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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Tuesday 8 February 2022

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: Before we start today's business, I want to say something about the disgraceful behaviour yesterday that was directed at the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) and the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy). I deplore the fact that Members of this House were subjected to intimidating and threatening behaviour while simply doing their jobs. I know the whole House will join me in saying that we stand with our colleagues in condemning the behaviour that they and the police experienced.

While I do not comment in detail on security matters on the Floor of the Chamber, steps must be in place to keep passholders secure as they enter and leave the parliamentary estate. I have requested a situation report from the Metropolitan police via our security team on how this incident occurred.

I understand that arrests have been made following yesterday's incident, so it would not be appropriate to comment in detail. I know it has been reported that some of the abuse directed at the right hon. and learned Gentleman, the Leader of the Opposition, related to claims made by the Prime Minister in this Chamber, but regardless of yesterday's incident, I made it clear last week that, while the Prime Minister's words were not disorderly, they were inappropriate. As I said then, these sorts of comments only inflame opinions and generate disregard for the House, and it is not acceptable. Our words have consequences and we should always be mindful of that fact. I will not be taking points of order as we move on to the business.

Oral Answers to Questions

JUSTICE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Domestic Abuse Victims: Legal Aid

1. **Vicky Foxcroft** (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of support provided through the legal aid system for victims of domestic abuse. [905496]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (James Cartlidge): Access to justice is a fundamental right, and this Government are committed to ensuring that everyone gets the timely support they need, including legal aid, to navigate the justice system. In addition, the Government are absolutely clear that victims of domestic abuse must have access to the help they need. In the light of this, we are conducting a review of the means test for legal aid and this is specifically considering

domestic abuse victims; we plan to publish this consultation shortly. We have already made some further changes to improve access to legal aid by removing the cap on the amount of mortgage debt used in determining access to civil legal aid.

Vicky Foxcroft: The Bellamy review outlines serious and long-standing concerns about the lack of funding for criminal legal aid. Domestic abuse victims already face trauma, and experience mental and physical scars that are only exacerbated by the Government's failure to fund legal aid properly. What assessment has the Justice Secretary made of the impact of the potential strike by the Criminal Bar Association on the already immense courts backlog? Will he finally commit to engage with the CBA, so that victims are not denied access to justice?

James Cartlidge: Legal aid for domestic abuse is primarily a civil legal aid matter, but in relation to criminal legal aid I am pleased to confirm to the hon. Lady that I am meeting the CBA later this week and engaging with the association through the all-party parliamentary group on legal aid in a webinar tomorrow. I am engaging with all stakeholders because I think that is the right and constructive approach to drawing up this important policy so that we achieve our aim, which is better reform of the criminal justice system.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): Lighthouse Women's Aid in Ipswich does huge work in the area and across Suffolk, as the Minister knows. I hope that Ipswich being one of the seven outposts for Ministry of Justice civil servants will mean that we are at the forefront of new initiatives to tackle domestic abuse. Will the Minister update me on the timeline for these jobs coming to Ipswich and the strategy to ensure that as many of them as possible go to Ipswich people?

James Cartlidge: My hon. Friend and neighbour is a great champion of his constituency. We will set out further details of our plan to move staff out of London. It is entirely right that we do that as part of the Government's levelling-up agenda. I should also say that I welcome his championing of what the voluntary sector can do to support victims of domestic abuse.

UK's Human Rights Framework

2. **Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on reforming the UK's human rights framework. [905497]

5. **Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): What steps he is taking in response to the publication of the Independent Human Rights Act Review published by his Department in December 2021. [905500]

7. **Stuart C. McDonald** (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on reforming the UK's human rights framework. [905503]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Dominic Raab): Under this Prime Minister and this Government, before the next election, we will replace the Human Rights Act 1998 with a Bill of Rights to end the abuse of the framework and the system by dangerous criminals and to restore some common sense.

Deidre Brock: The Justice Secretary claims that his reforms will protect free speech—a right that already receives special protection in the Human Rights Act—yet simultaneously the Government want to criminalise exercise of the right to protest, through the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill, and there are already plans to take away whistleblower protections in the Official Secrets Act. Is it all free speech the Justice Secretary aims to protect, or only the kind his Government want to hear?

Dominic Raab: I thank the hon. Lady, because she raises a good substantive point. We want to strengthen and reinforce the right of free speech, in particular given some of the judge-led privacy law we have, but also some of the encroachments on free speech we have seen in political debate. I think constituents of Members in all parts of the House would recognise the difference between free speech, lawful protest and, frankly, the downright sabotage that we have seen by groups such as Extinction Rebellion, where we are right to legislate to protect the freedoms of others.

Mr Carmichael: This is not new territory for the Secretary of State. He has been around this course. He failed last time of course, because he could only do what he wanted by leaving the European convention on human rights. That is still the situation now, so will it be Government policy that we should follow the human rights example of Belarus in leaving the protections of the convention?

Dominic Raab: We have been around this house a few times. It is precisely because our reforms through a Bill of Rights can make a substantial difference by injecting some common sense without leaving the European convention that we will proceed. I will give one example. I visited HMP Frankland in Durham. It is a high-security category A prison. One of the challenges in dealing with terrorist offenders, particularly those who could infect the minds of others, is the issue of separation centres. We are increasingly seeing litigation claims claiming article 8 as a right to socialise getting in our way. That is a good example for the common-sense approach and the balance we want to have. I am very surprised that the right hon. Gentleman is opposed to it.

Stuart C. McDonald: The position is that the Government commissioned an independent review, did not like the conclusions and so have simply just ditched them. Why should anyone have any faith that the Government will listen to their consultation responses if they are so hellbent on pursuing what Sir Geoffrey Bindman QC has labelled an

“indefensible...inward-looking and cowardly” retreat from human rights?

Dominic Raab: I am very grateful for the independent Human Rights Act review. We looked very carefully at all the recommendations, some of which we take on board and for others we are going to innovate in different areas. I will give one example. I suspect the hon. Gentleman's constituents would want us to reform the system to stop foreign national offenders, whether they are living in Scotland or any other part of the UK, from frustrating deportation orders on the most flimsy, elastic grounds created by article 8. That is something we will do, and I think he should support it.

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I am grateful that my right hon. Friend made reference to the independent review of the Human Rights Act. I am sure he would want to join me in thanking the right hon. Sir Peter Gross, the chair of that review, and his colleagues for their exceptionally hard and diligent work in this regard. Sir Peter gave evidence to the Justice Committee last week. He pointed out that while the Government have published their own consultation document—“Human Rights Act Reform: A Modern Bill of Rights”—that document is not in fact a response to the independent Human Rights Act review report. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that it would only be fair and courteous to Sir Peter and his colleagues to ensure that once the consultation on the Government's document is concluded, their response to that consultation includes a full response to Sir Peter's panel's review, including detailed replies to all the points the Government do or do not accept, exactly as was done with the Faulks review?

Dominic Raab: I thank my hon. Friend, the Chair of the Select Committee. First, I have already thanked the chair and all the panel, but I am happy to join my hon. Friend in doing so again. The IHRAR panel produced a well-considered and useful report, and I considered it very carefully. The consultation that we are pursuing is ongoing, and includes—this is an important point—areas beyond the terms of reference of the IHRAR report, such as adding a recognition of the right to trial by jury and strengthening freedom of expression, which Members have already raised. There are also areas where the Government wish to explore only a subset of the options considered by that review, and section 3 is a good illustration of that.

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): Can the Deputy Prime Minister outline how his reforms to the Human Rights Act and a new British Bill of Rights can help us to take back control of our borders and stop the small boats crisis in the channel?

Dominic Raab: Clearly the issue of small boats goes well beyond issues in the European convention on human rights, but what I would say to my hon. Friend more generally is that the reforms we are pursuing allow us to take more firm action under the Nationality and Borders Bill and under wider powers to deal with foreign national offenders. He should be aware that some 70% of claims by foreign national offenders scuppering deportation orders are under article 8. That is clearly an area where we can reform.

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): I am tired of hearing the rights of asylum seekers so desperate to get here that they will go on these dangerous boats conflated with those of dangerous foreign national offenders. The Secretary of State needs to stop drawing that parallel.

I echo the Chair of the Select Committee in calling for a full response to Sir Peter Gross QC. Indeed, I wonder why the Government bothered to appoint him if they were not going to listen to him. Does the Secretary of State at least agree with his first recommendation, which is that there should be a full and robust programme of education about what the

Human Rights Act actually is? Or would that be a bit of a hindrance to this Government's programme of misinformation?

Dominic Raab: It is precisely through the process of consultation on our proposal for a Bill of Rights that we can have a proper, substantive debate, listen to all sides of the argument and inject some common sense back into the system, and disseminate that more widely. I think that constituents of hon. Members in all parts of the House would appreciate that.

Anne McLaughlin: The other thing that the Secretary of State keeps on doing is saying that we have to review this because there are so many dangerous foreign criminals, but will he listen to the UK security services, who know more about dangerous foreign criminals than he does? They have warned that overhauling the Human Rights Act could affect their ability to provide evidence in secret. I know he knows why that is dangerous, particularly in terrorism cases, so will he listen to them and to his predecessor in this role, who has also warned that this could make the UK, and by extension all of us, less secure?

Dominic Raab: May I gently say to the hon. Member that there is an issue around extraterritorial jurisdiction, where we will want to consult very carefully? Whether it is the deportation of foreign national offenders—and no, I am sorry, but we will keep talking about that; it is something that our constituents care about, and this is a reform that needs to happen—or whether it is parole reform, which I believe we also need to undertake, or separation centres in our most high-security prisons, these are all areas where the public, constituents of hon. Members in all parts of the House, will expect us to take a common-sense approach. That is exactly what our Bill of Rights will achieve.

Sentencing for Terrorist Offences: Northern Ireland Executive

3. **Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Northern Ireland Executive on sentencing for terrorist offences. [905498]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (James Cartlidge): I have had no recent discussions with the Northern Ireland Executive on sentencing for terrorist offences. While sentencing is a devolved matter, the Department continues to engage in discussions with the Department of Justice on devolved matters where helpful and relevant.

Theresa Villiers: The Police Service of Northern Ireland makes huge efforts to bring to justice those responsible for terrorism there, but the chances of convicting those offenders are undermined by excessive delays in the criminal justice process. Will the Minister work with the Northern Ireland Justice Minister to try to address this problem, so that we can hold to account those who still seek to use violence to achieve political ends in Northern Ireland?

James Cartlidge: My right hon. Friend speaks with great expertise on these matters. She will be aware that justice and policing are devolved matters, and the Northern Ireland Executive recently reaffirmed their commitment

to speeding up the criminal justice system in the New Decade, New Approach agreement. At the end of last year, the Northern Ireland Assembly passed the Criminal Justice (Committal Reform) Bill, which contains measures that will simplify the current system, remove some avoidable delays and ensure the quicker progression to court of some of the most serious cases. I welcome this significant step forward in reforming the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland.

Violence Against Women and Girls

4. **Mr Virendra Sharma** (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to tackle violence against women and girls. [905499]

21. **Andy McDonald** (Middlesbrough) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to tackle violence against women and girls. [905518]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Victoria Atkins): May I take a moment, Mr Speaker, to place on record my sincere thanks to Her Majesty the Queen, as we celebrate the seven decades of peerless public service that she has provided to our great country? May she long reign over us.

This Government set out its ambitious tackling violence against women and girls strategy in the summer to change attitudes, support women and girls who are victims of crime, and pursue perpetrators relentlessly. This focus includes rolling out section 28 video-recorded evidence in sexual and modern slavery cases nationally and helping victims of domestic abuse to have more time to report common assaults, through the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill. Last week we also launched the tender for the first ever national 24/7 support service for victims of rape and sexual assault.

Mr Sharma: This Sunday we marked International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation. Sustainable development goal 5.3 commits the UK to the elimination of

“all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation”

by 2030. However, the UN estimates that 2 million extra girls are at risk of cutting due to the pandemic. Is the UK on track to meet its own targets?

Victoria Atkins: We are. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising this important subject, because female genital mutilation is one of the most hidden crimes. Those poor victims, who are often very young, face the most terrible pressure to explain to others what has been done to them, often by their loved ones. We are really supporting victims not just through the tackling violence against women and girls strategy that I have already discussed, but through our work over the last decade to tackle those terrible crimes, so that they can, if they feel able, seek help. Importantly, we are also educating people that it is not a fit practice for the 21st century.

Andy McDonald: A woman has approached me for help. She tells me that as a teenager, she was raped and has lived with the trauma for over 30 years. She has no confidence or trust in the police or the criminal justice system. She feels intimidated and frightened by her

attacker to this day and fears that she will not be listened to, taken seriously or protected. What can I say to her?

Victoria Atkins: May I thank the hon. Gentleman for gravely articulating the many effects that such terrible crimes have on victims, not just in the immediate aftermath but for many years, often decades? We have a programme of work to address the failings in the criminal justice system in terms of prosecuting sexual assault and rape cases. We have already been publishing our national scorecards, which aim to bring transparency to every corner of the criminal justice system to give victims and the public the confidence that they need in it.

On the hon. Gentleman's point, I commend to him the current Ministry of Justice campaign #ItStillMatters. I very much hope that the lady he speaks about can seek support through that campaign or through the sexual violence helpline that I outlined in my previous answer, which I hope will be up and running very soon.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): One of the most heinous forms of violence against women and girls is found online and the law has some serious gaps, as my hon. Friend knows. Cyber-flashing, which is online indecent exposure, and deep fake pornography are not against the law. What is she planning to do to change that?

Victoria Atkins: I thank my right hon. Friend who has been concerted in her campaign on that terrible form of online crime involving deep fake imagery. On cyber-flashing, I am pleased to confirm that the Government are looking for a legislative vehicle in which to outlaw that pernicious modern-day crime. On deep fake imagery, she will know that we have sought the advice of the Law Commission to help to update our general laws to better reflect the 21st century in which we all live.

Sarah Atherton (Wrexham) (Con): Many women are sent to prison for low-level summary offences, and incarceration has a catastrophic effect on them and their families. The female offender strategy will see the first residential women's centre sited in Wales that will provide accommodation and rehabilitation for vulnerable women. Can the Minister give an update on the progress of that centre in Wales? Will it house a families unit?

Victoria Atkins: I am grateful to my hon. Friend because, as she will know, because she has a particular interest in the area, there are women in the criminal justice system who have been the victims of crime, including domestic abuse. Of course there are women who commit incredibly serious crimes—indeed, sadly, we have seen them in the news recently—and who must be imprisoned to serve their sentences. For the more vulnerable women who my hon. Friend talks about, however, we are looking seriously at and progressing our plans for a residential women's centre in Wales. I cannot go into more detail at the moment, but I hope that I will be able to come back with an update in due course. It will provide an alternative for judges and magistrates in dealing with those particularly vulnerable female offenders who may benefit from the sort of intensive care that we hope to provide in such a centre, rather than putting them in prison.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): At a roundtable with rape survivors last week, victims told me that they had come to terms with what had happened with them, but could not come to terms with how they had been treated by the criminal justice system. It now takes a shocking 1,000 days for a rape case to get to court, and only 1.3% of rape cases are prosecuted, so it is no surprise that victims feel that the system is working against them. Will the Minister back Labour's fully costed plans to give rape victims a legal advocate from the moment they report the crime through to trial, or will she continue the Government's failure to tackle violence against women and girls?

Victoria Atkins: I sincerely hope that the hon. Lady has welcomed the victims Bill consultation. As she will know, it has just closed, but it is very much part of this Government's work to bring the victims Bill into law to provide safeguards of the sort she indicated. In addition, we are already funding more independent domestic violence advisers and independent sexual violence advisers. These people can really help from the very moment a victim feels able to report their crime to the police, and they have that support when they need it. I also think, as I say, that using the helpline—the 24 hours a day helpline—we are setting up for victims of sexual violence may be the first step some victims feel able to take before reporting the crime to the police.

Finally, I very much hope that we can persuade the Opposition to support the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill. It has many measures to help tackle violence against women and girls, but in particular we are raising the period of time that violent offenders and sexual offenders spend in prison from half to two thirds if they receive a sentence of more than four years. This is a really important step, and I very much hope the Opposition will support us in our efforts to keep dangerous sexual offenders in prison.

Restorative Justice

6. Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): What steps he is taking to help increase the use of restorative justice. [905501]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Tom Pursglove): The new victims code sets out clearly that victims must be told about the option of restorative justice and how to access it. We are enshrining the code in law, and for 2021-22 we are providing £115 million of grant funding to police and crime commissioners for victim support services, including restorative justice. Overall, we are increasing MOJ funding for victim and witness support services to £185 million by 2024-25.

Elliot Colburn: As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on restorative justice, I have seen how it can massively help both offenders and victims of crime. Would the Minister agree to meet me to discuss the findings of the first ever APPG report on restorative justice and how we can integrate some of its recommendations into the victims Bill?

Tom Pursglove: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend, who is a tireless campaigner on the issue of restorative justice, for sharing the APPG's report with me and my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister, who I know has also thanked him for his efforts. We are carefully considering its recommendations and will respond

in due course. I am particularly mindful of the fact that, especially in relation to acquisitive crime, restorative justice can play a significant part in righting such wrongs, and I would of course be delighted to meet him to discuss this further.

Domestic Abuse: Prosecutions

8. **Laura Farris** (Newbury) (Con): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help increase the number of successful prosecutions for domestic abuse. [R] [905504]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Dominic Raab): This Government are committed to bringing more perpetrators of domestic abuse to justice. It is a key plank of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, which creates new offences such as non-fatal strangulation, and extends the coercive or controlling behaviour offence to include former partners.

Laura Farris: The excellent work the Government have done on domestic abuse risks being seriously undermined by recent reports of Met police conduct published by the Independent Office for Police Conduct. One officer who had attended a domestic abuse incident said of his victim that she was mad and deserved a slap. As Members of this House will know, that was the tip of the iceberg of the remarks uncovered. Police conduct is of course the subject matter of the Angiolini inquiry, but before that concludes, what work is my right hon. Friend doing with the Home Secretary to ensure that domestic abuse victims retain confidence in the criminal justice system?

Dominic Raab: I thank my hon. Friend, who is absolutely right. The remarks she cited are utterly abhorrent I would imagine to everyone on all sides of the House. The public rightly expect the behaviour of the police to be beyond reproach, which is why we have tasked the Angiolini inquiry, as she said. In addition to that work, as my right hon. Friend the Minister for Crime and Policing set out last week, inspections are ongoing in forces across England and Wales to judge their vetting and counter-corruption capabilities. More broadly, we are of course taking forward the victims Bill consultation and we have increased funding for support services. They have actually increased to £185 million by 2024-25, which will help fund an increase—by about a half, up to 1,000—in the number of independent domestic abuse advisers. So we will keep showing zero tolerance of domestic abuse while those wider inquiries are ongoing.

Anna McMorris (Cardiff North) (Lab): Domestic abuse victims face the trauma of first, gaining the courage to report it, fearing for themselves and their children's safety, wondering whether they did the right thing and whether their truth will be believed, then they face this broken justice system: being cross-examined, questioned and treated like a criminal. With prosecutions collapsing and criminals being let off the hook, the Government cannot keep letting victims and survivors of domestic abuse down, so will the Secretary of State commit to putting in place a proper package of training, specialist support and trauma counselling for all victims of domestic abuse and their children?

Dominic Raab: I totally agree with the hon. Lady's sentiment and frustration. We need to do more. We have got the local criminal justice scorecards, which will deal with not just wider crime, but rape. Those are coming up in the first quarter of this year. The victims strategy and the victims consultation will put victims at the centre of the justice system. That is important: I think it is a moral duty, but it will also make us more effective in delivering prosecutions. We also have a wider domestic abuse strategy, which will be outlined later in the year. As the hon. Lady knows, we have introduced in the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill an extension of the time limit for reporting domestic abuse and common assault and battery to give victims of domestic abuse longer to come forward with their claims and to prevent the perpetrators from finding themselves timed out.

Sexual Offences: Timeliness of Cases

9. **Maria Eagle** (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the timeliness of cases involving allegations of sexual offences. [905505]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Victoria Atkins): In June, we published the end-to-end rape review report and action plan, which examined forensically each stage of the criminal justice system response to rape. As part of that, we are publishing timeliness data for each part of the criminal justice system in our new national and soon-to-be-released local scorecards, allowing us to increase transparency and hold agencies to account for delivering across the system.

Maria Eagle: According to the latest figures from last September, 23% of the cases waiting in the Crown court backlog have been outstanding for more than a year. That is up from 15% in the previous September. The National Audit Office says that rape and serious sexual offence cases have been disproportionately affected by those delays. Does the Minister therefore agree that victims of such crimes should not be expected to wait for years and years and years to get justice and that the increasing delays are a shameful indication that the Government have lost their grip on tackling serious crime?

Victoria Atkins: If I may correct the hon. Lady, the Crown court backlog is beginning to come down. We all welcome that, following an investment of £250 million by the Government to ensure that that happens. On the data, I hope that she has had the opportunity to look at the national scorecards. She will see how detailed they are. Recent timeliness data shows that timeliness for adult rape cases has improved slightly from the second quarter of last year. I do not take that as job done by any means. This will be a very long journey, involving every aspect of the criminal justice system, to give victims the confidence to report and then remain with a case. I hope that she will see that our work through the rape review looks at not just timeliness, but all the other levers we have at our disposal to try to improve the situation.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): The delays across our courts system cause lasting damage to the lives of victims, defendants, witnesses and their families. I was therefore very surprised to hear that yet another

Nightingale court—Monument this time—is closing in a couple of months, when the delays in criminal cases, including sexual offences cases, recently reached a record high. Will the Minister explain why that is happening, confirm the Department's plans for the remaining or any new Nightingale courts and let us know just how much longer that vital resource will be available?

Victoria Atkins: In an effort to help the hon. Gentleman, I point out that we have extended 32 Nightingale Crown courtrooms until April and we have opened two new super-courtrooms in Manchester and Loughborough. In the Crown court, the outstanding case load reduced from around 61,000 cases last June to around 58,700 cases at the end of November. As I say, we do not in any way say that this is job done. We will continue to invest in this, but the figures are beginning to go in the right direction after the pandemic.

Family Courts: Delays

10. **Stephen Timms** (East Ham) (Lab): What steps he is taking to reduce delays in the family courts. [905506]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (James Cartlidge): We are determined to reduce delays and bring down waiting times in the courts to reduce the impact the pandemic has had on children and their families. We invested £0.25 billion to support recovery in our courts in the last financial year, and that included £76 million to increase capacity to hear cases in the family and civil courts, as well as in tribunals. Last year's spending review provided £324 million over the next three years to further improve waiting times in the civil and family courts and tribunals.

Stephen Timms: In east London the position is getting worse. The delays in the east London family court are the worst in London. Several months ago we were told that parts of east London would be transferred to other courts to ease the problems, but nothing seems to have happened so far and families are now having to wait a minimum of seven months for a hearing. When will we finally see some progress on this? Do we not need additional court capacity?

James Cartlidge: I hear what the right hon. Gentleman says. I can confirm that the Government and senior judiciary are working closely together to increase the sitting capacity across the east London cluster. In recognition of the pressure on family work across the east London estate, a Nightingale court was created at Petty France, with four additional courts, and additional courts are being utilised at Stratford magistrates and the Royal Court of Justice. But I recognise that this is an important issue for his constituents and I would be more than happy to meet him to talk about what more we can do.

Criminal Courts: Backlog of Cases

11. **James Daly** (Bury North) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to reduce the backlog of cases before the criminal courts. [905507]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (James Cartlidge): We are already seeing the results of our efforts to tackle the impact the pandemic has had on our justice system. In the magistrates courts, the caseload is close to recovering to pre-pandemic levels

and, as we have just heard, in the Crown court the outstanding case load has reduced from around 61,000 cases in June 2021 to around 58,700 cases at the end of November 2021. I can confirm that in the next financial year we expect to get through 20% more Crown court cases than we did in the year previous to covid.

James Daly: Will my hon. Friend update the House on how his Department is working to ensure we maximise use of the current court estate, including courtrooms not used during the pandemic, and what view he takes on the continued role of Nightingale courts to address the backlog?

James Cartlidge: My hon. Friend speaks with great expertise as a former criminal solicitor. In terms of Nightingales, as I have said, we extended 32 Crown Nightingale courtrooms until the end of March and we are taking steps to extend individual Nightingale courtrooms on a case-by-case basis. He makes the crucial point about the existing estate in our courts, which is where the custody cell capacity is, and we need that to come back into use.

Two key decisions were made to help us to bring those rooms back into use. First, last summer we came out of lockdown at the earliest opportunity while others were suggesting we should remain in lockdown. Secondly, this Christmas we did not panic, we did not lockdown and we listened to the data. If we had gone with the recommendation from the Labour party in the Administration in Wales, we would have had 2-metre social distancing back in our Crown courtrooms. Fortunately, I spoke to the Counsel General in Wales, and they took measures to be more flexible and were able to keep the courts open, which is why the backlog is now falling.

Mr Speaker: So I can look forward to Chorley courts being reopened—excellent.

Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): The average time between a victim reporting a rape and the case coming to trial has just hit a record high of more than 1,000 days, thanks to the Government's courts backlog. Many rape victims live in fear of being confronted by their attacker if they have to wait so long for the case to come to trial. Can he tell victims why the delay in getting justice is still far too long?

James Cartlidge: The volume of convictions for rape has actually just increased, but I hear what the hon. Gentleman says about timeliness. As the Minister of State, Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins) pointed out earlier, the backlog is now falling. It has fallen significantly in the Crown court, but of course we will continue to take steps to improve it. We have taken a whole range of positive steps to battle the backlog. Importantly, we have taken the Judicial Review and Courts Bill through the House: his party opposed it. We keep coming up with constructive measures to deal with the backlog, but the Opposition oppose them and fail to come up with any constructive suggestions of their own.

Steve Reed: I am afraid that to many victims who are waiting nearly three years for their case to come to trial that response will sound very complacent. The Bar

Council has told the Government that their proposal to give magistrates more sentencing powers could make the backlog even worse because it would lead to more defendants choosing to go to Crown court, where there is already a very significant backlog. Are the Government making a bad situation worse because they do not have a clue what they are doing or because they have gone soft on crime?

James Cartlidge: We are not going to take any lectures on being soft on crime from a party that voted against our measures to toughen sentences for serious sexual and violent offences. Labour Members voted against that in the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill, so we will not take any lectures. The key thing is this: we keep taking positive measures—we have mentioned the super-courts and the Nightingale courts—and they keep opposing them. They have not yet come up with a single constructive suggestion. We are putting the investment in place, with £477 million in the spending review. At some point the hon. Gentleman will have to come up with a constructive suggestion, not just carp from the Opposition Benches.

Drug Use in Prisons

12. **Simon Fell** (Barrow and Furness) (Con): What recent progress he has made on tackling drug use in prisons. [905508]

The Minister for Crime and Policing (Kit Malthouse): Before I begin, may I associate myself with the spontaneous expression of fealty by the Minister of State, Ministry of Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins) towards Her Majesty? We do a lot in our Department at Her Majesty's pleasure and I know that my hon. Friend's remarks will have added to her good humour this morning. Before Christmas, we published a 10-year drug strategy that will reduce overall illegal drug use across the whole of the country, with a huge investment in treatment and recovery. Making sure that all prisons have a zero-tolerance approach towards drugs is critical to our success in that regard.

Simon Fell: I thank my right hon. Friend for his response. Drugs are responsible for about half of all acquisitive crime, burglaries and robberies in the UK, so if we hope to give people who are leaving the prison estate a chance in the future, we have to drive down drug use within that estate. With that in mind, does he agree that the only way we are going to drive those figures down is through improved security measures and abstinence-based treatment?

Kit Malthouse: My hon. Friend has put his finger on the button. Too often in dealing with drugs we imagine there is a silver bullet, whereas in fact we need a suite of tools to attack both demand and supply. He is right that increased security in prisons is critical, making sure we have a ring of steel to ensure it is very hard for drugs to penetrate the secure estate, but also that we invest in treatment and rehabilitation, not least as prisoners leave the secure estate. You will be pleased to know, Mr Speaker, that last year we secured funding, and ongoing, that will ensure everybody who does need a treatment place on exiting a prison will secure one. He is right that it is totally critical for our assault on acquisitive crime that we get that approach correct. I would just point him towards a new development in this area, which is the

roll-out of what is called depot buprenorphine. That is, effectively, a new inoculation against heroin and opium addiction, which we think holds out enormous promise.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): Just look at the state of our prisons: drugs up 500% in the last 10 years; violence up by more than 100% between 2010 and 2020; and almost 12,000 frontline prison officers leaving the service since 2016. With prisons in crisis, it is no wonder that reoffending rates are, staggeringly, over 40%. The Government are failing to keep the public safe. When are they finally going to get to grips with this?

Kit Malthouse: The hon. Lady, as usual, gives a partial picture. She will know that reoffending rates now are lower than they ever were under the Labour party and we continue to make inroads into that number, pushing hard—critically, between the two Departments, the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice—to get the number down. She will know, of course, that since the last quarter of 2018, assaults in prisons are on a downward trend. Look, we are not pretending that the picture of the prison estate is entirely rosy—there is still lots more to do—but the Government have recently announced enormous investments, not least in drug rehabilitation and treatment both within and outside the secure estate, and we believe that will make a huge difference.

Reform of Family Law

13. **Andrew Bridgen** (North West Leicestershire) (Con): What plans the Government have to reform family law. [905509]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (James Cartlidge): We are committed to reforming family law to reduce conflict, protect children and protect victims of domestic abuse. The Divorce, Dissolution and Separation Act 2020 will commence on 6 April. This is the biggest change to divorce law in 50 years and introduces no-fault divorce to reduce conflict. Courts in Dorset and north Wales will pilot new integrated domestic abuse courts from 21 February, introducing a less adversarial way of hearing private family law cases, and we are supporting the private Member's Bill from my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) to raise the age of marriage to 18 in England and Wales.

Andrew Bridgen: The current system for child maintenance, administered by the Child Maintenance Service, clearly financially incentivises resident parents to withhold contact with children from non-resident parents. Does the Minister think that this is a fairer system for children and parents alike?

James Cartlidge: My hon. Friend asks an important question. I can confirm that Baroness Stedman-Scott is the Minister with responsibility for the Child Maintenance Service at the Department for Work and Pensions, and I would be more than happy to put him in touch with her on that specific point. Child maintenance calculations can be adjusted to reflect a situation where care of the child is shared between both parents. That reduction is intended to broadly reflect the cost associated with any care that is given. The calculation is not intended to take into account every aspect of a person's circumstances. Bespoke rules that aim to reflect each family's individual and changing situation will result in complexity and delay money getting to children.

Safety in Prisons

14. **Grahame Morris** (Easington) (Lab): What steps he is taking to improve safety in prisons. [905510]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Victoria Atkins): Prison staff carry out a vital role in protecting the public, and we must do all we can to protect them and the prisoners in their care. That is why in the prisons strategy White Paper we have committed to a zero-tolerance approach to crime and drugs, which fuel violence behind bars. We have introduced the key worker role into the Prison Service to support individual prisoners and to try to deal with problems before they escalate, and we are providing PAVA spray and body-worn video cameras to prison officers to help them to protect themselves.

Grahame Morris: I thank the Minister for that response, but since I presented my Bill to reduce violence in prisons—the Prisons (Violence) Bill—last month, numerous prison officers have contacted me to share their experiences of being attacked at work. I noticed that the Minister was nodding during the presentation of the Bill. Will she listen to her prison staff and back the provisions in my Bill to reduce violence, including the obvious step of counting all kinds of violence, not just the most serious cases, against prisoners or staff as key performance indicators or management targets for every prison?

Victoria Atkins: The hon. Gentleman talks about an issue on which there is agreement across the House. I do not think that anyone in the House wants to see our brave prison officers hurt or put at risk in their place of work. That is completely unacceptable, which is why I was nodding along through his comments on his Bill. I recognise many of the points that he rightly made in presenting his ten-minute rule motion. We note, however, that Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service and private prison providers are already subject to statutory duties to protect staff and prisoners from violence. We have committed to further work to improve the safety of everybody behind prison walls through our prisons strategy White Paper, including—I am delighted to say—by March this year, the completion of our £100 million security investment programme to root out the drugs, phones and other illicit items that can play such a terrible role in the safety of our prisons.

Topical Questions

T1. [905522] **Luke Pollard** (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Dominic Raab): Over the last month, I have met offenders participating in the community payback scheme in Birmingham, prisoners at HMP Hatfield who are being supported back into work in partnership with the charity Tempus Novo, and frontline staff at HMP Frankland working to tackle extremism and terrorism, including through their separation centre.

Luke Pollard: On behalf of the prison officers I represent in Plymouth, I ask the Secretary of State: now that he has dropped his plans to close Dartmoor prison,

what plans does he have to invest in facilities at the dilapidated prison to ensure that it can be a safe and humane environment again?

Dominic Raab: I am happy to write to the hon. Gentleman about that particular prison in his constituency. He will know that we are investing almost £4 billion over the next three years to deliver 20,000 additional modern prison places by the mid-2020s. I have been to look at some of the advantages that they can have, including at Glen Parva prison, which has started the operational build. It is not just about the numbers; it is also about such things as the in-cell technology and workshops that can be a pathway to get offenders to go clean and get into work, in order to cut reoffending and protect the public.

T2. [905523] **Sarah Atherton** (Wrexham) (Con): Wrexham houses the newest and largest prison in the UK, HMP Berwyn, with a criminal justice network to support it. Wrexham is therefore the perfect place to locate a justice satellite hub, and I welcome the relocation of hundreds of jobs to Wales under the levelling-up White Paper. Does my hon. Friend agree that this is proof that the Government have a commitment to the seats that Labour left behind?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (James Cartlidge): My hon. Friend is an absolute champion of her constituency and she is right to want it to get its place in the levelling-up agenda. As she said, the Ministry of Justice is already a major employer in Wrexham through HMP Berwyn, which employs around 750 staff directly and over 250 more through partner organisations. We also have two courts in Wrexham employing around 100 staff. The key point, as detailed in the levelling-up White Paper, is that our Department is committed to moving more than 2,000 roles from London to the regions by 2030, of which 500 roles will be moved to Wales as a demonstration of our full support for strengthening the Union. This will include a number of locations, particularly Wrexham.

T3. [905524] **Kate Green** (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Women leaving custody without a safe and secure home risk harm to themselves and to the public, but many of those women are not captured in official homelessness statistics. Will Ministers commit to rolling out the temporary accommodation service to all probation areas this year, and to extending support for vulnerable women to get into permanent housing beyond 12 weeks?

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Victoria Atkins): I thank the hon. Lady for her point about the important role that accommodation plays in resettling women. I know that she will take comfort from the fact that nearly 23% fewer women are in custody than in 2010, but of course work continues and we need to ensure that women as well as male prisoners are set up for their life on release. Although the prisons strategy White Paper focuses on the male estate, because that is where the majority of offenders reside, it applies equally to the female estate. I hope that the hon. Lady will take some time to look at resettlement passports, for example, to see what we believe can really make a difference to the life chances of those who are given that second chance.

T5. [905526] **Scott Benton** (Blackpool South) (Con): Reforming our broken asylum system and tackling illegal immigration is in part dependent on reforming the Human Rights Act. The British people expect action on the issue, so how quickly can we expect firm proposals to reform the HRA, following the end of the consultation next month?

Dominic Raab: I thank my hon. Friend for his support. He is right that across a whole suite of issues, including illegal migration, the proposals for a Bill of Rights with common-sense, sensible reforms will help us to address the problems. Once the consultation results come back, we will want to listen very carefully and proceed to legislation in the next Session.

T8. [905529] **Gill Furniss** (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): When my constituent Neil was 27, they discovered that they were the product of rape. Although they had been adopted as a baby by a loving and supportive family, this left them feeling hollow, cut adrift, scared and alone. Thanks to Share Psychotherapy, a fantastic charity based in Sheffield, Neil got the support that they needed, but so many like them do not have such services available. Will the Secretary of State commit to recognising in law those conceived from rape as victims?

Dominic Raab: May I thank the hon. Lady and express my solidarity in the awful and harrowing case that she refers to? If she writes to me, I will be happy to look at her specific proposal.

The overall level of funding for victims this year is three times the level in 2010. Through the victims Bill consultation, we are ensuring that victims are at the very heart of the criminal justice system. Our local as well as national justice scorecards will help to monitor where there is best practice within the justice system and where we are falling short, right across the country.

T6. [905527] **Damien Moore** (Southport) (Con): The Judicial Review and Courts Bill—I served on the Public Bill Committee—will allow a few low-level crimes to be dealt with automatically online. Will the Minister consider extending that provision to help clear the courts backlog?

James Cartlidge: My hon. Friend, who put in a great shift on the Committee, makes an excellent point. The Judicial Review and Courts Bill will introduce a new procedure for certain low-level offences such as travelling on a train without a ticket, enabling defendants who wish to plead guilty to make a plea and accept a conviction and standard penalty entirely online, without the involvement of the court. Given that it is a new type of procedure for dealing with certain minor offences, we are proceeding with caution and limiting its scope initially to three offences. However, new offences could be added in future. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that through precisely such steps and through the single justice procedure, we will reduce in-person pressure on magistrates so that we can move more business from the Crown court to magistrates and bear down on the backlog.

Abena Oppong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): There are three prisons in my constituency, Belmarsh, Thameside and Isis, which a lot of my constituents

work in. Prison officers and other justice staff go into work to protect us, but the Government are failing to protect them at work. One cause of increasing violence in prison is understaffing. Can the Minister tell us what the Government are doing to tackle the recruitment and retention crisis?

Victoria Atkins: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to say that our officers and staff are a critical part of protecting the public through our prisons. Without those staff and officers, our prisons simply do not function. The Deputy Prime Minister and I are looking intensively at not only the pay but the other conditions under which officers and staff are working. The hon. Lady will appreciate that we are about to enter into the pay round review, which is done by the independent body. We take that very seriously. As I have said, I also want to look at the conditions for staff and officers working in prisons, because they are the hidden emergency service that keeps us safe day in, day out.

Dr James Davies (Vale of Clwyd) (Con): What plans are there to take heed of the National Audit Office's recent comments on the delivery of the female offender strategy? Can I highlight community solutions such as the North Wales Women's Centre in my constituency, which provides support to help tackle the root causes of crime, such as domestic abuse and poverty?

Victoria Atkins: I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend for highlighting the vulnerabilities of some female offenders. We are very much committed to delivering the female offender strategy by reducing the number of women in custody and seeing a greater proportion of women managed in the community. We are investing £9.5 million in women's community sector organisations, and the North Wales Women's Centre received nearly £50,000 of that investment last year. I commend him and the women's centre for doing such important work in his constituency.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): The Justice Secretary will have heard the exchange with the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers). He should be aware that there is a cohort of IRA murderers who have evaded justice, successfully fought extradition and now abide in other countries. Would he consider any Government proposals to deal with the legacy of our past to be morally repugnant if those individuals were allowed to come home and retire with a level of dignity that they never offered to their victims?

Dominic Raab: I do understand the level of pain, suffering and anxiety that the hon. Gentleman has expressed. I can understand it from communities on all sides of the troubles and the conflict, which is why the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has come forward with a set of proposals that offer a balanced approach and that we hope will allow those communities on both sides to move forward.

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): In Darlington, organisations such as Family Help provide specialist domestic abuse support for women and children fleeing abuse. Our landmark Domestic Abuse Act 2021 sets out a framework for the delivery of support locally. Will my hon. Friend outline the progress being made towards establishing domestic abuse local partnership boards and the role that local organisations will play?

Victoria Atkins: I thank my hon. Friend for the tireless work that he put into the Committee that scrutinised the Domestic Abuse Bill. I am delighted to confirm that all tier 1 local authorities have set up domestic abuse local partnership boards, in line with the Act, to provide them with advice on the provision of the specialist services that are such an important part of that landmark Act. I genuinely encourage all Members across the House to engage with those boards to see what they are doing for their local communities and how they are helping their constituents.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State's defence of free speech earlier today, but the truth is that free speech is under attack in our courts. Tom Burgis is appearing in court today against oligarchs who are seeking to silence him. When will the Secretary of State bring forward a defence against strategic lawsuits against public participation—SLAPPs? If we want to live in truth, we need SLAPP-back laws now.

Dominic Raab: The right hon. Gentleman is not the only one who has raised this with me; my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) has also been campaigning on it. I am very happy to look at the specific issue. The House has periodically looked at questions of libel law and we will keep those issues under constant review. As I have said in relation to a Bill of Rights, this is an opportunity to reinvent the priority attached to freedom of speech.

Jane Stevenson (Wolverhampton North East) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the focus on getting prisoners into stable employment when they leave prison has been critical in achieving the current reoffending rates, which are lower than they were under Labour? Can he also outline to the House what further measures he can take in this area?

Dominic Raab: I totally agree with my hon. Friend. I was at HMP Hatfield just last week, looking at the excellent work that the governor is doing with a local charity, Tempus Novo. One of the issues is the weighting attached to this key performance indicator, which is far too low. It is currently below 1%, which is extraordinary to me, and it will be ramped up as part of the review in the prisons White Paper. It will be much more central to the work that all prisons do and we are making it a presumption that offenders can be given a pathway into employment when it is suitable and secure to do so.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Although the justice system clearly has a role to play in prosecuting offences against women and girls, it is equally important that young men and boys grow up in an environment where they understand that misogyny, in all forms, is unacceptable. With that in mind, will the Minister join me in commending the fans of Raith Rovers football club, who last week forced the club to reverse its decision to give a playing contract to someone who, in two separate court hearings, had been found guilty of rape and who refused to show any remorse for his crimes? Does the Minister agree that, given the important role models that professional footballers are for young men and boys, there must be serious doubts as to whether that is a job that can ever be performed by an unrepentant and unreconstructed rapist?

Dominic Raab: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that that is absolutely abhorrent and of course I think that the club in question took the right decision. As the father of two young boys, I take very seriously, as we in Government should take seriously, and we in this House should take seriously, how we raise our children, and the level of education and awareness of these issues. We are taking a whole suite of measures, from the local justice scorecards to the victims Bill, the violence against women and girls strategy and the rape action review. But it is incumbent on businesses, including football clubs, which are so high profile, to make the right calls, as the football club has done in this case.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): Will the Minister commit to supporting victims of sexual abuse in the victims Bill in ways such as by rolling out section 28?

Dominic Raab: I absolutely endorse what my hon. Friend said. She will have seen that section 28, which deals with pre-recorded evidence from victims of rape, is set out in there. We will be articulating more clearly a plan to move from the limited trials we have at the moment to a national roll-out, which will be done in the first half of this year.

Jane Hunt (Loughborough) (Con): Two excellent support providers in Loughborough, the Exaireo Trust and the Carpenter's Arms, look after people who have been repeat offenders and/or suffered from addiction for many years. As one resident put it, they were "lost, broken and with no hope".

These two organisations completely transform the lives of those residents in their service. What is my right hon. Friend doing to work with local providers and support these organisations financially to help people into work?

The Minister for Crime and Policing (Kit Malthouse): I congratulate my hon. Friend and those organisations on their fantastic work. She is right that, if we are going to get ahead particularly of acquisitive crime, we have to look at the root causes of people's offending and so often that is drug addiction. As part of our 10-year drugs strategy, we are committed to binding together coalitions of organisations, including the kind of organisations she described, to make an assault on this kind of crime and addiction in every area of the United Kingdom.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Later this month, the best new prison will be opened in Wellingborough, on the site of the old prison. It is a strange time that we live in, because the same Department that is opening that prison wanted to close it years ago. A young councillor in my constituency, who represented the Croyland ward, put a community group together to save it. I wonder whether the Under-Secretary has any knowledge of that.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Tom Pursglove): I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who is always innovative in his questions. I well remember that campaign. It is funny how these things come around. I am delighted that the Ministry of Justice has changed its mind and that this new super-prison is going to

open, which is going to employ his constituents and mine. It is fair to say that he listened, campaigned and delivered.

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): As my right hon. Friend knows, I take every opportunity to champion the work of the Private Law Working Group and the Family Solutions Group. In 2020, their reports clearly set out the need for change in family law and why it is really important that we do that for families. What steps is he taking to increase the resolution of family disputes inside and outside courts?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I recently met the President of the Family Division. About 60% of the cases that go there, certainly on the civil side, are safeguarding or domestic abuse cases. They ought to go there, but for the rest we need to be looking at the incentives and disincentives, the use of mediation and the whole structure of the system to prevent these harrowing cases—they are particularly harrowing for children. In any event, many cases do not need to go through the courts and I am working with the judiciary to try to achieve that reform.

Elective Treatment

12.34 pm

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Sajid Javid): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on a new, ambitious elective recovery plan—the NHS's delivery plan for tackling the covid-19 backlog of elective care.

The NHS has responded with distinction during the country's fight against the virus, caring for over 700,000 people with covid-19 in hospital in the UK and delivering a vaccination programme that is helping this country to learn to live with the virus, while at the same time doing so much to keep non-covid care going. Nobody—no institution—felt the burden of the pandemic more than the NHS. There have been 17 million cases of covid-19 and the NHS has had to respond to the original variant, the alpha wave, the delta wave and, most recently, of course, the omicron wave. Despite these pressures, we had one of the fastest vaccination programmes in the world, including one of the fastest booster programmes in the world.

Sadly, as a result of focusing on urgent care, the NHS could not deal with non-urgent care as much as anyone would have liked. The British people have of course understood this. Despite those exceptional efforts, there is now a considerable covid backlog of elective care. About 1,600 people waited longer than a year for care before the pandemic. The latest data shows that this figure is now over 300,000. On top of this, the number of people waiting for elective care in England now stands at 6 million, up from 4.4 million before the pandemic. Sadly, that number will continue rising before it falls.

A lot of people understandably stayed away from the NHS during the heights of the pandemic, and the most up-to-date estimate from the NHS is that that number is around 10 million. But I want these people to know that the NHS is open and, as Health Secretary, I want them to come forward for the care they need. We do not know how many will now come forward—we do not know whether it will be 30% or 80%—because no country has faced a situation like this ever before. So in developing this plan, the NHS has had to make a number of assumptions. Even if half of these people come forward, this is going to place huge demand on the NHS, and we are pulling out all the stops so that the NHS is there for them when they do. We have already announced that we are backing the NHS with an extra £2 billion of funding for elective recovery this year and £8 billion on top of that over the next three years. In addition, we are putting almost an additional £6 billion towards capital investment for new beds, equipment and technology.

Today we are announcing the next steps, showing how we will help this country's health and care system to recover from the disruption of the pandemic but also how we will make reforms that are so important for the long-term future. That will allow the NHS to perform at least 9 million extra tests, checks and procedures by 2025 and around 30% more elective activity each year in three years' time than it was doing before the pandemic. This bold and radical vision has been developed with expert input from clinical leaders and patient groups. It will not just reset the NHS to where it was before covid but build on what we have learned over the past two years to transform elective services and make sure that they are fit for the future.

This plan focuses on four key areas. The first is how we will increase capacity. On top of enormous levels of investment, we are doing everything in our power to make sure that we have even more clinicians on the frontline. We now have more doctors and nurses working in the NHS than ever before. We have a record number of students at medical school and a record number of students applying to train as nurses. The plan sets out what more we will be doing, including more healthcare support workers and the recruitment and deployment of NHS reservists. We will also be making greater use of the independent sector, which formed an important part of our contingency plans for covid-19, so that we can help patients to access the services they need at this time of high demand.

Secondly, as we look at the backlog, we will not just strive to get numbers down but prioritise by clinical need and reduce the very longest waiting lists. Assuming that half the missing demand from the pandemic returns over the next three years, the NHS expects the waiting list to be reducing by March 2024. Addressing long waits is critical to the recovery of elective care, and we will be actively offering longer-waiting patients greater choice about their care to help to bring down these numbers.

The plan sets the ambition of eliminating waits of longer than a year for elective care by March 2025. Within this, no one will wait longer than two years by July 2022, and the NHS aims to eliminate waits of over 18 months by April 2023 and of over 65 weeks by March 2024, which equates to 99% of patients waiting less than a year.

I have heard the concerns that have rightly been raised, including by many hon. Members, about the pandemic's impact on cancer care. On Friday, World Cancer Day, I launched a call for evidence that will drive a new 10-year cancer plan for England, a vision for how we can lead the world in cancer care. This elective recovery plan, too, places a big focus on restoring cancer services.

The NHS has done sterling work to prioritise cancer treatment throughout the pandemic, and we have consistently seen record levels of referrals since March 2021, but waiting times have gone up and fewer people came forward with cancer symptoms during the pandemic. The plan shows how we will intensify our campaigns to encourage more people to come forward, focusing on areas where referrals have been slowest to recover such as lung cancer and prostate cancer. It also sets out some stretching ambitions for how we will recover and improve performance in cancer care: returning the number of people waiting more than 62 days following an urgent referral to pre-pandemic levels by March 2023; and ensuring that 75% of patients who have been urgently referred by their GP for suspected cancer are diagnosed or have cancer ruled out within 28 days by March 2024.

I am determined that we tackle the disparities that exist in this backlog, just as I am determined to tackle disparities of any kind across this country. Analysis from the King's Fund shows that, on average, a person is almost twice as likely to experience a wait of over a year if they live in a deprived area. As part of our recovery work, we are tasking the NHS with analysing its waiting list data according to factors such as age, deprivation and ethnicity to help to drive detailed plans to tackle these disparities.

Thirdly, this new chapter for the NHS provides an opportunity to radically rethink and redesign how services are delivered, to bust the backlog and to deliver more flexible, personalised care for patients. The pandemic has shown beyond doubt the importance of diagnostics. Although over 96% of people needing a diagnostic test received it within six weeks prior to the pandemic, the latest data shows that has fallen to 75%. Our aim is to get back to 95% by March 2025.

A major part of this will be expanding the use of community diagnostic centres, which have already had a huge impact. These one-stop shops for checks, scans and tests help people to get a quicker diagnosis and, therefore, the treatment they need much earlier. Sixty-nine community diagnostic centres are already up and running, and the plan shows our intention to have at least 100 in local communities and on high streets over the next three years.

We will also keep expanding the use of surgical hubs, which will be dedicated to planned, elective surgeries. They will allow us to do more surgeries in a single day than can be carried out in out-patient settings, so that we can fast-track operations and ensure that patients are more likely to go home on the same day. We have already been piloting these hubs, and we will now be rolling them out across the country.

Finally, we will improve the information and support for patients. I know the anxiety that patients feel when they are waiting for care, especially if they feel that they do not have certainty about where they sit in the queue, and I am determined to ensure that, as we enter this next phase, we will be open and transparent with patients. We will be launching a new online platform called My Planned Care, which will go live this month, offering patients and their carers tailored information ahead of their planned surgery. They will be able to see waiting times for their provider, so they can better understand their expected wait. A third of on-the-day cancellations are due to people not being clinically ready for treatment, and the new platform will also be able to link patients to the most appropriate personalised support before their surgery. This shows the approach that we will be taking in the years ahead, putting patients at the heart of their care and giving the support that they need to make informed decisions. We will also put in place a payment system that incentivises strong performance and delivers value for money for the public.

Just as we came together to fight this virus, now we must come together on a new national mission to fight what the virus has brought with it. That will mean waiting lists falling by March 2024, strong action to reduce long waiting times, and stretching targets for early diagnosis and for cancer care. This vital document shows how we will not just recover, but reform and make sure that the NHS is there for all of us, no matter what lies ahead. I commend my statement to the House.

12.46 pm

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement, but it falls seriously short of the scale of the challenge facing the NHS and the misery that is affecting millions of people stuck on record high NHS waiting lists. We have been waiting some time for his plan to tackle NHS waiting times. We were told that it would arrive before Christmas; we were told that it would arrive yesterday; and it is not

clear from his statement today that the delay was worth the wait. There is no plan to tackle the workforce crisis, no plan to deal with delayed discharges, and no hope of eliminating waits of more than a year before the general election in 2024. I wonder whether the Conservatives will be putting that on their election leaflets. The only big new idea seems to be a website that tells people that they are waiting for a long time, as if they did not already know.

Perhaps the Secretary of State can tell us whether the plan itself contains two other measures that have been floated in the press: the cancellation of patients' follow-up appointments, whether they need them or not, and an offer enabling people to seize the opportunity to travel hundreds of miles around the country, if they can find a hospital in England that does not already have a waiting list crisis of its own. What we did hear was a series of reannouncements, including some perfectly sensible proposals for community diagnostic and surgical hubs. We welcome those, but the Secretary of State cannot pretend that they meet the scale of the challenge.

The Secretary of State reaffirmed the Prime Minister's commitments on cancer, announced only yesterday. He announced a new target that no one should wait more than two months for cancer diagnosis, but there is already a target for the vast majority of cancer patients to be treated within two months of referral. Can he tell us which target he is aiming to meet? Is it the target that has not been hit since 2015, or the target announced yesterday, which seems to lower standards for patients because the Government consistently fail to meet them? The Prime Minister has also announced that three out of four patients should receive a cancer diagnosis within 28 days, but that is an existing target which was introduced in April and has never been met, and nothing that the Secretary of State has announced today gives me any confidence that it will be met in the future. Given that half a million patients with suspected cancer are not being seen in time, it seems that the Secretary of State declared a war on cancer after more than a decade of disarming the NHS, and is now sending the NHS into battle empty-handed.

Indeed, it is hard to believe that this is the announcement that the Secretary of State wanted to make. One Government official briefed Robert Peston that the plan was being blocked by the Chancellor, who is, "reluctant to rescue the Prime Minister". Putting to one side the appalling spectacle of the Tory leadership crisis impacting on life and death decision making in Government, it seems from the statement that the Chancellor has won the day. What other explanation can there be for a plan to recover the NHS and bring down waiting lists that does not contain a workforce plan? The single biggest challenge facing the NHS is the workforce challenge. There are 93,000 staffing vacancies in the NHS today. The NHS is understaffed, overworked and, if the Secretary of State is not careful, he will lose more people than he is able to recruit. This is not a new development, and it should not be news to him.

In April, the NHS called for a national workforce plan. Polling from the Health Foundation found that the public want more staff with fewer workload pressures. The Secretary of State himself told the Health and Social Care Committee in November that his plan would include a strategy for the workforce crisis. We know the NHS wants a workforce plan and the public

[*Wes Streeting*]

want a workforce plan. He promised a workforce plan, so where is it? There is not even a budget for Health Education England let alone a serious plan to recruit and retain the workforce that we need. Instead, he is proposing new NHS reservists. Who are they? Where are they coming from? How many does he imagine there will be? How does he imagine that they will make a dent in the 93,000 vacancies? It seems more “Dad’s Army” than SAS.

Then there is the issue of wider NHS and social care pressures that impact directly on waiting lists and waiting times: the pressures on GP practices that see people ringing the surgery at the crack of dawn in the hope of getting through before the appointments have gone; the pressures on social care that lead to delayed discharges from hospital, as we saw in more than 400,000 cases in November alone; and the missed opportunities and the wasted money that comes from a failure to invest in community services that lead to people turning up at A&E at greater cost to patient health and at greater cost to the taxpayer.

This plan falls well short of the challenge facing our country. Six million people are waiting for care. Cancer care is in crisis, with half a million patients with suspected cancer not seen in time. Heart and stroke victims are waiting more than two hours for an ambulance when every minute matters. It is clear from what the Secretary of State said today, from what his colleague, the Minister for Health, the hon. Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), said yesterday, and no doubt what will be heard repeated in the Tory scripts in the days and weeks to come, that the Conservatives are hoping to blame the state of NHS waiting lists on the pandemic—the “covid waiting lists”, they called them. But this is not a covid backlog; it is a Tory backlog. After a decade of Tory mismanagement, the NHS had: record waiting lists of 4.5 million before the pandemic; staff shortages of 100,000 before the pandemic; 17,000 fewer beds before the pandemic; and 112,000 vacancies in social care before the pandemic.

In conclusion, it is not just that the Government did not fix the roof while the sun was shining, they dismantled the roof and removed the floorboards. With the ceiling of their ambition that the Secretary of State outlined today being to go back to where we were before the pandemic, it is now clear that the longer that we give the Conservatives in office, the longer patients will wait.

Sajid Javid: I am surprised with the argument and the tone of the hon. Gentleman. It is 2022, not 2024. We have all come to expect the scaremongering that we have just heard from the Labour Benches at election time—that has happened in every election campaign since the war—but what I did not expect is this scaremongering from the hon. Gentleman on the plans to recover in the wake of a deadly pandemic.

I am astonished and disappointed that the hon. Gentleman is willing to stand there and claim that there is no covid backlog. [*Interruption.*] That is what he just said. He just said that there is no covid backlog. He is well aware that this country has just gone through its biggest health challenge in history. He is also well aware that there has been a national mission across the NHS to deal with that challenge and to recover from it. I paid

tribute to the hon. Gentleman just last week in this House—perhaps I was just a bit too early—when he rightly supported the nation’s vaccination programme, because he understood just how important it was. Perhaps some of his Back Benchers have now got to him, so instead of standing up for the British people, he is just thinking about his own leadership prospects in his party—perhaps that is what is actually going on.

Today, instead of doing the right thing and backing the NHS—backing the hundreds of thousands of doctors, nurses and everyone working heroically across the NHS—the hon. Gentleman decided to play party politics. A moment ago, he heard me talk about the 10 million people who the NHS estimates have stayed away from the NHS and who need reassurance from both sides of the House about what the NHS is doing. He should reconsider his approach and work together in the national interest.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): I welcome the statement and I am grateful to the Secretary of State for setting out a covid recovery plan to tackle the challenges that lie ahead. Every single Member of the House should support him in that endeavour. I ask him, however, how he will tackle the staffing crisis.

Sajid Javid: I thank my hon. Friend for her support. Over the past two years, the number of clinicians in the NHS has risen by about 40,000. In the past year, we have 10,000 more nurses, 5,000 more doctors and more people in medical school than ever before, so a huge amount of record investment is going into the workforce. Recently, I also asked the NHS to put together a long-term 10-year-plus workforce strategy and I look forward to receiving it.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): The elective care backlog is not the only crisis facing the NHS. Covid has affected the care being delivered by mental health services, primary care, emergency care, community care and social care. In the Health and Social Care Committee’s recent report on tackling the NHS backlog, we recommended that a broader national health and care recovery plan be published to set out a clear vision for how patient care will be improved. Will the Secretary of State confirm that that will be published before April, as the Committee recommended?

Sajid Javid: I thank the hon. Lady for her work on the Committee. She is right to raise the importance of mental health. Although today’s plan is focused on elective surgical procedures and diagnostics, she is right to talk about other types of care, especially mental health care. I know that she supports the huge amount of record investment going into the NHS for mental health care. Under the NHS long-term plan, it is an additional £2 billion a year. She is also right to raise the importance of patient care. I believe that there is a lot in this plan on patient care that she will support.

Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con): I welcome the statement and the national mission. I must say that for the Labour party to try to play party politics with it is a serious misjudgment. Surgical hubs have been successfully piloted in London by the Getting It Right First Time programme. As they are rolled out across the country, will the Secretary of State ensure that GIRFT continues to be properly resourced and is given a key role in leading the programme in future?

Sajid Javid: Absolutely; I agree wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend. There are already 44 surgical hubs up and running across the country, including in London. I went to see one at Moorfields, which is getting through cataract operations more quickly and seeing more people per day than ever before. He is right to talk about their importance and the funding is there in the plan to see many more of them across the nation.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The key issue seems to be the workforce. It is about trying to ensure that people do not leave the workforce now or do not leave it early. It is also about recruiting enough people, sometimes into specialties that are not necessarily the sexiest ones that people are pushed into at the beginning. For instance, there is no chance of getting diagnoses within the target set in 2018, which we now hope to meet in 2024, unless we train more pathologists every single year. This year, we will not train enough pathologists to meet the number who are leaving this year, so we are going backwards rather than forwards. How will the Secretary of State address that?

Sajid Javid: I agree with the hon. Gentleman about the importance of the workforce, especially in the context of specialisms, and pathology is a really good example. That is why we are putting record amounts of investment into the workforce and training. It is also one of the reasons why, to get a more joined-up plan in health, I have decided that Health Education England should be merged with the NHS. This will enable more joined-up thinking and much better planning for the future, especially in specialist areas.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I declare my interest as a doctor. Will the Secretary of State look again at how we structure doctors' pay and remuneration? At the moment, we are training lots of doctors—more and more of them—which is a great thing, but typically they leave in their late 50s, so we are losing a whole decade of productive medical time. That cannot go on. Will he look again to see how we can disincentivise early retirement of medical professionals?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend speaks with great experience and raises a really important issue. The short answer is yes. We have fantastic doctors throughout the NHS and more in training in medical schools than ever before, but we should also focus on retaining talent throughout the NHS. I assure him that that work has already begun.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): I am shocked that some Government Members are trying to pat each other on the back, because right now my heart is breaking for all those constituents who have emailed me to tell me that they are in fear and in pain, and what they have just heard is that that may continue for years to come. The Secretary of States talks about new tech, new hubs and new scanners, but without people to operate them they may be of limited use. Where is the plan to fill the almost 100,000 NHS vacancies?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady, like other hon. Members, is absolutely right to raise the importance of workforce. To deliver on this plan, of course we need to do so much more to keep increasing the workforce and make sure all the skills we need are there. Just last week, I believe,

the NHS published that it has more doctors, nurses and clinicians than ever before; 40,000 people have joined the NHS over the last two years, including many more doctors and nurses. Also, as I mentioned, I have asked the NHS, with HEE, which will become part of the NHS, to come up with a long-term plan. We look forward to that plan and will invest in it.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): People of a certain age, of whom, unfortunately, I am one, are terrified because they think that if something goes wrong, they might have to wait in pain for two years. We cannot wait until March 2024 to join the back of a slightly shorter queue. Then we see our friends who have private health insurance—I am not one of them; we cannot afford it—being seen within days. May I suggest a policy that would be wildly popular with many of our own supporters, which every Conservative Government until 1997 followed, which is to give tax relief to private health insurance? Why not look at every innovative solution that unleashes new money? Before the Secretary of State says that that is a matter for the Chancellor, will he at least put it at the back of his mind, so that when he next talks to the Chancellor they will at least discuss it?

Sajid Javid: I am always pleased to talk with my right hon. Friend about his ideas and suggestions, and I am happy to meet him to discuss this further, but I am sure he agrees with me on the importance of making sure that we invest in the NHS and the workforce so that they can deal with as many people as possible.

Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab): Across the country, millions of people are waiting for potentially life-changing procedures, and it is absolutely right that every effort be made to bring this backlog down, but the Secretary of State should be aware of just how big an ask he is making of frontline staff. This will be a herculean effort, especially for all those who have spent the last two years on the frontline of the fight against covid-19. When he considers the enormous sacrifices that NHS workers have made over the course of this pandemic and everything that they will be asked to do in the very difficult months ahead, will the Secretary of State concede that last year's 3% pay rise was pitiful and commit to giving our healthcare heroes the substantial pay rise they truly deserve?

Sajid Javid: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that all those working in health, and social care for that matter, have been the heroes of this pandemic. Everything that they have delivered and gone through over the last two years is something that the whole nation will respect. He is right to also point out that the expectation over the next few years for delivering on the plan is very high, and the workforce of course deserve maximum support. When it comes to pay, it is right that the Government listen to the independent pay review bodies, which will take into account a number of factors, and that is exactly what we did last year.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for coming to the House and making this announcement here first. Does he agree that, as other Members have said, particularly Opposition Members, we need to increase the workforce? How then can the mandatory vaccination of NHS health workers,

[Mr Peter Bone]

which was going to lose us 80,000 people, possibly have been right? We knew the covid backlog was there, so how on earth was that ever a good policy? I know that Opposition Members supported it hugely, but Conservative Members had their doubts. Was it not a wrong decision?

Sajid Javid: I agree with my hon. Friend about the importance of the workforce, but I am afraid I do not agree with his comments about the plans for mandatory vaccination. I will not go through the details again; I did make a statement to the House on that last week, and in fact it was supported by the vast majority of Members of this House. The short answer to his question is that it is all about patient safety. The Government and the NHS are always absolutely right to put patient safety first, and although the Government have now, in the light of omicron, rightly changed their plans, it is still the professional responsibility of everyone working in healthcare to get vaccinated.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I am grateful for what the Secretary of State said about diagnostic hubs. Will he investigate personally why the planned hub for Westmorland General Hospital has been delayed until 2023? I am also grateful for what he said about cancer services more generally. He knows that there have been 60,000 missed cancer diagnoses over the last two years, and I am sure he knows that radiotherapy is a key factor in tackling the backlog. Is he aware that radiotherapy ought to be accessed by 53% of cancer patients in this country but is accessed by only 23%, and that, as a proportion of our cancer budget, funding for radiotherapy in this country is only a little more than half the average for similar developed countries? Will he therefore make it a priority to meet with the all-party parliamentary group for radiotherapy and look at our manifesto, so that we can work together to save tens of thousands of lives that would be needlessly lost otherwise?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman raises a series of very important points, especially in what he said about cancer and radiotherapy. I believe he already has a meeting in the diary with Health Ministers, and I will look out for the output of that meeting. I agree with what he said about radiotherapy and the importance of investment in that, and there is a lot more investment. I referred earlier to the £6 billion extra capital budget, and a large part of that will be used for new diagnostics. I hope he also agrees with me that, as well as radiotherapy, we need to invest in the very latest cutting-edge technology for cancer care, such as proton beam therapy, which I saw for myself last week in London.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): The Secretary of State will know that many on this side of the House were very reluctant, but did support the increase in resources for the NHS through the increase to national insurance and then the health and social care levy. When we are making that argument to our constituents, they will expect that money to deliver results, so may I make one observation and ask one question? The observation is that, while the plan is welcome, only getting to 99% of patients waiting less than a year by March 2024 is not ambitious enough, so will he perhaps

be more ambitious? Will he also say a word about how the resources raised through national insurance will be removed from the NHS and flow into social care? From October 2023, we will have to fund social care with the same money. He did not talk about that, and social care is as important as the NHS, so will he say a word about that?

Sajid Javid: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right about the importance of making sure that every penny spent in the NHS, or social care for that matter, is spent wisely and in the very best interests of taxpayers. I absolutely agree with him on that, and that also has to translate into the ambition. My right hon. Friend, like other hon. Members, will not have had time yet to look at the plan. I am happy to discuss it with him afterwards if he wishes. I hope he agrees that it is full of ambition. Indeed, if the NHS can go much further than the targets I set out earlier, that is what we all want. As I said in my statement, it does depend on how many people come back to the NHS, and that is very hard to estimate, but I want as many people as possible to come back.

My right hon. Friend is right to raise the importance of social care and the need for much better integration between healthcare and social care. We will set out more detailed plans on just that very shortly.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): As a clinician, I am astounded by what the Secretary of State has brought forward today. First, he talks about health inequality, then puts forward a solution that will exclude people who experience the greatest health inequality because they also experience digital inequality. Not only that, but people on waiting lists are in a lot of pain. They are put on waiting lists because of the advancement of their condition. They do not need a website; they need clinicians surrounding them to give them the physical and psychological support they need over the two or more years they will have to wait. What plans has the Secretary of State got to ensure that they get the physical and psychological support that they need over that time?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady is of course right to talk about the importance of health inequalities. I hope that when she has had time to look at the plan she will see just how seriously the NHS and the Government take that. More broadly, I will have a lot more to say about tackling health inequalities shortly. Of course, the hon. Lady is right that there need to be alternatives to digital access for those who cannot easily access digital, be it through a web platform or the NHS app. There are alternatives in place, but I hope she agrees that for those who can use digital tools, we should make them part of the offering. The new “my planned care” service will be hugely important in providing more transparency than ever before, but also in helping people prepare for their surgical procedures. She may have heard me say earlier than one third of on-the-day cancellations of surgical procedures happen because people were not prepared.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I declare my interest as an NHS doctor and I echo much of what has been said by colleagues across the House about the workforce challenges.

As the Secretary of State said, covid has been a huge challenge to the NHS and it is a testament to NHS workers that cancer treatment was maintained at 94% of pre-pandemic levels throughout the pandemic and that 95% of people who needed cancer treatment started that within a month. However, I am sure the Secretary of State agrees that one month is a very long and frightening time to know that cancer is growing inside and that every day's delay could be the day that costs your life. How does he intend to reduce that time and what will be his target from diagnosis to treatment?

Sajid Javid: I agree with my hon. Friend about the importance of the workforce. She is right to raise the importance of cancer care and to note that it has remained a huge priority for the NHS despite all the pressures of the pandemic. In the plan that we are publishing today, we have set out a number of cancer targets. They are all very ambitious with record amounts of investment. Once my hon. Friend has looked at the plan, I would be happy to discuss it further with her, either the cancer aspects or anything else.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for a progressive and positive statement on the way forward. With statistics showing that there were some 10 times more patients waiting six weeks or more for cancer diagnostic tests at the end of November 2021 than in November 2019 in England, and with similar UK-wide statistics, what specifically is the Secretary of State doing to address the massive backlog in those life-saving tests?

Sajid Javid: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's comments. With respect to life-saving tests and scans, including for cancer, the plan sets out a huge amount of new investment in diagnostic capacity. One area of investment is the new community diagnostic centres, some 69 of which have already opened across England in convenient places such as shopping malls and car parks, which people can access much more easily and get their results from much more quickly.

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): I welcome the plan. I am most intrigued by the "my planned care" website, because one of the biggest problems for clinicians is that they spend a lot of time chasing admin. It is a great opportunity for pre-operative checks and for people to know where their follow-ups are. Will the Secretary of State look at expanding it to out-patient settings? People over the age of 80 may well have four, five or six specialists, so trying to keep track of their letters, of where they should be and of their appointments is really difficult.

During covid, 29 million people downloaded the NHS app and we had the fantastic covid dashboard, so we have seen what we can do with technology to help our patients and clinicians. Will the Secretary of State encourage the NHS to build on the measures that he is bringing forward to help with the backlog?

Sajid Javid: Yes. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to talk about the importance of technology in delivering world-class care. He will know that I have already announced that the parts of our health system that contribute to the best use of technology, NHSX and NHS Digital, will become part of the wider NHS so

that we have a more joined-up strategy. "My planned care" will start as an online platform, but will move to an app-based service as soon as possible. My hon. Friend is right to talk about the importance of having something similar for out-patient care; we are already on it.

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend work with our excellent GPs to increase access to primary care? Will he encourage them to open up more channels of communication such as email, text and chat apps to ensure that people feel able to raise their health concerns at the earliest possible stage rather than putting them off until they become more serious, when it is potentially too late?

Sajid Javid: Yes. I join my hon. Friend in thanking GPs up and down the country for all their phenomenal work throughout the pandemic amid the huge pressure that they have had to deal with. He is right about making sure that channels of communication with GPs are as varied as possible and are available to everyone in all age groups so that we can better support early diagnosis.

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement and for his leadership as we recover from covid. I must say that I find the words of the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) a bit hollow when the Opposition voted against £36 billion recently.

May I raise the matter of recovery in our emergency care? The Secretary of State will know that too many people in Newcastle-under-Lyme have had to wait too long for ambulances recently. Will he or his Ministers help to bring together West Midlands ambulance service, Royal Stoke University Hospital and the clinical commissioning groups to find a solution so that we can get patients into hospital and back out again as quickly as possible?

Sajid Javid: I thank my hon. Friend for reminding the House that the Labour party voted against additional investment in the NHS. He is right to talk about the impact on urgent care, particularly for ambulance services and especially during the recent omicron wave. We invested an additional £55 million in ambulance services over the winter. A lot more needs to be done to support urgent care, but the plans that we will shortly set out for the integration of healthcare with social care will certainly help to relieve many of those pressures.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Kettering General Hospital performed heroically during the pandemic and is now gearing up with determination to increase its elective surgery capacity by 30%. Does the Secretary of State take on board the point that in addition to having to clear the covid backlogs, areas such as Kettering and north Northamptonshire are seeing a very steep rise in the local population, with tens of thousands of new houses being built, and are expecting a very sharp rise in the next five years in the number of people aged 80 or over? Will he ensure that Kettering General Hospital gets all the resources it needs?

Sajid Javid: I join my hon. Friend in thanking the staff at Kettering General Hospital for everything they have been doing, especially over the past two years. Of

[Sajid Javid]

course, challenges remain. I understand that my hon. Friend the Minister for Health will visit Kettering General Hospital shortly; I look forward to hearing about it. I can assure my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) that when we look at funding and directional resources, we will certainly take account of not just the current population, but the forecast population.

Points of Order

1.19 pm

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. On 17 November 2021, the House approved a humble address motion compelling the Government to publish the minutes from or any notes of the meeting of 9 April 2020 between Lord Bethell, Owen Paterson and Randox representatives. Last week, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) received an answer to a written parliamentary question that explained that the Department of Health and Social Care had previously released the minutes of the meeting, referring to an attached document containing some heavily redacted notes. But when that very same document was made public in response to a freedom of information request in January 2021, it was with the explicit caveat that they were “draft notes” and that official minutes were not taken and sent to attendees. The Government appear to arguing with themselves, and not for the first time. Can you offer some assistance to explain whether it is in order for the Health Secretary to describe documents as “minutes” that his own Department has previously denied are minutes? If not, will he be afforded an opportunity to correct the record, explain what status those draft notes have and inform the House once and for all what happened to the formal minutes taken at that crucial meeting?

Mr Speaker: I do not know if the Secretary of State wants to respond—

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Sajid Javid) *indicated dissent.*

Mr Speaker: Then I will try to do the best I can. I thank the hon. Member for giving me notice that she would raise the point of order. The Chair is not responsible for the content of Ministers’ answers to parliamentary questions or for Departments’ responses to freedom of information requests. If the hon. Member believes that there is an inconsistency between the two in this case, there are always ways in which she can press the Department for further information to clarify the matter. Can I suggest that she takes it up with the Table Office for further advice? I hope that those on the Treasury Bench are well aware that this issue has been raised and are able to inform ministerial colleagues. I think we do need the answers: I do not want to keep dealing with the same points of order.

Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Have you been given notice that the relevant Minister will make a statement to the House on this year’s GCSE and A-level examinations? As you will know, advance materials were published yesterday, following weeks of uncertainty, the Government’s lacklustre education recovery efforts and concerning reports of A-level grade inflation in private schools. Given the impact on millions of pupils, school staff and parents across England, it is important that the House has an opportunity to scrutinise those developments properly.

Mr Speaker: Let me first state clearly that I have received no notice from Ministers that they intend to make a statement on this matter. Ministers on the Front Bench will, however, have heard the hon. Member’s point of order and, I hope, have noted his request.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I rise to ask again whether you have had any response from the Prime Minister after the UK Statistics Authority said that the statements that the Home Office, and subsequently the Prime Minister, made on crime were misleading. “Misleading” is not my word—it is the word of the independent chair of the UK Statistics Authority. The Prime Minister told the House

“we have been cutting crime by 14%”—[*Official Report*, 31 January 2021; Vol. 708, c. 24.]

The Office for National Statistics found instead

“a 14% increase in total crime, driven by a 47% increase in fraud and computer misuse”.

I raised yesterday “Erskine May”, resolutions of the House and the ministerial code, which all record the importance of the Prime Minister correcting the record at the earliest opportunity. This is five days on from the Statistics Authority’s comments. Do you have any guidance on what counts as “earliest opportunity”, as this does not feel like that?

The ministerial code also expects Ministers to abide by the Statistics Authority code of practice which says that people must be “truthful, impartial and independent” in their use of statistics. Given that the Statistics Authority, whose job it is to be independent, impartial and truthful, has said that the Government are being misleading, surely it is now a matter of basic respect for the House and the standards that we all signed up to about not misleading Parliament that the Prime Minister should give us a response.

Mr Speaker: First, I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for giving notice of her point of order. I can confirm that I have not had any notification of a statement, or any other response, on this issue.

I am not able to add to the responses to the three previous points of order on this matter. The right hon. Lady has put the point on the record, and I am sure she will find alternative ways to pursue this issue. I recognise it is important that this is heard, and I am sure that the Table Office, or possibly other available avenues, will now be used.

Motor Vehicle Tests (Diesel Particulate Filters)

1.25 pm

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to set standards as to the emissions particulate sensing technology to be used in roadworthiness tests for diesel vehicles; and for connected purposes.

As you know, Mr Speaker, I have been a Member for a very long time, but it is 20 years since I last moved a ten-minute rule motion, so I hope everyone will be tolerant of me today.

I declare my interest as chair of the Westminster Commission for Road Air Quality, as an active member of the all-party parliamentary group on air pollution and as chair of the World Health Organisation’s global network for road safety legislators.

Throughout my career in this House, as many colleagues may know, I have been a passionate campaigner for the environment, and I know that colleagues on both sides of the House share the view that we and all our constituents have an inalienable right to breathe clean air. It is now clear that toxic air is one of the greatest public health challenges of our time, affecting pregnant women, the elderly and our children and grandchildren. No one is exempt from breathing poisonous, polluted air in our country.

As a former Chair of the Select Committee on Education, and in much of my other work, I have always believed in pursuing good, evidence-based policies. On air pollution, the experts and the science are crystal clear. The challenge cannot be overestimated and it urgently requires not just a joined-up approach, or just a cross-party and cross-sector partnership, but a recognition of the huge scale of the challenge we face.

The Government are fully aware, because they have the records, that up to 36,000 people a year are dying from breathing polluted air. Indeed, it was linked to over 150 deaths in my Huddersfield constituency in 2020. Not only is it a tragic loss of life to this invisible killer but there is a huge economic cost, estimated at £20 billion annually, from the accumulation of treating health conditions and days missed at work.

This is a challenge that we are morally obliged to solve, but reducing air pollution is also vital to our economy, to our health and to the general wellbeing of our society. I am particularly proud to have worked over the past few years with Professor Sir Stephen Holgate, one of our greatest experts on this issue.

It is estimated that just short of 30% of our noxious emissions come from the transport sector, and over 90% of these emissions come from road transport vehicles—the cars, vans and lorries we see every day. Many of the challenges we face on air pollution will take major research, innovation and intervention, which will take considerable time and resources, but we also have an opportunity to seek more rapid, achievable wins. This Bill is at the top of the list.

Tackling diesel emissions can be achieved relatively speedily and, if this House so chooses, the Bill would have a profound impact on air quality in our towns, cities and communities in the short term. The World Health Organisation has made it crystal clear that diesel emissions have a dangerous impact on human health, especially respiratory health.

[Mr Barry Sheerman]

My hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East (Janet Daby) is familiar with the scale of the challenge, given the tragic case of Ella Kissi-Debrah. Ella's death and the evidence linked to her case shows just how devastating toxic air can be in urban spaces. Her mother, Rosamund, continues to campaign passionately for change to the law, and we must not let her efforts be in vain.

This brings me to the core purpose of my Bill. All diesel vehicles need to be fitted with fully functioning and fully operational diesel particulate filters—DPFs. A DPF captures and stores dangerous emissions released by the vehicle. If DPFs are not working and are not checked properly, that is how we get the pollution. Independent research shows that a single faulty filter produces the same amount of pollution as a three-lane, 360-mile-long traffic jam with vehicles that have proper, functioning DPFs fitted. That is the distance between my constituency of Huddersfield and Land's End.

To be fair, as a country, we have made some moves in the right direction. In 2014 and 2018, MOT tests became marginally more rigorous to ensure the proper working of these filters. But now, in 2022, we are being left behind and our MOT tests in this area are once again insufficient and out-of-date. Governments in countries such as the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany are making faster progress in reducing the levels of ultrafine particulate matter through simple improvements in MOT testing. This is of particular concern to me because one of the things that this does is to accelerate the ageing process. Looking around the Chamber, that concerns some of us very much indeed. In the Netherlands, 10 improved models of devices that test the efficiency of these filters are already set to be approved by this July. The Dutch, using more sensitive technology, are picking up on the real efficiency of these filters. The revised test would require improved sensing technology set at 250,000 particles per cubic centimetre. The current testing system in the UK picks up only 1% of faulty filters. With the higher standard used in the Netherlands, it is estimated that 15% more filters would be identified as faulty.

Checks on diesel particulate filters do make up part of the current requirements for diesel vehicles, but at present the test seeks only to determine if these filters are obviously defective or actually missing. I have been in touch with the Secretary of State for Transport and his ministerial team about this issue on several occasions and have always been told, "We already have safeguards in operation." However, the fact is that thousands of vehicles are falling through the cracks of this out-of-date testing system, to the serious detriment of air quality and public health nationwide. So, in essence, my Bill would bring the UK up to the highest possible standards in MOTs. It would introduce new sensing technology that would identify less obviously defective but still

dangerous filters. It would ensure that vehicles are roadworthy and fit for Britain's roads. Finally, these more stringent tests would protect the health and wellbeing of millions of drivers, passengers and pedestrians throughout our country.

This Bill is entirely realistic in its ambitions. Its proposal is tried, tested and has been rolled out repeatedly in other countries. It is a small change to make but it would potentially have huge, lifesaving impacts. Other countries' experience has shown the best practice that we can achieve. It is now clear that all we must do is to follow these examples and build consensus across this House and across industry to get these emissions down. In my experience, so many of our constituents want to play a role in addressing the climate change crisis. They may not be Greta Thunberg, David Attenborough or Bill Gates, but they want to help to make a difference in their communities and in our constituencies.

I believe that responsible citizens would readily change their behaviour and support these efforts if they were made aware that their vehicle had a broken filter and was poisoning the air we all breathe. Last week, I presented a Bill to the House that would put a duty on every local authority to audit the quality of its air and annually report this to Parliament. With the support of this House, MOT providers, road users and pedestrians would be able to proceed in the confidence that these changes can be brought into effect without unsustainable costs for garages or for drivers.

What is clear is that we cannot afford to wait. We are making advances in technologies such as hydrotreated vegetable oil fuel—with the help of Lord Tebbit's son, William Tebbit—and hydrogen and battery technologies are moving forward, but not fast enough. The UK should not be a follower in making MOT tests more rigorous; it should be a leader. We continue to hold the presidency of COP26 and there is still a window to show decisive, bold and thoughtful leadership. Let us take this step together and move closer towards achieving a goal that we should all share across this House: that our children, grandchildren, friends, family and loved ones are united in the right to breathe clean air.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Mr Barry Sheerman, Clive Efford, Christine Jardine, Geraint Davies, Kim Leadbeater, Dr Philippa Whitford, Huw Merriman and Sir Robert Goodwill, present the Bill.

Mr Barry Sheerman accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the first time; to be read a Second time on Friday 18 March, and to be printed (Bill 252).

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Barry taught me politics at Swansea University, so it is wonderful to be here for his ten-minute rule Bill.

Opposition Day

[12TH ALLOTTED DAY]

Cost of Living and Food Insecurity

1.36 pm

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House is concerned that households are bracing themselves for the biggest drop in living standards in thirty years; notes that the cost of living crisis includes steep price increases in everyday and essential food items, making the situation worse for the 4.7 million adults and 2.5 million children already living in food insecurity and risking more people experiencing food insecurity; regrets that the Government is making the cost of living crisis worse through tax hikes, low growth, falling real wages, and a failure to tackle the energy crisis; condemns a decade of Conservative-led governments for leaving Britain uniquely exposed to a global gas crisis and failing to create high paid, secure jobs; and calls upon the Government to set out a national strategy for food including how it intends to ensure access to high quality, sustainable, affordable food for all and meet the United Nations goal to end hunger by 2030.

Members on all sides are hearing more and more from desperately worried constituents who are concerned about rocketing household bills and the cost of food, but where is the Secretary of State? Where is the Cabinet Member responsible for this Department? The person who sits around the table with the Prime Minister and the Chancellor has not even bothered to turn up to this debate. That is absolutely scandalous. Is it that they do not understand the real-life consequences of food poverty and rocketing bills? The darkness of poverty is not just not being able to turn the lights on; it is being driven into debt and despair because you cannot afford to live. And the darkness is not just at night time: it is during the day when the curtains are closed because you are fearful of the debt collector knocking on the door. That is the darkness of poverty. That is what is clearly not understood by this Government, who are too busy saving the job of one person, the Prime Minister, instead of getting on with the job of running the country—Operation Shaggy Dog in full force—and I think that is absolutely outrageous. While the Government are putting all their energies into desperately trying to save the Prime Minister, they are hitting hard-working families with a triple whammy.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con): I do not think the operation was called Operation Shag a Dog, but perhaps the hon. Gentleman would care to correct the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I heard shaggy dog. I am sure everybody heard shaggy dog.

Jim McMahon: I am happy to clarify the record. I am, of course, referring to the Dulux dog, my favourite being Digby, although everyone has their own favourite.

Let us return to the real task in hand, because as much as we talk about the fun of Parliament and the Prime Minister's latest crisis and turmoil, this debate is about the people of this country. The people of this country are being ignored while Downing Street is in despair: first, there is the cost of living crisis on food, energy bills and goods; secondly, the universal credit

cut, cutting the income of 6 million families; and, finally, putting up taxes on working people and businesses, leaving us with the biggest tax burden for 70 years.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Is not part of the reason why the Secretary of State is not here perhaps that some of us will ask why the Department has been sitting for 18 months on a report on food bank use and ask what is driving that?

Jim McMahon: There is that, but I have no idea what the Environment Secretary does. I remember going up to Durham at the height of Storm Arwen, when families were disconnected from electricity for two weeks and more. The Environment Secretary, who sits around the Cabinet table with the Prime Minister, did not even turn up, and that matters to people.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Will the hon. Member give way?

Jim McMahon: I will make some progress. The cost of everyday and essential food items, on which millions of low-paid families depend, is soaring even faster than the headline rate of inflation. As campaigner Jack Monroe explained on "Good Morning Britain", the cheapest rice at one supermarket was 45p for a kilogram this time last year and it is now £1 for half that. That is a 344% increase, hitting the poorest and most vulnerable households the hardest. A can of baked beans has gone up by 45% and bread by 29%. All those are the staple of a household cupboard.

John Redwood: Will the hon. Member give way?

Jim McMahon: I will make some progress. As oil and gas giants are seeing more profits than the whole of the Treasury corporation tax take combined, Labour has been clear that a windfall tax should be levied on companies that are profiting, cushioning rocketing household energy bills and helping hard-working families here in Britain.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a really important point. Last year, the Meadows food bank, just one of the food banks in my constituency, gave out 38 tonnes of food and fed 40,000 meals to over 2,000 households. Does he share my concern that, with rising food and energy prices, those numbers will be even higher in 2022?

Jim McMahon: My hon. Friend shows us the contrast of an excellent local MP highlighting the work of the Meadows food bank, because we know the difference that it makes. Frankly, I find it sickening to see Conservative MPs carrying out the same visits. They are in government, and the job of Government is to make sure that there is not a need for food banks, not to turn up for a photoshoot.

On top of the cost of living crisis, the Government are making the situation even worse. The national insurance rise in April will cost the average household £600 a year more. The freeze in the personal tax allowance will cost £78 and petrol will be up £250 a year, with real wages and pensions set to fall further. This is firmly a bills bombshell and it is made straight at the door of Downing Street.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on the clear points that he is making. In Northern Ireland, 13% of people—241,000 people—are in poverty, with 17% of children and 14% of pensioners in poverty. With the 5% increase that the chief executive officer of Tesco said yesterday would happen to food prices, those in poverty are unfortunately facing a perfect storm that will mean they are in even worse poverty. Does the hon. Member agree that, for those reasons, this Labour motion should be supported?

Jim McMahon: I thank the hon. Member so much for that. Northern Ireland is a beautiful part of the world, but that is partly because it is so sparsely populated and rural. On top of the premium related to poverty, there is also a rural premium, where many energy-efficient homes are more expensive to heat and, in many cases, gas oil has to be transported in rather than piped in. That has a significant premium that is felt acutely by many communities.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Jim McMahon: I will make some progress.

We have heard that food bank use has rocketed significantly, and it cannot be right that so many food parcels are given out. It is right that volunteers step up, but we are one of the richest countries in the world and it should not be needed. I am proud of the efforts of the British people in supporting one another, and many of us have stood shoulder to shoulder with them, while at least one Government Member was earning £1,400 an hour helping tax havens to take on the UK Government. Volunteers up and down the country rallied, including groups in Oldham such as Mahdlo Youth Zone, where I volunteered to deliver sandwich packets during the school holidays, and the REEL project, where food parcels were being given out. *[Interruption.]* Let me tell the hecklers on the Government side the reality of this: those food parcels, made up by volunteers, were being given out to people after work—people in care uniforms and NHS staff were coming to collect those food parcels. This affects a lot of people in the community, and it is an absolute scandal that, instead of accepting that, the best we hear from the Government Benches is heckling.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Jim McMahon: I want to make some progress. As chair of the Co-operative party, I am proud that food justice has always been fundamental to our movement. Today, we have co-operative retail societies leading from the front in supporting the great efforts of Manchester's son Marcus Rashford to ensure that kids do not go hungry. Our food justice campaign has highlighted that the Government signed up to UN sustainable development goal 2, which is to end food hunger by 2030, but they do not seem to realise that that is in just eight years' time. Where is their sense of urgency in making sure we meet our international obligations under that SDG?

The Government will also know that this country is deeply unequal. Their own figures show that the north-east and the north-west of England have the highest level of food insecurity in the country, yet ensuring access to a

healthy diet does not feature at all in their levelling-up agenda. Let me tell the Government that they can't level up when people are going hungry.

Central to this is how we support the amazing work of farmers and British producers, who produce some of the best-quality produce in the world. Britain should be a beacon for quality, high standards, ethical treatment of animals, lower carbon production and environmental protections, but at every turn they are undermined or sold out by this Government, who are more interested in bankers in the Shard than farmers in the shires.

Craig Williams (Montgomeryshire) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman join me in calling on the Welsh Labour Government to work with farmers? At the moment, there is a target for tree planting, which is all well and good but it needs to respect farmers' knowledge of grade A agricultural land, so that we have a secure future for farming in Wales.

Jim McMahon: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman takes me on to the Welsh Government, who are leading from the front on this. We look on in England and see residents in Wales being given better access to welfare, school meals and prescriptions than people in England. But I share the fundamental concern that corporations in the City of London are buying farmland across the UK for carbon offsetting. That is not right, and it has the implications of undermining British farming production, rewilding and nature. It is really important that this Conservative Government come forward with a UK strategy to deal with that.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): The hon. Gentleman is making a series of good points. Does he share my concern that the Government's plans for environmental land management schemes provide an incentive for landowners to clear off their tenants from the land, take big loads of cash from the taxpayer and leave those farmers without work, wrecking not only the local environment but the rural economy, and massively reducing our ability to produce our own food, thus increasing food prices in the process?

Jim McMahon: Absolutely. We all welcome the fact that we bring in produce from all over the world, as it gives variety and helps maintain consumer prices. But it is really important that we do not undermine British produce in that process, and that we understand the importance of seasonality and of food security. If we allow food production here in the UK to be eroded and diminished, the time will come when we cannot feed our own population. That will be the real risk. The Government are watching this now and are allowing wealthy landowners on big estates to get rid of tenant farmers in favour of rewilding, and the Government are paying them for that. It is outrageous.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Jim McMahon: I am going to make some progress for a moment and then I will take the intervention, depending on the time. Food processors and farmers face steeply rising energy, fuel, carbon dioxide, fertiliser and other costs. Because of the Government's failure to plan, our food supply chains are missing crop pickers, meat factory

workers and lorry drivers. In addition, crops are wasting in the fields and there are gaps on supermarket shelves. Immorally, we have seen the cull of 35,000 pigs because the butchers were not available to send them to our supermarkets.

But the Government are not just standing by; they are actively making matters worse. Only yesterday, the Government had to issue another notice, warning of devastation in the pig industry caused, in part, by labour shortages. What an absolute waste. It is immoral to see people go hungry in this country while food is wasted. What is more, whether it is the Prime Minister, the Chancellor or the Governor of the Bank of England, every decision and every action must pass this simple test: does it make life better for working people, or does it continue to put more and more pressure on living standards?

Debbie Abrahams: Is my hon. Friend as concerned as I am that Oldham Foodbank is having to feed more than 1,000 people a month, as he knows? As the cost of living squeeze increases, those generous Oldhamers who have been helping source food for the food bank will get fewer and fewer, because it will not just be the people on the lowest incomes who are affected; it will span middle income groups too. What does he have to say to that?

Jim McMahon: Like my hon. Friend and neighbour, I think the work that our volunteers do at Oldham Foodbank reflects the work done in food banks up and down this country. They are the very best of us. They make sure that people do not go hungry, but they rely on the charity of our neighbours, and if our neighbours are struggling to put food in their own cupboards, that will have an impact on what they are able to donate to the local food bank. That is the reality, but where is the Government's plan for that? How are we going to tackle the cost of living crisis and ensure that the safety net is in place? We just do not see it. That is a real issue that we need to address.

Hywel Williams: Will the hon. Gentleman congratulate the Welsh Labour Government and Plaid Cymru on coming to a historic 46-point agreement for the next three years, which includes such matters as free school meals for primary school children? Will he also commend the fact that the agreement stiffens Labour's resolve to turn its fine words for many years into real action now?

Jim McMahon: This is my point—words into action is important in politics. People are so fed up with politicians saying one thing and doing another, and making promises that are not kept, that when they see a Government in power who do exactly what they say they are going to do—on free school meals, the natural environment and those issues that matter—people begin to rebuild trust in politics. I think we have seen that during the pandemic and how people viewed the Welsh Labour Government in power and making that real difference.

To conclude, Labour has a five-point plan to tackle Britain's obesity crisis: restrictions on junk food advertising; promoting healthy food choices in supermarkets; clearer calorie and nutritional information; a ban on the sale of energy drinks to our children; and public health weight management programmes to support people to live healthier lives. But we want to go even further and to

realise real food justice. Let us compare that with the Government. More than six months on, the Secretary of State is incapable of agreeing his food White Paper.

Labour is committed to fixing Britain's broken food system. Fundamentally, we should live in a country where working people earn enough through their work to put food on the table. In short, that means putting food justice at the heart of Labour's contract to deliver security, prosperity and respect for the British people. After 11 years, the Government stand on a shameful record of high taxes, low growth and rocketing bills. It is clear that they have run out of ideas, and the British people have run out of patience.

1.53 pm

The Minister for Farming, Fisheries and Food (Victoria Prentis): I start by paying tribute to all those who work around the clock to keep the nation fed, whether that is in fields, processing plants, factories, wholesalers or stores, and those who move our goods around. The pandemic has reminded us that domestic food production really matters. Our production-to-supply ratio remains relatively high, judged against historical levels. If we look at the foods we can produce here, it remains healthy at 70%, and that has been stable for the past 20 years or so. We are close to 100% self-sufficient in poultry, eggs, carrots and swedes, for example.

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is responsible for food security, including household food security, and monitoring it.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab) *rose—*

Victoria Prentis: I would be delighted to give way to the hon. Lady. She and I have discussed these issues many times.

Kerry McCarthy: We have indeed. Both the current Secretary of State, during the Committee stage of the Agriculture Bill, and the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), when he spoke with me at the Oxford real farming conference, made a pledge to support more county farms and peri-urban farming, so that cities such as Bristol could produce food locally. We were promised funding, but it does not seem to have appeared. Can the Minister tell me what the Department is doing on that front?

Victoria Prentis: It is always a real pleasure to talk to the hon. Lady about these matters, because she has really leant into them over the years, and the work of her all-party parliamentary group on the national food strategy has been very helpful. I should be delighted to meet her again to talk about what we can do for county and peri-urban farms. We are putting together a new entrants strategy as part of our environmental land management plans. We have not quite finalised that work, but I think it would be a good idea if I could meet her so that she can feed into the work that we are doing.

John Redwood: Does the Minister agree that there is no reason why we should not produce 100% of the temperate food that we need? We lost a huge amount of market share when the common agricultural policy was introduced, and some of us want to get that back now that we are out of the CAP. Is it not better to cut the food miles and rely on local jobs and local production?

Victoria Prentis: It is also a pleasure to talk to my right hon. Friend about these matters. I have also spoken to him many times, in this instance about his plan to boost horticulture, particularly fruit and vegetable production, in his constituency and, indeed, across the nation. Fruit production has fallen to 16% of what we consume nationally, and fruit is one of the very few foodstuffs whose price has risen in comparative terms over the last 10 years when the price of most other foodstuffs has fallen.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Will the Minister give way?

Victoria Prentis: If the hon. Gentleman does not mind, I will just finish this point.

It is very much part of our strategy and our future plans that we should do our best to boost innovation and investment in ways of growing those horticultural products in a way that we can do in this country. My Secretary of State is extremely keen on that.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Victoria Prentis: If Members do not mind, I will make a little progress now, because otherwise we shall be here all day.

Our Agriculture Act 2020 committed us to reporting to Parliament on food security in the UK at least once every three years. I have with me the excellent report that we published shortly before Christmas, and I commend it to colleagues. It is not a political document; it was compiled by Government statisticians, and it contains information about food security that will be extremely useful to Members in all parts of the House.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): Research from the House of Commons Library shows that in my constituency, electricity and gas prices are up by £741 a year, the petrol price is up by 22%, and food costs have risen by £100 a year. Does the Minister really think that this is the time to be hiking national insurance contributions by 1.25%?

Victoria Prentis: I will come to that point later, if I may. At this stage, I want to say more about the food security report.

As I was saying, the first of these reports was published in December. It examines past, current and predicted trends. Food prices fluctuate in any given year. They depend on a range of factors, including food import prices, domestic agricultural prices, domestic labour and manufacturing costs, and exchange rates, all of which fluctuate over time. Some of these factors are influenced by our trading arrangements with other countries. Most food sector businesses are accustomed to fluctuations in supply chain costs, and they do not necessarily pass them on to consumers. Negative food inflation rates were recorded for much of late 2020 and early 2021, as we were in the earlier stages of the pandemic. We know now that, sadly, energy costs are rising substantially, and we are of course monitoring the effects of that on prices of products for consumers extremely carefully.

We carry out annual surveys looking at household expenditure on food, and we monitor that closely as well. Spending among the poorest 20% of households has been broadly stable for the last 14 years. Since 2008,

between 14% and 17% of the expenditure of the poorest households has been on food and non-alcoholic drinks, while the average household has spent between 10% and 12% of its income on food.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Bearing in mind that we are the sixth-richest country on this planet, what explanation would the Minister offer for the fact that a growing number of my constituents in Leeds Central are having to go up to a complete stranger at a food bank and ask them for help to feed their families because they do not have enough money to feed themselves?

Victoria Prentis: I hope that in the course of my remarks I will be able to answer the right hon. Gentleman more fully, but in brief I would like to say that we clearly have increases in the cost of living. The Chancellor came to this House to talk about them in detail last week and I know that there have rightly been many debates on this important subject—

Hilary Benn: Will the Minister give way?

Debbie Abrahams: Will the Minister give way?

Victoria Prentis: If I may finish my remarks, I will.

There are many pressures on household budgets, the two top ones being broadly, usually, housing costs and fuel costs. There is very little give normally; there are very few other sources available to help families with those two important pressures. Food, as I am just outlining, is often a smaller part of the household expenditure pot. Because there are sometimes food charities to help with expenditure, it is a part where other help can be sourced. If I may, I will make some progress.

The average household has spent between 10% and 12% on food, so that is relatively low. Compared with EU countries, for example, it is the lowest. There has been a gradual decrease in expenditure as a percentage both for the lowest 20% by income and for all households. Back in the 1950s, the spend on food would have been about a third of income.

Of course, we work hard alongside other Departments in Government—for example, the Department for Work and Pensions, which is responsible for the welfare system and supporting those with particular challenges in their lives at any point. During the pandemic, we put in place a £170 million covid winter grant scheme, with 80% earmarked to provide support with food and bills. I chaired the food to the vulnerable ministerial taskforce, which was set up in spring 2020, and we put in place support for the most vulnerable individuals.

David Linden: Will the Minister give way?

Debbie Abrahams: Will the Minister give way?

Victoria Prentis: No, I will make some progress, if I may.

We put in place and then expanded the holiday activities and food programme, which helped to ensure that children are provided with and really learn about healthy food during the holidays. We increased the value of healthy start vouchers to support pregnant women and those with children under four on low

incomes, and we put in place £32 million of direct Government giving to food distribution charities, including FareShare.

There have also been some excellent private sector initiatives to help people who are struggling to afford food. Last year, Waitrose announced a trial that supported struggling families through the pandemic by linking farms that supply them with the food distribution charity FareShare. That was the first time a supermarket had covered the basic costs for farmers to divert surplus food directly from their farms to families who need it.

David Linden: Will the Minister give way?

Victoria Prentis: I am going to make some progress.

As we look to our recovery from the pandemic, we are supporting those on lower incomes, including spending over £110 billion on welfare support for people of working age. We know that people are facing pressures with the cost of living, which is why we are taking action to help them, which includes targeting support. Something we learned again and again in the pandemic, not least in my taskforce, is that, if we target support to the most vulnerable and low-income households, we can do the most good. Such targeted support includes the warm home discount scheme, winter fuel payments and cold weather payments. Vulnerable households across the UK are also able to access the £500 million support fund to help them with essentials, including food.

The Conservative route to fighting poverty is work. Just last week, my right hon. Friend the Work and Pensions Secretary announced a new jobs mission to get 500,000 more people into work.

David Linden: Will the Minister give way?

Victoria Prentis: No. We have 1.2 million vacancies to fill, and our message to jobseekers is clear: we will support you to help you into work.

I am really keen to start a national conversation when it comes to food, and I am delighted that we will shortly be publishing our promised food strategy. It is a once-in-a-generation opportunity.

David Linden: Will the Minister give way?

Victoria Prentis: I would be delighted to give way to the hon. Gentleman, with whom I have discussed these matters previously.

David Linden: I wonder what it says about the Government's global Britain image around the world when they send Ministers away on their £500,000 jets. Do they go abroad to talk to people about the fact that they have all these taskforces? On that point, is the taskforce still meeting? Surely the Minister will understand that, yes, there are pressures in terms of exporting and prices, but the fundamental reality is that people just do not have enough money in their pocket at the moment, and that the pandemic just highlighted pre-existing problems that this Government must get a grip on.

Victoria Prentis: The food to the vulnerable ministerial taskforce was set up at a particularly frightening time for our country right at the beginning of the pandemic, when, for the first time, we were dealing with people's access to food not just in terms of paying for it but in terms of physically going out to buy it. The Government

had to deal with a whole range of problems that, frankly, I could never have predicted. I am very proud of the work that we did. We worked closely with the devolved Administrations, who were very much part of that taskforce, and we were able to provide help to the shielding and to people who felt unable or were unable to leave home. We also worked closely with retailers at a time when they were under enormous strain.

Chris Stephens: Will the Minister give way?

Victoria Prentis: No, I am going to conclude now.

The food strategy will be published shortly and I am very much looking forward to bringing the White Paper before the House. We are working on the final draft at the moment, and I very much expect it will be here in weeks, rather than months. It is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to create a food system that feeds our nation today and protects it for tomorrow. It will build on existing work across Government and identify new opportunities to make the food system healthier, more sustainable, more resilient and more accessible for people across the UK.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Just to give everyone an indication, a lot of people are trying to catch my eye and I anticipate that we will start the wind-up speeches no later than 4.10. There will be 10 minutes then for each Front Bench, and the switch-over for those wanting to take part in the next debate should be no later than 4.30, but those outside the Chamber should please keep an eye on the monitors, as that could come earlier. There will be a five-minute limit on Back-Bench contributions immediately after Peter Grant.

2.7 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I commend the Labour Front-Bench team for tabling this motion, and I commend the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) for setting out succinctly and forcefully the impact on real human beings of the failures of this Conservative Government. It was so farcical as to be really comical, if it was not so tragic, that the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood), who is no longer in his place, asked the Minister to agree that cutting food miles was a good idea, yet a Minister from the same Department a couple of weeks ago thought it was brilliant that we had arrived at a new trade deal with Australia and that we should be trying to cut food deals. What better vignette could there be to illustrate the inconsistency and chaos of this Government? They have torn up the best trade deal we will ever have with our nearest neighbours and replaced it with a deal with people who are literally on the other side the world, yet they have the cheek to tell us that the way to deal with food shortages in Britain is to cut food miles.

Just to put into context the scale of what we are facing here, the Bank of England has increased interest rates to try to control increasing inflation, but it is warning that it could reach 7.25% in April. Very few of our constituents will get a pay rise that comes within a mile of 7.25%, and most will be lucky to get anything. Data released by the Food Foundation charity shows that, in January this year, 4.7 million adults had experienced food insecurity, and National Energy Action estimates that 6 million households in these islands will be living in fuel poverty: that is not having to cut back slightly,

[Peter Grant]

but being unable to keep themselves warm enough to be safe and healthy, or to feed themselves and their families enough to keep healthy.

New analysis by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation warns that the energy price cap will have the harshest impact on the poorest families. We knew that anyway, but JRF has given the evidential backing to it. The poorest families will spend 18% of their income on energy bills after April. Can hon. Members imagine spending 18% of their £80,000-a-year salary on fuel bills? This place would be in uproar if that happened. Why is it acceptable for low-paid folk to pay a bigger chunk of their income when it would not be acceptable for Members of Parliament? The Office for Budget Responsibility forecasts that average real wages will still be lower in 2026 than they were at the start of the financial crisis in 2008.

If all that was being said about a poor economy, a poor country or a poor collection of countries, we would think it was shameful, but it is being said about one of the richest places on the planet, as the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) mentioned earlier. Fuel poverty and food poverty—people literally living on the edge of starvation and hypothermia—are happening not because of necessity but because of a deliberate sustained political choice. It has certainly been the political choice of Conservative Governments since they were elected under the former Prime Minister David Cameron.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend, like me, remember that, in 2014, the Labour party and the Conservative party said to Scotland that, if we voted for independence, freedom of movement to Europe would end, supermarket shelves would be empty of food and energy prices would go through the roof? Does he agree that they have quite a bit of explaining to do?

Peter Grant: It is a valid point. Every so often, I go back through all the scare stories that have been pushed through my letterbox—mainly from the Labour party, because we do not really have a Tory presence in my constituency, or certainly not in my part of it. When we go through all the horrible things that they say will happen if Scotland becomes independent and leave them for two or three years, we find them happening anyway. It started with the closure of the naval base in Rosyth and it is still happening today with the end of freedom of movement and increasing food prices.

It is estimated that 1 million adults, equivalent to more than 3.5% of the UK population, are having to go without food at least once a month because they cannot afford to eat. About 640,000 people in Scotland cannot afford their energy bills, and that is before they got put up by 50%. That is in a country that has more energy than it needs and that, most years, exports energy to England and other countries because it cannot use all the energy it produces.

Where else in the world would we find any commodity in surplus that is, at the same time, priced beyond the affordability of its own citizens? What on earth is wrong with the way that Scotland is run that means that the people who produce almost more energy per head of

population than anywhere else in the world cannot afford to pay their bills, keep their homes heated and keep their families healthy?

The Chancellor's response is better than nothing but it is woefully inadequate. He is basically offering a payday loan: "We'll give you the money just now to pay off your fuel bills and we're going to hope and pray that they come back down again in the next few years." If they do not, what on earth happens? The Scottish TUC has said that the Treasury's buy now, pay later loan

"comes nowhere near tackling the problem...It is nothing short of shameful that people are being forced to choose between food and heat."

If emergency loans are such a good idea to tackle the problem of increasing energy prices, why not go to the source of the problem and give them to the energy companies? They are struggling because of many global factors that have been covered in other debates. At least that way, the Government would be giving the loans to people whose shareholders should be able to meet the cost. Why give the loan to somebody who will not be able to afford to pay it back next year, the year after or the year after that?

Given that the decision has been made to give that money directly to citizens, the SNP says that it should be turned into a grant. People should not be made to choose between taking the money now and not being able to pay it back later. The Chancellor must also cut VAT on energy bills, which is within his gift. Why has he not done it?

As well as giving emergency loans to the energy companies, the Chancellor should have ruled out a rise to the energy price cap—he simply should not have allowed it, or Ofgem should not have allowed it. He could also reintroduce the £20-a-week universal credit uplift that the Tories cancelled recently. None of that by itself will solve the problem completely, but at least it would give an indication that we are dealing with a Government who care, whereas, quite clearly, we are dealing with a Government who could hardly care less.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Single young parents under the age of 25 face lower universal credit payments despite being the sole breadwinner for their child and despite, naturally, facing more barriers to work. Does the hon. Member agree that it is unacceptable for the Government to allow children to live in poverty based only on the age of their single mother or father?

Peter Grant: Absolutely. My hon. Friend—I hope that I can continue to call her a good friend and colleague—has, as always, made a very valid point.

One of the most iniquitous and downright evil things about the crisis that we are now facing is that the people who get the hardest hit will be those who are least able to afford it. If we all had to take a 20% hit to our living standards, none of us would enjoy it, but all of us would manage. Most of my constituents cannot afford to take that scale of hit to their standards of living and they are the ones who are being hit the worst.

I want to look briefly at some of the things that have been done by the Scottish Government, using their limited powers to mitigate this crisis. The Scottish Government have a much more progressive income tax

system than the rest of the UK. It is often attacked by Tory Back Benchers who are interested only in the wellbeing of high earners, but the fact is that, in 2021-22, 54% of people in Scotland—the lower paid 54% of people in Scotland—are paying less income tax than they would if they lived in England. There is also the fact that Members of Parliament for Scotland pay a bit more income tax than our colleagues in England. I do not mind that if the money is going into essential services.

Last year, the Scottish Government invested around £2.5 billion to support low-income households, nearly £1 billion of which went directly to children living in low-income households. They have committed more than £3.9 billion to benefit expenditure in 2022-23, providing support to more than 1 million people. That figure of £3.9 billion is £361 million above the level of funding that we get from the UK Government, so while again the Tories will demand guarantees that all of the money that comes to Scotland be used for its intended purpose, the Scottish Government are spending almost 10% more than they are receiving for that purpose.

The reaction of the Child Poverty Action Group was that this was

“a hugely welcome development on the path to meeting Scotland’s child poverty targets... a real lifeline for the families across Scotland who are facing a perfect storm of financial insecurity as the UK cut to universal credit bites, energy prices soar and the wider costs of living rise.”

It said that on 29 November 2021. The British Government did not seem to wake up to the problem until about 29 January 2022.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow—

Patrick Grady: North.

Peter Grant: Glasgow North. I do beg my hon. Friend’s pardon. I love the city of Glasgow, but I can never remember the constituency boundaries.

My hon. Friend has raised the impact that Brexit is having. Brexit has had a disastrous effect on our economy, and it has not finished. The OBR estimates that we still have three fifths of the way to go. Most of the damage from Brexit has still to be done. Every single person on these islands faces a cost of around £1,200 as a result of Brexit, and we know who will be hit the hardest. Make UK, the organisation that represents 20,000 manufacturers, has said that Brexit changes will undoubtedly add to soaring consumer costs in 2022.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): I am listening carefully to the hon. Gentleman’s argument. I believe that he is making the point that Brexit is leading to some other cost of living issues. If that is the case, why are we seeing even greater levels of inflation and unemployment in other countries inside the EU? Rising costs and rising inflation are clearly a global issue, and nothing to do with Brexit.

Peter Grant: Is it not remarkable how—in this great global superpower, this global leader of the free world, this super global economy—every time that anything goes wrong it is global’s fault? “It was not me. A big global done it and ran away.”

I did see one figure at the weekend—that the price of energy in France is going up by about 4%. Here it is going up by 10 times that, even more than 10 times that

for many people. Going back to the hon. Gentleman, I am only quoting figures from the Government’s own Office for Budget Responsibility. If the Government do not trust the OBR, perhaps it is because the number of people trusted by the Government is as few as those who trust the Government.

Let us not forget what promises were made before the Brexit referendum—I know that some people want to say that that is all water under the bridge and that we can forget about it. The present Prime Minister told us in 2016 that an upside of Brexit would be the freedom to scrap the unfair VAT on fuels. Now he says that removing VAT would be a “blunt instrument” that would not direct help towards those in most dire need. The Leader of the House, who I gather has just been promoted to the Cabinet, promised us in 2016 that the price of food would go down if we left the European Union. What has happened to those promises now, and where are the people who made them? Why are they not here to explain themselves to us and more importantly to our constituents?

Hywel Williams: Earlier the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) seemed at least to imply that the policy after Brexit was self-sufficiency in home-produced foods, whereas I had thought that, bestriding the world stage, we would import whatever we needed.

Peter Grant: Again, the hon. Member has got it absolutely spot on. Tory Back Benchers have been given quotes to read out by their Whips, and they routinely read them out regardless of whether they bear any relation to reality or whether they completely cut the feet from the argument presented in an earlier quote. They sometimes forget, especially these days, that what the Whips tell them to say today might well contradict what they told them to say yesterday, because the truth may have had to change.

Labour is absolutely right to condemn the record of this Tory Government, but Scotland will not forget that in previous incarnations the Labour party has played its part in creating this crisis. I know that it will not make comfortable listening for Labour Members to be reminded of that. One of the reasons we have been worse hit than a lot of other European countries is that even before the pandemic we were already one of the most unequal societies in Europe. The hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton mentioned that in his speech, but previous Labour Governments did nothing to address it. The Blair-Brown Government managed to preside over an increase in inequalities in Fife, Gordon Brown’s home county, during a period of economic growth.

Although I have no doubt that Labour in Scotland will demand that the SNP Scottish Government fix the whole problem, Labour has repeatedly voted against giving Scotland the powers to allow us to do just that. Employment law, minimum wage legislation, banning exploitative zero-hours contracts, banning fire and rehire, and the proper provision of sick pay could all have been put into the Scotland Act in 2015. Labour voted to keep all that within the hands of the Tories. Energy; the energy price cap; discriminatory charges for access to the national grid for Scottish producers; a decades-long obsession with nuclear power, whose true costs the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy admitted to the Public Accounts Committee yesterday

[Peter Grant]

we still do not even know—Labour’s policy on all these has been almost identical to the Tories’. Labour’s policy has been that Scotland should trust this Government on all of them.

Pensions—reserved to Westminster; income-related benefits—almost entirely reserved to Westminster; the national insurance increase, which everybody in this House opposes—reserved to Westminster. In fact, on pensions, during my time as an MP we have seen this British Government betray their promises to millions of WASPI women, betray their promises on the pensions triple lock and free TV licences, and underpay more than £1 billion in pensions to over 130,000 pensioners. Last year they also failed to pay tens of thousands of pensioners their pensions at all after they had reached state pension age.

It is quite clear that we cannot trust this Government with pensions, any more than we can trust them to look after anyone else living on a low income, but Scotland will never forget who did a tour of pensioners clubs in 2014 and told the people of Scotland: “Your pensions will be safe under a British Government.” My message to Gordon Brown is this: our pensions will never be safe under any British Government. If he thinks that the people of Scotland will be fooled by the same myth next time as they were in 2014, he has another think coming.

Although we will support the motion if it is put to a vote, and although the recent crisis has been made infinitely worse by the British Conservative party, we will not allow the Scottish Labour party, or the UK Labour party, to forget that the reason why Scotland is still part of this mess is the unholy coalition that Labour chose to enter into with the Conservative party at the last independence referendum. I urge Labour Members to consider very seriously indeed whether it is in the interests of their voters in Scotland or the rest of the UK for them to form a similar coalition with the Tories at the next independence referendum.

ROYAL ASSENT

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that Her Majesty has signified her Royal Assent to the following Acts:

Leasehold Reform (Ground Rent) Act 2022

Northern Ireland (Ministers, Elections and Petitions of Concern) Act 2022.

Cost of Living and Food Insecurity

Debate resumed.

Mr Deputy Speaker: We will now have a five-minute limit.

2.25 pm

Craig Williams (Montgomeryshire) (Con): It is a great pleasure to speak in the debate; I welcome the Opposition’s bringing it to the House. As I have only five minutes, I will focus on food security. That should come as no surprise to Members on either side of the House, because as the Member of Parliament for Montgomeryshire I represent many, many farmers producing first-class produce and contributing to UK food security.

I welcome what Opposition Members have said about companies buying agricultural land for carbon offsetting and about the need to balance tree planting in this country with agriculture. When the food strategy report is published—I welcome the Minister’s confirmation that that will be in weeks rather than months—I ask that we also look at the impact of the devolved Administrations’ policy on UK food security. It is often easy to leave looking at food security to the four nations of the United Kingdom, but we are one great country, so I ask that the UK Government look at the impact.

Although it is laudable that we have a policy to plant 86 million trees in Wales by 2030, I am incredibly concerned that we should work with the local custodians, the farming unions and the people who know which fields would be absolutely horrific to lose from the perspective of our food security. Owing to the targets, there is tremendous pressure to plant trees apace. We all welcome the reforestation of areas of Wales and some of the rewilding projects, but it has to be done with local knowledge and led by the farmers on the many small family farms and larger farms in my community who have generations of knowledge about where it would be a good idea to take forward the Welsh Government’s programmes and plant trees.

Since the Agriculture Act 1947, we have steadily increased our food sustainability under Governments of both colours, although luckily not the colour of the Scottish National party. Some 60% of the food we now consume is produced in the UK, which is great. Welsh lamb is of huge importance, especially in Montgomeryshire. Welshpool livestock market is the largest lamb market in western Europe; I usually frequent it on a Monday to look at the state of the market and the pricing. Lamb is one of the most sustainable meats in the world, so we need to look after the sector.

I want to touch on the international footprint and the London firms coming in, because there is a huge problem with the divergence of policies. Devolution is a wonderful thing. I call it localism, or getting decisions made as locally as possible—I would love to see more power going from Cardiff to mid-Wales, but that is a different debate. However, I want to see the UK Government and the Welsh Government working together to make sure that Welsh agricultural land is not left vulnerable to carbon offsetting by a divergence in policy. I would very much welcome collaboration between UK Government Ministers and Welsh Government Ministers.

This is not an overtly partly political issue. We all want to protect our agricultural land and make sure that decisions are made with the local custodians of

that land, but I fear that through party political skulduggery, farmers will be let down. It is always hard to get a UK Conservative Government Minister and a Welsh Government Minister in a room, even harder to get them to agree, and harder still to get them to make a public statement when they do agree. On behalf of my farmers, I would very much welcome the Minister looking at the devolved Administrations' impact on UK food security and working with Welsh Government Ministers to protect areas of Montgomeryshire, make sure we have the most sustainable farming in the world and get local miles down as far as possible.

2.29 pm

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): Having been born and bred in my Swansea East constituency, and having lived there all my life, I have always been aware of how vulnerable people are to food poverty, but a call from a local food bank during the first week of the summer holiday in 2016 really brought it home to me. The food bank needed me to put out an urgent appeal for donations, as its shelves were running empty. Without the free school meals that keep children fed during term time, demand for the food bank had rocketed. That summer, my team made sandwiches to deliver to free activities around the constituency, which is how my first summer lunch club was born and how I became the sandwich lady.

Each summer since, it has evolved and grown. During the lockdown in 2020, we adapted to feed those who were struggling, isolating or vulnerable. Every Christmas we run our "Everyone deserves a Christmas" project, delivering hampers, hot dinners and festive treats to those who otherwise go without. We reached more than 2,000 households across Swansea last Christmas, and even that was probably not enough.

Like in many towns and cities across the country, financial hardship has hit homes across Swansea. The pandemic certainly has not helped, but it would be naive to blame everything on that. My constituents have had to tighten their belts even more these past couple of years, but I assure the House that those belts were already buckled tightly.

This week's newspaper headlines tell us: "Rising cost of living leaves 4.7 million Britons struggling to feed themselves," "Deluge of families facing homelessness" and "Fears people will freeze to death at home as energy bills rocket." Some would say these headlines create moral panics and do not reflect what is really happening in our country. They might explain them as media propaganda or fake news, but I promise it is the reality in Swansea East.

Alongside the big headlines, I see the real-life experience of families who are unable to escape food poverty as the cost of living soars and incomes come down. I hear the panic in people's voices when they talk about their energy bills in the coming months, even people who, up until now, have managed to pay their bills and put food on the table.

I had a message on the evening of the hamper delivery last Christmas that brought home to me what some people are facing:

"Passing on thanks from a family who have just received a hamper. Thank you for making their Christmas this year—not just dinner but their entire Christmas. They usually rely on food banks and... whilst they are extremely grateful to the food banks... they said it felt amazing to... not feel like it's charity stuff"—

tins with black marks—

"they felt overwhelmed at being able to give their children a proper Christmas dinner, without tinned potatoes. Their 2-year-old had never tasted a fresh potato, let alone Brussels and parsnips. One cake is already open, and they are enjoying the sugar rush."

I defy anyone not to be moved by that text.

My constituents are facing a 54% rise in domestic fuel bills and huge increases in the cost of groceries and road fuel. At the same time, they are paying, on average, £155 extra in national insurance contributions. This is not just Swansea East's problem; it is everybody's problem. Somebody needs to step in.

We should not have two-year-olds who have never tasted fresh vegetables. We should not have children arriving at school hungry. We should not have pensioners who are too scared to put on the heating in the winter. And we certainly should not have a Government who react to all these things by taking from those who can least afford it and pushing more and more families into poverty.

This Easter, this summer and this Christmas, my continuing "Everyone deserves..." campaign will reach many more families. Nobody deserves financial uncertainty, fuel poverty and, worst of all, food insecurity.

2.34 pm

Suzanne Webb (Stourbridge) (Con): Once again, I and other Conservative Members are having to rise to oppose a motion from a party that is playing the blame game rather than offering solutions to support families, and overlooking what is really happening.

Over a year ago, the Government promised the British people that we would do whatever it takes to provide security and stability during the pandemic and in getting over it. That is exactly what we are doing, and we are delivering. I am acutely aware of the challenges that my constituents currently face with the cost of living and rising food and energy bills. This is an international issue that countries everywhere are facing.

I am surprised that the Opposition decry the Government for presiding over "falling wages" and a "lack of job opportunities." Was it not this Conservative Government who introduced the national living wage in 2016? Was it not this Conservative Government who raised the national living wage to £9.50 this year? Stourbridge has seen a 28% drop in the adult claimant rate and a 40% drop in the youth claimant rate since last March.

I am surprised that the motion laments the Government's supposed "tax hikes". The Government will continue to be the Government of low taxes. *[Laughter.]* Don't take my word for it—just look at our record over the past decade: an effective £1,000 tax cut to 2 million low-income people on universal credit; a council tax rebate for over 86% of households in the west midlands; fuel duty frozen for the past 10 years. The facts are there. The Opposition stood on a manifesto that the Institute for Fiscal Studies said would create the biggest tax burden since world war two, so I will not take any lectures or noises from them on taxation.

It is disappointing that the motion regrets the Government's

"failure to tackle the energy crisis".

That is another example of political point scoring. Labour's short-term sticking plasters are superficial solutions that will do nothing to help families facing

[Suzanne Webb]

rising energy bills in the long term. We need to be honest with people. A VAT cut on energy bills will not be effective—it would disproportionately benefit wealthier households. A windfall tax on oil and gas firms will not cut energy bills—it will merely be passed on to consumers down the line.

I am pleased that this Government are being honest with people by proposing practical policies to support families with rising energy prices. All households will receive a £200 rebate on their energy bills this year. Eight million pensioners benefit from the £2 billion winter fuel payment scheme. Those are facts. More than 2 million low-income households receive a £140 rebate on energy bills as part of the warm home discount, and 4 million vulnerable households receive cold weather payments. Those are real solutions that will provide real support to those who most need it.

Let us not forget launching the £500 million household support fund to support low-income households with the cost of food, utilities and wider essentials to lessen the cost of living pressures. We are a Government who are committed to supporting low-income families, spending £110 billion on welfare support for people of working age in 2021-22 to ensure that the lowest-paid are supported.

Covid-19 has tested our economy in a way that few of us, if any, have experienced before. The Government have been operating and developing policy in unparalleled times and at unprecedented speed. They have a keen eye to preserving employment and productive capacity to ensure that the engine rooms of our great economy have the support that they need to recharge our return to economic normality, and that has worked. This Government are providing the tools to enable, facilitate and empower us all. This Government have a sense of fiscal responsibility.

I have lost my last page, which was my power statement, but never mind. Millions of the most vulnerable in our society are receiving billions of pounds in support from the Government. This is a listening Government who offer unprecedented support that will benefit everyone in the country.

2.38 pm

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): The cost of living crisis has been a long time in the making and has not come out of the blue. It is an escalation of a crisis that has been going on for a long time. As households brace themselves for the biggest drop in living standards in 30 years, yesterday we were asked to pass a Government motion in this House that would effectively cut pensions and social security payments by 3% to 4% in real terms. That, combined with the slashing of the universal credit uplift, the rise of the energy price cap and the increase in national insurance contributions, points to the simple conclusion that the Government are knowingly pushing more and more families into circumstances where they have to choose between staying warm and putting food on the table.

Just like the coalition Government with their austerity programme after the financial crash, this Tory Government are visiting the fallout of the covid crisis and the energy crisis on those who are the most in need, with a shocking 4.7 million adults and 2.5 million children already living

in food insecurity. Two out of five children in my Middlesbrough constituency were in poverty before these latest insults.

It is both those in work and those out of it who are suffering. In-work poverty has hit new heights, with one in six working households now below the poverty line, thanks to the pitiful levels of the minimum wage, which despite the rise to £9.50 in April is plainly not enough to get by on. Statutory sick pay is so low, at just £96.35 a week, that during the pandemic many workers have been left with no option but to go into work when they are ill. Unlike in Germany, where SSP covers 100% of workers' salaries, in the UK it is a measly 19%. No wonder we have some of the worst covid death rates in Europe and now this cost of living crisis.

This desperate situation for so many has come about because of the erosion of their rights over the decades since the assault on working people began under Thatcher. From the end of the second world war until 1979, about 85% of workers across the country had their rights protected by collective bargaining agreements. Such agreements bring about great benefits for workers, primarily by preventing the undercutting of terms and conditions by setting minimum standards across a sector. With the changes to Government policy brought in since 1979, collective bargaining coverage has been driven down to about 23% of workers—one of the lowest proportions in Europe, where the average is about 60%.

Lee Anderson: The hon. Gentleman mentions collective bargaining, but will he say how successful that was in the 1970s, when the lights were out?

Andy McDonald: I think a lot of people would swap now for the 1970s, when people could afford a home and food and had decent terms and conditions. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman should recall the clapping for care workers throughout the crisis—the very people who should be benefiting from sectoral collective bargaining and fair pay agreements that give them a decent standard of living. We will take absolutely no lectures from Tory Members on that subject.

With the fall in these agreements, many workers have seen a similar dive in their rights and pay, undermining their ability to put food on the table. Almost four in five workers are now at the mercy of the labour market and the whims of their employer, with no means by which to bargain collectively—a situation only exacerbated by bogus and discriminatory classification of workers. There are a number of categories of worker, with different degrees of employment rights. Some workers—employees—are entitled to all the pathetic statutory rights that are currently available if they have been employed long enough, while others, including the bogus self-employed, limb (b) workers and agency workers, are denied many of the basic rights they should be entitled to.

That is why I am pleased to introduce in this House the Status of Workers Bill, which was guided through the other place by my noble Friend Lord Hendy. The Bill would merge all the categories so they would all be classified as workers with statutory employment rights giving them the freedom to bargain for a decent wage. I implore the Minister to allow the Bill the necessary time to pass through this House to make this fundamental change to workers' rights, which will bring about the changes we need to solve the cost of living crisis.

Like many in this Chamber, I have been inundated with cases of constituents who are struggling in the present circumstances. Lisa, a single mum, is in terrible circumstances. She has no money left. She has 10 days to go before she can get money to put food on the table for herself and her son, who is suffering from covid. I have pensioners who, proud as they are, refuse to go to food banks. That is a damning indictment of the current situation in modern Tory Britain. It has got to change—there must be fundamental change for the benefit of our constituents.

2.45 pm

Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con): I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate following the launch of the levelling up White Paper last week, which provides a framework for delivering the Government's vision and plan to help everyone in Britain get back on their feet after the devastation caused by the pandemic. We have heard from the Minister some of the mitigating actions the Government have taken to try to ease the situation for the most vulnerable, so I will confine my comments to the national food strategy.

As we all know, the last two years have been dominated by the coronavirus pandemic, which has highlighted health inequalities. That is why post covid it is vital that we build back a stronger, more resilient and prosperous country, with a focus on our health and wellbeing. I recently spoke with Lord Bird, founder of *The Big Issue*, and we agreed that we want a society where we do look not to make the poor more comfortable, but to eradicate poverty. The Conservative approach is to focus on creating more and better opportunities in every region across the United Kingdom, to invest in skills and lifelong learning and to create pathways out of poverty, while also supporting the most vulnerable.

We have been so lucky to live in a country where the vaccine roll-out response has been so unbelievably fast and effective. However, we cannot simply rely on medicine every time we get sick. We need to prevent people from getting sick in the first place. Research indicates that one of the major reasons Britain fared badly compared to other countries was because of the particularly high prevalence of obesity and diet-related disease. The Prime Minister said himself that he believed he almost died after contracting covid mainly because of his weight, and through that experience he introduced one of the most ambitious Government obesity strategies in UK history. However, it still is not easy for most people to enjoy the healthy life, although it is certainly easier for some than others. That is why health is crucial and central to the Government's levelling-up agenda.

While people in more affluent parts of the country enjoy easy, affordable and convenient access to healthy, tasty and nutritious food, many in Stoke-on-Trent do not have the same choices. Everyone is constantly told about the need to improve our diet and the risk we face from poorer diets, but little consideration is given to how hard it is to make improvements.

Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a characteristically positive and powerful speech, and she talks passionately about the Government's obesity strategy and the need to access healthy food, but does she agree that part of that strategy is finding opportunities for people to exercise and be involved in

sport? A key part of the Government's levelling-up agenda is investing in more community facilities, allowing people to take part in sport.

Jo Gideon: Absolutely—exercise and food go hand in hand in a healthy lifestyle.

There are plenty of fast food outlets in Stoke, but it is quite difficult to find nutritious options. It is not about eliminating all unhealthy choices or making us feel guilty about eating them: it is about increasing the choices available and ensuring that everyone can easily find and afford good food. I am reminded of the words of Lord Woolton, the Conservative party's food Minister in the 1940s. He said:

"Feeding is not enough, it must be good feeding."

Those words are as true today as they were back then.

Many colleagues have commented that my social media includes many posts of me eating a variety of what Stoke has to offer, from oatcakes—which are an important part of our culture and heritage—to healthy Sunday roasts. I have been surprised how popular the posts are. I do them to show food choices in our city and to promote local businesses and organisations through the medium of food. Food is central to our society, communities and daily lives. Food brings us together and allows us to share stories, ideas and cultures, and build wonderful memories, but food should not make us sick.

Currently, four out of five leading risk factors for disability, disease and death are related to poor diets. In other words, the British diet is making us sick. While the average percentage of adults living with obesity or excess weight is 62% in England, it is 72.8% in Stoke-on-Trent. The health profile for the area shows that in the majority of health categories—for example, cancer rates, cardiovascular disease, obesity, life expectancy, physical activity, smoking and alcohol—the situation is significantly worse than the national average. I cannot accept this. How can we level everything up if our people locally are getting more sick and dying earlier than people elsewhere?

That is why it is important that the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Michael Gove, included the Government's obesity strategy, and some policy recommendations from Henry Dimbleby's national food strategy, in the "Levelling Up" White Paper. However, more needs to be done. The "Levelling Up" White Paper sets a blueprint for future White Papers such as the Government's formal response to the national food strategy. This must set out a bold, brave and ambitious set of immediately actionable policies to help everyone in Britain to eat well. The six non-negotiable actions include the "eat and learn" recommendation that includes mandatory accreditation for food served in school to ensure that high-quality and nutritious food is not a postcode lottery; school curriculum changes such as reinstating the food A-level and Ofsted inspection of such lessons; and mandatory reporting for large food producers and manufacturers so that we know the proportion of healthier versus unhealthy food that companies are selling, as well as other metrics such as food waste.

We need to look at the sugar and salt tax. We need to look at public procurement so that those in our public sector buildings get the healthy food that they deserve. We need to introduce a good food Bill. We need to

[Jo Gideon]

ensure that all these strategies feed into each other making sure that we are the healthiest we can be. That is absolutely part of levelling up.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I remind Members not to refer to Ministers or Members by their names, please. I did not want to stop the hon. Lady's flow.

2.51 pm

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): Poverty and food insecurity are key elements of the cost of living crisis. More and more working households, including those in receipt of universal credit, are not getting the food that they need, and this will be made even worse after what happened yesterday. Despite it being called an uprating, the Government pushed through a real-terms cut to benefits and pensions that I opposed, just as I opposed the motion on the welfare cap last month when it was before the House. That is because millions of people across the UK are experiencing food insecurity, including an estimated 1.8 million of school age. The use of food banks was increasing before the pandemic and has risen dramatically during the pandemic, and it is very likely that the situation will continue to get worse and worse. In fact, food bank usage represents the thin end of the wedge, with largely only those experiencing severe food insecurity receiving emergency food parcels due to the stigma and level of availability. At the same time, austerity cuts have meant that important services such as meals on wheels and other important lifelines and support services are no more.

Yet as people continue to struggle, I am proud that people have stepped up to fill the gaps. I continue to be in awe of local people organising to protect our communities and support one another, whether that is the Felix Project supported by Islamic Relief UK, with its unique kitchen that collects good surplus food to cook 20,000 culturally sensitive meals and deliver it to some of the most vulnerable families, the volunteers at the food bank run at Christ Church on the Isle of Dogs, or the work of neighbourhoods in my constituency and Sister Christine in Poplar. Those are just a few examples of the community spirit that makes the east end such a special place.

But the truth is that soaring food insecurity and the normalisation of food aid as the solution to a complete failure of Government has important consequences for the future of the welfare safety net. It warns of a future where responsibility for structural failures is increasingly placed on individuals and the third sector. We need urgent action so that, in one of the wealthiest countries in the world, no one is left hungry. Surely it should not be that difficult. Indeed, it is entirely possible to guarantee that everyone has enough food so that food banks no longer have to exist. This is why I have been supporting the Right to Food campaign calling for the Government to be legally responsible to help anyone in our communities going hungry—to take action to prevent barriers in accessing food and end the crisis of food insecurity once and for all. I want to place on record my acknowledgment of the brilliant work that my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne) has been doing in this regard. In the long run, I would like to see universal free school meals and the Government bringing the delivery of those and other outsourced food services

back in-house, involving all the community in food provision. I repeat that even with the cost of living crisis it is possible to eradicate food insecurity. The question is do the Government really want to do that?

2.55 pm

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate on an issue that really matters to my constituents and the constituents of Members across the House: the cost of living increases. Contrary to some of the contributions we have heard today, the reality is that the challenges we face in the UK are the same as those facing other major economies—global inflationary pressures as the world economy rebounds after covid. That is undoubtedly causing strain on families and their ability to pay bills, and it is right that we support those most in need. I think it bears repeating that the best way to help people is to support those who can work to move into jobs. Our record is strong, with more than 400,000 people on payrolls now than prior to the beginning of the pandemic. We need to help them to gain skills to move into even more highly paid roles.

As a Conservative, I want to see people keep more of the money that they earn. To help the lowest paid people do that, we are increasing the national living wage to £9.50 an hour from April for workers aged 23 and over. That represents an extra £1,000 a year for a full-time worker. Nearly 2 million families on low incomes will benefit from £1,000 a year through the cut in the universal credit taper and increases to work allowances. However, we also need to redouble our efforts to help people without a job to move into one of the 1.2 million vacancies across the country. In my constituency, there are 1,800 people on unemployment-related benefits. Although that represents a lower rate than the national average, it still represents untapped potential for individuals. Employers in my area, whether in food processing or in other parts of the economy, are crying out for staff, so I welcome the newly launched Way to Work scheme to match people to roles that exist in North West Norfolk and across the country. It is also important to recognise the direct support through the half a billion pound household support fund to help low-income households with the cost of food and other essentials, as well as the increase in the value of Healthy Start food vouchers, which the Minister referred to.

The motion refers to sustainably high quality food, which is precisely what Norfolk excels in producing. Now we are liberated from the bureaucratic inflexible common agricultural policy, we are free to reform our agricultural sector and champion British produce internationally. I know from my discussions with the Minister that the food strategy, which we look forward to seeing soon, will have much more to say on that, on procurement and on food security.

Turning to the motion's reference to the energy crisis, it claims that Britain is

"uniquely exposed to a global gas crisis."

What a load of nonsense. The clue is in the word used by whoever drafted the motion, "global". Other countries face the same challenges from the rise in wholesale gas prices that we are facing. Some 80% of the increase in the energy price cap here comes from wholesale prices. The motion is silent on Labour's moratorium on nuclear

power, which meant that our nuclear fleet has not been replaced as rapidly as it should have been. I was advising the then Energy Minister in the then Department of Energy and Climate Change when the deal for Hinkley Point C was being negotiated. That power station is on track to open in 2026. With the financing legislation passed in this House recently, we can unlock further investment in the new nuclear we need.

Lee Anderson: My hon. Friend talks about nuclear power. It is quite interesting, actually, because I wonder if he can recall that, in 1997, the Labour manifesto said, “We can see no economic case for the building of any new nuclear power stations.” Does he think now, moving on 20-odd years, that they regret that?

James Wild: I do remember and we are dealing with the consequences. Eight advanced gas reactors are coming offline in the next few years and we do not have enough capacity to replace them rapidly enough. That is why the work the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy is doing to bring forward the regulated asset base model to get financing into nuclear power is so important.

What did the Government do in the face of increased energy price caps? They came forward with a £9 billion package to help reduce their impact on people. That is the political choice that we made on the Government side of the House. Some 88.75% of properties in my constituency will receive £150 off their council tax bills in April. Then, in October, there will be a £200 rebate through energy bills. For the people in my area living off the gas grid, that will be paid through energy bills, so they benefit too. However, those people are facing an issue with the steep increases in the price of domestic oil, which is not subject to a price cap.

A constituent contacted me last week to say that before the pandemic they were paying 19.6p per litre but last week they filled up at 55p a litre. So I ask the Minister to communicate with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to ask whether it can consider a referral to the Competition and Markets Authority to address those concerns about increased costs. Furthermore, councils will get £150 million to give targeted support to people not getting the council tax rebate. Others have spoken about the warm home discount, winter fuel payments, cold weather payments and other support measures that exist. In contrast, the Labour party proposes a regressive tax cut that would benefit the richest households most.

The challenges that individuals and families are facing are real. However, today, once again, we have heard arguments that pretend we can in some way be immune to the global pressures driving increased costs; that somehow we alone can keep energy prices artificially low. The British public are wise and realise that that is fantasy economics. In contrast, this Conservative Government will continue to help people with the day-to-day costs they face and drive economic growth, jobs and investment.

3 pm

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): I want to put some human context into this debate. I saw on social media this weekend a comment by a single parent. She said:

“It’s difficult to imagine without experiencing it how tiring being skint is. How you’re so utterly consumed by financial hardship that it affects every decision you make on a daily basis. It takes up every thought and you can’t escape. No wonder there is a mental health crisis”.

Lee Anderson: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Ian Lavery: That comes from a single parent and it sets the tone for this debate. The country is badly fractured and, sadly, broken. Kids cannot eat and pensioners cannot eat, yet sales of luxury yachts have gone through the roof.

Lee Anderson: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Ian Lavery: If we have a look at the grotesque inequality in this country, and at those who have and those who have not, we see that there has been a 500% increase in the number of billionaires since covid began, a £2 trillion increase in FTSE stock market value and £3 trillion increase in housing stock—

Lee Anderson: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Ian Lavery: And then we look at the other end of the political spectrum, where we see 14 million people in this country, the sixth richest economy on this planet, living in poverty.

Lee Anderson: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Ian Lavery: UK wages are at the lowest they have been and they are at a 15-year standstill. Wages are gone and energy bills are going through the roof—I will come on to that. Poverty is a political choice. Hunger is a political choice. I am sick and tired of debates in this place where people from all parts are basically reducing hungry and cold families and individuals to mere balance sheet statistics—count them as human beings. The debate often gets dragged into whether this is absolute poverty or relative poverty.

Lee Anderson: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Ian Lavery: That does not matter to people who are suffering greatly in our communities. If they are sitting at the table with nothing to eat in the morning or at teatime at night, they are not aware of whether they are in abject poverty, absolute poverty, relative poverty or overall poverty. They might not even know that they are in poverty, but they know they are hungry. I think we will all probably have experienced being behind the person in the local newsagent who has the key to put £5 on their electricity bill—

Lee Anderson: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. I do not believe Mr Lavery is going to give way, so please save your voice for the rest of the speech. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. What did the Member say?

Hon. Members: He said, “Coward.”

Mr Deputy Speaker: Please withdraw that word.

Lee Anderson: Mr Deputy Speaker, I am sure that the hon. Member is not a coward.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Thank you.

Ian Lavery: Mr Deputy Speaker, that has taken out a minute and a half of my time, but thank you very much for allowing me to continue. I am far from a coward, by the way.

The debate in here is quite often about relative poverty or absolute poverty, but that does not make any difference, man. We live in a country—the sixth richest economy in the world—where we have 4.3 million kids living in poverty, and we have 14 million people living in poverty. It does not matter how or what we claim about poverty, and it does not matter whether we have reduced it by 1 million or whatever. If we have millions of people in poverty, we should be bloody well ashamed of ourselves. It is a political choice and we can do things about it. We could have done something about it last night, but obviously we did not do what some of us chose to do and vote against the benefits uprating.

To move on very quickly, the fact is that there are them that have and them who do not. Is it not really embarrassing to this country when we have chief executives of energy companies, which have just made \$40 billion in the last few weeks, suggesting that it is not bragging to say their companies are like cash machines? What does that make people in poverty feel? And we introduce a “Buy now, pay later” scheme and think that is enough support.

Thank you for your forbearance, Mr Deputy Speaker. In concluding, let us tax the super-wealthy, the Tory donors and the corporations—they are the real benefit cheats in this country—because, quite frankly, that is the only way we will start to tackle the inequalities and make life look much brighter for many people in our country.

3.7 pm

Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con): I rise to speak in this debate, and I do so with great pride—pride in particular in my city of Peterborough, but also pride in some of the things that this Government have achieved and this Government are doing to combat some of the issues mentioned in this motion. For example, there is the £500 million household support fund, which is going to provide food, utilities and essentials for some of the most vulnerable in our society; the £110 billion—I repeat, £110 billion—that this Government spend each and every year on welfare; increasing the value of Healthy Start food vouchers; the £220 million on our holiday activities and food programme for disadvantaged children, helping vulnerable families; and, of course, this Government’s commitment to ending hunger by 2030.

These are all very positive things, but most of all the thing that I am most proud of is the £1,000 tax cuts for up to millions of working families on low incomes through our cut to the universal credit taper rate from 63p to 55p. Many of my constituents on universal credit are working, and this is going to come as a great reward to many of them—to keep more of their own money—and it is going to combat some of the issues that this motion identifies.

I do hate the party political posturing we have seen in this debate, but it is worth noting that no Labour Government—not one—have ever left office with employment lower than it was when they came to power. That is a fact. It is businesses and the private

sector that create the jobs that alleviate poverty in this country. To Opposition Members, business is the enemy. The reality is that the Labour party is a job-destroying party. That is the reality.

The reason I am proud to speak in this debate, as I have mentioned, is how proud I am of the people of Peterborough and what they have done to combat food poverty and hunger in my constituency. I spend a lot of my time—and I would recommend that hon. Members from all sides do much more of this—going out and talking to my people, the people in my city, the people I call Peterborough heroes. These are ordinary, everyday people doing extraordinary things for their communities.

There are heroes such as Cocoa Fowler from Food for Nought, who has helped thousands of vulnerable people by distributing food to food banks and community fridges across my city. He was recognised by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister with a Points of Light award, and recognised as an outstanding UK volunteer. There are heroes such as Carol and Giles from the Millfield Community Fridge, based at the Open Door Baptist church. I met them when I spent a morning working with them and other heroes who were volunteering there. There are heroes such as Erin Tierney from the food bank in the village of Thorney. Others have mentioned the hidden poverty that often exists in our rural areas. Erin Tierney’s selflessness in running a food bank and supporting the most vulnerable in her community makes me proud of her, and proud of her efforts.

Zillur Hussain of the Zi Foundation, pub manager Colin Wilson who provides 200 free meals a week, Rony Choudhury of the Bombay Brasserie, Zeeshan Manzoor from Big Mouth and Touqeer Tariq from the Rizq Peri Peri Grill all do wonderful work promoting and giving out free meals to those who are vulnerable in my city. It is worth mentioning those people, because they work day in, day out. Children of Adam, Unite 4 Humanity, the Westwood community café and the Peterborough food bank, based at Fengate, make me proud of my city as well. They too are my heroes. On Saturday, when I was knocking on doors in Gunthorpe, I was spotted and grabbed by Ken Pullen as I was passing the Open Door community shop. He dragged me in and there I met Ken, Maggie, Polly and Dave, some of the kindest people you could ever meet, working to help those who are struggling in my city.

Those are all examples of a caring city, and this debate has given me the opportunity to thank them once again for everything they do.

Ian Lavery: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I would like your advice about the intimidation that I seem to be getting from the Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson). The last couple of times I have been in the Chamber, there have been some absolutely terrible remarks. I am sure you remember, Mr Deputy Speaker, the last time he had to return and apologise. How can this be stopped? How can we tackle it? If Members do not want to give way, they do not have to, but they should not suffer abuse as a result.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. I was in the Chair the very last time this happened. That is why I intervened to say that the hon. Gentleman was not

giving way. I could not hear what the hon. Member for Ashfield said, because I was talking when he said it, and he then withdrew it. However, Mr Speaker made it absolutely clear at the beginning of today's sitting, after what happened on the streets of London yesterday, that we must all be temperate in the language we use, not only in the Chamber but outside it. I hope that all right hon. and hon. Members will take that on board before they stand up, and even when they make sedentary interventions, and that they are very temperate in the language they use.

3.13 pm

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab): Listening to Conservative Members, one would think that the cost of living crisis was something natural, like bad weather or a freak accident. They have said that the Government have done everything they can to help, but that soaring living costs, cuts in support and the fall in the real value of wages are beyond their control. That is simply not true. Britain is facing a cost of living crisis not in spite of the Government's political choices, but because of them.

Millions in the UK are struggling because of whose side this Conservative Government are on. Last week the Tories took the side of the bankers, voting to hand them a tax cut worth £1 billion a year. Last night they voted to slash social security for millions of people by roughly 4% in real terms. Last week, they took the side of fossil fuel giants, refusing to back a motion for a windfall tax on companies like Shell and BP. Then, just a few days later, they gave the green light to energy bills soaring by nearly £700. As the Government refuse to bring forward a wealth tax on the super-rich, they are hitting workers with a national insurance hike.

Time and again, the Government take the side of the wealthy few, not the struggling majority. They scrap the £20 a week universal credit uplift, but hand contracts worth £880 million to a handful of Tory donors. They dump the pensions triple lock, but let the likes of Amazon get away with tax dodging on an industrial scale. They allow Britain's billionaires to add an extra £106 billion to their fortunes in the pandemic, but stand idly by as poverty gets worse and worse, with nearly 5 million children now in poverty, including around 7,000 in Coventry South.

This is not inevitable. It is not a natural disaster. It is about whose side this Government are on: the many or the few? Do they hand bankers a tax cut while hiking national insurance for workers, or do they do things differently? *[Interruption.]* I can tell that some Members want to carry on doing the same: supporting the wealthy few. The alternative is taxing the richest and funding a proper safety net. It is about bringing in a windfall tax on fossil fuel giants and stepping in to bring down energy bills. That is what the French are doing—not letting bills soar by 54% like our Government, but capping the rise at just 4%.

There has been a lot of focus on the Prime Minister, and he should have resigned a long time ago, but it is not just him. Whether it is the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak) or for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss), they have all voted to slash taxes for the richest, while cutting support for the rest. They are all in it together and they all need booting out.

3.17 pm

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): Over the past few days, Nestlé has been confirming to its workforce in Fawdon that it will be closing its factory, with the loss of 500 good manufacturing jobs in Newcastle upon Tyne North. It is nothing short of a devastating blow to our community, especially to the workers, their families and the businesses around about that rely on their custom. My thoughts are with all those currently grappling with what this means for them and their families.

It is an incredibly sad end to well over half a century of proud chocolate making in Fawdon, during which time we have created and produced some of the most loved brands in this country, and it could not have come at a worse time for the workers and their families, with a cost of living crisis hitting household finances and a community still recovering from the devastation of the covid pandemic.

Since news of the potential closure emerged last year, I have met with Nestlé, and the GMB and Unite unions, which I know remain in discussion with Nestlé to negotiate the potential for jobs at alternative sites and enhanced packages for those who will be made redundant. I put on record my tribute to the unions for the work they put in to create alternative proposals to keep those jobs where they belong—in Newcastle. There is huge disappointment and anger that the proposals were rejected by Nestlé.

Unfortunately, it is not just those who are directly impacted who will feel the impact of this closure. It will have a huge effect on the wider community, with shops, businesses and supply chains that rely on the factory and the workforce losing that business and perhaps also becoming unviable. It has ripped the heart out of Fawdon, and we will need to work together to rebuild from this, but we need Government support.

The Minister should be aware that Nestlé's UK CEO is a member of the UK Investment Council and a Government adviser on levelling up. Last week, we heard so many bold promises from the Government about levelling up communities in the north, yet here we have one of their own advisers taking jobs from one of the most disadvantaged communities in Newcastle. Many are understandably questioning why Nestlé, one of the world's largest food companies, needs to close a profitable factory and offshore those jobs away from an area of the country that needs levelling up, not levelling down.

We do not want more households to rely on food banks. Food bank use was already unacceptably high before the covid-19 outbreak and it has skyrocketed. Households are feeling the strain of the pandemic and we will see the cost of living crisis only grow as a result of this decision.

We also know that households with children are particularly affected, and how important it is for them to have regular healthy meals for their physical and mental development. So it is unfortunate that 11% of pupils eligible for free school meals in the north-east currently do not even claim that support, often due to the fact that it is a complex process and some are unaware of their entitlement. I would like the Minister to confirm that the Government intend to do something to put that right and that they will take forward the recommendation of the Dimbleby review to introduce automatic registration for free school meals.

[Catherine McKinnell]

Children in the north-east already face a double whammy of rising child poverty and the cost of living crisis. Introducing that one recommendation would be a simple step that would make a huge difference to hundreds of thousands of families across the country and put right some of the inadequacies of the free school meals system. The Minister has mentioned the upcoming food strategy White Paper, which is the perfect opportunity to do it, so it would be excellent if she could confirm that today.

While constituents at the Nestlé factory in Fawdon and in the supply chain face an uncertain future, with the added challenges of the cost of living crisis, and while many are already forced to use food banks to feed their children, the Government are hitting those same families with a rise in national insurance contributions and a total inability to tackle rising energy bills. I beg the Minister and the Government to plough less energy—indeed, no energy—into saving the Prime Minister's political career and to get a grip on the cost of living crisis that is crippling our households. They should do more to level up, not just talk. We want to see action in Newcastle, but we are seeing the opposite at the moment.

3.21 pm

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): Wales has the highest poverty rates of the four parts of the state, with almost one in four people living in poverty. Worse still, Wales has the worst child poverty rates, with 31% of our children living in poverty. My party is determined to solve the crisis and to end that gross injustice through its work in the Senedd and at local level.

To give one example of our efforts, under the recent three-year agreement with the Welsh Government that I referred to in an intervention on the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon), school meals will be free for all primary school children; they will be phased in from September. That is a substantial step forward. It has been an ambition of my party and the Labour party in Wales for many years. Indeed, it has been long-promised by Labour. I am glad that Plaid has made sure that we have at last acted on those fine words.

More generally, families across Wales have been failed by the Westminster welfare system, inadequate as it is in meeting the cost of living crisis. Universal credit is the main tool of support for a third of Welsh families but it is just insufficient. Nearly a third of Welsh adults in poverty are actually in work. I agree that getting into work is a good way to get out of poverty, as Conservative Members have already noted—I have no argument with that—but when wages are so low, the effect is lessened to say the least. Universal credit is just not good enough.

Margaret Ferrier: Citizens Advice Scotland saw a 20% increase in sanctions-related advice from March to December last year compared with the same period in 2020. The Department for Work and Pensions' stats show that the number of people sanctioned while looking for work increased fivefold in August compared with June. Does the hon. Member agree that imposing further sanctions on those looking for work will only compound financial hardship unnecessarily?

Hywel Williams: I thank the hon. Lady for that point. The sanctions regime has increased misery for many people over many years, and I wish it were not applied as sternly and as regressively as it is. We need another way forward.

One of the things I most regret—I am sure many hon. Members regret it, too—is the Chancellor's cruel £20 cut to universal credit. Forty-three per cent. of households across the UK in receipt of universal credit are food-insecure, and it is worsening. In Wales alone, the Trussell Trust distributed 145,000 emergency food parcels in 2020-21—that is the number of emergency food parcels, not the total figure, which gives an impression of the scale of the crisis people face—which is 88% up on the level at the height of austerity five or 10 years ago. It is now much worse.

On a local level, I draw attention to the efforts of my constituents in Caernarfon. The Porthi Pawb scheme, which means “feeding everyone,” has distributed hot meals throughout the Caernarfon area for many months but, of course, it is not enough, despite its great efforts. I will burden the House with another example. Plaid Cymru has a very successful food share scheme in Bangor. It opened its doors at 10 o'clock on Sunday, and it was cleared out almost immediately, such is the scale of the demand.

Universal credit and, in many cases, employment are simply not paying enough to keep people out of poverty or to put food on the table. Poverty and its consequences for food security are, as has been said many times, an inevitable, direct and foreseen effect of Government policy. Where the benefits system is, to a degree, devolved, as it is in Scotland, the national Government can act for the good of all the people. For us in Plaid Cymru, and for Wales, having parity with Scotland and Northern Ireland on welfare powers is the obvious next step towards defeating and, indeed, eradicating poverty from our country—that and a proper allocation of money from Westminster to support this laudable objective.

In the meantime, I urge the Government to restore the £20 universal credit uplift immediately, to end the two-child limit and to increase local housing allowance back to the 30th percentile of market rates. Labour in Wales does, and indeed should, support Plaid Cymru's proposal for rent controls to stop the spike in rents in Wales. Many more measures could be taken. Such measures, partial as they are, would boost hard-pressed families' purchasing power, boost local economies and help to eradicate poverty and the curse of food insecurity from our country.

3.27 pm

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): I was pleased to contribute to last week's debate on rising energy prices, shortly after which the energy price cap was increased by 54%, adding more financial woe to millions of families across the country. If we listened to the Conservatives, everything is hunky-dory in the garden, everything is fine and great, there are no problems and we should move on. That debate provided important context for this debate on food insecurity and the cost of living.

Some 22 million households will suffer because of the Government's failure to invest in cheap, green energy generated on our shores—fact. The Chancellor's announcement that the Government will force people to take loans will do nothing but prolong their financial

misery—fact. Both energy insecurity and food insecurity are related to the dramatic increase in inflation over which the Government have presided, which is now a painful concern to millions of people—fact. But it is important that we put these issues in a wider context.

There are many long-running flaws in how our community is being run. After all, food insecurity is not a new phenomenon in the United Kingdom. In 2014, the coalition Government continued their deep cuts to state support, and the United Nations found that 8.4 million people were living in households in which someone did not have enough to eat. Since then, food bank queues have increased, as in my constituency.

Last year, the Trussell Trust provided 2.5 million three-day emergency food parcels across the country, and 40% of them were for children. Of course, inflation is intertwined with this crisis. According to the Office for National Statistics, food and beverage prices made the largest single contribution to inflation in December, but we have to look at the root causes, which include, under this Government, the longest fall in real pay since the Napoleonic era. That has left real wages at 2008 levels, and has been supplemented by repeated attacks by the Tories on public pay. There is also the tearing up of the social security net, which millions relied on to provide the bare minimum, and the slashing of funding for local authorities that try to cope on the frontline.

Those were the wrong choices, with the Chancellor asking workers earning only £9,000 to pay more national insurance while the wealthy were left untouched. There has been policy after policy attacking ordinary working people. Many just do not have enough money to put the food that they need—the right food, quality food—on the table. Inflation is not a single factor that is driving insecurity. This is a crisis of low pay, of insecurity, of our safety net. It is about much more than the cost of living and we cannot continue to ask working people to pay the price of the Government's mismanagement. We must now get the response right.

Last week, the Governor of the Bank of England suggested that working people should moderate their pay demands to avoid, in effect, a wage price spiral. In an interview, when asked whether the Bank was effectively asking workers not to demand a big pay rise, he told the BBC:

“Broadly, yes...In the sense of saying, we do need to see a moderation of wage rises...that's painful...I don't want to in any sense sugar that: it is painful”—

said the Governor, on £575,000 a year. That is exactly the sort of blinkered response that we have come to expect.

It is worth repeating that the 1.25% increase in national insurance is, in effect, an 8% increase in total—not 1.25%. If that is not adding to food insecurity, I do not know what is. There is a fairer way: not the Government Wonga scheme being introduced by the Chancellor, but real solutions that put money in the pockets of the poorest households, ending food insecurity once and for all. I am talking about a windfall tax on the big oil and gas companies; taxing wealth at the same rates as work to raise billions towards a permanent uplift to universal credit; and an end to austerity in the public services that we all rely on when times are so hard. The British public has paid too much under this Government. It really is time that the Conservatives asked their wealthy donors to pick up the tab.

Finally, I plead with Tory Members, of whom only three are in the Chamber at the moment: if they do not have the wherewithal and decency to rid the country of food banks, they should have the decency to stop visiting them for a photo opportunity. It is unseemly.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. I will have to reduce the time limit to four minutes in order to call a few more Members in, but we will not get everybody in, sadly.

3.32 pm

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): Last year, I spoke about one of my constituents who was fearful that the Government's cutting the universal credit uplift would mean that they had to choose between heating and eating. They lost £80 a month due to that Government cut, and their energy prices had already risen by £95 a month. That was in November, but the outlook is even more bleak now and we hear more and more often of that choice between heating and eating. The next few months will see too many people already under great stress plunged beneath the poverty line. Inflation is set to rise at almost double the rate of benefits, which means that the Chancellor's support package will not protect those most at risk of hardship.

I have a family in my constituency who receive universal credit, who are subject to the benefit cap and who already have rent arrears. The mother has told me that she is really struggling to pay her bills and is finding it difficult to feed her five children. The financial pressures mean a continued strain on her mental health and wellbeing. Every week, I and my team deal with so many cases like that.

A year ago, I joined a small group of people in Salford, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey), who wanted to find a way to give additional support to local families in need. Led by Antony Edkins, who has been a headteacher in my constituency, we set up the Salford Families in need Meal Project. Across the year, we have raised funds to enable a food club to be run every week in partnership with the social food charity, the Bread and Butter Thing. Our food distribution hub, run at Barton Moss Primary School in my constituency every Wednesday, provides a bridge between food bought from supermarkets and the crisis food given out by food banks. The families in my constituency who use the food distribution hub are among the 20,000 people across the north who now get affordable food distributed by the Bread and Butter Thing. Membership of that charity has grown by 270% in the past year, which shows just how much the levels of food insecurity have increased.

A report from the cross-party think-tank Demos says that the Government are failing to ensure that there are longer-term interventions to help people move out of food insecurity. Families in food insecurity can also have need for other types of help. Mark Game of the Bread and Butter Thing said:

“it's about so much more than food. People need access to healthy, nutritious, affordable food within an ecosystem of local services providing employment, mental health, debt counselling, housing support and more.”

[Barbara Keeley]

That range of needs was underlined by Victoria Unsworth, the local primary school headteacher, who helps run the food distribution hub in my constituency, when she said this to me recently:

“I cannot begin to tell you how, in the last few weeks, the need has increased. We have families with food shortages, removal from houses, living in houses with no toiletries, no heating, no electricity...parents splitting up, homeless. These are just the ones we know of.”

It is shameful that the Government are forcing people into these conditions. Families are breaking apart. How can the Government talk of levelling up when this is happening on their watch?

This cost of living crisis will have an impact on health, as we have heard earlier in this debate. Not being warm enough and not having enough food have consequences for our health, both physically and mentally. The Government have said that they want to reduce inequalities in healthy life expectancy, but that is impossible when 1 million adults go whole days without eating, and 9% of the population are experiencing food insecurity.

Today, the *Manchester Evening News* focuses on the fact that, for the first baby born in 2022 at a Bolton hospital whose family live in my constituency, life expectancy will be more than 10 years less than it is for a child living in a more affluent suburb in the south of England. The paper quite rightly says to the Government on behalf of those babies born in Salford and other northern cities in 2022, “Don’t leave us Behind”.

3.37 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Food insecurity will get worse and it will have an impact on the affordability of food for everybody. This is something that farmers know and, sadly, this is something that consumers will soon discover. It is because of the Government’s direct policies. Most in the House agree in principle with the transition from the basic payment scheme to environmental land management schemes, but the botching of the transition means that farmers lost between 5% and 25% of their income in December, and most of them will see a decline to nothing before they are able to access anything like an equivalent amount of money through the ELMS. That will mean the closure of family farms, the reduction in Britain’s capacity to feed itself, and, inevitably, a spike in the price of food.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): On that issue of feeding ourselves, in North East Fife I am seeing problems in attracting agricultural workers. Migrant agricultural workers are vital and, without them, we will see fruit rotting in fields, farmers making losses and the cost of remaining produce skyrocketing for consumers. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to see more joined-up working between the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Home Office to support our farmers to recruit and therefore ensure our food supply?

Tim Farron: I completely agree with my hon. Friend and believe that, in so many ways, the Government are getting it wrong when it comes to the availability of

visas to allow people to work. Many businesses in rural communities are not able to function at all because they simply cannot access staff.

In rural areas, the poverty we face is in-work poverty. There is very low unemployment in places such as the Lake District, and I am sure that the same is true in my hon. Friend’s constituency. The issue is businesses that cannot function; they cannot recruit the staff because the Government’s visa rules are so incredibly foolish and damaging. It is also worth pointing out that the BPS to ELMS transition is an accidental mistake that the Government are making, but the deliberate mistake they are making, as I mentioned earlier in an intervention, is their decision, through ELMS, to reward wealthy landowners for kicking off their land hard-working tenant farmers so that they can turn the land over to seed, therefore reducing food production capacity and wrecking rural communities in the process. That is not just morally unjust; it is incredibly stupid for a Government who are meant to be putting food security at the heart of their policy, and clearly are not doing so.

Energy bills are of huge significance. The rise in energy bills for the average household in two months’ time is expected to be £700. I can tell the Minister that Eden in Cumbria has the second highest rise in fuel bills anywhere in the country, while my own district of South Lakeland has the ninth highest. Rural communities are hit hardest, and as the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) mentioned, the costs for families with children, people with serious health issues or disabilities and elderly people are higher still.

Shell’s £14 billion profit and BP’s £10 billion profit were unexpected, unearned and clearly unnecessary. It might be a desperate measure at a desperate time, but it would be entirely logical to decide to employ a windfall tax on those huge profits so that people up and down this country could get through this incredibly difficult time and the appalling energy increases could be wiped out.

I know that some Government Members are climate sceptics and think we should get rid of all green taxes and what have you, but I suggest that there is one Brexit benefit that the new Minister for Brexit Opportunities and Government Efficiency might want to take on board: we could cut VAT. That is the only useful thing that we could do as a result of leaving the European Union—the one silver lining—but the Government will not deploy it. Why not cut VAT on fuel bills and give people the relief that they desperately need?

Too little is being done to help those whose need is greatest. With inflation at 7.25%, the 3.1% benefits uprating will lead to utter destitution. It is not just about physical hardship, but about the misery, shame and lack of dignity that go with it and the stress and mental health problems that go with abject poverty, when people cannot afford to feed their children, pay the rent or put fuel in their car to get to work—if they are lucky enough to have a car.

Kendal in my constituency is not a huge town by most people’s standards, yet Linda Sutherland’s wonderful team at King’s food bank in Kendal provided 48,225 meals last year, which was 50% more than in 2020. The massive demand for services from people in desperate need tells us that we are doing something seriously wrong as a country. The local housing allowance is not

remotely keeping up with people's needs, particularly in areas where the cost of living is that much higher. In constituencies such as mine, hundreds of families have been kicked out of private rented accommodation. Council house waiting lists in South Lakeland have increased by 50% in five years; there are now more than 4,500 families on them.

This is the opportunity for the Government to intervene. I understand what it is like to be criticised in government: it is natural to be defensive. I encourage Ministers not to be defensive, but to consider ways to make the lives of people in this country better in these most appalling of times.

3.42 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): The Food Foundation found this week that more than 1 million people have reported

"that they or someone in their household have had to go a whole day without eating in the past month because they couldn't afford or access food."

The north-east and north-west of England have the highest levels of food insecurity. I echo my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) in celebrating the brilliant Salford Families in need Meal Project. I also thank For the Love of Food, Salford food bank, Emmaus, Salford Food Share, Mustard Tree, Salford Loaves and Fishes and so many others. They are brilliant organisations, but the fact is that they should not need to exist. As Oscar Wilde once said, charity is not a solution to poverty, but

"an aggravation of the difficulty. The proper aim is to try and reconstruct society on such a basis that poverty will be impossible."

As one of the richest economies in the world, we have the economic means to sustain everyone, but if we cannot find the political will to achieve that, we will not live in a civilised society; we will live under barbarism. We can see that barbarism take form and the stark inequities of our system laid bare every single day.

Today, amid an energy crisis that will cripple households across the UK, oil giant BP has reported its highest profit for eight years, yet we are seeing no political action from the Government—no windfall tax on energy companies to help those who are struggling. Yesterday, the Government forced through a real-terms cut to social security and pensions at a time when inflation is skyrocketing, despite more than 30 charities and organisations stating that a real-terms inflation rise is needed for people to keep their head above water.

Then, of course, there is levelling up. Levelling up required a reversal of austerity and significant funding pledges for local government, whose budgets have been slashed in the last 10 years. We saw nothing but warm words in last week's White Paper. Those warm words will not feed my constituents, so today's motion is right: we need a national strategy for food. But we need to go further. Food, the basic building block of human existence, should become a legal right.

Salford is already a right to food city. As the right to food campaign suggests, putting that right into UK law would make the Government legally responsible for helping anyone in our communities who was going hungry, for taking action to prevent barriers to accessing food, and for taking steps to tackle the crisis of food insecurity in the UK. That would require the Government

to respond by setting out funding, tasks and responsibilities for the public bodies that would need to take action. Action should also include addressing the economic causes of food insecurity, for example, through improving people's incomes with a real living wage, increasing social security to a level people can actually live on, implementing controls on everyday costs such as utility bills and, longer term, lowering energy costs by bringing energy into public ownership.

Food insecurity in our country is not some abstract horror created by an unknown force beyond our control that can be addressed by benevolence. It is a political choice. The Government can make the political choice to end it and I hope that they take on board these points today.

3.46 pm

Beth Winter (Cynon Valley) (Lab): Today's debate on the cost of living crisis and food insecurity is vital because this Government's actions are hammering working-class people and driving more and more people into poverty. It is difficult to address the scale of the crisis in the short time available because people's incomes and living standards are under attack on so many fronts.

Rising inequality, poverty and hardship in our country cannot be better illustrated than by the shocking increase in the prevalence of food poverty in the UK: 11 million people are experiencing food insecurity and an estimated 2.5 million children in Britain are at risk of malnutrition as a result of living in poverty. Those are staggering figures. In Wales, there are now 129 Trussell Trust distribution centres and last year, the Trussell Trust distributed 146,000 emergency parcels. That was the seventh annual increase in a row.

The national situation is mirrored in my constituency of Cynon Valley. My local authority, Rhondda Cynon Taf, has the highest number of Trussell Trust distribution centres—18, which distribute more than 15,000 parcels. Behind all those figures and statistics are real people—mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, children—who are going without. They are people like Eirlys, as I will name her, in my constituency, a single mother with a young son who runs her own business. She told me that she has not had the central heating on for a whole week since she received a gas bill and since the rises in energy prices have been announced. It is not only fuel bills that are rising. She is particularly concerned about the national insurance rise and the cost of food shopping. She is devastated at the increases and does not know how she and her family will survive. There was pure desperation when I spoke to her.

That is just one story that is replicated not only across my constituency, but throughout Wales and the UK, as we have heard today. We should be angry that we, the fifth richest nation in the world, have allowed this situation to arise. It has become normalised and it has got to be challenged. I am pleased that those challenges are happening.

In the short time remaining, I want to refer, as others have done, to the national right to food campaign, led by my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne), who is doing outstanding work on tackling food poverty and insecurity in the UK. The campaign calls for the right to food to be enshrined in law to end the scandal of hunger and food banks. There

[*Beth Winter*]

is a movement building of trade unions, grassroots groups, and of cities and towns becoming right to food cities and towns across the UK.

I want to refer briefly to the motion passed at Labour's party conference last year in support of embedding the right to food in the Labour party's next general election manifesto. I look forward to that happening. The Welsh Government are also doing a lot, as others have mentioned. The co-operation agreement between Plaid and Labour includes a commitment to extend free school meals to all primary school pupils and to develop a food strategy to encourage the production and supply of locally sourced foods in Wales.

Hunger is a political choice. We can and must choose to do things differently. Rest assured that I am determined to continue to work alongside others in this House and outside to make the scandal of hunger end.

3.50 pm

Ian Byrne (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab): The fear currently being felt across this nation is palpable. Millions are worried that they will freeze or starve in their homes. In the fifth-richest country in the world, how has this injustice been allowed to happen? That is the position that so many face due to political choices taken in this House. Research by the Food Foundation in 2020 showed that 20% of adults in the UK—around 11 million—face food insecurity each year. A survey of food industry workers by the bakers union showed that more than a third went without to make sure that others in the house got a meal. They are the ones who produce the food in this country.

Food poverty leads to health and life expectancy inequality, malnutrition and obesity. Poverty destroys the life chances of future generations in our poorer communities. It affects children's educational attainment and life chances. How can we accept in this House that we have more food banks than McDonald's outlets? When do we collectively accept that the system is broken and is failing the people we are elected to represent? Hunger is a political choice; fuel poverty is a political choice. They are both choices made by the present Government, like the cut to universal credit, benefit sanctions and the erosion of workers' rights, all alongside a decade of Conservative austerity, which has cut our vital services to the bone.

It is three years since the United Nations special rapporteur on extreme poverty issued his powerful report on the UK, in which he described the horrific impact of the Government's dismantling of the social safety net and the political choices that have led to the injustice of where we find ourselves today. Nothing was done and his warnings were dismissed. The time for sticking plasters, such as a reliance on thousands of food bank and pantry volunteers and donors, is over. We need systemic change so that all our people might live with the opportunity of health, happiness and dignity. This is a humanitarian crisis that demands permanent solutions, not tinkering with a system that is broken.

If reliance on charity alone were considered a sufficient guarantee for basic human needs in the UK, previous generations would not have legislated for universal state schooling and the national health service—solutions to fundamental problems which have transformed this

nation for the better. That is why we need to legislate for the right to food. We need enforceable food rights to ensure that the Government of the day are accountable for making sure that nobody goes hungry and are prevented from making decisions that lead to people being unable to afford to put a meal on the table. Ministers should be under a duty, when setting the minimum wage and any relevant social security benefit, to state how much of the prescribed sum has been calculated for food, because right now it is not enough. How can this be allowed?

We should also legislate for universal free school meals: a nutritious, free school breakfast and lunch for every child in compulsory education. If we accept the universal and compulsory requirement that all children up to the age of 16 should be in school, why do we break from that principle of universal care, nurturing and protection in relation to their meals during the day? What a difference that would make to the 4.5 million children going hungry today.

Things must change. With so many trade unions, councils and community campaigners across the UK calling for the right to food to be put into law, will the Minister listen to those voices from across the political spectrum and impress on the Chancellor that the buck stops with him? The richest man in Parliament must find a solution and include the right to food in his spring statement, because hunger is a political choice.

3.54 pm

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): Diolch, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this debate and to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne), who I know is doing excellent work leading the campaign for the right to food.

We have all seen the catastrophic rise in food poverty at the hands of this Government and their decade-long cuts, and now we are faced with rising food prices and energy costs. Too many people in Pontypridd are at their wits' end trying to deal with the crisis. In my local area, people are going above and beyond to help support those who are struggling the most with this Government's catastrophic lack of action on the cost of living crisis. Food banks in Taff Ely and Pontypridd are incredibly busy and are supported by an army of incredible volunteers across the community, who work tirelessly to help people put food on their tables. Community groups, including some of Ponty and our city's excellent rugby and football clubs, have been doing fantastic work in collecting food to be distributed to those most in need, but it should not be that way.

While it is of course a privilege to be able to highlight the incredible work of my constituents, it is a privilege that comes with real frustration and, to put it bluntly, sheer exasperation. I simply cannot believe that their actions are necessary in a modern, developed nation such as ours. Food bank use has skyrocketed around the country, and it is shameful that everyday people, who are desperately worried that they will not be able to put food on the table to feed themselves and their families, are getting in touch with my office. While the Government are spending their time chasing their tails and trying to defend the indefensible, campaigners such as Jack Monroe and volunteers around the country are working all hours of the day to tackle food insecurity.

Raising prices and a reduction in the number of products in basic ranges has an unimaginable impact on people struggling, and while I know that in recent days some retailers have agreed to protect those products, they must all commit to making sure that those products are available and affordable for everyone who buys them.

While the Government's £20 a week cut to universal credit may not seem like a huge amount of money to some people or our billionaire Chancellor, for many living on universal credit it is the difference between being able to put food on the table for their families or going hungry. At the bare minimum, the Government must urgently reintroduce the uplift to support those most in need. They must also set out a national strategy for food, making it clear how they will ensure access to high-quality, sustainable and affordable food for all.

When talking about food insecurity, it would be remiss of me not to highlight the controversy that surrounded the UK Government's disastrous attempt to cut free school meals for children in England, a policy I would hope that Members from all political persuasions could see was an appalling idea from the get-go. I am a proud Welsh Labour MP, and I am proud that in Wales the Welsh Labour Government have consistently provided parents with the vital cash needed to put food on the table for children in the school holidays.

In December last year, they went one step further and committed to extending free school meal provision to all primary-aged children. There are important and wider benefits to that approach, such as giving children access to healthy food across the whole school and helping to improve social skills and attainment. I should not have to put that in terms for Conservative Members: they should know that it is simply wrong for any child to go without food. But sometimes it feels as though we are banging our heads against a brick wall.

On energy prices too, this Tory Government would do well to follow Labour's example. The Welsh Labour Government have just doubled the warm home discount, and Labour's plan would see the worst-off in society receive £600 to support them in paying their energy bills—real support, not words on a piece of paper or a loan to be paid off in the distant future. The Government have the chance to take action now to stop kids and families going hungry and shivering in their homes. I sincerely hope the Chancellor, the Secretary of State and the Minister in her place today grab the opportunity while they still can.

3.58 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): The UK already has the worst levels of poverty and inequality in north-west Europe and the highest levels of in-work poverty this century. The Trussell Trust recently revealed that food banks in its network distributed at least three parcels every minute of every day between April and September last year, which was an 11% increase on the same period in 2019. Emergency food provision remains well above pre-pandemic levels. Some 68% of working-age adults in poverty in the UK live in a household where at least one adult is in work. That is the highest rate of in-work poverty since records began, so I trust that the Minister will not tell me that the only way

out of poverty is work. People need jobs that pay a decent living wage, not the Government's pretend living wage.

Statutory sick pay also needs to be increased so that people who are ill can heat and eat. This is the 21st century, but we are back in Dickensian times. This is not worth it. Some £15 was added to the price of groceries last month, with the rate of food price increases set to soar further this year, just as national insurance contributions are set to rise. Let us not forget that the Prime Minister himself promised to cut energy prices during his botched Brexit campaign. Another broken promise. Perhaps the right hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) needs a long rest after his labours as Leader of the House. Perhaps that is why he has been appointed Minister for Brexit opportunities.

Disabled people will be disproportionately impacted by the higher cost of living and by food insecurity. Trussell Trust data shows that 62% of working-age adults using food banks are disabled. The Food Foundation says that levels of food insecurity are 12% higher for households with a disabled person. Pre-pandemic, the figure was half that. Disabled people did not even get the £20 universal credit uplift, and they are suffering even more during this cost of living crisis. If you are disabled, you need more heating; if you are ill, you need more heating. All of this is a complete disgrace.

In Scotland, the SNP Scottish Government are mitigating this Tory poverty crisis and supporting low-income households using the limited powers available to them to support folk. They have provided £65 million in direct financial support to over half a million households. The Scottish child payment is helping families in poverty in Scotland and it will be doubled in April. The Scottish Government have also introduced a winter support fund, and the winter heating allowance will replace cold weather payments. Why are the UK Government not doing something about that? They do not do anything.

Instead of hanging about, why will the UK Government not tackle fuel poverty properly? Giving folk who are already getting council tax rebates a further rebate does not work. Giving loans to folk who are already so poor that they cannot heat and eat, and making them repay them, does not work. It is time this Government did something. However, as long as Scotland is under Westminster control, we will always be vulnerable. Only with the full powers of independence can Scotland rid itself of these cruel Tory policies and build a fairer society.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I am trying to squeeze in as many speakers as possible, but it will not be possible to get everyone in. I am reducing the time limit to three minutes.

4.2 pm

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): We regularly hear in this Chamber about choices between heating and eating. That is a tough reality for many, but it does not have to be like this. The cost of living crisis and food insecurity sit at the Government's door. Over the last two years, the Government have had to take some serious action to deal with the furlough scheme and the speedy NHS roll-out of the vaccine, and those were indeed the right outcomes. However, the £4.3 billion in covid loans written off by the Treasury as wasted money,

[Janet Daby]

the £37 billion wasted on track and trace and the Government contracts given to their mates are all unacceptable. While public money is not being managed well by the Government, we have seen individuals and families attending food banks and asking for food that they do not have to cook, so that they do not have to use their ovens. Imagine it—no heating, no hot food and no excess money to buy white goods, furniture or clothes. Universal credit just does not go far enough.

Low-wage earners are squeezed to the maximum. They are experiencing rises in private rents, in fuel prices, in national insurance contributions and, of course, in food prices. Universal credit has been reduced at a time when it is needed the most. The Salvation Army in Catford has said:

“Money is not going as far as it should be to cover all expenses.”

We know that, but the question is: do the Government care? If they care, what are they doing about it? The Government have a track record of increasing poverty, or poverty being increased while they are in government.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does she agree that it is an outrage that this Government have just voted for a real-terms cut to social security and pension payments while giving the bankers a £1 billion tax cut?

Janet Daby: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The Government's track record is one where they are not doing what is needed for people in poverty and experiencing poverty. They are actually helping their own, and that comes down to one rule for them and another rule for everyone else.

The Government are not fit to govern our country due to their failed promises and decisions time and again. The Prime Minister promised that we would take back control when we leave the EU, with lower fuel prices, control of gas and oil and having more to invest in our NHS, but this could not be further from the truth. There are solutions to eradicate the burden of hunger and improve the standard of living to keep families warm and fed, but this Government lack the political will to do so.

4.5 pm

Claudia Webbe (Leicester East) (Ind): As the inspiring James Baldwin once said:

“Anyone who has ever struggled with poverty knows how extremely expensive it is to be poor”.

My constituents in Leicester West, Leicester residents and people across the country are facing an unacceptable squeeze on living standards that will increase already shockingly high rates of hunger and food insecurity. Between sky-high inflation, stagnant wages and the energy price crisis, households across the country are facing an unprecedented cost of living crisis. Inflation has already reached its highest level in almost 30 years—5.4%. This means that the cost of food and everyday essential items is getting more expensive. Worryingly, the chairman of Tesco warned that the worst of the food price rises is yet to come. This is after the managing director of Iceland said that his stores were losing customers not to rival supermarkets but to food banks and to hunger.

Hunger is not inevitable. In one of the richest countries in the world, we have more than enough resources to eradicate hunger for every resident across the UK. While so many have suffered, billionaires and the super-rich have increased their obscene fortunes during the pandemic. Yet this Government raise funds only by squeezing the struggling many while allowing the astronomical wealth of the few to continually grow. Figures released by the Trussell Trust show that use of its food bank in Leicester has risen by more than 300% during the pandemic. The number of children on free school meals in Leicester has increased by 31% since 2016, meaning that over one in five schoolchildren in our city are reliant on free school meals.

I have volunteered with many food banks in my community and I know from first-hand experience the incredible selflessness that is involved. However, the Government have created a scenario in which food banks are normalised and paper over obscene inequality and endemic instability. It is appalling that in one of the world's richest countries workers are paid poverty wages and are forced to live on the generosity of others. While food banks are currently necessary due to widespread poverty in Leicester and across the country, the over-reliance on them is a symptom of our unsustainably unequal society. Our priority must be to fight for a future that is built on solidarity and dignity, and in which poverty, hunger and food banks are a thing of the past.

4.8 pm

Kate Hollern (Blackburn) (Lab): Millions of people in this country are living with food insecurity, and this appalling state of affairs is the result of a decade of levelling down by this Government. Some 313,000 food parcels were given out in the north-west by food banks such as the Trussell Trust, which I commend for the excellent work it does. Relative poverty in Blackburn has jumped by more than 25% since 2014. Over 11,000 children are living in households that are struggling with the sad and unthinkable trade-offs that we are hearing about. This crisis has been a result of political choices, and that is shameful. It is shameful that we see such levels of relative poverty, child poverty, in-work poverty and food insecurity in one of the world's richest countries.

The Minister spoke of people in work, but I remind the House that in Blackburn over a third of people in work are in receipt of universal credit. It is not ending poverty. The Food Foundation found that almost 9% of households experienced food insecurity in the past month. Millions of children are living in households where they do not have healthy and affordable food, giving parents sleepless nights. Pensioners are struggling with this cost of living crisis, making tough decisions on whether to eat or heat. But this is an opportunity for the Government to act—to act fast and go further.

I am concerned that on numerous occasions the Prime Minister has had to be reminded about what he presents as facts in this Chamber. Perhaps he really believes the statements he makes, but policy decisions to improve the situation have not been based on sound data. If his decisions are not based on sound information, he will inevitably get them wrong. That is what is happening now.

4.11 pm

Nadia Whittome (Nottingham East) (Lab): I know that we are short of time, Madam Deputy Speaker, so thank you for fitting me in.

The cost of living crisis has been years in the making, and the blame lies at the door of successive Conservative Governments. Communities like mine have been devastated by a decade of austerity. The number of people using food banks has increased every single year that the Conservatives have been in government since 2010. Now, in the fifth largest economy in the world, there are more food banks than there are branches of McDonalds. Almost 1 million people are on zero-hours contracts and hundreds of key workers earn less than the real minimum wage. These jobs are simply failing to put enough food on the table.

Nottingham already has about 15,000 children eligible for free school meals. To make matters worse, last year this Government implemented the biggest overnight cut in social security since the founding of the modern welfare state when they ended the universal credit uplift. Some 14,250 households in Nottingham East have lost £20 a week. The national insurance hike in April will mean that workers lose an additional 1.25% of their income. This is a flat tax, of course, which will hit the lowest-paid workers the hardest.

The cost of food and bills is soaring. Rising inflation has a disproportionate impact on people in poorer households. Food writer and activist Jack Monroe has exposed how the prices of cheaper food products have soared as availability has fallen. For example, the cheapest pasta in their supermarket has gone from 29p to 70p—a 141% price increase. When I visited Himmah, a food bank in Nottingham East, in November last year, I was told it was already seeing a steep rise in the number of people relying on its services. I dread to think of the demand from April, as tax hikes and energy bill increases kick in.

The cost of living crisis was created by the political decisions of a Government who have chosen to protect the interests of the wealthy and huge corporations, not those of working people. Amazon paid only 7.5% of the value of its income in the UK in tax in 2020, despite sales increasing by almost £2 billion, and the wealth of British billionaires increased by £107 billion during the pandemic. To end the cost of living crisis we should be raising taxes on those who profited from the pandemic at the expense of those who got us through it. Ministers must increase the minimum wage, end zero-hours contracts, and abolish all anti-trade union laws to give workers power to negotiate better pay and conditions.

4.14 pm

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): I thank all those who have spoken in this debate and I welcome the Secretary of State—I presume it means that he has not been reshuffled and can hear the end of the debate. I thank all those who spoke in the debate, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), the first Back Bencher to speak from our side. She described her inspirational social action, which we all think is fantastic. My hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Apsana Begum) spoke of the brilliance of the east end of London, and my hon. Friends the Members for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) and for Middlesbrough (Andy

McDonald) rightly paid tribute, in the week before HeartUnions week, to the role of our trade unions in our country in supporting working people.

My hon. Friends the Members for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery) and for Coventry South (Zarah Sultana), the hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams), and my hon. Friends the Members for Bootle (Peter Dowd), for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley), for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey), for Cynon Valley (Beth Winter), for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne), for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones), for Lewisham East (Janet Daby) and for Nottingham East (Nadia Whittome) all, in their different ways, made the simple and direct point that poverty in this country is a result of political choice.

I want to refer to a song my grandfather wrote called “In my Liverpool home”. Many Members in this House may know it. Unfortunately, a version of it is sung on the football terraces and I hope you will not mind, Madam Deputy Speaker—I think the language is just about parliamentary—if I repeat it to make a point. It goes like this, “In your Liverpool slums, you live in the gutter with nothing to eat, you find a dead rat and you think it’s a treat, in your Liverpool slums.”

That chant is horrible. I hate hearing it. Lots of other football fans sing it and not just about Liverpool. In fact, I heard it on Sunday when it was sung by Cardiff fans about Swansea. The chant stings and it is meant to hurt. I quote it because it describes something we all know in our hearts to be true: poverty in this country is associated with deep shame. Football crowds choose the abuse because it is the ultimate indignity that they can hurl at the other side. So when I hear the Minister, in response to my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), explain that the reason we have food banks in this country is because housing and energy costs are fixed and food costs can therefore be supported by charity, I have to tell her that I cannot accept it. I cannot accept that the answer to a failed Tory decade is charity, not change.

As we have heard time and again in this debate, the indignity of being unable to provide for yourself and your family is exemplified nowhere better than in the exponential growth of food banks in the last decade. Even before covid hit, 2.5 million food parcels were handed out to our fellow citizens—up from just thousands in 2010. In 2019, with the help of great organisations around the country, I wrote a report on how we could make ends meet and end the need for food banks in this country. I can never forget the women I met in Fife who started a food co-operative precisely because both of them had fallen foul of the two-child policy in universal credit and ended up at the food bank door. They were horrified to be there, so they found a way to provide cheaper food for local families to buy and give them back the dignity of choice. Their starting point was that the shame of begging was no way to help any family. That is why the phenomenon of food banks in this country cannot be allowed to continue. We applaud the community spirit of volunteers who help, but we have to ask ourselves: how long can this generosity be allowed to paper over the cracks of 11 failed years?

For every family in this country, whether or not they have ever needed a food bank, who have ever sat around the dinner table and worried about paying their mortgage, or have ambitions for their children that they worry will

[Alison McGovern]

not come to pass, we have to get to the cause of our country's failures and put them right. In order to do that, we have to get to the root cause, which is a lost decade of economic growth that has been far too low. We have had low growth and it is now exacerbated by a broken Brexit deal, which promised a great deal and has delivered so many problems. Those problems have led to 4.5 million people in food insecurity and to 3.5 million people in insecure work, with terrible contracts that mean that they do not know how much they are going to earn from one month to the next. Even worse, the Office for Budget Responsibility is telling us that 18% of people, nearly one in five in this country, are working below their skill level. They could be doing more, they could be earning more, but they are not. That has led to low productivity, exacerbating the problem of low growth, which has been going on and on for far too long.

So what should the plan for change be? As many Members have said, we need a windfall tax on oil and gas to support the expansion of the warm home grant. We could take action now: we could take action on VAT and we could help people with energy prices. I am at a loss to know why the Government do not do that. Of course, we need a long-term plan on energy, too. We need proper investment in sustainable sources that will help to ensure we can keep the lights on and help bill payers, too.

Again, I am at a loss to understand why the low-growth Tory party would also want to be the high-tax Tory party—and that is what you are. I am at a loss to understand why they want to compound the problems in our economy without the more fundamental changes to the tax system that we need. Madam Deputy Speaker, my apologies for the use of the word “you” there.

We do need fundamental reform. As I mentioned, 3.5 million people are in insecure work; that cannot go on. We need a very different labour market, with the Low Pay Commission able to get to the root of these problems: not just low pay itself but the poor pay progression that stops work helping people do better tomorrow and even better after that. Central to that is trade union membership. We need more people to have the help and support of a trade union membership card in their pocket and a union rep when they need them. We know that trade union membership helps people at work and helps to increase pay. We have to fix that problem in our labour market. We need to look again at the broken Brexit deal that is holding us back and we need a DWP that can actually help people to improve their prospects at work, not constant initiatives like kickstart and restart that underdeliver again and again, wasting the time and efforts of all the excellent work coaches up and down our country.

Finally, we need to really help people to move on and move upwards. Instead of the “Levelling Up” White Paper, which has a huge number of pages but promises very little, we need actual rebalancing, giving proper powers to regional Mayors and others so they can deal with the labour market in their area, which they know best. We need to fix our infrastructure, from public transport to childcare, so that those people who at the moment are able to do little in work can be supported to move onwards and upwards. That is a plan for people's incomes that will mean that they will have not only a better working life, but money in their pockets.

In so many ways, I felt today this debate has been kind of ludicrous. It is bizarre to have to explain to the party supposedly of free trade that, when supermarkets are giving away food to stop it going to waste and workers do not have enough to pay, so the price of huge amounts of valuable food is effectively zero, that is a market failure. Surely even the Tory party understands that the existence of food banks themselves is a failure. For our side, we know and see the indignity of vulnerable families sent to food banks. It is not just market failure; it is social failure, too. Our country deserves so much better and the time for change is now.

4.23 pm

Victoria Prentis: With the leave of the House, I would like to thank Members from across the House for sharing the experiences of their constituents this afternoon.

I will start with my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire (Craig Williams), who made some very important points about growing enough food. We will answer them in the food White Paper and much more in our future farming policies. I undertake that I will continue to work with the Welsh Agriculture Minister, as he suggests.

I thank the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) for being the sandwich lady everyone deserves. That is a great initiative. She knows that members of my family have been involved in those deprived areas of Swansea for many years. I applaud everything she does.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stourbridge (Suzanne Webb) spoke powerfully on the effects of covid interventions on the economy. My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon), who runs the all-party parliamentary group on the national food strategy, referred to a very important quotation from Lord Woolton:

“Feeding is not enough, it must be good feeding.”

My hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk (James Wild) shared his experience and spoke with real authority on nuclear energy. My hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Paul Bristow) again spoke of his pride in his city and the Peterborough Heroes. I thank them too, as I thank all volunteers working in the food charity space, although I say to the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) that we share many of her views on ending the need for food charity, but we do applaud the volunteers who take part in those endeavours.

To the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell), I say that this is a very worrying time for employees at the Fawdon factory. I am told that the Minister for Employment would be delighted to meet her as soon as possible to discuss what support can be put in place for them.

I have met the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne) many times to discuss his important work in this space, particularly Fans Supporting Foodbanks, which is another great initiative. I will continue to work with him on his pleas for a right to food, although I am not promising yet. If only we could pass a law that would bring food poverty to an end, it would be a wonderful thing, but I am afraid that the challenges before us are more significant than that.

Chris Stephens *rose—*

Victoria Prentis: I will make some progress.

As the Chancellor said last week, we cannot do anything to control some drivers of cost increases, but we can lessen the blow. As a Government, we have put in place a range of measures to help people who are struggling because, really, of the covid pandemic. It is important to remember that the Treasury spent £400 billion on direct economic support during the pandemic. Universal credit has been a vital safety net for about 6 million people during this time. I also put on record my thanks to DWP staff in Banbury and across the nation, who continue to deliver that benefit and who have worked so hard during the pandemic to ensure that it reaches those who need it.

During the pandemic, we learned that targeted support is often best delivered by local authorities. Our £500 million support fund provides help to the most vulnerable with essential costs such as food. Last year, we spent £220 million on the holiday activities and food programme. It is good to see my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince) on the Front Bench, who worked very hard with me and other Ministers to try to get that provision in place.

We are taking action to support the most vulnerable and low-income households over the winter months with the warm home discount, the winter fuel payments and cold weather payments. When it comes to energy bills, which many hon. Members raised this afternoon, we are introducing a £200 rebate for all households. We are delivering a non-repayable £150 cash rebate for homes in council tax bands A to D, which is equivalent to 80% of all households. We are also giving £144 million in targeted discretionary funding for local authorities to help them to support homes that do not qualify for the rebate.

As we have said many times this afternoon, the best way out of poverty is work. Our plan for jobs is helping people into work. We have heard what has been said

about the levels of pay, which the Government take very seriously. The national living wage has been boosted to £9.50 an hour and we continue to work on that area. That is a 6.6% increase, which means an extra £1,000 a year in working people's pockets.

We now have 32.4 million people in employment and 380,000 fewer children in workless households. What we now need to focus on is filling the vacancies, of which we have 1.25 million. We heard something about them this afternoon, but in my sector of agriculture, we have vacancies today in processing, picking, haulage and packing. The Minister for Employment will be delighted to help hon. Members on both sides of the House to assist constituents into work, as will their local DWP offices.

The UK economy is roaring back to life. We are set to enjoy the fastest growth this year of any nation in the G7. I want everybody to be part of that and to benefit from the economic recovery as we come out of the pandemic.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House is concerned that households are bracing themselves for the biggest drop in living standards in thirty years; notes that the cost of living crisis includes steep price increases in everyday and essential food items, making the situation worse for the 4.7 million adults and 2.5 million children already living in food insecurity and risking more people experiencing food insecurity; regrets that the Government is making the cost of living crisis worse through tax hikes, low growth, falling real wages, and a failure to tackle the energy crisis; condemns a decade of Conservative-led governments for leaving Britain uniquely exposed to a global gas crisis and failing to create high paid, secure jobs; and calls upon the Government to set out a national strategy for food including how it intends to ensure access to high quality, sustainable, affordable food for all and meet the United Nations goal to end hunger by 2030.

Children's Mental Health

4.30 pm

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House recognises the importance of Children's Mental Health Week; is concerned about the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the mental health of young people and that there has been a 77% rise in the number of children needing treatment for severe mental health issues since 2019; calls on the Government to guarantee mental health treatment within a month for all who need it and to provide specialist mental health support in every school, including a full-time mental health professional in every secondary school and a part-time professional in every primary school; and further calls for the Government to establish open access mental health hubs for children and young people in every community to ensure the best start to life for future generations.

This is Children's Mental Health Week. I congratulate the children's mental health charity Place2Be, which launched the first ever Children's Mental Health Week in 2015. I also congratulate all the mental health charities and schools that are taking part in events this week.

The whole House will want to recognise the hard work and dedication of mental health professionals, campaigners, advocates, teachers, parents and guardians, especially over the past two years. So many mental health professionals have themselves suffered mental ill health, exhaustion and burnout. As we reach out to all the children and young people affected by poor mental health, we want them to know that we in this House are with them.

The pandemic has placed a huge weight on the shoulders of our children and young people. With schools closed, financial uncertainty at home, the exams fiasco and anxiety about the future, the pandemic has hit the poorest and most vulnerable children hardest. This highlights the inequalities in our society.

Children with chaotic home lives, children in overcrowded and noisy housing and children from black and ethnic minority communities suffer disproportionately from worse outcomes and worse mental health provision than white communities. Black children are much more likely to experience a mental health problem but far less likely to receive any support.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): I am interested in that comment because, of course, the Education Committee recently found that white kids from the most disadvantaged backgrounds have the worst educational outcomes. I would take issue with the hon. Lady's point.

Dr Allin-Khan: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. Perhaps he would like to understand that some white groups from poor socioeconomic backgrounds have such outcomes but, by far and away, it is disproportionately weighted against black and minority ethnic groups as a whole in this country.

There was a crisis in child and adolescent mental health provision in this country even before the pandemic made it worse. The latest report by the Children's Commissioner shows that demand for child and adolescent mental health services—CAMHS—increased in 2020-21, with one in six children likely to be suffering from a mental health condition, up from one in nine in 2017.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that children and young people who have suffered cancer and had long spells of cancer treatment

need mental health support, too? That should be part of the package. It should not be an add-on or something they have to search for; it should be part and parcel of their treatment.

Dr Allin-Khan: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. Some children endure unspeakable circumstances that unduly affect their mental health in a way that we can never comprehend. It affects not just them but their family—their siblings and parents. I thank him for his intervention.

Anna McMorris (Cardiff North) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Unlike the UK Government here, the Welsh Labour Government are adopting a whole-school approach, viewing this issue holistically and offering a package of measures, while the English approach has been described as shocking and despicable.

Dr Allin-Khan: My hon. Friend is always a powerful advocate when it comes to the importance of positive mental health for young people. I have visited Wales and seen at first hand the fantastic examples of what can be achieved when Labour is in power.

One in six children are suffering with probable mental health issues, but only about a third are able to access treatment. Now things are getting worse: the Conservative cost of living crisis is causing more misery, uncertainty and upheaval in the lives of millions of children and young people. For weeks the House has been witness to the impact of that Conservative cost of living crisis on people and their families across the country.

Children are going to bed cold and hungry, and their life chances are impacted because they are unable to concentrate at school. Many are watching their parents worry and cry about being unable to pay the bills. Dragging an electric heater around the house before jumping under the covers just to keep warm because there is no heating—that, for too many of us, feels far too familiar. It is how my brother and I grew up, and it will stay with me forever. I had hoped that that perpetual fear of insecurity that never leaves one was a thing of the past, but sadly not: it is alive and well in Tory Britain in 2022. This is a “cost of Johnson crisis”.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): The hon. Lady is making a powerful speech that stems from her personal experience. One of the groups who seem to be falling off the cliff edge are 16 to 18-year-olds, because by the time they are referred to CAMHS, the waiting lists take them out of the range that CAMHS can deal with. Does the hon. Lady agree that that is awful, and is leaving far too many young people with nowhere to turn?

Dr Allin-Khan: The hon. Member is absolutely right. So many 16 to 18-year-olds find themselves on a waiting list for an extended period only to drop off it just as they turn 18, or else have one or two sessions, then turn 18 and find that there are no longer any services for them. That goes on to have a detrimental impact. This is not just a tragedy for today but a tragedy for tomorrow as well, because poor mental health in children is carried into adulthood. What happens today will impact demands for mental health services tomorrow. The old saying

goes "Prevention is better than cure." That is why we have a range of public health measures in place for children—check-ups for eyesight, hearing, and growth.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): A GP with a surgery in my constituency contacted me recently about a serious incident of attempted suicide. The child involved is now on the waiting list, but must wait a whole year to be seen. Does my hon. Friend think that that is acceptable, or do the Government need to take action as a priority for children's mental health and wellbeing?

Dr Allin-Khan: My hon. Friend is entirely right, and that is why we are here today. Our children deserve better; they cannot go on like this. That is why we are talking about measures that can help to ameliorate these difficulties so that no child has to wait that long, and their families do not have to wait that long for answers. This is not okay.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that among young people, black and minority ethnic young people often experience particular mental health pressures? There must be more analysis of the support that they and their families need.

Dr Allin-Khan: As always, my right hon. Friend is a powerful advocate for all groups, but particularly when it comes to black and minority ethnic groups. We do not have the data—we do not collect the data—even to understand the scale of the issue. I think that that is convenient for the Government, because it means they do not have to accept that there is a problem which needs to be dealt with.

That is one of the issues for the future. We have to understand the true scale of the issue when it comes to some minority groups, and tailor support that helps them specifically. When people from minority groups are seeking help, often it is so difficult for them to make a connection with people who understand some of the particular social pressures they live with at home and some of the societal issues they have to deal with that also contribute to mental ill health—for example, systemic racism. My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to bring that up.

We have a range of public health measures in place for children—check-ups for eyesight, hearing and growth—and vaccinations to protect against measles, mumps and rubella, yet we ignore the wisdom of the ages when it comes to children's mental health. As a doctor, I know that adverse childhood experiences are a key contributing factor to poor mental health in adulthood. In A&E, I see increasingly younger children coming in having self-harmed or living with eating disorders. It is simply heartbreaking, and for parents it is absolutely agonising. Parents bring their children to A&E wondering why they are fainting repeatedly and are constantly exhausted.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree with me as a parent—we are both parents and many of us here are parents of school-age children—that the coronavirus crisis hit everyone with kids? I have 13 private schools within my constituency boundary, and I even have parents of children there emailing in that their kids, who were happy and outgoing

children, are zonked in front of Teams meetings all day and have turned into blithering wrecks of what they used to be. Coronavirus exacerbated what was a problem with CAMHS all the way along and that has hit all children in this country, and the only people who will not recognise it are Conservative Members, who are in denial because they have their own internal problems to be dealing with.

Dr Allin-Khan: I thank my hon. Friend for her very powerful point. When it comes to mental ill health, no group is unaffected. It is really important that we acknowledge that, while some groups are disproportionately affected, mental ill health can affect anyone. Children can live in a £3 million house, and still feel they want to take their own life or want to self-harm. The pressure that puts on parents is extremely painful, and it causes many parents to give up their job to sit at home and care for their child, because they are so crippled and so worried about what may happen if they leave the house and go to work. That is why it is so important that we acknowledge the real difficulty we have with waiting times for CAMHS.

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): Given that the hon. Lady and her party, unlike me, were enthusiastic supporters of lockdown measures and closing schools, and were not prepared to stand up to the teaching unions, does she accept any responsibility at all for this mental health crisis among young people, because those lockdowns have had such a negative impact on our young people's mental health?

Dr Allin-Khan: Do the right hon. Lady's Government take any responsibility for the tens of thousands of children who are now bereaved as a result of losing their parents because of this Government's shocking handling of the pandemic? We shall take no lectures from the right hon. Member and her party when it comes to protecting children's mental health. I shall move on.

When children come to A&E—[*Interruption.*] Please feel free to intervene: I will take interventions.

Edward Timpson (Eddisbury) (Con): The fact is that we are all in this debate this afternoon because we all care about the mental health of children right across the country. For me, this is an opportunity for us to use this precious time in the Chamber to try to find some common ground between us, so that we can move forward in a positive way and people watching can understand that there are things we can do to make their lives better. In that spirit, can I suggest to the hon. Lady that she look at my report on school exclusions, particularly at how we can ensure that teachers are better prepared at school, including with the mental health leads that the Government are bringing in, so that they understand issues such as trauma and insecure attachment and can enable children to get the support they need at the time they need it? That is the premise on which we should all move forward.

Dr Allin-Khan: The hon. Member highlights the point that mental health should not be a political football, which is why we hope that he will support the Opposition's recommendations. I should be delighted if he sent me his report; I will read it with interest.

[Dr Allin-Khan]

It is crucial that when a child comes to A&E or a hospital, doctors and nurses take the time to build trust with them as a patient so that they feel safe talking about their condition, but with waiting lists growing and the staffing crisis deepening, it is becoming all too difficult to find the time to build the trust and respect that every patient needs and deserves. That is the human cost of more than a decade of decline caused by under-resourcing and under-investment in our NHS and by the lack of a proper NHS workforce plan for the future.

The impact on entire families is crushing. Time out of school affects a child's ability to learn and their later life choices and chances. Parents have to take time off work and sometimes leave their jobs as a result, and siblings are deeply affected. It should be a badge of shame for the Government that three quarters of children were not seen within four weeks of being referred to children's mental health services.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): No doubt my hon. Friend is aware of the relationship between children's mental health and air quality. Poor air quality can give rise to anxiety, depression, lesser focus and dementia, as well as mental health problems in unborn foetuses. Does she agree that more needs to be done, particularly in the most diverse and deprived areas where air pollution is worse? It is directly hitting children's mental health.

Dr Allin-Khan: My hon. Friend is right to remind us that adverse childhood experiences and inequalities, including health inequalities, lead to worse mental health outcomes in later life and stop children from achieving their full potential.

Imagine being a mum or dad whose child is self-harming or presenting with symptoms of depression, anxiety or phobia, and being without specialist support for extended periods. We all agree that the pressure that that puts on families and parents is just so crippling. The number of children who needed specialist treatment for severe mental health crises between April 2021 and October 2021 was 77% higher than in the same period in 2019.

This is the UK in 2022. The bar to being seen by a specialist is high, the delays are long and three quarters of children were not seen within four weeks of referral. That time is one of anguish for them and their family. Does the Minister believe that making 369,000 children wait for vital mental health support is acceptable?

According to the latest report by the Children's Commissioner, waiting times depend on where people live—so much for levelling up—and when they are eventually seen, services may be hundreds of miles away. It is making the situation so much worse. Ask any parent or any young person; they will tell us that the uncertainty and paucity of mental health services damages mental health, exacerbates mental health conditions, allows symptoms to persist and makes conditions harder to treat down the line. Ultimately, it also costs more.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The mental health disorders with the highest mortality rate are eating disorders. What the hon. Member says is particularly true for eating disorders: the longer somebody waits for treatment, the longer the disorder persists, which makes it worse.

We really need to look at prevention and early intervention in all our services. Does the hon. Member agree that instead of saving money at the wrong end, it makes absolute sense to put money into early intervention and, better still, prevention?

Dr Allin-Khan: I entirely agree. It has been a pleasure to work alongside the hon. Member in looking at eating disorder issues over the past couple of years; she is a powerful advocate. She reiterates my point that prevention is better than cure. We know that in the pandemic, eating disorders have increased. Young people who feel the loss of their sense of control through fear can, in trying to understand what is going on in their lives, develop habits that are unfortunately very difficult to break. We know that the earlier someone can intervene when there are such issues, the better the outcomes will be.

Sometimes the damage, especially the damage done by waiting, is permanent. Imagine if we treated childhood cancer like we do children's mental illness: waiting for symptoms to get worse before seeing a specialist, waiting for months or even years for treatment and leaving patients and parents to rely on charity. There would be an outcry, yet that is what the Government are doing with children's mental health. When the Minister responds, I invite them to tell the House what new measures the Government are taking, what new money is being allocated to CAMHS, and where it is going. How many mental health staff will be recruited? How will they deal specifically with the impact of the pandemic on mental health? How will they tackle the deep-rooted mental health inequalities on the lines of place, race, class and income?

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech and showing her deep understanding of this important issue. She is absolutely right to mention the enormous pressure on families and on staff. Does she agree that there should be an important focus on the retention of skilled staff by the NHS and the Government?

Dr Allin-Khan: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. There has to be retention, and I will come on to focus on our plan to grow the workforce. I will make progress, because I appreciate that I have been talking for a long time, and I want as many Members as possible to be able to speak.

I would like the Minister to tell us how they will tackle mental health inequalities on the lines of place, race, class and income—not slogans, not rehashed announcements, but a real plan with real funding. I have no doubt, sadly, that they will rehash old announcements. This is all while the Department of Health and Social Care wrote off £8.7 billion on wasted PPE equipment.

Tom Hunt: Will the hon. Member give way?

Dr Allin-Khan: I am afraid I have to make some progress. Labour has a plan for children's mental health, and the next Labour Government will implement it.

The next Labour Government will guarantee mental health treatment within a month for all who need it, setting a new NHS target to ensure that patients start receiving appropriate treatment—not simply an initial assessment of needs—within a month of referral. The next Labour Government will recruit 8,500 new staff so

that 1 million additional people can access treatment every year by the end of Labour's first term in office. The next Labour Government will put an open-access mental health hub for children and every young person in the community, providing early intervention drop-in services. The next Labour Government will provide specialist mental health support in every school to support pupils and resolve problems before they escalate.

Labour's plan will see a full-time mental health professional in every secondary school and a part-time professional in every primary school. The next Labour Government will make every week Children's Mental Health Week, until every child has security, wellbeing and the support they need. Childhood should be a time of wonder and joy; a time to store up precious memories of friendship, holidays and play; and a time to experience the things that form us as adults, yet thousands of children are suffering from stress, anxiety or depression. We are failing them—failing on prevention, failing on access to treatment, failing on funding and failing on supporting their families—and the system is stretched to breaking point. The staff are exhausted. The children are suffering. It is all happening on the Government's watch, and they are doing nothing about it. That is why I urge all Members across the House to support the motion.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. It will be obvious that a great many people wish to speak this afternoon and limited time is available, so there will be an immediate time limit on Back-Bench speeches of five minutes. I give that warning now so that people can tear up several of their bits of paper and adjust accordingly. I call the Minister.

4.54 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maggie Throup): I hear your words loud and clear, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I am grateful to Opposition Members for providing the opportunity to debate the very important issue of children and young people's mental health on the Floor of the House in Children's Mental Health Week. As my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Edward Timpson) stated, this is such an important issue and I hope that we can use this debate to find common ground. I pay tribute to his work on this extremely important issue.

This year's theme is "Growing Together" and I know that the past two years have been tough for many young people and their families. While some young people may have seen their mental wellbeing improve during lockdown, for many others, the disruption to their home lives and education has caused difficulties. We must support them to grow emotionally and find ways to help one another to grow.

We recognise that both the health and care and education sectors continue to face challenges caused by covid-related issues. I thank all staff across all sectors for their ongoing dedication to supporting children and young people in this vital period and for the support for their families, too.

Children and young people's mental health and wellbeing are a priority, as is face-to-face education, so that children and young people feel supported in their education

and on track with their learning and wider development. Around 12,000 schools and colleges across the country benefited from £17 million to improve mental health and wellbeing support in schools and colleges. I want to be clear that children and young people are not alone on this journey and that the onus is not on them to catch up; it is something that the whole school and whole education system is looking to achieve together, and it is our priority to support them to do so.

The Government are delivering record levels of investment in mental health services, but that was not always the case. Through the 2016 "The Five Year Forward View for Mental Health", we now have a solid foundation on which we can build the necessary levels of care and support, but we know that we need to be more ambitious. That is why we published the Green Paper on transforming children and young people's mental health provision in 2017 and the NHS long-term plan in 2019. Together, they set out a clear vision for ensuring that children and young people who need mental health support can get it when they need it.

The NHS long-term plan is backed by an additional £2.3 billion a year for mental health services by 2023-24. That will mean that an additional 345,000 children and young people will be able to access support.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Maggie Throup: I will make progress because we are short of time and I want to give plenty of time for Back Benchers to contribute.

More than 420,000 children and young people were treated through NHS-commissioned mental health community services in 2020-21, which was almost 100,000 more than three years ago. The NHS children and young people's mental health workforce has seen growth of 40% from 11,000 whole-time equivalents in 2019 to 15,486 whole-time equivalents in 2021.

Early intervention and mental wellbeing support in schools and colleges can prevent poor mental wellbeing from developing into mental illness. We remain committed to the proposals set out in the Green Paper to roll out mental health support teams based in schools and colleges and staffed by mental health professionals. There are now more than 280 teams set up or in training, with 183 of those teams operational and ready to support young people in around 3,000 schools and colleges. I am really pleased that we have been able to accelerate that programme to meet our original target a year early and then reach around 35% of pupils through 399 mental health support teams by 2023.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): A number of parents in my constituency have contacted me with worries about their children and how best they can support them. We know that parental support in the family can lead to great improvements in children's mental health. What information is the Minister making available to parents on how best they can support their children when they are having difficulties with their health?

Maggie Throup: My hon. Friend makes a really good point, and I know that she has lots of experience on this issue from a clinician's point of view. She is right to say

[Maggie Throup]

that families play a very important role. In her absence, may I offer my hon. Friend a meeting with the Minister for Care and Mental Health, because she will be able to go into much more detail than I can at the Dispatch Box?

Janet Daby: One thing that I hear from parents in my constituency is about the situation when a young person or children have witnessed somebody die due to knife crime. Will the Minister say what type of support those young people should expect to receive in the community or at school?

Maggie Throup: I do not think that any of us can imagine what seeing such a trauma can cause to young people, and indeed to people of any age. I know that great community work is being carried out by the voluntary sector. For example, a voluntary group goes into the hospitals near my constituency and works with young people who have been victims of knife crime or of something related to that. I am sure that sort of work has been extended across the country and to many other places. There are many different ways that support can be brought forward, and that is just one example.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Maggie Throup: No, I will not give way. I must make some headway.

In May 2021 we announced £9.5 million of funding to offer senior mental health lead training to around a third of all state schools and colleges in England in 2021-22, and as part of our commitment to offer this training to all state schools and colleges by 2025. Today we have announced an additional £3 million to respond to the high demand from schools and colleges for this training. This will help them to build on the incredible work that they and their colleagues have done throughout the pandemic to promote and support the wellbeing of their students.

I know that waiting lists are a real source of frustration for young people wanting to access NHS support, and of course for their parents and carers. It is an issue that the shadow Minister also raised. That is why we have set up the first waiting time standard for children and young people's eating disorder services.

As part of its clinically led review of NHS access standards, the NHS has consulted on the potential to introduce a new waiting time standard, so that children, young people, and their families and carers presenting to community-based mental health services should start to receive care within four weeks from referral. This consultation closed in September 2021, and NHS England and NHS Improvement will publish their response in due course.

Robert Largan (High Peak) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Maggie Throup: I must make some progress.

Throughout the pandemic, NHS mental health services remained open, offering digital and remote access to maintain support and to accept new referrals. It is important that we bank the success of these digital

innovations, as service providers are actively considering what has worked well in encouraging children and young people to engage with, and adhere to, their treatment plans.

Government must also play their part. That is why we have provided £79 million of additional funding this year to make a real difference to young people's lives by ensuring that 22,500 more children and young people can access community mental health services, giving 2,000 more children and young people access to eating disorder services and, as I mentioned earlier, accelerating the delivery of mental health support teams in schools and colleges.

Opposition Members raised the important issue of services for those teenagers transitioning into adulthood, and we have provided £30 million to ensure that young adults, aged 18 to 25, including university students, are provided with tailored mental health support, helping to bridge the gap between children's and adult services.

Although lockdown measures have been very tough for many, thanks to the success of our world-leading vaccination programme, we can now look to the future. We plan to launch a public discussion paper this spring to inform the development of a new, longer-term mental health strategy, which will include children and young people's mental health. This will pave the way for a wide-ranging and ambitious conversation about potential solutions to improve mental health and wellbeing both within and beyond Government and the NHS.

We also plan to publish an update to the NHS long-term plan later this year, taking into account the impact of the pandemic. Today we have published the Government's third annual "State of the nation: children and young people's wellbeing" report. This year's report focuses on trends in mental health and wellbeing recovery over the 2020-21 academic year, as well as children and young people's views about wider society and the future.

We owe it to our future generations to seize the opportunity now for both the health and care and the education sectors to deliver on our commitments to improve the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in this country. The Government cannot do this alone. There is a crucial role to be played by local authorities, the NHS, the private sector, schools and colleges, and the voluntary and community sector. Most importantly, we must continue to look to children and young people themselves and their parents, families and carers to understand what really matters to them.

5.4 pm

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): Children's Mental Health Week 2022 comes at a time when the mental health of children and young people is discussed as never before. When I worked in mental health as a psychologist, the stigma was often so great across the generations that no one wanted to discuss mental health. That can never be allowed to happen again. No one should ever silence anyone on mental health, because speaking about it is key to wellbeing.

I welcome the debate today as mental health spokesperson for the Scottish National party but also as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on psychology. In the latter role, I have heard from young people from right across the United Kingdom. They tell me that the

focus on mental health is required, as is ringfenced funding. For too long, children's mental health has been a Cinderella service. It should not be because, the truth be known, children's mental health is key to our society's wellbeing for years to come.

It is clear that the pandemic has had a massive impact on the level of anxiety, depression, thoughts of self-harm and social isolation that many children experienced. They have had to process a life-changing event: the pandemic. Now they live with the impact of covid-19 on their childhood, and they will do that for the rest of their lives. We must recognise the trauma and loss for many, and that their childhood has been markedly different from that of other generations. Due to the restrictions, many children missed educational, social and developmental milestones. Many very young children missed vital infant socialisation experiences. As a result, social anxiety, depression and developmental delay is now a feature of many young people's lives.

For children already struggling with mental health issues, treatment may have been interrupted, exacerbating their distress. For those needing help with an arising mental health issue for the first time, help was not as accessible as it should have been. For those children who have learning difficulties or disabilities, restrictions also meant that they often lost their additional crucial support. Those needs must be met. Children are the most vulnerable in our society and their needs must be prioritised and addressed at this crucial time. That is why it is vital that we recover from the pandemic with a children and young people-led recovery plan.

Children and young people must be involved in how their care is designed, choosing in what modality it is presented and having the option of varying levels of intensity to address mild to severe presentations. Mental health must be viewed as a continuum, with the treatment that best fits.

It is important to say that children's learning is very different now from when I and many other MPs were at school. It is vital to ask children what works in terms of online technology and innovation. It saddens me that we must also be on top of the algorithms that are online. It is extremely concerning that when someone types in "self-harm" or "eating disorder", many sites perpetuate harmful content rather than directing young children towards help and assistance. Our online harms Bill must address that. Just last week I discussed those concerns with developers of a new, positive online mental health platform for young children, called Hidden Strength, but I was shocked to hear that harmful content is being enabled and advanced by platforms.

It is exciting that in Scotland a new mental health innovation hub is being developed this year, with children's mental health the key focus. The NHS Near Me platform is also being used by clinicians to connect with patients remotely, reaching 22,000 contacts a week. Building such services with children and young people themselves, with a "what works" agenda, is key. I was extremely honoured to meet local Members of the Scottish Youth Parliament recently to discuss their leadership on mental health. I was so impressed by what Mitchell Frame, Bethany Ivison, Jack Donaghy and Lennon Boyle had to say, and by their awareness of mental health as a priority for their generation.

Importantly, throughout the pandemic the Scottish Government have developed their mental health recovery plan in conjunction with our local authorities, bringing support directly into our communities. Funding has enabled local authorities at grassroots level to provide a tailored local response for five to 24-year-olds. More than 200 new community mental health and wellbeing services for children and young people have been established and a youth advisory group set up to ensure that young people involved are at the core of self-harm prevention policies.

During the pandemic, the Minister with responsibility for mental health also wrote to all health boards to emphasise that mental health remains a clinical priority. Services must continue. The recovery plan has committed to providing 320 additional staff in Scotland in child and adolescent mental health services. CAMHS should be a step-up service where required, dependent on increased clinical need. It can never be a one-stop shop. A stepped-up model is needed. Online treatments must be available to all, with in-school counselling available across our schools and mental health support normalised across our local authorities and communities for families, as has been described. CAMHS need to be for clinically intensive presentations or they will remain overwhelmed.

It would also be helpful for best practice across the UK—perhaps the Minister will consider this—if diagnostic hubs were developed locally for young people who require assessment for specific issues such as autistic spectrum disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder or learning disability, with input from multidisciplinary teams led by educational psychologists. Children should never have to be on lengthy waiting lists for CAMHS for assessment, because their diagnosis is key to getting other supports involved in their lives.

To conclude, I want briefly to mention the Diana Award and the all-party parliamentary group on mentoring, which I have been chairing. I commend all the MPs in this House from across parties who have contributed to our programme over the past two years. Over 200 MPs during this time have mentored a young person in their community. These are the life-changing opportunities appreciated by young people and their families, so Members should please get in touch with me if they want to prioritise mentoring a young person in conjunction with the Diana Award this year. This successful cross-party programme is promoting opportunity. It increases self-worth and wellbeing, and I thank everyone who has contributed. Together, we can make a difference across the House in policy and in our actions on children's mental health. I thank all the teachers, volunteers and professionals working in the field. Mental health is key. Let us make a difference together in all our communities.

5.12 pm

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) and her very constructive comments.

I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate on children's mental health. It is a subject that has thankfully received much more attention in recent years and is discussed far more openly by children themselves, and by their parents and teachers, and healthcare professionals. Children's Mental Health Week is an excellent way to shine a spotlight on the importance of young people's

[Rob Butler]

mental wellbeing. This year it is particularly appropriate to do so given the tremendous challenges that children have faced during the pandemic.

In Aylesbury, the formidable charity Youth Concern has highlighted mental health problems among young people in Buckinghamshire. The charity supports a wide range of young people, from those who require low-level support to those who have had major relationship breakdowns at home. It provides counselling services, which can be of significant benefit to those who do not reach the threshold for a referral to child and adolescent mental health services, or CAMHS. I commend everyone at Youth Concern for the difference they make to young people's lives in my constituency.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank teachers and parents across the constituency of Aylesbury for all they did to look after children at a time of such intense disruption in the pandemic, especially when pupils could not go to school for face-to-face lessons and instead had to learn at home. That is why I am so pleased that the Government focused on getting all children back into the classroom, ensuring that they could get the world-class education they deserve. It was this party and this Government who delivered on our promise to prioritise education, and the first step of the road map for leaving lockdown saw the return of all pupils to schools and colleges in March. That was a very welcome step, because Buckinghamshire Council's education team, despite doing an incredible job over the past two years, has witnessed considerable increases in mental health issues among pupils, which has in turn put further pressure on local CAMHS.

I absolutely acknowledge that waiting times for help from CAMHS are too long, but that cannot be resolved overnight. There have been shortages of qualified clinicians for a very long time. I would respectfully suggest to Labour Members that it is simplistic to suggest that guarantees of an appointment within one month could be delivered.

One of the reasons I was keen to speak in today's debate was my previous involvement in the youth justice system. I take this opportunity to declare my interest as a former board member of the Youth Justice Board, former non-executive director of HMPPS, former youth magistrate and member of the Sentencing Council. As the Justice Committee said in our recently published report on children and young people in custody, it is generally recognised that around a third of children in custody report a known mental health disorder. That is an absolutely shocking proportion, and it is very important to recognise the immense efforts of those who work in the youth secure estate to care for those young people, because that is not what our youth custody estate is designed for.

I am pleased to say that over the past few years much has been done to improve provision for children with mental health needs in custody. NHS England and NHS Improvement have led on the development of a framework for integrated care called SECURE STAIRS. That is being delivered in partnership with the Department for Education, the Youth Custody Service and the Ministry of Justice. It is a psychologically informed, trauma-based framework for integrated care that creates a single plan around the child. It is exactly what we need and it is exactly what is being done. It is based on the idea that every interaction matters and input from every member

of staff is fundamental. As it was put to us by the NHS, from the top of the Youth Custody Service to the cleaners and the cooks, every interaction matters, and its focus on the child's story, not on their diagnosis, their offence or any other label.

This is a clear demonstration of the Government recognising the requirement for specific support for a cohort of children with mental health needs, and then bringing together all the relevant organisations to deliver that help. Labour Members have been quick to criticise the Government, but the NHS long-term plan is clear that over the coming decade the goal is to ensure that 100% of children and young people who need specialist care can access it. Mental health support for children and young people will be embedded in schools and colleges. So far from the picture painted of strife and woe, this Conservative Government have grasped the nettle, are delivering on their promises and are taking action to ensure that all children and young people have a strong start in life.

5.17 pm

Kim Leadbeater (Batley and Spen) (Lab): On 11 January 2016, the then Prime Minister David Cameron pledged a revolution in mental health treatment. At that time, I was working as a lecturer at Bradford College, and would regularly find myself supporting students who were struggling with anxiety, depression and, in some of the worst cases, attempts at taking their own lives. I knew then that services for children and young people who were struggling with their mental health were failing to meet their needs. Sadly, years later, and now working as a Member of Parliament, reading the correspondence in my inbox and going into schools on a weekly basis, I am afraid I cannot see any evidence of any such revolution when it comes to children's mental health.

It would be remiss not to mention the impact of covid-19 on mental health over the last two years, but—as the excellent mental health charity YoungMinds said in November last year—the crisis in young people's mental health predates the pandemic. Indeed, in 2017, suicide was the most common cause of death for both boys and girls aged between five and 19. Research from University College London found that in 2018-19 almost a quarter of 17-year-olds had self-harmed in the previous year. YoungMinds also highlights the clear inequalities when it comes to children and young people's mental health, with high rates of mental health problems among young women, LGBTQ+ young people, young people with autism and young carers, alongside clear links between mental health and experiencing racism and discrimination, and mental health and financial insecurity. We clearly have a problem.

While I welcome the acknowledgment this week from the Children's Commissioner for England that progress has been made to reduce the gap between the number of children with an emerging mental health need and the support available, this is no revolution. She also discussed waiting times and the fact that we now have one in six children with a probable mental health disorder. People are still waiting weeks and weeks for treatment to begin. Under this Government, we have seen a 77% rise in the number of children needing specialist treatment for a severe mental health crisis, and almost 117,000 children were turned away from mental health services last year despite being referred by a professional.

Despite warnings from teachers of an increase in emotional and mental health issues in pupils since the pandemic, the Government continue to give the impression that children and young people are an afterthought in their plans. I wholeheartedly welcome the opportunity to have this important debate today, and I sincerely hope that Ministers will use it to address the unacceptable crisis facing far too many young people and families across our country. We need a revolution in mental health, prevention, early intervention and treatment, and it needs to start today.

5.20 pm

Ben Everitt (Milton Keynes North) (Con): Sadly, the impacts of this pandemic have been wide reaching and they will be long lasting. While we are no longer under lockdown, and our physical health may be recovering, the impact of those restrictions on our mental health is still being felt, especially by the youngest in our communities. Of course, there is no doubt that children are robust. However, they have faced real challenges during the pandemic, and it is right that we use this debate to recognise that. While adults were more able to rationalise the changes that we faced in our everyday lives, children were suddenly having to cope with drastic changes such as not being able to go to school, where they both learn and socialise all at once. The structure of the school day, along with the discipline, the routine and the predictability, are so important to children's development, especially those children from more disadvantaged backgrounds who do not necessarily have those things at home, and the impact of losing them is profound.

NHS surveys show that there has been a sharp increase in the number of children experiencing mental health problems, with one in six children now having a probable mental health disorder. That is up from one in nine. We know that this can be improved on, and we know we can change children's lives for the better, but only with the right support. I am pleased to say that that support is already coming from the actions of this Government. We are expanding access to community-based mental health services, we are boosting mental health funding by over £2 billion, and we are targeting our support to where it is needed most, through the new £500 million mental health recovery action plan.

Most importantly, it is this Government who are supporting our children's mental health by keeping them in school. It is worrying to think about where we would be now if we had listened to the Opposition on this and how much worse off our children would be. While they were calling for schools to close, it was this Government who were prioritising children's and young people's mental health by opening schools as soon as it was safe to do so. Schools are more than just places to learn. The structure and support that school brings to children is second to none. As a father of three, I know how hard home schooling was, and I am sure I am not alone in feeling grateful that I was excused from doing that, doing this job—[*Interruption.*] Even doing this job.

Beyond the school walls, there is an excellent, and quite simple, way to support children's mental health. It is something that I am passionate about, and it is something that we already have in Milton Keynes, through our access to green spaces. The benefits of exercise and our beautiful green spaces are well known. In fact, research from a Danish study has shown

that growing up near green spaces reduces the risk of developing mental health problems later in life. If this Government are serious about supporting children's mental health, which I believe we are, it is important that access to green spaces should be maintained and improved.

Milton Keynes is the perfect example of a town with access to green spaces at its core. We have 15 lakes, over 11 miles of canals and 5,000 acres of parks, woodlands and rivers. That means that no one is ever more than half a mile away from a park. This alone has been a real lifeline for many of my constituents during the pandemic, and hopefully as we move forward, it will be something that remains important throughout their lives.

Milton Keynes is a perfect example of what our cities and towns could be like if they were designed with practicality and our mental health in mind, and I would encourage others to follow our example. Our children and young people are far more resilient than we give them credit for, but if we truly want them not just to survive but to thrive, beyond our current investments, we must also invest in our green spaces.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I am afraid I have to now reduce the time limit to four minutes.

5.25 pm

James Murray (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op): On 10 February 2020, when I had been an MP for less than two months, I was glad to be invited to a youth-led mental health summit at William Perkin Church of England High School, in the heart of my constituency, organised by the brilliant Ealing Citizens. On that Monday morning, I listened to young people in their late teens talk about their and their friends' mental health. Not only was their openness inspiring, but they spoke with great intelligence about what support and help they needed from their school and the NHS. When they asked me to contribute to the discussion, I said that, when I was their age, about two decades previously, I could not have imagined talking with such clarity and honesty about mental health. I said I did not think that, 20 years ago, I even understood my own mental health; I certainly never considered sharing my thoughts openly with dozens of my peers.

I promised the young people I met that day that I would make their mental health and that of other young people I represent one of my priorities as their MP. That day, we were not to know that the following month we would go into the first covid lockdown. As we have all gone through lockdowns and restrictions, the importance of mental health for the young people I represent has become even more acute. One of the things the young people at the summit told me was that they wanted a mental health worker at their school whom they could talk to about their mental health, so I arranged a meeting with the Health Minister at the time. The Minister offered no extra support, but referred me to the local NHS. After a series of meetings with the NHS, I was glad when it was confirmed last summer that the NHS would, from September that year, put in place a dedicated mental health worker one day a week in every high school in Ealing North.

[James Murray]

That represents important progress with limited resources, and I thank the local NHS for listening to the many of us who made the case for such a service, but when I have spoken to high schools about having a mental health worker one day a week, it has been clear that, although welcome, it comes nowhere near to meeting the level of need. The truth is that, without a Government who take this seriously and offer the support that is needed, we will never see the transformation that young people deserve. That is why we have committed that the next Labour Government will provide a full-time mental health professional in every secondary school. That is what young people told me in February 2020 that they want and need, and that is what we would make a reality as part of a package that would also include a part-time professional in every primary school, open-access mental health clubs for children and young people in every community, and a guarantee of mental health treatment within a month for all who need it. Our plans for mental health services would be funded by closing tax loopholes for private equity fund managers and removing the VAT exemption from private schools.

I know we need this transformational change because I was told so by young people themselves. As a new MP, I learned so much from that summit in February 2020. Since then, I have made it a priority to keep listening to young people in my constituency, making sure to visit schools whenever covid restrictions have allowed. I was glad to visit Northolt High School and Alec Reed Academy recently. As ever, I am very grateful to students and teachers for sharing with me their time and their views on mental health. As I was in the mental health summit before the pandemic, I have been informed and inspired by listening to young people talk about their mental health and what support they need. A number of the young people I have met have explained their own techniques for looking after their mental health. From their talking about the subject, I and their fellow pupils have learned something, showing the simple but crucial effectiveness of people talking about mental health, understanding how they can help to look after themselves, and having support there when they need it.

Now is the time for us as MPs not just to listen to young people, but to act. Young people need us to do the right thing and put in place the high-quality mental health services they deserve.

5.29 pm

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): I am pleased to contribute to this important debate on young people's mental health. The pandemic has had a significant impact on many young people, and I know that our schools and colleges have done huge amounts to support their students through this period. I have been discussing mental health with many of them recently, and only last week I discussed it with the Minister for Care and Mental Health.

This work must start from an early age, and I particularly welcome the work being done in Stoke-on-Trent and nationally through the early years healthy development review. As a city, we must do more to build on the support for the most vulnerable families to ensure that every young person has the best start in life and can achieve their full potential. I very much hope that the

city council is successful in securing funding for family hubs in Stoke-on-Trent, as that investment is vital. Importantly, the council recognises that those services must reach out to the families and children who need the support most—not those who are already engaged but those in greatest need of support and who are often the hardest to reach. These are the lessons we must learn if we are to see genuine improvements in levelling up the life chances and achievements of our young people.

It is particularly vital that we continue to improve support for mental health in schools and colleges, including the development of mental health support teams in all education settings. The 2017 Green Paper suggested that that was to be fully rolled out over six years, which seems a long time. We have ambitions to reach the target sooner, and I recognise the challenges with significantly ramping up recruitment and increasing the very specialist skills in this field. However, it is important that young people who need this support get it now.

Not enough young people are getting treatment as quickly as needed, which I know the Government are determined to address. It is only by acting earlier and being more preventive that we will stop more serious mental health issues developing in the longer term. I was pleased to hear from the Minister last week that we are already ahead of schedule in the roll-out to education settings, and I hope that trend continues to accelerate. In Stoke-on-Trent, 22% of schools now have in-school mental health support teams, with the ambition to increase this significantly over the next two years.

I commend our local schools and mental health staff at North Staffordshire Combined Healthcare NHS Trust for their dedicated work in supporting our young people. The increasing challenges they face are significant, with demand for mental health support for our young people surging by some 40% across north Staffordshire during the pandemic. It is particularly concerning that the demand for autism assessments has been double the capacity over the last year. I am pleased that the Government are taking serious action, with the £500 million mental health recovery action plan put in place to help those most impacted by the pandemic. This builds on the additional £2.3 billion committed to mental health through the NHS long-term plan.

Our local mental health services are doing more to help address these issues, including by increasing training and mentoring in schools to help staff better support young people, and by growing capacity further to better meet the increased demand and pressures on these services. This follows the record £15 million investment we secured to improve mental health facilities in Stoke-on-Trent, including a £1.3 million investment in new CAMHS intensive-support services.

As we move towards more integrated healthcare models with the development of integrated care systems, we must continue to address these issues and better integrate mental health services with other public sector and third sector services.

5.33 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): I am pleased to be able to speak in this hugely important debate.

The facts and figures speak for themselves: a 77% rise in the number of children needing specialist treatment in 2021; three quarters of children not being seen within

four weeks of being referred to children's mental health services, and there were half a million referrals in 2021 according to the Children's Commissioner; and over a third of children with professional referrals being turned away from mental health services. There are also differences according to where people live and in which clinical commissioning group they are. This is not good enough for our children. We need to do more.

I echo my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Kim Leadbeater), who said that, although we are looking at the impact of the pandemic, this problem predates the pandemic. Many of us have taken part in previous debates to ask for action and Government progress. Although the pandemic has certainly made things worse for children, this situation predates the pandemic, as the Minister knows. We need to make sure that there is early intervention for young people with mental health problems, with professional help, and we need to take local action as well.

I chair the all-party parliamentary group on suicide and self-harm prevention. The year before last, we did a report on self-harm in children, and some of the things we looked at were about having really local, low-level assistance that people could access for support. Organisations such as YoungMinds, the Mental Health Foundation and others have been talking about having drop-in hubs for mental health services, as indeed we are, but that intervention needs to start quite early as well.

I want to praise two schools in my constituency—Whickham School, a secondary academy, and Kingsmeadow Community School; I have visited both and talked to the young people there—for the efforts that they are making to tackle the mental health issues among the young people they teach. I commend them very much for their efforts. I would like to see, as we are proposing, very much more support in schools to tackle mental health problems.

On inequalities, we cannot but notice that not all of us are affected in the same way. If people suffer deprivation, poor housing and all those other inequalities, the chances are that they may be affected worse. It is really important that we recognise that when we are developing strategies to deal with it.

Research by the Mental Health Foundation has found that young people experienced especially high levels of loneliness during the pandemic, peaking at 69% in the final month of 2020. There are well-established links between loneliness and poor mental health, and we must take steps to address that through schools and throughout our communities. Most of all, we must make it a public health priority to tackle all these urgent mental health issues. We do not want people to develop mental ill health. We want people and our children to be well. I urge the Government to take action to redress the lack of support currently being provided.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. If I am going to manage to get everybody in, I will have to take the time limit down to three minutes after the next speaker.

5.37 pm

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): It is very clear that this is an incredibly difficult time for our young people's mental health. Clearly the disruption caused to education has contributed towards their anxiety over exams, as has

not being able to socialise and do the things that they love. That has all contributed towards the significant increase in our young people needing mental health support.

It is important to bear in mind things like social media. Only this morning, we were in the Education Committee talking to experts about the impact that social media is having on young people. When I grew up and finished A-levels, we had Facebook Messenger, and I had Facebook when I went to university. Let us imagine a situation where someone is being bullied at school: back in the day, at least they could escape, or kind of escape, in the evenings, but in this 24-hour social media age it can be increasingly hard to do that. Serious regulation and intervention will have to be made in this area, and we have to be open to that. We cannot be overly libertarian on the impact of social media on the mental health of our young people.

When we talk about the disruption that has happened and the stop-start nature of a lot of it, largely unavoidably, we must bear in mind that often those with special educational needs really struggle with the transitions and their anxiety levels have potentially been inflamed particularly highly by the uncertainty that has been caused. Getting special educational needs right matters for the education of those young people, their ability to achieve in school, and their ability to get a good job and get on. If we do not get special educational needs right, it can be incredibly bad for the mental health of those individuals if they feel they are in an education setting where there is not an understanding of them and their needs, and how they process information. If you have a learning disability, your brain is wired a bit differently, as I know from my own experience.

The point I am making is about the importance of getting young people diagnosed as early as possible, because it is only when we know what we are dealing with that we can begin to have an education system that speaks to all young people and caters for them. Otherwise, they may feel as though they are not being understood and the education system is not speaking to them because of their potential "disabilities"—we call them that, but I do not like to do so, because I think difference is good and being an unconventional, creative learner, given the right support, is good.

Some positive steps have been taken and the Minister who is closing this debate is making a fantastic start, so he deserves credit for that, but we still need to strive to go further. Getting special educational needs right is important for not just these people's life chances, but their mental health. We see this when we look at the fact that about 40% of those in prison have special educational needs. If people feel as though the system is failing them, we can understand why some want to turn against that system. I often get the violins about my own experience, but I will mention it again. As somebody who at 12 had the reading and writing age of an eight-year-old, and had my eyes glazed over at the back of the classroom, I felt that anger as well. That is my point about children's mental health: it matters for all young people, but let us think about those with SEN, because not getting it right for their education is about not just their getting on in school and getting a job, but their mental health.

5.41 pm

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): Today's Opposition debate on children's mental health is timely, as children have been deprived of seeing their friends, unable to attend school

[Peter Dowd]

and even told that they cannot hug their grandparents. Those circumstances have all fed into a wave of anxiety, and we have seen record numbers of children seeking mental health services during this pandemic. Current modelling by the Centre for Mental Health suggests that 1.5 million children and young people in England will need either new or additional mental health support as a result of the pandemic. The Health and Social Care Committee notes that 60% of young people with a mental disorder are not able to access mental health support. It also warned that without urgent action, mental health services are likely to slip backwards as a result of additional demand and the scale of unmet need prior to the pandemic.

Many of us, from across this House, have spent much of the past decade warning of the detrimental impact that cuts to local government budgets and Sure Start centres would have on mental health support for our young people, and far too often those warnings fell on deaf ears. A study by the Children's Commissioner for England in 2019 found that about 60% of local authority areas have seen a real-terms fall in spending on low-level mental health services for children. We know that deprivation and economic inequality are strongly predictive of children and young people's wellbeing.

My local council is one of the most deprived in the country and it is reporting that about 20% of new parents are suffering with mental health issues. Our local community cannot afford to wait, which is why Sefton Council and Mersey Care NHS Foundation Trust's mental health team have created a new, groundbreaking early intervention programme to support parents and their babies, in an endeavour to break the cycle. In 2018, local health and social care professionals Dr Lisa Marsland Hall and Majella Maguire developed a bespoke specialist mental health service from work undertaken in Knowsley borough and in 2020 they were able to launch a 12-month pilot for a Sefton Building Attachments and Bonds Service—BABS. That has now been rolled out for a longer period of time. I will pass on the information to the Minister, because he may well use it, as it is an excellent service.

The Early Intervention Foundation has found that a failure to intervene early to avoid preventable mental health difficulties costs the NHS £3.7 billion per year, and a further £2.7 billion in relation to Department for Work and Pensions costs. The 10-year long-term plan is just that—it is over 10 years. We really do not have 10 years to sort this problem out for our children.

5.44 pm

Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con): We have heard some very powerful stories in the debate. My constituents have written to me with similar very distressing tales of self-harm and attempted suicide, and I am particularly conscious of the crisis in eating disorder services. To the appeal for further services and further investment, I say yes; I recognise what the Government are doing in that space and I support that.

On the wider policy that the Government and the whole country adopted on covid-19, I think we have all been partly guilty of the abuse of language. Ideals of duty, sacrifice, community, and putting friends and family first have been suborned to a totally different imperative: to stay apart, to isolate, to cut off our relationships and

our obligations, and to trust the agencies of a remote bureaucracy who knew better than we did what we should do and who we should see and what balance to strike between seeing a loved one and protecting them and others. I do not blame Ministers personally for any of that—I voted for it all. We did this together across the House and, indeed, with the support of most people in the country.

We outsourced social responsibility to the state and the state gladly took up the burden. We saw mass testing, including asymptomatic testing, which drove the figures so high, and that led us to mass lockdowns, despite the early evidence that the first lockdown, even if it was necessary to slow the spread of covid, had health costs that outweighed the health benefits in some respects, to say nothing of the economic and social costs, including those that we are debating today. Lockdown was so awful that it created the pressure for the vaccines, so after the mass testing and mass lockdowns we moved to mass vaccination. Despite the early assurances that it would only be for the elderly and the vulnerable, it was soon for everyone, even children, unnecessarily. Despite the early assurances that it would only be voluntary, we piled on the pressure with covid passes and, I regret to say, compulsory vaccination for health and care workers, which I am hugely pleased that the Government have now dropped.

I pay tribute to colleagues who resisted much of that, and to the Prime Minister and the Cabinet who, after the vote on 14 December, corrected course and faced down the voices who were calling for further lockdown. We are now one of the freest countries in the developed world, and that is testament to our parliamentary system and to this Conservative Government. Look at what is happening elsewhere, not just in Europe and Asia but in places with the common law tradition; what has happened to the traditions of English liberty that we exported?

We have to lead the way. No more lockdowns, no more mass vaccination and, most of all, we must put children and young people first. We owe them all our help in the years ahead. I know Ministers agree with that and I hope we will work across the House to make things right.

5.47 pm

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): There is a reason why on average every month since I became an MP just over two years ago, I have raised the issue of children's mental health, including in my maiden speech: from the moment I got elected, a relentless stream of parents, carers and young people have come to me who have often waited a year or more—six months if they are very lucky, but more likely a year or more—to access desperately needed support.

I get warm words from well-meaning Ministers and promises about all the things they are doing, but the reality is that we are not seeing that on the ground. That is why accountability is key. I have been discussing with Ministers behind the scenes for two years the need for much more detailed operational spending at a local level on children's mental health—and for reporting on waiting times, because we do not have the data to track progress. On that very issue, I hope that, next month, Ministers will back my private Member's Bill for an annual report to Parliament on children's mental health.

Behind every number we have heard today, there is a child who is struggling to do everyday, normal activities that every young person should be able to do—tragically, some take their own life, as happened with a year 11 pupil in my constituency last year—and parents who are tearing their hair out. The tragedy is that, if we intervened earlier, we would not end up with so many children in crisis. One mother came to see me a couple of weeks ago. Her 15-year-old was referred for anxiety in 2019; she is still waiting for treatment and now her needs are much worse, so she has to go to the back of the queue of another waiting list for a tier 3, instead of a tier 2, intervention. My local headteachers say that they are overwhelmed. They have seen a 50% to 100% increase in need since the start of the pandemic. They are buying in additional support, but their staff cannot cope with the volume and the complexity of need.

I witnessed, in a primary school, a seven-year-old having to be locked in a classroom because he was rampaging around with various items, attacking pupils and staff. That child is now on a CAMHS waiting list; in the meantime, he faces potentially permanent exclusion, and a mother living in fear at home. Is this acceptable for these children today? So many primary schools I speak to are relying on parental fundraising and donations to pay for mental health support.

It is no exaggeration to say that we need a wartime effort to tackle this crisis. We need a trained counsellor in every school—surveys have shown that they want to do more work, so there is workforce capacity—as well as community mental health hubs and more specialist provision. We owe it to those children.

5.50 pm

Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson), who made a powerful speech.

I think we can all agree with the sentiment behind the motion. Indeed, it is similar to the 2017 Green Paper, similar to the NHS long-term plan, and, in fact, very similar to the report produced recently by the Health and Social Care Committee, of which I am a member. However, I listened carefully to what was said by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan), and I heard a great deal about targets but very little about how Labour plans to achieve them.

We have put a huge amount of money into this space. Mental health funding has increased from £10 billion to £14 billion in a matter of years. The problem is, as we have all recognised today, that the numbers are rising exponentially, particularly in respect of eating disorders. As a number of Members have pointed out, we need to look at why this is happening. Why are we seeing a referral rate for eating disorders that has risen by, I think, 80%? It is extraordinary.

As well as pouring in even more money and trying to get more mental health support teams into schools, and more professionals, we need to focus on social media reform. My hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt) was right about that, as was the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron). Today, at an event involving the Internet Watch Foundation, I heard four teenagers talk about the pressures that they felt online, and how difficult they

found it to talk to people about what was happening and where to refer it. We must fix this, and I think that the Online Safety Bill will be the key to that.

I want to make some points about the care system. When our Committee was taking evidence about referrals, we heard that the Royal College of Psychiatrists was receiving ever more referrals from children in care. I think it is important for us to look into the training received by social workers, and to consider what more we can do to ensure that there is support for young people within the care system. The NHS has staffing problems; we know that that is true across all professions. Our support for those staff will be critical, because we all know about the pressure they have been under and how difficult they have found it. They have been into schools, and they are struggling to deal with the number of people coming forward.

The approach we have taken so far has increased the money available and the number of people doing this work, but we need to look at the causes, and I hope that that is what we will see Ministers doing.

5.53 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): We should not be surprised that there has been a 77% rise in the number of children needing treatment for severe mental health issues since 2019. We have lived through extraordinary times, and the fallout from that will be with us for years to come. However, in respect of mental health services, as with much of the rest of the NHS and social care, we have been woefully unprepared for the challenges with which the last few years have presented us.

I had a conversation with someone who had been a clinical psychologist in CAMHS for more than 20 years, and who listed some of the reasons why we find ourselves in this position now. She told me that during the last decade, staffing had been hugely squeezed. Whenever someone left, their post was frozen and the money was used to meet savings targets; staffing levels consequently shrank considerably, adversely affecting service provision. She said that nearly all the staff were very hard-working, working far longer hours than they were paid for and well-motivated, but staff sickness levels became very high over the years because of the pressure on the staff, exacerbating the problems.

One respect in which the service suffered was the increase in waiting times for all referrals other than emergency risk assessments from three months to a year. At some points the waiting time did fall, but most young people were then put on another waiting list for therapy, so, overall, waits were still far too long. A year is such a long time in a young person's life. The person I spoke to told me her particular concern about teenagers who were highly anxious and depressed to the extent of being unable to attend school and superficially self-harming: because they were not suicidal, they could not be assessed any more quickly. Imagine being in that situation—at times the feeling of helplessness must seem overwhelming. Concerningly, there were some young people who attempted suicide while on the CAMHS waiting list and were then risk-assessed when they got to hospital, which of course was too late. Of course, those are the children who actually got on the waiting list; last year, a third of young people were turned away altogether despite being referred by a professional.

[Justin Madders]

It sounds very much as if rationing is in place. A child would not be turned away with a physical illness, but because mental health issues often do not manifest in an obvious way until there is a crisis, children can be shuffled around the system for months, if not years. That is not parity of esteem, and it is no way to treat vulnerable young people, but some of my constituents feel that that is what is happening to their children and that CAMHS needs to be continually chased before action is taken. Even when action is taken, it may be a referral to treatment but not what is needed, so another referral is made and the whole process starts again.

One constituent, who has had to give up their job to look after their daughter because she has been so let down, said:

"I think one of the biggest problems is no single person is responsible for her care so you never know who to speak to and who is doing what."

That is heartbreaking to hear. I am afraid that it is symptomatic of a system that is stretched beyond breaking point.

5.56 pm

Miriam Cates (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Con): We are facing a crisis in children's mental health, as many hon. Members have outlined articulately in our debate. I welcome the Government's mental health recovery action plan, but if we are serious about tackling this tragedy—and it really is a tragedy—we have to look at the root causes.

First, covid-19, or our response to it, has been a disaster for children's mental health. Despite knowing very early on that covid posed almost no risk to children, we closed schools for months at a time and our children missed more face-to-face learning than in almost any country in Europe. However, covid measures have not been the only political threat to children's wellbeing.

Over recent years, we have seen the increasing politicisation of children in schools. Parents across England frequently write to me about extreme gender ideology and other radical ideologies being taught in schools and reinforced by the internet. When gender non-conforming, autistic, same-sex attracted or troubled children are being told by trusted adults that their problems can be solved by changing sex, we have a serious safeguarding and wellbeing issue. The rise of the internet, particularly social media, presents a serious threat to our children's mental health. There is a huge piece of work to do to keep children safe online, and tech companies must step up.

Family breakdown is a threat to children's wellbeing. Children aged 11 to 16 who live with a lone parent are twice as likely to be diagnosed with a mental disorder as those who live with both parents. It is no surprise that our children are facing a crisis of mental health when we have one of the highest family breakdown rates in the western world. In recent decades, our social policies have made family life progressively more expensive and stressful, with more and more parents pushed into full-time work with less time and energy to devote to nurturing children. I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom) for her amazing work in delivering the Start4Life offer that will strengthen families, but there is more to do.

We need to start by recognising that intervention through schools and through the NHS, as important as it is, is no substitute for strong families in which children have the opportunity to develop virtues and character traits that will give them the best chance of good lifelong mental health. We have to pursue policies that strengthen families and equip parents and communities to foster in their children values and virtues such as patience, resilience, perseverance, self-control and humility—the kind of virtues that are taught not only in school, but in families and communities—and to build the foundation for fulfilling and happy adult lives. As the proverb says:

"Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it."

5.59 pm

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): Mental health is at a crisis, but those on the other side of the House who stand up and say that it is because of covid, I am afraid, have their head in the sand, and those on the other side who say that it is because of family break-ups are looking in the wrong direction, because actually the problem is not covid.

The 369 people, most of them young people, who committed suicide between 2016 and 2020 in my NHS trust did not do it because of family break-ups or because of covid. I actually find it repulsive that those on the other side suggest that. They did it because of a failure of the last 10 years, with a destruction of youth work, a destruction of Sure Start and a destruction of counsellors in schools. Those on the other side praise themselves that they are reintroducing counsellors in schools, but let us be clear that it is a reintroduction, because under Labour last time we had those things that stopped the crisis of young people committing suicide in such large numbers. Of course it was not perfect—nothing is—but it was a hell of a lot better than what we have now, and to suggest otherwise is sickening.

I have constituents affected—hundreds of them—but I will mention three now. One who was diagnosed with autism in year 6 had to wait until year 8 at school before he got any support. That contributed to a mental health breakdown, and there was no psychiatrist in the local CAMHS to support him—a three-year wait and still no needed support. I have a constituent whose son is 13 and has been out of education for two years because of suicidal tendencies—a four-year wait for a proper assessment, including 16 months with no education, health and care plan put in place. Then, at the last moment, he was told he has another wait of 24 months, despite his parents having to take time off work in order to look after him around the clock. The son of another constituent was diagnosed in early 2019, and the first assessment was only in December 2020—three and a half years later he is still waiting for the final assessment and support.

The testimony I have had from an NHS nurse in a neighbouring trust says that there are 3,500 children waiting for an initial assessment, they have no CAMHS beds available, and routinely they have 10-plus children stuck in A&E. This is not covid or family breakdowns; this is a lack of funding and Government failure.

6.2 pm

Antony Higginbotham (Burnley) (Con): I welcome the general theme of the debate and recognise the importance of Children's Mental Health Week. We have come an

enormous way as a society on mental health. Although we have not erased the stigma of talking about mental health, we have come a long way. It was 10 years ago that the Health and Social Care Act 2012 enshrined duties on the Secretary of State for Health to improve physical and mental health, and it was a year later, in 2013, that the NHS constitution changed to bring parity to the two.

However, we have to recognise that the pressures on young people and children now are significant. Every generation has challenges, but this generation seems to be contending with more than most. First, there is the impact of social media. People can never switch off from Facebook, TikTok and Instagram—we know that—and platforms have to do much more to allow children and young people to take a step back. They have to do more to help children realise that unrealistic expectations are being put on them about body image, what relationships look like, and what careers and success look like.

Then we have to layer on top of that the impact of covid, and there has been an impact of covid on the mental health of children. It is not just the worry and anxiety that come from a pandemic, but the social isolation, the loss of learning and the loss of emotional development, whether children are four or five and just going to school for the first time, or 16, 17 or 18. These things are difficult to remedy, but that is what we must do.

Colleagues have spoken about the £500 million going into the mental health recovery action plan, and it is very welcome that £80 million of that is for young people. The long-term plan and the mental health leads going into schools are also very welcome, but I want to say a special thank you to Burnley FC in the Community, which does a really important job locally. Through its schools' mental wellbeing project, working with the premier league, it puts mental health practitioners into local schools. They offer one-to-one sessions and group sessions. Between January 2019 and November 2021, more than 3,500 students were engaged. That helps to reduce anxiety, improve mood and build self-esteem. Lots of progress has been made and there are lots of schemes, funds and projects out there to make a difference, but because of social media and covid, now is the time to accelerate them.

6.5 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I will focus on a few key points. On in-patient treatment for children in severe mental health crisis, the Health and Social Care Committee's report last year found that

"there are too many children and young people in inpatient units subject to inappropriate care: far from home, without adequate understanding of their rights, and subject to restrictive interventions."

Being far from home is a particular issue—so many children are being sent out of county and too far away for their families to visit. That is a particular problem for young people with eating disorders, because the beds are commissioned nationally, so even those who are clinically high priority may be sent out of county and isolated from their support networks. A recent BBC investigation found that children struggling with mental health problems during the pandemic faced agonisingly long waits for treatment, with more than one in five waiting more than 12 weeks, and doctors reported that distressed children ended up in A&E as they had nowhere else to go.

Another point that I want to make to the Minister—I know he is not a Health Minister, but I hope he will pass it on to his colleagues—is about the suitability of A&E for people presenting in mental health crisis. The number of A&E attendances by young people aged 18 or under with a recorded diagnosis of a psychiatric condition has tripled since 2010.

In Bristol we have a pilot of a separate room for autistic children who come to A&E, which is a hideous place to be, as hon. Members can imagine, even if someone has just burned their hand or something. There are bright lights, sirens and people rushing around—it is a whole sensory overload—especially at times when we know that A&E is full of people who are drunk, aggressive or violent. That can really add to a child's distress.

Bristol is piloting a scheme where children are put in a separate place, but I would argue that A&E is not an appropriate place for anyone having a mental health crisis. For example, someone having a psychotic episode should not be sitting in A&E. I hope that the Government will look at that—I think Oxford is thinking about how it can separate that out. Connected to that, youngsters are often being treated for mental health conditions on general wards, because the beds are not available, but obviously they do not get the specialist support that they need there.

Adverse childhood experiences have been mentioned. We must look at prevention, whether that is children suffering abuse in the home, domestic violence, extreme poverty, neglect or abandonment—we have seen so many terrible stories recently. We need to recognise how traumatic that is for children and build that into our services.

I will give one example. When mothers and children are fleeing an abusive situation at home, they should not be put in temporary accommodation that they might share with people who are addicts or who have mental health problems and can be aggressive. We need to make sure that they have a safe place to stay.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. We will try to get everyone in.

6.8 pm

Cherilyn Mackrory (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): I thank the Opposition for securing this debate. It is important that we shine a light on the issue. I have always said that it takes a village to raise a child, but it actually takes an awful lot more people than that. I thank everyone in Truro and Falmouth who helps children in their lives, such as council officers, health and care professionals, teachers, early year educators, child minders, charities, volunteers and, of course, parents and families.

I will highlight a few of the challenges that we are facing in Cornwall. The end of the national lottery HeadStart grant in July is a key issue for us. It has funded trauma-informed training in schools to support professionals to work directly with children. At the moment, it is not set to be replaced.

Cornwall gets money from the Department of Health and Social Care for health provision and from the Department for Education for schools, but nothing directly to the local authority. It uses its core budget to support emotional health and wellbeing. It invests in clinical psychologists to help the most vulnerable children

[Cherilyn Mackrory]

and school nurses to help with emotional health and wellbeing in order to prevent the escalation of need. However, I am told that there is no defined budget.

Schools in Cornwall are training and becoming trauma-informed schools, which supports children and their parents in their journey around mental health and is good for their health and wellbeing. That is being supported by Cornwall Council wellbeing for education, which is led by educational psychologists to enable staff to promote and support pupils' wellbeing. Cornwall has successfully set up the Bloom, which offers to support all professionals in advising children and young people around the county.

Children need routine. They also need stability, stimulation and ambition. Most Members in this Chamber will be shocked to hear that there are children in Cornwall who have never seen the sea. Cornwall is an important place where we can exploit our blue and green environment, with surfing, fishing, swimming and forest schools. Where these schemes are set up, they are life-changing for children with mental health issues and difficult home lives. They not only teach children practical life skills, but build confidence and resilience. For me, that is the opposite of being sat at a screen, continuously exposed to social media and the media-driven anxious society in which we find ourselves today. As a society we must do better. For example, rather than yelling at each other from one side of the Chamber to the other, we should work together to do better for our children. We must set an example and do much better in this Chamber.

I would like to see anyone and everyone who comes into contact with a child to inspire them; to let them know that they can achieve. If we do that from the start, from the very early years, I think we will do better in the future.

6.11 pm

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Children in Feltham and Heston and across the country face many challenges both online and offline against which they battle for their own wellbeing, their confidence and their achievement. Today, in Children's Mental Health Week, I want to speak in support of Labour's motion and thank my hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) for her passion and leadership in bringing this debate forward.

We have all been concerned about the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the mental health of young people, many of whom have also tragically lost loved ones. If covid has been scary enough for adults, just imagine how scary it has been for children. In truth, though, covid has only compounded the issues that were already there. I thank teachers, parents and all who work with children for helping to deal with this crisis that we face.

In north-west London, a staggering 71% of children are not seen within four weeks of being referred to children's mental health services. The headline message from my local heads, including those from Reach Academy, Springwest Academy and Cranford Community College, is that the need for mental health support is very high. Timely access to the right support is a key challenge, and the support that exists could be joined up. That is why it is right that Labour is calling for a guarantee for mental health treatment within a month for children

who need it, for a full-time mental health professional in every secondary school and a part-time professional in every primary school, and mental health hubs for children and young people in every community. These are vital to achieve three key things: support our young people, support our teachers to help them, and support parents to help their children.

Schools have sought to do what they can. In one school, 40 pupils—5% of the total cohort—are being seen weekly by an in-house counsellor. Such a resource that this school has introduced reduces pressure on external services and helps children and young people to get that support early. It is the business case for why we need these measures that we are debating today.

Professionals based in schools are critical because they can also join up work with parents and teachers so that support for children becomes more joined up and aligned. Far too much support is too siloed, and what teachers are telling me is that, in terms of catch-up, mental health treatment is the most acute need, but the support and the expertise that are needed are not there in schools.

We know that when children are waiting for weeks—even up to four weeks—for treatment, it is already too late. It is affecting their learning and their lives, and at that point they are already falling behind, exacerbating their mental health issues, causing anxiety for them and their parents.

In conclusion, we have shared some real stories today—stories of the real lives of children in my constituency right now. These are children who have not returned to school and who do not leave their bedrooms because of their anxiety. It is the same across the country. For goodness' sake, let us step up to the challenge and bring forward the measures that we need today.

6.14 pm

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) for securing this debate. The subject is close to my heart. While we know that the most valuable time in a human's development is during childhood, and that by setting the right foundations early in life, we can prevent and reduce issues that may occur as a person grows through to adulthood, we also know that mental health, just like physical health, can change at any point in our lives. We need to be bolder about how we tackle the advent of social media and the massively corrosive impact it has had, not just on young people, but on so many people across the age ranges—it does not discriminate.

Naturally, it is most welcome that this Government are acting on the early years healthy development review by asking all local authorities to publish a "Start for Life" offer for parents, backed up with a £500 million package for families. Staff and professionals in our local authorities, education settings, charities and health and community organisations work tirelessly to help our children and families. I thank them from the bottom of my heart for what they do. Yes, the pandemic has made that challenge all the harder, but they have tried their best in these unprecedented times.

The pandemic has also made things harder for parents and carers of children, whether they are living in homes not suited to the number of people in them all day, every day during lockdown, or struggling to balance working

from home with caring responsibilities and home schooling. Families need to know that they are supported, and it needs to be as easy as possible for them to know where to get support for their children.

Parents want what is best for their children, and finding support when needed can often be difficult. Family hubs will provide one central point of contact from conception until the day that the child legally becomes an adult, providing a more holistic approach that combines virtual access with face-to-face support. As amazing as technology is in connecting us, we still face a barrier of digital exclusion in some areas of our communities, and nothing truly replaces the benefits that come with face-to-face support. We need to build more robust and resilient young people, who will grow into robust and resilient adults for the generations to come, and that must start as early as possible.

6.17 pm

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Streatham) (Lab): This morning I visited a school in my constituency, Harris Academy Clapham, and I had the opportunity to speak to young people about their mental health challenges during lockdown, to meet Mabel, the cockerdoodle support dog, and to find out more about what they are doing during their wellbeing week. It is one of the few schools fortunate enough to provide an onsite counselling service, and not just to children, but to parents and teachers where needed. That is through the organisation Place2Be, the founders of Children's Mental Health Week. But even in schools such as that, that is simply not enough to meet the demand: the schools that are able to offer that take it upon themselves, stretching already slashed pupil premiums or sometimes funding from their local authorities, whose funding has also been severely cut. There is no dedicated funding from the Government specifically to provide that service at this time.

The reality is that we do not have the capacity to treat the rising levels of mental health issues, because this Government simply will not invest in it. Between 2010 and 2015, spending on children's mental health services fell by nearly £50 million. That is more than 6% in real terms. The early intervention grant, which was originally set at £2.79 billion for 2010-11, has since been cut by almost £1 billion.

Listening to the Minister speak earlier, I was reminded of something that my hon. Friend the Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins) was saying. If someone has £10 and I take that away from them and give them £1 back, I do not expect them to be grateful, but that is exactly what the Government seem to do every single day. Cuts, with austerity, real-terms cuts, and privatisation that ends up costing more and delivering less all mixed in for extra measure—that is the complete sum of this Government's economic policy.

In the sixth largest economy in the world, every crisis in public services, including this mental health crisis, is a political choice. We are seeing nearly 1,500 children a week presenting with mental health problems, while specialist services turn away one in four children referred to them. Around 75% of young people experiencing a mental health problem are forced to wait so long that their condition worsens, or they do not receive any treatment at all.

All Members will no doubt agree that our mental health services are as important as our physical health services, so why do we not treat them that way? While various announcements sound good on paper, they are all completely tokenistic if they are not combined with systematic support. There has to be long-term investment in mental health and education and the focus cannot be solely on training teachers, who are there to teach. We need specialist services.

For every £1 spent on intervening early, there is a cost saving to individuals and society of £6.20. At the moment, there is so much pressure on all our services, and preventive support is obviously the most cost-effective way of targeting funding. It is vital if we are to tackle the spiralling mental health crisis across the country.

6.20 pm

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): There have been some excellent speeches, but in three minutes, I cannot cover all the points that I would like to cover in this important debate. The hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) made an excellent point, if I understood her correctly, about local accountability. Too often in this place, we simply debate in terms of figures—£100 million, £80 million, £90 million—but we need to develop bespoke services that are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week to address the bespoke characteristics and the bespoke challenges that face people in our constituencies.

I will not recite a lot of facts. I just want to say that CAMHS in Bury is manned by two social workers with mental health training. There is a clinical psychologist post, for which we have been looking for somebody since 2020, and there is another full-time person. So for a borough of 200,000 people, we have two full-time social workers, one manager, one full-time person and no one else providing support for the young people in our constituency. It is no wonder that constituents contact me and say, "There is nothing and we are at the end of our tether" and all the other phrases they use. It is no good my standing here, going through a prepared speech with a lot of political soundbites about that. We have to find the solutions. Those solutions will be different in Bury, in Twickenham and in other places throughout the country. There has to be local ownership of that. The funding has to be invested in a way that gives the best support we can to local people.

I was very interested in the shadow Minister's opening statement. For a long time, I have called for what I describe as a special educational needs and mental health hub for Bury because that model is very interesting, but we heard no details about it from the shadow Minister. I do not say that as a criticism, but what is the detail? Who will be housed in those hubs? What services will they provide? The idea of 24-hour holistic care covering not only education, health, social care, but employment opportunities and mental health care is an interesting and passionate idea that we should all join together to take forward. I do not think the Government can be criticised in that respect because family hubs are established on exactly the same principle. I welcome the Government's commitment to that and I hope that more hubs will be rolled out and funded.

The Minister, who is an excellent man, would not forgive me if I did not say the following. I am chair of the all-party parliamentary group on nursery schools,

[James Daly]

nursery and reception classes. An early offer, early intervention in schools and an under-fives service: having support at that early stage is fundamental and I know he is committed to investing in that.

6.23 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): This debate on children's mental health matters because half of adults with lifelong mental health conditions first experienced symptoms by the age of 14, so the sooner we identify, treat, cure some and build coping strategies for others, the less the cost of the crisis to their families, their schools and society, and the better we are.

In 2019, I carried out a constituency survey on children's mental health and the top three issues raised with me were: long waiting times for specialist treatment; that children could access treatment only if they were severely ill or self-harming; and that the police were far too often the emergency service having to fill the gap. The situation during the pandemic is even worse. In the spring of 2020, I wrote to the Education Secretary to urge the Government to provide additional mental health care and resources for young people. We knew that the pandemic would have a huge impact and only increase the already acute and difficult pressures on young people and school staff.

Whatever help the Government have given, which Conservative Members have mentioned today, has hardly scratched the surface. Over the past week, I have heard from children and teachers what the covid situation has meant to them: missing families; not seeing grandparents before they died; primary-aged children missing play with friends; secondary school students worrying about their exam grades and their futures; particular problems for families in overcrowded accommodation—four children in a one-bedroom flat is not uncommon in my borough—money worries as parents lose their jobs; and no access to laptops or tablets to do schoolwork because other family members need them more. Many children have lost the ability to make new friends, particularly the very young and later teenagers. These children at critical parts of their lives, involving major transition, have lost the skills that they need to go forward.

Not surprisingly, the demand for services has increased massively. I do not have time to say everything I wanted to, but we are so lucky to have a really excellent youth counselling service in the borough of Hounslow, which provides not medication or treatment for young people in real crisis, but excellent professional counselling for young people who self-refer with anxiety and depression. Unfortunately, its staff are seeing too many children in crisis, a service for which they are not geared up and do not have the capacity.

I also want to mention the mental health ambassadors from the Gunnersbury Catholic School for boys. Those selected for this scheme have had direct or family experience of mental ill health and have now been given proper training to provide a listening ear for any student who needs specialist support. I hope that more schools can have that.

6.26 pm

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): What I am going to talk about will surprise no one. We have heard a lot about the causes and whether it was lockdown

or social media, but I am going to talk about the thousands of children I have met who have been victims of sexual violence and have lived in domestic abuse circumstances.

I used to run a counselling service—funnily enough, it was one of the first things that went in the cuts and then had to be paid for by the lottery—for children who had been raped. That lifeline was taken away. I want to remove this from what we can do in an educational or even an NHS setting and say that we need specialist trauma counselling for children who have been a victim of sexual abuse, violence and exploitation. Bear in mind that, this year, we are at the highest level ever of children suffering from exploitation. That went up by 10% last year—British children trafficked around the UK—and it is at the highest it has ever been, all while conviction and charging rates are falling. Each one of those children, many of whom I meet, are without any counselling or specialist support while they wait four to five years for justice to be served, for their child abusers to face any sort of justice.

I will speak briefly about my constituent, who I make come and see me every Friday because I am worried she is going to kill herself. She is 19. She was abused from the age of 10 and she first came forward to police forces when she was 14. She is awaiting the trial after coming forward at 14—she is 19, so that is five years she has been awaiting the trial. She is currently housed—this relates to the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) made—in unregulated, exempt accommodation for homeless women and bear in mind, she is a rape victim, a child abuse victim.

Suddenly, all the Ministers care about child abuse, one notes, this week. This child abuse victim has been housed with three men, two of whom are being released from prison. I have written to the Levelling Up Minister to say, "What would this do to your mental health, if you were a rape victim waiting five years for trial?" No counselling service was available to her when I tried to get it. Basically, I am going to pay for it myself, because there is nothing available to her—nothing. I might as well—I was going to swear then, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I will not—do something in the wind, trying to get her on to a waiting list. We are housing her in dangerous circumstances. When I asked the Minister to regulate that, they said we do not have the parliamentary time.

6.29 pm

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): Children's mental health has been ignored by the Government for far too long, way before the covid pandemic, although over the past two years, sustained periods of isolation, academic stress and uncertainty have taken a further toll on our young people. It is shocking that a third of children in need of support find themselves turned away from mental health services, despite a referral from a professional. For others, the waiting times can be agonising.

Across England in 2020-21, three quarters of children were not seen within four weeks of being referred to children's mental health services. In my area, covered by BLMK ICS—the Bedfordshire, Luton and Milton Keynes integrated care system—60% of children referred to children's mental health services are not seen within four weeks. We expect, and our young people deserve, better.

Early intervention and preventive services are vital to giving every child a healthy start in life and support for their future emotional wellbeing and good mental health. Yet during the last 11 years, in response to huge Conservative Government cuts to our local public services, charities and the voluntary sector have had to step up to ensure that our children have access to support services.

Across Luton and Bedfordshire, the charity Chums provides mental health and emotional wellbeing services to children and young people, and their families. Active Luton has delivered a range of holiday schemes for children up to 16 who are on income-related free school meals, encouraging them to play sports, and engage in arts and crafts, and other enriching activities, as well as ensuring that they receive a nutritious meal. On Monday, I was pleased to visit the KidsOut charity in my Luton South constituency to hear how it supports children who have escaped domestic violence. The charity works with domestic abuse charities such as Women's Aid to provide toys and games to children who may be living in a refuge or safe house.

While the work of local charities makes a huge contribution to our children's mental health and wellbeing, they, too, are overstretched and underfunded. Parents and guardians rightly expect their Government to deliver the support their children need, when they need it and on an equitable basis. Mental health and wellbeing are key parental priorities for children's education and schooling. Parentkind's annual parent survey in 2021 found that children from less advantaged backgrounds or with additional needs or disabilities are much more vulnerable to mental health issues. Also, the most serious mental health issues in children are more likely to be reported by parents of black, Asian or minority ethnicities, compared with those of white ethnicities. That is shocking and demonstrates how the Government are neglecting inequalities that drive mental health issues in towns such as Luton, which are super-diverse and have pockets of deprivation.

Finally, in this Children's Mental Health Week, I fully support Labour's plans to ensure guaranteed mental health treatment within a month, the recruitment of 8,500 new staff, an open-access mental health hub in every community and the provision of specialist mental health support in every school. Labour is ambitious for every child. Through our recovery plan and long-term support for children's mental health and wellbeing, every young person could receive the support that they need.

6.32 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I am speaking today, as I have done before, as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on eating disorders. Eating disorders are the mental health disorders with the highest mortality rate. My hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) talked today with a breaking voice about cases in her constituency and the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) talked about the terrible things happening to our constituents that we see and hear about; I worry about the lives of a number of young people I know and about their families, who are worried sick about losing them. That is what we are talking about today.

Eating disorders are complex and potentially life-threatening, and the number of cases has increased fourfold in the last two years. They have no single cause

and often start at school age. Recovery from an eating disorder takes on average three times as long as having the disorder itself. The fact that eating disorders all too often go undiagnosed—we have heard again and again about how long waiting times are—and that people are waiting so long to get treatment adds to the problem.

Eating Disorders Awareness Week is fast approaching. This year's focus will be on training doctors to recognise these disorders. A 2017 report from the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman identified a 'serious lack of training' about eating disorders, which received just a few hours of attention on medical courses. That means that children, who often cannot adequately express their needs or condition, have been left on their own with these complex and debilitating conditions. Three years on, very little has changed.

Moving forward, we must recognise the importance of prevention and early intervention, which dramatically improve the chances of recovery. School counselling is an ideal form of early intervention. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland all have statutory school counselling services. England does not. Meanwhile, community services and the voluntary sector face a backlog of people desperate for urgent help. Our voluntary sector, such as the regional eating disorders charities network, has taken on the lion's share of school counselling and shouldered the burden of addressing the mental health of our children. We must recognise the invaluable work that they are doing and make sure that they get more funding. Some £11 million has been allocated to improve eating disorder services, but only £1.1 million has been spent on the frontline. I have raised that worrying statistic with the Minister before, and I urge her to listen. We must make sure that every penny that the Government make available actually gets to the frontline.

6.35 pm

Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Lab): Here on the Opposition Benches we often refer to a crisis—the cost of living crisis, the fuel crisis and the poverty crisis—but the dire lack of children's mental health services is exactly that. I need a stronger word to describe the absolute gaping void where even the most basic help, support and accessible services should be. As mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), I learned last week of a constituent whose 13-year-old daughter was sent from Whitstable to Manchester. Surely there can be nothing on earth more stressful or soul-destroying than being unable to get urgent help for your child when they are suffering.

In debates such as this, our respective parties will send around statistics. The ones that we received today say that three quarters of children are not seen within four weeks of being referred to children's mental health services. As bad as that sounds, the reality is so much worse. In the almost five years that I have been holding regular surgeries I have seen case after case where parents are beyond desperate. They arrive, often a mum and a grandma, sometimes with the child in tow, with that all-too-familiar huge black folder rammed full of copies of emails, statements or education and health care plan paperwork, and report after report that makes it blatantly obvious that urgent help is needed immediately. I see parents crying in my office or over Zoom every single week without fail. Their health is affected as well. The stress and anxiety that those parents experience is

[*Rosie Duffield*]

off the scale. In some cases the young person has missed school for months, had problems for years, is self-harming or feeling suicidal. Parents have to leave their work and become full-time carers and campaigners just to secure an appointment for an initial assessment.

The Labour party has announced today that we want all children to be seen within four weeks, but that would be a miracle for most of the children and families that contact my office. When we first started taking on those cases, we were frustrated and upset to meet people who had been waiting for, on average, around 18 months. It then grew to two years. A few weeks ago, I met a desperate mother who had been waiting for help for her child for four years.

This is a huge crisis. The nation's children and young people are being failed. What can we do? Is simply signing a bigger cheque the solution? We need to look at the systemic problems and the solutions we can get from health professionals. We have some brilliant professionals in Canterbury, but they are desperate and they need help. Surely we need to look urgently at the structure and provision and the lack of uniformity across the UK.

We must restore preventive mental health services in schools, hubs and communities, with professionals available to offer proper support to the currently more than 100 complex long-term cases I have. Many other MPs are desperate for help as well. I do not want to see any more parents crying in my surgery. Please let us get them some support before it is too late.

6.38 pm

Olivia Blake (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab): I am glad we are talking about this issue today, because the figures quoted at the beginning of the debate are shocking. In my area of South Yorkshire and Bassetlaw, three quarters of children referred to mental health services are not seen within the four-week period. I find that beyond belief, but in other areas of the country that rises to nine in 10 children. That is a horrific indictment of the Government's approach and just goes to show that setting a target is only half the job. The energy and resources need to be put into meeting it too.

Other Members have eloquently outlined the broader picture of the crisis in children's mental health, and Labour's plan to address it. I want to use the opportunity of this debate to highlight a particular mental health problem and the effect that the lack of specialist services is having on children. The pandemic has seen soaring numbers of children suffering eating disorders. Some statistics we have not heard yet today are that between April and October last year 4,238 children were admitted to hospital with an eating disorder. That is an increase of 41% on the figures in 2020 and an increase of 59% on 2019, when the figure was 2,508. That is a dramatic increase in eating disorder in-patients, which should be incredibly concerning to all of us.

Of all the mental health issues, eating disorders are the No. 1 killer. It is perhaps even more concerning that, when these children and young people are admitted, the shortage of tier 4 beds and mental health practitioners means that they are often put in the wrong place in the system and do not receive support from people trained in eating disorders. These children are suffering from

acute mental health problems and, unfortunately, restraint is regularly used on health wards, not mental health wards. That is not a good intervention, and it is not an appropriate therapeutic pathway for such acutely ill children. They all deserve a tier 4 bed, given how ill they are. At the moment, they are treated only for the physical consequences of their eating disorder and do not receive any kind of mental health intervention. That ignores the whole cause of their eating disorder.

Members have highlighted that we are failing our young people and children on the four-week target. It is also vital that the care that is finally provided is provided by the right people, not by people who are unqualified to meet their needs, as is happening to thousands of children with eating disorders up and down the country. There is a real danger that the system is actively contributing to making their mental health problem worse and harder to treat.

Does the Minister have figures on the use of physical restraint against children with eating disorders in acute wards that are not mental health wards?

6.41 pm

Nadia Whittome (Nottingham East) (Lab): When I was in school under the then Conservative-led coalition Government, I remember friends and classmates whose mental health was in crisis. They struggled to be seen, and they waited months, even years. Since then, the situation has only got worse.

I am regularly contacted by parents who are caught in the snare of long wait times for underfunded and non-specialist services when trying to access mental health support for their children. In Nottinghamshire, 78% of children referred to child and adolescent mental health services wait longer than four weeks to be seen. Between April and October 2021, just six months, more than 409,000 children were referred to CAMHS for self-harm and suicidal thoughts. I challenge anyone here to tell me that that does not constitute a crisis and that it should not be dealt with as such.

This motion calls on the Government to ensure that there is mental health treatment within a month for those who need it; specialist professional mental health support in schools; and the establishment of open-access mental health hubs in every community. These are moderate demands when we consider what is at stake. There has been a 77% rise in the number of children needing treatment for severe mental health issues since 2019. In my constituency, referrals for treatment for eating disorders—as we have heard, these are the psychiatric conditions with the worst mortality and morbidity outcomes—outstripped predicted levels last year.

Last Friday, I visited children and young people at Hopewood, an in-patient unit in Nottingham East. Many of them were far away from home and far away from their family and friends, and one remarked to me that they felt forgotten about and that no one cared. They were all concerned about mental health funding. Of course it is important for us to talk about awareness, but the sad truth is that people are already aware because they are living it. What they need is material change, and that cannot be provided by volunteers operating on a shoestring. There is no way around it. The only option is for the Government to invest significant amounts of money in proper mental health support and in children's mental health services.

We must also tackle the root causes of poor mental health in children. The Mental Health Foundation highlights that living in poverty is a risk factor, and the Children's Society has said:

"Reductions in family income, including benefit cuts, are likely to have wide-ranging negative effects on children's mental health." This is not just a crisis of children's mental health but a crisis of inequality, too. That inequality is exacerbated by the policies of this Government, who now have a duty to fix it.

6.44 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I am grateful to all hon. Members who have spoken in this important debate. We have heard this afternoon many moving and devastating accounts of the ways in which children and young people who are struggling with their mental health are being let down by a system that simply cannot deliver the support they need, and by a Government who have no ambition for our children and young people and who refuse even to acknowledge the scale of the challenge.

There have been too many contributions this afternoon for me to mention everybody by name, but we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Kim Leadbeater) about the shocking figures on suicide and self-harm in her constituency. My hon. Friends the Members for Ealing North (James Murray), for Streatham (Bell Ribeiro-Addy) and for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) highlighted the importance of mental health support being provided in our schools. My hon. Friends the Members for Bootle (Peter Dowd) and for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins) highlighted the vital importance of early intervention. The hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) spoke movingly of some appalling cases in her constituency, including the suicide of a year 11 student.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) highlighted CAMHS waiting times in his constituency, as did many other hon. Members. My hon. Friends the Members for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) and for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield) spoke about the terrible problems with out-of-area tier 4 placements, which are far too common. My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) spoke powerfully, as she often does, of the impact of sexual violence and abuse on mental health.

Good mental health and wellbeing are vital for every one of our children and young people, while poor mental health is a barrier to learning that prevents children from fulfilling their potential. It affects children's sense of self and how positive they feel about the future. It can impact their whole lives and for some, poor mental health can, tragically, be fatal. For parents and carers, there are few experiences as devastating as watching their child's mental health deteriorate, yet that is the experience of hundreds of thousands of families across the country. Parents are living with unbearable anxiety, having to stop work to keep their child safe and try to soothe their pain. No parent should be left in this position, without access to the support their child needs.

The covid-19 pandemic has taken a severe toll on children's mental health, as children have been isolated from their peers, often unable to learn properly and at increased risk of online harms, with many suffering the trauma of bereavement or domestic abuse in lockdown. Before the pandemic, however, children's mental health

services were already in crisis, with waiting lists, acute admissions and out-of-area hospital placements far too high and with only around a quarter of children who needed mental health support able to access services.

We know what is needed to tackle the crisis in our children's mental health. What is lacking is not the knowledge of what to do; what is lacking is the ambition of this Government for a country in which the mental wellbeing of our children is a priority and services are there for those who need them. We know that early support is key. While children languish on waiting lists, their mental health deteriorates and so does the length of their recovery and the impact that their illness will have throughout their lives. Delivering mental health support teams in just a fraction of communities is not a fit-for-purpose strategy. It is a half-baked plan that is worsening the postcode lottery of children's mental health services.

Labour is pledging to end the postcode lottery. We will deliver specialist mental health support in every school, and open-access mental health hubs in every community. Hon. Members have asked about the detail of that service, and I would point them to one of my local authorities, Southwark, which has a service called the Nest. It provides open access to children who live in the borough and a really first-class standard of support for our children and young people, but we need such services to be available throughout the country to every single child who needs them.

We are also pledging an end to agonising waiting lists, with a new national commitment to mental health treatment within a month for every child who needs it. To those hon. Members who have questioned the value of targets I say this: if we do not measure it, it does not get done. Targets are not the whole solution, but they are a vital tool in ensuring that services are delivered to children who need them.

Today's motion is for every child and young person who needs support for their mental health and for every parent and carer living with devastating worry for their child. It is a statement of Labour's ambition for a country in which every child can thrive. I commend it to the House.

6.49 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Will Quince): I start by thanking all Members in all parts of the House for their valuable contributions to this important debate. It is, I hope, one of those debates in which all of us fundamentally want the same thing, and I think we have heard an awful lot of agreement across the House today. In Children's Mental Health Week, it is important that we raise awareness of this important issue. Like the hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan), I congratulate and thank Place2Be for all the work it does to raise awareness nationally. It is right that we have a spotlight on children and young people's mental health, and I join hon. Members in thanking all those who work in mental health services up and down our country.

As many Members rightly pointed out, the pandemic has proved to be hugely challenging for children and young children, but they have shown incredible resilience in the most difficult circumstances. The pandemic has been difficult for many families. We all know this and many examples have been cited today, but we should

[Will Quince]

not overlook the impact on children from not being able to attend school or go to after-school clubs, from not being able to see friends and family or play the sport they love, and from being stuck at home with their parents, as my children regularly said. There was disruption to their lives, and I thank teachers and support staff throughout the country for helping us to reopen schools and get children where we know it is best for them to be and they wanted to be. Whenever I visit a school, I ask about mental health and mental wellbeing. Immediately before this debate, I was in Trinity Church of England School in London, alongside Instagram and “Love Island” star Dr Alex George, to meet the mental health support team. They are doing incredible work, which I want to see rolled out further and faster; I will cover that in more detail later.

As Minister for Children and Families, I have a cross-Government role, but I hope the House understands that my focus today is on education. I will try to answer as many of the points raised by colleagues on both sides of the House as possible, but first—perhaps unusually for an Opposition day debate—I want to say how much I welcome the Opposition raising this subject and pushing the Government to go further and faster. As Children's Minister, let me say that one child or young person waiting too long for mental health support is one child too many. The health, both mental and physical, of children and young people is something that I and this Government take incredibly seriously. Are we doing a lot already? Yes. Can we do more? Yes, and we must. Our children and young people deserve nothing less.

Marco Longhi: Does the Minister agree that mental health is not something we can consider under one umbrella? In my Dudley constituency, Priory Park boxing club is doing fantastic work with children who are excluded from school. It is a great place not only for their physical wellbeing but for their mental health. The new hubs need to be integrated with other stakeholders in the community.

Will Quince: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I will come on to talk about family hubs and the role that they can rightly play.

I am no expert in this field, but I listen closely to those who are and I split mental health and mental wellbeing into three categories: resilience, identification and intervention, and specialist support. On the first, what can we do to help children and young people to be more resilient? We do that through our relationships, sex and health education, which is now compulsory between five and 16 years old, through our behaviour in schools guidance, through the sports and extracurricular activities that we have in schools throughout our country, and through things like forest schools, which have been mentioned and which are absolutely brilliant.

How can we identify emerging problems sooner and provide that all-important support? We can do that through measures such as mental health lead training and rolling out mental health support teams across the country. For access to specialist mental health support, we have the NHS long-term plan and additional investment of £2.3 billion a year by 2023-24, allowing at least an additional 345,000 children and young people to access NHS-funded mental health support, which of course comes under the Department of Health and Social Care.

Robert Largan: Does the Minister agree that we must not forget the acute services as well? It is fantastic news that we are putting £4.8 million into building a new psychiatric intensive care unit at Tameside General Hospital, which will be a big boost for the fantastic staff at the Cobden unit at Stepping Hill Hospital too.

Will Quince: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: acute services, which are of course a Department of Health and Social Care lead, are very important. In the Department for Education, we have a role to play in doing as much prevention as we can and getting early identification and support in place for people so that they do not need to attend the acute unit, which then frees up space for those who desperately do need it.

Let me turn to some specific points made by hon. Members from across the House. Time is relatively short, but I will cover as many as I can. I remind the House that my door is always open; Members can come to see me if I do not address any of these points and I will be happy to meet them to discuss them in person.

The hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron)—I have probably pronounced her constituency wrongly, so I apologise for that—and my hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Antony Higginbotham) made positive and constructive comments about how it is so important that we remove the stigma and break the taboo about mental health, and put children and young people at the heart of our recovery. My hon. Friend mentioned Burnley FC and its work through football in the community. It does hugely important work and I echo his comments about it. Those Members, along with my hon. Friends the Members for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott) and for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Miriam Cates), raised the issue of online harmful content, particularly about self-harm and suicide. They rightly said that the Online Safety Bill must tackle this issue, and I can certainly give the House the commitment and confirmation that the strongest protections in the Bill are on the safeguarding and protection of children.

My hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Rob Butler) raised the issue of the Youth Concern charity in his constituency, rightly praising its work, and I echo his comments. He also rightly raised the issue of waiting times, which are too long in too many cases. We need to address them, and we are doing that in part with the NHS long-term plan. His experience of the Youth Custody Service is hugely welcome, and we will certainly be calling on him to discuss that further.

The hon. Members for Batley and Spen (Kim Leadbeater) and for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) rightly referenced the serious point about suicide. Of course every suicide is a tragedy, especially so when it involves a child or young person. DHSC has a suicide prevention plan, and we are investing £57 million in suicide prevention by 2023-24, as part of the NHS long-term plan. I know that the Minister for Care and Mental Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) will be happy to meet both of them to discuss that issue further.

My hon. Friends the Members for Milton Keynes North (Ben Everitt) and for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory) discussed the importance of green open spaces—I am amazed at the number of people in Cornwall who have not had access to the sea, so we certainly need

to look at that. They also mentioned the importance of being in school wherever possible, and I have to say that there are no greater champions for the people of Milton Keynes, and Truro and Falmouth than my hon. Friends. The hon. Member for Ealing North (James Murray) raised the issue of mental health professionals in schools. We are rolling out mental health support leads and mental health support teams up and down the country, and I welcome his interest in this area.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton), a passionate advocate for children and young people in Stoke-on-Trent, has made a compelling case for family hubs and the family hub model and investment in Stoke-on-Trent, and we will no doubt discuss that further down the line. The hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) raised the issue of the importance of early intervention, and I totally agree on that; we are doing this in schools and colleges, and she was right to praise two schools in her constituency, in Whickham and Kingsmeadow.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt) is a passionate advocate for children and young people with SEN and disabilities, and I am happy to discuss this issue with him later at greater length. I agree with him on the importance of early diagnosis. My hon. Friends the Members for Devizes (Danny Kruger) and for Sevenoaks, and the hon. Members for Bath (Wera Hobhouse)—I wish her a happy birthday—and for Sheffield, Hallam (Olivia Blake) rightly raised the issue of eating disorders. We have put additional investment in, and there is a new waiting time standard, but I know we need to do more in this area, and I would be happy to work with the hon. Lady.

I am proud of our record in supporting children and young people, and I am grateful for the ongoing support that hon. Members have given to this agenda. Can we do more? Yes. Can we always do more? Yes. We must do more and we will do more. I welcome the spotlight on this issue. Let me assure the House that good mental health and wellbeing for our children and young people remains a priority for me and this Government, and it will continue to be a priority as we recover and build back better from this pandemic, improving children's futures and the future of our country.

Sir Alan Campbell (Tynemouth) (Lab) *claimed to move the closure* (Standing Order No. 36).

Question put forthwith, That the Question be now put.

Question agreed to.

Main Question accordingly put.

Question agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House recognises the importance of Children's Mental Health Week; is concerned about the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the mental health of young people and that there has been a 77% rise in the number of children needing treatment for severe mental health issues since 2019; calls on the Government to guarantee mental health treatment within a month for all who need it and to provide specialist mental health support in every school, including a full-time mental health professional in every secondary school and a part-time professional in every primary school; and further calls for the Government to establish open access mental health hubs for children and young people in every community to ensure the best start to life for future generations.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

POLICE

That the draft Representation of the People (Proxy Vote Applications) (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2022, which were laid before this House on 10 January, be approved.—(Michael Tomlinson.)

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

FINANCIAL SERVICES

That the draft Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing (Amendment) Regulations 2022, which were laid before this House on 6 January, be approved.—(Michael Tomlinson.)

The Deputy Speaker's opinion as to the decision of the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until Wednesday 9 February (Standing Order No. 41A).

COMMITTEES

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): With the leave of the House, we will take motions 5 to 9 together.

Ordered,

ENVIRONMENTAL AUDIT COMMITTEE

That Nadia Whittome be discharged from the Environmental Audit Committee and Clive Lewis be added.

HOME AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

That Paula Barker be added to the Home Affairs Committee.

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE

That Rachel Hopkins be discharged from the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee and Kate Hollern be added.

COMMITTEE OF PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

That Barry Gardiner be discharged from the Committee of Public Accounts and Kate Green be added.

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES COMMITTEE

That Alex Davies-Jones be discharged from the Women and Equalities Committee and Carolyn Harris be added.—(Sir Bill Wiggan, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.)

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. On 14 December, in the debate on the covid regulations, I said that more people were dying in the carnage on the roads than of covid-19. I have now seen the statistics and that was incorrect. I thought it appropriate to correct the record.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his point of order and for giving me notice of it. I am sure that the House will appreciate that he has corrected the record as soon as he knew that he had given incorrect information.

Rail Connectivity: Leicester, Coventry and Nottingham

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

7.2 pm

Claudia Webbe (Leicester East) (Ind): I rise this evening to discuss rail connectivity between the east and west midlands, specifically the connection between my city of Leicester and Nottingham and Coventry. Currently, the public transport links between Leicester and Coventry, in particular, are woefully inadequate. Leicester has a strong and proud railway history. For a century, roughly from the 1850s to the 1950s, Leicester had seven railway stations within its city boundary. Today there is just one—London Road. That is why I am making the case for real investment into new links for my city and constituents.

In response to my request, I am sure the Minister will talk about the integrated rail plan and the £96 billion investment into our railways. Of course, investment in public transport is welcome, especially during a climate emergency. Leicester did receive some support via plans to electrify the midland main line through Leicester, but more ambitious plans for unlocking capacity at the station were sadly overlooked.

It is also worth noting that the electrification would have already been completed by now if a Conservative Government had not cancelled it in 2017. All the mentions related to Leicester in the 162-page integrated rail plan document are simply a repeated formulation of the electrification policy. Crucially, the long-awaited and long-delayed integrated rail plan was silent on the Coventry-Leicester-Nottingham project, apart from an opaque mention of Coventry and of improving links in the midlands rail hub. I would be grateful if the Minister informed the House whether that mention was indeed a nod to this critical scheme. I and many Leicester residents would welcome some real clarity on that point this evening.

For the Minister's ease, I will read the relevant sentence on page 16 of the Government's integrated rail plan:

"By redeveloping the Midlands Rail Hub business case it focuses on improving links to Hereford, Worcester, Coventry and regional links to South Wales and Bristol."

As the Minister is aware, the midlands rail hub includes a Coventry-Leicester-Nottingham project within its broadest scope. Will she please confirm whether the Government share the view that the Coventry-Leicester-Nottingham scheme is part of the midlands rail hub?

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend share my frustration at the delays that we constantly get from this Government? It has been almost a year since Midlands Connect developed the strategic outline business case for these improvements, but we have still not had any funding decisions. Does she agree that it is now time for the Government to bring this important scheme to its next stage so that our constituents start to feel the benefits sooner rather than later?

Claudia Webbe: I do indeed. My hon. Friend makes an excellent and important point.

Will we be able to access funding via the rail enhancements pipeline as a result of the opaque mention in the integrated rail plan? The view that we should is held not just by me, but by Conservative Members and by Andy Street, Mayor of the West Midlands, who is regularly lauded from the Government Dispatch Box, so I would be grateful if the Minister cleared up the issue of scope for us this evening. That would put a lot of minds in the region at rest.

A recent report by the sub-national transport body Midlands Connect set out plans to reinstate direct rail services between Coventry, Leicester and Nottingham for the first time in two decades, creating more than 2 million extra seats on the region's rail network every year. The proposals would cut journey times by 30% between Coventry and Leicester and by 35% between Coventry and Nottingham.

Taiwo Owatemi (Coventry North West) (Lab): My hon. Friend makes an excellent point about the need for fast connectivity. My constituents in Coventry North West need fast, frequent and reliable public transport in order to commute, stay connected and access vital services. It is therefore scandalous that railway journeys between Coventry and Leicester often take longer today than they did before the first world war. Does she agree that is further proof that investment in the vital east-west route is long overdue? If levelling up the west midlands is to be anything more than a slogan, the Government really need to get on with fulfilling their promises.

Claudia Webbe: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Indeed, it is hard to think of two UK cities that are as close as Coventry and Leicester yet so atrociously connected by rail. It can take up to an hour to travel less than 25 miles, and passengers have to change trains halfway. It is simply not good enough.

No wonder 97% of trips on the route are made by road, compared with 30% of trips between Coventry and Birmingham, which enjoys a regular, fast and direct rail connection. Let me reiterate the point: only 3% of trips between two great midlands cities, Leicester and Coventry, are made by train. Surely, given all the Government's words, pledges and legislation on carbon and climate change, this project is a no-brainer. It is good for the environment and it is good for passengers.

I believe that by reintroducing faster, direct connections, we can encourage more people to travel sustainably, strengthen working relationships and increase productivity. We must now move ahead to create detailed plans for delivery, but that is possible only with the support of the Government. I should therefore be grateful if the Minister could tell me whether the next business case, the outline business case, will be funded, even in part, by the Department. Can she, this evening, give me that assurance? Let me stress that the outline business case would cost about £1 million. That, in the realm of rail projects, is a modest amount with which to explore the possibility of this regionally critical project. May I press the Minister to comment on the funding, as a real priority, in her response?

Subject to funding, with costs likely to be in the region of £90 million to £100 million, the first direct trains could run as soon as 2025, bringing benefits of over £170 million to the local economy. About half that £170 million will consist of wider economic benefits,

which means that nearly £80 million-worth of jobs, growth and trade will be created as businesses in Leicester trade with firms in Coventry and people move and spend in those two great places. The other half of the £170 million will cover journey time improvements as people can finally travel between our cities more quickly and easily. Fixing our links will therefore have a massive overall economic benefit.

The project also has widespread public support. When more than 3,000 people in and around Coventry, Leicester and Nottingham were polled recently, 87% supported these improvements. Journey times along the route will be cut significantly, with trips from Coventry to Leicester falling from 54 minutes to 38, while those from Coventry to Nottingham will come down to 70 minutes from 108. Loughborough and East Midlands Parkway will also have direct and more frequent links to Coventry.

To reach its target of becoming carbon-neutral by 2050, the UK must reduce emissions by 100% compared with 1990 levels, but transport emissions have fallen by just 5% over the last 30 years. What is being proposed would significantly increase the number of inter-city journeys made by rail, which produce 80% less carbon than travelling by car. The scheme could also benefit the freight industry by allowing freight trains to run from the south of England to the east midlands, thus taking lorries off the roads, with the many environmental benefits that that brings.

For too long, there has been a missing link between the east and west midlands, and this is our opportunity to re-forge it. The Government talk a great deal about “levelling up”. If they are truly genuine about addressing regional inequality, they will embrace this plan, which is supported by local people, supported by local councils, supported by our local Mayors, and supported by politicians of all parties. These rail plans will further open up Leicester and its jobs, leisure opportunities and universities to communities across the east and west midlands. At present, the midlands’ east-west rail connections are substandard, holding us back from a more productive and sustainable future. Turning these plans into reality is an essential step in boosting prosperity and public transport use across our region. On behalf of my constituents and residents across the midlands, I urge the Minister to embrace this crucial project.

7.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Wendy Morton): I congratulate the hon. Member for Leicester East (Claudia Webbe) on securing this debate about rail connectivity between Leicester, Coventry and Nottingham. The cities of Leicester, Coventry and Nottingham lie at the heart of this country, serving as beacons of productivity and potential, and so understanding the needs of their communities, passengers and businesses is absolutely crucial in delivering a rail network that works for everyone. That is why the Department for Transport set up Midlands Connect to help to develop a pipeline of proposals for the region, informed by local people, businesses and councils that know what is best for their region.

Midlands Connect is a partnership of local authorities, local enterprise partnerships, Network Rail, National Highways and the business community. It published its first transport strategy in 2017 and has spent the past

18 months refreshing its evidence base in order to produce a new strategic transport plan, which will be published in April. I eagerly await the plan, which will then set out Midlands Connect’s investment priorities for the next decade.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for her contribution this evening to that broad evidence-gathering effort. I know her advocacy of investment in the local rail network service serves as a valuable representation of the needs of her constituents. I am sure it will be understood that, given the constrained fiscal environment we find ourselves in, competition for funding is stronger than ever and not all proposals will receive funding. However, she is taking the right approach in advocating for rail investment in her region and, along with Midlands Connect’s ongoing work to develop proposals, this work is vital in shaping the future of the rail network in the east midlands, even if funding availability proves limiting in the short term.

Lilian Greenwood: I appreciate that our region has to compete with others, but the Minister will know that the east midlands region has the lowest level of transport rail spending in the country and has had for some time. If she is serious about levelling up, do we not have to invest in transport links in the east midlands region? Nottingham and Coventry are 108 minutes apart. They are about the same distance apart as London and Reading, yet the journey times in the south-east are so much faster. Should she not be investing to make that difference?

Wendy Morton: I will come on to some of the investments we have been making, but let us not lose sight of the fact that we are investing a massive £96 billion in the midlands and the north through the integrated rail plan over the next 30 years, which is about delivering benefits for passengers.

Taking a long-term approach to rail investment by developing a pipeline of deliverable proposals is the right way to ensure that the east midlands can receive investment as and when funding becomes available. Midlands Connect has produced a strategic outline business case setting out the case for connecting Coventry, Leicester and Nottingham by rail. This provides a useful overview of how rail connectivity between those three cities could be delivered and the benefits it could yield. Midlands Connect has made strong arguments for the proposal, describing a range of economic, social and environmental benefits that it expects to arise from the implementation of the scheme.

I therefore appreciate the desire of the hon. Member for Leicester East to improve transport links between the three cities. My officials at the Department are currently evaluating the case and will report back to me in due course. It is important that I reiterate that, in the context of an unprecedented economic strain as a result of the covid-19 pandemic, not all proposals we would like to deliver can be funded, but each proposal will be evaluated on its merits and affordability.

I also note that we are considering a number of other schemes proposed for the east midlands through the integrated rail plan. The IRP recommends improved connectivity between the east and west midlands via a new HS2 station at Curzon Street in central Birmingham and via existing stations at Nottingham and East Midlands Parkway. It also suggests that the Department works

[Wendy Morton]

with Midlands Connect to develop connectivity to the east midlands and Coventry as part of the committed midlands rail hub programme. Although it is important to plan ahead and strive for more, I will take a moment to reflect on some of the excellent work that has already been done in recent years to improve rail transport for the east midlands.

Tom Randall (Gedling) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Leicester East (Claudia Webbe) on securing the debate. Does the Minister recollect, as I do, that the press described the east midlands as the big winners of the integrated rail plan? Connecting places such as central Nottingham with central Birmingham will massively improve journey times. It will not only improve connectivity between Nottingham, Derby and Birmingham, but open up other cities in the west midlands for onward connections.

Wendy Morton: My hon. Friend is another passionate advocate for rail and he is absolutely right. The IRP has committed a massive £96 billion for the midlands and the north over the next 30 years, which is the biggest investment.

As I was saying, our work to electrify the midland main line represents the biggest improvement to the line since it was built in 1870. Along with the new timetable, the upgrade boosted the number of seats on services across the east midlands and cut travel time between London and Derby, Leicester, Sheffield and Nottingham. Meanwhile, the electric trains introduced between Corby and London are quieter and much better for the environment, because they produce nearly 80% less carbon. That means that people living near the railway will breathe cleaner air and experience less noise pollution.

Additionally, Leicester City Council was recently awarded £17.8 million from the levelling-up fund to make improvements to the station building. Following the Government's devolution deal with the West Midlands Combined Authority, which allows local authorities to deliver local priorities, Coventry City Council is undertaking an £82-million redevelopment of the city's station. Working with Midlands Connect and others, the Department will continue to seek opportunities to improve rail transport in Leicester and in other towns and cities across the midlands.

I will touch on a couple of specific questions that the hon. Lady raised. She sought some clarity on whether Coventry, Leicester and Nottingham are part of the

midlands rail hub. The Department wants to work with Midlands Connect and other regional stakeholders to consider how we improve connectivity between the cities and towns of the midlands. The recommendations in the integrated rail plan, which will provide a direct high-speed link between Birmingham and Nottingham, will have an impact on the current MRH proposals. Those impacts will need to be considered fully. We look forward to receiving the updated Midlands Connect strategic plan and its recommendations on that area.

The hon. Lady also raised the issue of funding for the next stage, which I believe is the outline business case.

Claudia Webbe indicated assent.

Wendy Morton: The hon. Lady is nodding. The pipeline approach is designed to ensure that future rail projects are properly planned and scrutinised to deliver maximum value and benefit to rail users and taxpayers, and that the portfolio is balanced and affordable. It is important that projects continue to be assessed and prioritised based on their business cases and how they contribute to key Government priorities.

The updated rail network enhancements pipeline is due to be published soon and we will set out our revised programme following the spending review. We will continue to work with stakeholders to develop proposals for future funding rounds should it not be possible to take forward particular proposals at this time.

I want to conclude by thanking the hon. Member for Leicester East.

Lilian Greenwood: Will the Minister give way?

Wendy Morton: I will continue to conclude.

I thank the hon. Member for Leicester East for securing this debate and shining a spotlight on rail connectivity between Leicester, Coventry and Nottingham. She should be assured that a lot of work is ongoing to understand the needs of the region and to plan a pipeline of work to deliver a better rail network for Leicester and the east midlands. I urge her to continue her work with the Department and with Midlands Connect to bolster our understanding of the transport needs of Leicester and the east midlands and to shape future rail investments for the good of her constituents and the wider region.

Question put and agreed to.

7.24 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 8 February 2022

[MR PHILIP HOLLOBONE *in the Chair*]

Yazidi Genocide

9.30 am

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Before we begin, I remind hon. Members that Mr Speaker encourages everyone to observe social distancing and to wear masks.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Yazidi genocide.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Hollobone. I begin by thanking the Backbench Business Committee for giving time for this important debate.

On 3 August 2014, Daesh launched a violent attack against the Yazidis in Sinjar, in Iraq. A few days after that attack, it also attacked the Nineveh plains, forcing 120,000 people to flee for their lives in the middle of the night. Daesh fighters killed hundreds if not thousands of men, abducted boys to turn them into child soldiers, and kidnapped for sexual slavery thousands of women and girls, 2,763 of whom are still missing to this day. In a reign of terror lasting more than two years, Daesh murdered, enslaved, deported, and forcibly transferred women and children, and imprisoned, tortured, abducted, exploited, abused, raped, and forced women into marriage, across the region.

It was not until the allied forces finally started to recover regions of Iraq from Daesh that the sickening scale of what was happening to the Yazidis and other religious groups became clear. That is why, in April 2016, the House of Commons voted unanimously to recognise the atrocities committed by Daesh as genocide. That was the first ever such determination by the House of Commons, and it was made while the atrocities were still ongoing. Since then, however, the UK Government have steadfastly refused to follow suit; they have hidden behind the defence that somehow it is not for Governments to determine what is and is not a genocide, and that only a competent court or a tribunal can determine that.

In my time in this place, I have taken part in many debates that have called on the Government to recognise what has happened as a genocide. That happened most recently a couple of weeks ago, when we debated the findings of the Uyghur Tribunal in a debate secured by the hon. Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani); the Government again used the “competent court” defence to avoid taking a stance.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): I thought that it was appropriate to intervene, given that my constituency was mentioned. I congratulate the hon. Member on securing this important debate. There are five markers of genocide that that tribunal was able to expand on; and there is no denying that Daesh has the intent to destroy. Let me quote what Daesh itself has said:

“Upon conquering the region of Sinjar...the Islamic State faced a population of Yazidis, a pagan minority existent for ages in regions of Iraq and Shām”,

which is Syria.

“Their continual existence to this day is a matter that Muslims should question as they will be asked about it on Judgment Day”.

It is very clear that Daesh's perverted view of the Islamic faith meant that it had to destroy the Yazidi. No doubt the hon. Member will agree with that.

Brendan O'Hara: I absolutely agree, and I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. The point about intent is crucial when deciding on genocide; I will expand on that later.

What sets this debate apart from all the others that we have had is the conviction in Germany in November 2021 of the Daesh terrorist Taha al-Jumailly for crimes including genocide and crimes against humanity. Not only is al-Jumailly the first Daesh member to be convicted of genocide against Yazidis, but his conviction means that the threshold demanded by successive UK Governments—that only a competent court can decide what is a genocide—has now been met. By the standard that the Government themselves set, they are now in a position to formally recognise the atrocities carried out by Daesh on the Yazidi people as a genocide.

I will first look at how the UN defines genocide. Then, using harrowing eyewitness testimony from survivors, I will set out why what happened to the Yazidi people more than reaches that threshold. Then I will examine the UK Government's long-held position on declaring a genocide, and show how the ruling of the Frankfurt criminal court must force them to fundamentally alter how they define genocide and what Daesh did to the Yazidis and other minority communities during its reign of terror.

The United Nations genocide convention has been in place for more than 70 years. It clearly mentions killing, causing serious bodily or mental harm, inflicting conditions calculated to bring about physical destruction, preventing births within a group, and transferring children to another group. When that is done

“with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group”,

it constitutes genocide. There is irrefutable proof that what Daesh did meets every single one of those tests without exception.

Since the initial attack on Sinjar, Daesh has killed hundreds, if not thousands, of Yazidis; we do not know the exact number—and may never know it, because graves containing the remains of Yazidi men and boys continue to be discovered to this day. In “They came to destroy”, the United Nations report on Daesh crimes against the Yazidis, the UN stated that Daesh

“swiftly separated men and boys who had reached puberty from women and other children...Following this separation,”

Daesh

“fighters summarily executed men and older boys who refused to convert to Islam...Most of those killed were executed by gunshots to the head; others had their throats cut...Other captives, including family members, were often forced to witness the killings.”

Daesh also attempted to destroy the Yazidi people by inflicting conditions calculated to bring about their physical destruction, including by cutting off food, water and medical assistance to those who fled to Mount Sinjar to escape the violence. In the summer of 2014, with temperatures rising to above 50°C, American, Iraqi, British, French and Australian forces had to

[Brendan O'Hara]

air-drop water and other supplies to the besieged Yazidis on Mount Sinjar. Daesh shot at the planes dropping humanitarian aid and attacked the helicopters attempting to evacuate the most vulnerable in the community.

A favourite Daesh tactic was to separate children from their parents, with girls aged nine years and over being sold as sex slaves, while boys were sent from the age of seven to military training bases in Syria and Iraq. In "They came to destroy", a 12-year-old boy told of his experiences at the hands of Daesh. He was taken from his family and sent to a camp. He said:

"They told us we had to become good Muslims and fight for Islam. They showed us videos of beheadings, killing and ISIS battles."

He said that Daesh said:

"You have to kill kuffars even if they are your fathers and brothers, because they belong to the wrong religion and they don't worship God".

We know all too well the serious bodily and mental harm suffered by Yazidi women, who were subjected to appalling, barbaric treatment by Daesh, including rape, sexual violence, sexual slavery, forced sterilisation, torture, and all manner of inhumane and degrading treatment. Some may recall that on the day before our debate in 2016, a 15-year-old Yazidi girl, Ekhlas, spoke to parliamentarians about her experience when Daesh arrived in her village. I will remind Members of what she said:

"There was knock at our door... My father and my two brothers were killed in front of me. They took me away from my mother. He grabbed my arm and my leg and then he raped me. He was 32 years old; I was 15. After they raped me, they took my friend and they raped her. I could hear her shouting, 'Where is the mercy? Where is the mercy?'... Any girls over the age of nine were raped".

That was as difficult to read as it was to hear, but the voices of that community have to be heard, regardless of how harrowing or sickening the detail might be.

Just one of those atrocities would be enough to meet the definition of genocide in the UN genocide convention, if it was perpetrated with the intent of destroying a group in whole or in part. In the case of the Yazidis, every single prohibited act set out in the convention was used by Daesh, and it was done, as the hon. Member for Wealden said, with specific intent to destroy the community. That can be seen in multiple publications by *Dabiq*, the official mouthpiece of ISIS, that have said absolutely that this assault was planned with the intent of destroying that community. Let us have no debate about Daesh's intention, because that is very clear.

Ms Ghani: Does the hon. Member share my anxiety that the Minister may, in his response, refer to the terms of the UN genocide convention? We should alert him to the fact that the 2007 ruling of the International Court of Justice in the case of *Bosnia and Herzegovina v. Serbia and Montenegro* says that when a state—not a court—learns of a serious risk of genocide, then it must act. We cannot keep relying on a defunct UN resolution when we have the ICJ's 2007 case behind us, supporting the Government's taking action.

Brendan O'Hara: I thank the hon. Lady for that contribution, which I am sure the Minister heard. I will come on to exactly what the Government have to do, and what they have so far failed to do.

It is beyond question that under international law, the Yazidi people—and other religious minorities in Iraq—were victims of genocide. One would hope that the Government would call these crimes exactly what they are, particularly given that back in 2016, Parliament voted by 278 votes to zero that this was a genocide. By any measure, and on any interpretation of the UN genocide convention, these atrocities clearly meet the legal definition of genocide.

For more than 50 years, successive UK Governments have said that genocide can be declared only by a "competent court". Many of us have long argued that this was an absurd position for the UK to adopt, because there was absolutely no legal basis for it. Indeed, as the hon. Member for Wealden said, that position is contrary to the UK's obligation as a signatory to the UN genocide convention, under which the UK has promised to act to prevent genocide the instant it

"learns of, or should normally have learned of, the existence of a serious risk"

of genocide.

It is a remarkable feat of political, moral and linguistic gymnastics to reach a position that says that a genocide can be declared only after the event, and only after a court has decreed it a genocide. I have always viewed that as both a legally and morally flawed position that is rooted more in an unwillingness to make hard choices, and a fear of economic consequences or the international strategic implications of upsetting a powerful ally, than in legal principle. It is also a position that our greatest and most powerful ally has diverted from in regard to the Yazidi and other minority communities. In 2016, the United States, under Secretary of State John Kerry, declared:

"Daesh is responsible for genocide".

That was confirmed in 2017 by his successor, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, who said that Daesh was "clearly responsible for genocide" by self-proclamation and deed. Having spoken to former State Department advisers, I know that those words were not said lightly, but came after serious, prolonged analysis and consideration.

The UK Government have had every chance to review and revise their flawed long-standing policy on genocide determination, but they have refused to do so, despite the fact that other states with a similar approach to genocide determination, most notably Canada and the Netherlands, have changed their approach in the light of the evidence. As recently as 27 May last year, the UK Government's position was reiterated by Lord Ahmad. He could not have been clearer:

"The UK policy remains... that the determination of genocide should be made by competent courts, not non-judicial bodies. This includes international courts, such as the ICC, and, indeed, national criminal courts that meet international standards."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 27 May 2021; Vol. 812, c. 178.]

In November 2021, a competent court that meets international standards recognised that Daesh atrocities against the Yazidi people were genocide. When Iraqi national Taha al-Jumailly went on trial accused of genocide and crimes against humanity, he was not tried as a German national. His victims were not German, and his crimes were not committed on German territory; but under the principle of universal jurisdiction, German courts have the authority to preside over cases of genocide and crimes against humanity. Al-Jumailly was found guilty of purchasing and enslaving a five-year-old Yazidi girl and her mother. They were subjected to forced

conversion and suffered great physical abuse, including battery and starvation. One day, to punish the child, al-Jumailly chained that little girl outside in the baking sunshine, and left her to die of thirst while her mother was forced to watch.

Following al-Jumailly's arrest, the court in Frankfurt put the evidence of the Daesh atrocities under detailed legal scrutiny, and applied all relevant international and domestic law before finding him guilty of genocide. The UK Government therefore now have the competent court ruling that they have long desired. I can see so no reason whatsoever why the Government should delay any longer before recognising what Daesh did to the Yazidi people and other religious minorities as genocide. Will the Minister confirm what we all want to hear, and call this barbarism exactly what it is—a genocide?

Other hon. Members are eager to speak; I am extremely grateful to them for coming along this morning. I am sure that they will make the appeal that justice for victims and survivors should be first and foremost in our mind, and will call for the thousands of missing women and girls to be found and returned. I also hope to hear about plans to stabilise the region; an absence of genocide does not mean that Daesh and its hideous ideology have been banished from the region—far from it. There is a genuine fear that they could return at any time.

Finally, later this year the UK is hosting a ministerial summit on freedom of religion or belief. Today, we have an opportunity to show international leadership on that issue by declaring to the world that what happened to the Yazidi community and others was indeed genocide, and by standing in solidarity with the victims and survivors in saying—and meaning—“Never, ever, again.”

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): The debate will last until 11 o'clock. I am obliged to call the Front-Bench spokespeople no later than 10.27 am, so we have about 40 minutes of Back-Bench time.

9.47 am

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) on securing this important debate, and thank the Backbench Business Committee for agreeing to it. I also thank the hon. Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani) for her moving contribution.

I am glad that hon. Members here recognise the genocide perpetrated against Christians and the Yazidi people by Daesh, but I am disheartened by the fact that the Government have not yet followed suit. Almost two weeks ago, many of us contributed to the Backbench Business debate marking Holocaust Memorial Day, in which we again committed to learning the difficult lessons of the holocaust and of genocides in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur. Exactly a week before that, many of us urged the Government to at least assess whether there has been a genocide of the Uyghur people. It is disappointing to be highlighting another instance of the very worst actions of mankind in hopes of Government recognition. It is devastating that such events continue in the modern world at all.

By not acknowledging the plight of the Yazidis as a genocide, the Government are failing the victims. This House voted unanimously to recognise it as such in

2016. This is not an argument of politics or about the technicalities of international law; it is an argument of morals, and of what we are willing to sit by and silently watch continue. In the past year or so, women across the UK have been incensed with rage at the murder of women at the hands of men. The Government voiced their support for those British women, and condemned the violence and abuse suffered every day by thousands across the country. Does the Government's responsibility to promote and protect women's equality stop at the UK's borders? Is women's equality elsewhere not our problem to worry about or make determinations on?

Where there are wide-reaching campaigns of persecution, such as Daesh's against Christians and Yazidis, women and girls face the most inconceivable and haunting horrors; we have heard about some of them. We cannot even begin to imagine those horrors, no matter how hard we might try—the trauma of forced sterilisation, rape, sexual mutilation perpetrated against children, lives destroyed before they have even begun, women abused and raped in front of their children, and women sold like cattle from man to man, time and again. There are still 2,763 women and children missing, and they have been missing for seven years. What contribution have this Government made to finding them, rescuing them or even finding out if they are alive? It is not enough simply to condemn these atrocities. The Government will not even use the word that defines them—genocide. Imagine, as a survivor, how that must feel.

There needs to be recognition of what survivors have lived through, and of what many did not survive. We all remember the headlines from those early years of conflict—the frequent news stories of British citizens leaving the UK to join Daesh in the conflict, or of those who joined Daesh but remained here at home. The UK is not entirely removed from these crimes against humanity in ways, we might argue, we are from other conflicts. Have the Government made any assessment of how many British citizens had a hand in these crimes?

No colleague here will need reminding of my final point. Unfortunately, the UK has its own issues that it must address when it comes to religious intolerance. There is a risk, whenever issues such as this come back into the public spotlight, that everyone of the same background becomes tarred with the same brush. Islam is a peaceful religion, as most are, when they are observed as they were intended to be. The word “Islam” means peace and submission. We must not let those who subvert its teachings to justify terror and atrocities stoke fear of religion, or fear of those of the faith. These atrocities are not committed in the name of Islam, but in the name of control. We cannot allow Daesh to retain control of this narrative.

9.51 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) for setting the scene so well. He illustrated the issues, which are painful to listen to; I find it incredibly difficult, but as I said to the hon. Member for Enfield North (Feryal Clark) before the debate, we want to ensure through this debate, our Government and our Minister that the issue of the Yazidis and Christians who were horribly mutilated, abused and kidnapped, and whose lives changed forever because of the evil intent of Daesh/ISIS and radical Islamicists, is not ignored. Today, in this House, we have

[*Jim Shannon*]

a chance to remind the world of what happened and ask our Minister and Government to take forward our pleas on their behalf.

In 2017 or 2018, I had occasion to visit Iraq with Aid to the Church in Need. It was before Mosul fell. I remember being on the plains of Nineveh, which the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute referred to. We became very conscious of where the saints had walked, according to the Bible, and, secondly, where Yazidis and Christians had at one time lived in peace and harmony with their neighbours. The people we spoke to told us the stories that were happening and the change in their lives. That reminded us clearly of the suffering and pain.

As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on international freedom of religion or belief, I am, very sadly, all too familiar with the issue of genocide and ethnic cleansing. There is not a day when we are not reminded of where that is taking place across the world. We have had debates in this Chamber about the Uyghurs, and our debate a few weeks ago reminded us of other atrocities across the world. We have a prayer time in the morning when we remember all the places across the world where many have evil intent and the innocence of families—women, girls, boys and men—is abused by evil people.

Today, we need to state that it is critical that Her Majesty's Government recognise a genocide for what it is. We hope that that might help bring dignity to the victims and aid the prosecution of the perpetrators. I am a great believer—you probably are as well, Mr Hollobone—that when this world ends, the next world will come. There will be a judgment day for the people who carried out these most horrific and horrible of crimes. I would love to see them getting their judgment earlier—in this world, rather than in the next. I would expedite that if it was humanly possible, because those people who wander the world and commit awful crimes seem to think that they are above the law. No, they are not, and this debate aims to hold them accountable in law. Again, we are eternally grateful to the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute for securing the debate.

In April 2016, the House voted unanimously to recognise Daesh's crimes against the Yazidis and other religious minorities as genocide; that followed similar motions in the House of Lords—a combination of the two Houses together. However, the Government's long-held position, that they should wait for a ruling from a court or tribunal before declaring a genocide, prevented recognition of the crimes at that time.

As the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute mentioned, on 30 November, in a court in Frankfurt, Taha al-Jumailly—hell will never be full until he is there, that is for sure—became the first member of ISIS to be convicted of genocide against the Yazidis. The landmark ruling fulfils Her Majesty's Government's requirement of a competent court ruling on genocide. Following that, a letter was sent to the Prime Minister, asking whether his Government would now recognise the crimes. So far, there has been no response to the letter. I ask the Minister—I say this respectfully, as he knows—to remind the Prime Minister that it is time to respond to the letter so that this House, through today's debate, can see what is happening.

The UK would not be alone in recognising the genocide; in fact, it would join some of our country's closest allies. The USA was the first country to recognise the Daesh genocide, under the Obama Administration. In 2016, both Canada and the Netherlands also recognised the genocide, after a report was published by the UN Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da'esh, entitled “‘They Came to destroy’: ISIS crimes against the yazidis”.

It is horrible to recount what has happened to a group of gentle people who have a religious belief. We in this House, including all those who have spoken in the debate and all those who are present, speak up for those with Christian beliefs, those with other beliefs and those with no belief. We believe in the freedom to exercise one's religious belief and that human rights are so important and need to be retained. That is why we are here today to make this plea on behalf of the Yazidis.

There is a strong legal justification for the UK to recognise this horrendous act as genocide, and it is time that it did. The reasons for the urgency can be summarised as follows. First, it is important to acknowledge what has happened. The act of genocide is a deliberate attempt to destroy a targeted group of people, and Daesh/ISIS set out to do that with vengeance and cruelty. In acknowledging what has happened, we have a duty to protect the victims and ensure that there are safeguards to prevent future atrocities.

It is important to remember that this is not a historical event, but a situation in which action is still needed to help the survivors. Tens of thousands of Yazidis are still living in tent camps, unable to access Government funds to rebuild their towns and villages, which were destroyed by Daesh. I know that the issue is not the Minister's direct responsibility—it is the responsibility of another Minister at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office—but what can be done to help those families get back to their homes and build their houses, villages and towns so that they can try to restart their lives, ever mindful of the horrible atrocities carried out against them? Some 2,700 Yazidi women and children are still missing, having been kidnapped by Daesh. Many are believed to be held in al-Hawl and al-Roj detention camps, trapped with 60,000 former Daesh members and fighters. We need little imagination to recognise and imagine the horrors that women and girls suffer daily in those camps.

It is important to recognise this as a genocide because it is important to prosecute the perpetrators and put them in jail—if the death penalty were still available, we should give them that for what they have carried out. It is very clear in my mind what they have done, and I recognise their brutality and murderous intent. It is time for them to take responsibility for their actions. The prosecution of those who carry out such crimes provides justice for the victims and sends a strong message to the perpetrators of other genocides that the international community, including here in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, is watching and will hold actors accountable for their actions. Prosecutions will also allow for the seizing of assets—yes, hit them where it hurts, in their pockets—used for the conduct of genocide. The removal of assets prevents ongoing atrocities and aids reparations for surviving victims. Ultimately, victims need money and finance when they go back to rebuild their lives.

Unfortunately, prosecution has been slow. So far, only one member of Daesh has been prosecuted with charges relating to genocide, in a criminal trial in Germany. The UK has prosecuted nationals who have returned from Iraq and Syria after joining Daesh. I welcome that, by the way, as a clear statement and clear action, but all 40 of those individuals have been prosecuted under anti-terror legislation, with no reference to crimes related to genocide or the sexual exploitation of women and children. Will the Minister respond on that?

Recommendation 21.b of the Bishop of Truro's review of Christian persecution recommends that those at the FCDO

"champion the prosecution of ISIS perpetrators of sex crimes against Yazidi and Christian women, not only as terrorists."

I am ever mindful that some parts of the Bishop of Truro's report have not yet been acted on, but I thank the Government and the Minister for the conference that will take place in July this year to highlight all the issues. The Government have been a driver in this, and I give credit to those who have tried hard to make things happen. On the issue of recommendation 21.b, I ask the Minister to give us some thoughts. Her Majesty's Government have pledged to adopt all recommendations of the Truro review by the summer of 2022. That is coming soon, so in the next three or four months we want to see that happening. To meet that recommendation, the UK needs to expand prosecutions against former Daesh members to include those crimes.

Finally, it is important to recognise genocide, as part of our international obligation to prevent future genocides. The hon. Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani) was here earlier; for the record, I should say that I greatly admire her fortitude and courage in speaking out for the Uyghurs and doing the same again here today on behalf of others. That illustrates our frustration as elected representatives: we recognise evil and the evil intent of people, but we expect—I say this with respect—our Government and Minister to do something about it, after the pleas we make on behalf of those who have suffered.

The UK is a signatory to the 1948 convention on genocide, which governs the steps that states must take to prevent genocide from occurring and to punish perpetrators after the crime has been committed. Today, in the debate, we need assurances so that we are confident that our Government and our Minister are taking every step possible to ensure that the perpetrators of those evil crimes will go to court and be subject to whatever the judgment of the court will be.

Her Majesty's Government's approach of waiting until a court or tribunal has ruled on genocide prevents the UK from doing more to stop genocides from occurring before they happen. With real grief in my heart, I look to the Government and the Minister to recognise the words that we are saying, although words in no way encapsulate what we are trying to say—words barely describe the issues. I know that the Minister understands, because he is of the same mind as me and as others present who find what has happened grievous to listen to, and more so when considering what we need to do.

In recommendation 7 of the Bishop of Truro's report, he asks the Government to

"Ensure that there are mechanisms in place to facilitate an immediate response to atrocity crimes, including genocide...and...be willing to make public statements condemning such atrocities."

I have mentioned the report a couple of times—the earlier recommendation and this one. We look to the Government's commitment that the adoption of all the recommendations will be finalised and concluded by the summer of this year. We need to have that assurance.

This is my last paragraph. The international obligations are important, as they help prevent future crimes. Sadly, the genocide against the Yazidis by Daesh is not unique. It is terrible to recall what happened, but we also recognise that genocide has been carried out in other parts of the world. Religious or ethnic minorities are at risk, including of genocide, in many situations.

In conclusion, I thank the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute and other speakers, and I look forward to the contribution from the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous), who would contribute to a debate such as this even if he were not shadow Minister. I also look forward to hearing from the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day), my friend and colleague from the APPG, who understands these issues well.

We have a duty to speak up for the Yazidis and Christians and that is what we have done, in a compassionate way that matters to us. We look to the Minister and our Government to ensure that there is accountability for what has happened to the Yazidis and Christians in northern Iraq and elsewhere. There must be accountability, recognition of genocide and completion of the recommendations in the Bishop of Truro's report.

10.6 am

Feryal Clark (Enfield North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I start by paying tribute to the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) for securing today's debate, for his advocacy on the issue, as vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on British Turks and Kurds, and for setting out clearly the steps our Government can take to correct a wrong.

I am an ethnic Kurd and speak Kurdish—something I share with the Yazidi Kurds in Iraq. In 2014, I watched as thousands of Yazidis were dislocated from their homes and I felt really helpless. I wrote to my MP, and tried to get their voices heard and recognised. I am proud to be here as a voice for the Yazidis and to support colleagues in this debate.

I was pleased when a debate finally took place in the House in 2016; this is not the first time the issue has been brought to the UK Parliament. In April 2016, the voice of the House was expressed clearly when it voted 278 to zero to recognise the atrocities committed by Daesh against the Yazidis and other religious minorities.

Unfortunately, the Government did not listen then, deeming that it was up to a credible court to make such a designation. As we heard from the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute, the criteria have been met as a result of the conviction in Germany. I am keen to hear from the Minister the steps our Government will take in response. Too often, sadly, it feels as though these discussions are treated as symbolic—merely a gesture to be made. That approach completely fails to acknowledge the duty imposed on states under international law, the role that developed nations such as the UK should play, and the real stories behind the genocide.

[Feryal Clark]

By recognising genocide, we are not just making a statement. We are taking practical steps to support those affected by the atrocities committed. In the case of the Yazidi genocide, the stories from victims should compel all of us to act. Daesh did not seek only to eradicate the Yazidi people; they sought the utter destruction of a community, its culture and its dignity.

Article 2 of the convention on the prevention and punishment of the crime of genocide sets out the prohibited acts that constitute genocide. One such condition is:

“Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part”.

It is on this that I will focus the remainder of my remarks. By subjecting women to organised sexual violence and enslavement on such a massive scale, Daesh undoubtedly sought their physical destruction. Rape, mutilation, forced sterilisation—these are just some of the things Daesh subjected Yazidi women to. This was not just violence and it was not an act of war: it was an attempt to systematically break the spirit of a people and bring about their physical destruction.

We have heard harrowing accounts of Yazidi women and girls from other hon. Members. I will share a testimony from a girl captured by Daesh at just 12 years old. She said:

“We were registered. ISIS took our names...where we came from and whether we were married or not. After that, ISIS fighters would come to select girls to go with them. The youngest girls I saw them take was about 9 years old. One girl told me that ‘if they take you, it is better that you kill yourself.’”

This girl was just 12 years old when she was captured. She was held by Daesh for seven months and was sold in that period four times. She was not thought of as a child, as vulnerable; she was treated as a commodity to be traded for the gratification of ISIS men. Daesh had so low a view of the value of Yazidi life that they stripped away all basic humanity and treated these women as mere goods.

Recognising the Yazidi genocide is not a gesture. It is not symbolic. It is an acknowledgment of how these women suffered and a commitment to help them. We know that thousands of Yazidi remain missing, yet we do nothing. We know the humanitarian crisis is ever growing, yet we do nothing. We can no longer stand by and look the Yazidi people in the eye and do nothing. Recognition is not an end point; it is not the conclusion of our responsibilities. It is the start of properly understanding the events that took place and of playing our part in ensuring that they never happen again.

The Government must act now and take steps to call this what it is: a genocide. I look forward to the Minister's response and to hearing his views on the criteria that have been met and what our Government will do.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): We now come to the Front-Bench spokespeople, the first of whom will be Martyn Day from the SNP.

10.13 am

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) for securing this important debate and for his important work with the all-party parliamentary group, championing this issue over recent

years. As we have heard, the Yazidis are a religious minority primarily residing in northern Iraq. Yazidism is one of the world's oldest monotheistic religions and has survived many genocides throughout history; a figure of 74 genocides has been quoted by the Yazidis themselves.

In August 2014, Yazidis were attacked by Daesh, who then controlled significant amounts of territory in Iraq and Syria. In addition to the attacks against the Yazidis, Christians, Mandaeans, Turkmen, Shabaks and other minorities were also targeted. There was mass slaughtering that wiped out entire villages, forced conversions, thousands of young women sold into slavery and raped and young boys trained as child soldiers. Figures from last year estimate that there were some 200,000 displaced Yazidis, with thousands of women and girls missing, still in Daesh captivity. It is estimated that more than 5,000 were killed, although the actual number is uncertain, as is the number captured or missing. Unquestionably, the treatment of this minority is an atrocity and something that we can all unite in calling out. We can also all unite in our opposition to Daesh, and in sympathy with the plight of the Yazidis.

However, the question is, what can be done about it? What can we do to help, and how can we hold the perpetrators of this violence to account? We have already heard quite a number of constructive suggestions, but so far, very few of the perpetrators have been brought to justice. Recognising the atrocities as genocide, and as crimes against humanity, is therefore a first key step.

In 2016, a UN human rights panel and the US Secretary of State, John Kerry, described the actions against the Yazidis as constituting genocide. A further UN investigative team in 2021 concluded that there was “clear and convincing evidence” of genocide. As we have heard, in April 2016 this Parliament unanimously voted—278 to nil—to recognise the Daesh atrocities against the Yazidis, and others, as genocide. As we know, the UK Government did not recognise it as genocide, instead standing by their policy that determination of genocide is a matter for a competent court to decide, rather than Governments. Competent courts include the International Criminal Court, the International Court of Justice and national criminal courts, so it is significant that the German court found a Daesh fighter guilty of genocide on 30 November 2021—the first genocide conviction of a Daesh fighter in the world.

The UN Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da'esh/Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant works to prepare evidence to support national authorities' efforts to bring prosecutions. It has identified 1,444 potential perpetrators of attacks against the Yazidis.

While usually a state only has jurisdiction if crimes happen on its soil, or are committed by its nationals or against its people, the Germans, as we have heard, used the principle of universal jurisdiction—a principle that came into existence following the second world war, as some crimes were considered so grave that they could be prosecuted universally, irrespective of where they took place. That verdict by a competent court must surely now lead to the UK's recognising the crimes as genocide. I add my voice, and those of my party, to calls for the UK to do that.

There is so much more that I would like to see the UK Government do. Hundreds of thousands of Yazidis now live in displacement camps, and have for seven

years. Without a timeline to close those camps, there is no end to the misery and displacement in sight. Kris Phelps, of the British charity War Child—one of the few international non-governmental organisations still working in the Yazidi camps—said:

“Yazidis feel betrayed by their neighbours, forgotten by their government, and the provision of aid is dwindling...It’s really striking to see the surge and ebb in attention the Yazidis have received”.

UK aid should be supporting those desperate and largely ignored families but, as we know, UK bilateral aid into Iraq has all but dried up. We ask, therefore, that the UK Government provide more bilateral aid and improve funding to the United Nations Development Programme’s funding facility for stabilisation, providing some basic services in Iraq.

On top of that form of abandonment, the UK Home Office has so far not taken a single Yazidi refugee. That should be contrasted with the UK Government’s having spent £8.4 billion on military operations in Iraq between 2003 and 2009. More needs to be done. The UK must work with international counterparts to help trace the thousands of missing Yazidis, and to advocate for and better fund the full provision of the Yazidi survivors law, which passed in Iraq in March 2021.

Perhaps the Minister can explain why the UK Government still do not have a whole-of-Government atrocity prevention strategy, or why they do not designate the destruction of cultural heritage as an early warning sign of atrocity crimes—something that happened in the Yazidi case—in line with the requirements of the UN framework of analysis for atrocity crimes. It is not good enough. Atrocities are becoming more commonplace across the globe, and there appears to be a rising sense of impunity among the perpetrators. Only one person has been convicted following the atrocities committed against the Yazidi people.

I hope that the Minister will step up to the mark and show willing for the UK to take the lead in rectifying those wrongs. A good starting point is with the recognition of the crimes as genocide. Then, perhaps, the UK Government could press for the use of universal jurisdiction to be replicated by Governments around the world in such cases. We need to improve legislation globally and avoid loopholes through which perpetrators can escape justice. More support from the UK Government must be provided to Kurdish and Iraqi authorities to help them improve their judicial systems. We also need to tackle questions of immunity of senior Syrian officials to make sure that nobody stands above the law. In short, we need firm action—not lip service.

10.20 am

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I thank the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara) for securing this important debate. Many horrors, atrocities and human rights abuses have been committed during the war in Syria, but the genocide against the Yazidi people carried out by Daesh between 2014 and 2017 must rank as one of the worst.

Human rights and international law must always be our guiding principles as Members of Parliament. Only by standing up for human rights and the rule of international law can we in the UK have any moral authority in the eyes of the world; only by standing up

for those values can we transcend the push and pull of sectarian politics. When it comes to the horrific situation endured by the Yazidi people, the Labour party, including myself, believes that the UK Government must do everything in their power to ensure that there is justice for the victims. The UK Government must recognise their duty to stand up for human rights in this situation.

In an ideal world, the determination of genocide would be made by a competent court with full access to all necessary evidence. Unfortunately, as hon. Members present will appreciate, the world is far from ideal. There are many situations where the international courts are unable to make that determination, either because of questions relating to the jurisdiction of the court or because the process has been blocked by a party to the proceedings. In such cases, when the preferred legal routes to recognising genocide are blocked, it falls to Parliament to take action as a last resort. In this case, that action is to recognise what happened to the Yazidi people as genocide.

The definition of genocide is very important, both as an assertion of the truth and as a crucial step to establishing international mechanisms for accountability. As the hon. Members for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon) have mentioned, in 2016, the House of Commons voted 278 to zero that IS, or Daesh, was committing genocide against the Yazidis, Christians and other ethnic and religious minorities in Iraq and Syria; yet the Government did not accept that expression of the will of the House, instead arguing that the matter of genocide should be decided by a competent court. So, while the Government have condemned the atrocities against the Yazidis, they have not done the one thing in their power that could really help the situation.

In fact, I argue that the Government’s long-standing policy that any determination of genocide should be made by competent courts, rather than the Government, is unhelpful to the victims of the genocide and the international pursuit of justice. As my neighbour and hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North (Feryal Clark) stated, recognising the genocide of the Yazidi people would be a practical step in helping the victims.

Without the events of 2014 to 2017 being defined as genocide, Daesh fighters are currently predominantly prosecuted for offences other than genocide, with terror-related offences the primary offence used in prosecutions. It is really important that everyone understands that prosecutions for terror-related offences serve only to undermine the true severity of the crimes perpetrated against the Yazidis. While Daesh fighters can be partially held to account via the mechanism of terror-related offences, a formal recognition of genocide would allow for greater justice for victims of genocide.

We saw moral leadership on this matter in Germany in December 2021 when, for the first time, a Daesh member was convicted of genocide against the Yazidi community. Germany’s use of universal jurisdiction in that case can and should be replicated by other Governments, including our own.

I would like to explain why it was indeed a genocide. As is well known, between 2014 and 2017 Daesh committed the most heinous atrocities against the Yazidi community in Iraq. In 2016, a UN human rights panel and the US Secretary of State, John Kerry, described the actions of IS, or Daesh, against the Yazidis as constituting genocide.

[*Bambos Charalambous*]

In 2021, a further UN investigative team concluded that there was “clear and convincing evidence” of genocide against the Yazidis.

It is worth noting exactly what the UN said in its report and why it chose to use the word genocide.

“ISIS has sought to erase the Yazidis through killings; sexual slavery, enslavement, torture and inhuman and degrading treatment and forcible transfer causing serious bodily and mental harm; the infliction of conditions of life that bring about a slow death; the imposition of measures to prevent Yazidi children from being born, including forced conversion of adults, the separation of Yazidi men and women, and mental trauma; and the transfer of Yazidi children from their own families and placing them with ISIS fighters, thereby cutting them off from beliefs and practices of their own religious community”.

It is now known that around 10,000 Yazidis were either killed or captured in August 2014 alone, out of which 3,100 were murdered by gunshots, beheaded or burned alive. Perhaps one of the most horrific aspects of the Yazidi genocide was the way in which Daesh systematically separated the women to rape, sexually mutilate and sterilise, while many children were sent to training camps. Sexual violence against the Yazidi women captured by Daesh occurred on a horrific scale; it was the systematic use of sexual violence as a tool of genocide. Around 7,000 women were sold as sex slaves, or handed to jihadists as concubines. Girls as young as nine were sold off to Islamic State fighters, routinely raped, and punished with extreme violence when they tried to escape. Children were killed as a means of punishing their mothers for resisting.

There is no doubt that the atrocities perpetrated by Daesh, including massacres, enslavement, conscription and rape, have inflicted communal and individual trauma on the Yazidi people. A study published in 2018 by BMC Medicine found that more than 80% of participants, mainly Yazidi women aged between 17 and 75, met the criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder. The rates reached nearly 100% for women who had survived captivity.

There is nothing that can undo this unimaginable suffering and the trauma it has caused for the survivors of the Yazidi genocide, but by showing leadership and formally calling the genocide by its name, the UK Government could establish or strengthen international mechanisms for justice. Crucially, it would be an honest and true reflection of the events that occurred on the ground. For the survivors of the genocide, who still live with unimaginable trauma, the recognition of genocide for what it is might perhaps do something to lessen the emotional weight of the injustice.

I would like to conclude by saying that when it comes to human rights, there is no left or right, only right and wrong. I put the following questions to the Minister: first, would he reconsider the Government’s decision not to declare what has happened to the Yazidi people as a genocide; and secondly, will he do all in his power to help those who have suffered, and continue to suffer, from the Yazidi genocide to get justice? The Government must and should recognise the massacre of the Yazidi people at the hands of Daesh. It is morally and ethically the right thing to do. It is genocide.

10.27 am

The Minister for Europe (Chris Heaton-Harris): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara) for securing this debate in the time apportioned by the Backbench Business Committee. I pay tribute to his work as a member of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief. The Minister for the Middle East, North Africa and North America would have been delighted to take part in this debate as part of his responsibilities, but he is travelling on ministerial duties. It is therefore my pleasure to respond on behalf of the Government. While I am sure the hon. Gentleman will understand that I am not the Minister with responsibility for this area, I do recognise the decent and honest conviction and the passion that he brought to the debate.

I am also grateful for the contributions from all other hon. Members, and I will try to respond to many of the points they have raised. I would like to acknowledge the hon. Members for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier), for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Enfield North (Feryal Clark), as well as the two Opposition spokesmen, the hon. Members for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) and for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous), for their contributions.

It is without doubt that the Yazidis have suffered immense pain and loss through the abhorrent crimes that Daesh has inflicted on them, some of which have been highlighted in the most harrowing terms today. The UK Government are steadfast in our support for the Yazidis and other religious minorities whose human rights have been so brutally violated by Daesh. We are committed to ensuring that the voices of those murdered, persecuted and silenced are heard, and that justice is secured for the survivors.

Nearly eight years ago, Daesh launched a brutal offensive against Sinjar—a region of northern Iraq. It killed up to 10,000 Yazidi people and forced thousands to flee their homes. It subjected them to torture, sexual violence and enslavement. Thousands of Yazidis, among Christians, Turkmens and other minorities, suffered unimaginable violence. The impact of these crimes resonates to this day.

Iraq’s religious and ethnic minority populations have dwindled as so many people have fled conflict and persecution. Amnesty International reports that 2,000 Yazidi children who were captured by Daesh have faced horrendous physical and mental trauma and now require urgent support from the Iraqi Government. Nearly 3,000 women and girls remain in captivity and 200,000 Yazidis remain displaced, living in camps without basic necessities. A wave of recent suicides among Yazidis grimly illustrates the mental health crisis they are facing. We condemn in the strongest terms the atrocities committed by Daesh against all civilians, including Yazidis, other minorities and the majority Muslim population in Syria and Iraq.

The hon. Member for Argyll and Bute described the Government’s policy. It is the long-standing policy of the British Government that the determination of genocide should be made by a competent court. Whether or not that determination is made, we are committed to robust action. In 2017, the UK was instrumental in the adoption of UN resolution 2379, which established the UN

investigative team to promote accountability for crimes committed by Daesh. Since then, a huge amount of work has taken place to gather evidence to map the appalling crimes of Daesh. The UK Government have contributed nearly £2 million to the team, and we continue to champion its vital work. Above all, Yazidis and all other Iraqis deserve a safe and secure future, which is why we remain a leading member of the global coalition against Daesh, supporting the Government of Iraq to ensure that Daesh can never recover and repeat its appalling crimes.

Every hon. Member has asked about the UK Government's position on the recent ruling of genocide in Germany. I will start by saying we condemn in the strongest terms the atrocities committed by Daesh against all civilians. We note the conviction in the German court on 30 November of a former Daesh fighter for war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide against a Yazidi woman and her daughter. We are closely following the case and the review. Following the proceedings in the Frankfurt Higher Regional Court, the Federal Court of Justice is reviewing the case. As a Minister who is not within his portfolio, I am hesitant to comment further on ongoing legal proceedings.

To reduce the risk of a Daesh resurgence, it is essential to build a more stable and inclusive Iraq. The UK has designated Iraq as a human rights priority country. Work to promote and defend freedom of religion or belief in Iraq is at the centre of that strategy. We believe passionately that the freedom to choose and practise a religion or to have no religion at all is a universal human right that everyone should enjoy. We are standing up for those who face religious persecution and those denied the right to practise their faith or belief freely. We continue to press the Government of Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government to promote freedom of religion or belief and to improve the lives of religious minorities.

Jim Shannon: In my contribution, I asked what would be done to enable Yazidis and Christians to return to their villages, towns and homes and to rebuild their lives, jobs and communities. It is important that, if they wish to return, every encouragement is given for that to happen. I understand that it is not the Minister's portfolio, but I would be grateful if he could answer that now or perhaps give us an answer later.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I hope to cover that in the rest of my contribution, but if that is not the case, and the hon. Gentleman taps me on the shoulder afterwards, I will ensure that I write to all present in the Chamber.

The Government of Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government must ensure that religious minorities are protected and included in decision making that affects their lives. As part of that, we meet frequently with religious minorities to show support and advocate against the insecurity, discrimination and inadequate public support they experience. His Holiness the Pope's historic visit to Iraq last year sent a welcome message of peace and reconciliation to Iraqis of all faiths and reminded us all of the importance of dialogue and understanding between religions.

We are also supporting the most vulnerable people in Iraq, including the Yazidis, with humanitarian aid and stabilisation support. We have provided more than £270 million since 2014 in humanitarian support, including

emergency food, shelter and medical care, in addition to money through the UN Development Programme to restore vital services, including hospitals, schools and water networks in areas that are home to Yazidi and minority communities, such as Sinjar and Sinuni.

It is also vital that we ensure that the Yazidis' cultural identity, memories and practices are preserved, and we are supporting this through the work of the British Council's cultural protection fund. That fund is helping the AMAR Foundation—a wonderful charity—to record and teach the unique music of the Yazidi people, helping to preserve it for future generations. That includes setting up a women's choir in one of the camps for internally displaced persons. That cultural protection fund is also supporting the University of Liverpool's work to preserve Yazidi culture and identity through filming their oral histories, festivals and rituals. We are funding Yazda, a non-governmental organisation, to provide much-needed mental health and psychosocial care to female survivors of sexual violence and conflict.

These projects offer a lifeline, but much more can be done by the Iraqi authorities and the international community. Last year, the Iraqi Parliament passed the Yazidi survivors law, a hugely positive step that officially recognised Daesh crimes against Yazidi and other minority groups as crimes against humanity and genocide. That law promises compensation and rehabilitation measures to support the survivors of Daesh atrocities. The UK will continue to press the authorities on those measures, and we are working with a range of organisations to support the law's implementation. The Government of Iraq must fully deliver on their promises so that survivors can begin to rebuild their lives and return to the places that they call home. That includes funding for Iraq's general directorate for Yazidi survivor affairs through our preventing sexual violence in conflict initiative.

I will conclude by again stressing our firm resolve to help Iraq build a future in which all groups can thrive and prosper. I commend the courage of the Yazidi people in continuing their fight for justice; their recovery and rehabilitation remains a priority. I commend every Member who has contributed today, including my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani), who was in the Chamber earlier. We will continue to work with the Government of Iraq to secure accountability and justice for Yazidi survivors and the other communities that suffered so dreadfully at the hands of Daesh.

10.38 am

Brendan O'Hara: I put on record my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day), to the hon. Members for Wealden (Ms Ghani), for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier), for Strangford (Jim Shannon), for Enfield North (Feryal Clark) and for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous), and to the Minister for what has been an interesting and informative debate. I am glad that the issues of the missing women and girls and of bringing stability to the region have been raised, but the crux of the debate was always that the threshold the Government set themselves has been met. The competent court threshold has been met, and by any standard and any definition, genocide has been established.

I am so disappointed that the Government still will not call this out and call it what it is. I understand that the federal court in Germany is reviewing this case, but

[Brendan O'Hara]

across the world, this genocide has been recognised, and we should be taking a lead on this matter, not hiding behind an appeal to a German federal court to block us from doing what we know is the right thing. We wrote to the Prime Minister on this issue, but we have had no response; I would appreciate it if the Minister could raise this with the PM and tell him that we would still appreciate a response. As the hon. Member for Enfield North said, recognition is not an end in itself: it is the start of a process of righting an historical wrong, and we have a moral responsibility to call this what it is. This is a genocide.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Yazidi genocide.

10.39 am

Sitting suspended.

Grit Bins

11 am

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Before we begin, Mr Speaker would like to remind hon. Members to observe social distancing and encourage Members to wear masks.

Robert Largan (High Peak) (Con): I beg to move,
That this House has considered the provision of grit bins.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I appreciate that for many observers, especially those in places such as London and the south-east, the provision of grit bins may not sound like a major issue, but in my home in the High Peak, things are bit different. Buxton, for example, sits 1,000 feet above sea level. As a result, we get a lot of weather. On average, temperatures here are at least 3° cooler than in London, and we can get snowfall as late as April and May—known locally as lambing snows. In November, Storm Arwen struck, leaving many homes in the more remote rural areas of the High Peak cut off, many roads impassable and some homes without power for as many as five nights. Just over a week ago, I was door-knocking in Harpur Hill when I got caught out by Storm Malik, which again left many without power.

Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that in places such as High Peak and Hyndburn and Haslingden, severe weather affects residents? The provision of grit bins is key around schools, for example, where severe weather can cause severe delays for people who are trying to get their children to school. Getting grit bins in the places where they need to be is something that local councils really need to focus on.

Robert Largan: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend, who is a fantastic champion for her constituents in Hyndburn. I will talk about schools later in my speech.

As I said, I was caught out in the middle of Storm Malik. A number of local residents who were waiting for the power to come back on were surprised to find their local MP on their doorstep, checking up on them while looking like a drowned rat. All this weather, along with the beautiful landscape of the Peak District and the poor quality of many rural roads, means that grit provision is of particular importance in my constituency.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate. In my constituency of Congleton, the provision of grit bins is an issue not just in the very extreme weather that he mentions, but each winter. Residents of Mow Cop, in my constituency, which has very steep gradients up to it, are concerned about safe access in icy weather and concerned that the roads are appropriately gritted—not least because many of the residents are elderly, and we need to ensure that access for emergency vehicles and emergency home deliveries is secured.

Robert Largan: My hon. Friend makes a very good point, particularly about the impact that this issue has on the elderly.

Grit bins are a big issue in my constituency, but unfortunately local provision is frequently not up to the task. In High Peak there are multiple tiers of local

government: Derbyshire County Council, High Peak Borough Council and a whole plethora of town and parish councils. Typically, parish and town councils take responsibility for providing and maintaining grit bins in High Peak, with varying degrees of effectiveness. However, Buxton, Glossop, Hadfield and Padfield are not parished, and therefore they fall between the tiers of local government on grit bin provision.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Does the hon. Member agree that district nurses and community care workers sometimes put their lives on the line as they attempt to make their way into housing developments to look after their patients? Those areas may have no grit bins because the gradient is half a degree less than that specified in legislation. The legislation prevents grit bins from being put into the estates where they should be, and they must be extended to areas where those with health needs live. It is important that nurses who need to visit constituents have access. Councils back home, in agreement with community groups, make grit and grit bins available on estates, where the local people themselves disperse the grit. There may be some ways of doing what we do in Northern Ireland.

Robert Largan: It is always a pleasure to give way to the hon. Gentleman. I will talk in a few moments about access for emergency services and healthcare, and the impact of grit bins.

As I was saying, large parts of the High Peak are not parished and fall between the layers of local government. Unfortunately, High Peak Borough Council and Derbyshire County Council are in a long-running dispute about who should take responsibility for new grit bins in those areas, leaving places such as Buxton, Glossop, Hadfield and Padfield at a disadvantage compared with the rest of the High Peak. Given the often extreme weather that we face in the High Peak, the failure of those two councils to resolve this dispute is deeply disappointing.

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): As co-chair of the all-party group on local democracy, which represents town and parish councils, I declare an interest. I agree with my hon. Friend that those most local councils are of utmost importance. In my community, it is not just about the split between district council and county council; we are a unitary county. I have had two successes with getting grit bins in: in Chapel Drive in Consett, and in George Street in Dipton. However, places such as Leadgate, Burnhope, Consett and Tow Law—former pit villages that are often described locally as having their own micro-climates because they are so exposed on the tops of hills—also need provision as quickly as possible. Does he agree that the issue is not just the tiers of local government, but the assessments made by those local authorities, whatever level of control they have?

Robert Largan: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. He is a fantastic champion for the people of Durham.

This winter, I have received a huge number of complaints from constituents who have been unable to go to work, take their children to school or even attend appointments to see their doctor, because of the lack of gritting on their streets. They have even been unable to leave their home safely in bad weather.

This is particularly acute on new-build estates, where no grit bins have been provided. Given the huge scale of house building in Glossop and Buxton, this problem will only grow. On Scotty Brook Crescent in Shirebrook, a short walk from my Glossop home, local resident Kim Price and local councillor Paul Hardy have been trying in vain for over a year to get a new grit bin installed, but without success. Similarly, on Carr Road in Burbage, local resident Greg Windows has been leading calls for a grit bin on his estate. Greg told me how he and his neighbours live in constant watch for bad weather and are forced to park their cars on the main road at the top of the estate whenever snow is forecast, for fear of being left stranded.

Back in November, when we had Storm Arwen, an ambulance became stuck in the snow and ice on Victoria Park Road in Fairfield. Local residents were quick to respond and cleared the road with shovels, digging out the ambulance. While this demonstrates the generous community spirit of the people of High Peak, it also highlights the failure of the local councils to engage constructively with each other to deliver an essential service. The councils' failure has a long-term cost measured in broken hips, as residents slip on untreated ice. Leaving people stranded and unable to go about their lives also puts a significant strain on their mental health and wellbeing.

For the reasons that I have set out today, hundreds of people have signed my petition urging Derbyshire County Council and High Peak Borough Council to get around the table to resolve their dispute and get on with installing new grit bins in Glossop, Buxton, Hadfield and Padfield.

Fiona Bruce: My hon. Friend is making an important point about grit bins. Does he agree that it would be helpful for the Minister, in responding to this debate, to consider the provision of grit bins within a highways authority's overarching obligation? Section 41(1A) of the Highways Act 1980 states that highways authorities "are under a duty to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, that safe passage along a highway is not endangered by snow or ice."

That is an overarching obligation that should surely apply, whether or not grit bins are provided.

Robert Largan: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. In High Peak, we boast some beautiful scenery but also some of the most difficult rural roads, which are often closed during bad weather. It is the duty of the local authority to do everything it can to keep those key links open.

I am pleased to see the Minister in his place. I want to use this opportunity to call on the Government to consider whether legislative changes are necessary in order to try to clear up the ambiguity of responsibility for utilities, such as grit bins, in two-tier authorities.

Mr Holden: In my local council area, one big issue has been that councillors are asked to use their local grant allocation to fund this, when funding should come from the local authority. Councillors Doug Oliver and Mike McGaun, in the Lanchester ward, have been told that if they want to get grit bins for Burnhope, one of the villages in my constituency, they will have to use their own funds from their allocation to provide grit bins themselves. That creates a problem between areas

[Mr Holden]

that really need them and those that do not. It should not be down to local councillors to provide them, because such services should be provided at a council or national level.

Robert Largan: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. A number of my local councillors are also stepping up to the plate and helping to provide those grit bins. Councillors such as Nigel Gourlay, Linda Grooby and Kath Sizeland are all excellent local champions for their areas.

Developers have a role to play in installing basic amenities when they are building new developments. As the Government look at reforms to the planning system, I hope they will consider placing a duty of care on new developments to include those basic facilities.

There are many different areas that we can consider when it comes to grit bins, so I look forward to the Minister's comments. In the meantime, my message is clear: Derbyshire County Council and High Peak Borough Council have got to stop the games and the finger pointing. They have to do the right thing, get around the table, resolve this petty dispute and start providing more grit bins for the people of the High Peak.

11.12 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Neil O'Brien): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Robert Largan) for bringing such an important topic to the attention of the House. He is a fantastic advocate for the people of High Peak, which is an area I know well, as it is just over the hill from where I grew up. I was on holiday there last summer. It is an area of outstanding natural beauty, with fantastic communities, but not one where anyone would want to be stuck on an ungritted road with a steep slope. My hon. Friend is quite right to bring this important issue to the attention of the House. I was haunted by the image in his speech of the ambulance stuck in the snow, which is exactly what we all fear.

I thank my hon. Friend for his contribution, and my hon. Friends the Members for Hyndburn (Sara Britcliffe), for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and for North West Durham (Mr Holden), and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), for their important contributions. As several of them pointed out, the Department for Transport has overall responsibility for the approach to gritting. I am sure Ministers in that Department will be paying close attention to our debate.

In terms of current requirements on local government, my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton pointed out that the Highways Act 1980 includes the requirement "to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, that safe passage along a highway is not endangered by snow or ice."

It would be impossible for central Government to mandate exactly how often every single road in the country should be gritted, but Members of Parliament play an important role by highlighting where there are problems and where particular roads should be gritted more often.

I am sure the issues around Leadgate, Consett and Burnhope in north-west Durham, and around Mow Cop, which my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton mentioned, will now be firmly on the radar of those

local authorities, who, I hope, will take appropriate action. Normally, local authorities tend to focus on A roads and busier B roads, but there are always particularly important roads that do not fit under those headings.

Mr Holden: In areas such mine, with new-build properties going in, does the Minister think it could be appropriate for the council to stipulate as part of the planning consent that grit bins must be provided? I am thinking particularly of Meadow Rise in Consett, where my Delves Lane councillors Michelle Walton and Angela Stirling have had to provide a new grit bin from their own resources. If that had been part of the planning consent, they would not have had to do it. Does the Minister think that the Government could nudge councils in that direction?

Neil O'Brien: That seems an entirely appropriate point for my hon. Friend to raise, and his local council will want to take it into account in its plan-making process, as would any council, particularly in a hilly area. It is for local authorities to decide whether grit bins are provided and, as a result, most do. As hon. Members have pointed out, the responsibility is divided between parish, district, borough and county councils. Although county councils can provide grit bins, the functions are typically delegated to other councils, such as towns, districts and parishes.

There are different ways to address the problems that my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak has brought to the House this morning. One is through greater devolution of power, and he will know that Derby and Derbyshire is one of the first areas with which we are seeking to negotiate a county deal to provide significantly greater local control over transport spending and policy. Derbyshire has a huge opportunity as part of that. Of course, my hon. Friend's constituency looks as much to Greater Manchester as it does to Derbyshire and the east midlands, and we must be conscious of that in the negotiations, but clearly there are opportunities to improve local transport and local roads through that exciting devolution deal process.

Robert Largan: I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Minister. I just want to put on the record that I certainly welcome the levelling-up White Paper and some of the announcements in it, including the discussion of a county deal for Derbyshire. Also mentioned was the green light for enhanced bus services for Derbyshire, which is another big positive, and I know the Minister is playing a significant role in that. I want to put that on the record.

Neil O'Brien: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. There are two potential solutions in the White Paper to the problem that my hon. Friend raised. The first is the devolution deal process that we have just talked about. The second is the plan to improve power at the very local and neighbourhood level. It is obviously not for central Government to mandate whether Glossop or Buxton should have a town or parish council. Personally, I am a huge fan of parish councils and recognise the work that they do in my constituency and, indeed, across the country. It is ultimately a decision for local people, but it is none the less a decision that we might make easier for people to take.

Under the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007, local electors throughout England can petition their principal council—the district, in the case of my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak—for a community governance review to be undertaken. Principal councils have responsibility for undertaking community governance reviews and deciding whether to give effect to the recommendations made in them. In making that decision, principal councils are expected to take account of the views of local people. The final decision to create a new parish council rests with the local authority, although the decision can be subject to a judicial review if campaigners are not happy with it.

As my hon. Friend will have spotted, the levelling-up White Paper outlines how we will go further through our plans to remove barriers to community organisation and neighbourhood governance, supporting community leadership to take root and thrive. We will review the effectiveness of neighbourhood governance in England, including the role and functions of parish councils, with a view to making them much quicker and easier to establish. I hope that will be helpful to people in Glossop and Buxton. We will make it easier for local people and community groups to come together to set local priorities and shape the future of their neighbourhoods. That will include further exploration of the models of so-called pop-up parishes and community improvement districts that were recently recommended by the Kruger review, and further details of the plans to review neighbourhood governance will be set out in due course.

At the end of his speech, my hon. Friend raised an hugely important point about the role of developers in providing facilities for local residents. My hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham raised this point too, and the hon. Member for Strangford told us about an important and innovative way that communities are doing that for themselves in Northern Ireland. I could not agree more about the central role of providing essential neighbourhood infrastructure with all new developments. My hon. Friends will have noted the continuing turn towards a brownfield-led and urban regeneration-led model of development in the White Paper, which we have been pursuing particularly strongly under the current Secretary of State.

The Government are clear that local authorities are best placed ultimately to make decisions on local planning matters. The national planning policy framework requires local authorities to set clear policy requirements for infrastructure and affordable housing through plans. Those plans should be informed by appropriate and proportionate evidence, including on infrastructure needs and costs, which need to be taken into account. It is important that new housing always comes with the infrastructure needed to support it. In this House we all know that it is a bugbear for people when that does not happen, or when it has not happened appropriately.

Contributions from developers play an important role in delivering the infrastructure that new homes and local economies require. Local authorities can obtain contributions by charging a community infrastructure levy on new development, or through section 106 obligations. Those vehicles have some issues we might seek to improve on.

The levelling-up White Paper sets out the important role of the planning system in the Government's wider mission to level up the country and regenerate left-behind

places. Hon. Friends will have noted the ambition to produce a transformative King's Cross-style regeneration in 20 different places around the country using the formidable experience, expertise and sweeping powers of Homes England to get central Government back into the business of providing powerful support for urban regeneration, a business they should never have got out of in the first place.

Mr Holden: I very much welcome the Minister's commitment to levelling up. I know he has put a huge amount of work into it. I also welcome the discussions that he has already started to have with Durham County Council on a county deal for our area. We have started to see Government offices moving out of London and into the regions, and I know Durham is keen to engage in that space. Will the Minister comment on any discussions he has had, and will he engage further on that possibility?

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. If the Minister wishes to respond, will he make sure he references grit bins?

Neil O'Brien: Mr Hollobone, you rightly point out that it would be wrong of me to stray too far from our key subject of grit bins. None the less, I am extremely enthusiastic to pick up on my hon. Friend's point about the Places for Growth programme, with the Treasury move to Darlington, the Ministry of Justice move to Wrexham and my own Department's moving of a significant number of people to Wolverhampton. Those are hugely important investments in regeneration.

Returning to the core issue of grit bins and public safety, at the end of his speech my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak made an important point about how all new-build developments should come with that type of infrastructure. We are thinking about how we take forward the idea of an infrastructure levy, which would be an improvement on the section 106 and community infrastructure levy processes, to ensure that we have more developer contributions and much more flexibility about how the money is spent so that we can really pick up on all the different types of neighbourhood and community needs that hon. Members have raised this morning.

To conclude, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak and all hon. Members who have contributed this morning. The underlying theme of our discussion is that for too long a lot of the decisions that impact on local communities in our constituencies have been taken from far too far away, whether they are decisions about transport that are made in Whitehall and could be made in each of our shires, or decisions about grit bins that could be provided at the neighbourhood level through empowered local communities. If we change the rules, we can create more opportunity for people at the parish and neighbourhood level to do things for themselves.

On the subject of grit bins, I am sure my hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport will be interested in our debate today as he considers how winter maintenance might be improved further. I conclude simply by saying that although the issue of grit bins is a narrow one, and while various hon. Members have had the opportunity to highlight deficiencies in local provision, the issue strikes at a wider issue of power and decision making in this country. That is what our levelling-up agenda is all

[Neil O'Brien]

about: transferring control over important decisions from Whitehall to the local level through powerful devolution deals in places such as County Durham, Derby and Derbyshire, and also to the neighbourhood level through our changes to parish and neighbourhood legislation.

Question put and agreed to.

11.24 am

Sitting suspended.

Leamside Line

[MR PHILIP HOLLOBONE *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Before we begin, I would like to remind Members that Mr Speaker encourages us all to observe social distancing and to wear face-masks.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the potential merits of reopening the Leamside Line.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I thank all Members in attendance. I can say that there are colleagues here today just as passionate as I am on this subject, and I look forward to hearing their contributions. It is important to emphasise from the outset the unity on this issue in the north-east from those on all sides of the political spectrum, and from the business community, the transport sector, local authorities and the general public.

I would like to outline the vision for the Leamside line. It has three key purposes. The first is local: it would allow for an expansion of the Tyne and Wear Metro through the South of Tyne and Wearside loop, which would connect Washington's 70,000 residents to the system. The second is regional: it would open up passenger rail services for the whole Leamside corridor and its population of 124,000 people, from Ferryhill to Pelaw. It connects that population, and the 1 million people with indirect access to the line, to Tyneside, Wearside, Durham and Teesside. It would revolutionise transport across the region. The final is national: it would support east coast main line capacity for passenger and vital freight services, as well as national rail connectivity. Those three aspects form the overall strategic ambitions for the reopening of the line.

I am incredibly happy to have secured this very timely debate, following a huge event on Friday 4 February 2022, in which I visited three strategic points along the line to visualise where it will one day run, along with colleagues who are present today, local authority leaders, and representatives from Transport North East, led by Tobyn Hughes; the Northern Powerhouse Partnership; the North East local enterprise partnership; and the North East England chamber of commerce.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this really important debate. I was pleased to join my hon. Friend and the hon. Member for Sedgefield (Paul Howell) at Follingsby in Gateshead to show the unity on proceeding with this line, which makes excellent sense for all kinds of reasons.

Mrs Hodgson: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for joining us, although it was freezing. We were in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne), who was unable to join us but did have representatives present.

The next location we visited was in my patch, in Washington. It was in the shadow of Penshaw monument, near the magnificent Victoria viaduct, which stretches over what is, in my opinion, the most beautiful part of Wearside. The viaduct was built in 1838, and it shows

the scale of the engineering skill, the genius, the hard work and, through its beauty, the hedonism that characterised the region at that time, which was the powerhouse of global Great Britain. It is a shame to see such a feat of engineering go unused. It is incredible, however, to learn that with minimal reinforcements, the viaduct will be ready to take rail services, some 200 years after it was built.

The last time a train crossed that bridge was in 1992, when the line was mothballed after serving for around 30 years as a diversionary route for the east coast main line. It even took the Queen's train across the Wear. However, it had been in infrequent use since 1963, when the infamous Beeching cuts were made, and Washington station has not been used since.

Washington was a very different place at that time. It was populated mostly by families who were dependent for work on the many pits that dot the area, or the chemical works. In 1963, when the rail link was taken away, a Government White Paper proposed that Washington be developed as a mark II new town, in order to stimulate faster progress and raise the scale and quality of the region's urban development.

Washington was developed as a series of villages near-equidistant from Sunderland, Newcastle and Durham, and new industries, especially the automotive industry, thrived there. Hon. Members will be aware that Nissan is in my constituency. We should be careful not to romanticise or become overly nostalgic about how life was then, but there was a determined national policy and vision for the development of the town, and properly funded public services made the town prosperous. Graeme Bell, who worked on the town development corporation in the 1960s, wrote in 2019:

"Our brief for Washington New Town was to create 'a town in which people want to live'. So simple, so complex. We started with the consultant's masterplan which envisaged a place where the car was king. ... a grid of dual carriageways with grade-separated junctions was to criss-cross the countryside to enable the 50,000 planned population to travel between home, work and play. This was to be Los Angeles-on-the-Wear!"

A fore-runner of the design for Milton Keynes, the idea was that by taking the traffic out of the built-up areas, car-free spaces could be created where families and particularly children could safely walk to school, play and socialise. Within the grid were also to be factories and offices – jobs that were crucial to the success of Washington – and shops and parks, so residents wouldn't need to travel great distances to live a good life."

Those who live in Washington, or live and work around Washington, can see that vision of how it was intended to be. The latter part of the vision, however, was dismantled as industries such as the pits and the chemical works were decimated, and policies led to the loss of the good public services that fulfil the needs of modern life. The story of how we moved into that situation is one that we all know well.

Washington is now home to a number of areas identified as left-behind neighbourhoods, where social infrastructure is lacking. Residents have markedly worse socioeconomic outcomes than the residents of other equally deprived areas. The all-party parliamentary group for "left behind" neighbourhoods notes that "steady bus service decline" and low car ownership,

"combined with rail closures have led to these places being disconnected and cut off from essential services and amenities".

This Chamber recently heard about the major cuts to Tyne and Wear bus services in a debate led by my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist). Those cuts

now seem inevitable as covid-19 funding unwinds. With our local authorities being told to bear the brunt of keeping our public services afloat, I worry that residents dependent on those services risk being stranded. Meanwhile, 40% of households in left-behind neighbourhoods have no car; in England, the average is 26%.

Those circumstances make things even harder for residents of Washington, which, as I mentioned, was built at the dawn of the automotive age. The design of the town, combined with the current insufficient provision, means that the demands of modern society are not being met. Residents are being left behind; like populations in other towns across the country, they have to get out to get on. Great jobs, especially in the car industry, are on the doorstep, but they are highly competitive, and not all of them are accessible to those who live closest to them. Young people often find themselves having to move to neighbouring cities for good jobs, and that creates a de facto brain drain. For those who do not make it out, do not drive and cannot make the 40-minute bus journey into an education centre, opportunity is therefore stifled.

Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this really important debate. She expresses very eloquently the real problem for people in our area: if they do not have a car, their chances of getting the employment that they really want are cut massively. By not providing public transport and not agreeing to Labour's plans, this Government are strangling opportunity for people in the north-east.

Mrs Hodgson: I thank my hon. Friend for her comments; she is right.

Leamside is the solution to these transport and connectivity problems. I welcome the sentiment behind the Government's levelling-up White Paper, published last week; it aims to level up the left-behind, but the sentiment simply did not translate into tangible, real-world differences on the scale needed to level up the places that colleagues here and I represent. Connectivity matters. It is all about access. For the communities up and down this stretch of line, it is about access to education, jobs, business and leisure. It aids and expands access to economic benefits, health options, educational assets and cultural capital.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on bringing this important debate. I am the Member of Parliament for Newcastle Central—not only the place, but the mainline train station of the same name. Does she agree that the Leamside line would give people from across the region access to Newcastle institutions, such as Newcastle College and Newcastle University, and that it would also give those institutions access to the wider region? The interconnectivity of which she talks is so important economically, and in creating a critical mass of energy, innovation and skills that will allow our economy to thrive.

Mrs Hodgson: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct: the connectivity works both ways. This is not just about people being able to get out of Washington; it is about people across the region being able to come into Washington and see everything that Washington, Sunderland, South Tyneside, Durham, Gateshead and the whole region

[Mrs Hodgson]

have to offer. This connectivity will mean that people from further afield can come to those places and access the cultural capital that we have to offer, as well as leisure and employment opportunities.

Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing this important debate. Does she agree that the Leamside line is important as a core piece of transport, but needs to be part of a joined-up picture? There are fantastic job opportunities on the line, but there need to be buses to connect them, and there needs to be a holistic solution.

Mrs Hodgson: I agree. That is why this debate links so well with the debate on buses that we had here a few weeks ago. We need the extra connectivity. The scheme is all very well for people who live near the Leamside line, but lots of people do not. They will need the whole passenger transport network to connect and link up.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) said, the reopening of the line would benefit the whole region; that is indicated by the presence here of non-Leamside line MPs. The line would give young apprentices who cannot afford a car access to Nissan and the International Advanced Manufacturing Park; it would enable workers to get to the two massive Amazon sites along the line; and it would give access to Doxford International Business Park and Integra 61 in Durham. All these employment centres provide over 25,000 jobs, and are growing.

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): As the hon. Lady will know, my constituency has received massive investment—Treasury jobs, the Darlington Economic Campus and a whole host of other civil service jobs. Does she agree that reopening the Leamside line would open up those job opportunities to her constituents, who could travel to Darlington?

Mrs Hodgson: I agree. People should be able to reach the jobs easily, wherever they are—and not just those who can afford a car. Often the car comes after the job; people need to be able to get to the job first.

Leamside is not only a solution to a problem, but an opportunity for the whole north-east. Every journey on the Metro by a commuter, shopper or tourist adds an average of £8.50 to the economy. Think of the boost that Leamside would give to the South Tyneside and Wearside Metro loop, even without the wider Leamside line. There are three benefits to this line, and the Metro is just one. This is a win, win, win, as I constantly say. It would mean that people lived and spent money in these local communities. It would change the socioeconomic future of the whole north-east. As Henri Murison said, it is vital for the whole northern powerhouse.

Levelling up the left-behind takes money, but it is question of priorities. Where our high streets are struggling, it is because the local economy is struggling unaided. Where our communities are declining, it is because the services that bind them together are being allowed to fall into disrepair. Where chances for generations of young people are being slashed, it is because the barriers to opportunities are allowed to continue to exist. These

are political choices, but they can be addressed and reversed, just as the mothballing of the Leamside line can be reversed.

Before 1992, the line was used for freight purposes, which helped the east coast main line. The Minister will know that the Leamside line has the potential to extend capacity by some 50% on a vital, but highly congested, stretch of the east coast main line—the artery that links the north to Scotland.

Paul Howell: I thank the hon. Lady for giving way again. Does she agree that the Leamside line has the potential to provide resilience to the east coast main line? For a long stretch, there are just two tracks, and if anything goes wrong there, the connection between England and Scotland is effectively stopped.

Mrs Hodgson: I absolutely agree. As someone who has travelled up and down that line for almost 17 years, I know that when something goes wrong on that stretch and trains are stuck higher up the line, the trains cannot get to Newcastle. The whole thing then falls apart, as all of us who travel down that line know.

There is a comprehensive need for the Leamside line to be reopened—for national, regional and local purposes. Again, I stress the north-east unity—the Minister will hear that unity today—and the joint voice calling for the Leamside line to be reopened. When I took my seat in 2005, I quickly got to grips with this campaign, its importance, and the word “conurbation”. Washington is one of the largest conurbations in the UK without a rail or rapid transit link—I constantly mention that small fact.

I have presented five petitions to the House over 17 years, sent countless letters to the Department for Transport and the Minister’s predecessors, submitted evidence following a call for evidence on light rail, and recently co-sponsored three bids to the restoring your railway fund with the hon. Member for Sedgefield (Paul Howell), so it is fair to say that this means a lot to me. I am very proud of the cross-party nature of this campaign, both at local authority level and here in this House.

Where are we now? Leamside has featured as a significant element of previous local and current regional transport plans, including the 2021 north east transport plan and Transport for the North’s statutory advice. While the disappointing integrated rail plan in effect ruled out Government investment in the Leamside line for east coast main line purposes, the case remains strong.

I appreciate that the integrated rail plan indicated that the reinstatement of the Leamside line could be part of a devolution deal, but I believe it absolutely should be part of any forthcoming devolution deal. The hon. Member for Sedgefield and I discussed this with the Minister when we met earlier. However, until that deal is on the table, I do not want to see those promises used to kick the can down the road. I want Government co-operation in making the Leamside line a reality in the meantime. That means listening, working with others and, ultimately, financially helping with the steps needed to get there.

The North East Joint Transport Committee has taken on the Government’s feedback, and is developing the umbrella strategic business case in phases. It has secured

£100,000 in funding and is commissioning a strategic outline business case for the Metro loop element of the line.

We are taking matters into our own hands; the north-east is taking steps to achieve its ambitions, but it can only take itself so far, because our local authorities continue to be starved of cash. A project as significant and game-changing as the Leamside line will eventually need to be funded by central Government. Let us not beat about the bush: this is a very expensive piece of infrastructure, but it is needed and very much wanted.

I hope this debate shows the weight behind the will for the reinstatement of the Leamside line. I hope that, ultimately, the Government will listen to the north-east and match their rhetoric on levelling up with their commitment. The north-east is making inroads on reaching its ambitions. We hope that the Government will work with us to realise the potential of the Leamside corridor communities, secure a better future for the north-east, and future-proof national infrastructure by supporting the reopening of the Leamside line as soon as possible.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): The debate will continue until 4 o'clock. I am obliged to call the Front Benchers no later than 3.37 pm, and the guideline limits are 10 minutes for Her Majesty's Opposition, 10 minutes for the Minister, and then Sharon Hodgson will have three minutes at the end of the debate to sum up the proceedings. In the meantime, I hope to get everybody in. We have just over 45 minutes, so if Members could moderate their speeches, everybody will be able to contribute. We will have an excellent example to start us off with from Peter Gibson.

2.50 pm

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Mr Hollobone. The debate raises a hugely important issue for the connectivity of communities across the north-east, and I am pleased to see so much cross-party unity from the north-east. I congratulate the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) on securing the debate, and commend her on her efforts campaigning for the Leamside line.

I am proud to have been elected on a manifesto that promised to level up all regions of the UK, realising and releasing the full potential of places such as Darlington. Levelling up is already bringing huge benefits to the north-east, but levelling up must be for everyone, as the hon. Lady said. If we are to ensure that local people can access those new opportunities and that investment can continue to reach communities such as mine, we must ensure that we improve transport infrastructure across all modes of transport, but especially through improvements to rail. In Darlington alone, we are seeing progress with £105 million invested in Bank Top station, but we must not stop there. The reopening of the Leamside line has huge potential benefits to further boost connectivity across the whole region and bring even more investment to our area.

Next year will mark the 60th anniversary of what is, to some, one of the most infamous episodes in this country's railway history: the Beeching cuts. The north-east has not escaped the legacy of those cuts, which led to further decimation of our railway lines, and we are still

feeling the impact on our railways and the connectivity of our region. I am proud that this Conservative Government are seeking to reverse that wrong, and I want the Leamside line to play a role in restoring our railway links to their former glory.

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): I want to emphasise the importance of the points that my hon. Friend is making. The Darlington station changes are vital to another project, the Weardale line, which he and I support as well; they will also play into what we are looking at for the wider north-east, which is an expansion of capacity across the region, particularly with Leamside for freight capacity. Does my hon. Friend agree that this is about seeing the entire thing as one package, with Darlington playing a vital role in that?

Peter Gibson: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's intervention: he has raised some of the points that I was going to mention. The connectivity of our region is pivotal to Darlington, given our important connection to the railway, and he is absolutely right that the debate about how we move forward has to be a whole-region debate.

The 21-mile stretch of the Leamside line, from Gateshead through South Tyneside to Sunderland and County Durham, would open up potential to create new jobs and housing, as well as environmental benefits through taking hundreds of cars off some of the region's main commuter roles, easing congestion and improving air quality. The Leamside line will help deliver public transport that is fit for purpose, getting people to where employment opportunities are and opening up communities that are currently disconnected to new investment opportunities. The area of County Durham that would be served by the Leamside line has the lowest car ownership per person, meaning that there is public reliance on public transport. It is not right that those people should become further disadvantaged because of matters outside their control. The reopening of the Leamside line could play a part in levelling that playing field and open up opportunities to communities in the rest of the north-east.

In November, I warmly welcomed the Government's £96 billion integrated rail plan for the north, which will deliver better transport links and spread prosperity and opportunity decades sooner than planned. Reopening the Leamside line would undoubtedly complement that wider package of improvements to rail in the north and midlands. It would take our planned improvements to the east coast main line further by helping to speed up journey times, linking the north-east to the rest of the UK rail network and delivering much-needed east coast extra capacity.

While we have the Minister here, I want to say that we should not just restore the Leamside line. I would also warmly welcome the restoration of the Darlington to Weardale line. Reopening that line would have huge potential to improve local connections and boost business, employment, education and leisure opportunities for my constituents. I am pleased to see that receiving real consideration and look forward to the Government's feasibility study into the scheme.

I note that we are once again debating reopening a railway line that will better connect areas of the north-east to Darlington. Indeed, I might go as far as to say that it seems that all rails lead to Darlington. It would be

[Peter Gibson]

remiss of me not to point that out, as it is further evidence that Darlington is the true home of the railways and a clear choice for the home of Great British Railways.

2.56 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) on securing this important debate. I do not propose to go over all the reasons why it is so important to reopen the Leamside line—she has eloquently covered that—but we need a degree of realism and honesty about why we are in the current situation.

The reopening of the Leamside line has cross-party support, cross-business support and cross-community support. The North East Combined Authority, representing local authorities south of the Tyne, and the North of Tyne Combined Authority support it, along with Transport North East. I congratulate Transport North East on its 2021 to 2030 transport plan, which sets out a comprehensive and ambitious plan for the region's transport. It talks not just about rail, but about other modes of transport as well, which will not only lead to economic benefits for the north-east but improve the air quality in the environment in which we live. The only people who do not support the plan are the Government, who left it out of their integrated rail plan, announced towards the end of last year. In doing so they said that the project could be part of a city region deal that they hoped to negotiate sometime in the future. I suggest that that is part of the Government's wider agenda on devolution—it is jam tomorrow so long as regions agree to tinker around with their governance structures.

In the levelling-up White Paper, which I read over the weekend, there was a very good history lesson on the origins of the Venetian city state. One of its main themes was leadership, but I would argue that we have leadership in the north-east in the ambitious plan being put forward by Transport North East and the united support of the political leadership across parties and businesses. The only thing missing in support of that plan is the Government. Instead, we have the vague ideas that were talked about in the levelling-up White Paper last week of devolving powers without resources, or resources being devolved but having to be bid for from central Government. That is not proper devolution; it is a different control mechanism from Whitehall.

Instead, there is the inefficient and expensive Beeching reversal fund. From the two examples that have been awarded so far in County Durham, its only main benefits seem to be to provide expensive press releases for local Conservative Members of Parliament or to fund rail consultants. People's expectations are raised, and we know from some of the examples that they will never be met—it is not achievable.

Let me give the finest example of that, and I am glad that my neighbour, the Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden) is here to hear it. It is the proposal to extend the Tyne and Wear Metro system to Consett. The feasibility study has so far cost £50,000. The price tag for delivery given in that study is £640 million, and it will rip through either my constituency or that of my

hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist). That price tag is more than the entire £500 million that has been allocated to the Beeching reversal fund. If that were not bad enough, the Lib Dem-Tory council in County Durham is committed to push the project on to the next phase, spending more money and employing more consultants, knowing that it will never be achieved.

Mr Holden: Does the right hon. Member agree that it is great to see the support of the Labour-led Gateshead Council for the project between Consett and the Tyne, as well?

Mr Jones: They have clearly not read the report. If the hon. Gentleman tells me that any Government are going to provide him with £640 million of public money for a railway to Consett, he is deluding himself. That is not going to happen. The point is to be honest with people. I know that he came out with that flippantly when he did not think he would get elected as the Member for North West Durham, but he did and, therefore, he feels he has to follow through. It is not going to be achievable.

I object to the fact that the public are being deluded, and that more public money has frankly been wasted on highly paid consultants. The hon. Member for North West Durham referred earlier to the Weardale line, which is another example of similar amounts of money being suggested. That line will not be achievable, because the amount of money being argued for will not be forthcoming. Why not just be honest with people?

The strategy is clear: throw around all these projects to give the impression that something is happening when it is not. We have a real example with the Leamside line where, if the Government concentrated on putting in the money, it would create benefits. The hon. Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson) is right that it would improve his constituency and those on the east coast main line, due to capacity. However, I wish he would not argue about the new timetable for the north-east coast line, which would mean that an hourly service would be introduced from Chester-le-Street. The hon. Member and the Tees Valley Mayor complained that that would reduce the number of trains to Darlington. I am sorry; we need an hourly service and that needs to be addressed. It would be addressed if we got the project.

Peter Gibson: My job as the Member of Parliament for Darlington is to stand up for the services that reach my constituency, just as I am sure the right hon. Gentleman would fight if the services in his constituency were reduced. I have no hesitation in continuing that fight for the services in my constituency.

Mr Jones: I have no criticism of that, but the hon. Gentleman speaks up and gets the entire thing shelved for six months. That means that my constituents do not get the hourly service from Chester-le-Street that they were promised. That shows how logic has gone out of the window in arguing for the overall benefits on the east coast mainline, not just for one particular town that happens to have a Conservative Member of Parliament.

Peter Gibson: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way again?

Mr Jones: Yes.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. This is a debate about the Leamside line. Four other Members seek to contribute to the debate. I am sure Mr Jones is almost finished and will conclude his remarks with reference to the line we are debating today.

Mr Jones: I will, but these issues are important, Mr Hollobone. Since 2010, the north-east has had the second smallest increase in transport funding, at £17 per head. The Institute for Public Policy Research report of 2019 showed that transport spending in London was seven times higher than that in the north-east of England. We need a degree of honesty from the Government. Why do they not trust the elected representatives of the north-east to set priorities, and why not be clear why they are not reopening the Leamside line? That is a clear political decision.

If we are to believe the rhetoric on devolution, it should be about listening to the united voice of the political and community leadership in the north-east and agreeing the funding for the Leamside line. The Government can come up with as much smoke and mirrors as they like to argue why they are not funding it. The ultimate reason lies in the Government's political will to do it.

3.4 pm

Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con): It is an obvious pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Hollobone. I repeat my congratulations to the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) on securing the debate. Members tend to focus on their own areas, as we have seen in the last stretch of the debate. My speech will therefore start at the bottom of the Leamside line, which goes from the Newcastle area to Ferryhill in my patch, its most southerly aspect.

Opening the Leamside line in full is an important part of demonstrating to the population that the Government are serious about levelling up, especially in the north-east. Since right hon. and hon. Members from across the parties will cover their various constituencies, I will focus on mine. Reopening the Leamside line is an integral part of delivering on the levelling-up agenda. It has been a key long-term aspiration for the north-east and boasts cross-party support from MPs, councillors, businesses and partnerships. As mentioned earlier, it just needs the last piece of the puzzle: backing from Government.

On the surface, levelling up is about providing investment in infrastructure to areas that have been chronically underfunded, which I will cover shortly. However, as discussed in the all-party parliamentary group for "left behind" neighbourhoods—I am co-chair, and the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West is an officer, as are other Members—it is about creating pride and trust in our local heritage and the places where we live. The north-east in particular can boast of its historical importance to the industrial revolution as the home of the steam train and a huge provider of the coal this country ran on. The Leamside line is of such historical importance to the local area that reinstating it would not only provide transport and opportunities but would bring back to life such an important part of local history and pride. Passengers would be able to travel on a line that was once the true artery of the area and carried the very coal and minerals that made the area so successful in the 19th and 20th centuries.

The first section of the line opened as early as August 1838 between Washington and Rainton Meadows. By the 1840s, it was providing passenger services to Darlington and Gateshead. It was then included in the original east coast main line from London King's Cross to Edinburgh and carried both passenger and freight services. The line's main source of revenue, as with most of the early railways, was mineral traffic, principally from the Durham coalfield. The line was linked to many private colliery branch lines and wagon ways.

When the present east coast main line began to take a quicker route through Team Valley and Low Fell, the Leamside line—or the old main line—continued to be used for passengers and freight. It served open mines nearby, and the area swelled with smaller lines and sidings to accommodate the amount of mineral being moved. By the 1920s, Ferryhill station, in particular, was said to be one of the busiest goods yards in Europe. During the second world war, its tucked-away location hid it from the Luftwaffe and made it a safe space for storing the coal so desperately needed by wartime Britain. It was used as a diversionary route when the new main line was blocked—we still have that opportunity now—to ensure that the important direct line from Scotland to London was always clear.

Unfortunately, from the 1940s, parts of the Leamside line began to close. First, passenger services at Ferryhill and Leamside were withdrawn, and then stations began to close in earnest. While Ferryhill continued to carry coal and other freight into the 1980s, its usage had greatly declined by that time due to the gradual demise of the Durham coalfields. The Leamside line was mothballed entirely in the early 1990s and reduced to a single line. However, even though it was closed, hope was always present that the Leamside line would reopen. The land is safeguarded from development, with no sales of land attached to the line.

Proposals to reopen the line were put forward in the early 1990s. It is an important cultural landmark for the area, recognised by local communities, local leaders and partnerships alike. Its reinstatement would bring pride of place, an appreciation for the north-east's heritage and a feeling of being heard in the north-east for those who currently feel cut off from investment and Government attention.

The second reason why the Leamside line needs to be reinstated is the most easily quantifiable: local growth, increased employment and increased private investment. This is the version of levelling up more commonly discussed, and it is sorely needed in the communities along the Leamside line. The former coalfields in the south-east of County Durham are characterised by above-average levels of deprivation, with as much as one third of the population living in areas in the 20% most deprived nationally. Ferryhill lies within the top 10% to 20% of the most deprived areas, according to the 2019 index of multiple deprivation, and the north-east has a lower life expectancy than any other region in England, with Ferryhill lower than that average still.

The North East local enterprise partnership strategic economic plan identified that the local economy has the potential to grow significantly further and into different sectors over the coming years. However, that growth will not happen on its own. It will rely on better local transport connectivity provided by an improved and expanded network, enhancing access to labour markets,

[Paul Howell]

education and skills. Unless this is tackled head-on, the region risks falling further behind other areas of the country as local economic inequalities continue to grow, and the regional productivity gulf could widen as the benefits of investment elsewhere, such as in HS2, take effect.

Currently, the growth of the local area is heavily constrained by the east coast main line. It is the sole rail artery linking the north-east with the rest of the country, yet between Northallerton and Newcastle there is only one track per direction, so it is very much a bottleneck for traffic and growth in the area. The route is already at capacity. No extra passenger or freight services can pass through the area unless the infrastructure is upgraded, and alternative relief routes become necessary.

If we focus on the Ferryhill area of the line served by the Leamside, in my constituency the current situation is pretty dire. Nearly 35% of the population have no cars or vans, and they rely on infrequent and slow buses. These people find leaving the local area and expanding their opportunities very difficult. Individuals cannot access jobs, children cannot access schools, and businesses cannot access labour and resources. The lack of suitable rail transport is suppressing the opportunities of the people along the Leamside line's mothballed track. That could change with Government approval for the line.

By diverting freight from the east coast main line and utilising the full extent of the Leamside and Stillington routes, capacity could be lifted by up to 50%. That would mean more resources moving into the area from the rest of the country and more passenger services so that people can travel. The line would also open up travel within the locality. People could see their friends, take their children to sports clubs further afield or do a bit of city centre shopping. Those things are taken for granted in other parts of the country.

Luckily, our separate but related bid for Ferryhill station to be rebuilt got initial bid approval, and we are awaiting on the outcome of stage 2, the strategic business plan; we are particularly optimistic about the outcome. I hope the Minister will indicate when the separate bid might be cleared. Does she agree that, although it would be discrete, a successful Ferryhill reopening would be a natural fire-starter signal for the reopening of the Leamside line?

Ferryhill's reopening enjoyed great enthusiasm from the Minister's predecessor, and I hope she will come to share that enthusiasm. Ferryhill's reopening should be made the most of. Ferryhill is an intrinsic link between Teesside and Leamside in the north. It would be brilliant for both ends if the shovel in the ground at Ferryhill signalled something larger and really transformative.

In summary, will the Minister advise us when approval will be given to proceed with the Ferryhill case, which would link the base of the Leamside to Teesside? Can she provide us with clear direction as to what specific actions are required to progress the IRP's recommendation that the Leamside would be

"best considered as part of a future city region settlement"?

Whether it is for passengers or freight, capacity or resilience, hope or opportunities, or even just the need to provide low-carbon transport options, there is a clear and obvious economic and cultural need for Ferryhill

station to be the fulcrum between Teesside on the Stillington line and Tyneside and Wearside through the Leamside line. We need the Government to recognise that as a critical part of levelling up. Let us build back our north-east transport infrastructure to make its future as impressive as its past.

3.13 pm

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) for securing this debate. She is a tireless campaigner for the Leamside line, and the entire region is grateful for her work.

In Durham we hear a lot from the Government about levelling up. The term has been used so interchangeably by members of the Cabinet in reference to every scrap of funding or half-baked policy that is thrown our way in the north-east that it has pretty much lost all meaning. In Durham, it is spoken about with increasing irony and frustration, with the words "So much for levelling up" becoming more and more common every time the Government over-promise and under-deliver.

Levelling up should be about more than delivering one-off funding or a few insecure jobs. It should be about transforming the infrastructure of our left-behind regions and improving our schools, homes, roads, railways, economies and so much more, so that the communities we live in—those we are proud to call home—can deliver to a person in the north-east the same quality of living and the same life chances as someone in a more affluent region has. Investment in our transport systems, including our railways, is integral to that.

Transport infrastructure has been underfunded in the north. That is not my opinion; it is fact. In 2019-20, transport spending was more than £560 higher per head in London than in the north-east, while transport investment was almost £380 higher per head in London. The levelling-up agenda was meant to right those wrongs and make up for the years of deprivation and underfunding. That is why I and many of my colleagues in the region are frustrated beyond belief at the Government's continued refusal to invest in the north-east's transport infrastructure by reopening the Leamside line.

There are few issues that I and my neighbour, the hon. Member for Sedgefield (Paul Howell) agree on, but on the reopening of the Leamside line we are in complete agreement about its benefits for County Durham and the wider region. In fact, the campaign is supported by virtually every politician in the north-east, regardless of their political party, as well as by our region's major employers and business groups. That is because the economic and social benefits of reopening the line are clear.

Reopening the line would create more capacity for rail freight, taking polluting lorries off the road. In turn, that could allow more longer-distance passenger services to operate from Durham station on the east coast main line. It would drastically improve connectivity across the region, with the potential to bring rail services to Bowburn, Belmont park and ride and West Rainton in my constituency, creating new public transport links with major employment centres such as Nissan and transforming the economic opportunities for people in County Durham. Reopening the line could also be an

integral step in attracting thousands of jobs to County Durham. I have heard at first hand from stakeholders in Bowburn of the benefits of the Leamside line for the Integra 61 site and the surrounding villages, and I am happy to raise their support today.

Although the Government agree that the plans have “good potential in terms of transport and socioeconomic benefits”, they believe that “the overall cost of the reinstatement remains prohibitive”.

Even though the entire project would cost just £600 million and bring new levels of connectivity to the north-east, it is deemed to be too expensive by those in Government. Do Ministers understand how insulting that is to our region when HS2 is projected to cost at least £80 billion? In the north-east, we are all too often treated as second-class citizens and as less deserving of investment.

Peter Gibson: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mary Kelly Foy: Of course.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. If the hon. Lady is generously giving way, she needs to resume her seat. I say to the hon. Gentleman that I am keen to have a debate across the Chamber, of course, but there are still two hon. Members who have yet to contribute, and he has already done so. Hon. Members need to be mindful of that.

Peter Gibson: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way. Can she outline to the House why the last Labour Government did not deem it necessary to reopen the Leamside line?

Mary Kelly Foy: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. *[Interruption.]* Yes, there were probably a number of reasons, to do with the preceding Government and some of the rules that were in place. All I can say is that my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West has been fighting for years and years.

Mr Kevan Jones: We were unpeeling the mess of rail privatisation and the underinvestment in the system, which led to things such as Potters Bar. We did get major investments, including the improved electrification of the north-east main line.

Mary Kelly Foy: I thank my right hon. Friend for that. In the north-east, we are too often treated as second-class citizens and as less deserving of investment. Yes, the plans would cost money, but the best things do. I believe that Durham deserves the best and our county is worth investing in. I only wish the Government thought the same. Sadly, Ministers seem to find it easier to let the north-east down than to level it up.

3.19 pm

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) for bringing this debate to the House today.

Like other Members, I was very proud to be elected on a manifesto of levelling up. The right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) was right to say that my

election in 2019 was a slight surprise, but if he had spent more time on the ground rather than grandstanding down here in Westminster, he probably would not have been as surprised. He would have understood the issues affecting local people in my constituency, and he would not have seen such a massive decrease in his share of the vote at the last election.

I am very supportive of the Leamside line, which is vital to the levelling-up agenda for the north of England. Alongside education and employment opportunities, transport and transport infrastructure are really important parts of the agenda. I am here to support the Leamside line because it is vital for the whole north-east, particularly because it would help to improve capacity on the east coast main line. It may also play into one of the schemes in my constituency, the Weardale line, which was supported by my hon. Friends the Members for Sedgefield (Paul Howell), for Bishop Auckland (Dehenna Davison) and for Darlington (Peter Gibson). We are looking into extracting minerals from Weardale—lithium exploration is currently under way—and the Leamside line could enable direct rail transit and avoid the need for freight to trundle through the constituency of the right hon. Member for North Durham via road. Instead, it could go via rail, bypassing all the issues. There is a broader strategic aspect to the line, particularly with the gigafactories opening around Nissan, which I was happy to visit not long ago with the Prime Minister.

The Leamside line is important for access to the local area as well, as hon. Members have said. It is about capacity, but it is also about enabling people in our communities to move readily between them and to access employment and education opportunities that are not there at the moment. As the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) and others have said, enabling greater freight service use would also help with the reliability and greater frequency of services—perhaps even the services to Chester-le-Street that the right hon. Member for North Durham mentioned.

The Leamside line has to be part of a wider transport plan. That plan cannot just be about rail; it has to be about road as well. That is why I am delighted to support the A68 changes that have been proposed in a levelling-up fund bid by my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland. I hope that, down the line, we will also be able to support the A693 upgrades for the right hon. Member for North Durham.

I will address a couple of broader issues that were raised about levelling up the country. It is vital that we look at all sorts of schemes. If some hon. Members had spent the two decades since they were elected actually campaigning for reconnections to places such as Stanley, Annfield Plain and Consett, we might be a lot further advanced in these plans than we are today.

Mr Kevan Jones: The hon. Member knows as well as I do that the main answer for a lot of communities in his constituency and mine is the bus network. The fact is that because of the Conservative Government, who have been in power since 2010, Durham County Council has lost £224 million in central Government allocation, and that has led to bus services and subsidies being withdrawn. I am sorry, but I will not take any lectures off him about transport in Durham.

Mr Holden: If the right hon. Gentleman listened to one of his own local councillors, who represents Chester-le-Street and with whom I campaigned to get the feasibility study going—the former Labour leader of Durham County Council—and if he listened and worked with people like me, rather than listening to people who want to live in the past as he does, he would be on side now.

Mr Jones: £640 million.

Mr Holden: The right hon. Gentleman shouts from a sedentary position, which he should not do. He could stand up and try to make another intervention if he wished. It is true that these schemes would be expensive, but if he had been campaigning for them for a longer period of time, rather than carping from the sidelines, as he is doing—

Mr Jones: Will the hon. Member give way?

Mr Holden: No, I will not give way again; the right hon. Gentleman has had plenty of time to have his own say during the debate. If he had campaigned for these measures for a longer period of time, perhaps we would be further advanced. Of course it is about buses. I am fully supportive—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. I have not heard the words “Leamside line” mentioned for about five minutes. Can we get back on to the subject of the debate? There is still one other Member seeking to contribute.

Mr Holden: Thank you very much, Mr Hollobone.

Let us come back to the matter in hand. I have one proposal under way, working with Labour-controlled Gateshead Council and the coalition at Durham County Council. The transport lead for the north-east is the leader of Gateshead Council; the right hon. Member for North Durham praised him earlier but later said that he had not read the report. The key thing about the Leamside line is that it will provide extra capacity through my constituency for some of those routes. It is vital because it will help broader connections across the entire county.

Hon. Members have talked about the disparity between transport spending in London and in the north. That has been the same under multiple Governments, over a long period of time. I want to see that addressed, but we cannot do that by saying, “We’ll choose this over that.” As a broad region, we need to push, on a cross-party basis, for better connectivity for our communities.

I am happy to support people from other political parties on schemes such as the Leamside line and the bus scheme across the north-east, which will feed into the Leamside line. I hope that hon. Members from other political parties will think about how we can work together on all these schemes, rather than trying to put down people who fight for something important for their communities.

3.25 pm

Kate Osborne (Jarrow) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) on securing this debate and on her brilliant opening contribution.

It is sadly no surprise to me or to other Labour Members that this Conservative Government have failed to support rail infrastructure in the north-east. We have been starved of this much-needed investment for many years. The Government have talked a lot about levelling up, but, when it comes to South Tyneside and Gateshead, along with the wider north-east region, where is the real investment that is so desperately needed? The Government now have an opportunity to show real ambition in that regard.

For the past 30 years, the Leamside line from Gateshead, through South Tyneside and Sunderland, and on to Ferryhill in County Durham, has been closed. The line runs through numerous areas where new jobs and opportunities could be stimulated to assist in getting people into work, education and training, and in travelling around our region, as well as into and out of it. That could take hundreds of cars each day off some of the region’s main commuter roads, improving air quality and decarbonising transport. I hope the Government will listen to the contributions in today’s debate, and to the very valid and real arguments that all hon. Members have made for the reopening of the Leamside line.

Not just the Leamside line, but our railways as a whole—our whole transport infrastructure—need large-scale investment. As things stand, those of us in the north will yet again continue to be far worse off than those in the south. The figures speak for themselves, as my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) and the hon. Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden) have highlighted. Transport spending per head in London is well over double what it is in the north of England, with £877 spent per head in London in 2019-20, compared with around £300 per head in the north-east. There is a clear demand for good public transport in the region, as we have the lowest rate of car ownership in the country outside London.

The north-east has been neglected for far too long. The Government tell us they are fully committed to our region, but 12 years on we have seen a whole host of empty promises and little to no action. The restoration of the Leamside line between County Durham and Pelaw in my constituency would facilitate a park-and-ride service to Follingsby Business Park, which currently offers employment to over 2,000 people, and allow local train services to return to places such as Washington for the first time in many years.

The reopening of the Leamside line would also relieve pressure on the east coast main line, which is already at capacity, pave the way for a major extension of the Tyne and Wear Metro and increase rail freight capacity. It is now time that the Government seized the opportunity to invest in the region’s railways. We need to see action and a clear demonstration that the Government are prepared to listen to our communities, businesses and cross-party politicians, and properly invest in our transport network.

The reopening of the Leamside line would open up parts of the north-east to direct rail connectivity and transform the region’s socioeconomic future. The case for reopening the line is strong. I hope the Minister and the Government will listen today and, most importantly, take action to reopen this much-needed transport option, because, to quote my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West, “connectivity matters.”

3.30 pm

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve again under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I know that for many hon. Members who have spoken today, the reopening of the Leamside line has been a long and hard-fought campaign, so I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) for bringing this issue forward for debate, which, as she mentioned, is very timely. I also congratulate her on her powerful and eloquent speech.

Last week Transport North East, alongside many hon. Members, hosted a stakeholder event to continue the push for the line's reopening, continuing to make the case for that integral 21-mile line to run from Gateshead, through South Tyneside, Sunderland and County Durham, which has remained closed since 1992. Looking around today and hearing the strength of cross-party support for the line is heartening. I commend the tireless campaigning of Members from across the political spectrum. I know that many hon. Members could not attend today's debate owing to events in the main Chamber, but the petitions, debates, parliamentary questions, local campaigning and cross-party working are exactly what our Parliament should be—working together to deliver transformational projects for our constituents.

Indeed, this project has seen widespread support not only across the areas that would have a Leamside line station, but across the north-east. Local authorities, businesses, Jamie Driscoll, Mayor of the North of Tyne, the local enterprise partnership and the North East England chamber of commerce all seem to appreciate the benefits of increasing capacity on the east coast main line by reopening Leamside.

There is increasing public support. All this is hardly surprising when we consider, as other Members have highlighted today, that every local journey taken contributes £8.50 to the north-east economy. Yet, as we have heard from multiple colleagues today, rail connectivity is about so much more than that. It is about connecting a talented student to their chosen college; reducing the emissions of a visit to friends and family; widening job opportunities for local people; and making local travel more affordable, accessible and appealing. It would help to improve Union connectivity between England and Scotland and reduce congestion and pollution on the roads.

Already the foundations have been laid. There are businesses and manufacturing parks on the line's route already, such as Nissan's factory, as my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West highlighted, and new housing and regeneration projects. The project has been heavily included in the north east transport plan adopted last year and would deliver a station for Washington, which, as my hon. Friend knows all too well, is the fourth-largest town in England without a station. That needs to be corrected at the earliest opportunity and is desperately needed. If we want to grow the economies of the north-east, we must build the necessary infrastructure capacity to sustain that.

Prior to the pandemic, Network Rail noted that demand on the east coast main line would also increase significantly by 2040. As north-east authorities have continued to protect the Leamside alignment from development and

it is under the ownership of Network Rail, everything is set, yet time on this project lamentably rolls on, as was highlighted by my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones). Given the huge support from all quarters, why are the Government dragging their feet? We need honesty from the Government. Given the strength of support and planning, I join hon. Members here today in their disappointment in the lack of progress.

Despite the best efforts of hon. Members and local leaders, and given the tenacious and dogged campaigning emanating from the region, I know that many expected to see the Leamside line feature in the recent integrated rail plan, yet it never came. The Minister is well versed—as are her predecessors—on my views on this shambolic document, known by many of us as the “disintegrated rail plan”. It fails the people in the north-east in particular, with the double blow of scrapping the High Speed 2 eastern leg and Northern Powerhouse Rail. As highlighted by Transport North East, it is based on short-term cost savings rather than its long-term benefits. Rather than levelling up, it is an insult to local leaders and residents, when their preferences were made abundantly clear.

For both HS2 phase 2b and an NPR network to be delivered in full, we need investment in the east coast main line corridor between Northallerton and Newcastle, including reopening the Leamside line to free up capacity, divert freight and build resilience. Even the final plans for NPR presented to the Government included the restoration of the line to achieve full and complete connectivity across the north. However, yet again their expert advice and local voices were ignored. The completion of those schemes in full would have sparked a rail revolution, but once again it is northern communities paying the price for broken Tory promises on rail. I hope that today the Minister has better news for the good people of the north-east.

More frustratingly, I know that the Government themselves recognise the benefits of the line and the need for the project to move forward. In fact, in the unsuccessful restoring your railway bid, the Transport Minister noted that it shows,

“good potential in terms of transport and socio-economic benefits”.

However, the Government have now indicated that,

“the case for re-opening the Leamside route would be best developed as part of any future city region settlement.”

Sadly, that once again kicks the can further down the road, and also seems to be somehow dependent on the North of Tyne and North East combined authorities forming one mayoral combined authority. I hope that the Minister can provide some clarity on that point.

There are already plans for Transport North East to produce studies to further prove the benefits, with the chair of the North East Joint Transport Committee and leader of Gateshead Council, Martin Gannon, outlining that Leamside is one of our top priorities, with the potential to be game-changing. That would be true levelling up: investing in local transport, supported cross-party and purely driven by the benefit that the region would inevitably see.

For too long the north-east has been chronically overlooked, as was highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) when she pointed out that the north-east has so many left-behind communities suffering from a lack of investment, including transport spending. Investing in local transport is incredibly

[Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi]

important. I hope that the Minister realises that here, today, she can offer more than just warm words in support of the project; we can take actual steps to ensure that it can very soon be achieved, alongside the local authorities.

I also want to highlight some of the excellent speeches from across the Chamber. The hon. Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson) spoke about the importance of regional connectivity linking people with jobs in different towns and cities. The hon. Member for Sedgefield (Paul Howell) talked of levelling up, given the prevalence of areas of social deprivation. The hon. Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden) talked about the need to improve broader connections and connectivity across his county. My hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne) made an excellent speech about how the Government have failed to deliver rail infrastructure investment in the north-east.

There have been lots of empty and false promises, but now is indeed the time to show ambition. The Labour party will stand up for our communities and demand that the Government deliver the northern rail investment that has been so often promised. Continuing to short-change the north for short-term savings is not going to cut it any more. I hope that the Minister will address the concerns that have been voiced today by Members from across the Chamber, so that we can move forward with what is clearly a well-supported and much-needed rail line.

3.40 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Wendy Morton): It is a pleasure to be able to respond to the points that have been raised during today's debate, Mr Hollobone. First, though, I thank the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) for securing today's debate.

Improving transport connectivity in the north-east is an important topic. It is vital for the Tyne and Wear region, as we have heard, for the north of England and for the United Kingdom. I thank the hon. Lady for providing a coherent, well-reasoned argument for reopening the Leamside line between Pelaw junction and Tursdale junction, and for highlighting the potential local, regional and national benefits involved. I also thank hon. Members from around the Chamber for their invaluable contributions today, and for sharing with me a little bit more about the rich rail history of the north-east, including in their constituencies. I am reminded of my great-grandfather, who many years ago worked on the railways in County Durham—I have yet to find out exactly where, but I will find out.

I will start by reassuring the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West and all Members present that the Government are wholeheartedly committed to delivering on their vision of levelling up the British economy and building back better. Improved transport connectivity within and between our great cities is fundamental to that vision, unlocking the economic potential of the northern powerhouse, building back better from this awful pandemic, and ensuring that the Tyne and Wear region and the north of England play a key role within a resurgent UK economy. That is why my Department, led by my right hon. Friend the Secretary

of State—who is also the Cabinet Minister responsible for the northern powerhouse—is at the forefront of making that vision a reality.

Since 2010, over £29 billion has been invested in transport infrastructure in the north, but we want to go further and faster. In November 2021, we published the £96 billion integrated rail plan for the north and the midlands, our biggest ever single Government investment in Britain's rail network. The IRP is a strategy focused on bringing communities in the north and the midlands closer together, boosting inter-city connections and improving east-west links—the journeys that people are often most likely to make. The plan delivers a modern network for the whole of the country, benefiting small towns alongside our big cities far sooner than previously planned, with many improvements in this decade.

That means we are providing more seats between London and the north-east than in previous proposals, with opportunities for further increases. Previous proposals would have reduced connectivity between destinations south of York and the north-east. HS2 trains to Newcastle and York could only have been accommodated at the expense of existing services, potentially reducing or removing connections between the north-east and Doncaster, Newark and Peterborough. Now, with extra train paths from the north-east to London via the east coast main line compared with previous proposals, and with a Cross Country-type service to Newcastle likely to continue running via Doncaster, there is scope to retain improved connectivity where appropriate. Investment in the east coast main line will ease the bottlenecks that we have heard about today and provide improved segregation between passenger and freight. Journey times from London to Darlington would also be cut by 15 minutes compared with today, bringing journey times closer to the original HS2 plans, but delivered much earlier.

Importantly, the IRP included a specific reference to the Leamside line, which we are discussing today, acknowledging that the Government have carefully considered proposals to reopen that line, most recently in the form of bids for development funding through the restoring your railway ideas fund. On the basis of available evidence and value-for-money analysis, the Government consider that the case for reopening the Leamside line would be best considered as part of any future city region settlement. The north-east will be eligible to work with Government to agree a funding settlement with the city region sustainable transport settlement programme once appropriate governance arrangements are in place.

Mr Kevan Jones: Why are the Government wedded to linking this vital investment to rejigging their arrangements for the region? The Minister has heard today that it is supported across all political parties, both here and in the region. Why are the Government wedded to that, when there is really no need to do it? They should just give Transport North East the money it needs.

Wendy Morton: If the right hon. Gentleman will let me continue with the CRSTS point, I will come to a further point about the absence of a new devolution deal, which will perhaps help address his question.

The city region sustainable transport settlements represent a significant investment of £5.7 billion in local transport networks, predominantly in the north of England. The settlements that will be agreed by central Government

are based on plans being put forward by Mayors and local leaders, and they will help to drive forward the economies of city regions, support levelling up and decarbonise transport. In the absence of a new devolution deal, or until a new deal is reached, the seven constituent local authorities in the North East Joint Transport Committee will continue to receive transport funding as currently, including highways maintenance funding, funding from the integrated transport block, and funding received in the final year of the transforming cities fund in 2022-23.

In the meantime, and in response to the IRP recommendations, I understand that Transport North East remains in regular contact with my officials on its plans to undertake a number of further Leamside line studies, including one to develop a new business case for the South Tyneside and Wearside Metro loop, with a view to building towards an updated business case for a reopening that maximises the benefits to passenger and freight services across the whole region. I would strongly encourage such engagement to continue, and I hope that local stakeholders will work together to establish a pragmatic and phased strategy for taking forward this important local scheme.

Mr Jones: I am sorry, but the Minister has not answered the question. She is talking about co-operation and working together, but the region is doing that already. She is basically saying that unless we agree to some type of devolution mechanism for the governance of the region, we will not get the money. Why link the two together? There is no need. There is unanimity and leadership among all councils and partners in the region now, so let's just get on with it.

Wendy Morton: I think I was very clear in my response to the right hon. Gentleman, when I set out the situation with regards to the CRSTS, which was set out in the IRP, and then explained how the funding currently flows through that joint committee with the seven constituent local authorities.

I will now turn back to the Leamside line in a bit more detail, and to the restoring your railway programme. I know that the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West and several other local MPs present were disappointed to hear recently that the proposal to reopen the Leamside line did not receive funding through the latest round of the Department's restoring your railway ideas fund, and I absolutely sense the enthusiasm and passion for the project in Westminster Hall today. As part of the levelling-up agenda, the Government pledged £500 million for the restoring your railway programme in January 2020 in order to deliver our manifesto commitment and to start reopening lines and stations. That investment will reconnect smaller communities, regenerate local economies and improve access to jobs, homes and education.

Although our restoring your railway expert panel noted that the Leamside line proposal had demonstrated potential, it is important to note that the ideas fund has had a very high level of interest. Some 141 unique bids were received across the three rounds. Of those, 38 were successful and are being supported to develop a strategic outline business case, including three schemes in the north-east. I note the remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for Sedgefield (Paul Howell) on the importance

of improving connectivity for residents of Ferryhill, and I can confirm that the proposal for a new station at Ferryhill, which is near the Leamside line, was awarded development funding in November 2020 as part of round 2 of the ideas fund, and that Durham County Council recently submitted its strategic outline business case. The Department will confirm next steps for the scheme in the coming months.

My hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson) asked about the Weardale to Darlington line. The reopening of that line was also a successful idea in round 2 of the restoring your railway fund. A business case on that is currently being developed and is due in December.

Although the IRP has grabbed the headlines, we continue to work with partners on a number of rail schemes that will benefit those living and working in the north-east. In January 2021, for example, we announced £34 million to progress plans to reopen the Northumberland line to passenger services between Newcastle upon Tyne and Ashington by the end of 2023. As part of our new stations fund, Horden, just outside Durham, received £4.2 million towards the delivery of its new station. On 29 June 2020, the station opened to the public and has reconnected the towns of Horden and Peterlee, which previously had no access to the rail network.

We are also investing £1.2 billion in a programme of infrastructure enhancements for the east coast main line. Those upgrades are vital to improve the service on the railway for the tens of thousands of passengers, including hon. Members, who travel along that route. Alongside the brand-new Azuma trains, those upgrades will help to deliver journey time, reliability and capacity improvements.

Elsewhere, Network Rail has recently started on-site works on the £18 million phase 1 redevelopment of Sunderland station, including a new southern entrance and an enhanced southern concourse. The transforming cities fund is providing £95 million towards the delivery of the Metro flow project to extend the Tyne and Wear Metro, with Nexus taking ownership of an existing freight line. That will improve frequency, capacity, resilience and connectivity, and will generate an additional 1.7 million passenger journeys.

We recognise the importance of the Metro to the local population of Tyne and Wear, which is why we have recently provided Nexus with a £336 million fleet replacement grant for the purchase of new rolling stock, and an additional £30 million for the construction of new depot facilities. The Metro has also benefited from the Government's covid-19 financial support packages, too.

Finally, I want to underscore the importance of the integrated rail plan, which was published in November 2021. It brings a whopping £96 billion of investment for the north and the midlands—the biggest ever single Government investment in Britain's rail network. It is important that we do not lose sight of ongoing investments.

I am genuinely grateful to colleagues for this very insightful debate, and for sharing with me the perspectives from their communities. I hope that my response has demonstrated to the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West that my Department recognises the importance of improving rail connectivity in the north-east.

3.53 pm

Mrs Hodgson: I express my warm thanks and appreciation to all hon. Members who have taken part in this very important debate, to the excellent shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi), and to the Minister. We have heard from Government and Opposition Members from across the whole region—from Newcastle down through Gateshead, South Tyneside, Sunderland, Durham and Darlington. As we have heard, the issue unites the whole region—all politicians, local authorities and agencies from business and transport—in one endeavour: to reopen the Leamside line for all the reasons that we have heard.

Passions can run deep on why we are at this point, but we all agree that we need to look forward with one united voice, and use that passion to achieve what we all desire: the reopening of the Leamside line to the benefit of all who would use it, across all our communities, for generations to come. We acknowledge that this would be a huge investment, but it is one that people of the north-east are long overdue. The return on that investment will be huge. We do not have that figure yet, but it is being worked on as we speak, as we discussed with the Minister earlier, and I am told that we will have it soon.

I hope that the Minister has been left in no doubt about our collective passion for this endeavour. I am sure that she will expect to find herself back here, perhaps in the not-too-distant future, for further such debates once we have further evidence and figures from our feasibility studies, and as we expand our case for the reopening of the Leamside line. I hope that this Minister—although my hon. Friend the Member for Slough may be the Minister when this happens—will be there to cut the ribbon. I very much look forward to that day.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Maybe it is a good omen for the Leamside line that we have pulled into the platform earlier than scheduled.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the potential merits of reopening the Leamside Line.

3.56 pm

Sitting suspended.

Covid-19: Military Aid to Civil Authorities

4 pm

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Before we begin, I remind Members that Mr Speaker encourages all to observe social distancing and to wear masks.

Chris Loder (West Dorset) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered requests for military aid to civil authorities during the covid-19 outbreak.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Mr Hollobone. I am grateful to the House for allowing time for this important debate.

Coronavirus has created pressures on all public services the likes of which we have never seen before. When those services are critical for preserving life, the pressures—increased absenteeism and greater demand—are significantly more noticeable. Many constituents have had awful experiences of waiting four, eight or even 10 hours for an ambulance for either themselves or a relative. I applied for this debate because constituents—many of whom are relatives of vulnerable people—have recently been in touch to share their despair over having to wait many hours for an ambulance, even in urgent circumstances.

One constituent had to stay by the side of his late father's body for nine hours before an ambulance was able to attend to his father and take him away. The shock of finding his father unexpectedly dead at home would have been enough—I cannot imagine having to sit beside a deceased loved one for many hours, waiting for help that just does not turn up. Another constituent in her 80s waited for an ambulance for 10 hours after she broke her hip at home. Another was identified as having a stroke by a doctor who lived nearby; because they could not wait for an ambulance, the doctor kindly drove her directly to the hospital.

There are many such stories. I am sure West Dorset is not the only area in the United Kingdom experiencing such difficulty, and I am sure I am not the only MP hearing such stories. In this debate, my intention is not to pile criticism on the South Western Ambulance Service. In West Dorset and across the wider south-west, our ambulance service has been working to absolute capacity until it simply cannot do any more. Diligent MPs cannot stand by and allow this situation to go on without proper scrutiny. It is clear that something needs to change.

These failures are caused not by incompetence or inefficiency, but by a greater demand upon our health systems than they are capable of handling without further back-up. A lack of social care options for people fit for discharge has caused a backing up throughout the hospital system that has ultimately compounded this situation. Ambulances often need to queue outside A&E for hours, with patients having to wait so long that they are triaged in the ambulance.

Ambulance drivers are in frequent close contact with vulnerable people. They have needed to be even more vigilant than the rest of us about self-testing and isolating when required so that they do not infect their patients. While that sense of care and responsibility is their duty, it has resulted in higher levels of absenteeism than the ambulance workforce has been able to manage.

The compounding of those issues—with absenteeism and capacity pressures in hospitals resulting in ambulances queuing at A&E, unable to leave until they have safely transferred their patients into the care of hospital staff—has meant the ambulance service is unable to respond to the next call. The result at home in West Dorset is a lack of ambulances available and people waiting for hours, sometimes in great pain and distress.

When our civilian services are in this situation, during a national crisis or not, the last step of escalation is to the Government, for assistance from the Ministry of Defence.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on an absolutely superb debate, as I was saying to him beforehand. It will probably encapsulate all our thoughts, and I know the Minister will wish to respond to him. We have been grateful recipients of Army medics in our hospitals during covid-19; indeed, even this week, help is being given by 50 to 60 medics in the Ulster Hospital, just on the edge of my constituency. Does the hon. Member not agree that there is a very clear role for the Army to play, and that that role has not yet ended? Further, we owe a debt of gratitude to those who serve us in times of war and peace—our wonderful armed forces.

Chris Loder: I cannot agree enough with the hon. Gentleman. I am delighted to be part of the armed forces parliamentary scheme and spending time with the Royal Navy at the moment. Those in the armed forces not only dedicate their lives to service of this country, but go so far in supporting and helping those in need in the most difficult situations. They are to be commended far more than I can do in this debate this afternoon.

Although we understand that armed forces capacity is not limitless, we unconsciously rely on them, safe in the knowledge, that in the direst circumstances our service personnel will step in and avert a crisis. When that does not or cannot happen, the resilience of our emergency services comes into question.

My local South Western Ambulance Service first scoped its request for military support in July last year. There were six operational and clinical areas where it sought additional support, because of increased activity and absenteeism due to coronavirus. Of those six areas, only one was fulfilled. After many weeks of negotiation, the South Western Ambulance Service received very limited military personnel on 11 August last year: 18 soldiers to fill logistics roles, who also replenished equipment on ambulances until the end of August. Those 18 soldiers were much appreciated, but that was only 18 for 5 million people in the south-west.

The South Western Ambulance Service had also asked for clinicians, blue-light drivers and mechanics, among other roles, but those requests were not granted. I know that it is not the role of Her Majesty's armed forces indiscriminately to provide any and all support to civilian services that is requested. However, in March 2020, the Secretary of State for Defence announced:

“From me downwards the entirety of the Ministry of Defence and the armed forces are dedicated to getting the nation through this global pandemic.”

At that time 10,000 personnel were put at higher readiness, thus making 20,000 personnel available, if needed. Therefore, we might be forgiven for believing that assistance from the Government would be more forthcoming in this case.

The period of the coronavirus pandemic has been one where our armed forces were at their most ready to assist civilian services, and they should be commended for it. Of course, more services required help and so military assistance had to be spread more thinly, but it was surprising to discover that the MACA request from the South Western Ambulance Service was fulfilled only to an extremely small extent. That gives me and my constituents great cause for concern. That was mainly as a result of the original request being filtered down and weakened by some civil servants before evaluation. That is a great concern to me as a south-west MP.

I have no doubt that difficult decisions had to be taken. The armed forces are needed operationally for so many things. To ask them to support civil services is no small request in terms of resources and, of course, the military cannot simply be diverted from its primary role. However, given the extent to which we have experienced ambulance waiting times, citizens waiting in pain for so long, and the watering down of the needs of ambulance services before evaluations took place, I question whether there are things that can be learned to improve the process of MACA requests in future, by looking at examples such as those I have outlined.

Ambulance services exist to respond to acute and critical events. Those are situations that cannot, by definition, wait without potentially endangering life. Compared with another operational deployment of the armed forces in the pandemic, testing, one has to note that, although testing was vital for oversight of the overall size of the pandemic in the UK, a timely covid test does not compare, in terms of urgency, with a person waiting for hours in acute pain—a person in their 80s having broken their hip or a person with a suspected heart attack or stroke.

Perhaps in the future we ought to have a better publicised hierarchy of need when we face a crisis that requires military support to the civilian authorities. I cannot pretend to know the intimate details of every MACA request submitted to the Government, but I can think of few acute and urgent services that might need prioritised support—and none other than our ambulance service.

One of the criteria for MACA provision is that military aid should always be the last resort, and that the use of mutual aid, other agencies and the private sector must be otherwise considered as insufficient or unsuitable. I pay tribute to St John Ambulance, which has provided much support and continues to do so. It is a volunteer army in itself, with a deeply held mission to help those in need. I wonder whether there needs to be a more established role for St John Ambulance in this area, so that it is able to more readily and structurally respond to some of these needs and to have a more substantial role in our nation's resilience arrangements to support the emergency services. That would enable ambulance services to receive support more readily than in the cases I have outlined.

The South Western Ambulance Service did not and does not ask for help lightly. Only when the situation for its patients was becoming very difficult indeed did it contact the Government for help. I should say that it is only following my own intervention and inquiry that the ambulance service kindly shared some of its insights with me. Even I was surprised, though, to hear that only one out of six of its specific requests was partly fulfilled.

[Chris Loder]

I hope this debate will offer an opportunity for the Government to review and improve the systems surrounding MACA requests. Greater clarity and transparency for those services making requests is needed so that they know what levels of support they can expect, especially when there is no alternative. Then my colleagues and I—MPs of Dorset and the wider south-west—will be able to further support the ambulance service in making sure we never experience some of these difficulties again.

4.13 pm

The Minister for Health (Edward Argar): It is a pleasure, as ever, to service under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder) on securing this debate, and I pay tribute to him for the manner in which he conveyed some challenging personal experiences on the part of his constituents and others. I will turn first to the situation faced by ambulance services, before clarifying for my hon. Friend that many of the expectations in terms of specialist posts are not realistically achievable within the constraints on the military's resources.

Ambulance services have faced extraordinary pressures over the past 18 months, and I know that all hon. Members will join me in paying tribute to all the staff for their dedication and hard work. The pandemic placed significant demands on the service. In December 2021, it answered almost 1 million calls—a 22% increase on December 2020—placing significant pressures on ambulance services and the wider NHS.

We know the background reasons for that: infection prevention and control measures, higher instances of delays in the handover of ambulance patients into A&E and, crucially, the staff absence rate. Flow through our hospitals, which is always the key determinant of the ability of ambulance services to offload patients to the safety of A&E, is about the ability of that A&E to either get those patients discharged safely or admitted to hospital. A combination of those factors has placed unprecedented stress on the service and driven increased response times to patients in the community. Despite those pressures, performance for category 1 calls—the most serious calls, classified as life-threatening—has been largely maintained at around nine minutes on average over the last several months, despite a 16% increase in these calls compared with before the pandemic, although we are clear that there has been a significant increase in response times across other categories.

It is exactly because of those pressures that we have put in place strong support to improve ambulance response times, including a £55 million investment in staffing capacity to manage winter pressures to March. All trusts will receive part of this funding, which will increase call handling and operational response capacity, boosting staff numbers by 700. NHS England will also strengthen health and wellbeing support for ambulance trusts, investing £1.75 million to support the wellbeing of frontline ambulance staff during these pressured times. More broadly, NHS England is undertaking targeted support for the most challenged hospitals, where delays are predominantly concentrated, to improve their patient handover processes, helping ambulances to get swiftly back out on the road. That includes a £4.4 million capital investment to keep an additional 154 ambulances on the road this winter.

The crux of my hon. Friend's speech was to acknowledge those pressures and to look to the military, through the MACA system, for further assistance. The scale of the challenge we faced, and continue to face, cannot be overestimated. The UK, like every other country in the world, saw its health systems and capabilities stretched to the limit. As many of our civilian agencies and institutions struggled to cope, we should take great pride in the role our armed forces played in assisting them in responding to the pandemic, reacting with skill and agility. However, we must be cautious about the limitations on the numbers of those who are qualified to drive blue-light ambulances, and indeed clinicians. I have to say that, of the 20,000 personnel my hon. Friend spoke of, only a small proportion would be clinically qualified to assist as paramedics or qualified to drive a blue-light service.

Chris Loder: I completely understand some of the difficult points the Minister makes, but does he agree that St John Ambulance has a wonderful suite of resources and could play a much more substantial role in supporting our emergency services?

Edward Argar: I will address that point and then return to the military point. I had a very productive meeting with St John Ambulance in the past couple of weeks to discuss exactly that. We should not underestimate the huge role it has already played throughout the pandemic in supporting our ambulance and other emergency services.

Jim Shannon: This does not cover the constituency of the hon. Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder), but Northern Ireland has a Territorial Army medical regiment based in Belfast. The majority of people in it are probably NHS staff—they are doctors, nurses or whatever—and that is where their interest in being in the TA comes from. Will there be circumstances on the mainland in which the TA medical corps could be used to our advantage and to address staffing shortcomings?

Edward Argar: It is important that we take advantage of all opportunities in terms of those qualified professionals and their ability to support our more regular frontline services.

To pick up on the point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset about MACAs and military capacity, a large number of those 20,000 were used for testing and helping to build Nightingale hospitals, and they have recently been helping in vaccine testing centres. However, capacity in terms of, for example, clinically qualified Army medics is limited, and they often already serve in the NHS and in hospitals, so there is not a huge pool to draw on. It is important that we are clear about that. Secondly, I mentioned to my hon. Friend the point about those qualified as blue-light drivers. Again, that is not all the 20,000 or anywhere near. We have to be—realistic is the wrong word—careful in our expectations of the capacity to support specific requests, such as the specific types of support that his ambulance service put in for.

More broadly, considerable support has been offered by the military for tasks such as logistics, which my hon. Friend highlighted—for example, in supporting the ambulance service in a range of roles. Currently, the Ministry of Defence provides support to ambulance services in the following ways: 366 personnel in a range of roles, including non-driving roles; 96 personnel

continuing non-blue-light ambulance driving support for the Scottish Ambulance Service; and 313 personnel in driver support to the Welsh ambulance service.

My understanding of the specific matter to which my hon. Friend referred is that it was incorporated into the broader request for ambulance drivers between 10 and 31 August last year. The element of that request to be granted was the 28 category C drivers who were provided by the Ministry of Defence. However, I come back to the point that, while he is right that the military are always there to assist us in times of need, we equally need to be realistic about their capacity in specific places.

Chris Loder: I appreciate the Minister's candour. I respectfully remind him that the fundamental issue is that we have constituents—patients—who are in great difficulty for a long time. I fully appreciate the many pressures that he outlined, but what I am looking to achieve through the debate, especially for those families and individuals who have gone through painful experiences—I hope the Minister can help me a little further with this—is that we do not get into this position again, with constituents on their own waiting for such a long time.

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend will have heard me set out exactly how we have done that with the extra investment in our ambulance services. That is the key—to reinforce the strength and resilience of our existing ambulance service provision. He is absolutely right to highlight the impact—the patient and familial impact—of long waits for an ambulance, but the real answer is the measures that we are taking to invest in the ambulance service, with the £55 million more, the investment we put into hospitals to ensure that they were ready for winter, and the broader funding across the piece for our healthcare system to strengthen it further. Today, we saw another element of that package in the announcement of waiting list recovery and how we intend to approach that.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the military. In extremes, they are there to help in very specific and pressured circumstances, but they are not the solution to the problem in the long term or to avoiding the challenges recurring. That is why we have our plan not only for the ambulance service, but for improving urgent and emergency care. We saw £450 million invested in that over the past 18 months or so to improve A&Es across the country, helping them to function more

effectively, in particular in the context of IPC—infection prevention and control—measures. More broadly, we are investing in our acute hospitals to allow for the flow of patients out of A&E and into the hospital or, we hope, home. That is the key to solving this.

Chris Loder: I am pleased that the Minister highlighted that. I highlight and thank him again for the £65 million that the Government have dedicated to Dorset County Hospital to address that very difficulty.

Edward Argar: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. He is right to highlight that, not least because of his role in continuing to argue for it and in supporting Dorset hospitals in that context.

The military have done, and continue to do, a fantastic job in the context of this pandemic. However, as I say, the key to this issue is long-term investment, which is exactly what we are putting in place. I am very conscious of the challenges faced by all ambulance services over the winter, but I know that my hon. Friend's local ambulance trust faces specific challenges of geography, distance and location of hospitals, which can be difficult for it on occasion. I appreciate the particular complexities of the system in the south-west, and we continue to work closely with the local system, but also with the military where appropriate, to see where they can support us and help add additional resilience into the system.

However, there is no substitute for the investment we are putting into making those systems more resilient in the long term, the need for which my hon. Friend has highlighted again today. We continue to focus on outcomes for patients—which is, I think, exactly where he is coming from—to avoid or reduce the risk of people having to wait a long time for an ambulance in very challenging circumstances. Tackling and improving the performance of our ambulance trusts remains a high priority in my ministerial inbox. That is in no way a criticism of the amazing work their staff are doing, but they face significant challenges. We continue to focus on those, and I look forward to working with my hon. Friend and his colleagues in Dorset to meet the challenges in the south-west.

Question put and agreed to.

4.26 pm

Sitting suspended.

Merseyside: Funding of Local Authorities

4.30 pm

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): I remind Members that Mr Speaker encourages everyone to observe social distancing and to wear masks.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered funding of local authorities on Merseyside.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I begin by thanking Mr Speaker for granting this debate, and I also thank Members from across Merseyside for attending today. I look forward to hearing their contributions.

According to analysis by the National Audit Office on selected main revenue income sources for local authorities, in 2010 Government funding for local authorities in England was just over £34 billion. Over the course of the next decade it decreased steadily, and by 2020 Government funding to local authorities in England was just over £8 billion. The cut of funding from £34 billion to £8 billion is staggering, and goes a long way to explain why we have seen the widespread erosion of public services. It represents a cut of around 76.5%. In other words, local authorities are being expected to continue to provide public services when they are receiving a fraction of the money they used to receive from central Government. No wonder our communities are feeling it.

If we look at Merseyside in the context of those National Audit Office figures, we see that the Government funding cuts that its local authorities have suffered are even higher than the England average. In my own local authority of Wirral, in 2010 the council received just over £266 million in Government funding, but by 2020 that figure was down to just over £40 million—a reduction of around 85%. Colleagues will be only too aware that it is a similar story elsewhere in Merseyside, and I am sure that we will be hearing details of the impact of those cuts.

I ask the Minister to listen closely to the figures that I am about to share. In Knowsley, the same National Audit Office figures show that in 2010 the local authority received more than £243 million in Government funding; that figure was down to just over £35.6 million in 2020—a reduction of around 85.3%. In Liverpool, in 2010 the local authority received more than £560 million from the Government, but by 2020 that figure was down to just over £75 million—a reduction of around 86.6%. In St Helens, in 2010 the local authority received more than £151 million, but in 2020 it received just over £16 million—a reduction of around 89.4%. In Sefton, in 2010 the local authority received more than £203 million, but 2020 saw it receive just over £16.7 million. That is a drop of around 91.8%.

Although local authorities have generally kept 50% of business rates revenues raised locally since 2013—and there is a pilot scheme to keep 100% of them in Wirral—that is nowhere near to making up the shortfall created by Conservative Government cuts. For example, Wirral Council received over £110 million less in annual income in 2020 than it did in 2010. Similarly, Knowsley received £116 million less, Liverpool over £209 million less, St Helens over £60 million less, and Sefton over £94 million less. Those staggering and brutal cuts by central

Government are really punishing our communities. Political decisions taken by Conservative Governments since 2010 have had the effect of running down and forcing the closure of local public services.

Let us remind ourselves what it is that local authorities deliver. They provide and look after our libraries and leisure centres. They maintain our roads, streets, parks, and our open spaces where people relax, exercise, and walk their dogs and where children play. They license taxis, the sale of alcohol and the movement of animals. They provide support to local businesses and chambers of commerce, stimulating the local economy. They manage planning processes, are responsible for public health, bin collection and waste disposal, free school meals, welfare support and advice, and adult learning. They are responsible for trading standards and ensuring the safety and standards of the products that we buy. They are responsible for social services, safeguarding children and ensuring that vulnerable adults, including people with dementia, are cared for and protected, whether in their own home or a care home.

A decade of cuts to local government has resulted in £8 billion being lost from adult social care budgets, and many vulnerable people have been left without the support that they need. Some 400,000 older and disabled people are on council waiting lists for care, and there are more than 100,000 staff vacancies across the sector. That is a truly damning indictment of this Conservative Government. In short, local authorities, the services they deliver and the public realm they maintain are fundamental to our society and the way we live. If we want our councils to deliver good-quality universal public services, they need to be funded properly.

The Conservative party presents itself as the party of tradition, but it is anything but. The cuts it has imposed on local authorities since 2010 undermine our way of life and our traditions, and are pulling away the foundations of our communities. I am sure that we will hear from colleagues across Merseyside about what these cuts mean to their constituencies.

I want now to talk specifically about Wirral, where, as I outlined earlier, the local authority saw an 85% reduction in Government funding between 2010 and 2020, and received around £110 million less in overall income in 2020 than in 2010. The authority has been told that it must find savings of £20 million in its budget for 2022-23. Not doing so could lead to Government intervention. As a result, the council has been forced to make proposals to meet these financial constraints. The proposals are wide-ranging and, if implemented, would have serious implications for communities in Wirral. The proposals include the permanent closure and demolition of Woodchurch leisure centre and swimming pool.

Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for raising the issue of Woodchurch leisure centre and swimming pool, and for all her hard work in leading the campaign to keep its doors open. She has made some excellent points in her speech. She will know that, as well as serving many other constituents, the Woodchurch is an invaluable community asset for some of the poorest communities in Birkenhead, including the Prenton and Nocturnum estates. Like the Woodchurch estate in my hon. Friend's constituency, people living in those communities have far worse health outcomes than their peers in more affluent areas of the Wirral. Does my

hon. Friend agree that closing this cherished institution would deal a grievous blow to the invaluable work that has gone on in recent years to improve the health of people living in the most left-behind communities that we represent?

Margaret Greenwood: I thank my hon. Friend for his excellent contribution. He is absolutely right, and he is right about the health deficit in the area. Woodchurch has a higher percentage of people with long-term health conditions and disabilities than the borough as a whole. He has anticipated the next part of my speech with regard to the surrounding areas, which are so important. It really is important that we save this swimming pool.

The Woodchurch leisure centre and swimming pool are much loved by residents and groups, including Woodchurch swimming club, and as my hon. Friend said, the facilities serve thousands of people across Wirral, including communities in Woodchurch, Upton, and the Beechwood and Noctorum estates.

Leisure centres and swimming pools are vital to the health, wellbeing and relaxation of people in Wirral. The Woodchurch estate has a far higher proportion of people with long-term health issues and disabilities than the borough as a whole. When meeting user groups in the past, I have been struck by how many people use the pool to help with health problems such as joint pain and mental health issues. It cannot be right that this important facility is at risk of closure, but of course, sadly, Government cuts have led us to where we are.

Leisure centres and swimming pools are important, too, for the education of children, who are now required to learn to swim as part of the national curriculum—so, although leisure services are not a statutory requirement, swimming is. Before covid, 14 schools were using Woodchurch pool to teach children to swim—a vital skill for children growing up on a peninsula fringed by beaches. Now, those schools are having to bus children further afield, taking valuable time out of their school day and adding costs to already overstretched schools.

Wirral Council's proposals also include the potential closure of numerous libraries, including those in Hoylake, Greasby, Pensby, Irby and Woodchurch in my constituency of Wirral West. These are libraries to which young families can take their children to introduce them to books and meet other young families, and which, as children grow older, they can independently visit, browsing and learning in an informal environment. They are places where people who have ideas about entrepreneurial projects that they want to pursue can carry out research, drawing on the expertise of highly qualified librarians who know how to source information on all aspects of human endeavour. They are places where people who do not have internet at home can access it to explore any subject they want and, if necessary, search and apply for jobs. Libraries provide incredibly important community hubs, and they are, of course, very important for tackling social isolation. We know that loneliness was identified as a public health challenge in Wirral prior to the pandemic, and libraries have a vital role to play in addressing that issue.

Further proposals in Wirral include ceasing maintenance in open spaces, including up to 10 to 15 local parks, and halving maintenance in others; the closure of two golf courses; changes to residents' parking permits, in some cases introducing charges for residents living in areas of

deprivation; a reduction in highway maintenance; an end to night-time lighting inspections; the withdrawal of additional street cleansing services in some areas; the closure of public toilets; and a reduced school crossing patrol service. That is not even the full extent of what is being considered. The implications of such measures are extremely serious and Wirral Council, like so many others, is having to make up for prolonged, brutal central Government funding cuts.

Last month, I and other Wirral MPs wrote to the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, calling on him to come forward with emergency funding for Wirral to prevent further reductions in public services. We eagerly await a response to that letter and I repeat that ask to the Secretary of State, via the Minister.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mick Whitley) has been working to secure a meeting between the Wirral MPs and the Secretary of State to discuss the very serious situation facing Wirral. Last week, the Secretary of State said:

"I am looking forward to a meeting. I recognise that there are real issues in the Wirral, which I hope we can work together to resolve."—[*Official Report*, 2 February 2022; Vol. 708, c. 336.]

I appreciate that the Secretary of State's office has made contact this week, and I understand that it will be in touch again shortly, to find a date after recess. I hope a meeting can be arranged as soon as possible, because time is of the essence.

Tomorrow, Members will have the opportunity to debate the local government finance settlement. This is the fourth one-year settlement in a row for councils, which, according to the Local Government Association, "continues to hamper financial planning and council financial sustainability."

Wirral Council feels that it is imperative to have a multi-year settlement from 2023-24, so I would be grateful if the Minister could update us on that issue.

The response from Merseyside to the draft local finance settlement for 2022-23 was very clear. The leader of Knowsley Council said:

"We are continually lobbying the Government for fairer funding and ensuring that those areas that have greater needs are appropriately funded. Yet again, this has been ignored and we are once again having to look at how we can continue to provide the essential services our communities value and need."

The leader of Sefton Council has said:

"I am afraid that the latest funding settlement shows little evidence of the Government investing strongly in public services... The Government has left us facing a position that remains austere and which will make our Borough's economic recovery from COVID-19, when it does finally end, even more difficult."

For Wirral, council funding from central Government does not come close to meeting the needs of the borough, as highlighted by the requirement to make such drastic savings.

The decimation of our local authorities and public services by this Government has to stop. As I have said, the Conservative party likes to present itself as the party of tradition, but when we look at the scale of the cuts it has delivered to local authorities since 2010, it is clear that it is anything but. It is leaving local authorities that want to serve local people struggling to provide even the bare essentials, and forcing the closure of vital community spaces such as libraries and leisure centres.

[Margaret Greenwood]

The Government have a choice. They can either continue down their current path of squeezing local authorities of every resource possible, or they can take another path and invest in people and communities, nurture and grow the potential of everybody, and create and maintain a physical and social environment in which individuals, communities and businesses can thrive, and in which people can have a sense of stability. It really is a simple choice, and it is a political choice.

It is time for the Government to change course. They must face the fact that services delivered by our local authorities, and the public realm that they provide and maintain, are fundamental to the functioning of a civilised society. If we are to thrive, the Government must invest in our communities, provide financial stability and fund the services upon which we all rely.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. The debate can last until 5.30 pm. I am obliged to call the Front-Bench spokesman for Her Majesty's Opposition no later than 5.12 pm—the guideline limit is five minutes—and then the Minister, and then there will be three minutes at the end for Margaret Greenwood to sum up the debate. Until then, it is Back-Bench time and there are seven superstars from Merseyside seeking to contribute. There will, I am afraid, have to be a strict four-minute time limit, and then everybody will get in. We will start with the first person on my list, Maria Eagle.

4.44 pm

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) on her contribution and on obtaining the debate.

My constituency covers two of the local authorities involved on Merseyside—Liverpool City Council and Knowsley borough council. I want to say a little bit about Knowsley. This small authority has been disproportionately hit by the austerity and the brutal cuts that my hon. Friend referred to in her introductory speech. It has lost more than half its funding—that is, over £100 million. Years of austerity cuts have resulted in an average loss of £485 per person, compared with the average countrywide loss of £188 per person, yet Knowsley borough council represents the second most deprived borough in the nation. It was ranked the fifth worst when the Lib Dem-Tory coalition began to impose austerity, and it is now ranked the second worst, so it has not been improving over that period; its situation has worsened. It has the lowest score in the city region for deprivation affecting children, and the second lowest for deprivation affecting older people. More than 10,000 households are in fuel poverty—15% of the total—with many of them living in the Harewood part of my constituency. They are now facing a cost of living crisis as well as having to deal with the austerity cuts that my hon. Friend has set out.

Inflation is at its highest level for 30 years, and energy bills are about to rocket by 54%. Food prices are rising faster than general retail prices. Wages are stagnating and falling in real terms, with tax increases to national insurance and council tax stealth increases to come in April. The cut in universal credit has impacted on many

people in Knowsley, with many now having to choose between heating and eating—that is the choice facing them. When they turn to the council, the amount of support that can be given after 12 years of brutal cuts is much lower than it used to be, and it is much harder for the council to provide the kind of support that it used to provide. It is the same in Liverpool, where the capacity for local people to get support from the council has been severely curtailed because of the impact of the cuts over that period.

If the concept of levelling up means anything, surely it means improving the lives of people in places such as Knowsley in order to level them up to the better standards of living in other parts of the country. One might have expected, therefore, that Knowsley would receive some of the Government's levelling-up funding, but it has not. Despite making bids for the funding that the Government keep saying is available, it has not received any. The council was unsuccessful in its bid for an allocation from the levelling-up fund, and neither has Knowsley benefited from any of the other levelling-up schemes through which the Government have been dispensing largesse.

The Government said that funding would be allocated to level up places such as Knowsley, but Knowsley has not been given any such funding. Instead, it has been given to other places that are perhaps not as high as Knowsley on the indices of multiple deprivation. This is not good enough. I hope the Minister will come up with a better way to make sure that people in Knowsley can get the respect and levelling-up funding that they deserve, because it has not happened so far.

4.48 pm

Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab): It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) on securing this important debate. She has painted a vivid picture of the grave situation facing Wirral Council and Merseyside, and of the terrible price that people living in both our constituencies are set to pay for the Government's abject failure to give local authorities the support they so desperately need in the midst of this historic cost of living crisis. No corner of our borough will be spared the devastating consequences of further cuts to frontline services, but the poorest communities of Birkenhead stand to lose the most of all.

I represent one of the most left-behind constituencies in the country, with the north end of my town ranking in the top 1% for deprivation nationally. Families living there have already borne the brunt of a long and cruel decade of austerity. Youth services have been decimated, benefits have been slashed and the basic support on which so many people rely has been stripped to the bone. Birkenhead is now bracing itself for a renewed onslaught on frontline services, and it is our youngest and most vulnerable who will be hit the hardest of all.

The list of proposed savings currently being considered by the council makes for daunting reading. Eleven libraries are set to close their doors, including in the highly deprived wards of Prenton and Rock Ferry, where they are used by so many people as a means of accessing essential services. Adult and children's services will be cut, and the Hive youth zone that neighbours my constituency office is to lose £150,000 in cancelled

funding—a devastating blow for the many young people it supports. This not levelling up at all; it is punching down.

I look forward to the Minister's contribution and have no doubt he will want to talk about the levelling-up funds that have been allocated to Birkenhead to support its ambitious regeneration scheme. In a town that has been starved of investment for so many decades, that money is very welcome, but we will not be made to feel grateful for what we have rightly deserved all along. We cannot ignore the fact that this is largely capital spending that will do nothing to cover the day-to-day costs of getting support to those who need it most.

I also imagine that the Minister will want to parrot the findings of the recent Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy report on the state of the council's finances, with all the talk of making difficult decisions. That report makes no mention, however, of the fact that this was a crisis made in Westminster, not Birkenhead. Since 2010, a staggering £260 million of direct Government funding to Wirral Council has been slashed. That was not inevitable. It was an ideologically motivated attack on the public sector, perpetrated by successive Conservative Chancellors, and it has devastated the lives of thousands of people who I represent.

When the Minister rises to speak in a few moments, I hope he will accept responsibility on behalf of the whole Government for the catastrophe looming over our communities. Today, the *Liverpool Echo* carries the story of Delilah, a baby girl born in Birkenhead on Christmas Day. Her parents, Suzie-Lei and Nathan, want nothing but the best for their daughter, but the simple truth is that so much of their life will be shaped by what the Government do or do not do in the coming months and years. On behalf of Delilah and the countless young people living in my constituency of Birkenhead, I urge the Minister to make good on the promises of levelling up and give Wirral Council the support it so desperately needs at this difficult time.

4.51 pm

Sir George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): It is, as always, a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) on securing this important and timely debate. I thank her, and my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle), for setting out the headline figures for the reduction in grant funding to Knowsley since 2010. They both also referred to levelling up. Since they have put all that information on the record already, I will not go over the same material, but I will concentrate my remarks on levelling-up funding.

Last week, *The Guardian* published the results of its investigation into the local authority areas that have not benefited from levelling-up funding so far. Its conclusions are truly shocking. The article points out that some of the wealthiest areas in England are receiving 10 times—yes, 10 times—more funding than the poorest. How can that possibly be justified?

As I think my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood pointed out, Knowsley, which is a Labour-controlled local authority, received the shocking amount per head of population of zero—nothing—in the latest round of levelling-up funding, whereas Conservative-controlled Central Bedfordshire received £90 per head.

Whereas Knowsley is the third most deprived borough in England, Central Bedfordshire is in the top fifth. How that can be justified defeats me, and I am sure it would defeat many qualified statisticians and researchers.

As Jonathan Webb from IPPR North accurately put it:

“This new analysis from the Guardian demonstrates the gap between the rhetoric and reality of levelling up.”

He went on to say that the way levelling-up funding is allocated is

“unacceptable and will only widen the UK's existing regional” disparities. That is the complete reverse of what we are told it is supposed to do.

Despite Knowsley's being the third poorest borough in England, it received not a penny from the future high streets fund, the community renewal fund or the towns fund. Councillor Graham Morgan, the excellent leader of Knowsley Council, put it in a nutshell when he said:

“Levelling up has been nothing but a slogan so far. The people who work on these schemes can't find any box which we haven't ticked, so is there some other reason—a political reason—why Knowsley isn't getting the support that local people need?”

The answer to Graham's question, sadly, is yes—it is a political reason.

I will conclude with three questions. First, how can the Minister justify this politically skewed allocation of levelling-up funds? Secondly, can he give me a firm assurance that when the education investment areas are announced, Knowsley will be among them? Thirdly, will he agree to meet me and Knowsley Council to discuss the need for the regeneration of Huyton town centre?

4.55 pm

Dame Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, and I add my congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) on having successfully applied for this important debate. The past 11 years of Conservative rule have seen an unrelenting assault on the budgets of local authorities, but that assault has been worse in some places than in others. Those with the poorest and most vulnerable populations have been hit hardest; those with the biggest issues to deal with have suffered the highest level of funding cuts. That has been a conscious choice made by successive Conservative Governments in full knowledge of the consequences, which is why the phrase “levelling up” rings so hollow on the Wirral and Merseyside.

In my local authority of Wirral, £230 million in direct funding from the Government was cut to just £37 million by 2020, despite the fact that close to a quarter of Wirral's neighbourhoods rank in the 10% most deprived nationally. We have all seen the explosion in food banks, social supermarkets, and people going hungry and not being able to afford to heat their homes as a consequence of deprivation and soaring levels of poverty.

There has been a staggering 53% real-terms cut in our Government funding since 2010, which equates to £635 per household. In the same period, local authority staffing levels in Wirral have fallen from 7,669 to just 3,713. The adult social care budget has been cut by a quarter since 2010, despite a huge increase in the number of older people and young disabled people who require help simply to live. This means that a huge and growing area of need is going completely unmet, and the life experiences of those who need support have plummeted, putting an

[*Dame Angela Eagle*]

unbearable burden on their carers. However, close to two thirds of the budget is taken up by adult and children's services, leaving very little for anything else.

Despite the Government's vainglorious boasts, the 2022-23 local government finance settlement is actually a 2.2% decrease on the last financial year when adjusted for inflation, and that adjustment will get even worse as inflation soars. National Government funding for Wirral has decreased by 37.3% in real terms since 2015-16, leaving the difference to be made up by huge increases in council tax, which the Government assume in their figures. More Government sleight of hand means that they are assuming that all local authorities will put up council taxes by the full amount they can without having to hold a referendum. This transfer of funding from national to local taxes has left local residents paying far more in council tax for far fewer services because of the huge cuts to their budgets allocated by the national Government.

In the aftermath of the covid pandemic, which closed council services and destroyed revenue-raising opportunities, Wirral has been ordered by Ministers to make £27 million of cuts to its 2022-23 budget, under the threat of further national Government intervention. That will mean the decimation of services, increased charges for the use of what local facilities remain, and a mass sell-off of local authority buildings. It means that, at the diktat of national Government, residents in Wallasey will continue being asked to pay more in council tax for lower levels of services. The Government have taken far more from our local area than is fair and have forced huge increases in council tax, which is still failing to keep up with the rising demand. That is not a fair or sustainable solution, and I look to the Minister to give us some relief in his response.

5 pm

Paula Barker (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Hollobone. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) for calling this important debate. It is timely, because the Secretary of State is in Liverpool today, addressing northern leaders at the convention of the north.

Last week, we heard the Government fanfare around the levelling-up White Paper. As one commentator put it, "the Government is like the arsonist turning up late to the scene of their crime with a fire extinguisher in hand claiming to help put out the fire they started".

So hollow is the Government's plan that this year—the year of levelling up—councils are being forced to increase council tax precepts yet again, while at the same time making deep cuts to local services. The degradation of local government finances since 2010 has exacerbated geographical inequalities, held back our regional infrastructure and limited the potential of our people and communities.

In this coming financial year, Liverpool City Council will see a starting revenue gap of an eye-watering £34 million. Inflationary pressures and the increase in national insurance—not to mention the insult of having to increase the pay of central Government commissioners by 50%, which is nothing short of a disgrace—are making the picture even grimmer. All that is on top of half a billion pounds-worth of cuts since 2010.

The picture is the same across the Liverpool city region. Even after the Prime Minister's non-plan for adult social care, councils across Merseyside are still having to make swingeing cuts in that area and raise the adult social care precept, with a starting position of £12 million of cuts for Liverpool in adult social care alone. All the while, demand for services increases, and the recruitment, retention and workforce crisis rages on in the sector. We cannot go on like this.

Such is the arrogance across Whitehall that shuffling deckchairs is the modus operandi, with no real plan for municipal revival and no plan to restore local government to the pinnacle of achievement. Most insulting of all, there is no acknowledgment that the decisions of the past decade have contributed to the growing divide between the north and more affluent parts of the country. It is not rocket science why communities in places such as Merseyside, which have some of the highest levels of deprivation in the country and have been subject to some of the most brutal cuts, have become dirtier and less safe, have lower life expectancy, suffer from increasing food bank usage, and see widening education attainment gaps.

Forgive me for thinking that that has been a deliberate political ploy to re-engineer politics across the north of England, which lets Labour councils, as local establishments, shoulder the blame and burden for austerity and higher taxation, while the Conservative Government come along at the eleventh hour to save the day. Pay more, get less—no wonder our residents are fed up. It may benefit the Conservative party, but it is bad governance, and it is our communities that pay the price. The perverse nature of the centralised British state means that we now have Treasury announcements on filling potholes. Guess what? Local councils used to just fill potholes without the need for a Whitehall press release.

The Government cannot and will not level up this country while our councils are scraping around year after year to produce balanced budgets against a backdrop of sustained cuts. Across our city region, we simply cannot take any more. I hope the Minister has some real ideas for how that is going to be addressed.

5.3 pm

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): I am pleased to serve under your chairmanship once again, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) on securing this much-needed debate.

Merseyside's wealth is its people. They are warm and generous, with a tremendous sense of humour. Most of all, we are supportive of each other. I am glad to see so many of my Merseyside colleagues here. I have the honour and privilege of representing two local authorities in Merseyside: St Helens, the home of glass and, of course, of my beloved Saints; and Knowsley, the home of the historic towns of Prescot and Whiston.

Knowsley and St Helens have an impressive track record of delivering regeneration. They have both delivered projects to raise the aspirations of our communities and, ultimately, improve life chances. Both areas are full of proud people who want the best for their community, yet both areas have had their budgets eviscerated over the past decade of austerity, which has continued into the '20s. We hear the budget cut figures so much that

their consequences can be lost, but it is right that we hear them, and I am pleased that Members have covered them so adequately today.

The decade of austerity was destructive to our communities, yet it is about more than the cuts; it is about the communities and their needs, local authorities' legal duties to protect and to provide care, and the consequences of the cuts and the vicious cycles they create. The Government have massively reduced central grants to local councils. The idea was for local authorities to become self-sufficient. Councils were expected to raise council tax and retain business rates to cover the cuts. The Government were repeatedly warned about the consequences that that would have. It may work in wealthier parts of the country, but it does not work everywhere.

Knowsley and St Helens are second and 22nd respectively on the 2019 list of most deprived local authorities. Less well-off areas do not raise as much council tax or business rates as wealthier ones. The consequences have caused even greater hardship for communities that still have not recovered from the massive loss of manufacturing jobs. Areas that have been left behind are being pushed further adrift. It is a vicious cycle that is hard to escape. The wealthier areas that generate more income stay ahead, while areas such as mine are not given the investment to catch up. I am not sure how that complies with the so-called levelling-up agenda. Forcing local authorities to bid for scraps that are a fraction of the budgets that they have had cut is not good enough.

The regional imbalances that we have are quite simply a stain on our country. We are more geographically unequal than any other rich country. How is it that Germany, a country that was divided in two for the majority of my life, the eastern part of which was under the yoke of communism for decades, is today a more equal country? It is an embarrassment that requires a serious plan to fix.

St Helens, Knowsley and other areas in need are not asking for a handout; we are asking for fairness. We want to become more self-sufficient, like the wealthier parts of our country. The Government must help us to achieve that by supporting local authorities with fair funding. That means funding based on needs—for care in particular. Deprivation needs to be included in funding distribution formulas. Our country's regional imbalances can no longer be ignored; they need to be addressed now, before they become irreversible. I call on the Government to get down to addressing the needs of the people of this country.

5.8 pm

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) on securing this important debate.

My hon. Friends, the superstars of Merseyside, have spoken eloquently of the funding crisis across Merseyside. The communities we represent have suffered systematic defunding for decades. This latest round of so-called levelling up is just the most recent in an endless stream of broken promises and increasing pressures on poor and working people.

In Liverpool, we have had two thirds of our budget cut over 12 years of Tory austerity. The damage that has done to the service we deliver cannot be overstated.

I pay tribute to councillors and officers in Liverpool who have worked hard with the ever-shrinking budget to ensure that our council continues to provide the best support possible to those in need in our city, including Granby Sure Start, Windsor Street library, Park Road sports centre and the invaluable citizens support scheme.

Liverpool is rated the third most deprived local authority in England. The deprivation faced by our communities is incredibly stark and increasing at an alarming rate. With in-work poverty at record levels and child poverty sky-rocketing, those we represent are facing a cost of living crisis. There is a triple whammy of soaring energy bills, real-term wage freezes and Tory tax hikes for those least able to bear them. Now, we are expected to fund an eye-watering 50% increase in the wages of the central Government commissioners, while making cuts of £34 million—all at a time when billionaires, bankers and shareholders are seeing their profits soar and their taxes cut. It beggars belief.

How can it be that Shell has declared a 14-fold increase in profits at the same time as it was announced that the energy price cap is being raised by 54%? The Government-driven rise in council tax in April will further compound these regional inequalities, as the wealthier councils in London and the south-east will be able to raise far more money than councils such as ours in Liverpool. Unless the Government commit significantly more funding to Merseyside and other underfunded areas, they will fail to address the systemic growth in inequality and poverty that is crippling our region.

The financial challenges faced by our communities are growing at an alarming rate. If we are truly to face up to them, cushion the most vulnerable against the worst of the impact and give our communities the long-overdue investment they need and deserve, we need to reverse the cuts of the last decade and provide multi-year settlements for councils in order to provide stability and phase out bid funding culture.

We have been here and seen it all before. Liverpool is no stranger to central Government policies of managed decline—we fought them in the '70s under Thatcher, and we will fight them today under Boris Johnson. We cannot allow our communities to pay the price. Our local government institutions are already scraping the bottom of the barrel to balance the books. We must reverse the cuts to public services and local government; we need a £15 minimum wage to boost incomes to the lowest earners; and we must reverse cuts to social security and pension payments and reinstate the triple lock.

5.11 pm

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship once again, Mr Hollobone. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) for not only securing this important debate, but the work she is doing with local Labour MPs, councillors and residents to protect services from Government-imposed cuts in the Wirral. The Secretary of State is quickly gaining a reputation as the Minister for closing down, boarding up and hollowing out services in the Wirral and right across Merseyside.

Libraries, leisure centres and golf courses in the Wirral are facing closure, and their staff are facing the chop, as a result of centrally imposed austerity—an additional £27 million of austerity, despite the Chancellor and this lame duck of a Prime Minister promising that

[Mike Amesbury]

it was over. The stark reality can be witnessed right across every community in Merseyside and beyond. All right hon. and hon. Members present have exposed the continued pathway of Conservative-imposed austerity, despite the Government's fine words, and have laid out the consequences for council budgets, people and services. My hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) referred to the exclusion of Knowsley Council from the mysterious levelling-up fund, while my hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mick Whitley) referred to the 11 libraries that are being levelled down and facing the chop.

Last Wednesday, the Secretary of State and his team finally published the long-delayed and trailed levelling-up White Paper, as referenced by many Members present. After 12 years of Tory Government, we were presented with 12 mission statements that act as a scorecard for failure; it is a cut-and-paste job with no new money, reannouncements and vague targets to be met in 2030.

It may be fascinating to discover, on page 2 of this 300-page levelling-up White Paper, that Jericho was the earliest permanent urban settlement. However, Members present—and, more importantly, our constituents—want to know when our councils and communities will get back the funds that have been taken away from our villages, towns and cities over the last 12 years. Some £490 million has been taken away from the people of Liverpool, and another £34 million is expected to be cut; more than £50 million has been taken away from my local council of Halton. In fact, every Merseyside local authority has seen a cut of more than 50% in real terms, according to the National Audit Office.

The Minister will of course refer to cash-terms increases, but that excludes inflation, which is at a 30-year high. The consequences in many cases are workforces depleted, children's centres closed, libraries shut, youth services decimated and new charges introduced. The Government's approach to levelling up has been to give communities a fiver for jumping through mysterious hoops, while taking away a tenner.

In the case of Knowsley, Tory Ministers do not even see the council as worthy of the crumbs off the table of the levelling-up fund; they instead favour Richmondshire, multi-billionaires who happen to donate to the Tory party, and filling the potholes on the driveway up to their mansions. The good people of Knowsley remain left behind in Tory Britain.

Without doubt, the Minister will refer to the Government's preferred measure when talking about local government finances: core spending power. There will be some additional funding for adult and children's social care, but nothing like enough to meet demand or to plug the gaps. In fact, it was stated that in real terms there will be a cut of 2.5% in this settlement. This smoke-and-mirrors approach will result only in the Secretary of State being laughed off the Merseyside pitch during his visit to Liverpool today.

Between 2010 and 2021, council tax has gone up by a massive 31%, while the area-based grant has been cut by 37% on average. Tory Ministers have piled on the pain, with hard-pressed families paying more while receiving less in services, as was rightly stated. People have seen services closed down, places boarded up, and more and more councils facing bankruptcy.

Having council tax as a main source of income is inherently unfair; many councils in Merseyside have a higher number of band A properties with a lower tax base, but the arrangement favours the Secretary of State's Surrey authority. Ministers have promised a fair funding review time and again, yet councils and communities are still waiting desperately. When can we expect that, and a fundamental reform of business rates?

That unfairness and the cuts have consequences. It is no coincidence that, as was reported on the front page of the *Liverpool Echo* today, a baby born in Merseyside will on average die younger than a baby born in Surrey—a shameful indictment of the Government's 12 years in office.

5.18 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Neil O'Brien): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) on securing this important debate. As she has shown today, she is a passionate advocate for not only her constituency, but the whole of Merseyside. She has done us a favour by bringing together Members from across the region on the eve of the local government finance settlement debate to look at the funding in Merseyside.

Merseyside is a place with a hugely proud history and present. It is a European capital of culture, has legendary musical exports and at least two iconic football teams, and has, over the course of my lifetime, made significant economic progress, bouncing back from a difficult period of de-industrialisation. On the other hand, while Liverpool is absolutely recovering and making progress, we recognise that the city region continues to face profound challenges of deprivation and poor health—challenges that are among the most severe in the country.

We are committed to delivering a more prosperous future for Merseyside, and we want to help the area to play to its considerable strengths while it adapts to the challenges that I mentioned. Our plan is to do that in two different ways: first, through extra resources for local authorities in the local government finance settlement; and, secondly, through our flagship levelling-up proposals.

Mick Whitley: Will the Minister give way?

Neil O'Brien: I am afraid that I do not have time to give way; I am so sorry.

Dame Angela Eagle: Oh, come on!

Neil O'Brien: I am up against the clock, as the hon. Lady knows.

As we announced on Monday, the local government finance settlement for the next year makes an additional £3.7 billion available to councils in England; that includes funding for adult social care reform. This is an increase in local authority funding of more than 4.5% in real terms compared with the previous year, and we expect core spending power—the measure of resources available to local authorities to fund service delivery—to rise from £50.4 billion in 2021-22 to £54.1 billion in 2022-23, which I am just about to come to. I emphasise that the Government are providing around £1.6 billion in additional grant in the next year through the settlement, and through

additional funding for things such as the supporting families programme and cyber-resilience. What that means for Merseyside is that core spending power will increase for all authorities in the region by at least 7.7%, compared with last year.

Maria Eagle: Will the Minister give way on that point?

Neil O'Brien: I have made it clear that I will not give way.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. The Minister has made clear that he is not giving way. I am not saying whether that is right or wrong. However, I point out that he has six minutes left. I know that feelings are running high, but everybody has had their say, so let us give the Minister the courtesy of hearing what he has to say.

Neil O'Brien: Thank you, Mr Hollobone. That 7.7% increase is above the average cash increase across England of 7.4%. It is a cash increase of 7.7% for Sefton, 7.9% for the Wirral, 8.1% for Liverpool city, 8.4% for St Helens and 8.5% for Knowsley.

However, as every Member here will know, we vowed to build back better from the pandemic, and that is not only about local authority spending. We plan to do that through a cross-government mission to level up the country. We will increase our support for local councils, such as those in Merseyside, taking control of their destiny and stimulating their own growth.

Last week saw the long-awaited publication of our levelling-up White Paper, which Members referred to. It set out our plans. Part of it is about helping people directly; that is why we have changed the universal credit taper rate, making the average full-time worker £1,000 better off. Part of it is about employment support and the extra £1 billion we are spending on helping sick and disabled people into work, so that they have a chance to earn more money. It is also about directly increasing wages through our record increase to the national living wage, which again will make people about £1,000 better off.

On the one hand, we are helping people in Merseyside directly, and on the other we are devolving unprecedented powers to Liverpool and Merseyside. When we came to power, the only part of England that had any devolved powers was London, the capital and the richest part of England. That settlement was obviously unbalanced—good for London, but not necessarily good for the rest of the country. As Members mentioned, the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities is speaking at the Spine in Liverpool today, alongside council leaders and metro Mayors—a post that did not exist when we came to power—from across the north of England.

However, we know that our ambitions for Merseyside will not be delivered without proper investment, so our ambitions are backed up with funding. Since Steve Rotherham's election as Liverpool city region Mayor in May 2017, the Government have provided the city region with £172 million through the transforming cities fund and £332 million through the local growth fund, and will provide it with £710 million over the next five years to transform local transport networks. Across the Liverpool city region, four areas have also seen substantial

cash injections through the towns deal programme, which is designed to rejuvenate high streets. That includes £37 million for Southport; that is one of the biggest town deal investments to date. Through that kind of funding, we can help restore people's civic pride in the place they call home in the years ahead. I also draw Members' attention to the launch last year of the dedicated freeport in Liverpool, which estimates suggest could add £850 million to the local economy and create 14,000 new jobs.

To answer a question raised by Opposition Members, Members should look forward to further details on the UK shared prosperity fund, which we will set out shortly. That fund is worth £2.6 billion and will back the sort of projects that help people access opportunities in places of need. To respond directly to one of the questions asked, that will be an allocative process, not a competition. We are responding to the desire of places to have certainty about their funding. A number of Members raised questions about the commissioners. None of us wanted commissioners to have to go in. According to the independent Liverpool City Council commissioners report last year,

"The Council is emerging from a difficult, somewhat toxic period that has led to police investigations."

I do not want to delve further into that. However, none of us wanted those commissioners to have to be there. We hope that their work will be complete soon.

A few hon. Members spoke about the wider context. The tax share of GDP is at a record high; there is increased corporation tax and capital gains tax, so the rich are paying more through that route; a crackdown on tax avoidance has raised £160 billion-plus; we got rid of the double Irish arrangement and various other tax dodges that flourished under the last Labour Government; and we introduced the first tax on private jets. We have done a number of things to ensure that those with the broadest shoulders are paying, and that is why we are able to produce the increases in spending power for local authorities that I outlined.

Provided that the local government settlement passes through the House tomorrow, we believe that Merseyside and the local authorities making up the region will be on a firm footing for the year ahead. We are moving to a multi-year settlement as soon as we can. It is important to get that right. I am confident that the hon. Member for Wirral West and all those who have contributed to today's debate will share in my pride at the progress that has been made in Merseyside over the past decade. If I think back to when my brother and friends used to live there, there has been humungous progress across Merseyside.

In Liverpool's heyday, when it dominated transatlantic trade, it was considered the New York of Europe. Today, the fusing together of the powerful role played by the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority and its Mayor with significant Government investment in the region has given the city region a new lease of life. The alchemy of science, health, technology, culture and education that we see in Merseyside in 2022 is testament to a truly great city region, and to its people looking not back but forwards with confidence. Although the city region is part way through its renaissance, there is a lot of potential still to be realised, and I look forward to further discussions with colleagues from across the House on how we can best support Merseyside.

5.26 pm

Margaret Greenwood: I am somewhat flabbergasted by the Minister's response, to be perfectly honest. He talks about our councils being on a firm footing for the year ahead and humongous progress on Merseyside; he cannot have been listening particularly closely to the debate, or the evidence brought forward by MPs about the huge amount of deprivation. I remind him that my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Kim Johnson) spoke passionately about the urgent need to address systemic poverty and inequality. Colleagues talked about food bank use, which has gone through the roof.

My hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) spoke of Knowsley—her constituency is in two local authorities—being the second most deprived borough in the nation, so how can the Minister stand there and talk about things looking good for Merseyside? As my right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley (Sir George Howarth) said, Knowsley is not receiving any levelling-up money. It is astonishing that the Minister has taken this course. My hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mick Whitley) spoke passionately about this crisis being made in Westminster, not Birkenhead. He explained clearly that this ideological attack has devastated the lives of thousands of his constituents. He described it as not levelling up, but punching down. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley explained, Knowsley received no money for levelling up at all, whereas central Bedfordshire received £90 per head, and it is in the top fifth of the country. He asked how the Government can justify skewing the levelling-up fund.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle) spoke about an unrelenting assault on local authorities in the last 10 years, with the poorest populations

being hit the hardest. She said that that was a conscious choice, which is why the phrase “levelling up” rings so hollow in Wirral. She spoke about the explosion in the number of food banks and social supermarkets, and about how devastated our social care budgets have been. My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Paula Barker) spoke about the half a billion pounds-worth of cuts in 2010 to Liverpool—there was a cut of £12 million to Liverpool adult social care alone—and said clearly that we cannot go on like this.

This debate has been a plea from the MPs of Merseyside to the Government for funding for our communities. The impact is clear, raw, and hurting our people. My hon. Friend the Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer) spoke about the importance of working to improve life chances, but she described a decade of austerity that has been destructive to our communities. She spoke of the huge regional inequalities in our country, and described how they are being entrenched, as less well-off areas can raise less through council tax and business rates.

I think I have covered everybody who spoke in this really important debate. I ask the Minister to go away and revisit the points made in it, especially that made by my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) about this not being a Government of levelling up but a Government of closing down. This is real, and it is hurting our constituents. We ask the Government to think again.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered funding of local authorities on Merseyside.

5.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 8 February 2022

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Child Online Safety

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Chris Philp): Protecting children online is a Government priority and the strongest protections in the draft Online Safety Bill are for children.

The Online Safety Bill will establish new statutory duties requiring companies to take robust steps to improve safety online. The duties will cover user-to-user services—those that allow users to upload and share content that may be encountered by others—and search engines. All companies in scope will need to protect their users from illegal content and activity, and companies with services that are likely to be accessed by children will be required to protect children from legal but harmful content. While the Bill is technology neutral, we expect companies to use age verification technologies to prevent children from accessing services that pose the highest risk of harm to them, such as online pornography.

The online safety regime covers many of the most visited pornography sites, social media, video sharing platforms, forums and search engines—thereby capturing many of the sites through which children access pornography. These companies will have to prevent children from accessing pornography or face enforcement action by Ofcom.

The Government recognise the concern, raised by the Joint Committee during pre-legislative scrutiny of the Bill and by other child online safety stakeholders, that the Bill needs to go further to protect children from online pornography on services that do not currently fall within its scope.

To strengthen protections for children further, we will make changes to the Bill to incorporate a stand-alone provision requiring providers who publish or place pornographic content on their services to prevent children from accessing that content. This addresses the concerns that have been raised about a gap in scope for non-user-generated pornography, and ensures that all services that would have been captured by part 3 of the Digital Economy Act, and all the user-to-user and search services

covered by the Online Safety Bill, will be required to protect children from pornography. This new duty will be enforced by Ofcom with providers being subject to the same enforcement measures as other in-scope services.

The Government are committed to bringing forward the most comprehensive approach possible to protecting children online. We will introduce the Online Safety Bill as soon as parliamentary time allows and will continue to engage with Members of Parliament in both Houses on the protections for children within the Bill.

[HCWS599]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Automatic Enrolment Review 2022-23

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): Automatic enrolment into workplace pensions (AE) has been a huge success to date. Since its introduction in 2012, over 10 million people have been automatically enrolled and savings by eligible employees have increased by £28.4 billion. This has been achievable through the 1.9 million employers who have played a crucial role by enrolling their employees and paying contributions as appropriate.

An objective of this year's annual review of the AE earnings trigger and qualifying earnings band (the AE thresholds) is the continued stability of the policy. We also want to ensure that our approach continues to encourage individuals to save towards their pensions while ensuring affordability. Our approach is designed so that everyone who is automatically enrolled continues to pay contributions on a meaningful proportion of their income. The review has concluded that there should be a freeze of all AE thresholds for 2022-23 at 2021-22 levels. This is consistent with our ambitions to build a stronger, more inclusive savings culture. The Government are considering what more can be done to enable people to have greater financial security in retirement.

The 2022-23 Annual Thresholds

The automatic enrolment earnings trigger will remain at £10,000,

The lower earnings limit of the qualifying earnings band will remain at £6,240,

The upper earnings limit of the qualifying earnings band will remain at £50,270.

The analysis supporting the proposed revised AE thresholds will be published in due course. A copy of this will be placed in the Library of the House and will be available on the www.gov.uk website, following publication.

[HCWS598]

Ministerial Correction

Tuesday 8 February 2022

TRANSPORT

Topical Questions

The following is an extract from Transport questions on 3 February 2022.

Grant Shapps: I would like to update the House on action we have taken against the behaviour of Insulate Britain activists. Last year I asked National Highways to seek injunctions against the so-called eco-warriors who have inflicted such misery on motorists across the country, and following the latest High Court hearing yesterday a further five immediate prison sentences

were imposed as well as 11 suspended sentences against Insulate Britain activists for breaching these injunctions. That brings the total number of sentences and suspended sentences handed down to 31. Gluing oneself to the tarmac and throwing paint on public highways, causing miles of misery, just is not on; it affects hard-working people and causes misery to them, costing the taxpayer money.

[Official Report, 3 February 2022, Vol. 708, c. 446.]

Letter of correction from the Secretary of State for Transport, the right hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps).

An error has been identified in my response to the hon. Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones)

The correct information should have been:

Grant Shapps: That brings the total number of sentences and suspended sentences handed down to **34**.

ORAL ANSWERS

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MINISTERIAL CORRECTION

Tuesday 8 February 2022

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Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]
