be more than a museum piece. In order to increase services, we must first have our master plan for bringing together infrastructure upgrades.

The Railways Bill provides a once-in-a-generation opportunity for Shrewsbury station to fulfil its true potential under Great British Railways. We have such latent demand for additional services that when TFW upgraded our service to Birmingham to four carriages—it used to have two carriages, and 81 people standing—ticket sales went up by 18% overnight. Imagine how many more tickets we could sell to passengers at Shrewsbury when a nationalised service joins up routes and opens up opportunities for my residents. We may have 2.2 million passengers at Shrewsbury, but I am keen to support a new breed: the wannabe passengers, who want to make the modal shift away from cars and on to our rail network, and who need to travel for work, study or leisure, but for whom there are no seats or services yet. They need earlier, later and more frequent trains.

In Shropshire, we still dream of that direct train to London, which would reconnect us to the capital. Research shows that it would add £9 million a year to our local economy. It is not just me who thinks that rail investment in Shrewsbury could unlock bountiful economic growth. I was delighted yesterday to see the report published by Midlands Connect for DFT entitled “Wolverhampton to Shrewsbury: a corridor for growth”, showing that connectivity between the two centres will boost regional economy, benefit productivity and support employment sectors. This corridor supports major employers, such as the i54 enterprise zone, the Battlefield enterprise park and Shrewsbury business park, as well as future developments in Shifnal and Telford. Those sites alone support more than 4,000 jobs and require improved access to rail, bus and active travel infrastructure.

Enhancing that transport corridor will also deliver benefits for Wales because of the cross-border gateway and the freight connections between our two nations, and growth in this area aligns with priorities over the border. In the Budget, the Chancellor committed £445 million in investment over the next 10 years specifically to support transport infrastructure in Wales, highlighting the importance of major investment in cross-border rail activity. As the major border rail hub between an already nationalised Transport for Wales and a soon to be nationalised West Midlands Railway, Shrewsbury offers to be the strategic link that ensures the success of GBR. Only when our regions and devolved nations can co-deliver two nationalised rail systems seamlessly for passengers at hubs like mine will we have succeeded.

The Great British Railways Bill was written to improve services in places like Shrewsbury, and Shrewsbury has been waiting for Great British Railways—not least my wannabe passengers, who are still hoping that it will unlock employment and economic opportunity for them. Shrewsbury will become the beating heart of our reinvigorated railway.

5.25 pm

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): The experience of my constituents in Esher and Walton, served by South Western Railway—the first of the train

[*Monica Harding*]

operators to be taken into public ownership—is not that nationalisation guarantees a better experience. This autumn feels as bad as the last. I feel it on my way—or not—into this place, and I have a sack load of constituent complaints about delays and cancellations.

At Esher station, 30% of trains were delayed last month. Only yesterday, a constituent told me that he was forced to spend £60 on taxis and two hours of extra childcare because of a train cancellation—something that is too frequently experienced by us in Esher and Walton. School children are missing hours of school because their trains are consistently delayed and they miss their connections. On 16, 17, 20 and 23 October, and on 7, 10, 12, 13, 18, 19 and 24 November, the trains were delayed and 278 students were affected. I understand the under-investment, the lack of accountability and, frankly, the shameful mess that the Conservative Government left this Government to sort out, but I urge the Minister to go further and faster on reform to ensure that the Bill is not a continuation of this disappointment.

Today, on Second Reading, I wish to make the case for Hershham station, which is long overdue for improvement and another shameful example of the neglect of our railways and lack of accountability. Hershham sits on the south-west main line in my constituency, which contributes more to the Exchequer than any other outside London. People are using the station every day, commuting into London and creating the growth that our country needs. Despite being used over 600,000 times a year, Hershham station is an eyesore, ramshackle and rundown. There is nothing at the station that tells these communities to go and get growth as part of a national mission. There is nothing to suggest any ambition as a country, or that we are on the sharp end of innovation and technology, efficiency and delivery. The only message they get from the station is that the Government and train operator have neither the desire nor ambition to get them to work on time.

At Hershham, the stairs up to the platform are crumbling—visible holes expose the long drops below—and they shake underfoot. Needless to say, there is no step-free access. The roof is exposed corrugated iron. Both platforms were built in the 1960s, using materials meant for temporary use. When groups of schoolchildren step off the train and walk down the platform, shaking can be felt underfoot. Last year, someone put their foot straight through the platform, and it took the managing director of South Western Railway coming down to get the hole fixed. Should I give up hope on a complete refurbishment of the station for my constituents in Hershham, who have put up with this for too long?

Clauses 46 and 47 give us, for the first time in decades, a national centralised mechanism through which we can say, “This is not good enough, and it must be fixed.” However, the clauses do not go far enough. For decades, oversight was provided by the design panel of the British Railways Board; the Government used that to raise the standard of design across the British nationalised railway system from the 1950s. That system disappeared with privatisation. Since then, station design has been neglected, and passengers have paid the price in exactly the kind of decay that we see at Hershham station.

I would like to see clause 46 strengthened by amendments, so that minimum station standards must explicitly include design quality, accessibility, durability and engagement with the community. There must also be clear time limits for fixing safety and accessibility-related defects. I ask the Minister to look at the matter carefully, and to provide the funding, resource and ambition to give Hershham station what it so desperately needs.

5.29 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests and declare an interest as vice-chair of the RMT parliamentary group. I am delighted in particular to follow my hon. Friends the Members for Salford (Rebecca Long Bailey) and for Stourbridge (Cat Eccles). I will make some similar points, which I hope the Minister will address either in his closing speech or perhaps in Committee.

I am delighted that this Labour Government have placed the transformation of our railways, bringing track and train back together, at the forefront of their agenda for change. I will mention four points: workforce; rolling stock leasing companies; rail freight; and track capacity.

On the workforce, as colleagues have said, our railway workers are the backbone of the industry. They drive the trains, maintain the tracks and keep the stations and carriages clean. Some 150,000 rail workers keep the network running smoothly and safely every single day. Will my hon. Friend the Minister provide greater clarity on the intended structure of GBR and shed some light on why the Bill makes no reference to the employment of rail staff? That is causing great uncertainty among the workforce.

I refer to concerns raised by the Public and Commercial Services Union regarding 225 of its members at the Department for Transport, who are due to be transferred to the subsidiary company DFT Operator Ltd by 31 March 2026—coincidentally, the target date for departmental headcount reductions. In addition to the risk of job losses and the consequential loss of experience and expertise, which could hamper delivery of the rail reforms, those staff will lose their civil service status and may well face poorer terms and conditions. The funding arrangements for the new company are still unclear.

The transfer appears to run counter to Labour’s commitment to the biggest wave of insourcing in a generation. Insourcing, ensuring that workers are kept in-house and cutting out private sector profiteering is a great aim, and the Bill is a step towards that. I would like to see the Government look more closely in the Bill at how we can entirely cut out profiteering from the railways and at how we can procure our own rolling stock, making changes to end excessive profiteering by ROSCOs.

It would really be sensible for GBR to establish its own rolling stock company, ordering and owning its own rolling stock, taking advantage of low Government borrowing rates. That is what we should be striving for. In the short term, the RMT is calling for a profits levy on the ROSCOs. A 50% levy on pre-tax profits would raise £116 million a year in funds that could be used for much needed upgrades.

I want to highlight the enormous opportunity in rail freight, which often gets overlooked, particularly in my constituency at the port of Seaham, which is ideally placed to seek efficient, reliable routes to move goods in and out of the region. We have only one freight train a week coming in to Seaham. I therefore welcome that the Bill requires the Secretary of State to set a target for rail freight growth and place duties on GBR, Ministers and the ORR to promote it. A single dedicated rail freight business unit operating within GBR and working with rail freight businesses would, however, be an even more effective driver of long-term growth, integrated with, rather than competing with, the passenger railway. I hope that the Secretary of State will examine the benefits of such an approach.

5.33 pm

David Chadwick (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): Let me be clear from the outset that the Bill fails Wales. Last year, Wales voted decisively for change, and this is just another example of how that change will not be coming. The Bill fails my constituents, who rely on some of the most neglected rail lines anywhere in the United Kingdom.

For years, the people I represent have endured cancellations, painfully slow journeys, ageing trains and stations that would embarrass any modern transport system. The Marches line still runs on signalling technology that belongs in a museum. The Heart of Wales line—a lifeline for rural communities—has been crying out for meaningful investment for over a decade. What does the Bill do to fix any of that? Nothing. Instead, it centralises even more power here in Whitehall and offers Wales nothing more than a pat on the head and the promise of consultation. Consultation is what Wales has had plenty of for the last 30 years and look where it has got us.

Yet the real injustice is this: Scotland gets real power over its railways and Wales gets nothing. No power of direction, no power over infrastructure, no power over funding and not even a guarantee that Welsh needs will be taken seriously. This Government have gone out of their way to give Scotland the meaningful authority and yet Wales, a nation with its own Parliament and its own transport strategy, is told to make do with a memorandum of understanding—a document with no legal force, no accountability and no guarantee of action.

That inequality has real-world consequences. Independent experts told the Transport Committee that England will receive tens of billions in rail investment over the next decade, while Wales will receive only a few hundred million. That is a gap so vast that it can only be described as systemic neglect. Indeed, just this week, analysis by the Welsh Liberal Democrats showed that Wales is set to lose another £1 billion after Northern Powerhouse Rail was wrongly classified as an England and Wales project. That brings the total lost for Wales through that accounting trick to around £6 billion, while Scotland and Northern Ireland receive their fair share. Meanwhile, the Government expect Wales to be grateful for £445 million over 10 years. It does not take a maths genius to see that those of us in Wales are being short changed.

My constituents see the results every day: rural stations left behind, limited services, long commutes and opportunities missed. The rail network in Wales is not second-class by accident but is second-class by design, and the Bill entrenches that design. It hands the UK

Secretary of State even more control over decisions that directly affect Wales, with no matching powers for Welsh Ministers to shape the services that our communities rely on.

Let me say this plainly. A modern railway for Wales cannot be built on scraps of power handed down from Westminster. Wales needs the same powers that Scotland already has, Wales needs fairness, not favours, and Wales needs the tools to build a railway network worthy of our own people. Wales deserves better than this Bill and as Welsh Liberal Democrats, we will not accept anything less than equality for our nation.

5.37 pm

Baggy Shanker (Derby South) (Lab/Co-op): I refer the House to my interest as vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on rail.

Rail is in Derby's DNA. For decades, it has powered our community, moulded our economy and inspired generations of engineers and designers. I see the proof of that week in, week out, whether when meeting fantastic apprentices at Alstom, celebrating Railway 200 by bringing an incredible 40,000 people together in Derby for The Greatest Gathering or hearing how organisations such as Angel Trains, Loram, Porterbrook and many more drive forward innovation right across the sector from Derby.

As a proud Derby MP, I welcome the Bill. At its heart, it stands up Great British Rail and at the heart of Great British Rail is Derby. I was proud to campaign alongside so many others in our city who made the case for Derby to become GBR's home. I am proud now to work alongside a Government that are committed to delivering GBR in Derby.

Despite our city's proud rail heritage, manufacturing credentials and exciting future at the heart of UK rail, people travelling by train in Derby face the same challenges as any other commuters up and down the country. They know the frustration of paying through the nose for a train ticket only to find out that their train has been delayed or, even worse, cancelled. They navigate through confusing, fragmented ticketing systems, trying to work out if splitting a ticket will save them extra money or just end up causing havoc. I am pleased that through the Bill, our Labour Government are clearly saying that that is simply not good enough. GBR will put passengers first, whether that is through a new robust passenger watchdog with real standards and teeth or through simplifying and modernising fares with a common-sense, consistent approach.

I also strongly welcome the Bill's requirement for the Transport Secretary to publish a long-term rail strategy. This will be good for the sector and especially good for Derby because, for far too long, rail has been in a feast and famine cycle, with boom and bust orders, factories standing idle and workers and their families left in limbo. Derby knows this story all too well, unfortunately. In recent years, we have had to fight for the future of Alstom, pulling together across our city and standing shoulder to shoulder with our fantastic trade unions to protect skilled jobs, but this uncertainty is no way to run an industry that thousands of jobs depend upon. We need stability, we need certainty and we need a long-term plan, and that is exactly what this strategy will provide, supporting our rail supply chain, protecting

[Baggy Shanker]

the thousands of jobs that depend on it and giving businesses the confidence to invest in the future. When Britain backs rail, Britain backs Derby and Derby delivers for Britain.

5.40 pm

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): Great Western Railway fares are 2.2 times higher than those of European operators for similar lengths. Rail users in my constituency will be all too familiar with this reality, regularly paying more than £100 for a return ticket to London. Since the Labour Government came into power, we have seen the power of the unions once again, with eye-watering salary increases but no expectations to improve productivity. This means that on the line down to Devon, contracts were not changed when salaries were increased. This would have cleared up the mess that is the lack of seven-day-a-week contracts. Try travelling to Westminster on a Sunday! The creation of Great British Railways is being held up as a panacea to any such issues with our railway. Having served the last year or so on the Transport Committee, where we have been tracking the progress of these plans, I remain unconvinced by the Bill.

I gave my maiden speech during the passage of the Passenger Railway Services (Public Ownership) Bill, the mechanism through which the renationalisation of the railway was enabled. What I said then about that Bill remains true as we debate this one. I said that it was “a Bill that seems to indicate ideological time travel back to the nationalised railway system of the past and a mistaken belief that state-run institutions are the answer to all our woes. Our railway system needs to drive forward into the middle of the 21st century, not creep backwards to the 1970s.”—[*Official Report*, 3 September 2024; Vol. 753, c. 237.]

As a child of the '80s, I remember the old British Rail. Aside from the excitement of travelling on a 125 between Plymouth and my grandparents in Somerset, I do not recall it being any better than the privatised system we have today.

In the development of Great British Railways, the Government must work with industry. There are real concerns that without a strong independent rail regulator, this Bill will squeeze out private investment. Great British Railways will become the second biggest employer in the country—hardly an agile organisation—and it will be calling the shots. As a result, the state-owned operator will be chosen over private sector rivals. The Office of Rail and Road will see its power significantly altered, and some might even say reduced, by this Bill. It is arguable that it will lose its teeth. I would simply urge the Government to keep passengers front and centre of the Bill, but I am not sure that the quango regulator that they are setting up will be in passengers' best interests.

Private investment extends to rail freight, which is competing not only with state owned operators but with road haulage. The Rail Freight Group warns that the Bill risks driving the sector into decline, costing the UK economy up to £ 2.5 billion and adding 7 million additional HGV movements to the UK road network. While the Government have committed to introducing a statutory duty on GBR to promote the use of rail freight, supported by an overall growth target, I would

be grateful if the Minister took this opportunity to clarify how the duty will operate in practice and how it will ensure that GBR does not give preferential treatment to state-owned operators. Where the Bill places freight in the hierarchy of railway line use is critical, but it is not yet explicit on that, which is concerning.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): I wonder whether my hon. Friend is concerned, as I am, about how Ministers will square their responsibility to the trade unions—who, of course, fund the Labour party—with the producer interest, and whether she has any reflections on their past failure to get that balance right.

Rebecca Smith: My right hon. Friend raises an interesting point, which is that the very good conditions that private companies have been forced into by trade unions will end up TUPE-ed across to these state employees and, ultimately, the best conditions will be the ones that get delivered to the most, all in that huge new employer.

Many Members from across the House have highlighted the importance of connecting underserved areas, and nowhere in the country is that case more powerfully made than in the south-west. Before closing, I would like to highlight to the Minister two examples affecting my constituency. Both featured in my maiden speech, so I know he is familiar with them. I will continue to champion them, as well as the need to secure the railway line at Dawlish.

Many CrossCountry trains currently pass through Ivybridge station without stopping, because the platform is too short. That forces local people to travel by bus or car to Plymouth, Totnes or Tiverton, making rail travel far less convenient. I have secured with local stakeholders the funding for a feasibility study for the extension. That modest project would make a huge difference to our community and I hope it will not be hindered by the Bill.

I am also committed to securing a Plymouth metro, including plans for a station in Plympton in my constituency. Plympton's 30,000 residents have been without a station for more than 60 years, and it would be transformative for that part of my patch. Both Plympton and Ivybridge have many residents working at Devonport naval base and at the growing defence hubs in Turnchapel and Langage. The Government have promised billions of pounds to the city as part of a defence deal, but if that deal does not include funding for transport, what is the point? I urge the Government to ensure a joined-up approach in delivering the railway that the city and surrounding communities need to deliver on the defence role that the Government want.

I support the efforts to improve our railways and to bring ticket prices down, but a simple return to a nationalised British Rail is not the answer. As Conservatives, we understand the importance of retaining a strong role for the public sector through open access, protecting rail freight, improving efficiency and providing—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Many colleagues have been waiting for a while to speak. To enable me to get every colleague in, I need to drop the speaking limit to three minutes and encourage Members not to take interventions. The next person to speak will be Dr Scott Arthur with three minutes.

5.46 pm

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker—what a wonderful surprise.

I am a huge fan of rail. Every week I travel to this place via rail, and on my usual train, I am able to get to London in just four hours and 20 minutes. Since I came to the Chamber today, I have had an email from LNER saying that that time will be decreased by 10 minutes, so already this Bill is delivering for people in my constituency. The journey is only slightly longer than the equivalent flight, though it uses 14 times less carbon dioxide and is 100 times more relaxing. Most of the time, the journey runs smoothly—LNER is publicly owned—but like everyone here and across the UK, I am familiar with the delays and cancellations that regularly disrupt our wider railway. That is why I welcome the reforms that the Railways Bill brings. It is a once-in-a-lifetime chance to get our railway system back on track.

The creation of Great British Railways will put passengers before profits, simplify ticket purchasing and improve passenger accessibility across the network—something we have heard about already. The Bill also respects and preserves the devolution agreements concerning rail, giving Scottish Ministers the power of guidance and direction over GBR and ensuring that those changes directly benefit my constituents and the Scottish rail sector more widely. Importantly, the Bill will trigger the integration of track and train provision across the UK. That integration has been operating in Scotland for some years and does, for the most part, work well.

It is true that there are some points of concern around provision in Scotland, including regular cancellations and delays, but by and large the system works well. I have to say that the reason that rail is in public ownership in Scotland is due to years of campaigning by both the Labour party and our brothers and sisters in the trade union movement. The relationship between Network Rail and ScotRail is one area where GBR could take note. It is an effective and joined-up relationship between track and train operators, and will be vital to a successful national rail service.

I welcome the fact that the Bill provides a basis for Scottish and UK Ministers to work together and provide efficient cross-border services, and I look forward to seeing the memorandum of understanding, which will lay out exactly how that relationship will work. I look forward to supporting the Bill. I must say, the Lib Dems and the Conservatives have asked for a lot of local improvements to be delivered via this Bill, yet they do not intend to support the Bill itself. They cannot have their cake and eat it.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Talking of cake, I call Dr Ben Spencer.

5.49 pm

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

My mission for my constituents is to keep Runnymede and Weybridge moving. Supporting and improving our train services is a vital part of delivering that.

On the changes that the Bill delivers for people across my constituency, the proof of the pudding will be in the eating. I will give an example of how much this means to them. Salesian school in my constituency takes in

many children from the local and surrounding areas. They use the Chertsey to Addlestone branch line, which is one of South Western Railway's worst-performing lines. As a result, they are very often late to school, and the school has to allocate teachers to the platforms for safety purposes, because the platforms become crowded when there are delays. That has serious material impacts on those children's education. I am sure that that experience is replicated for schools across the local area.

The Chertsey-Addlestone loop is punished by level crossings, including in Addlestone and Egham. The Pooley Green level crossing has had downtimes of over 10 minutes, including just a couple of months ago. Constituents tell me that they do not go to the fish and chip shop and other businesses on the other side of the level crossing because of those downtimes. Whatever happens with the Bill, it is absolutely critical that there are improvements to the level crossings at Egham, Addlestone and across my constituency, so that we have data, such as from downtime monitors, to see the impact that the problem has on traffic.

We need timetabling that changes not in a click of the fingers but with proper consultation with residents about what is happening. That would mean proper train services for the children going to school in my constituency and the people who depend on commuting to get to work and to see their families. It would end the last-minute train cancellations that have seemed to be more frequent in the past few months. As a regular South Western Railways user—I live in Chertsey in my constituency—I see the impact that that is having on my constituents.

We also need improvements to accessibility. It is completely scandalous that the lift at Weybridge station is still out of service. Accessibility problems are not limited to lifts; they also affect stations themselves. Services need to be responsive to the needs of my constituents, but passengers are too often punished when engineering works take place on our tracks, causing traffic carnage for the weekend. Engineering works must be co-ordinated with local roads.

5.52 pm

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): I am delighted to speak today in this debate. I hope that the Bill marks the start of a new era for our rail system.

Bracknell's rail links are its lifeblood, connecting us to jobs, friends, family and opportunities through lines to London and Reading, as well as to Gatwick airport from Crowthorne and Sandhurst. That is why I am so delighted that South Western Railway has now been brought back into public ownership, with Great Western Railway services to follow shortly. The renationalisation of our rail services will create more opportunities for growth, more opportunities for investment, and a rail service for the public good.

First, the Chancellor froze rail fares in the Budget, which means my constituents will save almost £300 on the cost of a season ticket into London, and now we are laying the foundations for a new, modern and joined-up railway system, owned by the public and run for the public. The new GBR livery revealed today, which proudly incorporates our Union flag in its design, is, I think, a powerful symbol of the national pride that we should feel in our railways, but which has, for many years, been undermined by high prices and low reliability.

[Peter Swallow]

Bracknell is already seeing the benefits of renationalisation, including the ongoing upgrade of the fleet on the Reading to Waterloo line. The new Arterio trains will provide 50% increased capacity compared with the outdated class 455 fleet, and will offer accessible toilets, air conditioning, charging points at every seat, real-time information screens, on-board wi-fi and walk-through carriages, meaning that more people can travel in better conditions every day. These trains were first purchased back in 2017 at a cost of £1 billion but have been stuck in the sidings. What greater symbol can there be for the failure of privatisation than that? I thank the Rail Minister for meeting me recently and for all his work to roll out this new stock.

I am also delighted that the Bill makes provision for GBR to take control of the timetable, as the current system has led to some inexplicable gaps in service. As the SWR timetable stands, after 9 pm there is only one service an hour from Bracknell to Reading. Trains from Reading to Bracknell are also reduced to an hourly service after 10 pm. Needless to say, that has a significant impact on the ability of Bracknell Forest residents to travel for work and leisure. Again, I call for that to be addressed.

The north downs line is deeply unreliable, and I know that Members across the House are concerned about the need to electrify it. The Minister knows that I care passionately about a rail connection to Heathrow airport as well, which is vital, and I know he cares passionately about delivering that along with private sector investment. On that, I will—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order.

5.55 pm

Liz Jarvis (Eastleigh) (LD): It is a pleasure to contribute to this debate. I am proud to represent a railway town. Eastleigh has a long railway heritage. However, over the past year, my constituents have been subjected to lots of delays and cancellations, all while paying a premium for the privilege of travelling by train.

I agree that the current structure of the rail industry is too fragmented and in need of reform. A long-term strategy, clearer accountability and a coherent approach to infrastructure and operations are well overdue. However, one of the biggest tests of this Bill is whether it will improve services and increase accessibility and safety. I campaigned successfully to keep ticket offices at our local stations in Eastleigh open, because for many passengers, including disabled people, older travellers, the vulnerable and those with visual impairments, staffed stations are essential. Accessibility must be built into the system from the start, to ensure that people can travel with confidence. We need proper staffing arrangements, clear information, reliable lifts, step-free access and a design approach that works for all passengers, not just the most agile or those most familiar with the system.

Integrating rail infrastructure and operations under one public body is not inherently controversial. However, what the Government have designed here looks more like a top-down body answerable to Ministers, rather than a modern, customer-focused railway. We have seen what over-centralisation looks like in practice, and it rarely leads to better outcomes for passengers. How will

the Minister ensure that Great British Railways is genuinely accountable to passengers, not just to central Government? To address the concerns of passengers, we need a much stronger and genuinely independent passenger voice in the system. People need to know there is someone who will stand up for them when services fall short.

I also hope the Minister will look at expanding discount schemes for young people. My constituency is lucky to have two fantastic colleges that draw students from across the region, with many travelling to Eastleigh by train. Keeping travel affordable is essential to allow them to access their education without the cost of the journey becoming an obstacle.

Eastleigh deserves a railway that is reliable, affordable and fit for the future. This Bill contains some welcome measures, but it needs to go further to bring about the transformation of Britain's railways that our country needs and passengers deserve.

5.58 pm

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): The desperately poor condition of our railway system is entirely symbolic of the wider decline in public services over the past 14 years. I regularly make the 10-hour round trip up to London from west Cornwall on trains that are often beset with delays, and a lack of water or heating. My constituents know and feel this all too well. Our one main railway line runs the length of Cornwall, from Penzance to cross the Tamar bridge at Saltash. It is a vital transport artery, connecting south-west England with Cornwall. As with many other pressures faced by remote coastal and rural communities, there are unique difficulties. Fewer trains stop at Hayle, for example, and bus services are generally suspended there at about 6 pm, cutting off communities to the west. To illustrate that point, due to a fault with the signalling system today, all trains from Penzance were cancelled.

Great Western Railway is currently operated by FirstGroup, but under this Labour Government's rail reform programme, it will be brought back into public ownership and integrated into Great British Railways next year. This transition will ensure that decisions about Cornwall's rail services are made in the public interest, not for private profit, and that passengers will see improvements in reliability, affordability and accountability. We need a railway that is better governed, and locally attuned and responsive to the people who depend on it, supporting growth in every region.

The revival of the railway system must be innovative and practical. I saw a great example of innovation a few weeks ago, when I attended the launch of a superfast wi-fi pilot on a GWR train. Advanced engineering and connectivity solutions, combined with leadership from transport authorities, will deliver a new benchmark and support a long-standing ambition to bring faster, more resilient wi-fi connectivity to Cornwall and south-west England.

In 2021, under the previous Government, a plan was published that included a recommendation for a new public body and a long-term strategy for rail, but the Conservatives failed to implement it. This Bill will remove friction and bureaucracy, which are endemic in the current system. We have an opportunity to sweep away duplication of roles and departments to produce substantial savings and a smooth service. We can free

up resources, trusting rail staff to build a better system than the current bureaucratic, bloated and top-heavy organisational ecosystem, riddled with institutional incompetence.

This Labour Government will bring clarity where there was confusion, reliability where there was disruption, and affordability where costs were sky high. I very much look forward to supporting the Bill.

6.1 pm

Siân Berry (Brighton Pavilion) (Green): The Green party welcomes the Bill. It is right in principle to end the failed, long experiment in surrendering public services to the private market.

We are pleased to see an extended role for the passenger watchdog set out in the Bill, and clear requirements for business plans and strategies to be published and consulted upon. I want the measures in the Bill to include deep scrutiny of those plans and strategies. Passengers, rail workers and locally elected representatives must use their voices to have more control over what Great British Railways offers, both in advance and during the development of these plans and strategies.

I am pleased that the duties laid out for Great British Railways include consideration for “potential passengers”. That will help to better include many people when they use the railways, such as disabled people, people with buggies, older people, people for whom toilet access is more than crucial and others for whom accessibility barriers are still too high on our railways. This and the public interest duty should help to create social benefits for people for whom the cost of rail travel is prohibitive, including young people, who need more connectivity and access to jobs and training.

However, the Bill still lacks on its face a specific duty to grow passenger numbers. We have an integrated transport strategy on the way, but the Bill contains a mode shift target for freight without including one for passengers. The Bill needs to say more about the need to plan for new capacity and services on the basis of creating maximum potential to reduce car dependency, to shift people away from the most polluting and socially unequal modes of transport, not just to respond to current demand or congestion on the railways.

Public ownership is popular with the vast majority of people. Before the last election, it was even backed by 60% of those who intended to vote Conservative. It is a strong desire for people in Brighton Pavilion, for whom the legacy of privatisation is too often one of expensive and unreliable services, with big gaps in accessibility. I believe strongly that local voices, such as those in Brighton, must be more in control of our public services. We need more clarity on how mayoral, local and combined authorities will be able to control investment plans and services.

During the passage of the previous rail Bill, I argued that there should be public ownership of rolling stock companies. I understand that decisions are being made for future rolling stock not to be purchased through the evil twin of the private finance initiative. However, the fact remains that the current rolling stock is a scandal. Rolling stock leasing companies—ROSCOs—paid £275 million in dividends to shareholders in 2024-25, and those payments are up by 59% in five years. That is outrageous profiteering and a drain on public finances,

so I urge the Government to cut that waste, find ways to bring our rolling stock into public hands and look at a windfall tax on the current ROSCOs to address this injustice.

6.4 pm

Daniel Francis (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Lab): I draw attention to my role as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for wheelchair users. I rise to support the measures in the Railways Bill. I know that the measures will be supported by my constituents, who predominantly travel from the four train stations of Barnehurst, Bexleyheath, Slade Green and Crayford, which are all located in my constituency. Three of those stations are solely served by Southeastern, with the benefits of nationalisation beginning to be seen on the service. For instance, in a new timetable that will take effect next week, the Bexleyheath line will see both additional evening services and increased capacity to Victoria at weekends. I appreciate that more remains to be done, and I will continue to campaign for improvements.

I have a long-standing interest in these matters, having served for four years as a member of the board of London TravelWatch—or, as it is technically known as and referred to in the Bill, the London Transport Users Committee. That experience lives with me, and it is the reason why I support the Bill. On far too many occasions at board meetings, I heard excuses from train operating companies and Network Rail blaming each other for issues relating to punctuality. That led to the lunacy of hundreds of staff being employed to establish who should cover the cost of delays.

Earlier this year, we saw the Southeastern and Network Rail Kent route unite under a single leadership team to form South Eastern Railway. The partnership is delivering improvements, with increased customer satisfaction and reduced cancellations. Initiatives include shared planning, daytime track access without service disruption, and trials of drone and AI technology.

I welcome the measures included in the Bill to help ensure that the railway is made more accessible for all. Hon. Members will have heard my tales of my experience using public transport as the parent of a wheelchair user and my requests for the introduction of a National Rail accessibility app. I am therefore delighted that the Secretary of State has named accessibility as one of the six key objectives for the railway.

Having one national operator, rather than competing operators, will improve the assistance offered and the simplification of ticketing for disabled passengers. Importantly, paragraph 49 in schedule 3 to the Bill will amend the Equality Act 2010 to ensure that the public sector equality duty applies to GBR. I welcome the Government’s road map to an accessible railway based around seven priority themes.

Finally, I welcome the establishment of an expanded passenger watchdog, having served on the board of London TravelWatch and having worked alongside Transport Focus on some aspects of joint working during that time. Those changes in London to the London Transport Users Committee include the expansion of the current role for my constituents, which will see a “particular regard to the interests and needs” of disabled people.

For the reasons I have outlined, I look forward to voting against the amendment this evening and voting in favour of the Bill on Second Reading.

6.6 pm

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): Getting to grips with the railways by simplifying and integrating aspects such as freight, passenger services, ticketing and long-term planning is welcome. This Bill makes great sense for England. However, it does not work for Wales.

Currently, two Governments on either side of the M4 control different parts of what should be a single unified train and rail network in Wales. This bizarre split makes designing railways in the best interests of the people of Wales almost impossible. We can see that in the broken promise by Whitehall to fully electrify the south Wales mainline beyond Cardiff, or even to start work on the equivalent line in the north. This overlooking of Wales will only continue, as under the Bill Welsh Ministers can only request that Wales is consulted in long-term rail planning as part of an England and Wales strategy. The people of Wales do not want consultation; we deserve control.

Wales's lack of control means that funding decisions from Westminster are made at our expense—an injustice that this Bill is silent on. With Welsh control over the rail track, Whitehall could no longer continue its perverse logic of designating English rail projects, such as HS2, Oxford-Cambridge Rail and now Northern Powerhouse Rail, as “England and Wales projects”. When combined, they deny £6 billion of funding to Wales. The absurdity of the situation would be laughable if it was not so serious. Not one of those projects has an inch of track in Wales.

While in opposition, the Secretary of State for Wales previously called for Wales to receive £4.6 billion in HS2 funding. She has U-turned on that and now celebrates only £350 million, which was announced at the spending review for Welsh rail over the next few years—just 5% of what we as a country are owed. While the money is welcome, it does not touch the sides when it comes to the decades and decades of underfunding that we have experienced.

It saddens me to say that this Government have decided to follow an age-old adage: “For Wales, just see England.” We are the only nation in Great Britain who do not have full control over our own rail network. Only last week, 11 Welsh Labour Members of the Senedd wrote a letter to the Prime Minister saying that expectations were raised by the Labour party in opposition that it would support the devolution of rail to Wales. Plaid Cymru is clear that Welsh rail should be in Welsh hands, and that it is time to devolve it to Wales.

6.9 pm

Alex Ballinger (Halesowen) (Lab): In our part of the country, in Halesowen and the Black Country, we have a long history of building trains and railways. Indeed, in Stourbridge—just one stop down the line—Foster, Rastrick & Co. built the Stourbridge Lion, the very first steam locomotive to be exported to the Americas in 1829.

However, since the closure of passenger services at Halesowen train station in 1927, my constituents have had to travel to Cradley Heath, Old Hill or Rowley Regis to get on to the Birmingham-Worcester line that runs through Snow Hill. Sadly, the performance of that line is very poor—only 70% of West Midlands trains are on time, and 7% of them are cancelled. This means that my constituents are getting earlier trains so that

they can ensure they catch their connection and get to their meetings on time. Frustratingly, that train route no longer goes into Birmingham New Street, so if my constituents need to travel to other parts of the country and make connections elsewhere, they have to walk for 10 minutes through the middle of Birmingham, from Moor Street to New Street.

In that context, I welcome the Bill, which puts Great British Railways on a statutory footing as the guiding mind of the system, giving us a single body that will be responsible for managing infrastructure, planning services and overseeing passenger operations. I also welcome the fact that franchising was abolished in November and that West Midlands trains will be brought back into public ownership in February 2026. Public ownership of Great British Railways gives us a chance to simplify objectives: run the trains on time, with enough seats and at a fair price.

I also want to highlight the midlands rail hub, which is a programme of improvements that will deliver real benefits for the people of Halesowen. Midlands Connect estimates that the scheme will deliver 300 extra trains a day in and out of Birmingham, with 20 million extra seats a year, providing many shorter and faster journeys on the Birmingham-Worcester line that my constituency runs on. It will mean more trains from Kidderminster and Worcester running through Stourbridge and past Rowley and Cradley Heath to Birmingham; more capacity at Moor Street, easing the pressure that ripples back down the line; and an opportunity for trains to run direct from my constituency into Birmingham New Street, so that people will be able to make their onward journeys up into the rest of the country.

The Black Country helped give our country and the world the railways, and my constituents are not asking for anything extravagant in return. They want a service that runs on time, with enough carriages, under a system in which someone is clearly in charge and accountable. They want the benefits of the midlands rail hub and rail nationalisation to deliver fewer cancellations, shorter journey times and a decent chance of getting a seat. If we get this right, not only will we honour our railways' past, but we will finally give our constituents the modern railway they deserve.

6.12 pm

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): It is a pleasure to contribute to this debate, Madam Deputy Speaker. I will start with the things I welcome in the Bill and in what the Government are doing on railways. After increasing rail fares by almost 5% last year, it is very welcome that the Government have frozen fares—something that Liberal Democrats have been asking for for seven years. That is really positive, as is the Government's investment in the new station at Wellington in my constituency—they deserve credit for that investment. It is important that the DfT is involved in that project, and I might write to the Minister after this debate to pursue this issue, because it is one of only a small number of new stations being built in the country, and it is really important that the project is seen through. There needs to be a recognition that the year of delay has increased costs.

I also want to say some words about the importance of open access rail providers. I am concerned about the provisions in the Bill that potentially make open access

a lot more difficult. Go-op rail wants to open a route from Taunton through to Wiltshire, which would be very important. We also want to see opportunities for future investment in railways, including reopening lines. There is a heritage line from Taunton to Minehead that should ultimately be provided with a proper rail service. If it were, the West Somerset Railway would become an open access railway on the same line.

What is important to most of my constituents is not just seeing a new station like Wellington, but seeing a reduction in fares and an improvement in reliability. The number of services from Taunton has recently been cut in half, which means that people cannot get on the trains. What is needed is the form of investment that I have described, and moving the rail institutions over from the private to the public sector will not necessarily deliver the improvements that we need. I therefore remain to be convinced about the Bill.

6.15 pm

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): I am pleased to speak about a matter that is so important to my constituents. For too long, our railway has been held back by fragmentation, competing interests, and a lack of clear accountability. By bringing services back into public hands and creating Great British Railways, the Bill gives us the opportunity to plan, run and improve the railway as a single coherent system. For my constituents, a key priority is reliability. People want trains that turn up when they are meant to, connections that they can trust, and information on which they can rely. A unified, public operator, with responsibility for timetabling, infrastructure and service delivery, gives us the best chance of reducing disruption and building a network that works consistently, day in and day out.

A strengthened public railway also depends on the people who operate it. The workforce is essential to improving reliability and delivering a better experience to passengers. Staff deserve clarity about how, and if, the transition to GBR will affect their jobs. If we want a well-run railway, we must support the people who maintain the tracks, staff the stations and run the trains. I ask Ministers to continue the constructive dialogue with trade unions, in order to ensure that the employment conditions of their members are protected during the creation of GBR and into the future.

The need for a more co-ordinated railway has been brought into sharp focus in Durham recently. London North Eastern Railway's proposed timetable changes would have removed important morning commuter services on which many local residents rely. I worked closely with local people to challenge those plans, and I welcome the progress that has been made, but the experience showed how vulnerable local connectivity can be when decisions are made in isolation, or via flawed consultation processes. Communities must have certainty that key links will be protected, strengthened, and not placed at risk.

The Bill gives us a chance to build a railway that is more reliable, better connected, and more focused on meeting public need. I support it strongly, and I look forward to working with Ministers to ensure that, as it progresses, it delivers the improvements that passengers in Durham expect, and the support that rail workers deserve—including my niece Kate, who has just started

her training with Northern Rail. I look forward to her getting me to King's Cross and back to Durham on time, and safely, in the future.

6.18 pm

Alex Mayer (Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard) (Lab): This summer, when I was travelling by train to a bus conference, I managed to lose my bag. I did what everyone in that circumstance would do and panicked slightly, because my purse and my keys were in it, along with my House of Commons pass. I thought, "Who on earth do I contact?", because I was not entirely sure where I had left it. Had I left it on the train? Had I perhaps left it at the station when I was changing trains—and, indeed, which train might I have left it on?

All the station staff were very helpful. They all pointed me to different online forms, and I have to say that my faith in humanity was absolutely restored about two weeks later, when everything was found, all of it still in the bag. I received an email saying "Come and collect it." I paid my ten quid and got it back. Then, about three weeks later, I received another email, this time from Transport for London—which I had also contacted—telling me that unfortunately my bag had not been found, and they had finished the search for it. That, I think, is just one illustration of the fact that we have a completely un-joined-up railway. I was struck by the five mentions of competition in the Bill and the absence of any mention of standardisation, which is what I think our passengers are really after.

I have a couple of other points on which the Minister might be able to provide a bit of commentary. As mentioned by the Chair of the Transport Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), clause 18 lacks a target for passenger growth. Although that might be missing, I very much welcome the inclusion of the phrase "potential users", which feels very much like the idea of "prospective" passengers that I tried to get into the Bus Services (No. 2) Bill but did not.

I really welcome the five-year stability for infrastructure funding, but could we extend that to operations? I would be grateful for the Minister's views on whether schedule 2 will allow Ministers to cut funding mid-period too easily. On devolution, I hope we will soon get guidance on how mayoral combined strategic authorities will be able to get the necessary powers. How will they get a devolved railway? There are many references in the Bill to mayoral strategic authorities, but perhaps the wording should sometimes be "mayor", because it is important that we actually consult the democratically elected person. Finally, on data being open by default, will the Minister assure us that all ticket sellers will get exactly the same data that GBR gets? All in all, this is a fantastic Bill, so we are all on track—full steam ahead.

6.20 pm

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): I must declare an interest: I have been a railway geek since childhood, travelling up and down the country, and I am a member of my local rail user group. I personally kept both Hornby and Bachmann train models alive for several years, and I now torment my son by taking him on the Severn valley railway far more than he would prefer. I also declare my membership of the ASLEF parliamentary

[Chris Bloore]

group, and I am a regular commuter who did not recognise the railway utopia described by the shadow Minister.

Those interests, both personal and formal, only strengthen my belief that the Bill marks an important moment for our railway network and for the people who rely on a fit-for-purpose service. For too long, passengers have lived with the consequences of a fragmented railway system divided among multiple operators, with split responsibilities, inconsistent priorities and a lack of clear accountability. The result has been a network that too often fails to meet the needs of commuters in Redditch, who just last week faced every service being cancelled on the morning because of poor weather.

The Bill brings together track and train—Network Rail and the passenger operators—under one coherent structure. This is the most significant structural reform of our railways in a generation, and it restores the principle that the railway should operate as a single integrated system. Passengers understand this, and those who work on the railway understand it. Organisations such as my local railway user group and ASLEF have long campaigned for an integrated national system, and consistently argued that our railways simply work better when the parts work together.

The Bill delivers simplicity. Today's railway involves a bewildering array of actors—there are 17 different organisations with overlapping responsibilities. This structure does not serve passengers, freight customers or the taxpayer. Great British Railways will bring clarity. There will be a single guiding mind, a single organisation responsible for the railway's performance, and a single body accountable to Parliament and the public. That alone will improve the experience of millions of travellers.

The broad implications of the Bill are clear. It introduces long-term planning, strengthens freight, modernises ticketing systems and ensures that the railway is accountable to the public it serves. Too often, my constituents in Redditch have suffered from cancellations and poor service. On top of the investment in the midlands rail hub and the freezing of fares, the Bill lays the foundations for an integrated railway that works for passengers and the staff who keep the system running every day. It is an important and necessary step towards building a railway worthy of the future of this country.

6.23 pm

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): The Government are simplifying a very complex system, so that we can take forward a railway that is fit for the future, and I really welcome the measures on timetabling, tickets and the merging of the 17 bodies. I also welcome the 30-year long-term rail strategy, which is a fantastic idea.

Rail is so vital in Cornwall, but the main line is slow and badly designed—sorry, Brunel, but it goes to the wrong places and is very poorly defended. We do, though, have successful and busy branch lines in St Ives and Falmouth, and we would like more of them. We have just had a pilot of wi-fi on trains. We may have very slow trains, but we would like very fast wi-fi. If that could be rolled out across the south-west, it would really help us on those 10-hour return journeys.

The staff, who are fantastic, will probably have a single employer, but it would be good to have that confirmed. There is also insourcing rather contracting out, particularly on cleaning and food—and my goodness, do I make a plea for the return of the buffet, so that we do not just have the trolley that goes up and down, but which people can never get to.

I want to focus most of my speech on how much I welcome the duty to promote the role of rail freight and set a growth target for rail freight. I want to set out a huge opportunity for the Minister and the Department for Transport. In Falmouth, we have a beautiful multi-use port; uses involve defence, repair crews, I hope floating offshore wind in the future, and exports. We also have the rebirth of the critical minerals industry in Cornwall, with a £50 million strategy from this Government. That will lead to a great requirement for freight transport, but each train would take 129 lorries off our narrow Cornish roads. We have the full support of our businesses, chamber of commerce and council, and we have an enterprise zone. As a next step, we need a feasibility study, but for a very small amount of money in the grand scheme of things, we could open up the 150 yards to Falmouth docks for rail freight. That would be a step for the future; critical minerals could come into or leave Cornwall, and we could grow our economy, as we would love to.

6.26 pm

Dr Marie Tidball (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): One of the most special moments of my first year as an MP was singing ABBA on the Penistone line train with the wonderful We Can Survive Singers, while travelling through my beautiful constituency. This line is the spine connecting south and west Yorkshire, running between Huddersfield and Sheffield. It courses through eight constituencies, serves over half a million people, and connects six hospitals, four universities, several further education colleges, and hundreds of schools and GP surgeries. It laces together communities with rich histories, vibrant high streets and industry with huge potential.

When I was growing up, our south Yorkshire transport system was the envy of the world, but 14 years of the Conservatives' broken promises resulted in an unacceptable north-south transport divide. On the day that the previous Conservative Government announced that the money for Network North was going to be spent on potholes in London, three out of the six Penistone line services were cancelled. What about Reform? The Reform Members have not even bothered to turn up to this debate. They do not care about rail, but this Government do.

I am thoroughly delighted to support this Bill to take back control through Great British Railways, to deliver improvements for customers, and to take long-term decisions in the national interest. Those at the Penistone Line Partnership are brilliant advocates for our local line, and their voices will be strengthened by the Bill's introduction of a new passenger watchdog, which will set tough standards.

This Labour Government's Bill—along with the work of our Labour mayor, Oliver Coppard, and local councils—provides the opportunity to restore the transport network, so that it is once again the envy of the world, including by delivering phases 1 and 2 of the Penistone

line upgrades. Our Labour Government have already begun to power that change with our £48 million investment in phase 1, and phase 2 is much needed.

We must go further and fulfil the recommendation of Lord Blunkett's Yorkshire plan for rail, which includes delivering two trains an hour. South and west Yorkshire deserve better than the once-an-hour service we currently have on this line. It is crucial that the second stage is covered in the next spending review to ensure that my constituents in Dodworth, Silkstone Common, Penistone, Chapeltown and all the places in between can get to college, university, hospital and employment. My constituency helped to build the prosperity of this great nation, and it needs this line's second upgrade to ensure that it is once more the beating heart of rail.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order.

6.29 pm

Dave Robertson (Lichfield) (Lab): After years of falling standards under the Conservatives, this Labour Government are investing in our railways. Anyone who commutes from Lichfield to London, as I do every week, will have seen for themselves how sorely needed that is. We have all had trains cancelled and re-routed, and been crammed in with standing room only. The Bill, creating Great British Railways, is the biggest overhaul to our rail system in a generation. GBR will run our trains, set the timetable, and control the track, stations and depots. It is about putting our railways back squarely in taxpayers' hands—a public service under public control.

GBR will be a step change compared to some of the difficulties that my constituents, in places such as Fradley, Handsacre and especially Streethay, have had with HS2—years of delay and disruption under the last Government. This Government are putting new management in place at HS2 to sort it out and I know my right hon. Friend the Transport Secretary will be holding them to account, just as she will be holding GBR to account. It is really important that we get this right, because the failings of HS2 Ltd have been so significant for so long. Continuing with the way that the previous Government ran our railways is clearly not the way forward, especially when we look ahead and at the wonderful project that is the midlands rail hub.

GBR will give taxpayers control over the railways and projects such as the rail hub by investing record sums in upgrading the network. That project, almost £1 billion, will mean that the clogged Birmingham New Street will have its capacity significantly increased, allowing 300 more trains to run through the city each day. It will unlock huge increases in the number of services across the midlands and beyond. This is amazing news for people in Lichfield, Burntwood and the villages, especially those who use the cross city line, which links Lichfield to Birmingham and is the busiest commuter line outside London. Since covid, we have had only two trains an hour. The midlands rail hub will help us get that back to the four we need.

Beyond that, Labour believes in our railways, publicly owned and run for people, not profit. No longer should shareholders benefit while passengers suffer poor service. I really want to see every single pound from tickets reinvested in great services and further expanding our rail network.

In my area, the next stage of rebuilding our railways really does need to be getting a passenger service back on the line from Lichfield to Burton and Derby, and a new station at Alrewas for the National Memorial Arboretum. The arboretum is our national centre for remembrance, but public transport links to it are extremely limited. Opening that line up and reinvesting what we can from a publicly owned railway service will connect people to jobs and take pressure off our roads. My right hon. Friend the Transport Secretary has heard me make the case BEFORE and she will hear it again. I will keep pushing the business case for that line under a new publicly owned railway service.

6.32 pm

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): And now we turn, at last, to a fundamental question which has perhaps gone unasked in this House for too long: what is the mass and acceleration of an average-sized peacock? The question does not spring from the pages of a script for "The Goon Show" or "Monty Python". It is a real case that came before the rail industry's Delay Attribution Board.

A delay caused by a collision between a train and a small bird is the responsibility of a private operator, which pays the cost of compensation, but if the unfortunate bird is deemed to be large, then taxpayers are on the hook. And so it came to be that one day expensive lawyers gathered to compare calculations and precedent, and argue out whether the unfortunate peacock was more akin to a goose than a duck. Few incidents better illustrate the costly absurdities of rail privatisation.

It is worth reflecting on the fact that the cost of privatisation is borne by all taxpayers, whether they use the railway or not. The railways received nearly £700 million in subsidy in 1990-91. By 2018-19, before the pandemic impaired the industry's finances, the net subsidy requirement had increased to £4.3 billion—an increase after inflation of some 236%; more than doubling, even after passenger journey increases had been accounted for. To this day, subsidy is lower in Northern Ireland, where the railways remained in public hands.

Everywhere, the railway's contingent parts are divided and separated by contractual barriers. For passengers, that can mean station staff who cannot even board a train to help someone with mobility issues, because they work for different companies. There is a multiplicity of such unnecessary contractual barriers, and public money and public confidence drains through each one.

We should not expect a complete change of services on day one of operations under GBR, as there was not on the Attlee Government's vesting day for nationalisation in 1948, but change over time it will, and for the better, including for my constituents who travel from Longbridge, Northfield and Kings Norton. The Bill is the instrument of that transformation.

Tonight's vote is on the principle of establishing Great British Railways. In the weeks ahead, there will be time for detailed line-by-line scrutiny, to which I look forward to contributing, including through the Transport Committee. But for tonight, I just want to say that there can be no doubt that this is the right policy and the right Bill. It has been a privilege to have had the occasional view of the development of this area of transport policy down the years. I look forward to voting for it tonight.

6.35 pm

Jacob Collier (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): As we mark 200 years of our railways, it is fitting that we are embarking on a new chapter in their history. They continue to be an integral part of the story of Britain, as I am reminded every time I visit London St Pancras, which helped Burton upon Trent to become a brewing powerhouse. Below platform, passengers walk where Burton beer barrels were once stacked high—a reminder of the importance of our railways in shaping the very fabric of Britain, and of course supplying punters with the very best beer.

Great British Railways will be the new guiding mind of our railways, joining up operations and putting passengers at the heart of the rail service. Particularly important is the Bill's focus on disabled people, who must currently navigate a network of inaccessible stations and who constantly worry about whether accessibility services will be in place. Our railways are and must be for all.

My constituency of Burton and Uttoxeter borders what will be the new home of GBR, Derby. Putting aside our rivalries for a second, that will bring benefits to my area and the wider region, and build on 185 years of rail expertise. The long-term rail strategy will be the first of its kind in setting out strategic objectives over the next 30 years. Just as in defence, we are creating an always-on supply chain. I welcome that long-term approach, which means we can bring security to rail workers and prevent the cliff edge that has affected workers in Derby and Newton Aycliffe. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Northfield (Laurence Turner) would like to see the return of the InterCity swallow livery, but delivering improved passenger services must be the priority; that is what this Government will be judged on.

The Select Committee has heard concerns about rail freight, which have been addressed today, particularly in relation to clause 63. We also heard concerns about the operator appeal process as set out in clause 68, which is equivalent to a judicial review; some of the evidence we heard suggests that that is a very high threshold.

The Railways Bill is exactly the change that my Burton and Uttoxeter constituents want to see. With public ownership, we are taking a long-term approach to the railways, with investment through GBR putting passengers and railway workers back at the heart of their railway. In 2027, CrossCountry and East Midlands Railway will come into public ownership, and it will not be long until the people of Burton and Uttoxeter will see the benefit of a publicly owned railway. Right now, the reality is that people face unaffordable tickets, unreliable or cancelled services, inaccessible stations and overcrowded carriages. For many of my constituents, those are barriers to railway travel. The Bill is about changing that. It is how we keep the promise we made in the election to get our railways back on track.

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

6.38 pm

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): This has been a very popular debate with a lot of contributions; I congratulate all those who managed to

make their points in just three minutes. I will do my best to summarise the debate, starting by noting the excellent contributions from Opposition Members.

My hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight East (Joe Robertson) brilliantly managed to discuss a Railways Bill by referring to ferries, but he did make the serious point that we want pragmatism, not ideology, to reform the railways. My hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Immingham (Martin Vickers) made the good point that, through nationalisation, the taxpayer now has to replace private investment.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) made three important points: that the reforms simply advance the sprawling centralisation of powers; that, again, they involve practicality giving way to ideology; and that their drafting puts open access concessions at risk.

My hon. Friend the Member for South West Devon (Rebecca Smith), who is a member of the Transport Committee, was concerned that this was ideological time travel that takes us back to the 1970s. My hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer) said that, post nationalisation, cancellations of South Western trains had increased on his Chertsey-Addlestone loop.

There were also many thoughtful contributions from the Liberal Democrats. It is telling that the Government's insistence on nationalisation as the only answer has united the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives. It is worth noting that we have heard nothing from Members of the fag packet party, who, I think, still support nationalisation. Then again, however, they would not recognise a transport policy if it slapped them in the face.

Then there was Labour, with speech after speech welcoming the nationalisation of the railways—[HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"] Bring it on. In speech after speech, they showed deep suspicion of the profit motive. The tone was set by the Transport Secretary, who said that the current system benefits companies over passenger services—as though the two things are mutually exclusive—and taken up by the hon. Members for Wrexham (Andrew Ranger), for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) and for Salford (Rebecca Long Bailey), with claims of profit prioritised over customer experience, large-scale profiteering on the railways and dividends prioritised over people. I could go on.

This is the authentic voice of Labour: the private sector is not good—not good in the way that the state is good. The private sector invests to make a return, not to create unionised jobs. It innovates to make a return, not to satisfy a Government productivity goal. It innovates to beat the competition and make a return, not to satisfy a ministerial target. However, it does invest, it does innovate and it does improve to compete. Nevertheless, Labour clings on to its ideological faith in the efficiency of the state, despite all the evidence to the contrary—and there is evidence. After all, we have tried this experiment before.

Laurence Turner: When the hon. Member for Orpington (Gareth Bacon) was the shadow Transport Secretary, he was recorded saying that his party would likely not reverse nationalisation because the public would be unlikely to think it was a good idea. If this Bill passes,

will it be the policy of the hon. Member for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew) to privatise the railways all over again?

Jerome Mayhew: Let us wait to see if Labour actually nationalises it first; but the Conservatives are here to lead, not to follow.

There is plenty of evidence because we have tried the nationalisation experiment before. The railways were nationalised in 1948. *[Interruption.]* If Labour Members listen, they might learn something. When the railways were nationalised in 1948, there were a billion passenger journeys a year. Thereafter, the impact of nationalisation was immediate: year after year, fewer customers chose to use the trains; year after year, they voted with their feet because the service did not give them what they wanted and was not focused on them and their needs. There was low investment because the railways were competing with schools and hospitals, followed by poor industrial relations with an organisation more focused on itself than its customers—*[Interruption.]* The Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), says from a sedentary position that it was because there were more cars—let us just hold that in our minds.

By the 1990s, just 735 million passenger journeys were taking place a year, instead of a billion. In 1993, the system was privatised by the Conservative Government. The unions hated it, and Labour therefore hated it, too. However, every year, more and more passengers were attracted to use the trains—not just a few more, but vastly more. By 2019, 1.75 billion people were using the railways each year—and there were many more cars. Labour cannot explain it; it should not have happened, but it did.

If the purpose of the railway is to carry passengers, any rational observer must conclude that privatisation beat nationalisation hands down. Why? Profit is made only by attracting customers. Train operating companies focused on new and more trains, more services, innovative ticketing and customer service, and people voted with their feet.

The railways are a complex system where capacity is limited and costs are high. It is absolutely crucial to drive efficiency, maximise the scarce resources of track access and drive value for money with dynamic management. Can hon. Members think of a nationalised organisation that is a byword for management dynamism and efficiency anywhere, in any country at any time? I cannot either. If poor railway management is the problem, nationalisation cannot be the solution. Why is it that socialists and the fag packet party are such bad learners?

Graham Stuart: The Minister responding to this debate represents Selby. One of the great successes of the open system has been Hull Trains, which provides a fantastic service from Hull, through Selby, down to London, and then back again. Does my hon. Friend worry, as I do, that open services such as Hull Trains will be crushed by Great British Railways and the Minister, despite whatever he may say?

Jerome Mayhew: My right hon. Friend is right. If Members read the Bill properly, they will see that it spells the death knell for open access.

It is true that the last few years have exposed serious weaknesses in the train franchise model. The separation of track and train created perverse incentives—I accept that. Too often a lack of effective competitive tension allowed there to be poor services. Changes to the DfT contract meant that franchises were encouraged to overbid, leaving them financially vulnerable to any downturn. This Bill was the golden opportunity to address those issues, but the Government have messed it up. Instead of keeping the best and fixing the rest, we have a damaging return to 1970s state control, with 1970s industrial action likely to follow.

The Government are already finding out that money does not grow on trees, that merely saying that they are in favour of growth does not make it happen, and that funds from hard-pressed taxpayers are not limitless. Their plan replaces private investment with taxpayers' money, drawn away from schools and hospitals and Labour's ever-growing welfare bill. Their plan replaces railway management teams with civil servants, increasingly micromanaging operations, who will have powers to direct GBR across all its functions.

Then there is that trademark socialist arrogance: gone is the independent economic regulator, for the gentleman from Whitehall knows best. GBR will mark its own homework, save for a toothless passenger council that has no enforcement powers. It will not just mark its own homework but decide whether to allow any competition against itself. It will decide how much to charge its competitors, limited only by how much it thinks they will be able to pay. GBR, on the other hand, will pay no charge at all. The right of appeal is not to be allowed on the merits of a decision, only on the grounds of procedural irregularity.

The Bill marks the end of competition on the GBR rail network, and it is such a shame. This could have been transformational. It could have solved the tensions between the operation of track and train. It could have refined concession and franchised contracts, removing the micromanagement of DfT officials. It could have solved the stop-start funding approach by National Rail and its dysfunctional control periods. It could have focused relentlessly on benefits to passengers and the taxpayer.

Instead, we are seeing a Government floundering at 14% in the polls, whose Back Benchers are in open revolt against their own leader, and whose union paymaster, Unite, is discussing disaffiliation in the press. This is a Government desperate to shore up their fading support. They are sacrificing the future of our railways on the altar of left-wing ideology. We heard speech after speech from Labour Members demonising profit as a motive for economic activity. Do they have any idea how the productive economy works? Ideology before practicality, state direction before dynamic management, and union demands before passenger demand—no, no, no.

I ask colleagues to support the reasoned amendment in my name and help put this bad Bill in the bin.

6.48 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Keir Mather): May I begin by saying what a pleasure it has been to listen to this debate? My response is centred on a strong belief that if somebody takes the time to say what they think about our railway, for whom it should

[*Keir Mather*]

be run and in whose interests, they should be listened to, because it is going to make clear whose side they are really on. This Government's loyalties are clear. We are proud to be creating through this Bill a united Great British railway run for and by the British people. Our ambitions are clear for all to see. We want to end the miserable era of Tory disruption and delay and make travelling on our railway simpler and fairer.

What reactions have we produced? What passions have we stirred? Many colleagues across the Chamber have spoken in support of the Bill's provisions but asked meaningful and searching questions that it is our responsibility to answer.

Wendy Morton: I welcome the Minister to the Dispatch Box. On the specific point of answering our questions, can he give us clarity on accountability? Where does accountability lie? Where will we as Members of Parliament see accountability for the actions of Ministers and mayors?

Keir Mather: I carefully noted what the right hon. Lady said in her speech. I will come to accountability, and if she thinks that I do not cover her point, she is welcome to come in again.

I will start with accessibility, which 11 hon. Members across the House raised, including my hon. Friends the Members for Southend West and Leigh (David Burton-Sampson) and for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) and the hon. Members for Esher and Walton (Monica Harding), for Eastbourne (Josh Babarinde), for Yeovil (Adam Dance), for Epping Forest (Dr Hudson) and for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan) among others. The Bill sets out a passenger and accessibility duty, ensuring that GBR promotes the interests of passengers, including in particular the needs of disabled persons. I have heard the calls from colleagues across the House about the importance of the Access for All scheme. In our published accessibility road map, we commit to continuing that programme; work has already been completed to roll out step-free routes to 270 stations so far.

The Chair of the Transport Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), and my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Andrew Ranger) raised the important matter of the passenger watchdog. The watchdog will be in a unique position to understand the passenger experience through its research and investigation functions as well as its access to complaints and performance data. It will use that to advocate for passengers, set tough consumer standards for the railway and advise the Government and GBR.

Many hon. Members pointed to the critical importance of freight to UK growth. The Government are committed to supporting rail freight growth across the United Kingdom. Freight operators will benefit from a legal duty for GBR to promote freight. The sector will also be championed within GBR by a representative on its board with responsibility for freight. There is also a requirement for the Government to set a rail freight growth target for GBR, so insinuations and accusations from the Conservatives that freight does not sit at the heart of what GBR is designed to do are flatly wrong.

With Christmas coming, I am afraid that I need to turn to my naughty list. The Conservatives have painted a dystopian picture this afternoon: they have told us to

imagine a railway where the needs of the passenger come last; one that is plagued by disruption and poor management, strikes and shutdowns. My answer could not be clearer: the British public do not need to imagine a rail service on its knees, because for 14 years they have been living with one.

Let me turn to the points raised by Opposition Members. First, on cost, the right hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Holden) asked whether we need to reduce the subsidy. Absolutely we do; hon. Members will not hear me say anything else. The way to do that is to ensure that somebody is finally in charge of running our railways in a cohesive and united nature, saving the £150 million that the public pay to private operators every single year. The cost of establishing GBR will account for just 1% to 2% of the operating budget for a single year. That, alongside the Government's other rail reforms, could unlock up to £1 billion in efficiencies by the end of the decade, alongside the £600 million in savings for passengers in the fare freeze that is being introduced next year for the first time in 30 years.

The right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) and the hon. Member for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos) raised the important point of open access services, and a Back-Bench contribution noted that I get Hull Trains every single week to Selby. I know how important open access is, and I want to reassure the House that it will have a role as part of the establishment of GBR. The Government are not opposed to open access, and the idea that GBR is bad for open access is simply false. We believe that, under the right circumstances, GBR can in fact create more opportunity for all towns and all operators by reviewing the network holistically with a view to how it might work better under our new, reformed system with open access playing its part.

Graham Stuart: I am sure that Hull Trains will be grateful for the passionate way in which the Minister made its case. Would he be open to amendments to the Bill that would look again at that balance? As the Bill is currently drafted, it looks as if GBR can just squeeze out the open operators—it has all the power and they have none.

Keir Mather: The right hon. Member and I have a philosophical difference on the question of track access. It is critical, if we are establishing Great British Railways to manage access, that it has the full ability to do so. It will be regulated by the Office of Rail and Road to make sure that its access decisions are fair, but the provisions in the Bill are sufficient to make sure that open access can continue and continues to provide incredibly important support to communities such as mine.

I turn back to the point about accountability, which is incredibly important, to set out some of the ORR's functions and to tackle some of the disinformation coming from Opposition Members. The ORR will continue to be the sector regulator and the Bill will enhance its monitoring role. It provides independent advice to the Secretary of State, it will enforce GBR's licence, its industry obligations and its minimum standards, and it will work with the passenger watchdog to make sure that passengers are once again at the heart of our railways. The ORR's accountability function is hardwired into the Bill.

Wendy Morton: To be clear on accountability, how and where can a Member of Parliament hold a directly elected mayor to account for his or her decisions when it comes to railways?

Keir Mather: I have no doubt whatsoever that the right hon. Lady is perfectly capable of holding her elected mayor to account on rail infrastructure within her constituency, but she will also be able to do so through the passenger watchdog.

Time is short and I must address the Conservatives' reasoned amendment, which I believe fundamentally misunderstands the Bill. It claims the Bill does not grow rail freight when in fact it contains two specific duties that require GBR to do so. It fails to engage with the reality that the Bill places the ORR at the centre of GBR's functioning and allows open access to continue to play a vital role on our railway. The amendment is, frankly, as intellectually stunted as it is ideologically blinkered, and I urge Members across the House to reject it.

I am disappointed to say that we have received the news throughout this debate that the Conservative party will vote against Great British Railways and say no to its only chance to right the wrongs that it has committed. Let me therefore spell out to the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats that if they decide not to vote for the Bill tonight, they will be working against the interests of passengers across the country and their right to have the railway that they deserve. The Conservatives and their former coalition partners will have to look their constituents in the eye and explain why they want to continue the insanity, bureaucracy and waste of 17 different organisations running our railway instead of one united service; why they want to deny passengers a one-stop-shop app with timetables, tickets and accessibility support literally in the palm of their hand; and why they want to waste the opportunity of changing ticketing to take advantage of the first freeze in rail fares for 30 years.

Siân Berry: To the credit of those on the Conservative Front Bench, one line in the reasoned amendment mentions the need for a duty to grow passenger numbers. A number of hon. Members across the House have mentioned that today. Will the Minister come back to the House on the question of a duty to raise passenger numbers?

Keir Mather: That is critical. GBR will be set up as an organisation to facilitate as many people as possible to use our railway. Wanting to grow passenger numbers is inherent in what we are doing, but we do not want to do that in a way that overly congests the railway and is not strategic. That is something we will work on. Parties will also have to explain why they want to waste the opportunity to take this reform forward.

In sum, I ask everyone in this House to support the Bill, to seize the opportunities and to show the public whose side they are really on. This Government know who the Bill is for and who we are for: we are for passengers and not profit; we are for the commuters, the football fans, the hen parties, the grandparents and the rail enthusiasts; we are for everyone who gives our great British railway its distinctly British personality. If Members across the Chamber want to join us in that mission, I look forward to seeing them in the Aye Lobby tonight. I commend this Bill to the House.

Question put. That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 170, Noes 332.

Division No. 387]

[6.59 pm

AYES

| | |
|----------------------------|--|
| Allister, Jim | Harding, Monica |
| Amos, Gideon | Harris, Rebecca |
| Andrew, rh Stuart | Hayes, rh Sir John |
| Aquarone, Steff | Heylings, Pippa |
| Argar, rh Edward | Hinds, rh Damian |
| Babarinde, Josh | Hoare, Simon |
| Bacon, Gareth | Hobhouse, Wera |
| Badenoch, rh Mrs Kemi | Holden, rh Mr Richard |
| Baldwin, Dame Harriett | Hollinrake, Kevin |
| Barclay, rh Steve | Holmes, Paul |
| Bedford, Mr Peter | Huddleston, Nigel |
| Bennett, Alison | Hudson, Dr Neil |
| Bhatti, Saqib | Jardine, Christine |
| Blackman, Bob | Jarvis, Liz |
| Bool, Sarah | Jenrick, rh Robert |
| Bowie, Andrew | Johnson, Dr Caroline |
| Bradley, rh Dame Karen | Jones, Clive |
| Brandreth, Aphra | Jopp, Lincoln |
| Brown-Fuller, Jess | Kohler, Mr Paul |
| Burghart, Alex | Lamont, John |
| Campbell, Mr Gregory | Leigh, rh Sir Edward |
| Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair | Lewis, rh Sir Julian |
| Chadwick, David | Lockhart, Carla |
| Chamberlain, Wendy | Lopez, Julia |
| Chambers, Dr Danny | Lowe, Rupert |
| Chope, Sir Christopher | MacCleary, James |
| Cleverly, rh Sir James | MacDonald, Mr Angus |
| Cocking, Lewis | Maguire, Ben |
| Coghlan, Chris | Maguire, Helen |
| Collins, Victoria | Mak, Alan |
| Cooper, Daisy | Malthouse, rh Kit |
| Cooper, John | Martin, Mike (<i>Proxy vote cast</i> |
| Costa, Alberto | <i>by Bobby Dean</i>) |
| Coutinho, rh Claire | Mathew, Brian |
| Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey | Mayhew, Jerome |
| Cross, Harriet | Maynard, Charlie |
| Dance, Adam | Miller, Calum |
| Darling, Steve | Mitchell, rh Sir Andrew |
| Davey, rh Ed | Mohindra, Mr Gagan |
| Davies, Mims | Moore, Robbie |
| Dean, Bobby | Moran, Layla |
| Dewhurst, Charlie | Morello, Edward |
| Dinenage, Dame Caroline | Morgan, Helen |
| Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain | Morrison, Mr Tom |
| Dyke, Sarah | Morrissey, Joy (<i>Proxy vote</i> |
| Easton, Alex | <i>cast by Mr Mohindra</i>) |
| Evans, Dr Luke | Morton, rh Wendy |
| Farron, Tim | Mullan, Dr Kieran |
| Forster, Mr Will | Munt, Tessa |
| Fortune, Peter | Murrison, rh Dr Andrew |
| Fox, Sir Ashley | Norman, rh Jesse |
| Francois, rh Mr Mark | Obese-Jecty, Ben |
| Franklin, Zöe | O'Brien, Neil |
| French, Mr Louie | Olney, Sarah |
| Fuller, Richard | Patel, rh Priti |
| Gale, rh Sir Roger | Paul, Rebecca |
| Garnier, Mark | Perteghella, Manuela |
| George, Andrew | Pinkerton, Dr Al |
| Gilmour, Rachel | Pritchard, rh Mark |
| Glen, rh John | Raja, Shivani (<i>Proxy vote cast</i> |
| Glover, Olly | <i>by Mr Mohindra</i>) |
| Goldman, Marie | Rankin, Jack |
| Gordon, Tom | Reed, David |
| Grant, Helen | Reynolds, Mr Joshua |
| Green, Sarah | Robertson, Joe |
| Griffith, Andrew | Robinson, rh Gavin |
| Griffiths, Alison | Roome, Ian |

Rosindell, Andrew
 Sabine, Anna
 Savage, Dr Roz
 Shannon, Jim
 Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
 Simmonds, David
 Slade, Vikki
 Smart, Lisa
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, rh Sir Julian
 Smith, Rebecca
 Sollom, Ian
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, Patrick (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
 Stephenson, Blake
 Stride, rh Sir Mel
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Taylor, Luke

Thomas, Bradley
 Thomas, Cameron
 Timothy, Nick
 Trott, rh Laura
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Voaden, Caroline
 Whately, Helen
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wild, James
 Wilkinson, Max
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wilson, Munira
 Wrigley, Martin
 Young, Claire

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr Andrew Snowden and
Gregory Stafford

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Adley*)
 Abbott, Jack
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Adam, Shockat
 Ahmed, Dr Zubir
 Akehurst, Luke
 Alaba, Mr Bayo
 Alexander, rh Heidi
 Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Anderson, Callum
 Anderson, Fleur
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Arthur, Dr Scott
 Asato, Jess
 Athwal, Jas
 Atkinson, Lewis
 Bailey, Mr Calvin
 Baker, Alex
 Ballinger, Alex
 Bance, Antonia
 Barker, Paula
 Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
 Baxter, Johanna
 Beavers, Lorraine
 Begum, Apsana
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Berry, Siân
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Billington, Ms Polly
 Bishop, Matt (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Blake, Olivia
 Blake, Rachel
 Bloore, Chris
 Blundell, Mrs Elsie
 Bonavia, Kevin
 Botterill, Jade
 Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
 Brash, Mr Jonathan
 Brickell, Phil
 Buckley, Julia
 Burgon, Richard
 Burton-Sampson, David
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, Ian
 Cadbury, Ruth

Caliskan, Nesil
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Irene
 Campbell, Juliet
 Campbell-Savours, Markus
 Carden, Dan
 Carling, Sam
 Carns, Al
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Charters, Mr Luke
 Chowns, Dr Ellie
 Coleman, Ben
 Collier, Jacob
 Collins, Tom
 Coombes, Sarah
 Cooper, Andrew
 Cooper, Dr Beccy
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Cox, Pam
 Coyle, Neil
 Craft, Jen
 Crichton, Torcuil
 Curtis, Chris
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas
 Dalton, Ashley
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Ann
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies, Paul
 Davies, Shaun
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 De Cordova, Marsha
 Dearden, Kate
 Denyer, Carla
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dickson, Jim
 Dixon, Anna
 Dodds, rh Anneliese
 Dollimore, Helena
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Downie, Graeme
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Eastwood, Colum
 Eccles, Cat
 Edwards, Lauren
 Edwards, Sarah

Efford, Clive
 Egan, Damien
 Ellis, Maya
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta
 Falconer, Mr Hamish
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Mark
 Fleet, Natalie
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Francis, Daniel
 Frith, Mr James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gelderd, Anna
 Gemmell, Alan
 German, Gill
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Gittins, Becky (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Grady, John
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Hack, Amanda
 Haigh, rh Louise
 Hall, Sarah
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Hendrick, Sir Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hinder, Jonathan
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Hume, Alison
 Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Mr Adnan
 Hussain, Imran
 Ingham, Leigh
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jarvis, Dan
 Jermy, Terry
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, rh Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Lillian
 Jones, Ruth
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kane, Mike

Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kumaran, Uma
 Lake, Ben
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewis, Clive
 Lightwood, Simon
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Malhotra, Seema
 Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonnell, rh John
 McDougall, Blair
 McFadden, rh Pat
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahan, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 Medi, Llinos
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Miliband, rh Ed
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mishra, Navendu
 Mohamed, Abtislam
 Mohamed, Iqbal
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, rh James
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Nash, Pamela
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Dame Chi
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Owen, Sarah
 Pakes, Andrew
 Patrick, Matthew

Payne, Michael
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Phillips, Jess
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Peter
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Race, Steve
 Rand, Mr Connor
 Ranger, Andrew
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reader, Mike
 Reeves, rh Ellie
 Reeves, rh Rachel
 Reid, Joani
 Reynolds, rh Emma
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rigby, Lucy
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Dave
 Roca, Tim
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell, Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Sackman, Sarah
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Sandher-Jones, Louise
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Scrogham, Michelle
 Swards, Mark
 Shanker, Baggy
 Shanks, Michael
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simons, Josh
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, David
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevenson, Kenneth

Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Strickland, Alan
 Stringer, Graham
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Sultana, Zarah
 Swallow, Peter
 Tami, rh Sir Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Fred
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thompson, Adam
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Toale, Jessica
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turley, rh Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Karl
 Turner, Laurence
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Imogen
 Ward, Chris
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Jo
 White, Katie
 Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, David
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yang, Yuan
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Lilian Greenwood and
Stephen Morgan

Bailey, Mr Calvin
 Baker, Alex
 Ballinger, Alex
 Bance, Antonia
 Barker, Paula
 Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
 Baxter, Johanna
 Beavers, Lorraine
 Begum, Apsana
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Berry, Siân
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Billington, Ms Polly
 Bishop, Matt (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Blake, Olivia
 Blake, Rachel
 Bloore, Chris
 Blundell, Mrs Elsie
 Bonavia, Kevin
 Botterill, Jade
 Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
 Brash, Mr Jonathan
 Brickell, Phil
 Buckley, Julia
 Burgon, Richard
 Burton-Sampson, David
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, Ian
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Caliskan, Nesil
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Irene
 Campbell, Juliet
 Campbell-Savours, Markus
 Carden, Dan
 Carling, Sam
 Carns, Al
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Charters, Mr Luke
 Chowns, Dr Ellie
 Coleman, Ben
 Collier, Jacob
 Collins, Tom
 Coombes, Sarah
 Cooper, Andrew
 Cooper, Dr Beccy
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Cox, Pam
 Coyle, Neil
 Craft, Jen
 Crichton, Torcuil
 Curtis, Chris
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas
 Dalton, Ashley
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies, Paul
 Davies, Shaun
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 De Cordova, Marsha
 Dearden, Kate
 Denyer, Carla
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dickson, Jim
 Dixon, Anna
 Dodds, rh Anneliese
 Dollimore, Helena
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Downie, Graeme
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil

Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Eastwood, Colum
 Eccles, Cat
 Edwards, Lauren
 Edwards, Sarah
 Efford, Clive
 Egan, Damien
 Ellis, Maya
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta
 Falconer, Mr Hamish
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Mark
 Fleet, Natalie
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Francis, Daniel
 Frith, Mr James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gelderd, Anna
 Gemmill, Alan
 German, Gill
 Gittins, Becky (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Grady, John
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Hack, Amanda
 Haigh, rh Louise
 Hall, Sarah
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Hendrick, Sir Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hinder, Jonathan
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Hume, Alison
 Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Mr Adnan
 Hussain, Imran
 Ingham, Leigh
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jarvis, Dan
 Jermy, Terry
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, rh Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Lillian
 Jones, Ruth

Question accordingly negated.

*Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 62(2)),
 That the Bill be now read a Second time.*

The House divided: Ayes 329, Noes 173.

Division No. 388]

[7.13 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)
 Abbott, Jack
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Adam, Shockat
 Ahmed, Dr Zubir
 Akehurst, Luke
 Alaba, Mr Bayo
 Alexander, rh Heidi
 Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Anderson, Callum
 Anderson, Fleur
 Anderson, Lee
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Arthur, Dr Scott
 Asato, Jess
 Athwal, Jas
 Atkinson, Lewis

Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kane, Mike
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kumaran, Uma
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewis, Clive
 Lightwood, Simon
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Malhotra, Seema
 Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonnell, rh John
 McDougall, Blair
 McFadden, rh Pat
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorrin, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Miliband, rh Ed
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mishra, Navendu
 Mohamed, Abtisam
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, rh James
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Nash, Pamela
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Dame Chi
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Pakes, Andrew
 Patrick, Matthew

Payne, Michael
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Phillips, Jess
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Pochin, Sarah
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Peter
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Race, Steve
 Rand, Mr Connor
 Ranger, Andrew
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reader, Mike
 Reeves, rh Ellie
 Reeves, rh Rachel
 Reid, Joani
 Reynolds, rh Emma
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rigby, Lucy
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Dave
 Roca, Tim
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell, Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Sackman, Sarah
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Sandher-Jones, Louise
 Scrogham, Michelle
 Sowards, Mark
 Shanker, Baggy
 Shanks, Michael
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simons, Josh
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, David
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Strickland, Alan
 Stringer, Graham
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Sultana, Zarah
 Swallow, Peter
 Tami, rh Sir Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Fred
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thompson, Adam
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Toale, Jessica
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turley, rh Anna

Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Karl
 Turner, Laurence
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Imogen
 Ward, Chris
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Michael

Whitby, John
 White, Jo
 White, Katie
 Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, David
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yang, Yuan
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Lilian Greenwood and
Stephen Morgan

NOES

Allister, Jim
 Amos, Gideon
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Aquarone, Steff
 Argar, rh Edward
 Babarinde, Josh
 Bacon, Gareth
 Badenoch, rh Mrs Kemi
 Baldwin, Dame Harriett
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Bedford, Mr Peter
 Bennett, Alison
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blackman, Bob
 Bool, Sarah
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, rh Dame Karen
 Brandreth, Aphra
 Brown-Fuller, Jess
 Burghart, Alex
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Chadwick, David
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Chambers, Dr Danny
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Cleverly, rh Sir James
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Cocking, Lewis
 Coghlan, Chris
 Collins, Victoria
 Cooper, Daisy
 Cooper, John
 Costa, Alberto
 Coutinho, rh Claire
 Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
 Cross, Harriet
 Dance, Adam
 Darling, Steve
 Davey, rh Ed
 Davies, Ann
 Davies, Mims
 Dean, Bobby
 Dewhurst, Charlie
 Dinenage, Dame Caroline
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dyke, Sarah
 Easton, Alex
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Farron, Tim
 Forster, Mr Will
 Fortune, Peter
 Fox, Sir Ashley

Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Franklin, Zöe
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Garnier, Mark
 George, Andrew
 Gilmour, Rachel
 Glover, Oly
 Goldman, Marie
 Gordon, Tom
 Grant, Helen
 Green, Sarah
 Griffith, Andrew
 Griffiths, Alison
 Harding, Monica
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heylings, Pippa
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Holden, rh Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Holmes, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Liz
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Jones, Clive
 Jopp, Lincoln
 Kohler, Mr Paul
 Lake, Ben
 Lamont, John
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Lockhart, Carla
 Lopez, Julia
 Lowe, Rupert
 MacCleary, James
 Maguire, Ben
 Maguire, Helen
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Martin, Mike (*Proxy vote cast by Bobby Dean*)
 Mathew, Brian
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Charlie
 Medi, Llinos
 Miller, Calum
 Mitchell, rh Sir Andrew

Mohamed, Iqbal
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Robbie
 Moran, Layla
 Morello, Edward
 Morgan, Helen
 Morrison, Mr Tom
 Morrissey, Joy (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Munt, Tessa
 Murray, Susan
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Norman, rh Jesse
 Obese-Jecty, Ben
 O'Brien, Neil
 Olney, Sarah
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paul, Rebecca
 Perteghella, Manuela
 Pinkerton, Dr Al
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
 Rankin, Jack
 Reed, David
 Reynolds, Mr Joshua
 Robertson, Joe
 Robinson, rh Gavin
 Roome, Ian
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Sabine, Anna
 Savage, Dr Roz
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Shannon, Jim

Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
 Simmonds, David
 Slade, Vikki
 Smart, Lisa
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, rh Sir Julian
 Smith, Rebecca
 Sollom, Ian
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, Patrick (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
 Stephenson, Blake
 Stone, Jamie
 Stride, rh Sir Mel
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Taylor, Luke
 Thomas, Bradley
 Thomas, Cameron
 Timothy, Nick
 Trott, rh Laura
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Voaden, Caroline
 Whately, Helen
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wild, James
 Wilkinson, Max
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wilson, Munira
 Wrigley, Martin
 Young, Claire

Tellers for the Noes:
 Mr Andrew Snowden and
 Gregory Stafford

Question accordingly agreed to.

Bill read a Second time.

RAILWAYS BILL (PROGRAMME)

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

That the following provisions shall apply to the Railways Bill:

Committal

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

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

(2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Thursday 12 February 2026.

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

Consideration and Third Reading

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

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

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

Other proceedings

(7) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.— (*Christian Wakeford.*)

Question agreed to.

RAILWAYS BILL (MONEY)

King's recommendation signified.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Railways Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of:

(a) financial assistance provided by the Secretary of State to Great British Railways,

(b) any other expenditure incurred under or by virtue of the Act by the Secretary of State or by a government department, and

(c) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under or by virtue of any other Act out of money so provided.— (*Christian Wakeford.*)

Question agreed to.

DEFERRED DIVISIONS

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 41A(3)),

That, at this day's sitting, Standing Order 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply to the motion in the name of Secretary Heidi Alexander relating to Railways Bill: Carry-over.— (*Christian Wakeford.*)

Question agreed to.

RAILWAYS BILL (CARRY-OVER)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 80A(1)(a)),

That if, at the conclusion of this Session of Parliament, proceedings on the Railways Bill have not been completed, they shall be resumed in the next Session.— (*Christian Wakeford.*)

Question agreed to.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): With the leave of the House, I will bundle motions 6 and 7 together.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

That the draft International Development Association (Twenty-First Replenishment) Order 2025, which was laid before this House on 11 September, be approved.

CUSTOMS

That the Customs Tariff (Establishment) (EU Exit) (Amendment) Regulations 2025 (SI, 2025, No. 1199), dated 17 November 2025, a copy of which was laid before this House on 17 November, be approved.— (*Christian Wakeford.*)

Question agreed to.

PETITIONS

Proposed local government reorganisation in Rushcliffe

7.26 pm

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): I rise to present a petition on behalf of almost 15,000 members of the public from the borough of Rushcliffe, much of which falls in my Newark constituency. The petition declares that

“the people of Rushcliffe strongly oppose a forced reorganisation of local government which would merge their community into a new authority combining Rushcliffe Borough Council with Nottingham City Council.”

The parts of Rushcliffe that I represent are rural areas, made up of market towns, villages and hamlets, and it would be patently absurd for them to be merged with the urban Nottingham city council. These areas have been well served by Rushcliffe borough council for generations, while Nottingham city council has been a catalogue of financial disasters for as long as I can remember. My constituents do not deserve that fate.

The petitioners therefore request that

“the House of Commons urge the Government to reject the proposal for the Rushcliffe Borough Council area to be merged with the Nottingham City Council area, and to retain the borough of Rushcliffe within the county of Nottinghamshire.”

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the Rushcliffe area,

Declares that the people of Rushcliffe strongly oppose a forced reorganisation of local government which would merge their community into a new authority combining Rushcliffe Borough Council with Nottingham City Council.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to reject the proposal for the Rushcliffe Borough Council area to be merged with the Nottingham City Council area, and to retain the borough of Rushcliffe within the county of Nottinghamshire.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003143]

Pornography and violence against women

Rebecca Paul (Reigate) (Con): I am pleased to present a petition on pornography on behalf of my Reigate constituents. Pornography has never been more accessible than it is today, and it is fuelling an epidemic of violence against women and girls. It is vital that action is taken to protect both those viewing this material and those individuals featured in pornographic content.

The petitioners therefore request that

“the House of Commons urge the Government to extend safeguards applied to pornography offline to pornography distributed online; and to legally require all pornography websites accessed from the UK to verify the age and permission of every individual featured on their platform—and give performers the right to withdraw their consent at any time to the continued publication of pornography in which they appear.”

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the constituency of Reigate,

Declares that pornography use is fuelling sexual violence; violence against women is prolific in mainstream pornography; and sexual coercion is inherent to the commercial production of pornography.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to extend safeguards applied to pornography offline to pornography distributed online; and to legally require all pornography websites accessed from the UK to verify the age and permission of every individual featured on their platform—and give performers the right to withdraw their consent at any time to the continued publication of pornography in which they appear.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003144]

Joani Reid (East Kilbride and Strathaven) (Lab): I rise to present a petition in the same terms as the hon. Member for Reigate (Rebecca Paul). It is a petition calling for stronger action on online pornography, which fuels violence against women and girls. As we approach the end of the United Nations’ 16 days of activism, we are reminded of just how pervasive online pornography is, and how it is shaping attitudes towards women and girls. Its production relies on coercion, and violent portrayals of women are treated as routine. This normalisation is fuelling misogyny and contributing to a culture in which sexual violence against women and girls is minimised.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that pornography use is fuelling sexual violence; violence against women is prolific in mainstream pornography; and sexual coercion is inherent to the commercial production of pornography.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to extend safeguards applied to pornography offline to pornography distributed online; and to legally require all pornography websites accessed from the UK to verify the age and permission of every individual featured on their platform—and give performers the right to withdraw their consent at any time to the continued publication of pornography in which they appear.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003145]

Illegal waste dumping

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): I am proud to present this petition from my constituents who care deeply about protecting our natural environment, and especially the River Cherwell, from criminal pollution from the enormous dump of illegal waste close to Kidlington. I thank all those who signed the petition, and those who collected signatures from more than 950 people. Billy Burnell, Anthony and Emma Henman, Laura Reineke and Vanessa Langton—who are here in the Gallery tonight—represent the anglers, farmers, environmentalists and residents who signed the petition.

The petition states:

“The petitioners therefore urge the House of Commons to press the Government to direct the Environment Agency to clear the illegal waste at this site urgently and prevent waste—

further waste—

“from entering the River Cherwell.”

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the constituency of Bicester and Woodstock,

Declares that the discovery of one of the largest illegal waste dumps in the UK on land near Kidlington, located metres from the River Cherwell and on a known floodplain, has caused deep concern; further declares that rising river levels pose an imminent risk of contaminated waste entering the river and surrounding soil, and that there is also a risk of fire at a site adjacent to the A34; further declares that the cost should not be met through council tax.

The petitioners therefore urge the House of Commons to press the Government to direct the Environment Agency to clear the illegal waste at this site urgently and prevent waste from entering the River Cherwell.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003146]

Illegal Migrants: Unknown Whereabouts

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Christian Wakeford.)

7.31 pm

Rupert Lowe (Great Yarmouth) (Ind): The scale of illegal immigration and its impact on our country is simply not understood in this Parliament, and nor do most Members even care. British people are genuinely scared—women are frightened to go into their towns alone, and parents are terrified to let their children walk to school. It is getting worse and worse. The British people are not stupid; they can see their communities radically changing, and they can feel their streets becoming more unfamiliar, more dangerous and more menacing, all while the Home Office deliberately conceals the true extent of the change from our citizens.

I am contacted by dozens and dozens of women who genuinely fear for their lives and who feel ignored by this place—ignored by those who are supposed to represent and protect them; ignored and abandoned; thrown to the wolves in pursuit of some sick multicultural experiment that is being forced on our people, one that has very real-world consequences.

What happened just yesterday? Two Afghan illegal migrants were jailed for raping a schoolgirl. The footage exists—she filmed herself during the rape. Even the men’s barrister warned that it would lead to “disorder” if it was released, as it was so horrific. “You’re going to rape me”, the girl cried as she was dragged away. She screamed for help and begged not to be taken. One of the migrants gagged her with his hand. The Afghan men forced her to perform sex acts in a secluded area. She is heard screaming for help; she calls for her friends; she wants to go home. She is pleading for help from passers-by—none came. Can you imagine her horror, her fear and her desperation? Think if it was your daughter. How would that make you feel? Honestly, think about that.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): The hon. Member is giving a very powerful introduction to his speech. He and I share profound concerns about the scale of illegal migration to the UK, and the ability of those migrants to arrive here and then disappear. For me, the most disturbing aspect of the case that he has mentioned, which was reported yesterday, is the fact that we are being gaslit by the media. Those two Afghani boat arrivals were described as being from Leamington—they are not from Leamington. Does the hon. Member agree that women and girls are less safe in this United Kingdom now, today, than they were five years ago, for this reason?

Rupert Lowe: I thank the hon. Member for her intervention, and I completely agree with what she has said.

The girl was then pushed to her knees before being brutally raped. Another—one of too many.

Last year, a 35-year-old old Iranian small-boat migrant raped a 15-year-old girl in an alleyway. He was known to police in Germany, where he had been convicted of assault offences. He told the girl she could be his “sex doll”, and that he wanted to—I quote— “fuck her”, before dragging her down an alleyway, forcing her to her knees outside a secluded doorway, and then

[Rupert Lowe]

raping her. The poor girl's anguished mother later asked, "Why was he in this country?" It is a question that millions and millions of British people are asking. Why are they here?

These are unimaginable horrors, but they are happening, right across our country, every day, brutally and relentlessly. This House may not like to hear this, but it must listen; it must understand; it must digest. This is a political choice, and it is one that this Parliament has made. These are men who should never have been in our country to begin with. They should have been detained, and they should have been deported, indiscriminately and without question. They were not: they were housed, fed and cared for at taxpayer expense. They were released on to our streets and allowed to roam freely—thousands and thousands of them, unvetted foreign men from barbaric cultures that have no place in our communities. Words cannot adequately describe my disgust at what has been forced on to the British people.

Since being elected, I have used what little influence I hold to try and uncover the impact of these migrants and just how severely the British people are suffering because of it. I have asked more than 600 questions of the Home Office, but I receive very few answers, particularly when the question is regarding illegal migrants. "No data", "not centrally collected" and "disproportionate costs" are often cited. I thought that perhaps it was incompetence, but evidence has come to my attention that proves the Home Office has been misleading MPs. On 20 January, I asked the Home Office "what information the Department holds on the number of irregular migrants defined as absconders."

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way—I did give him notice that I was going to intervene. It is inconceivable, is it not, that Home Office Ministers would not know the answer to that question? When I was a Home Office Minister, I would ask my officials for exactly that kind of information. It is not just that the hon. Gentleman did not know; it seems that Ministers did not either. I cannot believe that. It is inconceivable.

Rupert Lowe: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his helpful intervention.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for securing the debate. He has illustrated with the story that he has related, and by citing the evidential base, how bad things are. Data from the Home Office—I checked this before the debate—shows that, as of October 2025, 53,298 migrants had breached their immigration bail or absconded from detention, which means that their whereabouts were unknown. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that this only adds to the stress in our communities, including that caused to the health and housing systems, and that more must be done to find those who have illegally breached immigration bail and deport them to their countries of origin?

Rupert Lowe: I thank the hon. Member for that intervention, and I will come to that point in a minute, but I completely concur.

To recap, I asked the Home Office

"what information the Department holds on the number of irregular migrants defined as absconders."

A Minister replied:

"The requested data is not readily accessible from published statistics, and could only be collated and verified for the purpose of answering this question at a disproportionate cost."

That was not true.

On 3 September, I asked the Home Secretary

"what estimate she has made of the number of foreign nationals who have absconded after being served with a deportation order."

The answer, from a different Minister, was:

"The Home Office does not hold any central record of the requested information."

That was not true.

On 24 November, I questioned the Home Office permanent secretary in the Public Accounts Committee on the number of illegal migrants who have absconded from Home Office accommodation in the past five years. I got no concise answer.

During all this, a Home Office whistleblower presented themselves with these figures, in black and white, regularly disseminated within the Home Office. The actual data is as follows: there are 736 foreign criminals in the total absconder pool for foreign national offenders. That is 736 foreign criminals who have been released from prison and then absconded before deportation. Please think about that: 736 criminals—rapists, murderers, paedophiles. They were meant for deportation but have escaped into the community—736 of them. It is a terrifying thought.

Overall, the total absconder pool stands at 53,298, largely referring to the number of illegal migrants who were once in the system and whose current whereabouts is unknown.

Alex Easton (North Down) (Ind): Given that 53,000 illegal immigrants have absconded with no address, and 736 who have committed crimes have absconded, does the hon. Member agree that this Government have lost control of their borders and their immigration policies, and they have lost all credibility when it comes to immigration issues?

Rupert Lowe: I do agree with the hon. Member's helpful intervention. Unvetted and unknown men—sex pests, misogynists, and even far worse—are in our communities, on our streets and near our schools, in the thousands and thousands. This is a national security emergency and must be treated as such.

The evidence is undeniable. I have seen it in Home Office documents. It exists. It is real. The figures were not even disputed by the Home Office; they simply told *The Daily Telegraph*:

"The Home Office has refused to confirm whether the figures are accurate, saying it does not comment on speculation."

This is not speculation. This is cold, hard data. The numbers demonstrate quite spectacularly how the Home Office has failed to keep the British people safe. It is an outrageous scandal that this information has been deliberately hidden from the British people. We deserve to know the facts. We deserve to know what is being forced on to our communities. The answer is staggering: 736 foreign criminals gone, disappeared; and 53,298 illegal migrants gone, disappeared. My questions—

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): There will be 18 of them.

Rupert Lowe: My questions are these. Where are they now? What is the Minister doing to detain them? Where did they come from? What are their convictions? How has this been allowed to happen?

Mike Kane: That was No. 5.

Rupert Lowe: I can count, thank you. Why did the Minister mislead the British people? Who is being sacked?

Alan Gemmell (Central Ayrshire) (Lab): Is that allowed?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. We do not need commentary from a sedentary position. I remind Mr Lowe that we do not accuse other Members of misleading the House, so please refrain from using such terms and please check your language.

Rupert Lowe: Will the Minister now commit to publishing these figures on a regular and transparent basis, or will I have to continue exposing this? Further whistleblowers have already come forward with additional information, and I thank them for that. My warning to the Home Office and to other Departments is this: be very careful about any further misleading statements. There are many decent people in the civil service who will not tolerate it, and I want them all to know that they have a safe and secure channel to release this information publicly through me. Sunlight is the best disinfectant, and this festering, rotting mess desperately needs to be disinfected.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Will my hon. Friend write to the Procedure Committee with his file on this case? The Procedure Committee is at the moment inquiring into the quality of answers to written questions, and is very concerned about the lack of quality. I am also concerned about receiving answers, in my case from the Treasury recently, that suggest there was an attempt to deliberately mislead, which has been exposed only as a result of supplementary answers.

Rupert Lowe: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and I will indeed write to the Committee.

I have one final question for the Minister: what else is the Home Office lying about?

Hon. Members: No, no!

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Mr Lowe, have you finished?

Rupert Lowe *indicated assent.*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Mr Lowe, we spoke about this earlier. We do not accuse each other of misleading and we do not accuse each other of lying. There are different ways of framing such questions—

Alan Gemmell: You have a responsibility to be an adult!

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. If I needed the hon. Member's help, I would have asked for it.

Mr Lowe, this is a very serious subject. We have to make sure that our language is appropriate and serious. I will now call the Minister, and no doubt you will want to intervene on him, but please keep your language in check.

7.46 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mike Tapp): I thank the hon. Member for Great Yarmouth (Rupert Lowe) for securing this debate, and I am grateful to him and all other hon. Members who have participated. As we have heard, this an important issue for the Government, the public and the Home Office, which does not lie. A lot of ground has been covered, and several claims and criticisms have been aired about how this Government are tackling illegal migration, many of which I would contest or flatly reject, as I do the apocalyptic picture that he paints of our great country. He can continue to talk it down, but it will not gain him any more votes.

I will respond to this issue in more detail shortly, but before that, I must do two things. The first is to state without hesitation or equivocation that this Government are utterly determined to tackle the scourge of illegal migration. Anyone who comes to this country illegally or remains here illegally should not expect to stay. In cases of an individual with no right to be in the UK absconding or disappearing, efforts are made to trace them and bring them back into contact with the Department. As the Home Secretary has repeatedly made clear, the ability of the state to determine who can come to this country and who must leave is an essential part of any functioning immigration system.

Public safety is paramount, and the hon. Member mentions some disturbing recent events, but we will do everything in our power to protect our citizens, our communities and our country. It has been a top priority to fix the mess that we inherited, and our efforts are having an impact. Removals of those with no right to be here have increased dramatically. Almost 50,000 people have been returned since July 2024. That is up 23%—a record increase. Deportations of foreign criminals have also increased significantly in the last year, with over 5,430 foreign national offenders having been returned as of the end of October 2025. That is an increase of 12% on the previous year.

I must stress that the mess we inherited is not fixed in a week, a month or a year. We inherited open borders. We inherited hotels full, costing taxpayers £9 million a day. In the Home Office, we inherited a system that had ground to a halt. Processing has now increased by 50%. That demonstrates very clearly that we are making progress, and that Britain will not be a soft touch for illegal migration. We have ramped up enforcement activity, whether against the criminal gangs, illegal journeys or illegal working here at home. In the past year, enforcement action to disrupt illegal working across all sectors reached record-breaking levels; there were over 11,000 visits and 8,000 arrests. That is up 51% and 63% respectively—the highest levels that this country has ever seen. On top of that, people-smuggling arrests, convictions and seizures have increased by 33% in the past 12 months. That all contributes to the Government's comprehensive and systematic work to reduce the incentives that draw people here illegally and to scale up removals.

Sir John Hayes: My experience in this House over almost 30 years is that most people here—indeed, the overwhelming majority—want to do the right thing, irrespective of party, and I make that perfectly clear through you, Madam Deputy Speaker. But in that spirit, I know that you will take the view that it is critically important that parliamentary answers be full and accurate. That is something that I conjured with as a Minister, answering many, many written questions in a variety of Government Departments. Will the Minister address the specific issue raised about the accuracy and completeness of answers to questions?

Mike Tapp: I thank the right hon. Member for his two questions. On the first, I completely agree that the vast majority of those who come to this country are decent people. The sweeping changes to the asylum system over the past few weeks further encourage people to integrate and contribute, and further ensure that there is not the asylum shopping that we currently see across Europe. But there are bad eggs, and when we get those bad eggs, we will do what we can to deport them. That is why we have also seen changes in the last few weeks to make it easier to remove and deport people. I will come on to written questions shortly.

More broadly, we must never forget that the chronic problems we face long predate this Government's time in office. When we took office, we inherited an asylum system overwhelmed by escalating costs, record hotel use and a backlog that undermined public confidence. We recognise that the current arrangements for accommodating asylum seekers are not suitable. The Government will close every asylum hotel, and we are on track to do that by the end of this Parliament. We are working to move asylum seekers into more suitable accommodation, such as military bases, to ease pressure on communities across the country.

It remains necessary to use hotels in the short to medium term to deliver our statutory responsibility to ensure that individuals are not left destitute, but whereas over 400 asylum hotels were open in summer 2023, costing almost £9 million a day, fewer than 200 hotels remain in use. This is not just about cost; it is about restoring control to our asylum system. International co-operation is key to improving returns, and through our landmark UK-France agreement, we have strengthened our ability to return individuals to France. Our efforts are having an impact, and they will go further.

Turning to the focus of the debate, I am aware of the interest in these issues, and specifically in absconders. I will not comment on leaked data, but I can set out to the House the steps that are taken to ensure that an individual remains in contact with the Home Office, and the consequences should they abscond. An individual granted immigration bail may be required to reside at a specified address, and to report at regular intervals, either in person to a reporting officer or a police station, or by telephone or digital messaging. In some cases, a person may also be required to wear an electronic fitted device. Where someone fails to comply with that, efforts will be made to re-establish contact through the most appropriate method, which might be a visit from an enforcement team.

Individuals can come into contact with the Department for a variety of reasons, but if they are considered to be an absconder, their details will be circulated on the

police national computer. The Home Office has a range of tools to locate those who abscond, and a dedicated tracing capability, which works in partnership with the police, other Government agencies and commercial companies.

Tracing foreign national offenders will always be a priority, and tracing is just one of the ways in which contact with an individual can be re-established. Many individuals who are out of contact may also re-engage with the Department voluntarily or decide to leave the UK. Individuals are also encountered through routine immigration enforcement and police activity. In all cases, the Home Office will consider the most appropriate action, including arrest and detention.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): I am listening with interest to the Minister, but as a Member of this House, I would like to know whether the figures quoted by the hon. Member for Great Yarmouth (Rupert Lowe) are correct or incorrect. Surely the House is entitled to know that.

Mike Tapp: I thank the hon. and learned Member for his question. We do not comment on unverified leaks.

After internal reviews, my officials have acknowledged that the interpretation of an absconder requires clearer definition in departmental policy. Work is under way to amend guidance and operational processes, so that it is easier for immigration officials interacting with individuals to know when an absconder marker should be associated with a person, enabling them to take the right action in a timely way. Of course, there is more to do. That is why we are implementing the most significant immigration and asylum reforms of modern times.

Mike Kane: When we talk about emotive subjects such as this one, it is important that we establish the facts. The hon. Member for Great Yarmouth (Rupert Lowe) recently railed on social media against illegal migrants coming to his constituency. They happened to be canoeists traversing the Atlantic and fundraising for motor neurone disease. Now he is Billy No Mates; he is like some latter-day King Cnut, without his courtiers, on the beach, railing at the tide to go backwards. Does the Minister not agree? For the record, Madam Deputy Speaker, I hope that I pronounced Cnut correctly.

Mike Tapp: In public life, it is important to ensure that we are not sensationalising, or raising the temperature on such an important and divisive issue. That is precisely why the Home Secretary is looking to restore order and control to the system—so that the likes of the hon. Member for Great Yarmouth cannot use it as a divisive tool for their own political ends.

I turn to the published figures, and will address the questions around them. The Government are not in a position to state the current number of illegal migrants whose whereabouts are unknown because the information is not available from the published statistics. The data would have to be taken from a live operational database, and would include historical records, which means that any figures would not be sufficiently robust and would not be verified.

I thank the hon. Member for Great Yarmouth again for securing this debate, and thank all Members who have contributed. These issues are a source of concern for

many of our constituents, and it is right that they be discussed in this House. Perhaps inevitably, given the subject matter, a range of views and arguments have been advanced. Let me conclude by reasserting the Government's stance: we will not stand for abuse of our immigration system, we will always put the safety of

our citizens and the security of our nation first, and we will use every possible measure to find and remove those individuals with no right to be in this country.

Question put and agreed to.

7.59 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 9 December 2025

[MARTIN VICKERS *in the Chair*]

Net Zero Transition: Consumer-led Flexibility

9.30 am

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

That this House has considered consumer-led flexibility for a just transition.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Vickers. We have a problem in this country—one that is hitting all our constituents in the pocket, while wasting electricity and pushing up carbon emissions. At the root of the problem is a mismatch between supply and demand. The places where it is cheapest to generate clean electricity are not the areas that consume the most, and our current grid does not have the capacity to move the electricity from one place to the other when demand is high. It was built to transmit power being produced by a limited number of large power stations, not the dispersed renewable energy that provides so much of our electricity today.

As we make ever greater demands on the grid, as we electrify transport and move away from gas for heating, the problem grows, and those demands are not felt evenly throughout the day. In particular, there is a big peak in the evening as people return home from work and school, cook their evening meal, plug in their cars and turn on the heating. Those peak demand periods do not necessarily match the peak supply periods of intermittent weather-dependent forms of generation.

Something has to be done to balance the grid, so how do we deal with the problem currently? We have the farcical situation whereby we all pay producers to turn off wind turbines in Scotland and pay others to turn on gas-powered fire stations in south-east England. Those constraint payments have already cost us nearly £1.3 billion this year, and it is predicted that that could rise to a massive £8 billion by 2030. All of us are paying those costs through our electricity bills. Paying producers to turn off clean power while paying others to burn fossil fuels sounds like madness, but it is the reality.

What can we do to solve the problem? We could fix it by upgrading the grid infrastructure, which needs to happen, but that takes time, and time is not on our side. We could fix it by building new power generation capacity in the areas that need it most, but that cannot be done quickly either, and do we really want to locate renewable energy capacity in suboptimal locations simply to meet local demand?

Fortunately there is an alternative: consumer-led flexibility—a way for households and businesses to flatten the demand, help to stabilise the grid, increase our nation's energy security and cut everyone's bills. Unlocking just 10 GW of consumer-led flexibility by 2030 would be the equivalent of a third of the UK's entire gas power station capacity. It is more sophisticated

than the old Economy 7 time-based approach. Smart technology can respond to signals from the grid and to users' needs.

Imagine someone arriving home from work in their electric car—they do not need to use it again until the next morning, but it is easiest to plug it in when they get home so they do not forget to charge it. Unfortunately, it is the peak period, so they are adding to the peak demand, but with electricity costing the home consumer the same throughout the day, where is the incentive to do otherwise?

With a smart charger and tariff, and a car that can do vehicle to grid—giving power back to the grid from its battery—things could be different. Importantly, from the consumer's point of view, little changes—they plug in when they get home as usual, and next morning, their car is charged and ready to go. But instead of charging straight away, a smart charger recognises that the car could give back some power now. That helps to boost supply at the time of peak demand, and that supply is being provided right where it is needed, not hundreds of miles away at the other end of an inadequate grid. Then the car is recharged later, when demand is lower.

There are many other, similar scenarios involving battery storage, smart appliances, heat pumps and thermal storage in homes and workplaces, which are all ways to intelligently shift energy use to times when it is cheap, clean and abundant. The upsides are huge, not least because, by cutting constraint payments and reducing the investment needed in new and upgraded energy infrastructure, the potential is there to cut bills for everyone, not just those who can participate.

The MCS Foundation estimates that consumer-led flexibility could cut £375 from the average household electricity bill by 2040. It can be deployed more quickly than building new infrastructure. It can reduce carbon emissions by reducing the need for gas. It can increase grid resilience, enhancing our energy security, and it can create jobs and growth, with UK companies exporting their know-how abroad.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): I declare an interest: I worked on RIIO-ED2 for the Northern Powergrid and on its business plan for the current price period. The hon. Lady mentioned the pace and speed of flexibility, and the whole concept behind that plan was flexibility-first. Flexibility has been talked about for a long time in the industry. Does she agree that what we need now is real urgency to make it happen?

Claire Young: I absolutely agree, and I am coming to those points.

The Government have set out a clean flexibility road map, and E.ON has found that 84% of people want more control over energy, so what is the catch? It might be said that this is all well and good for affluent consumers, who can afford the smart technology—the electric cars, battery storage and heat pumps, and the washing machines and dishwashers with timers so that they do not have to get up in the middle of the night to switch them on. It is all right for those who are digitally literate and for those who have heard of smart tariffs—let alone got their head around how they work. What about those who do not fit into those privileged categories? How does consumer-led flexibility fit with a just transition?

[*Claire Young*]

A report by the MCS Foundation in August found that 78% of people are unaware of schemes that reward households for reducing energy use at certain times and 41% are unlikely to switch to tariffs offering cheaper electricity outside peak times. If only a privileged few can access flexibility, will it deliver the potential benefits or simply place more of a burden on those already struggling to pay? It has the potential to lower all bills—as previously mentioned—by driving costs out of the system. That benefits even those who cannot participate. But we need to do more. To achieve the scale of change necessary, we need more action from the Government.

About three in 10 homes still do not even have smart meters, and the Government concede that, in those that do, one in 10 is faulty, while others put the figure even higher. That does not bode well for the roll-out of more advanced smart technology. What about the digitally excluded? The Government should oblige energy suppliers to engage with digitally excluded groups and those on low incomes on the benefits of flexibility. Does it not make comparing tariffs more complicated? Potentially it does, so why not support a “try it and see” approach by requiring energy suppliers to offer risk-free trial periods for time-of-use tariffs?

We have all seen, in other periods of rapid technological change, that some projects fail, so Ofgem needs to strengthen consumer protection, with clear redress powers if that happens. The Government’s own clean power action plan says that to reach clean power 2030, we need 12 GW of consumer-led flexibility—more than nuclear, hydrogen and carbon capture combined. But flexibility gets none of the coverage that those technologies do. It is all very well having a road map. What are Ministers actually doing to change the fact that nearly four in five people do not even know that they can be rewarded for changing when they use electricity?

The markets have been designed for the traditional fossil fuel generators, not for individuals and businesses that generate their own power or can offer storage. We need a presumption of openness in energy market design and rules to support them. If a rule from a market maker prevents a family with a battery, or a business with thermal storage, from participating in the market, it should be forced to justify why. The way that the network costs and final consumption levies work means that consumers cannot currently be paid to use excess renewable power when electricity prices go negative. That needs urgent reform. Imagine how much easier it would be to make the case for the clean energy transition if people could be paid for using clean, free power.

If flexibility is to be delivered, there needs to be clear accountability, without room for buck passing between the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, Ofgem and the National Energy System Operator. The new flexibility commissioner needs to be given teeth, the ability to demand transparency and accountability from everybody involved, and the authority to call out failure. Have Ministers looked closely at the industry progress board that has been set up, and can the commissioner work with it?

It is time to give people the chance to take control and be active participants in our energy system, rather than being at its mercy. The road map, the commissioner and the technology are all in place, and we know that the public want more control over their energy and their

bills. Will the Government take the extra steps needed to make this happen, or will they allow the dinosaurs of the old system to stand in the way? Let us move beyond the map to make this a reality and slash bills for everyone.

Martin Vickers (in the Chair): I remind Members that they should bob if they wish to be called during the debate.

9.38 am

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Gateshead South) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. I thank the hon. Member for Thornbury and Yate (Claire Young) for securing this debate.

As we know, the Government have declared a clean power 2030 mission, which aims to achieve a target of 12 GW in consumer-led flexibility. Earlier this year, the Government also published their landmark “Clean Flexibility Roadmap”, which I fully support and which formally recognises consumer-led flexibility as essential for energy security and will lower bills for more than 4,000 households in fuel poverty in my constituency. I have campaigned extensively, over my whole parliamentary career, on fuel poverty. I cannot beat the Minister, who comes from Scotland, but the north-east tends to be one of the colder parts of the UK, so that issue is very important. Consumer-led flexibility is essential for a just transition. Unlocking just 10 GW of consumer-led flexibility by 2030 is equal to a third of the UK’s entire gas power station capacity.

I will start by highlighting some of the impressive developments taking place in my constituency of Washington and Gateshead South. Nissan is leading the way by developing electric vehicles, while AESC is currently building a second battery plant in my constituency, supported by a Government-backed £1 billion funding plan, which will be the UK’s largest gigafactory. Those are proud additions to the north-east’s already impressive manufacturing history. EVs are an example of the smart technology we need to shift energy use intelligently to times when it is cheap, clean and abundant, as the hon. Member for Thornbury and Yate mentioned.

Nissan has also boldly embraced wind power to supplement its power supply. Across the UK, however, we are not using that energy efficiently. Octopus Energy has found that we are currently wasting more than £1.2 billion a year paying wind farms to turn off and gas plants to turn on. More broadly in the north-east, we are pioneering solar energy through companies such as Power Roll, while former coalfield communities such as mine are exploring mine-water heating as a potential heat and energy source of the future, rooted in our past.

The award-winning Gateshead district energy scheme in the town centre supplies 24 buildings with heat and/or power, as well as more than 600 homes. That includes 4 MW of power capacity, forming part of the UK’s capacity market, and 5 MW of solar PV farms on urban brownfield sites. It also operates the UK’s largest mine-water heat pump, extracting renewable heat from flooded mines beneath Gateshead. Furthermore, Labour plans to ensure that clean energy jobs are always good jobs, by ensuring that companies receiving public grants and contracts must create jobs with decent pay, access to trade unions and strong rights at work.

The clean energy economy is currently growing three times faster than the wider economy. Labour's analysis shows that employment in clean energy jobs is expected to double to 860,000 by 2030. Our energy transition must not just be driven by the technologies we know; the Government must also keep an eye on emerging technology. I am impressed by the widespread uptake of heat pumps and happy to see that heat batteries are one the latest technologies added to the boiler upgrade scheme.

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech, talking about different types of emerging technology. We have had solar panels on domestic roofs for more than 30 years, yet our electricity grid is not ready for new types of technology. Does she agree we should have started flexibility earlier, with the emergence of the solar revolution? Consumer flexibility will create those jobs and give people a stake in the electricity market.

Mrs Hodgson: My hon. Friend makes a good point. Sadly, we could only start once we came into government. We can see that more should have been done over the past 14 years. At least we are now in government and heading in the right direction.

As a leading alternative for homes where heat pumps are not yet viable, heat batteries support consumer flexibility by storing energy at cheaper, off-peak hours and releasing it on demand. Consumers should also be rewarded when renewables are plentiful, which is an increasing proportion of the time. Perhaps the Government should investigate the final consumption levies and network costs to allow consumers to be paid for using power. That would be a tangible benefit of the green transition that they could feel in their pockets, which is very important to our constituents.

I warmly welcome the Government's appointment of the UK's first flexibility commissioner, following campaigning by organisations such as the Association for Decentralised Energy with its ADE: Demand initiative. The commissioner's role will be to champion this agenda across government, Ofgem and NESO, providing the accountability and leadership that have been missing. There is more work to be done, but I welcome the positive steps the Government are taking and their recognition that consumer-led flexibility is essential for both energy security and a just transition.

9.45 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Vickers. I thank the hon. Member for Thornbury and Yate (Claire Young) for leading this debate and for setting the scene incredibly well. It is always a pleasure to see the Minister in his place; I look forward to the helpful and positive remarks he always makes. It certainly gives a lift when he answers the questions, and I am quite sure he will do likewise today.

The Minister for Energy (Michael Shanks): Lower your expectations.

Jim Shannon: No, no—upwards! Everything upwards. It is also a pleasure to see the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Mid Buckinghamshire (Greg Smith), in his place and I look forward to his contribution as well.

Consumer-led flexibility is so important. It refers to ordinary households and small businesses adjusting their energy use to support a cleaner and more resilient energy system. Who does not want that? It is about how we make it happen, however, and whether there is a cost factor to it. Can people make the changeover—the transition, so to speak—in a way that achieves the goals but does not inhibit their pocket financially in the way it sometimes might?

The cost of energy has been such a huge issue nationwide. I know from my constituents that it is a real problem. The two things that affect them more than anything else are the price of foodstuffs and the cost of energy. Especially as we head into winter, the cost of energy becomes a critical factor. It is about balancing one's income at the end of the month to ensure that all those things are covered. For my constituents, that is a real problem with increasing costs and consumption, so it is good to have an opportunity to represent them in this Chamber today.

I always add a Northern Ireland perspective to the debate, and I know that the Minister always endeavours to reply to us in Northern Ireland on how Westminster can help, so it is important to put that on the record. For a just transition in Northern Ireland, any move to low-carbon energy systems must be fair, affordable and supportive of communities reliant on older heating fuels.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): My hon. Friend has just touched on affordability. Would he agree that, by and large, people across communities—whether in Northern Ireland or across the UK—want to embrace green energy and be environmentally friendly, but they do not want to pay a massive premium to attain a goal that is unrealistic in the timeframe? The important thing is reconciling those two things to bring the community with us.

Jim Shannon: I thank my hon. Friend for that; it was my next point. He is right: I have not met anybody who does not want to improve the environment or support the net zero targets, but they want to do so in a way that does not disadvantage them inadvertently. It is very important that we try to achieve that.

Back home in Northern Ireland, this is crucial, because of the point that my hon. Friend referred to. We have a very specific issue in that 68%—two thirds—of Northern Ireland homes use oil heating, which is more than anywhere else in the UK. Fuel poverty rates are also historically high, I suspect, as a result. I have oil in my house, as do all the farmhouses in the countryside, and there is very little access to gas except on specific estates in Newtownards and perhaps a bit in Ballynahinch and Saintfield as well.

Furthermore, according to the 2023 update from housing statistics, only about 39% of dwellings have a rating of band C or higher, especially in rural areas, which is a very large section of my Strangford constituency. Few homes have access to gas in Northern Ireland and there are no alternative decarbonisation pathways, so we have to be realistic about trying to achieve the goals in a way that does not bring people down to not only fuel poverty but poverty overall.

I welcome the Government's commitment to try to address some of those things, but perhaps the Minister can give us some ideas on how we can help our

[*Jim Shannon*]

constituents in Northern Ireland—both mine and those of my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell).

James Naish: The hon. Gentleman is outlining a range of issues that make it difficult for people to reduce their bills. Does that not highlight the benefit of flexibility, because it would give people greater control, empower them and give them information, so that they can control their bill as best as possible? That is why we have to lead with a flexibility-first approach.

Jim Shannon: The reality is that, although people subscribe to the idea and wish to develop the net zero targets, it is about how that sits in their pockets. That is the ultimate goal that people reflect on. I am no better than anybody else, and my constituents are telling me—as I am sure they are telling every other MP in here—that Christmas is coming. I stay across the river at the Park Plaza hotel, and I asked a guy last night, “Are youse busy today?”, and he said, “No. It’s much quieter than it’s been for a long, long time.” He surmised that it was because it is Christmas and people are cutting back. It is the same back home. As I said before, I have not met anybody who does not want to achieve the net zero goal, but it is about how the Government help them to reach it.

There are income inequalities and geographic inequalities in Northern Ireland, and they interact strongly with affordability—it is a key issue. There is also poor uptake of smart meters in Northern Ireland, so many people end up paying way more as a result of estimates. That is another critical factor. The Minister travels to Northern Ireland regularly, so that might be an opportunity to get his thoughts across to the relevant Minister back home on how we can achieve some of these goals.

When we talk about consumer-led flexibility, the conversation must be about giving households the ability to shift their energy use to cheaper, cleaner times of the day. There are things that can be done, and things that the Government are helping people with, which I know the Northern Ireland Assembly are also trying to take advantage of, but when it comes to smart technologies and fairer tariffs, and generating or storing energy locally, how can they be achieved? That vision will work only if ordinary people can access and afford the technology and infrastructure required, but too many households are being left behind. Rural households face higher charges and costs, and the up-front expense is simply too much. I know that this is a critical issue, but we can never move away from thinking about affordability, as my constituents tell me.

Consumer-led flexibility should be not something that happens to communities, but something that communities shape, benefit from and own. To respond to the hon. Member for Rushcliffe (James Naish), if consumers can see it as part of what they want to achieve and the Government can help them in that transition, it is a win-win for everyone. Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK have enormous potential: world-leading renewable resources, strong communities and a desire for a cleaner and more secure energy future. Let us build an energy system that works for everyone in the

United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—not just for today, but for my children, my grandchildren and generations to come.

9.53 am

Martin Wrigley (Newton Abbot) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. My hon. Friend the Member for Thornbury and Yate (Claire Young) has made the case extremely well. I think I have heard unanimous opinion around the Chamber that we should not only do this, but do it now with some urgency. Flexibility first is the way to go. I will go one level further than the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who called this a “win-win”: I would call this a win-win-win. We can shave £1.3 billion off infrastructure costs through actions like this, which will be reflected in every single person’s bill. That is a massive win. It is also a win for producers because it is easier to balance production and consumption, and it is a win for individual consumers who will reduce their individual prices. It is three wins in one. Why would we not want to do that?

I absolutely agree with the hon. Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel)—we should have done this yesterday. The best time to plant a tree was 10 years ago; the second best time is now. We are at the point of the second best time, but let us use this time and make sure that it happens. I join my hon. Friend the Member for Thornbury and Yate in pushing the Government to take action urgently.

When preparing for this debate, I remembered a geography school trip I went on where we looked at last-century solutions for balancing the grid. We went to visit Dinorwig, which is a pumped storage system—or was; I am not sure it is still going—in the hills in Wales. During the night, it pumps the water from the lake at the bottom of the hill up into a corrie at the top—apty, as it turns out. As was quoted in the ad break in the middle of “Coronation Street”, when people switched on their kettles and created a power surge, that system could switch on in 30 seconds and provide significant amounts of power into the grid. It was a very good solution, but it is last century’s solution. What we need is an information-based solution, an individually empowering solution, such as we are talking about here, with consumer flexibility coming first.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): The hon. Member makes a point about a modern solution. I have felt for some time that our supermarkets, with the installation of bi-directional chargers, could offer consumers the opportunity to bring their mobile energy source—their EV—as a power supply during peak times for supermarkets; in return, consumers could be offered a discount on their shopping for that hour. When the Minister makes his comments, I would welcome his thoughts on whether we need to go further with bi-directional chargers in supermarkets.

Martin Wrigley: That had not occurred to me, but it is an amazing idea; people taking their mobile power source with them—fantastic.

That brings me on to other solutions that we should be looking at, particularly community energy generation, community networks and community power consortia, as well as business inclusion—businesses that can generate more electricity during the day than they are using.

We should be encouraging those things to happen, moving away from the centralised model of the past and towards the distributed and inclusive model of the future.

While flexibility is an excellent step, it will obviously not solve all the issues. We still need to fundamentally change energy generation contracts to de-link the cost of electricity from the price of gas. That will need to be done as well, but all these things are largely contractual issues, not technical ones. We do not need to reinvent something humongously different; we simply need to get the contracts right and change the energy market. I say “simply”—I understand that these changes have their complexities, but they are achievable. We know what we need to do.

The other massive energy issue is home insulation, which must not be forgotten. It is the single most important thing we need to do to reduce our fuel usage. The district council that I led demonstrated that very well—I draw hon. Members attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests, which notes that I am still a councillor on Teignbridge district council—when it started building council houses for the first time in 30 years. The first pair of semi-detached houses that we built are well insulated, with solar panels on the roof and air source heat pumps. At the height of the gas price crisis, the power bill for that home was just £500. We can do that with modern insulation and modern efficiencies.

Flexibility is one extra piece that we need to further reduce the cost. It is all part of a journey, and we are going in the right direction. I urge the Government to take faster action and to do everything they can to make it happen. As we have heard, industry is already looking for it. Let us make it happen.

9.59 am

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): As ever, Mr Vickers, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. The Opposition have a deep and growing concern about the direction in which Ministers of this Government are taking our energy system. It is a direction that depends increasingly on the weather, and I do not believe that anyone in this House should pretend that such dependence makes our country more secure. I have battled with this in my own constituency of Mid Buckinghamshire, where large-scale solar development projects threaten to consume vast areas of productive farmland and countryside while adding yet more intermittent generation to an already fragile system.

Expanding weather-dependent capacity without addressing firm power needs not only strains local communities, but further undermines the resilience of our national grid. We are also moving towards a system in which electricity supply must follow the wind rather than meeting the needs of households and businesses. This is being presented as modern, progressive and resilient. In truth, it is none of those things. It is a system built on hope rather than reliability, which is not what this country needs.

The National Energy System Operator has already set out that the future system will require a very large amount of what it calls flexible demand to prevent power shortages and to keep the lights on. “Flexible demand” is a polite phrase. What it means is encouraging or requiring people to use electricity at times when they might not want to use it. It means shifting everyday life

around the weather to accommodate low output from wind power. That is not energy security; it is energy insecurity by design.

As the economist Sir Dieter Helm has put it, such arrangements amount to voluntary power cuts, because they rely on people reducing their demand whenever renewable output falls. Sir Dieter has also warned that wind and solar do not provide firm power and that without enough firm capacity, the system simply cannot function reliably.

The facts support Sir Dieter. A recent study of wind patterns found that extended periods of very low wind are surprisingly common and can last a week or more. These wind lulls occur at times, and for durations that exceed the capability of storage and interconnectors to compensate. In those conditions, families, hospitals and industry cannot simply wait for the breeze to return, yet that is exactly what the current strategy risks requiring them to do.

Consumers are already paying the price for an energy system that prioritises intermittency over reliability. According to the Nuclear Industry Association, balancing costs, which are the payments needed to bring dispatchable power online when renewable output is too low, reached £2.1 billion between January and September this year. That represents a 25% increase on the previous year. These costs add nothing to the strength of the system; they simply mask its weakness and push bills upwards.

NESO’s winter outlook for 2025-26 forecasts an operational margin of 6.1 GW. Although this is the highest margin since 2019, the operator warns that there will still be tighter periods, when further interventions may be needed. In other words, even now, with relatively healthy margins, the system is fragile. As more dispatchable plants retire and more intermittent generation comes online, that fragility will only deepen. That point leads me to the most pressing issue underpinning this debate.

At the end of this decade, the United Kingdom faces a firm capacity crunch. Older baseload and dispatchable plants are closing, and they are not being replaced at the required scale. Nuclear projects are delayed, investment in new gas capacity has slowed, and Government strategy appears to assume that flexibility and good fortune will fill the gap. My right hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho) has called for greater private investment in gas power stations to provide the security of supply that only firm capacity can deliver, yet the Government persist in placing their hopes in demand shifting and in a growing share of intermittent power. That is not a credible energy strategy for a modern industrial economy. Other major economies are not taking this gamble; they are investing in firm, reliable power generation, because they understand that energy security is the foundation of economic strength and national resilience.

I ask all Members to consider what this would mean in a time of national emergency or war. In such circumstances, our productive capacity would need to run at full speed, continuously and without interruption. A system that is built around weather-dependent electricity and consumer demand shifting simply could not meet that requirement. We should not resign ourselves to an energy future in which households are constantly asked to postpone cooking, heating or charging appliances during peak times purely to compensate for low wind output, nor should business be expected to halt operations

[Greg Smith]

because the breeze has dropped. Innovations that give consumers the option to save money or lower bills are welcome. Where demand flexibility is voluntary and genuinely benefits consumers it should be encouraged, but it must never become the cornerstone of our national energy strategy. Flexibility should support the system, not prop up its structural weakness.

Our ambition as a country should be far higher. We should aim for an energy system that provides cheap, reliable and abundant electricity at all times of day and in all seasons; a system that does not depend on weather patterns and does not require consumers to become the balancing mechanism; a system with enough firm capacity built in that the lights remain on, even in the stillest winter week.

Martin Wrigley: May I draw to the hon. Member's attention the analogy with off-peak train tickets? That is a similar way of using flexibility and offering consumers cheaper tickets when the trains are empty. He would have us believe that that is not a good thing, but it is exactly the same with offering flexibility in electricity consumption.

Greg Smith: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's intervention, but the trains will continue to run 24/7, whereas we are talking about a system in which if renewable sources drop and the wind does not blow or the sun does not shine, the electricity is not there. I am not sure that his analogy is necessarily a helpful one, but I hear the point that he makes.

Ministers are creating a system that depends on the weather, while claiming that it makes us more secure. It simply does not. It papers over a capacity crisis that is approaching fast, and it risks burdening families and businesses with the consequences of that miscalculation. True energy security requires firm power, serious planning, serious investment and, above all, a willingness to confront reality rather than wishing it away. I urge the Government to rethink their approach and pursue a strategy based on reliability first and flexibility second. The country deserves nothing less.

10.7 am

The Minister for Energy (Michael Shanks): It is a pleasure to serve under you today, Mr Vickers. I am frequently told that consumer-led flexibility does not get enough time, but I now have almost an hour to talk about the Government's plans on it. I intend to use every moment I have.

Martin Vickers (in the Chair): You don't have to!

Michael Shanks: No, I don't intend to—do not worry, colleagues.

This is an important debate, however, and I thank the hon. Member for Thornbury and Yate (Claire Young) for securing it. She made a point that those in the industry make regularly to me: that this is too often a footnote in the discussion about achieving our future energy security. It should not be. It should be much further up the agenda. It is not for want of trying; I often talk about it, but it is regularly the bit that gets cut out of interviews before they are broadcast. The Government are certainly talking about these issues.

The hon. Lady outlined perfectly the problem of how we get cheaper, more secure power to homes and businesses, and the three fixes: building more grid, strategically planning where energy is built in the first place, and utilising flexibility. The truth is that we need to do all three at a pace never before seen in this country. I will come back to those points, but I welcome her recognition of them.

My hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson) made a fantastic speech, as always. She is a fantastic champion for the north-east and a long-standing campaigner on the issue of how we can reduce fuel poverty. She made the point that we risk losing the opportunity of getting cheaper power to people's homes and bringing down their bills, and she mentioned the fantastic innovations out there already. I have had the pleasure of seeing a number of them. When I visited the Mining Remediation Authority recently, I had the genuine pleasure of hearing about the mine water heating scheme. That is a fantastic example of how we can utilise something that we used decades ago to power the country. There is also a social justice argument, as those communities who still have deep scars from that period can benefit from cheaper bills in the long run.

I also want to recognise the point the hon. Member for Thornbury and Yate made about the equality aspect and how we will bring everyone with us on this transition. I will return to that point, but first I want to return to first principles and say why the Government are committed to delivering clean power by 2030. At the heart of that mission is an energy system that delivers flexibility for consumers: not forcing consumers to make choices, but giving them the opportunity to make choices that bring their bills down, and to use technology for the betterment of their lives in a way they choose.

The clean power action plan outlined 10 GW to 12 GW of consumer-led flexibility. I think that in the months ahead we will be talking much more about that part of the action plan. The Government have had to move very quickly in the first 16 months to deliver on the auctions in offshore and onshore wind, to lift the ban on onshore wind and to deliver much more solar than we have ever seen, but flexibility has been hugely important in the background, and we will say much more in public about it in the coming months.

Let me respond briefly to the core argument that the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Mid Buckinghamshire (Greg Smith), made about the clean power mission:

"The UK is a world leader in renewable energy...and we must go further. Energy security means national security. We must replace imported fossil fuels with cheaper, cleaner, domestic sources of energy. That is how we will ensure that the UK never again suffers the rising prices caused by Putin's weaponisation of energy following his invasion of Ukraine."—[*Official Report*, 22 November 2023; Vol. 741, c. 21WS.]

Those are not my words, but the words of the shadow Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho), in November 2023. I am not quite sure what has happened to the Conservative party in two years, but the Conservatives seem to have completely changed not just their position, but their understanding of the facts and science behind what they were saying then. The right hon. Member, who was Secretary of State at the time, made my argument just as well as I could ever seek to. I will leave it at that.

A just transition has the power to unlock enormous benefits for people right across the country. It is why we have pledged to deliver clean power, because we know it is cheaper and it removes the volatility of which all our constituents are still facing the cost. It will shield consumers from the volatility in global gas prices, over which we have absolutely no control, but it will also create new jobs in industries right across the country. It is the economic opportunity of the 21st century.

The role of storage will be important. The hon. Member for Newton Abbot (Martin Wrigley) talked about a school trip to Dinorwig; in Scotland, I think every single school child went to Cruachan, the hollow mountain, which is another pumped hydro power station. Although pumped hydro may be a technology from the last century, it is critical in this century as well. Indeed, the Government have launched the first new long-duration energy storage in 40 years. It is a critical way of dispatching clean power and storing it for when we absolutely need it, so it still plays an important role.

Consumer-led flexibility will play an important role in getting renewable energy to people's homes. It will help us to balance the grid and ensure that we have supply when we need it. It enables us to take advantage of low-carbon energy and reduce periods of peak demand and the associated infrastructure needs. It also involves financial rewards for those who choose to shift their electricity use to times when supply is more abundant, cheaper and cleaner. Smart meters are a key part of that. As we all know from our constituencies, we would all have liked to see a more efficient roll-out of the smart meter programme over the years, but 70% of meters across Great Britain are now smart or advanced meters, with more than 40 million homes and businesses having them installed.

We will continue to monitor the roll-out in Government very closely. Indeed, I chair a working group that is looking at how we can deliver market-wide half-hourly settlements much faster. That is really important so that consumers and businesses benefit directly from having a smart meter and new technology.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister for the positivity of his answers. The take-up of smart meters in Northern Ireland has not been good at all—nowhere near expectations. In his discussions with the relevant Minister in Northern Ireland, what can be done to help us to do better back home?

Michael Shanks: I will come to the hon. Gentleman's point. I always appreciate the kindness of his contributions, although he needs to lower his expectations of mine. He rightly mentioned the statistic that 68% of households in Northern Ireland have oil heating, which he raised with me in a previous debate. That figure surprised me, and it is a reminder of the complexity of the different circumstances across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. I work closely on this issue with Northern Ireland Executive colleagues in the Department for the Economy, and we share much of our good practice to make sure that everybody comes with us on this journey. I will shortly say more on the hon. Gentleman's point about gas.

We are already seeing consumers benefiting from flexibility. Last year, the demand flexibility service saw over 2 million households and businesses save money by

flexing their demand. We are committed to ensuring that all consumers have the option to participate, not just those who can afford certain technologies. The Government have committed £1.5 billion through the warm homes plan, which will help to upgrade low-income households. The Government will also work to ensure that flexibility is simplified and accessible for all consumers who want to take part, not just the tech savvy and those who are already able to. We have to remember that flexibility brings down the price for everyone, even those who are not participating, because of the benefits it brings to the overall system.

As we shift away from gas, consumer-led flexibility will become even more vital for managing an electrified system. Crucially, it will bring down bills for all consumers, not just those who actively participate. The Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Newton Abbot, gave a figure on the direct benefit from consumer-led flex, and a more flexible system is estimated to save up to £10 billion a year overall because of that efficiency. It is hugely important.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) asked about the transition. Obviously, connecting to the gas network is difficult in Northern Ireland, and this is a huge opportunity for many households to jump a step—from oil heating to heat pumps and other technologies. There is a real opportunity for those households to benefit, perhaps even more than some other households, if we get the transition to consumer-led flex correct. I look forward to more conversations with the hon. Gentleman on that issue.

The other point I want to make is about the role of technology. Consumer-led flexibility is becoming increasingly automated, which means that consumers can benefit from these opportunities with little or no intrusion in their daily lives. Indeed, I have seen examples where consumers have set up technology and let it run for months at a time. For example, an EV owner can plug their car into a smart charger, which will optimise charging so that it happens at the most cost-effective times of the day, while still meeting the battery charge they need the next morning, saving a significant amount of money.

I recently had a great opportunity to visit Flexitricity in Edinburgh, which is a fantastic business—not least because it has a fantastic view of Edinburgh castle, although that was not my reason for visiting. My visit brought home two things: first, the cutting-edge technology and innovation that we already have in this space; and secondly, how this is an opportunity to create high-paid, skilled jobs across the country. I met a number of apprentices and people who had changed career to be part of that innovation—the business is a fantastic example. I thank the Association for Decentralised Energy, some of whom I see in the Public Gallery today, for joining me on that visit and for the work they do.

We recently published the flexibility road map, which sets out specific, measurable actions for DESNZ, Ofgem and NESO to deliver the flexibility we need. The road map sets out a strategy and clear actions to make sure we can deliver on this. It acknowledges that the Government, in partnership with Ofgem and NESO, will need to take a leading role in making sure this is a priority for those organisations. The publication puts consumers at the heart of what we want to achieve.

[Michael Shanks]

The road map is a first step. To deliver it, we know we have to sustain that momentum. As many hon. Members have said, agreeing that this is the right thing to do is not enough; we have to get on with delivery. This debate is perfectly timed, because this afternoon I will attend the first clean flexibility road map quarterly forum to make sure we are driving progress on this. That was already in the diary, but this debate is perfect timing.

I thank the ADE for all its engagement and expertise on this matter, and I thank all the organisations working in this space for raising innovative and creative ideas for how we can make this happen faster. This is an area where the Government do not always know best, and the innovation from the private sector and communities across the country will help us to deliver this transition. It is crucial that the Government continue to hear that, and that we continue to be challenged to move further and faster.

We have seen good progress on leadership, which goes hand in hand with our work on the road map and on the appointment of a flexibility commissioner. We will be able to announce who we are appointing very soon, and they can then get on with driving this work forward as part of the clean power mission. Leadership is important more generally in this space. As politics moves away from a fact-based, rational discussion of the challenges this country faces, it is ever more important that we have these debates on the detail of how we deliver such important policies.

We must also recognise that we are making progress. There is sometimes a tendency to think that nothing is happening, but a huge amount is happening: the migration of consumers to half-hourly settlement has begun and is making great progress; NESO is about to consult on the next iteration of the demand flexibility service; Ofgem is assessing how to recover costs through bills in a way that is fair and efficient; and we have consulted on our smart secure electricity systems programme, including how we can make it easier for electricity consumers to participate. All that work going on in the background will start to have a real impact on people's lives in the coming months.

I thank everyone for their contributions to this debate. The Government are committed to delivering a clean power system, because that is the only way to bring down people's bills in the long run, to remove the volatility of fossil fuels, for which we are paying the fossil fuel penalty, and to deliver energy security in an increasingly uncertain world. Flexibility is at the heart of this, and for us to have a genuinely just transition—one that brings people with us—we have to do what is challenging. This is a new way of working. It is different,

and it will require people to think differently about their energy use and about how we deliver the change as a country, but opportunity is right at the heart of this—we should never forget that opportunity is the prize if we achieve this.

We will continue to work across Government and across the energy sector so that people can take advantage of the benefits of consumer-led flexibility and so that, ultimately, we end up with a 21st-century energy system that recognises that all our lives have changed in the last few years in how we consume electricity. Every single projection suggests consumption will increase over the coming years, so it is hugely important that we take these steps now so that the people of this country benefit from the energy transition that is under way.

I thank everyone again, and I thank the hon. Member for Thornbury and Yate for securing this important debate.

Martin Vickers (in the Chair): I thank the Minister for not taking the full 50 minutes available, which leaves more than the usual two minutes for Claire Young to wind up.

10.22 am

Claire Young: I will not test everyone's patience either. I thank everyone for their contributions. Between us, we have highlighted not just the potential for lowering bills but, as the hon. Member for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson) explained, the benefits for local economies through the generation of good, clean energy jobs. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) highlighted the benefits for those in rural, off-gas areas, which many of my constituents will appreciate, and the importance of making the technology affordable.

I hope the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Mid Buckinghamshire (Greg Smith), does not really want our constituents to continue paying for excessive fossil fuel generation when there is an alternative. It is important that consumer-led flexibility is about empowering our constituents, not forcing them to do things. It is also important that we support everyone who wants to participate, not just those for whom it is easiest. I thank the Minister for his response, which gives me some hope, but I will be keeping a close eye on this transition as it progresses.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered consumer-led flexibility for a just transition.

10.24 am

Sitting suspended.

Medal for Wounded Service Personnel

11 am

Martin Vickers (in the Chair): I will call David Baines to move the motion, and will then call the Minister to respond. I remind other Members that they may only make a speech with prior permission from the Member in charge of the debate. As is the convention in 30-minute debates, there will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up.

David Baines (St Helens North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the potential merits of a medal for service personnel wounded in combat.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Vickers. The UK's military honours system is comprehensive. We recognise gallantry through the Victoria Cross and the George Cross. We commemorate operational service through campaign medals. We created the Elizabeth Cross in 2009 for families of the fallen. Yet there remains no official recognition for those wounded in service. Unlike the United States, with their Purple Heart, the British armed forces have no equivalent. While everyone who serves deserves recognition, I believe that those who are injured deserve special acknowledgment of their sacrifice.

Let me start by saying that serving in the military is a positive and honourable career choice. Like everyone in my constituency of St Helens North, I am proud of our community's history and heritage of service, and I am incredibly thankful and respectful of all those who serve today and everything they do. I have heard at first hand from servicemen and women that a life in the forces brings with it fantastic opportunities for those who join—opportunities for education, training, travel and personal development.

Our armed forces play a significant role in defending and protecting us all and we should celebrate that, but those who join the armed forces know that by the intention and design of their role they are significantly more likely to face hostile action than those in other public services. Military personnel are deployed specifically to environments where armed enemies attempt to kill or injure them. That is the fundamental nature of military service, not a criticism of it, but we need to recognise the unique sacrifice that it entails.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for bringing forward the debate. I spoke to him beforehand. Obviously, I am a Northern Ireland MP, and I declare an interest as someone who served in the forces in Northern Ireland for some 14 and a half years. I gently remind Members that many soldiers were wounded in combat while serving in the Northern Ireland troubles. I believe they deserve formal recognition for their sacrifice—the very thing the hon. Gentleman is referring to.

For over three decades, British soldiers, many barely out of their teens, patrolled our streets, stood between communities and faced down threats to protect civilians from terrorism and uphold the law. What the hon. Gentleman refers to is about acknowledging the lasting physical and emotional scars borne by those who serve. Does he agree that awarding a dedicated medal to those wounded in combat during the troubles would be a moral gesture and the right thing to do?

David Baines: I completely agree with the hon. Member; he makes an excellent point.

According to Ministry of Defence statistics, since January 2006 a total of 2,644 personnel have sustained battle injuries while on operation—that is, they were wounded as a result of hostile action. Behind every one of those numbers is a person like my constituent Corporal Andy Reid MBE, whose life has been permanently altered in service to this nation yet who receives no specific recognition for the wounds that he carries.

On 13 October 2009, Andy stepped on an improvised explosive device while on patrol in Helmand Province. He was 22 years old. The explosion destroyed his right leg below the knee, his left leg above the knee and his right arm above the elbow. Medical professionals doubted that he would survive, yet after just two weeks in hospital Andy made his first trip home to St Helens. Within a month, he met up with members of his patrol again.

What Andy has achieved since is extraordinary. He married his wife Claire and became a father to two children. He climbed Mount Kilimanjaro on prosthetic legs, becoming the first triple amputee in the UK to do so. He raised over £200,000 for armed forces charities and he has established the Standing Tall Foundation in St Helens, providing mental health support and counselling for veterans and non-veterans alike. He received an MBE in 2019 for voluntary service to veterans and people with disabilities.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend on bringing forward the debate. I fully support this excellent campaign to create a brand-new medal for all servicemen and women who have been wounded in combat. He mentions Andy Reid's charitable works, which are legendary in themselves. I had the pleasure of meeting Andy at the recent Rochdale Man of the Year awards, where he raised many more thousands of pounds for our local Springhill hospice. Does my hon. Friend agree that Andy's main motivation is his motto that he is not a victim but a survivor? That goes to the heart of this medal: all those wounded in the line of service deserve recognition by their country. Those like Andy who have literally risked life and limb deserve that recognition more than anyone.

David Baines: I completely agree. Andy's motto, that he is a survivor, not a victim, is not about wallowing in what has happened but recognising it and using it to grow and help others. That is exactly what he is doing day in, day out.

Andy wears his operational service medal for Afghanistan with pride, but that medal tells only part of his story. It records where he served, not what he sacrificed; it does not mark the physical wounds he carries or the daily challenges he faces with tasks that others take for granted. Andy's story is tragically not unique. The conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan created a generation of wounded veterans. Thousands carry visible injuries—amputations, severe burns, blindness—while others carry hidden wounds, both physical and mental.

Advances in battlefield medicine mean that many personnel thankfully survive injuries that would have been fatal in previous conflicts. That means more wounded veterans living among us, many facing lifelong challenges. Those men and women deserve formal recognition.

[David Baines]

Andy has been publicly advocating for the medal, drawing on his experience and extensive work with the veterans community.

This is not the only campaign being fought for such recognition. Recently, the hon. Member for Cheadle (Mr Morrison) led a debate on establishing an injury in service award for emergency service personnel: police officers, firefighters and paramedics who have been injured in the line of duty. I fully support that campaign; it is good to see Parliament giving serious attention to recognising those injured while serving the public, which is long overdue. The campaigns for emergency services recognition and for a wounded in action medal both speak to the same principle: when people put their bodies on the line in service to others and pay a physical price, their sacrifice deserves formal acknowledgement.

I want to be clear that this debate and a call for a medal for service personnel injured in combat is not about comparing public services. I completely support the call for recognition of those in the emergency services. Some would maybe combine the two campaigns into one medal, but I believe that our emergency services deserve unique recognition. I would also argue that the fundamental nature of military service—men and women deployed specifically to environments where armed enemies attempt to kill or injure them—is likewise worthy of separate and significant recognition.

The Government have set an admirable goal: to make Britain the best place in the world to be a veteran, using a whole-society approach. This proposal for a new medal fits squarely within that vision. Defence companies have expressed positive interest in funding it. They recognise their obligation to support those wounded in service. With industry support, the cost to the public purse could be minimal. Even bearing the full cost, we are talking about recognition for individuals who have surely paid far more than any price we could put on a medal.

This is the whole-society approach in action: Government setting policy, industry contributing resources, and the voluntary sector providing support, as I am sure it would. The medal would be the visible symbol at the centre of this effort. I believe it could also help to boost recruitment and retention, which the Government are keen to do. Those considering military service rightly want to know that any sacrifice they may have to make will be formally recognised. This new medal is, therefore, practical policy as well as a moral imperative. As to the injuries that might be eligible for the medal and how far back it would apply, my strong feeling is that veterans' organisations and forces personnel should be involved in setting the terms. This would be their medal and they should own it. I do not believe it should be for MPs or civil servants to decide those details.

Andy Reid does not lead this campaign because he seeks personal glory. He already has an MBE, the respect of his community and the gratitude of the charities he has raised hundreds of thousands of pounds for. He campaigns because recognition matters. He has met countless wounded veterans who feel that their sacrifice too often goes unacknowledged. He believes those who have been injured in service to this country deserve to have that sacrifice formally recognised.

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): I completely endorse what my hon. Friend is saying and his plan for a medal. Does he agree that organisations such as Veterans in Sefton in my constituency do a remarkable job, supporting people across Merseyside? This would be another symbol of our support for our veterans, who do such a fantastic job for our country.

David Baines: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. In our part of the world, we have a long and proud history of service in the armed forces; I know it is the same in his part of Merseyside as it is in mine. I thank him for raising that point and putting it on the record.

I agree with Andy Reid and all those calling for this new medal. I am sure that many people in this country would agree too. It is time to address the gap in the system, honour our wounded and introduce formal recognition that says to every serviceperson wounded in defence of our nation, "We see you, we honour you, and we'll never forget what you've given."

11.10 am

The Minister for Veterans and People (Louise Sandher-Jones): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Vickers. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens North (David Baines) for securing this debate and highlighting the continued importance of properly recognising those who have served in our armed forces. I know how much work he has been doing, both in his role as an MP and with St Helens borough council—including in his time as leader—to lead the way on implementing the armed forces covenant and showing support for the veteran community, for which I thank him, both as a Minister and as a veteran myself. I also thank Andy Reid MBE and acknowledge his amazing work. Again, he has done so much campaigning on this and other causes to support veterans. He is a fantastic campaigner and a huge inspiration.

I thank other hon. Members who have spoken today to highlight their support for veterans. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) rightly highlighted the role of those who served in Northern Ireland; I have the greatest respect for those who served in that conflict. My hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Paul Waugh) movingly spoke of how much work Andy Reid has been doing, particularly on behalf of Springhill hospice, which shows the impact that he has had on his wider community. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) for his fantastic work as well.

Although I recognise that the debate was originally aimed towards my Cabinet Office colleagues, as it is they who administer the UK honours and awards system, I hope my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens North will see the practical reasons for me responding, given the focus on the armed forces. If it is the Government's first duty to protect the population, they can do so only by asking the men and women of our armed forces to do extraordinary things. As I saw during my own deployment to Afghanistan, regular and reservist members of our armed forces served with courage, commitment and resilience, separated from their loved ones, often in difficult and dangerous situations. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens North for highlighting how many people who are veterans of that conflict still have to deal with the impact on their lives every day.

If we are to expect our armed forces to display such qualities in protecting our country and the values that we hold dear, it is only right that we, as a Government, ensure that they are properly supported and recognised for doing so. That means expressing our gratitude on behalf of the British people through practical support—here I want to highlight our Valour initiative to improve the co-ordination of support for our military veterans; Fortitude, which houses homeless veterans and those at risk of homelessness; and the work to expand the armed forces covenant, which, as the Prime Minister announced in June, will be extended across central Government—and, of course, through the rightful award of medallic recognition.

Medals are a form of recognition from the Government on behalf of the monarch, instituted by royal warrant, and sitting firmly under royal prerogative powers. That is important, because it places the medals system and other honours and awards above the political fray. As such, it is a process underpinned by a Cabinet Office–led system of committees that make evidence-based judgments on the merits of individual endeavour to ensure that our system is fair. For that reason, I believe that the British model for medallic recognition is highly respected across the globe.

Medals for members of our armed forces mark an individual's contribution to a military operation that has protected this country or enhanced global security. They may also recognise acts of exceptional courage. It is a basic principle that those who wear a medal must have earned it. Therefore, eligibility is always checked carefully against the person's service record. Similarly, when a new medal is proposed, there must be a clear and robust rationale that doing so evidences the delivery of and furthers the UK's aims.

Let me turn specifically to service personnel wounded in combat. Currently, those injured and evacuated from an operational deployment that attracts a campaign, operational or general service medal are automatically awarded the relevant medal, regardless of whether they have met the standard eligibility criteria. Effectively, the automatic award is made in recognition of the fact that the individual has sacrificed their wellbeing while on the operation. I recognise that there are those who wish to see a more specific acknowledgement of service personnel injured in the course of their military careers, and in particular, those wounded on military operations. With an awareness of the proposals, my officials are considering this, in terms of whether a defined injury medal would be the best method of recognition in such circumstances, whether such an award would be viable, and the hows and wherefores.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens North for raising this important topic. I acknowledge that he, and indeed the House, might want me to go further today and make a commitment to implement an injury medal for armed forces personnel, but I hope that he will understand that that is not possible at this time, as any consideration of this matter must be progressed through the correct channels. However, I trust that he is reassured that the Government are fully committed to ensuring that those who serve this country with bravery and dedication will be supported in the practical sense, but will also have their selflessness and sacrifice properly recognised through the award of medals.

Question put and agreed to.

11.16 am

Sitting suspended.

Water Scarcity

[GRAHAM STUART *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered water scarcity.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stuart. In a country where we always complain about the rain, we have somehow contrived to have a water shortage. I am reminded of the words of the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge:

“Water, water, everywhere

But not a drop to drink”

But the honest truth is that it really does not rain like it used to. This year, the UK experienced the hottest and driest spring on record. Farmers endured a devastatingly poor harvest and lost £800 million to drought. Over the long term, the prediction is for ever greater weather volatility. In October—yes, October—my home county of Sussex was placed under drought measures, as Ardingly reservoir fell below 30% capacity, compared with the seasonal average of 76%, and there are greater challenges to come.

By 2050, the UK population is forecast to rise by 10 million. Further demand from data centres, renewable energy infrastructure and new industry is also rising quickly, but is yet to be factored in to demand. The National Infrastructure Commission projects a national supply-demand deficit approaching 5 billion litres a day by 2050 unless action is taken. That is a gap equivalent to the daily water use of more than 30 million people, and that does not even include commercial demands, such as farming, manufacturing, horticulture or business activity.

For something that has become so precious, we are remarkably careless about it. Fully one fifth of the water that enters the system is lost before it reaches even a single property because of leaky pipes. River abstraction now accounts for 61% of all environmental water abstraction, up from around 40% in the early 2000s. This is clearly contributing to severe pressure on our waterways, especially chalk streams, one of Britain’s most unique ecosystems.

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): My hon. Friend talks about water abstraction and using water in the right places. The Independent Water Commission’s recommendation 10 suggested using pre-pipe solutions. Does he agree that mandatory rainwater harvesting on new homes and major renovations would allow us to capture water and use it at source, reducing pressure on reservoirs and the need for river abstraction?

John Milne: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention; I very much agree. We need to look at every measure to utilise water that is already there, in addition to reservoirs, which take up lots of space.

When it comes to our groundwater bodies, 40% are already classed as over-extracted, and only 16% of England’s surface waters are judged to be in good ecological status. The National Audit Office warns that, as of today, 12 million people already live in water-stressed areas. Seven water company regions are expected to hit critical

status by 2030, and the number rises to 12 by 2040. Meanwhile, average water use per person is surprisingly rising, completely contrary to policy. It is now at around 140 to 150 litres a day, despite a Government target of just 110 litres by 2050.

Water underpins everything—our environment, our economy, our wellbeing and, of course, our national food supply—and right now the evidence is clear: we are not on a path that will guarantee water security for future generations. The situation is not helped by poor management performance and under-investment from many of our privatised water companies, which has additionally resulted in a crisis of water quality as well as scarcity.

That is the national picture, but there are two sectors where the consequences are being felt most acutely: housing and the rural economy. The Government has set a target of 1.5 million new homes by the end of this Parliament, but it is not going to happen without solving the water crisis. In Cambridgeshire, water stress has already delayed 9,000 homes and 300,000 square metres of commercial development. Over the course of this Parliament alone, more than 60,000 homes could become undeliverable due to water constraints, with more than £25 billion in lost value. Research suggests that in some areas nearly 40% of the Government’s new housing target cannot be delivered under current water supply conditions. Developers cannot invest when they cannot guarantee water. Local businesses cannot expand without commercial space. Communities cannot grow when basic infrastructure cannot be secured. Therefore, water scarcity is fast becoming a major handbrake on economic ambition, and in some of the UK’s highest growth potential regions.

In my constituency of Horsham, West Sussex, we have been fighting our own version of water wars for the past four years. That is a result of a unique requirement, known as water neutrality, by which no new houses could be built if they increased demand on water supply by as much as a single litre. That was ordered by Natural England to protect a rare river habitat in the Arun valley, threatened with over-abstraction. It was a daft rule imposed overnight and now it has been removed—again, overnight. Both decisions are wrong.

Those wild policy U-turns at a national level have left Horsham without a five-year land supply, turning Horsham district council into a wild west for speculative developers. Creating water headroom for new housing requires the Government to create new supplies, not simply fiddle with the figures. Looking at how Horsham has been treated, it is hard to have confidence in the Government’s bona fides on the environment.

The second area I want to turn to is the rural economy. Farmers, vineyards, garden centres and nurseries rely heavily on access to water. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for rural business and the rural powerhouse, I hear regularly from farmers who have faced ruinous losses during drought periods. In 2025 alone, arable farmers have lost £800 million to drought. Increased water capture and storage is the obvious solution, but farmers face obstacles everywhere: historical abstraction limits no longer fit for purpose, complex planning rules and grant schemes not open to smaller enterprises. The Government have recently confirmed that they intend to reform permitted development rights

for farm reservoirs. If the Minister could confirm a timetable for that to happen, I am sure hon. Members would be grateful.

The horticulture industry employs more than 770,000 people, contributes nearly £40 billion to the economy and more than £8 billion in tax revenue. This year, the driest spring since 1983, followed by among the hottest summers, has pushed many growers to the limits. Although hosepipe bans have become routine these days, the impact on business profits is anything but. One nursery reported to the Horticultural Trades Association that footfall fell by 20%, and it lost £300,000 the last time drought measures were imposed in their region.

An abstraction threshold of 20 cubic metres per day forces many growers to fall back on using treated drinking water, which is costly, inefficient and environmentally absurd. In Horsham, local growers tell me that water scarcity is now one of the biggest constraints on their investment. Ben from Tates of Sussex garden centres says:

“A few days without irrigation can mean tens of thousands of pounds of plant losses...and rising water costs are becoming a limiting factor on our entire business.”

The rural economy has the potential to contribute an additional £19 billion a year to the UK, but only if it has access to the water infrastructure it needs. What should we do? For housing, we need to be more water-smart. That means construction guidelines for new homes and usage standards for white goods. What it should not mean is overly restrictive rules enforcing hyper-low-pressure devices. Push too far in that direction and people simply respond by taking longer showers and double-flushing the toilet. Instead, we need practical, efficient, enforceable standards. We need retrofit incentives for existing housing stock, because old homes are where the real efficiency lies, and there are many more of them.

For the rural economy, we should introduce new permitted development rights for small and medium reservoirs. The current rules effectively block most farms or nurseries from qualifying. We should create more flexible abstraction rules for winter refill. It is not fair to ask farmers to invest hundreds of thousands of pounds building reservoirs, without the certainty that their licences will be renewed. We should support nature-friendly farming and soil health. Healthy soil can hold up to 350,000 litres of water per hectare, which reduces the risk of both drought and flood. We should recognise essential food infrastructure as nationally important, while also recognising the role that water storage plays in food infrastructure.

At the national level, we urgently need joined-up oversight. Britain remains without a single national strategy for water security. Responsibilities are spread across the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Environment Agency, Ofwat, local authorities and water companies. The National Audit Office has warned repeatedly that this confused accountability leads to strategic inertia. Funding decisions are fragmented, planning cycles are misaligned and essential investment—nearly £20 billion in resilience infrastructure identified by the National Infrastructure Commission—remains unfunded.

We should bring water resource management plans, drainage strategies and price reviews into a single co-ordinated process. We should launch a national water literacy campaign to put water efficiency on the same

footing as net zero, and we should give one agency clear responsibility for delivering long-term water resilience, ensuring that all future demands are met. If we get this right, the benefits are enormous: a resilient rural economy that can grow and innovate; ecosystems that are healthier, more diverse and no longer pushed to collapse by over-abstraction; chalk streams that remain a part of our national heritage; secure food production; reliable water for homes, industry, data and energy; and a housing sector that can actually deliver the homes we need.

It is a simple choice: action now or crisis later. Water is not an optional extra; it is the foundation of a functioning country. I hope that we can agree that what Britain needs is not just investment and regulation, but a national plan under coherent leadership. We need a commitment that water security will not be an afterthought, but will continue to be the backbone of our infrastructure system.

Graham Stuart (in the Chair): I remind Members to please bob if they wish to be called in the debate.

2.42 pm

Chris Hinchliff (North East Hertfordshire) (Lab): It is an honour to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Stuart. I begin by recognising that the Minister takes these issues very seriously, and congratulating the hon. Member for Horsham (John Milne) on securing this important debate. I agree with him that one would think it would take true organising genius to arrange for water scarcity in a country as wet as ours. Yet water scarcity is not a future risk; it is a constant and present reality. Take chalk streams, which have already been referred to: they are the crown jewels in our natural heritage, but less than a fifth are in good ecological status, and that situation is largely driven by over-abstraction.

The River Ivel in my constituency is one of the most over-abstracted chalk streams in the country. Where once there were boats, watermills and watercress meadows, there is now often little more than a dribble. The nearby Cat Ditch chalk stream mostly no longer flows at all. If we are to deliver on our manifesto commitments to reverse England's nature crisis, we must ensure that we have a chalk streams-first approach to water resource management, adopted in full.

The second point I will make is that reservoirs alone will not save us. The planned nine new reservoirs up to 2050 will provide around 670 million litres of water a day but, as has already been referred to, our projected deficit is more than 5 billion litres a day. The calculations for existing water resource management plans do not take into account the quenchless thirst of data centres, demanded not by our constituents, but by tech corporations.

The brings me to my third point: we must move towards an economic model and a planning system that respect environmental boundaries and stop acting as though they do not exist. Speculative applications from profiteering developers must be reined in and firmer restrictions put in place where new development would require abstraction at rates not compatible with the good ecological health of our rivers. We must also make more efficient use of grey water. Above all, we need a clear national assessment of the maximum population growth we can absorb in our country, for a future in which both our taps and our rivers still run.

Graham Stuart (in the Chair): If everybody speaks as scheduled, it should be about seven minutes each.

2.45 pm

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stuart. I thank my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (John Milne), for securing this important and timely debate.

Over the past week, my constituents in Mid Sussex have watched the appalling situation in Tunbridge Wells—families left without water for days on end, businesses forced to close and vulnerable residents unable to wash or cook—with deep concern. South East Water’s handling of the crisis has been nothing short of shocking. My constituents are asking the very reasonable question, “Could we be next?”.

While we accept that climate change is affecting rainfall, and recognise that house building places additional pressure on supply, none of that excuses the simple truth: South East Water has failed to invest properly in its network, failed to maintain its pipes, and failed to plan to ensure resilience. We have also not seen a major new reservoir in England since 1991. In Mid Sussex, we are now seeing the consequences of that neglect. Ardingly reservoir is at 44% capacity—this time last year, it was full. We have had a hosepipe ban imposed since the summer, businesses have been restricted under a drought order and South East Water is now racing to design a 13-kilometre pipeline to move up to 30 million litres of water a day from Weir Wood reservoir, just to keep Haywards Heath and surrounding villages supplied next spring and summer. That is not resilience; they are chasing their tails. The pipeline proposal raises serious questions. Its route would cross private land, roads, railway lines and environmentally sensitive areas, including Ashdown Forest. Local people deserve clarity, they deserve transparency and they deserve independently verified information, not only on the feasibility of the pipeline, but on every contingency plan the company claims to be developing.

I call on the Minister to go further. We need a full assessment of South East Water’s long-term resilience and investment strategy. We need clear, published forecasts of supply risks for every community and we also need regulators to ensure that companies owned by far-off investment funds are delivering water security, not just profits. Most of all, we need to protect our residents. Households, care homes, schools and businesses cannot simply be left to hope for rainfall or trust in last-minute engineering projects.

My constituents expect—and deserve—reassurance that the disgraceful scenes in Tunbridge Wells will not be repeated in Haywards Heath, Burgess Hill, Lindfield, Cuckfield or anywhere else in Mid Sussex. It should be a given, especially with rising bills, that people can live safely in the knowledge that they have access to a clean, reliable water source. For a Government with massive housing targets, it is unreasonable to expect local people to support targets of more than 1,000 homes per annum that are being delivered when they know that the existing population’s water demands are, at best, precariously met. That breaks the social contract. I draw my comments to a close there, but I look forward to hearing how the Minister plans to ensure that the situation is better managed in the future.

2.49 pm

Steff Aquarone (North Norfolk) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Stuart. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (John Milne) on securing a debate on this vital issue. The fact that I previously secured a debate in this place on flooding in Norfolk and our problems with too much water, and now I am complaining about the places with not enough, just highlights the range of challenges that North Norfolk faces. In a rural community such as mine, there is an ongoing battle with a range of environmental factors just to keep livelihoods and businesses functioning as they are.

Water scarcity is a big issue for the farming community, which is large in North Norfolk. Farmers I speak to tell me of the significant challenges they face with water abstraction, and how it is impacting our food production and, importantly, our food security. As with greater flooding, the root cause of greater water scarcity is the climate emergency.

Climate change is making our rivers and watercourses more unpredictable, leading to changes in the patterns that have served farmers well for decades. As a result, many farmers want to build small on-farm reservoirs to give them greater surety of access to water, which would also ensure that our rivers do not become over-abstracted. However, for many farmers, that is incredibly difficult to do. Permitted development rights in this regard are outdated and unhelpful; they need to be urgently reviewed to assess how we can make it easier and simpler for farmers to secure access to water.

This issue was raised as part of the discussions on the Planning and Infrastructure Bill, and an amendment was sent back to us from the other place to ask us to consider it again. The Minister in the Lords told the other place that

“We recognise the need to look at those permitted development regulations, and we will return to them.” —[*Official Report, House of Lords, 20 October 2025; Vol. 849, c. 520.*]

In the debate on those Lords amendments, I raised the concerns of my farmers with the Minister for Housing and Planning, and asked him whether we could expect a timeline for the Government to return to and review the regulations. *Hansard* reported that he “indicated dissent”, which is a rather diplomatic way of describing the fact that he shook his head vigorously.

I hope that the Minister responding to today’s debate will be slightly less dissenting than her colleague. On matters of water, I know that she is well respected in the House and in my community, too, so we look to her for some clarity and guidance.

Water attenuation also helps us to manage the other end of the spectrum, flooding. It is farcical that some of the same farmers who struggle with abstraction are then also hit by floods in other parts of the year, but cannot do anything about them. Attenuation on farmland also prevents floodwater from running off into the residential communities nearby, reducing flood damage to homes and businesses.

We could tackle two great issues here, but the Government will have to act. Farmers already face many challenges in keeping their businesses afloat and keeping our communities fed, but this is a burden that can be relieved, and it is in the power of the Government to do so. For once, I am not even asking for money—I am

just asking for the Government to look again at the current regulations to see what they can do to help our farmers out.

However, it is not only farming businesses who find water scarcity limiting their development. Over the county border in Suffolk, we have seen some areas slapped with a ban on new non-domestic connections due to water scarcity, and we are incredibly fearful of the same thing happening in Norfolk.

I have spoken at length about the steps that we need to take to unleash the rural economic powerhouse; such limitations are so damaging to expanding businesses in rural communities, and yet another challenge that drives a wedge between rural businesses and urban businesses. That challenge would not present itself to someone expanding their business in London or Manchester, but in rural areas we are subjected to draconian restrictions on free enterprise because of years of water sector mismanagement. The situation cannot be allowed to continue—or, by the time restrictions are eased, there simply will not be any more rural businesses trying to expand.

As a rural and a coastal MP, much of my community is built around water: our precious coastline, the chalk streams running through our villages and the beautiful broads that attract so many visitors to Norfolk. Climate change now threatens to turn that water from an asset into a struggle. I hope the Government recognise the severity of the issue we face and take the necessary steps to protect my community in the years to come.

2.52 pm

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stuart. I am very aware that the Division bell might ring at any moment to signal that we have to go to the main Chamber for a vote, so I will very slowly begin what I had planned to be a three or four-minute speech, while waiting for the bell to ring.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (John Milne)—[*Interruption.*]

Graham Stuart (in the Chair): Order. The debate is suspended for 15 minutes for a Division in the House, as brilliantly predicted by the hon. Member.

2.53 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

On resuming—

Graham Stuart (in the Chair): The debate may continue until 4.11 pm.

Jess Brown-Fuller: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stuart, as much as it was 15 minutes ago. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Horsham for securing this important debate.

The south-east, where my constituency is, has been designated as water stressed since 2021. As reflected in many of the contributions, that sometimes feels quite hard to believe in such a wet country. Much of my constituency is a low-lying coastal plain, and weather volatility is causing severe conditions on both ends of the scale. Droughts and floods are a commonplace occurrence, whereas before they were less likely.

I would like briefly to talk about chalk streams. I am very lucky to represent two of England's 200 chalk streams, and over-abstraction on the River Ems over many years means that the point of constant flow has moved two kilometres downstream since the 1960s. That means that a large proportion of the river is drying up every summer when it never used to. Constituents have told me harrowing accounts of trying to rescue the salmon that migrate down the River Ems, and it feels like a total catastrophe when people are trying to save those fish. The Test and the Itchen, just outside my constituency, are also rare habitats and important chalk streams. They, too, are really impacted by over-abstraction.

To address that, Portsmouth Water is building the first new reservoir in more than 30 years, the Havant Thicket reservoir, just on the border of my constituency. That was largely favoured by the local community, because it would create a new space and an exciting environment for people to visit and walk around. Then Southern Water got involved. It saw this brilliant idea that was popular among the population, and it put forward a proposal to invest in Havant Thicket with Portsmouth Water by introducing an effluent recycling scheme, the first of its kind in this country to supplement our drinking water supply. By investing in that technology, Southern Water can use clever accounting tricks to maintain its bottom line by describing the technology as an asset rather than investing in fixing its existing infrastructure, which is much less appealing to its shareholders.

The cost of the scheme to introduce effluent recycling into the drinking water supply at the Havant Thicket reservoir is estimated to be £1.2 billion, but the costs are spiralling every year. There is also no lasting legacy to this project. The plant will become redundant in 60 years, but customers will be paying for it in their bills for far longer. It is also hugely energy intensive. At the same time, as many hon. Members have mentioned, Southern Water wastes 100 million litres of water every day from leaky pipes that it has failed to maintain.

Sarah Gibson (Chippenham) (LD): My constituency is in Wiltshire, and the northern part is served by Thames Water. In Lyneham we seem to see outages almost every week. Thames Water is wasting water and pouring it down the streets of Royal Wootton Bassett, but cannot supply tap water to Lyneham or to parts of Bassett. On top of that, the company gives residents no information about when supply will be reinstated. Would my hon. Friend agree that water companies should be making better use of their assets, but also giving residents information when they fail?

Jess Brown-Fuller: I thank my hon. Friend for making a valid point. I am sure that for that reason, she agrees that the best way to address our failing water system is to make water companies into public benefit interest companies, so they are beholden to their customers and the environment before the needs of their shareholders. Although these companies may profess to care about the public, they are always looking far more closely at the bottom line and how shareholders feel.

With confidence in water companies at an all-time low, Southern Water being one of the worst offenders, it is hard to believe that the Secretary of State will sign off on the Havant Thicket project without encouraging the company to prove that all other options have been

[Jess Brown-Fuller]

exhausted. I would appreciate it if the Minister provided an update on whether the Government are in favour of the scheme. I understand that the decision has been deferred until spring 2026. That provides an opportunity for the Minister to meet local campaigners from my constituency and the neighbouring one who would love to share their thoughts on the project, which could end up providing a blueprint for the rest of the UK.

Water scarcity is not just about supply. It is also about demand, which is rising exponentially with a projected deficit of billions of litres of water a day, as many hon. Members have mentioned. That is why I tabled an amendment to the Planning and Infrastructure Bill calling for all new developments to introduce dual piping at the build stage so that households could introduce grey water recycling into their homes without a huge cost. The cost to the developer would have been very small—we are talking in the single hundreds of pounds—and yet if households had decided to start using grey water in their washing machines, for example, or to flush their toilets, they could have made huge savings in the long run.

Although the Government chose not to accept my amendment, there does need to be a serious conversation about the use of grey water to reduce demand on drinking water. We also need urgently to implement schedule 3 to the Flood and Water Management Act 2010, which is long overdue. Although local authorities can choose to make SUDS mandatory for all new developments—I know the Minister is passionate about SUDS, as she has told me in many a Westminster Hall debate—as my local authority, Chichester district council, has done, it is still not mandatory across the country, so I would appreciate an update from the Minister on the review of schedule 3.

Portsmouth Water is undertaking a project in my constituency of Chichester to install meters on every property for which it provides water, which should mean that those that use more water pay more, and those who are conscious of their water use see a saving on their bills. With water bills going up exponentially across the country, I am sure that would be a welcome saving to lots of my constituents in Chichester.

3.11 pm

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): It really is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Stuart. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (John Milne) on securing this timely debate. I am grateful to have the opportunity to raise an issue of huge importance for my Hazel Grove constituents, namely the impact of water scarcity on the UK's canal network.

The UK is unique in having a network of more than 2,700 miles of waterways, much of it 250 years old and still supporting many businesses. My constituency, the finest in the land, is lucky enough to contain stretches of both the Macclesfield and Peak Forest canals, including the famous and beautiful Marple lock flight, which is an especially beautiful part of my patch—a green vein running through High Lane, Marple, over the Marple aqueduct, and through Romiley and Woodley on to Tameside. Earlier this year, I launched a campaign to make Marple locks, one of the steepest and longest flights in the country, a UNESCO world heritage site.

Marple is one of the best examples of industrial waterways in the UK. Our canal heritage makes it one of a kind, and it is our own local slice of great British history. I am a proud and long-standing trustee of the Stockport Canal Boat Trust for disabled people and their carers—I refer all colleagues to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Not only are our waterways of cultural and historical significance to our communities, but they provide crucial habitats for wildlife and serve as a natural green corridor. Our canals are vital to our nature and our wellbeing, and they contribute hugely to combating climate change. They are vital for water management, and we should do everything we can to protect and preserve them for future generations.

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): The Leeds and Liverpool canal runs through my constituency of Shipley, and on it is the very famous Bingley Five Rise locks. Because of water scarcity, that lock, and passage through it, has been shut for some time. Does the hon. Member agree with me that as part of managing our water system, it is essential that we keep our canals moving?

Lisa Smart: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. I agree strongly that keeping our canals moving is hugely important when we are thinking about how we manage our waterways, how we manage traffic on them, and how we keep them and preserve them for future generations.

Similarly to what the hon. Lady has described, because of a combination of drought and work that the Canal and River Trust had to conduct on some of their large raised reservoirs in line with the requirements of the Reservoirs Act 1975, many reservoirs in my area were drawn down last winter to permit legally required works to take place. As a result, the reservoirs started the year with a lower volume of water. This year, as the CRT told me, we experienced the driest spring in England for 132 years, the driest February to August in England since 1976, and the third driest March to August period on record overall for England, followed by the hottest summer since records began in 1884, according to the Met Office.

During dry seasons, low water levels can cause the canal banks to become unstable, leading to structural damage, erosion and, if left unaddressed, the eventual collapse of the canal. Therefore, it is essential that water levels are managed and maintained to ensure the stability and functionality of canals. When drought conditions are faced, restrictions are placed on boat movements to make the existing water in the canal system go as far as possible. This year, the CRT deemed that restrictions in my area, like in the area covered by the hon. Member for Shipley (Anna Dixon), did not go far enough to conserve water, so it stopped boat movements on the Macclesfield and Peak Forest canals over the summer.

As well as the challenges of a changing climate, there is an increasingly demanding regulatory framework, ageing and deteriorating infrastructure, inflation, higher construction costs and a reduction in Government funding. Without funding changes, I fear that such closures are sadly likely to occur more often. That will have a dire effect on not only the people who live and work on the waterways, but those who visit the canals for their benefits for physical and mental health. For many in my constituency, the canals are an escape from traffic pollution and noise. They provide a sanctuary of peace amid a busy world.

The principal reservoir that feeds the Peak Forest canal is Toddbrook. As a result of damage to the reservoir back in 2019, a key source of water for the canals has not been available of late. The CRT is currently working on a project to restore the reservoir, but without support from the Government, and increased funding to ensure that reservoirs are kept in good working condition, the water scarcity that we have experienced this year could result in more closures of canals and waterways in the future.

I join others, including campaigners from Fund Britain's Waterways and the Association of Waterways Cruising Clubs, in urging the Government to put real consideration into our canals when allocating funding to ensure that water scarcity does not have negative ramifications for our waterways, and that we can protect these vital national assets for future generations.

3.17 pm

Pippa Heylings (South Cambridgeshire) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Stuart. Along with many others, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (John Milne) on securing this important debate.

Only last week here in Westminster Hall, I was highlighting the issue of water scarcity in my constituency in the context of the Oxford-Cambridge growth corridor. If we do not get this right, all those ambitious development plans will be dead in the water—or rather, dead in the lack of water. Our precious chalk streams, which the Liberal Democrats have been campaigning constantly to protect and are prioritised in the new environmental improvement plan, are already being degraded due to over-abstraction from the aquifers that sustain them. Far too many of them in my constituency now depend on artificial augmentation, which is when water is pumped from the boreholes into the headstreams just so that there is enough flow to sustain the wildlife within them. The fact that there is any flow at all is false. Sustainable water management must be the core principle that underpins growth across our region—as was said, it should be the backbone of our growth.

How are we doing? The Cambridge Water and Anglian Water plans say that they can meet existing and future demand, but last year, the Environment Agency did not accept that. It withdrew its support for already approved development plans for 9,000 homes and the cancer hospital, pausing construction and lodging an objection because it said there is not enough water. Never mind existing water; these plans do not include the additional thousands of homes being proposed as part of the Oxford-Cambridge growth corridor. For example, the Fens reservoir, which we celebrate, will meet the already ambitious local plan for Greater Cambridge, but the thousands of homes planned by the Cambridge Growth Company are not included.

We need to end the doublethink; growth plans and water-resource plans must be aligned from the start. That requires projected demand—how many additional houses are we actually talking about?—as well as handling both sides of the equation.

First, we need to increase supply, potentially through more new reservoirs or infrastructure—the existing and planned reservoirs are not enough—and no more water should be abstracted from our chalk aquifers. Secondly,

we should reduce demand by cutting leakage. As we have heard, in England, leakage stands at almost 50 litres per person a day. That dwarfs the potential savings from household behaviour change or efficiency measures in new builds. Alongside tackling leakage, as my hon. Friend said, we need changes to the permitted development rights to enable farmers to invest in farm reservoirs on their land.

My central question to the Minister is this: who will be responsible for ensuring that plans for growth and plans for water resources are properly aligned in South Cambridgeshire and across the UK, and that action to increase supply and reduce demand is delivered? The current governance for water is fragmented, with multiple institutions producing plans that do not include new growth ambitions, and that is a failing of the regulator. People no longer trust water companies to act in the public interest. We Lib Dems welcome the intention to abolish Ofwat, but we continue to call for a truly independent water authority.

Therefore, will the Minister join my calls for the Cambridge water scarcity group to be reconvened urgently, together with Lord Vallance and the Oxford-Cambridge growth corridor team, to honestly address the mismatch between plans for growth and the measures needed to eliminate the water deficit, and for the water scarcity group—which brings together all the actors: the water companies, Ofwat, the Environment Agency, the planning services and the growth company—to continue to play a role, even if a development corporation comes forward?

3.21 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is always a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Stuart. I particularly thank the hon. Member for Horsham (John Milne) for setting the scene so incredibly well and giving us all a chance to participate through his choice of debate today. It is always a pleasure to see the Minister in her place; I always look forward to hearing the Minister's response. I know that she has no responsibility for Northern Ireland—she will be glad to hear that—although I will explain the differences between what is done here and in Northern Ireland. The Minister always gives us reassurance in her responses, and we appreciate that very much. I thank her for that.

I like to attend these debates to give a local perspective from back home, with our own water service, Northern Ireland Water. Through my constituency office, I am in frequent contact with Northern Ireland Water—almost daily and certainly twice a week. Many constituents have raised issues with me regarding pressure, no water, or access to water for new developments, so it is indeed important to be here to discuss just this. Northern Ireland Water—as the Minister and hopefully others will know—is controlled by a Government Department; it is not beholden to any water company. Therefore, the responsibility lies on the shoulders of that Department, through the Northern Ireland Assembly.

When I listen to all the stories that hon. Members have told me around here or contributed in debates, and the regular questions on this issue, it is clear to me that the Lib Dems are very strong on this subject and that they understand the issues and put forward solutions. But for us back home, there is no big chief executive getting a six or seven-figure bonus for not doing his or her job right.

Anna Dixon: As the hon. Gentleman may know, the chief exec of Yorkshire Water, while publicly not taking her bonus, took quite a large sum of money from the Kelda Holdings company. Given that lack of transparency at Yorkshire Water, does the hon. Gentleman agree that companies such as Kelda Holdings should not be involved in water, leveraging debt and handing out large secret bonuses to their chief execs?

Jim Shannon: I certainly do. I know the Minister is equally concerned about that, and I am hoping that the Minister's response will give reassurance to the hon. Lady, and indeed to all of us, in relation to that. I think there is something obscene and immoral about these executives getting large sums of money—whatever Department it comes out of and whatever way it is manipulated to get that through—and it is good to know that the Government will be taking some measures to address that.

Jess Brown-Fuller: Will the hon. Member join me in asking the Minister to share her thoughts on the Southern Water boss having an incredible pay rise to get round the fact that bonuses for chief executives have been banned? These private companies will always find workarounds unless we change the structure of the water companies themselves.

Jim Shannon: I think the two words “immoral” and “obscene” sum up the issues that the hon. Lady has referred to, and we look forward to the Minister's response.

In 2024, Northern Ireland Water published a new water resource plan, extending its long-term planning horizon from 25 years to 50 years, so it has in place a structure to look forward at what will happen in Northern Ireland. Our population has increased by, I think, more than 200,000 in the last 10 years. The increase has been quite significant. There have been large developments. My constituency of Strangford has experienced that. There is a development coming through in the east of the town. There will be 750 new houses, and that will add stress on the infrastructure, including the water system and all the roads. But we have to address population growth, housing demand, water usage and climate change. The plan recognises that future weather patterns are likely to include more frequent extreme events, and pledges to build resilience so that the water supply remains secure.

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): This is the first time I have intervened on the hon. Member—it is normally the other way round. He mentioned climate change, and I was alarmed to read that last year Hampshire and Isle of Wight Fire and Rescue Service attended 197 outdoor fires and wildfires, which was one of the highest numbers in the whole of the UK. We are seeing water scarcity and abstraction from rivers against the backdrop of having had the 20-odd hottest years on the planet—year after year after year. It has to be acknowledged that that is affecting water scarcity as well.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Member highlights another issue in relation to climate change and the dry spells that we are having, which lead, ultimately, to the fires that take place, whether deliberately or by accident.

Spelga dam supplies most of the water for the Greater Belfast area, and that takes in the area that I live in, Strangford, and North Down, and goes down as far as South Down. I also want to refer to Lough Neagh in a

few minutes. Water usage per person in Northern Ireland is rising—the hon. Member for Horsham referred to this issue in his introduction—and has exceeded 160 litres per day. The system is sensitive to dry spells. I am recalling the summer that we have just had and the Twelfth of July—this is a very important year for us Orangemen—when the weather was outstanding. So much more water was used for children's play pools, sprinklers and watering plants. The weather should not be taken for granted and neither should the amount of water that we are using. That is what this debate is all about—how we use water better. The situation was similar to one a few years back in Northern Ireland. I remember that there was actually a hosepipe ban, involving restricted hours, to limit the amount of water that was being used. We have had drought spells in Northern Ireland in the past, but we do not really have much shortage of rain, by and large.

Water quality is also a big issue back home. Environmental concerns have been released by the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs on the safety of some of the water that it manages. Large bodies of water such as Lough Neagh, the UK's largest freshwater lake—this has been in the headlines all over the United Kingdom, but especially in Northern Ireland—have repeatedly experienced toxic algae blooms. The issue is not isolated to just that location; it happens in other locations as well. Northern Ireland has also witnessed a risk to infrastructure and investment, which could have a direct impact on our drinking water supply. Funding constraints are always an issue, to the point that Northern Ireland Water has actually halted new wastewater connections for many new housing developments. It puts the onus on the developer to come up with the sewerage systems, come up with the water supply—come up with the infrastructure that it would normally put in—and the developer pays for that.

There are real issues regarding water scarcity back home. I always have great faith in the Minister in relation to her discussions with the relevant Minister in the Northern Ireland Assembly. I am always encouraged by the Ministers who come to these debates and whom I speak to, because when it comes to contacting the Ministers back home, by and large they have all done that. If this Minister has had that opportunity, what has been the outcome?

Water is not scarce in Northern Ireland, but there are many contributing factors that imply that the situation could get worse. On water condition and water access, more needs to be done to repair the damage and ensure that agencies such as Northern Ireland Water have the money that they need to improve our services. I look to the Minister to tell us what discussions and conversations she has had with the Ministers back home to ensure that we can address this issue centrally here at Westminster, but for the benefit of all the regions.

3.29 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): It is a joy to serve under your guidance this afternoon, Mr Stuart. I plan to be here for the next two debates, so we will have a lovely afternoon together as we have apparently just rejoined the EU on a tied vote. The tie means that we win on the away-goals rule, which is good to hear. All legislation should be settled like that in future.

I give massive thanks and congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (John Milne), who not only secured the debate but led it superbly. All contributions from parties present have been excellent, focused on their communities and on trying to solve the issue. It was great to hear the affinity between the DUP and the Liberal Democrats; after all, we are both very fond of the colour orange. It is great to get a perspective from one of the devolved nations.

The amount of water available at any time depends not only on natural supply—rainfall, rivers, aquifers—but on the capacity of the infrastructure maintained since privatisation by the water companies. Demands from households, industry and agriculture also play a significant part. In Cumbria, we have 20 million visitors a year. Those people are very welcome but that is a lot of drinking water, showers and flushed lavatories, and we need the infrastructure to provide that. On top of that, we provide fresh drinking water for millions of people in the north-west of England. Again, we are proud to do so but we are under pressure.

The Environment Agency has projected national and regional deficits in water supply. Deficits will only worsen over the next 25 years as matters are scheduled. By 2050, the shortfall could reach nearly 5 million litres per day—equivalent to more than a third of the water that we currently rely on for public consumption. Outrageous water shortages have been experienced by South East Water customers, who have been referenced by hon. Friends and championed by our hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mike Martin). Those water shortages could become the experience of people across the country, not just in the south-east region, if we do not radically reform our water industry urgently to ensure that we stop the leaking of billions of pounds of billpayers' money into the pockets of shareholders and senior executives, when that money should be reinvested in a water infrastructure fit for the British people.

Anna Dixon: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman—

Tim Farron: Not yet.

Anna Dixon: The hon. Gentleman—sorry. As he said, Yorkshire has also experienced water shortages. From July this year, we have had a hosepipe ban and reservoirs remain at critically low levels, given what we should expect this season. It was at about 31% of capacity in September. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that Yorkshire Water, like some of the others he mentioned, has failed to invest in the necessary infrastructure to deal with the impact of climate change, as well as rising demand?

Tim Farron: The hon. Member makes an excellent point. All this afternoon's interventions have been good and on the money. Talking about money, this is money leaking out of the industry and not being invested in it. Bonuses and dividends should reward success; clearly, Yorkshire Water and others have failed in their basic task, which is to provide clean water for their communities.

To focus on the scale of the problem, since privatisation the water companies have amassed £70 billion of debt. Adjusted for inflation, they have paid out £83 billion in dividends. That means that on average 30p out of every pound that people pay on their water bills is to service the debt of the water companies, which was racked up to pay dividends. That is a moral outrage.

The main drivers of this impending crisis are clear: climate change; population growth; increased housing demand; business expansion; the demands, which have been mentioned, for huge additional energy and water usage given the growth in AI; pressures on the natural environment; and the growing need to prepare for drought. Those drivers are compounded by historical underinvestment in infrastructure and insufficient demand management.

Successive Governments have comprehensively failed to take climate adaptation measures seriously, guaranteeing misery for communities affected by flooding, wildfires and heat stress. If we are to build new infrastructure, including new homes and data centres—and we must—we must also ensure that water infrastructure keeps pace. That means sustainable drainage, new supply capacity and integration of water resilience into planning from the start. For instance, we should ensure that data centres are built predominantly at coastal locations and that desalination plants are an integral part of their design and key to their gaining of planning consent. Otherwise, we simply will not have the capacity to both provide clean water for our people and be the AI superpower that we desire to be.

The Liberal Democrats have long backed an infrastructure-first approach to development. We cannot allow water infrastructure to remain an afterthought. It is not right that water companies that have failed to invest in adequate sewerage, drainage and water supply infrastructure are able to get away with telling the local planning authority that there is no need for further investment and, at the same time, gain the financial benefit of the extra water bills from new households, while not laying out the extra investment needed to provide for them.

Jess Brown-Fuller: My hon. Friend raises an important point about the infrastructure necessary at waste water treatment works. In Bosham in my constituency, a new development is coming online, which has hundreds of homes. Currently, Southern Water says that it does not have any more capacity at the waste water treatment works. Yet because it has the statutory duty to connect, people will potentially be moving into the homes without any of the water infrastructure.

Meanwhile Chichester harbour, which is a protected landscape, is having more and more sewage dumped into it because the water infrastructure has not kept pace. Does my hon. Friend agree that water companies should play an important role in the planning decisions before the houses are brought online, so that those houses are built where the infrastructure is?

Graham Stuart (in the Chair): Order. Interventions should be short.

Tim Farron: I agree with my hon. Friend. We made those points during the passage of the Water (Special Measures) Bill, now the 2025 Act, and we will of course try them again in the near future. Water scarcity and limited water storage capacity put acute pressure on farming and food production. There must be more support for farmers to manage water well and for the development of local resource options to secure and store water.

[Tim Farron]

Flooding and drought both threaten our agriculture sector and therefore threaten Britain's food security. In the last few days we have been commemorating with great sadness and dark memories the 10th anniversary of Storm Desmond in Cumbria and elsewhere in the country. We see water levels rising today and recognise that it is so important that we invest in protecting our communities—in particular those who provide the food for our tables: our farmers.

Water companies must be held to account. That means requiring them to reduce leakages, deliver on efficiency targets, expand uptake of water meters and embrace water-saving technologies. In my constituency, we do indeed have an awful lot of lakes, and they need topping up, so it rains rather a lot. We are the most beautiful part of England, I would argue, but we are also the wettest. Yet despite the fact that we get three and a half times more rainfall per year than even Manchester, we end up facing droughts and potential water rationing over the summer months. That can only be the consequence of appalling levels of investment in our water network as we see good water leaking out of the system. The wettest place in England last summer had a hosepipe ban—that is barmy and outrageous.

At the same time, we recognise that augmenting supply may become unavoidable. Options must include new reservoirs, especially in regions that suffer from lower rainfall, as well as greater water recycling, desalination where ecologically feasible and transfers of water between regions. It is vital that we support farmers and land managers as they struggle with extreme weather. The Liberal Democrats stand alone as the only party in England calling for food security and resilience of food supply to be counted as public goods and therefore supported through the environmental land management schemes, which we would boost with an additional £1 billion per year. The lack of water through periods of drought is a fundamental threat to our food security, so we would ensure that farmers are actively supported to ensure that they remain able to put food on our tables no matter the weather.

Before I close, we ask the Minister: will there be a comprehensive cross-departmental UK adaptation strategy that embeds climate resilience, including water resilience, across all Government policies and agencies? Will that be set out in the water White Paper that we are expecting very soon following the Independent Water Commission report just before summer? Will the White Paper introduce resilience standards for water and support homeowners in installing adaptation measures against flooding and overheating?

Will the White Paper restore agricultural permitted development rights, as set out by my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Pippa Heylings), to allow farmers to build on-farm reservoirs with the support of the local community? Will the White Paper bring in a new clean water authority to replace the failed Ofwat and merge it into an authority with other regulators too?

Sarah Gibson: On the subject of flooding, which is slightly off the point, I have just received information from the Environment Agency to say that Chippenham is flooding again this year. The Minister will remember

that she and I spent some time mopping out in wellies, and we are at that point of flooding again. Does my hon. Friend agree that funding for flood resilience is vital? The fact is that areas not within mayoral authorities seem to be unable to secure any funding for anything.

Graham Stuart (in the Chair): Order. Shortly after the hon. Member responds to that intervention, he should bring his remarks to a close.

Tim Farron: I have only a little left, but thank you, Mr Stuart. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, who is a strong advocate for her communities and is echoing their anger at being overlooked for funding. It is worth recognising that, although it may be no fault of the Minister's, DEFRA is one of the few Departments that got an actual cut in the Budget. Does that affect farming or flood investment? It is deeply concerning for all of us who live in habitually wet communities.

I want to press the Minister on whether the White Paper that is coming will set out a single, powerful regulator that the water companies actually fear, rather than what we have at present: a whole range of weak regulators that the water companies play off against one another. Meanwhile, the companies continue to take people's money and not provide adequate water infrastructure. Water scarcity is a real and growing challenge. The causes are in part natural, but in part they are political. We have a water industry that is structured to make a small number of people incredibly wealthy, not to meet the needs of our country. Will the White Paper address the outrageous and outdated ownership model to ensure that we tackle the problem?

We will not deal with the issue by tinkering around the edges. It will only change when we have the kind of regulation that the industry cannot shimmy its way around, and when we have an ownership model that puts water supply and water users ahead of an amoral dash for profit. If we do not act now with joined-up planning, proper investment, accountability, strong regulation and a better ownership model, then the shortfall of water forecast by 2050 will hit communities across our country, and Governments both past and present will rightly get the blame.

3.41 pm

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stuart. I thank the hon. Member for Horsham (John Milne) for securing a really important debate on water security and resilience—a topic that has not had as much focus as it deserves for a long time. Water is a vital resource, but one that has over the last half century, unfortunately, received nowhere near enough attention. We are now reaping the consequences of that inaction. In simple terms, our population is 10 million people greater than it was 30 years ago and we have not constructed any new reservoirs in that period; that is why we have ended up with the challenges that we have heard about.

The Environment Agency estimates that, driven by population growth and climate change, there will be a shortfall of nearly 5 billion litres of water a day in this country by 2055—the equivalent of a third of current public consumption. Water scarcity is of course important when we consider drinking water, but there are also dangerous knock-on effects for the environment and for

food production, as has rightly been said. Over-abstraction of stretched water sources is having a huge impact on vital habitats such as chalk streams; this year alone, record-breaking droughts have cost arable farmers approximately £800 million in lost production. This was the second-worst harvest on record, and our horticultural industry has been severely impacted.

The hon. Member for Horsham rightly talked about the challenges facing chalk streams and infrastructure, and about the lack of strategy planning for water security and resilience. He talked about the implications for his farming community, where there are water-leakage issues with water companies. Indeed, Yorkshire Water represents my constituency, and we have had hosepipe bans consistently for months now. Given that in September we were at 31% capacity, it is not good enough for water companies across the country, including Yorkshire Water, not to put the level of investment into dealing with not only leakages but water storage capacity-related issues. That is not acceptable for many of our constituents.

Anna Dixon: As neighbouring MPs, the hon. Gentleman and I have a shared interest in Yorkshire Water's performance. As he set out, this is not a recent problem; it has been going on for decades. Given his previous role in the last Government, would he take some responsibility for the consequences of the lack of funding for the infrastructure of our water system?

Robbie Moore: As the hon. Member will know, it is down to the regulator to set how much a water company is able to spend on infrastructure projects. Ofwat has not provided water companies with the flexibility they need to provide the correct level of investment. There is significant frustration about that, and that is coupled with frustrations about our planning system that have prevented large water storage schemes from progressing through the system. It is really disappointing that this Labour Government's Planning and Infrastructure Bill, which is progressing through the House, does not address any of the issues associated with the challenges of increasing water storage and water resilience in this country. That is a real missed opportunity by this Labour Government.

We all know that the last Government took some steps to address the risks of water scarcity. We set a clear direction through the Environment Act 2021 to reduce water consumption by 20% per person by 2038. Although the target will ease demand, we should still be planning to address the larger challenges around increasing water storage. I was proud to help develop the last Government's plan for water, which set clear objectives to improve efficiency, reduce leaks and plan for increased supply. It is encouraging to see that the Government have announced a further 670 million litres of daily water supply through the proposed new reservoirs, but I challenge the Government on the speed of delivering them, including the Fens reservoir, as mentioned by the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Pippa Heylings). It is frustrating that the Planning and Infrastructure Bill—a key piece of legislation—has not addressed those challenges on the speed of delivery.

Mims Davies (East Grinstead and Uckfield) (Con): Weir Wood and Ardingly reservoirs in my constituency are covered by South East Water, which, out of the blue,

wants to build an overland emergency pipe to improve water resilience, but there has been no consultation or engagement with businesses and residents even though the pipe will affect 58 residences and homeowners, as well as the Bluebell railway line. Does my hon. Friend agree that part of the issue is a lack of consultation?

Robbie Moore: Yes—absolutely. My hon. Friend has spoken to me on many occasions about her challenges with South East Water, which is not investing sufficiently in increasing water storage capacity. I know there is a meeting tonight to address some of those challenges, but South East Water seems to be consistently chasing its tail and not interacting enough with my hon. Friend, in whose constituency these reservoirs are, or with wider water users. More openness and transparency should be expected from South East Water.

Although new reservoirs are definitely needed—I think all Members in this Chamber would concur on that—we must have a broader conversation about water in this country, and most importantly, how we value water. Water can have a positive or negative value depending on whether one's constituents are being flooded or whether one's area needs to store more water. At the moment, we are wholly reliant on water companies to deliver major infrastructure and reservoir projects. When a price review index is set by a regulator in a five-year rolling strategy, it is not providing the flexibility that the Government require to increase water storage.

I encourage the Government to go further to provide more certainty on increased water storage beyond that which has already been announced. Would it not be better to look at how we can deliver greater water storage capacity in a dispersed way? We should empower smaller-scale projects on private land, which could involve incentivising farmers or landowners, potentially financially, to not only go above and beyond the water storage capacity they need for their own usage, but to store water on their land and then release it to a water grid. I encourage the Government to look at different ways of attracting private sector investment to increase water storage capacity, rather than it being the water company's responsibility to do that. We must think outside the box on this water resilience issue.

Likewise, farmers and landowners do a great service when they allow their land to be flooded during rainy periods. I remember very well, having previously been the water Minister, that I met many farmers who had been flooded during Storm Henk and Storm Babet. Environment Agency assets had burst, and the Environment Agency was saying to me—the current Minister may be getting the same response—that we must not look at dredging or removing vegetation from our man-made assets to get water to flow better through the system. If she is getting that advice, as I did, I would encourage her to push back and say that, as well as trying to build better flood alleviation schemes, we should look at those strategies for water to be stored to potentially deal with some of our water scarcity issues we have.

Vast amounts of water are there for us all to see when the land is flooded, and there is an opportunity to use that land to deal with water scarcity issues. At the moment, far too much water is going out to sea during rainy periods and then, come summer, as we have all experienced with another drought, we cannot deal with the water resilience issues.

[Robbie Moore]

Finally, I strongly encourage the Minister to look at how we can expand and develop the relationship and the flexibility between the internal drainage boards, the Environment Agency, and landowners and farmers who want to increase water storage and capacity on their farm but also want to move water through the system. The catchment-based approach of IDBs and their grassroots nature mean they are doing some excellent work across the country. While they are facing challenges, the way that they are moving water across our farmland and farm businesses is a huge success story.

I hope the Minister will be able to tell us what level of investment the Government are making beyond the current promises about existing reservoirs that have been announced. How will the Minister deal with the planning challenges to ensure that we get more smaller-scale reservoirs built at speed? What future legislation is she planning to present to the House beyond the missed opportunity of the Planning and Infrastructure Bill, which does not deal with water resilience or security measures? What additional pressures are the Government putting on water companies like Yorkshire Water to deal with water leakage, despite us seeing hose pipe bans and dealing with challenges around water security? We have heard South East Water, Yorkshire Water, Southern Water and Thames Water all mentioned in this debate, but we do not have certainty from the Government that they are putting enough pressure on those providers.

3.52 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Mr Stuart. I thank the hon. Member for Horsham (John Milne) for bringing forward this debate, which has raised some important issues that I do not think have had the hearing they need in Parliament.

Water scarcity is a huge and pressing issue, and it is particularly brought to mind by the climate change that we can see happening in front of us. As has been mentioned, we have just had one of the driest spring and summers, and I have been involved throughout the year in the national drought group that brings together the Environment Agency and all stakeholders to look at the issue of drought across the country. Next year will be a special anniversary of the situation 50 years ago, in 1976, and I am mindful not to be in a similar situation as a Minister. What we do around water and how we deal with problems of scarcity are therefore very much at the forefront of my mind.

I agree with many of the points that have been made, including about the issue of leakage. In effect, customers are paying for a resource that is literally being spilled out in the wrong place. We have strong targets on leakage, because looking at reducing leakages is one of the big levers to pull in how we deal with and meet the demand for water in future. A 20% reduction by 2027, 30% by 2032 and 50% by 2050 is where we need to get to in reducing leakage, using the baseline of 2017-2018.

The hon. Member for Chippenham (Sarah Gibson) mentioned that her constituency is flooded again. I well remember visiting it with her and seeing the devastation of people mopping water out. They had done a brilliant

job by the time we arrived, and I remember being very impressed at how well they had cleared it out, but it is absolutely awful. That shows why we need all the money that we are putting into flood alleviation, and why it is crucial.

I hope that this time the flood alerts and warnings system was more effective. Following last year, we looked at how we could improve that system, which has been upgraded, so I am keen for feedback. I wrote a "Dear colleague" letter—which I know you will have read in great detail, Mr Stuart—about how we can support constituents and businesses with information and contact numbers related to flooding, and I am also keen for feedback on that.

This debate is about our other water problem, however: not flooding, but scarcity. The situation for the people of Tunbridge Wells has been horrific. I have been in regular contact with the chief executive officer of South East Water and the local Member of Parliament. I have made it clear that we think the disruption in Tunbridge Wells is completely unacceptable.

On what happens next in the process, hon. Members will understand that people there are under a boil notice, and South East Water is looking at when that boil notice will be lifted. Importantly, the Drinking Water Inspectorate will do a full investigation that will include interviewing all the relevant people and drawing its conclusions. It is looking into why the problem happened, why it has taken so long to restore supply, and at the company's important communication with customers.

Graham Stuart (in the Chair): Order. Please speak through me, Minister.

Emma Hardy: Apologies, Mr Stuart; I should gaze upon you at all times.

Protecting customers, of course, must be one of the top priorities, so I have been chairing one of the multi-agency responses. Normally agencies talk to agencies and Government, but I felt the need to intervene personally in this matter—which I have done three times in the last week—to look at every step that has been taken to resolve the issue, and particularly the concern around communication and making sure that vulnerable people are getting the water that they need.

Alison Bennett: Does the Minister support Liberal Democrat calls, including those of my hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mike Martin), for the chief executive of South East Water to resign over this issue?

Emma Hardy: At the moment, the chief executive needs to focus on getting the boil water notice removed and getting drinking water back into everybody's house. Of course, the Drinking Water Inspectorate will be doing a full investigation into exactly what has caused the problem and why it has taken so long to resolve. South East Water is responsible for compensating customers. The changes that we introduced to the guaranteed standards scheme mean that for the first time compensation can be given to people who are under boil notices. Under the previous Government someone under a boil notice did not receive any compensation; we have introduced compensation. Customers will be compensated not only for not having water but for the duration of their boil water notice.

On water scarcity, I agree with many of the points that have been raised. My hon. Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire (Chris Hinchliff) talked about the over-abstraction of chalk streams and he is absolutely right that that is crucial. Over-abstraction and pollution are the main causes of problems for our chalk streams. One of the reasons that we have such a demand for future water is because we are committed to reducing abstraction, particularly from our chalk streams. He is right to say that we cannot think just about having the reservoirs; we need more actions, including strong and stringent targets to reduce leakage, and we need to look at all our water needs going forward. He was right to highlight—although there seemed to be some amnesia in the Chamber—the years of under-investment in water and in infrastructure more widely. We are getting on with doing many things that should have been done in the last 14 years.

Chris Hinchliff: Briefly, may I encourage the Minister to come to my constituency and see the incredible work being done by the RevIvel campaign, which is trying to restore the Ivel chalk stream? It has a brilliant proposal for a chalk stream-first approach that would restore not just that chalk stream but the whole chalk aquifer and help the Cat Ditch flow again. It would be great to see her there.

Emma Hardy: I thank my hon. Friend for that lovely invite. Visiting a chalk stream sounds beautiful—perhaps in springtime, when it is looking particularly gorgeous, or in summer.

I agree with so many of the points made—even those made by the shadow Minister—about farming, what we can do to support farmers and how we can make it easier for them to store water on their land. At this moment, I cannot commit to saying exactly where my thinking is on this, but I can say I am looking at it extremely closely: how can we make it easier for farms to become more resilient and for farmers to store water when it rains, so that it is there when they need it? I have also been looking closely at the interestingly titled WAGs—I thought that meant something else entirely, but as we all know stands it for water abstraction groups. I have been looking at how they have been doing some of that work.

Robbie Moore: Landscape recovery schemes are a great way of dealing not only with water quality schemes, but with water resilience strategies. Will the Minister commit to working with her colleagues to look at removing the one-year break clause that now exists within landscape recovery schemes, because it makes it very difficult for anyone willing to get involved to sign up?

Emma Hardy: I commit to taking that to the farming Minister to have a thorough look at it. I am acutely aware of how difficult farmers have had it this year. The flooding in the winter and the drought in the summer have been devastating for them, so I am really keen to see what we can do.

There was a call for a campaign on the preciousness of water, but one already exists: the water efficiency fund campaign, the chair of which will be announced in the new year. It is a fund by Ofwat looking into the communications we need around water and how precious it is.

The Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron), keeps wanting me to give him spoilers, but I will continue to refuse to give spoilers on exactly what will and will not be in the White Paper. As has been announced—he knows this already—we are going to look at having one powerful regulator and a joined-up, comprehensive approach to regulation across the whole of the industry.

I completely agree with the point that was made about fragmentation; there are so many different plans involved in how much water we need. We need to look at how we can streamline this, make it more straightforward and hold people to account for who is delivering what and when. There is much more to come in the White Paper, as well as the legislation following it.

Anna Dixon: I commend the Minister for all she has done so far to address the problems in the water sector, and look forward to the forthcoming water White Paper. I realise she cannot give away too much, but I urge her to look again at some of the recommendations of the People's Commission on the Water Sector, particularly the idea of a SAGE for water—having an expert advisory panel—and stronger democratic oversight, particularly of catchments. I urge her to look at those ideas again before she finalises her paper.

Emma Hardy: I thank my hon. Friend for the work she has done on the People's Commission. I have read it, and thought there were some interesting suggestions in it. There is so much consensus on this issue; everyone fundamentally wants the same thing—enough water, including for farmers, growth and the general public. Furthermore, everyone wants to do that in a way that does not damage the environment or too expensive for customers. There is so much consensus on which we can all build when we tackle this issue.

On the issue of performance-related pay, in a report on 5 November, Ofwat highlighted the broader issue of a lack of transparency when it comes to executive remuneration across the water sector. It noted in particular the examples of Yorkshire Water and Thames Water, which made retention payments from the parent company. Due to that, Ofcom will consult on requiring companies to publicly report in full the details of all executive remunerations, including explanations of what the remuneration relates to. This is intended to apply to company accounts in 2025-26. In a nutshell, it will get a better grip on the situation.

Lots of Members mentioned canals. I spoke with the Canal and River Trust and I hear the difficulties it has had, mainly because of the drought. When water becomes more scarce, of course that creates a problem for canals. I acknowledge that it has been a particularly difficult year. Many Members talked about chalk streams. One of the best things we can do to support chalk streams is to reduce over-abstraction.

There were lots of comments about how we will deal with future water use and make sure that we have all the water we need. There is some good news that I think everyone here might become very excited about, as I have. It is the building regulations consultation, which is happening at the moment and lasts until 16 December. If any hon. Member has not responded to that consultation, I encourage them to do so. It is considering how we can make homes more water-efficient, including the use of

[Emma Hardy]

grey water, water reuse and what potential future standards could be. The outline proposal is for the minimum standard to be reduced from 125 to 105 litres per day and there are even options for a tighter standard, which range from 110 to 100 litres a day.

The consultation is also looking at evidence on water reuse systems in new developments, so there is quite a lot in it. That is really exciting, because these ideas will enable customers to save money on their water bills and on their energy bills, because they will not have to use as much energy to heat their water. They also support the environment and our house building targets. As I say, the consultation is quite exciting, and it closes on 16 December.

We also intend to introduce mandatory water efficiency labelling to help customers to make informed choices about different appliances when they buy products for their home. We believe that intervention alone will save 23 billion litres of water over 10 years. Building new houses to the highest potential for water efficiency leaves room for further growth in the future. There are quite a lot of exciting things happening in this sector. *[Interruption.]* I am now being coughed at, which I think means that I should shush.

I again thank the hon. Member for Horsham for securing this debate. I am sure it will not be the last time that we talk about the importance of water scarcity. We all have a role to carry the message that water is a precious resource, which is necessary not just for us but for farmers and the environment. I look forward to continuing the debate on this subject in future conversations about water after Christmas. Merry Christmas.

4.6 pm

John Milne: I thank the Minister for her response. I guess it is quite a challenge being a water Minister at a time when we seem to have endless droughts, but there we go—I will not blame her personally. This issue is a great big challenge for Government, because we are discussing changes that need to be made 20 or 30 years in advance. Let's face it—Governments of all kinds have not been the best at that kind of long-term thinking. I very much appreciate her words today.

I also thank hon. Members for all their contributions today. If there is one thing that this debate has shown us, it is how diverse water stress is; it is creating different problems locally, everywhere. However, we need there to be national attention on it.

My simple message at the end of this debate would be that we have neglected this issue for far too long. We have taken water for granted and we simply cannot afford to keep doing so. I hope this debate will contribute to there being a greater focus on this very important issue.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered water scarcity.

Creative Education

4.9 pm

Graham Stuart (in the Chair): I remind hon. Members that they may only make a speech with prior permission from the Member in charge of the debate and the Minister. There will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up, as is the convention for 30-minute debates.

Dr Simon Opher (Stroud) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered creative education in schools.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stuart. I welcome the Government's curriculum and assessment review, which recognises the need for a broad and balanced curriculum and recommends the removal of the English baccalaureate, allowing greater space for arts subjects. At present, far too many children do not have access to these opportunities. Research from the Arts and Minds Campaign reveals that participation in arts subjects at GCSE has fallen by 42% since 2010, even though 90% of young people want to study a creative subject. The decline is sharpest in the most disadvantaged communities. School leaders in socially deprived areas are almost 50% more likely to report being unable to find specialist arts teachers, and one in four schools does not have the funding to run creative GCSEs at all.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way and sorry to intervene so early in the debate. I want to make a point about outdoor education, which is also about enrichment and helping young people to be resilient and to have better outcomes. Is he aware that among state schools in wealthier postcodes, 52% of young people get an outdoor education residential opportunity while at school, while in the poorer areas, only 18% have this opportunity? Does he think that the Government need to be aware of this and fund access to outdoor education experiences for children, wherever they are from?

Dr Opher: I totally agree. In fact, there is evidence that creativity outside is even more effective for people than inside. This is clearly about access to natural spaces.

I am chair of the all-party parliamentary group on creative health. There is really strong evidence that creativity reduces mental health problems in children.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for bringing forward this debate; he is right to do so. Creative education is so important. Creative education will give thousands of children the opportunity to thrive, and will be the tool that gets them the careers for the future. Those children who have special educational needs must have additional opportunities so they are not left behind, and must have the opportunity also to succeed. Does he agree that helping those people who are less well-off educationally and at a disadvantage is important, and that the opportunity is here, in the creative industries, to do the best for them?

Dr Opher: It is interesting that creativity is particularly important for children with special educational needs. Indeed, there is some evidence that including creativity can actually make them attend school on a more regular basis.

I have visited loads of schools in Stroud over the last 18 months, and one common theme has been the rise in mental health problems in young people, who are under countless assessments and the pressure of living in a 24/7 social media world. I do feel that this is pushing a lot of children to the brink, and that creativity may be a way of repairing that. One in five young children has a probable mental health condition, and this figure is rising every year. As a GP, I have been using art to treat mental health in children and adults for about 26 years, quite often with really spectacular results. The lack of art subjects has contributed to this pandemic of mental health problems. The Southbank Centre just across the river is doing a project as we speak around introducing creativity to children who are on the child and adolescent mental health services waiting lists. It will be quite exciting to see whether that can make them better as well.

Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does he agree that the role of community-based arts organisations is central to supporting our schools? I hope he will also support my campaign to turn Reading Gaol into an arts and heritage hub, which, one day, in showing the possibilities of an arts-based education, may be able to support local schools across the Reading area.

Dr Opher: I know that my hon. Friend is incredibly supportive of the developments in Reading. I commend him on that.

Because I am a scientist, I thought I could provide some reasoning on why the creative arts can help. They help on three different fronts. Biologically, they can influence physiological symptoms of anxiety—they reduce anxiety. Psychologically, they can improve self-expression, confidence and, probably most important, self-esteem. That is because often when we do a creative thing, we feel that it came out a little bit better than we anticipated. It is the same for children. There is good, strong evidence that the creative arts build self-esteem in children, and in social terms, they build connections and a sense of belonging.

I want the Minister to join me in a campaign to make teaching children how to play musical instruments available in every primary school. I shall talk a little bit more about music. In Stroud, schools such as Bussage primary school are leading the way by making sure that every key stage 2 child has exposure to musical education. Last week, we had a roundtable in the House of Lords with a group called Rocksteady, which takes rock music into local schools. I was really impressed by what I heard. Not only were the effects of the group's work really impressive, but there was a measurable reduction in pupil absence rates. It had an effect on the whole school, and made everyone feel better.

In Gloucester, we have the Music Works, where quite deprived children can learn how to DJ, to play the drums or guitar, or to sing. That has been transformative for many children. There are other examples, such as the fantastic Big Noise in Scotland. Some big organisations, including the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic, the English National Opera and the Royal Opera House have big programmes that reach into schools. There is some evidence that they can teach the teachers, which is one of the problems I will explore.

Jessica Toale (Bournemouth West) (Lab): SoundStorm is a multi-award winning lead partner in the music hub in my constituency. It has helped more than half a million young people since being founded in 2002, but like any publicly funded body, it is worried about future funding, so I welcome the Education Secretary's commitment to working through music hubs. Does my hon. Friend agree that we must continue to support music hubs in their work to teach teachers and get music into schools, so that kids at all ages can have a great music education?

Dr Opher: My hon. Friend has made exactly the point I was coming to about the role of music hubs. There are 43 music hubs in the UK, delivering something like half a million lessons and interventions up and down the country. Their reach is incredible, taking in about 90% of schools, although there is an issue in that they sometimes charge for their lessons, which I shall come back to.

I welcome the upcoming launch of a new national centre for arts and music education, to support the delivery of high-quality arts education in schools and ensure that high-quality arts education is open to all. I would welcome further information from the Minister on the plans for that establishment.

Creativity in education does not just mean musical or visual arts. Recently, I met Tash Alexander, the inspirational director of Head Held High, which ran a comedy and performance workshop for teenage students in London schools; I also met one of the graduates, Ro. What really struck me about the programme is the way it uses creative expression to build confidence, especially among children who do not always thrive in more traditional learning environments. One aspect of creativity and the arts is that they often really suit people who do not get on very well at school. They are made to feel a failure, whereas actually they can make fantastic artworks or music. We must give them that opportunity. That is the real power of a creative education—it reaches young people differently and gives them a space to discover who they are. Despite Tash's excellent work over the last 12 years, funding is a challenge all the time. I urge the Department for Education to meet her and discuss how we can continue to fund that programme.

One of the main barriers to creativity in education is that teachers are not qualified or do not have experience of teaching the creative arts. The less creativity there is at a school, the less likely the teachers are capable of teaching it. One third of school leaders cannot find specialist teachers, for example, so big national organisations may have a role to play in taking them under their wing, showing them how to teach and giving them the confidence to teach. That is one big problem.

Another problem is cost. Half of all parents cannot afford extracurricular arts activities. As a result, children's creative futures are increasingly dictated by family income, not by talent or passion. It is already mandatory that looked-after children are provided with free musical instruments. Should that be extended to those on free school meals? Could we use the pupil premium for music lessons? Libraries can lend instruments easily and musical hubs provide the organisational ability to spread teaching through a school.

Groups such as the Ed Sheeran Foundation and the Nicola Benedetti Foundation are supporting music education, and we could perhaps use them more,

[Dr Opher]

particularly with less advantaged children. Creativity should never be a postcode lottery. It should not be a luxury for families who can afford instruments, lessons, dance shoes or even theatre trips. If we are serious about tackling inequality, we must rebuild creative opportunities into the heart of every child's school experience.

Anna Gelderd (South East Cornwall) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this important debate. Every child deserves a broad curriculum that values creative subjects alongside the core skills, but financial education from an early age is also vital. In communities in rural coastal settings such as mine, we face specific barriers to allowing children to access these important subjects. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to examine the barriers and include these subjects as part of our offer to children across the whole of the UK?

Dr Opher: That is very true, and it comes back to the capabilities and confidence of the teachers, particularly in smaller schools. My children all went to smaller schools and they were lucky to have an inspirational music leader, but not every school has one. We can go further; we could have a world-class curriculum, but it cannot be world-class if we sideline the arts. All schools need the resources, staffing and flexibility to deliver meaningful creative education. I believe that the curriculum review provides that flexibility.

To finish off, I have requests of the Minister. I would like the Government to consider funding free music lessons for all less well-off children, and teacher training in the arts for all teachers. I would like them to expand the arts in the curriculum and offer all children in primary schools musical instrument teaching by the end of this Parliament. For the sake of our young people's wellbeing and our future creative industries, we must restore creativity to its rightful place in our schools.

4.23 pm

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Stuart. I thank the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Opher) for allowing me to say a few words in this important debate. I will keep my comments brief.

Art is intrinsic to humankind, whether it was our forefathers painting in caves or, as stated in the United Nations article 31, a child's right to participate freely in cultural life and the arts. We are all born hardwired with the capacity to enjoy, love and learn via art and creativity. I firmly believe that talent is everywhere, but unfortunately opportunity is not.

In my Leicester South constituency, De Montfort University is undertaking a 25-year study called Talent 25, tracking the impact of arts, culture and creative activity on young children's development, including their educational outcomes. The programme offers babies aged three to 12 months free workshops in music, storytelling, messy play and creative activities. Their five-year interim findings are positive, demonstrating how participation in the arts has helped those children to build strong relationships and improve their mental resilience. It also helped to develop coping mechanisms during covid, which is when the study started.

The Education Endowment Foundation shows that participation in the arts at school has a positive impact on other academic outcomes. Music helps to improve children's mathematical skills, drama helps children with their English literacy, and participation in structured arts activities increases cognitive ability.

We live in polarising times. If children can experience other people's art and culture from a young age, it will foster harmony and resilience against the many who wish to divide us along ethnic lines. For example, spreading greater understanding of black stories through arts and culture could have avoided a lot of ignorance surrounding the Windrush scandal abomination; Opal22 Arts in my constituency is doing that excellently. An understanding of Islamic art—its architecture, calligraphy and poetry—would help different cultures in our great nation to understand that we have much more in common than dividing us.

Sadly, as the Member for Stroud pointed out, research has shown that children living in poverty are even less likely to have access to arts education, meaning that the kids in greatest need of the enrichment and hope given by the arts are the least likely to receive it. That increases the divide between the richest and the poorest in our society. In 2016, the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) brought forward a Labour manifesto that would have invested £160 million in arts education via an arts pupil premium. I urge the Government to do the same, because when we invest in our future generations, we not only ensure that they are fully furnished with the skills needed to live harmoniously in society, but build their confidence and wellbeing.

4.26 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Olivia Bailey): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Stuart.

I am hugely grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Opher) for opening this valuable debate on creative education and for his thoughtful suggestions and campaign work. I also thank other colleagues for their contributions, which have included interesting comments about outdoor education and the importance of community-based arts organisations. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Reading Central (Matt Rodda) for his campaign work on Reading Gaol, and my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud for his campaign on musical instruments. The Government have invested £25 million in the last year on funding for musical instruments, and I will say more on that later. Finally, the hon. Member for Leicester South (Shockat Adam) reminded us of the benefits of the arts to the wider curriculum.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud is a great advocate for creative education, especially music. I understand that he is a keen flautist. I attempted to play the violin and viola at school, but I suspect that the joys of playing music were felt only by me, and not by anyone forced to endure my performances. None the less, music education gave me, like so many children and young people, a chance to build confidence, make friends and explore my creativity—although I would rather forget my rockstar phase, even if I maintain that Standard Deviation was a great name for a band.

The Government are clear: high-quality arts education must not be the preserve of the privileged few. Arts subjects are important pillars of the rounded and enriching education that every child deserves. As my hon. Friend highlighted, creative education also benefits children's wellbeing.

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): Will the Minister give way?

Olivia Bailey: Very briefly. I cannot take too many interventions because I am short on time.

Jess Brown-Fuller: Does the Minister agree that a creative arts education opens up multiple opportunities and careers for young people that do not necessarily involve being on a stage or creating music? The creative industries need intelligent engineers to make the lights and sound work, so a creative education can open many doors to exciting careers in the creative industries.

Olivia Bailey: I agree entirely with the hon. Lady. The creative industries unlock so many skills for the wider economy.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud spoke powerfully about the important subject of children's mental health. We are providing access to specialist mental health professionals in every school, so that every child and young person can access early support. Schools can also play a vital role by promoting good mental wellbeing and providing effective early support to pupils who may be struggling, and we are clear that creative activities can be part of their approach. For example, our targeted support toolkit gives education staff guidance on the use of creative and arts therapies to support pupils' emotional wellbeing.

Access to the arts starts with the curriculum, as was rightly said. All young people should have the same opportunities that my hon. Friend and I did to develop their creativity and to find their voice. That is why one of our first actions in government was to launch an independent curriculum and assessment review. We will improve the arts curriculum through clear and rigorous programmes of study for music, art and design, and strengthened curriculum content for dance in physical education and drama in English. We are legislating so that academies will be required to teach the reformed national curriculum, including arts subjects, ensuring that creative education is not subject to a postcode lottery.

However, curriculum reform alone will not be enough to ensure that all children have access to a high-quality arts education; we also need to support our schools and our teachers. That is why in March we announced our intention to launch a new national centre for arts and music education. I am pleased to give my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud the additional detail that he requested: this new centre will help us to support schools in the teaching of music, art and design, drama and dance,

and our intention is to establish it by September 2026, appointing a delivery partner for the centre through an open competitive procurement that we will issue in the new year.

The centre will also be the national delivery partner for the 43 music hub partnerships across England, which offer whole-class ensemble teaching, music instrument tuition and instrument loans, as well as continuing professional development for teachers. This Government continue to support that crucial programme, with grant funding of £76 million secured for this academic year and longer-term funding to be confirmed in due course.

For some pupils, particularly those facing disadvantage and with additional needs, the barriers to accessing music education can be particularly significant. That is why we are investing in a music opportunities pilot, backed by £2 million of Government investment and £3.85 million of funding from Arts Council England and Youth Music, with targeted support for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds or with special educational needs and disabilities. The pilot offers pupils across primary and secondary schools the opportunity to learn to play an instrument of their choice or to sing to a high standard by providing free lessons.

We also recognise the importance of specialist training in supporting young people to pursue the most advanced levels of arts education, including through means-tested bursaries through the dance and music scheme. That is why this Government continue to provide generous support to help more than 2,000 students access specialist music and dance education, committing £36.5 million for this academic year. Future funding for the scheme will be announced in due course.

In concluding, I would first like to take a moment of the Chamber's time to pay tribute to the late Michael Harper, a vocal coach and champion of under-represented voices in the arts. Working with institutions such as the Royal Northern College of Music, the Guildhall School of Music and Drama and the English National Opera, Michael was a passionate advocate for music education in every region of the UK. It is people such as Michael and his husband Tony—friends to many of us in Reading and in the Labour party—who recognise the transformational impact that access to the arts can have on children and young people. We remember him fondly.

This Government are committed to ensuring that all children can access and engage with high-quality arts education. I thank, once again, my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud for bringing forward this debate, and all the teachers, volunteers, music trusts and arts education advocates who work tirelessly to give our children a love for the arts. Creative subjects such as art, music, drama and dance are a vital part of a rich, broad school experience and must not be the preserve of a privileged few. While my violin playing was patchy and Standard Deviation never got our big break, I want every child to have the same opportunity to discover their love for the arts.

Question put and agreed to.

Network Rail Timetable Changes: Rural Communities

4.34 pm

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the impact of Network Rail timetable changes on rural communities.

It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Stuart. This year marks the 200th anniversary of the first passenger railway services in our country. Railways have transformed transport and trade, connecting towns and cities and accelerating economic and social change in our country. Our railways are often the subject of fierce debate. Of course, the Labour Government have taken the decision to nationalise them. We can debate the rights and wrongs of that decision, but there is one thing that is undoubtedly now true: decisions made about our railways will now be the responsibility of the Labour Government and them alone. They will need to account for their decisions.

In five days' time a new Network Rail timetable comes into force. London North Eastern Railway claims that the timetable will "provide more trains" and "thousands more seats". I am afraid that for my constituents it does the exact opposite. It will have a terrible impact on our rural communities, such as those I represent.

Berwick-upon-Tweed station sits just outside the Scottish Borders, but it serves thousands of the people who live there, as well as those in North Northumberland who rely on train services for work and pleasure. The timetable change means that the number of LNER services from Berwick-upon-Tweed will be dramatically cut to just one every two hours. Services from the station connect the Scottish Borders and North Northumberland to our key cities: Edinburgh, Aberdeen, York, London and many other parts of our United Kingdom. Berwick-upon-Tweed is in the top 30% most used stations, used by thousands of passengers every single day.

Many areas will benefit from the change. Newcastle station, for example, has seen a dramatic increase in its number of trains. Peterborough will see its number of trains to London surge, as will York. So what are we witnessing? Rural communities and small towns are losing out for the benefit of large cities. Indeed, it has been a stated aim of the Government that the timetable changes are about securing more high-speed train services between London and Edinburgh. Those cities already have good train services and other public transport options. It is simply not fair or acceptable that my constituents should see a service that they have come to rely on cut in such a way.

Rachel Gilmour (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): Just one Network Rail station, Tiverton Parkway, lies in my very large constituency. Like many other rural parts of the country, we are dogged by totally insufficient transport. Does the hon. Member share my view that if proper, predictable timetabling in rural areas is a lever for social mobility, unpredictability is very much a barrier?

John Lamont: The hon. Lady makes an excellent point. Many rural communities depend on train services, bus services and public transport links because there are no alternatives. If the timetables, trains and services do

not run on time, they have an even greater impact because there is no alternative compared with what happens in larger towns and big cities where, if one service does not turn up, people can jump on alternatives without too much trouble. For our constituencies—I think my constituency might be marginally bigger than the hon. Lady's—it has a disproportionate impact.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. If there is a change in the rail service and how it works, there has to be something to take its place, at least in the short term in the rural communities that he and the hon. Member for Tiverton and Minehead (Rachel Gilmour) represent, and in those that I represent as well. There must be a bus service that can fill the gap and at least help to get people from A to B. I think in particular of those who have health appointments and those who have to get somewhere by a certain time. If the bus service is not there, that is a problem for those of us who live in rural areas and do not have a car. We really need to have a bus service to fill the gap.

John Lamont: The hon. Gentleman makes another excellent point. The argument put forward by Network Rail and LNER is that there will be alternative services, but it involves connecting to other trains. As I will go on to describe, if someone is disabled or an older person, the idea of making a connection is in itself sometimes daunting, and if they miss the connection the consequences can be far greater compared with the consequences for those of us who are perhaps more frequent travellers.

I use Berwick-upon-Tweed station regularly to travel to Westminster. The trains are well used and busy, so the decision to reduce services and make travel more complex does not make sense. Since the final timetable was published in September, I have been pleased to work cross-party with the hon. Member for North Northumberland (David Smith), whom I am pleased to see in his place. We met with Network Rail and LNER in September, so that they could explain why they had taken the decision to cut the number of services, on which our constituents rely.

I would like to thank Councillor Rosemary Mackenzie of Berwick-upon-Tweed town council for her campaigning on this issue, and Councillor Carol Hamilton from the Scottish Borders council and Councillor Richard Wearmouth from Northumberland county council for their work.

Irene Campbell (North Ayrshire and Arran) (Lab): The Largs to Glasgow line is a well-used service, especially in the more rural parts of my constituency. I have recently received many complaints from constituents on a range of issues: serious disruption with trains running late, being severely delayed, signalling issues and loss of power to the track. Does the hon. Member agree that that is just not good enough from the SNP Government, and that ScotRail and Network Rail must work together to ensure a timely and accessible service for all passengers, with a reliable timetable?

John Lamont: The hon. Lady makes an excellent point. She will know that I am familiar with her part of the world, having been brought up there. I know that beautiful stretch of railway particularly well, with a view of Arran and Millport, up to the west of Scotland.

Her key point is the catastrophic failure the SNP is making of Scotland's railways. ScotRail is run by the Scottish Government and is not doing a good job. When we are trying to encourage people to make that modal shift on to public transport, if the train does not turn up or turns up late, they will not want to make that shift again. The hon. Lady makes an important point and highlights why the SNP is letting Scotland down so badly.

To make matters worse, LNER's punctuality at Berwick-upon-Tweed station is far from outstanding. In the latest performance period, just 65.6% of services there arrived on time. We now face a number of services being dramatically cut, and existing services turning up late a third of the time.

I particularly want to raise the impact on those who are disabled or older, as I mentioned in response to an earlier intervention. Having to change trains halfway through a journey can be frustrating for all of us, as we are on edge waiting to see whether we will make our connection. But as one of my constituents, Elizabeth Johnston, said, for disabled passengers direct services are not simply a convenience; they are often the only practical and dignified way to travel long distances.

Wheelchair spaces on trains are also extremely limited. These changes will further limit disabled passengers' choice. They could be forced to wait several hours for the next available service. Just one missed connection can leave a wheelchair user stranded without accessible facilities. I do not find that situation acceptable. A significant number of my constituents travel by train for work.

Sarah Gibson (Chippenham) (LD): I represent a rural constituency in Wiltshire. Our local college has had to reduce the timetable for its 16 to 18-year-olds, given that they can no longer rely on trains that are constantly delayed. That causes issues related to deprivation, which was highlighted in recent Government statistics as being caused by lack of access to work and skills.

John Lamont: The hon. Lady makes a good point. Talk of social mobility often focuses on urban and city areas, but those of us who represent rural constituencies know that social mobility is a big problem. Arguably it is even greater in our areas because, as the hon. Lady highlighted, if the bus or train does not turn up, it is not just a matter of waiting for the next one; it is a matter of not being able to get to work or access an important college course that opens up many other opportunities.

One of the strengths of the east coast main line is that it makes travel through our key cities relatively easy and time efficient. Today one can travel from Berwick-upon-Tweed to London in just over three and a half hours. Under the new timetable, services will take longer and be less frequent. Trains will inevitably be busier. In the Borders, we are trying to attract more young families to live in our communities. Regular, reliable train services are an essential part of making the Borders an even more fantastic place to live.

David Smith (North Northumberland) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing this important debate. He mentioned Berwick train station, which is in my constituency. Although the initial timetable change began in 2021, it is true that it has been brought in now.

I want to highlight more regional travel. It is good to be working cross-border and cross-party on this issue. Does he agree that, at a review point hopefully coming up in the next few months, we should focus on Berwick's burgeoning and developing night-time economy as well, and that it would be a shame to miss that opportunity for later evening and weekend trains?

John Lamont: I am grateful to my neighbour for his contribution and for the cross-party, cross-border working we have secured on this issue. He is right that the consultation took place back in 2021. There was great opposition at that point and then there was a further, much smaller, consultation. I think a lot of people assumed the views they had submitted in the earlier discussion about the timetable changes were in some way captured. I do not think many of our respective constituents understood that whole timetable change was possibly going to happen again. There was not much awareness that these changes were back on the table.

The night-time economy is an important issue not just for Berwick, but for all our constituents who enjoy going to Edinburgh—and Newcastle—particularly around festival time in Edinburgh. I know that a lot of my constituents enjoy going to Edinburgh in August when the festival and fringe are on, and to be fair to the train companies they often put on additional services for people coming back. However, that should not be a once-a-year occasion. We should recognise that such travel is happening much more often, and people should be encouraged to do that through much more frequent late night services.

We currently have a Labour Government that seem totally and utterly obsessed with net zero at all costs. These timetable changes could make people more likely to opt to fly from Edinburgh or Newcastle because that service is more frequent, more reliable and quicker. That makes the changes even more nonsensical at a time when the Government say they want to encourage more people to use our railways.

There is also the impact on tourism. People come to the Scottish Borders from far and wide. We have some of the most beautiful parts of the United Kingdom there. The changes will inevitably affect tourism in the Borders. Day trips will become harder. People may choose alternative destinations. That will make it even more difficult for our local tourism and hospitality businesses, which are already suffering thanks to the decisions of this Labour Government.

We have seen progress on improving rail connectivity in the Scottish Borders over the last decade. The Borders Railway connecting Tweedbank and Galashiels with Scotland's capital has been a success, but we need that to go further to connect with Hawick, Newcastleton and on to Carlisle. We have also seen the reopening of Reston station in Berwickshire on the east coast main line, which continues to grow in success. That has all been part of a joined-up approach to improve rail connectivity right across the Borders. The timetable changes stall that progress. In fact, we will go backwards.

I was struck by the fact that the Secretary of State said last month that she wants a railway that is fit for the future,

“one that rebuilds the trust of... its passengers”

[John Lamont]

and regenerates its communities and restores reliability. These timetable changes will not do anything to achieve the Secretary of State's ambitions.

I will now consider solutions. Last week, I met the Rail Minister Lord Hendy. It was a productive and considered meeting and I thank him for that. He undertook important work on behalf of the last Government in relation to the Union connectivity review, so I know he is a man of great experience and is a good appointment to his role. As he said to me, any timetable is never the final one. We need to see changes to the timetable to get more services to stop at Berwick-upon-Tweed. I will not stop fighting for better rail services for my constituents and for the thousands who cross the border to use Berwick-upon-Tweed station.

Working with residents, local councillors and others, we will demonstrate the real-world negative impact that these changes will have and why it matters for local people in our rural communities to have good quality, reliable public transport. I am sure that—as we have already—we will hear examples from hon. Members from across the UK of how their communities will be negatively impacted by timetable changes or unreliable train services. For connectivity, for economic growth, and for our communities, this is bad news for the Borders. It should not have happened in the first place, and we need to focus all our efforts on restoring services so that residents in rural communities have access to the public services that they deserve.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Graham Stuart (in the Chair): Order. I remind Members that they should bob if they wish to be called to speak in the debate.

4.50 pm

Anna Gelderd (South East Cornwall) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) for securing this important debate.

I begin by recognising the dedication of Network Rail staff. They work extremely hard to keep services moving safely. I know that local teams may sometimes dread seeing my name in their inboxes; I contact them so often because I frequently raise questions about transport in South East Cornwall. Their continued engagement with me matters, and I thank them for it.

I have serious concerns about my local transport routes, but we are seeing improvements, with new speed safety cameras, pedestrian crossings, better road safety measures and barriers put in place since my election. That progress reflects years of effort by many residents and community organisations in South East Cornwall.

Rural transport has always been a challenge for my area. As a rural and coastal area, that reality can often mean isolation for many, and difficulty when accessing essential services. In South East Cornwall, many residents look to Plymouth to attend healthcare appointments or go to school. For them, travel often relies on the Tamar crossings—either the bridge or the ferry. That creates an additional financial hurdle that is not faced in most other constituencies. Rail services help to bridge that gap. They are vital for residents who do not or cannot drive, in providing independence for them. Maintenance works

are necessary to keep that network safe for passengers and staff, and those works will always need to take place, but my concern is the timing of some of them and the suitability of alternative services on offer as timetables change. As we speak, work is being carried out to cut back overgrown trees and shrubs, meaning that buses are replacing trains between, for example, Liskeard and Looe. In more urban settings that may be straightforward; in a rural and coastal setting it can be very difficult. Bus timetables have also been unpredictable for many of my communities.

I have been working with residents in Saltash in particular to look at unreliable bus and train service connections, cancellations, and buses failing to turn up. Those issues have an impact in my area beyond the frustration of a few minutes' delay. Local residents have reported missing appointments, or not being able to get to work and wages being docked because of that, to me.

John Whitby (Derbyshire Dales) (Lab): The new East Midlands Railway timetable will remove a second morning train between Matlock and Derby, significantly impacting commuters in the Derbyshire Dales. That will jeopardise employment and students' education. Will my hon. Friend join me in urging EMR to find a solution that would ensure that the early morning train can continue to run between Matlock and Derby?

Anna Gelderd: I absolutely support my hon. Friend's calls for those services.

Cornwall is unique and its geography calls for tailored solutions. I thank the Government for their support of my calls for those tailored solutions. Will the Minister look closely at how replacement services in rural and coastal constituencies are designed, and look to co-ordinate timetables around the needs of communities such as South East Cornwall? The alternative travel options available need to reflect our lived experience of a lack of other alternatives. I would like to work further with the Department and with Network Rail to share that local evidence and support that improvement.

Graham Stuart (in the Chair): I call the Liberal Democrat spokesman.

4.54 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): It is a joy to continue serving under your guidance this afternoon, Mr Stuart—I am thoroughly enjoying it, and I hope you are as well.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) for securing a very important debate, which I think would have been even better attended if it had not clashed with the Railways Bill. This issue matters hugely to so many of us, but I am sure it also matters to many Members who are in the main Chamber. He made a really strong case for rural rail services in his beautiful constituency, as did the hon. Member for South East Cornwall (Anna Gelderd), who made a really good speech that highlighted the issues affecting her lovely part of the world.

The major timetable update that we expect on 14 December is a source of significant worry for many of us in rural communities. Although there are some exciting developments that I am sure the Minister will list,

we fear that the changes will be overwhelmingly urban and intercity focused, just like those introduced in May. They offer far too little to the rural communities that the Liberal Democrats now represent so comprehensively from Wick to Penzance, with Oxenholme pretty much halfway.

Rural rail routes suffer from limited frequency, infrastructure constraints and, ultimately, a lack of investment in tracks, stations and rolling stock. On the Lakes line, the Furness line and the Cumbrian coastal line, we see hourly services if we are lucky, whereas it is closer to every two hours on the Settle to Carlisle line. This has a negative impact on commuters, on school and college students, and on our vital visitor economy, which serves 20 million people, provides jobs for 60,000 and is worth £4.5 billion to the economy every year.

Connecting to local buses, which hon. Members have mentioned, becomes precarious when even small timetable changes can blow apart entire journey plans. In Grange-over-Sands, buses and trains coincide at exactly the same time on each hour, and predictable lateness on both roads and rail mean that there can be no certainty of interconnectivity. People seeking to get home to Cartmel, Flookburgh, Allithwaite and Lindale live with the daily anxiety of not knowing whether they will make their connection. On the Leeds-Settle-Carlisle line, villages in Yorkshire and Cumbria miss out because passenger services to rural communities have been downgraded. The 13.37 service from Carlisle to Leeds, which passes through my constituency, has been converted into a semi-fast service, so it misses out most of the intermediate stations. By working with local campaigners, we have thankfully secured additional stops at Garsdale and Ribbleshead, but Armathwaite, Lazonby, Langwathby, Dent and Haughton are still bypassed, leaving those communities with a four-hour gap in southbound services in the afternoon. The Government would never tolerate this sort of thing in an urban community.

An additional example of rural and northern communities being overlooked is the network closures in January during the Clifton bridge work—something that will impact pretty much everybody on the west side of the country. Passengers changing at Oxenholme between the Lakes line and TransPennine Express services to Manchester airport face waits of almost an hour in both directions, but that is not the half of it, because Avanti has chosen not to serve Oxenholme at all. This is hardly a surprise to many of us, because whenever there is a problem with the track in Scotland or Cumbria, Avanti almost always chooses to cancel all services north of Preston anyway. We are used to Avanti treating Cumbria, north Lancashire and Scotland as if we do not exist, but as predictable as this is, it is not acceptable.

If Avanti's normal London timings had been maintained as far as Oxenholme, the connection with the Lakes line could have continued. Alternatively, TransPennine Express, which is still operating, could have taken over those timings, but it sadly declined. Even if its trains could not continue beyond Preston, a simple Preston to Oxenholme shuttle would have kept a reliable interchange in place and still provided four trains per hour to Manchester.

With years of west coast main line upgrade work still to come, the lack of planning for rural connectivity cannot be allowed to continue, and the upgrades do not promise enough for the main line in the rural far north-west

of England. I think it would be fair to conclude that we saw that most acutely with the derailment on the southbound track at Shap on 3 November. It was not a laughing matter, and we were very grateful that no one was seriously injured, but that derailment has surely got to be a wake-up call for Network Rail.

Rachel Gilmour: I have three nuclear facilities in my constituency: Hinkley A, B and C. David Peattie, the chief executive officer of the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority, has referred to the horrible incident at Shap, because the NDA runs nuclear waste on trains on that rail line. Does my hon. Friend agree that if there had been nuclear waste on that train, the situation would have been even worse?

Tim Farron: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for making that point. The horror was even closer to happening than that: nobody was hurt and the train remained upright between the tracks, but it was about eight minutes off being hit by the northbound train going in the opposite direction, which would undoubtedly have led to catastrophic loss of life. I do not want to pre-empt the ongoing investigation by the rail accident investigation branch, but we cannot help wondering whether the failure of this Government and the previous Government to fund the upgrades necessary to ensure the resilience both of the line and of the embankment between Warrington and Lockerbie could have played a part in that terrifying near miss.

There is much to welcome—the Liberal Democrats welcome the expansion of contactless fares into more rural and suburban areas of the London commuter belt, as well as the improvements on some rural midland lines—but we are urging the Government to establish a nationwide tap-in, tap-out ticketing system, which would be simple, modern and fair. It is time to end the regional lottery that passengers face across our network. We also continue to campaign to reverse the cuts to the restoring your railway scheme, which was scrapped by the Chancellor in last year's Budget. That scheme would have delivered genuine social, economic and environmental benefits to rural areas that are too frequently cut off from public transport. We want to see smaller rural stations reopened and a UK-wide Network Rail railcard introduced, making rail travel more affordable, tackling regional inequalities and simplifying the system for passengers.

David Smith: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Graham Stuart (in the Chair): Order. I think the hon. Gentleman is drawing to a close—and focusing on timetable changes, which are the subject of this debate.

Tim Farron: Well, even the best timetabling is meaningless, Mr Stuart, if you cannot make it to the platform to catch your train. The Government have effectively scrapped the mid-tier section of the Access for All scheme, which is meant to end the barriers to access for people with disabilities and mobility issues. If the mid-tier scheme is scrapped, only mainline train stations will ever be made access-friendly for disabled people, which is outrageous. I have an example in my constituency: the platform at Staveley station on the Lakes line, which passengers have to stagger up 41 steep steps to reach. I ask the Minister to reopen the mid-tier scheme, to support not just Staveley but all rural stations.

[*Tim Farron*]

Rural communities deserve a railway system that recognises them as equal partners in our national network, not an afterthought. The solutions are not beyond us. With the right priorities, the Government could transform the experience of passengers right across the country. We call for a nationwide tap-in, tap-out system to extend the planned best price guarantee across all digital and physical sales channels, to ensure that passengers are offered the most cost-effective ticket available. We call for electrification as standard for new line. We call for ambitious targets to expand battery and hydrogen technology, where appropriate, including for freight. The Government should also grab the low-hanging fruit and invest in passing loops, such as the one proposed for the Lakes line. That would be a relatively inexpensive way to double capacity on so many of our rural lines—

Graham Stuart (in the Chair): And on timetable changes?

Tim Farron: And to ensure safe and reliable onward travel, Mr Stuart.

The reality is that when someone's train comes in, if they cannot get to their next destination they are utterly snookered. That is particularly the case in rural areas where stations are unstaffed. At night, that often creates not only inconvenience, but a lack of safety, particularly at this time of year, particularly with late-night services curtailed and particularly for those who are travelling on their own. I will finish by simply saying that railways should work for all, urban and rural alike.

5.3 pm

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): As ever, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stuart. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) for securing this debate on an issue that matters greatly: ensuring that transport, in this case on the railways, effectively serves rural communities. It is particularly important to me, as a rural MP representing 336 square miles of rural Buckinghamshire, that these timetable changes work in the interests of rural communities in Buckinghamshire and across the whole of our precious United Kingdom.

The mindset of Government must always be passenger-focused. Whatever form of transport someone is using, we should ensure that the priority is providing the service that best helps most people. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the proactive steps that he is taking, and arguing for, to ensure that people in the borders are effectively served by the timetable and that communities like his are not cut off because of timetabling changes that have resulted in the removal of services.

Unfortunately, in our communities we have too often seen transport policies from the Government and from Labour councils that are more focused on helping them to raise revenue or penalise drivers, for example, as opposed to serving local residents. Those concerns have only hardened as rural areas across the country have been squeezed and treated like a cash cow by the Government. As the Government continue to expand their ever growing control over the railways, it is essential that the changes they implement consider rural areas at their very heart.

Although I acknowledge that the Government had a wide array of elements to examine, it is interesting to

note the absence of any mention of rural areas in their response to the consultation on the Railways Bill, which is having its Second Reading debate in the main Chamber right now. There was only one reference in the impact assessment, which noted “fewer services in rural areas”.

The Government's lack of consideration as to how their reforms may impact particular areas does not instil confidence about how the new organisation will treat rural communities.

The Government claim that Great British Railways will play the critical role in establishing timetables as we move to the new system. I stress that I have no contention with the idea that a unified body can play an important role in setting timetables. The Williams-Shapps plan for rail was born out of chaotic timetabling in 2018 and specifically recommended that its version of GBR should set the timetables. However, much remains to be answered about how effective the new body will be in serving rural areas and setting the timetables that serve rural areas. There is nothing that means intrinsically that it will inherently help those locations. In fact, other policy decisions, such as those on the bus fare cap, have seen the Government make travelling more expensive for rural communities rather than cheaper. There are real risks that nationalisation may result in timetabling that serves the organisation itself rather than the passengers who use the network.

David Smith: I have a simple question for the hon. Gentleman, on this auspicious day of the Second Reading of the Railways Bill: would he characterise the fracturing of rail services in this country over the past 20 years, specifically in relation to timetabling, as a success for rural areas?

Greg Smith: Chiltern Railways serves my constituency and Buckinghamshire more widely, on both the Chiltern main line and the Aylesbury branch. The Aylesbury branch in particular is a very rural service; it stops at a number of very small stations, often village stations, between Aylesbury and Marylebone. For a very long time, it was the gold standard of railways: the reliability was high, the fares were not too bad, and lots of my constituents praised it. Only in the post-pandemic era, when services have not been put back on as most of us would have expected, have standards slipped on the branch line.

When we debate the timetabling of rural services on the rail network, it is important that we do not lose sight of where the real challenges have come from. Am I going to stand here and say that everything about the way the railways were privatised was absolutely bang-on perfect? No, but I will defend the principle of having private sector risk to drive up standards and to improve competition, rather than the one-size-fits-all nationalisation model that the Government are proposing—the delivery model of which is being debated in the main Chamber right now, although I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman has chosen to spend his afternoon in this debate and not that one.

The Minister may well say that nationalisation will not lead to timetabling that serves Great British Railways more than it serves passengers. However, without sufficient safeguards in the system, it remains a possibility that the timetabling proposed will not match the needs of

commuters and other passengers. The example of Berwick-upon-Tweed station that my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk mentioned demonstrates the role that services play in connecting our communities to locations across the country. A reduction in service hurts not just Berwick, but the surrounding areas on both sides of the England-Scotland border.

I hope that the Minister will consider what more the Government can do to ensure that rural locations are served better by transport links. Rural areas of the United Kingdom absolutely depend on those links, and it is essential that the Government prioritise them.

5.9 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Stuart, and a pleasure to see all hon. Members at this Westminster Hall debate on the impact of the timetable change on rural communities. I congratulate the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) on securing the debate, and everyone else on their contributions.

The hon. Member rightly raised concerns about the impact of timetable changes on rural communities. Timetables are the core product of the railway, ensuring that local, regional and inter-city communities are connected. On the east coast main line, the first major timetable change in more than 11 years will go live in a matter of days, on 14 December. It will deliver 60,000 additional seats per week and will improve journey times between London and Edinburgh by 15 minutes, unlocking the benefits to passengers of the £4 billion invested in infrastructure and new rolling stock on the route.

After a number of delays over a number of years, including delays in addressing stakeholder concerns, it was left to the Rail Minister to take the decision to implement the timetable. Relying on the Rail Minister to decide on timetable changes is not, frankly, a sustainable way to make decisions for an efficiently run, evidence-based and demand-led railway. It highlights the urgent need to reform our railways.

Building a timetable is a very complex task that requires balancing a number of competing demands. Balancing high-speed inter-city services with local and regional connectivity while also giving space for freight; ensuring stopping patterns are balanced with faster journey times; matching capacity to forecast demand and growth; ensuring sufficient infrastructure, power and rolling stock are in place to operate the services; maintaining a reliable service that is not prone to disruption—the list goes on and on.

Given how busy the east coast route is, the trade-off between stopping patterns and faster journeys is and will remain a common theme along the route. That is particularly important for rural communities, who quite rightly seek greater connectivity to support their local economies. Berwick-upon-Tweed station, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland (David Smith), is an example: some 20% of passengers travel to London King's Cross or other mainline stations south of Newcastle. That compares with around 52% of passengers who travel to either Edinburgh or Newcastle.

I remain confident that the changes to the east coast main line timetable better align the train service to the journeys passengers make, while retaining the key early-morning LNER trains to London. Furthermore, nearly all tickets to London will be interchangeable on other services, even for passengers having to change trains for LNER services at Newcastle. Additionally, while my hon. Friend may rightly point to fewer LNER services at Berwick-upon-Tweed in the new timetable, the service level is comparable to similarly sized destinations with a similar draw for tourism.

TransPennine Express introduced five additional services post covid; that will increase to eight in the new timetable. Berwick, with 147,000 passenger journeys to London each year, will have two hourly services to and from King's Cross with additional trains in the morning. That is comparable to Harrogate and Lincoln, which have annual passenger journey numbers to London of over 250,000 and 275,000 respectively.

Other inter-city services provided by CrossCountry and TransPennine Express will offer at least hourly services each way from Berwick-upon-Tweed to Edinburgh, Newcastle and cities in Yorkshire. CrossCountry will continue to offer hourly services linking Berwick-upon-Tweed with Birmingham, Bristol and destinations in Devon. Despite these complexities, no timetable is ever the final one, as the Rail Minister told my colleagues. There is always scope for improvement, investment and growth. Passenger and economic needs change, and the railway will always need to adapt.

However, it is only fair to allow the new east coast main line timetable to settle in and embed. Once established, potential tweaks to stopping patterns or the wider timetable may be possible. Before I move on, it is worth noting that customers travelling from Berwick to London can purchase tickets from the same range of fares, regardless of whether they are travelling on a direct service or changing at Newcastle or York.

Under the Government's plan for growth, it is not solely the reliance on rail services that will underpin growth in local communities, particularly in rural areas. The Government's integrated national transport strategy is a critical piece of the jigsaw. It will focus on creating a transport network that works well for people wherever they live across England, including those in rural areas, and will empower local leaders to deliver good transport for their areas.

David Smith: I thank the Minister for his answers thus far. I may be slightly gazumping him—he may be coming to this—but one key thing that has not come out in the debate so far is investment. Ultimately, we all realise that the east coast main line is overused and very stretched. I thank the Government for the £3 billion of extra investment in the first year of our Government compared with the previous year. My key question for the Minister is: can rural lines be considered? The Northumberland line in south Northumberland has been a great success; we need something similar in north Northumberland. Could that investment go to rural areas as well?

Simon Lightwood: This Government remain ambitious for our rail and have set up fantastic objectives in the Railways Bill. I am sure that the Rail Minister will have heard exactly what my hon. Friend has said about

[*Simon Lightwood*]

further investment in the rail system. Of course, by addressing the main barriers that people face in accessing good transport, such as reliability and integration, we will improve access to opportunities and services, drive economic growth and create sustainable—rather than environmentally impactful—journeys that connect all our communities.

Devolution also has a role to play, whether that is in the form of local economic growth initiatives or by helping to shape local and regional transport networks across all modes of transport. Another key part of the new approach to devolution is funding. We have listened to what local government needs and are working to simplify funding to help local authorities to deliver on their local priorities. Multi-year, consolidated funding settlements will give local transport authorities greater freedom and flexibility to make the strategic decisions that best impact their local areas.

Let me return to the railways, and specifically the work of reform that we are carrying out. Great British Railways will be established to be the directing mind when future timetables are designed. Above all, it will be more responsive to local needs. GBR's geographic business units will bring today's infrastructure management and passenger services together in a single local team to manage track and train together, providing a locally focused face of the railway and a single point of leadership for local leaders.

Local stakeholders will have a role in providing evidence to Great British Railways to support the case for how future timetables can be designed to support local and regional GDP growth. They will have a say on how investment is prioritised to ensure that our railways continue to grow in terms of both revenue and capacity for more journeys, as well as supporting the high levels of performance that passengers rightfully expect. Through the rail reform agenda, local communities will be able to set out their aspirations for more stops or faster journeys, work with Great British Railways to identify the priority areas for investment and agree plans for sustainable growth that can and will be delivered. That is how this Government, the Department for Transport and Great British Railways will better serve rural communities.

As for the comments from the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Mid Buckinghamshire (Greg Smith), I find it difficult to take lessons from the Conservatives when it comes to our railways after the complete mess they left our railways in. He did touch on buses. On the bus fare cap, the previous Government had allocated no further funding beyond the end of the last cap. Despite the terrible fiscal inheritance, we managed to sustain a £3 bus fare cap and will continue to do so until March 2027. On top of that, just a couple of days ago I announced £3 billion—a billion pounds over each of the next three years—which is going directly to local transport authorities in order to improve buses in any way they see fit. That could include further concessions on

bus fares. Crucially, rather than being a “Hunger Games”-style competition for bus funding, the new formula includes an important element on rurality, recognising the distinct challenges that our rural communities face. That has been built into the funding formula.

Today's discussion was an opportunity to reflect on the importance of timetable changes and their impact on rural communities. I thank the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk for securing this important debate, and all hon. Members for their contributions.

5.19 pm

John Lamont: I am grateful to all hon. Members for their contributions this afternoon. We have demonstrated the importance of rail services to the rural communities that we collectively represent.

I am grateful to the Minister for his response. I have two points of concern. We again heard from the Minister about the importance of the inter-city connection—the London to Edinburgh service. That may well be an admirable aim of the Government, but they need to be clear that the consequence is that the rural communities in between are being left behind. That includes Berwick-upon-Tweed and many other places, which will be sacrificed for that high-speed connection. We can debate the worth of that link between London and Edinburgh and elsewhere, but that is the direct consequence of the policy.

Secondly, I think the Minister said that 147,000 passengers used the Berwick station, compared with 250,000 that use Harrogate. We need to remember that Harrogate is a much bigger centre of population than Berwick. It is a bigger town in itself and the catchment area for those who use the station is significantly bigger in population terms. The 147,000 people using Berwick travel much further to get to that station—it is a much bigger catchment area and a focal point for a much wider area. People will travel from Hawick in the south of my constituency all the way to Berwick to use that service. The figure of 147,000 is much more significant than 250,000 in a relatively big place in Yorkshire.

I will continue this campaign to persuade the Government and Network Rail that we need to get services back to where they were at Berwick. I am sure I will have the support of others; I certainly will have the support the community. I know how strongly the constituents I represent feel about this issue. I know how strongly people feel in Berwick-upon-Tweed and in North Northumberland. The fight will go on.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the impact of Network Rail timetable changes on rural communities.

5.22 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 9 December 2025

TREASURY

Covid Counter-Fraud Commissioner: Independent Review

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rachel Reeves): I am pleased to inform the House that the Covid Counter-Fraud Commissioner's independent review, "Pursuing Recoveries and Preventing Reoccurrence", CP 1462, has been laid in Parliament today.

The commissioner, Tom Hayhoe, was appointed in December 2024 to lead this important work over the course of this year. During his time in post, the commissioner has worked across Government, drawing on expertise in the Public Sector Fraud Authority, the Government Commercial Function, the Government Debt Management Function, the Department of Health and Social Care, the Department for Business and Trade and others, to ensure that the Government are recouping public money lost in pandemic-related fraud and from contracts which have not been delivered. The commissioner collaborated with a wide range of experts across sectors to test his hypotheses and findings, and considered lessons learnt and the experiences of key international partners.

The commissioner's report sets out that £10.91 billion^[1] was lost to fraud and error from covid-19 spending, of which £1.79 billion has been recovered. Failed pandemic-era PPE contracts cost the British taxpayer £1.4 billion, and over £1.9 billion^[2] of bounce back loans have been flagged as suspected fraud to the British Business Bank.

The commissioner finds that the previous Government's over-ordering of personal protective equipment and delays in quality checking mean that £762 million is unlikely to ever be recovered, with substandard PPE—gowns, masks and visors—remaining uninspected for up to two years, preventing recovery of public money. Litigation remains active or in prospect for eight contracts. DHSC was successful in action against PPE MedPro and efforts continue to recover the £122 million settlement ordered by the High Court.

Covid fraud under the previous Government was not confined to the procurement of PPE but included the exploitation of inadequate checks for loans and grants. Following the commissioner's recommendations, the Government launched a three-month voluntary repayment window for ineligible support scheme funds^[3] and the covid fraud reporting site for anonymous fraud reporting. This voluntary scheme encourages repayments ahead of the Government exercising comprehensive powers under the Public Authorities (Fraud, Error and Recovery) Act 2025 to investigate and recover fraud, which extends the limitation period for covid cases for a further six years.

The Government are estimated to have delivered nearly £400 million of covid fraud benefits to date and will relentlessly pursue more cases through the new Public Authorities Fraud Investigation and Enforcement Service and further action on fraudulent covid loans, including bounce back loans, confirmed in the recent Budget.^[4]

The commissioner finds there is more to do to recover fraud and error from the previous Government's covid-19 spending, with recommendations for eight Government Departments, including DHSC, DBT and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. The Government will now carefully consider all recommendations made in the report, working at pace to provide a full response early next year.

Covid fraud and corruption is an appalling financial scandal which has cost UK taxpayers dearly. I would like to thank Tom Hayhoe for his tireless efforts to chase down fraud, so that public money can be used as intended on public services like hospitals and schools. This Government will continue to relentlessly pursue covid-19 fraud to retrieve taxpayers' money, hold those responsible to account and ensure such failures can never be repeated.

The report is published on gov.uk: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/final-report-of-the-covid-counter-fraud-commissioner>

^[1] Public Sector Fraud Authority estimate of fraud and error in covid schemes.

^[2] <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-loan-guarantee-schemes-repayment-data-september-2025/covid-19-loan-guarantee-schemes-repayment-data-september-2025>

^[3] <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/make-a-voluntary-repayment-of-covid-19-funding>

^[4] <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/report-covid-19-fraud>

[HCWS1144]

DEFENCE

Defence Export Controls Agreement

The Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry (Luke Pollard): I am pleased to set out that the UK has acceded to the agreement on defence export controls, to which France, Germany and Spain are existing parties. This represents another step forward in our support for the vital role played by UK's defence industry in UK growth and defence and wider European security.

The UK's accession to the agreement will reduce the administrative burden of granting export licences between our nations, open opportunities for UK businesses and help boost economic growth across the country. UK sovereignty and robust export controls on defence equipment exports will be maintained under the agreement. The agreement does not affect the UK's export control regime or its obligations under international law, including the arms trade treaty, on the conditions for exporting of military equipment. The UK's licensing authority will therefore continue to assess each licence application against the strategic export licensing criteria. Accession to the agreement will not change this approach.

The agreement establishes a framework between the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and Spain to facilitate the licensing of defence exports within collaborative industrial programs. It creates an expectation that signatories consider joint exports favourably and aims to reduce the likelihood of signatories objecting to the export of joint Government projects and industrial joint ventures, subject to compliance with existing national and international legal obligations. This will mean more certainty for UK firms involved in multinational defence programmes and supply chains, while preserving UK sovereignty.

The strategic defence review and the defence industrial strategy include an aspiration to see the UK becoming Europe's leading defence exporter. UK accession to the agreement aligns with this intent and supports Government work to facilitate the UK defence industry's role as an engine for skilled UK jobs and growth. The SDR also recognises that support for secure, interoperable and agile defence supply chains is central to sustaining the UK's industrial capability and resilience, including through international partnerships. This agreement underlines the Government's commitment to supporting industry through exports and comes on the back of our £10 billion frigate agreement with Norway and £8 billion Typhoon deal with Türkiye.

The UK is committed to reinforcing its leading role in NATO and Euro-Atlantic security in an increasingly volatile world. Strengthening our defence and industrial partnerships with European allies is central to the endeavour. By joining the agreement, the UK reinforces its commitment to responsible defence trade and strengthens co-operation with NATO and European allies on shared security priorities, making a positive contribution to UK national security and NATO, while maintaining robust standards under the UK's strategic export control framework.

[HCWS1140]

EDUCATION

Franchising in Higher Education Consultation: Government Response

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Josh MacAlister): Today I am announcing the publication of the Government response

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/franchising-in-higher-education>

to the consultation on franchising in higher education, as announced in the "Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper". This response sets out the steps we will take to lock in stronger long-term oversight of provision and ensure accountability where it matters most.

Alongside this, the Secretary of State has written to all registered providers

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/letter-to-higher-education-providers-9-december-2025>

to reaffirm the shared responsibility for protecting public money from exploitation and asking them to assure themselves that practices are being managed appropriately within their institution and within organisations delivering on their behalf.

There has been a significant expansion in franchised provision in higher education since 2019. The Higher Education and Research Act 2017 and other regulatory changes created the conditions for this expansion. Between 2018-19 and 2022-23, the number of franchised students more than doubled, from 50,430 to 135,850, representing 5.7% of all students in the higher education sector. A majority—62%—of franchised students study business and management. This expansion has given rise to concerns regarding quality, governance and the integrity of higher education provision, and recent reports from the National Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee have highlighted serious issues, including poor-quality provision and the misuse of public funds.

Students invest heavily in their future and deserve world-class teaching, robust support and genuine value for money. Taxpayers expect absolute assurance that public funds are safeguarded against fraud and deliberate misuse. We will deliver that assurance.

We are tightening the regulatory net. Any franchised provider with 300 or more students will now be subject to direct regulation by the Office for Students as a condition for access to student loan funding. This requirement will be brought in for academic year 2028-29, with the first decisions on designation being made in September 2027.

The requirement on unregistered franchised providers with 300 or more students to register with the OfS will not apply to franchised providers in the following categories: state-funded schools, the statutory further education sector—further education corporations, sixth-form colleges corporations and designated institutions—providers of National Health Service services, including an NHS trust as defined in section 25 of the National Health Service Act 2006, police and crime commissioners, local authorities, Government Departments, the armed forces and mayoral combined authorities.

This latest action forms part of a comprehensive strategy to stamp out malpractice and raise standards. It builds on recommendations from the National Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee and complements cross-Government action to prevent fraud and misuse of public funds.

As set out in the written statement in March, the Public Sector Fraud Authority is taking action to ensure cross-Government data sharing is in place to detect and to stamp out fraudulent behaviour where bad actors are targeting several sources of Government funding. These measures will be further enabled by the Public Authorities (Fraud, Error and Recovery) Bill, which has now completed its passage through both Houses of Parliament and will give Government the powers required to act quickly and decisively.

The Office for Students has already introduced a new initial registration condition requiring providers to have robust and comprehensive arrangements in place to prevent, detect and address fraud and the inappropriate use of public funds. If they have previously received public funds, providers must also demonstrate a track record of managing public money responsibly before gaining registration.

The OfS has also published student outcomes data for all sub-contractual partnerships, which underlines the responsibility lead providers have to ensure that where franchising occurs it is in students' interest. It has consulted on additional proposals for the oversight of all sub-contractual arrangements in English higher education, and I look forward to the outcome of that consultation early next year.

As set out in the "Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper", we will be taking legislative powers at the next available opportunity to further strengthen the OfS powers to intervene decisively to tackle poor-quality provision and prevent abuse of public money at registered providers as well as safeguard against provision with poor outcomes for students. This will ensure there is tighter oversight for all franchise arrangements and all other third-party relationships in future, as well as a higher bar for their market entry and expansion.

We want to ensure that higher education continues to be a source of opportunity, excellence and national pride. It should support learners to succeed, drive economic growth and deliver this Government's mission to break down barriers to opportunity. This Government are taking the action needed to end the poor practice of the past and ensure that access to public funding is earned through quality and strong governance.

A copy of the Government response will be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS1141]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

National Maternity and Neonatal Investigation: Progress Update

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting): This statement updates Members on the national maternity and neonatal investigation. In June 2025, I launched a rapid national investigation into NHS maternity and neonatal services. Baroness Amos was appointed to lead this investigation to examine the systemic causes of unacceptable care affecting women, babies, and families.

She and her team have made significant progress since then, having met with over 170 individual family members, including site visits where they have met further families and NHS staff to gather evidence and hear about their experiences of maternity and neonatal care. These local visits have included in Barking, Oxford, East Kent, Kings Lynn, Somerset and Bradford, and Gloucestershire.

Today is the first of three publications that are expected from the investigation. Baroness Amos' update today sets out reflections and initial impressions since the investigation was launched of the work done and the picture that is starting to emerge. I want to recognise the extraordinary courage that bereaved and harmed families have shown in coming forward to share their experiences. What they have described is deeply distressing, and I cannot imagine how difficult it must be for them to relive these moments.

Baroness Amos highlights the significant challenges faced by women and families within maternity and neonatal care. She has also heard how fathers and non-birthing partners frequently feel unsupported, and how discrimination against women of colour, younger parents, and those with mental health challenges leads to poorer outcomes. Her reflections provide a valuable perspective of the issues and barriers that prevent the delivery of high-quality maternity and neonatal care.

We know that there is a diversity of views among families on the immediate action that needs to be taken. Families do not all agree, and we have a responsibility to listen to all of them. For example, some families want a full statutory public inquiry. Others are focused on systemic change that will prevent future harm. Some want individual case reviews and accountability. Others prioritise learning lessons quickly. I am absolutely committed to recognising this diversity of views and finding a way forward that delivers both accountability and urgent action.

As the investigation progresses, an eight-week call for evidence will begin in January 2026, and engagement will continue with national organisations and seldom-heard

voices from communities facing health inequalities. This will be brought together by the investigation to build one set of national recommendations to improve the safety and experience of maternity and neonatal care.

Baroness Amos will deliver two further publications next year. The initial findings will come in February 2026, and a final report and recommendations are expected in spring 2026.

While there is still much to be done, today's update is a key step forward in improving maternity and neonatal care, and families' experiences. We are setting up the national maternity and neonatal taskforce early next year, which I will chair. It will develop and oversee the implementation of a new national action plan, based on the recommendations made in the national investigation's final report. In the meantime, we are pressing on with important improvements to maternity safety, including a new early warning system to spot and tackle emerging safety concerns, and the roll-out of a programme to avoid brain injury in childbirth.

I would like to express my gratitude to Baroness Amos and her team for their dedication to the investigation and their work to date. The Government recognise the urgency of the concerns raised, and I would like to thank the bereaved and harmed families for their courage and bravery in sharing their experiences with the investigation.

[HCWS1148]

Tackling Sexual Misconduct in the NHS

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Dr Zubir Ahmed): Any instance of sexual violence, harassment or abuse in the NHS is unacceptable and will not be tolerated. On 5 December 2025, NHS England set out further actions for all trusts and integrated care boards, so that they can redouble their efforts and take swift and robust action to tackle sexual misconduct in the health service. This builds on action already taken to address sexual violence, harassment or abuse in the NHS.

In September 2023, the sexual safety charter was published by NHS England, and every trust and integrated care board has signed up to the charter now. In October 2024, NHS England produced a sexual misconduct policy framework, which it urged trusts and ICBs to adopt or adapt. E-learning was also introduced to support awareness of sexual safety in the NHS. In August 2025, NHS England set out further actions for all trusts and ICBs to take to identify and act against potential perpetrators of sexual misconduct in the NHS:

- Complete an audit on their sexual misconduct policies.

- Review policies, such as information sharing and chaperoning policies, to ensure that they are up to date.

- Staff to complete training modules on sexual misconduct.

- Keep electronic staff records up to date, with ongoing and complete investigations into staff.

The most recent letter went further still, by setting out new actions for trusts and ICBs:

- Take part in national training on sexual misconduct investigations.

- Ensure a pool of doctors or dentists have received specialist training in sexual misconduct.

- Ask all primary care providers to sign up to the sexual safety charter, self-assess themselves, and confirm with their ICB that they have done so.

Principles to be reflected in chaperoning policies to ensure that chaperones are being used correctly and in an auditable way by providers.

Review groups to be adopted for sexual misconduct cases.

Issued a further audit on sexual misconduct policies for all trusts and ICBs to complete.

The Department of Health and Social Care fully endorses the actions taken by NHS England, and expects them to be rigorously implemented. The Department will require ongoing updates from NHS England on implementation on a quarterly basis. You can find further detail of the actions in the NHS England letters.

The August 2025 letter:

<https://www.england.nhs.uk/long-read/actions-to-tackle-sexual-misconduct-in-the-nhs/>

The December 2025 letter:

<https://www.england.nhs.uk/long-read/an-update-on-actions-to-prevent-sexual-misconduct-in-the-nhs/>

The NHS operates a robust approach to sexual misconduct. The Department of Health and Social Care stands with NHS England to take all necessary action to identify sexual perpetrators, and prevent them having access to our NHS. Together, we will continue to monitor and take all necessary action to help ensure the sexual safety of everyone accessing the NHS.

[HCWS1147]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Forensic Information Databases Strategy Board: Annual Report

The Minister for Policing and Crime (Sarah Jones):

I am pleased to announce that I am, today, publishing the annual report of the Forensic Information Databases Strategy Board for 2024-25. This report covers the national DNA database and the national fingerprints database.

The strategy board chair, Assistant Chief Constable Simon Wilson, has presented the annual report to the Home Secretary under section 63AB(7) of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984. Publication of the report is a statutory requirement under section 63AB(8) of the 1984 Act, as inserted by section 24 of the Protection of Freedoms Act 2012.

The report highlights the continued, fundamental value of DNA and fingerprints in the provision of vital evidence and intelligence to support police investigations and the criminal justice system in bringing offenders to justice, protecting and supporting victims, and preventing harm to potential future victims.

I am grateful to the strategy board for their commitment to fulfilling their statutory functions.

The report has been laid before the House and copies will be available from the Vote Office and also on gov.uk.

[HCWS1142]

Changes in Immigration Rules: Nauru

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mike Tapp): My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is today laying before the House a statement of changes in immigration rules.

Introduction of a visit visa requirement for Nauru

We are today introducing a visa requirement on all visitors from Nauru. This will come into force at 15:00 GMT today. Nationals of Nauru will also be required to obtain a direct airside transit visa if they intend to transit via the UK having booked travel to another country.

Nationals of Nauru will no longer be eligible to apply for an electronic travel authorisation for travel to the UK. There will be a six-week, visa-free transition period for those who already hold an ETA and have a confirmed booking to the UK obtained on or before 15:00 GMT on 9 December 2025, where arrival in the UK is no later than 15:00 GMT on 20 January 2026.

Arrangements are in place so that nationals of Nauru can apply for visas. We are publicising the changes so that travellers are aware and can plan accordingly.

We are taking this action in response to the country's decision to introduce a new citizenship by investment programme. The practice of granting citizenship through investment is inherently high-risk and allows individuals access to a new identity with minimal ties to the issuing jurisdiction. Careful consideration of Nauru's programme has highlighted significant risks to UK border and national security. Its design is particularly vulnerable to misuse and, in its current form, poses an unsustainable risk of exploitation by criminal actors or individuals seeking to circumvent UK immigration controls without genuine intent to comply with UK law. Due to the programme set-up, we also lack confidence in the legitimacy of any vetting and due diligence processes. This model cannot operate without rapidly escalating the level of risk to the UK border. The Government therefore consider it necessary to take action through this rules change.

The decision to introduce a visa requirement has been taken solely for national and border security reasons. This does not change the importance of our relationship with Nauru, a Commonwealth partner. Any decision to change a visa requirement status is not taken lightly. We keep the border and immigration system under regular review to ensure that it continues to work in the UK's national interest.

All other changes will come into effect on 30 December 2025 and 1 January 2026, as detailed in the statement of changes.

[HCWS1143]

JUSTICE

Prison Capacity Review: Government Response

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice

(Mr David Lammy): On Tuesday 5 August, Dame Anne Owers published the findings of her independent review into the handling of prison capacity. The review was commissioned in February 2025 by my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Ladywood (Shabana Mahmood), to examine the decisions that led to the prison capacity crisis between 2022 and 2024, and to make recommendations to help future Governments avoid repeated crises. I am grateful to Dame Anne for her thorough and candid analysis, and I will ensure a copy of the review is deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

This statement sets out the Government's response, but first it is important to place this review in its proper context.

This Government inherited a prison system on the brink of collapse. Aside from a two-week period at the start of covid, the last time the total prison estate occupancy was under 95% was more than 12 years ago. At one point in 2024, there were fewer than 100 spaces in adult male prisons. If our prisons reach capacity, courts would be forced to suspend trials, and the police would be forced to stop making arrests. The consequences would be dire, and we would face a breakdown of law and order in this country.

The causes were clear—the last Government added just 500 net places to our prison estate in 14 years, while at the same time sentence lengths rose.

That is why this Government have acted decisively. We have committed to the largest expansion of the estate since the Victorians, committing £7 billion to building prison places between 2024-25 and 2029-30. We are delivering 14,000 new prison places, including four new prisons, and are on track to do so by 2031. We have already opened HMP Millsike, a 1,500-place prison, in March 2025, and broke ground on HMP Welland Oaks, a new 1,700-place prison in November 2025. We have delivered around 2,900 new places since taking office.

We have also recently introduced the Sentencing Bill to Parliament in order to implement many of the recommendations in the sentencing review as soon as possible and put prisons on a more sustainable footing.

We need to lift the prison system out of crisis and start improving it, raising standards to keep the public safe while tackling reoffending. Our actions will increase capacity and are the turning point for us to improve prisons' performance.

We welcome the review's findings, which shine a light on the flawed decision-making structures and missed opportunities. We acknowledge the need to address prison capacity within the context of wider criminal justice reform and have accepted in principle the majority of Dame Anne Owers' recommendations. Work is already under way to address these.

For instance, we are increasing investment in probation services by up to £700 million by the final year of the spending review period. This enhanced funding will allow us to tag and monitor tens of thousands more offenders, enabling close supervision in the community and reducing pressure on the prison estate. Alongside this, we are deepening our collaboration with the third sector—through the Our Future Probation Service stakeholder engagement forum and other established channels—to ensure that community services are designed and delivered in ways that reflect frontline expertise and meet the needs of those we support.

We are also committed to improving transparency across the criminal justice system. In December 2024, the Ministry of Justice published the first annual statement on prison capacity, which set out population projections, supply plans and information on probation capacity.

These steps, alongside other planned and ongoing activity, reflect our commitment to building a more resilient, transparent and forward-looking criminal justice system. Dame Anne's review will help inform our strategic

approach to prison capacity and ensure the mistakes of the past are never repeated and that prison places are always available for those who pose a risk to public safety.

[HCWS1139]

NORTHERN IRELAND

Independent Reporting Commission: Eighth Substantive Report

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Hilary Benn): I have received the eighth substantive report from the Independent Reporting Commission, and have laid a copy before the House.

The commission was established following the Fresh Start agreement of November 2015 to report on progress towards ending paramilitary activity in Northern Ireland. That agreement set out the Northern Ireland Executive's commitments around tackling paramilitary activity and associated criminality, and led to a programme of work to deliver a Northern Ireland Executive action plan. It also provided the framework for the UK Government, the Executive and law enforcement agencies, alongside partners in Ireland, to work together to tackle the challenges of organised crime, paramilitarism and terrorism. In the New Decade, New Approach agreement in January 2020, a commitment was made to ongoing work to tackle paramilitarism, and this work continues, including through a second phase of the NI Executive programme.

The commission's eighth report primarily considers activity undertaken to tackle paramilitarism in the financial year 2024-25. It highlights progress in a number of areas. It notes that Police Service of Northern Ireland statistics indicate that 2024-25 was the first year since records began in 1969 in which there were no security-related deaths, and that violent crime linked to paramilitarism appears to be on a downward trajectory. The report also notes law enforcement successes in tackling paramilitarism and welcomes progress across the justice system in embedding trauma-informed approaches. The report also highlights significant progress in the development of a co-ordinated response to child criminal exploitation.

The report points out that security statistics only tell part of the story. There is still much work to be done on tackling paramilitarism in Northern Ireland. The commissioners note that intimidation, coercive control, and threats linked to paramilitary groups persist, and that paramilitary structures continue to be used to facilitate organised crime and other forms of violence.

The commission has made a number of recommendations on how the approach to paramilitarism can be strengthened and on ways in which a focused effort on paramilitarism can be maintained beyond the life of the Executive programme on paramilitarism and organised crime. We will consider recommendations for the UK Government through engagement with representatives of Northern Ireland political parties, the Executive, the Irish Government, civic society and community representatives in Northern Ireland, and the Independent Reporting Commission. The commissioners also note the scoping exercise that is now under way by Fleur Ravensbergen, the independent expert on paramilitary group transition to disbandment. We look forward to receiving her report on this work next year.

Paramilitarism is a scourge on society in Northern Ireland. The UK Government remain committed to working closely with our partners to support efforts in tackling the enduring threat and harms posed to communities by paramilitary groups. The Executive programme has demonstrated how progress can be made in tackling these harms, and the UK Government look forward to continuing work with the Northern Ireland Executive as they develop plans to build a sustainable, long-term approach for addressing multiple types of violence and harm for the period beyond March 2027.

I would like to extend my thanks to the commissioners for their work in producing this report on progress made towards ending paramilitarism.

[HCWS1145]

Northern Ireland Troubles: Operation Kenova

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Hilary Benn): I am making this written ministerial statement following the publication of the Operation Kenova final report earlier today.

The report covers the activities of the alleged agent Stakeknife, as well as other investigations referred to Operation Kenova by the Police Service of Northern Ireland.

The Operation Kenova investigators received the Government's full co-operation and have completed a thorough investigation which, in the Government's view, has been article 2 compliant.

The way in which the Kenova team, led by Sir Iain Livingstone, and before him, by Jon Boutcher, have carried out their work and engaged with families has been exemplary. They were able to build trust with families, put victims first and provided many answers about what happened to their loved ones. Operation Turma, which was part of Kenova, resulted in the prosecution of an individual, now extradited from Ireland and awaiting trial, for the murder of three Royal Ulster Constabulary officers in 1982.

Kenova has set a new standard for future legacy investigations, and we have drawn on a number of those lessons in drafting the Northern Ireland Troubles Bill. I wish to express my heartfelt condolences to all the families who lost loved ones in the appalling circumstances described in this sobering report.

Operation Kenova was asked to establish whether there was evidence of criminal offences by the alleged agent known as Stakeknife, or their alleged handlers. The activities of the alleged agent, and their role in the Provisional IRA, are deeply disturbing and should not have happened. The actions of the Provisional IRA led to the deaths of over 1,700 people, who were killed in the most brutal way, and whose remains—in some cases—were hidden in unmarked graves.

My thoughts are with all the families who lost loved ones to the Provisional IRA during the troubles, including as a result of the activities highlighted in this report. I would also like to commend the work of the security forces who operated at considerable personal risk in highly difficult circumstances.

On Operation Kenova's request to the Government to name Stakeknife, I set out in a letter to Sir Iain Livingstone on 13 August 2025, which I have placed in the Library, that

“Due to ongoing litigation relevant to the Neither Confirm Nor Deny policy, namely the Thompson Supreme Court appeal, a substantive and final response to your request will be provided after judgment has issued in that case.”

Judgment in the Thompson case is expected imminently, and we anticipate that this will provide some clarity on the use of NCND and the role of the courts.

The Government's first duty is to protect the national security of the United Kingdom. When any agent—active, living or otherwise—is publicly identified by the state, that calls into question the whole premise of NCND and can deter future covert human intelligence sources from co-operation, while jeopardising the trust of current CHIS, even if such a confirmation of an identity were to happen decades after the events.

There have been significant reforms to agent handling practice, including through legislation, to ensure that lessons are learned from the past. The use of CHIS is nowadays subject to strict regulation under the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 and the CHIS (Criminal Conduct) Act 2021.

Compliance with this legislation and the related code of conduct is subject to rigorous scrutiny by the Investigatory Powers Commissioner's Office. The investigatory powers tribunal also provides a forum for individuals to challenge the state if they believe CHIS have acted improperly or illegally.

As outlined in another letter to Sir Iain in August 2025, the Government notes Kenova's recommendation of a review of NCND and the security classification of past Northern Ireland legacy reports. Past reports are owned by a number of different bodies, including the UK Government, the PSNI and the Office of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland. The Government already follows a procedure for the declassification of historic material via the Public Records Act.

On the sections of the report regarding MI5's discovery of material relevant to Kenova's investigations of the alleged agent Stakeknife in 2024, it was deeply regrettable that the material was found after decisions were made by the Public Prosecution Service and the publication of the interim report on 8 March 2024. The Government are reassured, however, by former Assistant Commissioner Helen Ball QPM's report, which found that none of the material was deliberately withheld from Kenova at an individual or organisational level. Helen Ball also found that much of this material had already been disclosed to Kenova during the original disclosure exercise. In its final report, Operation Kenova has said that MI5's proactivity in volunteering the additional material is not consistent with a concerted attempt to conceal or cover up additional material. The Government are assured that MI5 has learned important lessons around information management and that proper procedures are now in place to reduce the risk of such a thing happening again.

The final Kenova Report also makes public the high-level findings of Operation Denton, which looked at killings carried out by the UVF Glennane Gang. The behaviour alleged in these findings, including collusion by individual members of the security forces, are shocking and would never be tolerated today. Checks and balances now exist

to prevent such events from happening again. The Government will respond to the Denton Report when it is published in full, bearing in mind that there are related legal proceedings ongoing, as also in the case of Stakeknife.

In October, the Government brought forward the Northern Ireland Troubles Bill, which will bring about much-needed reform to the way legacy is addressed. This follows the framework agreement with the Irish Government announced in September. This will fulfil the Government's King's Speech commitment to repeal and replace the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023, acknowledge and address the suffering of victims and survivors, and take forward an unfinished part of the Good Friday Agreement.

We have drawn from the approach taken by Operation Kenova in drafting this legislation, particularly with regard to the formation of a new legacy commission, with statutory oversight arrangements to provide accountability and a statutory advisory group to ensure that the voices of victims, their families and survivors, including those who served, are heard as part of the commission's work.

The Government responded to the recommendations in the interim Kenova Report in a letter to Sir Iain Livingstone on 13 August 2025, which is available in the Library.

On some of the matters raised, such as the recommendation of a state apology, the Government will not be considering this while litigation remains ongoing. Regarding Kenova's suggestion that the longest day, 21 June, should be designated as a day when we remember those lost, injured or harmed as a result of the troubles, the Government are committed to recognising and supporting victims and survivors of terrorism. That is why the Government recently announced plans to introduce a national day, to be held on 21 August, dedicated to anyone in the UK impacted by terrorism—including terrorism related to the troubles. The Government are open to the suggestion of designating a day to specifically remember all of the victims of the troubles, as it is something that would carry significant weight. Our initial view is that this should be explored in consultation with the Northern Ireland Executive, victims and survivors groups and others.

Finally, I would like to pay tribute to Operation Kenova, and to Sir Iain Livingstone and Jon Boutcher, for all of their work over the years. The investigations that they have led have been transparent and open to families who had many questions, and have always put victims first in everything they have done.

[HCWS1146]

Petition

Tuesday 9 December 2025

OBSERVATIONS

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Sale of Disposable Barbecues

The petition of residents of the constituency of Mid Dorset and North Poole

Declares that there is a growing threat of wildfires across Dorset and the UK; further declares that disposable barbecues have been the initial cause of multiple wildfires in the UK; and further that the sale of disposable barbecues should be banned to reduce the number of wildfires that will occur in the UK in the future.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to introduce legislation to ban the sale of disposable barbecues.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Vikki Slade, *Official Report*, 24 November 2025; Vol. 776, c. 180.]

[P003134]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mary Creagh):

The Government would like to thank the petitioners for raising the issue of disposable barbecues.

The Government take public safety very seriously. While there are no plans to introduce a blanket ban on disposable barbecues, the Government are taking action in a number of areas to help keep people safe.

Officials continue to work alongside partners including the National Fire Chiefs Council to issue proactive communications through the “Fire Kills” campaign including, for example, advice around the safe use of barbecues, cigarettes and open fires. Information about

outdoor fire safety is also available on the Fire England website at

<https://fireengland.uk/fire-safety/fire-safety-outdoors>

The campaign is supported and promoted by local fire and rescue services to improve fire safety within their communities.

Fire and rescue services also actively prepare for wildfires and reflect risks in their area through a community risk management plan. The NFCC has applied lessons learnt and examples of good practice to make improvements to training, national resilience and operational response. In 2024, the Government took an additional step by providing funding for a national resilience wildfire adviser to evaluate what further national capabilities are needed to boost resilience against wildfires and to ensure that efforts across the sector are co-ordinated effectively.

All disposable barbecues must conform with the relevant product safety legislative requirements. The General Product Safety Regulations 2005 place obligations on manufacturers or importers to ensure that products are safe for the consumer before placing them on the market. These regulations also include obligations to provide appropriate labelling, warnings and instructions on use. Retailers can also take voluntary action to halt sales of single-use barbecues as demonstrated by the British Retail Consortium guidelines https://brc.org.uk/media/682052/voluntary-guidelines-for-disposable-bbqs-dbbqs-_final.pdf

Local authorities in England also have powers to apply local bans on council or public land. National landscapes and national parks also have specific powers to regulate and prohibit fires on access land. The UK Government encourage all local authorities to use these existing powers if they feel it necessary.

Fire incident statistics, published by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, indicate that the number of fires caused by barbecues are relatively low. Our latest data set

<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/fires-by-barbecue-dataset-2020-to-2024>

shows that out of the 45,673 accidental primary fires in 2024, only 229 were started by barbecues. However, it is important to note that we do not know how many of these were caused specifically by portable or disposable barbecue products—as opposed to static or domestic barbecues. Improvements in data collection are being driven by the upcoming fire and rescue data platform, which will include a category for disposable barbecues.

Written Correction

Tuesday 9 December 2025

Other Correction

JOHANNA BAXTER

Child Poverty Strategy

The following extract is from the statement on the child poverty strategy on 8 December 2025.

Johanna Baxter: I warmly welcome the publication of the child poverty strategy, in particular the lifting of the two-child benefit cap, which will lift 1,560 children

in Paisley and Renfrewshire South out of poverty. But 100,000 children in Scotland remain stuck in homelessness accommodation, and that is on the SNP's watch; it has control of that in the Scottish Government.

[*Official Report*, 8 December 2025; Vol. 777, c. 68.]

Written correction submitted by the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Johanna Baxter):

Johanna Baxter: I warmly welcome the publication of the child poverty strategy, in particular the lifting of the two-child benefit cap, which will lift 1,560 children in Paisley and Renfrewshire South out of poverty. But **10,000** children in Scotland remain stuck in homelessness accommodation, and that is on the SNP's watch; it has control of that in the Scottish Government.

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PETITION

Tuesday 9 December 2025

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**not later than
Tuesday 16 December 2025**

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