

Thursday
26 January 2023

Volume 726
No. 108



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Thursday 26 January 2023

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Speaker's Statement

9.34 am

Mr Speaker: Before we start today's business, I want to note that tomorrow is Holocaust Memorial Day. I know the whole House will agree with me about the importance of remembering the 6 million Jewish people murdered during the holocaust, alongside the millions of other people killed as a result of Nazi persecution, as well as those killed in more recent genocides in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur. I know also that colleagues will want to join me in thanking the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust for the important work it does. This important event will be marked by a talk from survivors of the holocaust and of genocides in Darfur and Bosnia in Speaker's House at 1 pm today, and a ceremony in Portcullis House Atrium at 4.15 pm, at which you are all welcome.

Oral Answers to Questions

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Broadband Coverage: Rural Areas

1. **Daniel Kawczynski** (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): What progress her Department has made on expanding broadband coverage in rural areas. [903252]

10. **Selaine Saxby** (North Devon) (Con): What progress her Department has made on expanding broadband coverage in rural areas. [903262]

The Minister of State, Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Julia Lopez): I wish to echo your words about the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust's important work, Mr Speaker.

We are investing £5 billion through Project Gigabit to deliver lightning-fast broadband to hard-to-reach areas across our country. Last week, we announced that thousands of people living in rural Cornwall will benefit from a £36 million contract. We have now awarded six such contracts, covering up to 681,000 premises. More procurements are in the pipeline and we have also upped our voucher scheme so that more premises can benefit.

Daniel Kawczynski: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. Obviously, I am delighted that last week we secured nearly £19 million from the levelling-up fund

for Shrewsbury town centre, but we will never really have levelling up across the whole of the United Kingdom unless rural parts of our constituencies have broadband coverage commensurate with metropolitan areas in coverage and speed. What is she doing specifically to make sure that improvements are made in the county of Shropshire?

Julia Lopez: My hon. Friend is right to talk about the importance of digital connectivity to the whole levelling-up agenda, which is why we are prioritising our procurement to some of the really tough-to-reach parts of the country that have been poorly served by broadband previously. I know that he has been campaigning hard on these issues since 2015. He has good superfast coverage now in his constituency, but I appreciate that gigabit is not where it should be in his county. I am pleased to say that our Mid West Shropshire procurement is going to be awarded in April to June this year, and I hope that his constituents will benefit from that.

Selaine Saxby: The roll-out of rural broadband has made great progress in the past three years. Will my hon. Friend outline when the new framework and guidance for fibre community partnerships and the gigabit roll-out will be available, so that the roll-out can continue at pace across North Devon?

Julia Lopez: I thank my hon. Friend, because the progress has been substantial and she has been a key part of that by making sure that political pressure is maintained to get this kind of connectivity to places such as her constituency. On the fibre community partnerships, Openreach temporarily paused the registration while the supplier worked through the current requests. We have been working closely with Openreach to assist its review of that scheme. We hope it will be reopening it as soon as possible, but she will be pleased to hear that we are also on track to launch the Devon and Somerset procurements in April. Again, I hope that her constituents will stand to benefit from that.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I recently met people from CityFibre in my constituency to celebrate the roll-out of full fibre in Inverness. CityFibre is now moving into the rural areas, and it has taken the full fibre coverage from 0.8% to 60%. What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that companies such as CityFibre, working in partnership with local councils and others, can continue to operate in this market as there is this competition, and that they have the ability to operate in and expand into rural areas?

Julia Lopez: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his constructive intervention and question. CityFibre been fundamental in driving stiff competition in this area, which has really accelerated the roll-out. We thank CityFibre and other altnets and providers for all the work they are doing. We absolutely prioritise having a competitive framework, because we think it has been so crucial to making sure that areas such as his are covered.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): As has been said, if levelling up is to mean anything, it would mean it in broadband. Often, what is needed is just a green cabinet and small amounts of money for rural areas. What confidence can people have that the Government will act in this Parliament? Other countries

with a much worse topography have seen their rural areas get broadband years ago. What confidence can people have that the UK is going to act in the next two years—in this Parliament?

Julia Lopez: I am always grateful to hear from the hon. Gentleman. I know that his constituency is a very rural one with an island population, which creates particular challenges. Much of the broadband roll-out is being driven by the Scottish Government. Their R100 programme has had some problems, and I have spoken to Ivan McKee about how we can assist with those. We are keeping a very close eye on the matter, because we want to make sure that every part of our country is covered by this connectivity and is not disadvantaged by some of the local ways in which the projects are being managed.

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): The Gigabit Broadband Voucher Scheme is not working as intended in the smaller rural villages of Tatton. The community groups have found that the scope of the local authority contract includes commercially viable areas, but excludes the remote areas. I thank the Minister for being very helpful, but, ironically, the more work that we did, the more we exposed the weaknesses. Will she meet me, representatives of Lower Peover and Building Digital UK to solve the issue?

Julia Lopez: I thank my right hon. Friend for all the work that she has done to make sure that Cheshire is connected. I have looked at the issues of Lower Peover. In particular, she highlights challenges with the voucher scheme. I want to assure her that we have upped the amount that can be claimed to £1,500 per premises. I am always happy to meet hon. Members on these issues, but I also hold BDUK surgeries regularly, so please book in for those, but, of course, I will meet her personally to discuss this.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her answers and for the help that the central Government at Westminster give to Northern Ireland for rural broadband. One issue is banking, online shopping and postal services. Has the Minister had the opportunity to assess how, in relation to rural broadband, these things impact on banking services in rural areas? We are moving forward to new technology and new times. We need help.

Julia Lopez: The hon. Gentleman highlights just how important good connectivity is to accessing all the services that are going online. One great thing about Northern Ireland is some of the progress that it has made on gigabit connectivity from its contract with Fibrus, and we thank Fibrus for all that it has done. I am happy to look into any of the issues that he raises, but, as I have said, he highlights very well just why it is so important that people do have that connectivity.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I wish to begin by echoing your words about Holocaust Memorial Day.

From April, families across the country will face a 14% rise to their broadband bills, but, even before that increase, there were already more than 1 million households struggling to pay for the internet. Expanding gigabit

coverage is vital, but it is pointless if families cannot afford a broadband package. How will the Department work with Ofcom to examine the impact of mid-contract price increases and wholesale prices rising by inflation?

Julia Lopez: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. She is right to highlight the cost of living challenges that are affecting so many households. We have worked hard on this. It is important that we have a stable regulatory framework that allows companies to invest, but we have hitherto had some of the most competitive telecoms prices in Europe and consumers have benefited from that. In relation to those who are really struggling with their bills, we have done a lot of work with telecoms providers on social tariffs. Unfortunately, the uptake of those tariffs is not where it should be, so I ask every Member of this House to help us raise awareness, because their constituents can get deals from as little as £10 a month. Trying to get them that connectivity is so important to people's job chances, life chances and so on.

Mr Speaker: Before I call Nicola Richards, may I say congratulations to her?

Ownership Structure of Football Clubs

2. **Nicola Richards (West Bromwich East) (Con):** What steps she is taking to review the ownership structure of football clubs. [903253]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Stuart Andrew): The Government do not assess the ownership arrangements with individual clubs. However, the Government response to the recommendations made in the independent Fan-Led Review of Football Governance sets out our view that tests of new owners and directors are needed to ensure the future sustainability of football clubs and the stability of the game in total.

Nicola Richards: Thousands of West Bromwich Albion fans are deeply concerned about the actions of the club's ownership. The owner took a £5 million loan from the club to fund his other business—money that is yet to be repaid. The club has now taken a high-interest loan of £20 million to fund day-to-day business secured against the club's name and stadium. Will my right hon. Friend bring forward the Government's response to the Fan-Led Review and introduce a regulator to give fans the power to stop owners abusing the club's assets in this way and to penalise owners whose business decisions are not in the best interests of the football club?

Stuart Andrew: I add my congratulations to my hon. Friend on her recent wedding and praise her for the work she has been doing in this area in support of her local football club, working closely with fans' groups such as Action4Albion and Shareholders for Albion. We will set out our plans for reform in the White Paper, which will be published in the next few weeks and will include strong action on owners and directors to ensure that they are suitable custodians for clubs and to avoid harm to fans and local communities such as she has described.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Sustainable ownership in the long term can only be achieved if we sort out football finance. There are negotiations going on at the

moment between the English Football League and the Premier League around the issue of parachute payments, which create a financial imbalance, particularly in the championship. There are 14 clubs in the premier league that will not move on the issue of parachute payments, because they are the most likely to fall into the championship. Are the Government going to act on that, or will it take a Labour Government to do it?

Stuart Andrew: We have had extensive engagement with both the EFL and the Premier League, encouraging them to get on with the negotiations. Sometimes they have progressed and sometimes they have stalled, but I am pleased to say that they have been progressing somewhat more rapidly in recent weeks—I think the prospect of the coming White Paper may have encouraged that—and we hope they will come up with a solution that will bring financial stability to the whole of the pyramid.

Broadband Speeds: Urban Areas

3. **Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): What steps she is taking to increase broadband speeds in urban areas; and if she will make a statement. [903254]

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michelle Donelan): We have made it as attractive as possible to deploy gigabit broadband in the UK by busting barriers and requiring Ofcom to promote competition and investment. There are now more than 80 providers investing nearly £35 billion rolling out gigabit broadband, and coverage has risen to 73% from 6% in early 2019. The vast majority of urban areas will be connected commercially, at no extra cost to the taxpayer, by 2025.

Michael Fabricant: As we have already heard today, the spread of broadband into rural areas is going ahead at pace, but there are pockets in urban areas—I think particularly of Westminster and the centre of Birmingham—where Openreach is using very old copper twisted-pair technology, which has been around for more than 100 years and cannot develop the speed. It is up to firms such as G.Network, Hyperoptic, Virgin Media and City Broadband to provide that service, but they do not always provide a telephone service. What can my right hon. Friend do to encourage Openreach to upgrade its technology and infrastructure in urban areas?

Michelle Donelan: London and the west midlands are among the best-connected regions in the country: coverage in London is at 83% and in Birmingham it is even higher at 93%. However, as my hon. Friend points out, there is still more to do. This month we have brought into force new laws that make it easier for telecom companies to get faster broadband into 9 million flats where people are living, and the vast majority of premises in urban areas will be connected by 2025, whether by Openreach or another provider, at no cost to the taxpayer.

Grassroots Music Venues: Government Support

4. **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): What support the Government are providing to grassroots music venues. [903255]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Paul Scully): The Government are committed to supporting our grassroots music venues, the lifeblood of our world-leading music sector. Arts Council England has extended its Supporting Grassroots Live Music fund until 31 March 2023. During the pandemic, venues benefited from the cultural recovery fund; we are also supporting venues through the energy bills support scheme and will continue to do so through the energy bills discount scheme until spring 2024.

Kerry McCarthy: I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. With Independent Venue Week coming up next week, I pay particular tribute to Big Jeff, the best ambassador for grassroots music venues anyone could ever want, who is finally getting back out on the gig circuit after his terrible accident last year—thank you for indulging me on that, Mr Speaker. The sector is on a knife edge, sustained by a 0.2% profit margin. As I understand it—although the Minister may want to correct me, considering the answer he has just given—it is not included in the support for energy bills from 1 April. Will the Minister, if he does not have good news for me today, take that up with the Treasury as a matter of urgency, because it could be energy bills that finally push many independent music venues over the edge?

Paul Scully: I thank the hon. Lady and congratulate Big Jeff on all the work that he is obviously doing in the sector. We will certainly reflect on that. I think that the new energy scheme strikes the balance between supporting businesses over the next 12 months and limiting taxpayers' exposure to volatile energy markets, and there is a cap based on estimated volumes. It is really important that we support music venues, hospitality and wider community venues to the benefit of our community and the amazing creative sector.

Accessibility of Cultural Attractions

5. **Ian Levy** (Blyth Valley) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to increase the accessibility of cultural attractions. [903256]

8. **Angela Richardson** (Guildford) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to increase the accessibility of cultural attractions. [903259]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Stuart Andrew): My Department is committed to broadening the accessibility of our cultural heritage sites across the country. Arts Council England recently announced the 2023-26 national portfolio, which will significantly improve access to arts and culture. DCMS also works closely with David Stanley, the disability and access ambassador for arts and culture, to improve accessibility to the sector for those with disabilities.

Ian Levy: In recent months, projects in Blyth Valley have received upwards of £700,000 of funding from my right hon. Friend's Department, including the refurbishment of the grade I listed Seaton Delaval Hall, Headway Arts in Blyth, and the replica of the Williams II sailing ship that discovered Antarctica in 1820—there is so much to see. On that point, I offer my right hon. Friend the

opportunity to experience those projects at first hand, meet the people involved, and sample the excellent fish and chips on the north-east coastline.

Stuart Andrew: Heritage and culture play a vital role in many of our communities, including in the Blyth valley, showing that they are great places to live, work and visit. I am delighted that the Department and our outside bodies are funding projects there, including the £96,000 for Headway Arts. That is just what we want to see. Of course, I would be more than happy to visit my hon. Friend's constituency. As I represent the home of the original Harry Ramsden's, I would be interested to compare them with good old Yorkshire fish and chips.

Mr Speaker: Aren't they closed Minister?

Angela Richardson: I am incredibly proud of the Yvonne Arnaud theatre in Guildford and the outreach work that it does in the wards of Stoke and Westborough, which have some of the highest rates of deprivation and the lowest health outcomes in Surrey. It does all that work outside the national portfolio organisation framework, with little support from the local authority. To truly level up accessibility to the arts for my constituents, what can the Department do to encourage local authorities to recognise and support arts organisations that sit outside the NPO framework?

Stuart Andrew: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to be proud of her theatre and all the work that it does despite being outside the portfolio. Our Department is absolutely committed to ensuring that all people have access to arts and culture regardless of where they live. Many local authorities invest in those sectors and respond in innovative ways, and have created many new models. I hope that her local authority will look at the huge benefits that others have enjoyed by accessing many of the partnerships that have brought about best practice in our country.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Unboxed was a £120 million investment to celebrate the best of Britain. The Department reported in November that the figure for audience engagement was just over 18 million. That sounds a reasonable reach, but it turns out that a one-hour "Countryfile" TV special was doing the heavy lifting with 5 million viewers—nearly a third of the total. I understand that a wider evaluation is in hand, but does the Minister think that the festival made the impact that his Department intended it to, and can he ensure that this point is considered in the wider evaluation?

Stuart Andrew: The hon. Gentleman is right to question in the way that he has. Unboxed has had many successes, and it has brought about cultural and art experiences to places that would perhaps never usually enjoy them—I am thinking about the work that went on in Caernarfon in north Wales, for example. He is right that we are evaluating it, and this will be a part of the assessment that we make.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): What steps will Ministers take to ensure that cultural attractions in tourist spots offer full disability awareness training for staff, covering not just physical disabilities but hidden disabilities, so that they can better accommodate their visitors?

Stuart Andrew: The hon. Lady is absolutely right: when we talk about access for all, we absolutely mean it. The disability unit in the Government has launched an enhanced and expanded programme of disability and access ambassadors to help us drive progress in increasing access. I am pleased that many of our establishments are working on that at speed.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): The accessibility of cultural organisations will be affected greatly by the Government's tapering of orchestra tax relief and theatre tax relief from April. The Association of British Orchestras tells me that the 50% rate has enabled orchestras to survive at a time when box office and other earned income is falling. It has enabled concerts in non-traditional venues, reaching new audiences in underserved communities. However, the tapered rate will cost some national organisations as much as £3 million. Jobs will be lost, there will be cuts to productions, and outreach work, such as that we have heard about, will not be possible. Some orchestras and theatres will just not survive. Will the Minister ask the Chancellor to review urgently the reduction in orchestra and theatre tax reliefs?

Stuart Andrew: The hon. Lady is right to raise those important points. I assure her that both I and my ministerial colleagues in the Department have regular discussions with colleagues in the Treasury. We will continue to do so and raise the points she has highlighted.

Grassroots Club Rugby: Recovery after Covid-19

6. **Sam Tarry** (Ilford South) (Lab): What recent steps her Department has taken with the Rugby Football Union to help support the recovery of grassroots club rugby following the covid-19 outbreak. [903257]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (**Stuart Andrew**): Supporting grassroots sports is a key Government priority. It brings communities together and makes people happier and healthier. Through the sport survival package, rugby union received £160 million to ensure the survival of clubs at all levels during the pandemic. That was specifically designed to help those grassroots clubs. In addition, Sport England offered £23 million to support rugby union during the pandemic.

Sam Tarry: Local rugby clubs play a vital role in encouraging a healthy lifestyle, bring communities together and provide young people with an opportunity to develop friendships and skills for life. As the Minister knows, the pandemic has proved ruinous for many clubs, with clubs local to me in Ilford, Dagenham, Barking, Romford, Chingford and Wanstead all facing either closure or significant difficulties. The president of my local club, Ilford Wanderers, told me:

"We aren't just losing players; we losing wholesale teams."

That has been compounded this week by the controversial changes to the amateur games rules for rugby union regarding safe tackle height, announced without consultation. I seek the Minister's assurance that funding will be ongoing and he will work with the Rugby Football Union on financial support to save those community clubs and ensure that this fantastic game, in all its forms, continues for many generations to come.

Stuart Andrew: The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight the significant contribution that rugby union makes in many of our communities. I pay tribute to the many thousands of volunteers who give up their time to ensure that these clubs survive. We work constantly with the RFU and Sport England to ensure that the best assessment is made of support that is needed for the sector. I will continue to do that and raise the points that he highlighted.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Ind): I welcome the news that more than 200 grassroots rugby, football and boxing organisations across England and Wales are to be awarded £5 million to put on local schemes. Does the Minister agree that, apart from the obvious health and wellbeing benefits, these schemes help to keep vulnerable young people out of antisocial behaviour and crime?

Stuart Andrew: My hon. Friend is right. The power of sport is significant and far-reaching: it helps with health and wellbeing and, as he rightly points out, can be a great avenue for helping people not to be tempted into areas of crime. That is why grassroots sports will be a key focus of our sports strategy.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): We all love the game of rugby football union. In Wales this week, the Welsh Rugby Union was accused of sexism and misogyny. It is shocking and, unfortunately, reaches throughout the culture of Welsh rugby. Will the Minister and the Secretary of State reach out to the Welsh Government to provide their support and give the right guidance on setting up an independent regulator?

Stuart Andrew: Sexism, misogyny or any prejudice has no place whatever in any of our sports. As the hon. Member knows, sport is devolved, but I will reach out to colleagues in the Welsh Government and have a discussion about that. I am absolutely clear that our sports strategy will have inclusion at its heart.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): First, may I congratulate you, Mr Speaker, on last month becoming the new president of the Rugby Football League? I suspect that your form of the game will see a big influx of new players as the English Rugby Football Union seeks to rewrite the rules of the union game.

Does the Minister agree that, given 75,000 players, coaches and supporters of the union game have already signed a petition rejecting the new rules, the RFU should think again, work more collaboratively with the grassroots across all the home nations and ensure that all steps taken to improve player safety are consistent and workable and do not lead to a player exodus?

Stuart Andrew: My right hon. Friend raises an important point that a number of colleagues have already raised with me. As he will be aware, national governing bodies such as the Rugby Football Union are responsible for the regulation of their sport and ensuring that appropriate measures are in place to protect participants from harm and serious injuries. I can assure him that we continue to work with sports bodies, including the RFU, to ensure that player safety is prioritised, and I will certainly raise the points he has raised in my next meeting with it.

Rugby Football Bicentenary Celebration

7. **Mark Pawsey** (Rugby) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to support the celebration of the bicentenary of rugby football in 2023. [903258]

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michelle Donelan): The Government are delighted that rugby union is celebrating 200 years in 2023. We are looking forward to working with my hon. Friend to mark that occasion, and I am delighted that the Minister for Sport, my right hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew), plans to join some of those celebrations at Rugby School. Rugby continues to be one of our biggest participation sports, and the very best of the game will be showcased in the men's world cup later this year. We also look forward to supporting the growth of the game, with England hosting the women's world cup in 2025.

Mark Pawsey: Mr Speaker, you will know that my constituency is known around the world as the birthplace of the game, where it is played in both codes—both union and league. The game all started in 1823, when a Rugby schoolboy, William Webb Ellis, picked up and ran with the ball at a time when everybody else just kicked it. The bicentenary this year gives both the town and Rugby School the opportunity to celebrate with events and matches on The Close, including one with the parliamentary team from the Commons and the Lords. We are welcoming the Minister for Sport, and we look forward to seeing him at the celebrations with the first pass of the ball, which will be transported to rugby-playing countries around the world.

Michelle Donelan: The Minister is very much looking forward to joining the start of the global pass, which will see 200 passes take a rugby ball through the hands of fans across the globe. The programme of events will give plenty of opportunities for the people of Rugby and beyond to celebrate their role in the history of the sport.

Mr Speaker: Do not forget that the Minister for Sport is a rugby league man. At least now he can do both codes.

Football Governance: Fan-Led Review

9. **Dan Jarvis** (Barnsley Central) (Lab): Whether she plans to implement the recommendations of the Fan-Led Review of Football Governance. [903261]

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michelle Donelan): When we published our response to the recommendations made by the independent Fan-Led Review of Football Governance, we were clear that football needs reform to ensure the game's long-term sustainability and to safeguard clubs, and I have met the authorities to push for action now. We will publish a White Paper setting out our detailed position within the next couple of weeks. That will set out the direction of travel for significant reform within football.

Dan Jarvis: I do not know whether I need to declare an interest as a supporter of Barnsley football club, but I put that on the record anyway. Further to the point

made just a moment ago, we are still waiting for progress between the Premier League and the English Football League on increased funding to the pyramid, which could, hopefully, avoid another Bury football club or Derby County scenario. The Minister and the Secretary of State have mentioned the White Paper, but given that it may be 18 months before any new regulator is operational, can the Secretary of State say what she will do in the interim to break the deadlock and ensure that football clubs are financially sustainable for the longer term?

Michelle Donelan: While we will publish the White Paper in two weeks' time, it is clear that football does not need to wait for the Government to act. Both the Minister for Sport and I have had several meetings trying to push that along. I urge football to act now because it is in its interests, too, to safeguard clubs and to protect the interests of fans.

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): I welcome the news that the Government's White Paper will be published shortly. Does the Secretary of State agree that most football clubs that get into financial difficulties are already trading outside of the rules of the competitions they play in? If those rules were properly enforced, these problems would not occur, and that is why we need the regulator to ensure that transparency exists.

Michelle Donelan: As always, my hon. Friend talks a great deal of sense, and I completely agree with him. That is why this Government will be acting and standing up in the interests of clubs and fans to ensure that the regulator is in place to do just that, but of course the rules of the game could be enforced now.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): Everton football club is reportedly up for sale, with its stadium half-built. With others up for sale, this looks set to be a record year for premier league clubs changing hands. Many others face financial problems and ownership uncertainties, all since the Fan-Led Review was published. Yet fans will have no say and new owners are not subject to robust independent checks. We still do not have the deal on financial distribution in the pyramid. Will the Secretary of State take responsibility for the clubs that go under or get themselves into trouble before the independent statutory regulator is finally implemented?

Michelle Donelan: This Government have proven time and again that we are on the side of the fans. We committed to the review in our manifesto. We stepped in during covid to protect clubs with a £600-million sport survival package. We stepped in again to prevent the super league—a competition that no fans wanted. Whenever fans have needed us, we have been in their corner. This will be a huge shake-up of football, and I will not apologise for taking the time to get it right. We will come forward with the White Paper in the next two weeks.

Topical Questions

T1. [903297] **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michelle Donelan): The Online Safety Bill reached a major milestone when it passed its Third Reading. It is now being introduced in the Lords. Last week I visited Birmingham to hear how the 2022 Commonwealth games has contributed £870 million to the UK economy. Meanwhile, another major event is heading down the tracks, with just 100 days to go until the King's coronation. The Government are helping to deliver a historic weekend that will bring our country and communities together. Everyone can join us across the whole weekend, whether it is hosting a street party or volunteering through the Big Help Out for causes that matter to them.

Bob Blackman: I thank my right hon. Friend for that update. There has been much conjecture in the press about widely differing rules on transgender people participating in elite sports, with very different agreements made. Could my right hon. Friend give an update on her position, to ensure that we protect the integrity of women's sports?

Michelle Donelan: On all sport, the Government are clear that a way forward is needed that protects and shows compassion to all athletes. We are also clear that sex has an impact on the fairness of competitive women's sport. Fairness should be the primary consideration. We need a common-sense approach in this area, which is why I am holding a roundtable with domestic governing bodies in the coming weeks, and working with UK Sport on an international engagement plan.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): Half the DCMS shortlisting panel for the BBC chair had close links to the Conservative party, but even they managed to put forward five candidates. So what does the Secretary of State think it was about the close confidante of the former Prime Minister who was helping with his personal finances that first attracted him to appoint Mr Sharp over the other four candidates? Does she have confidence in the process and that the actual and perceived conflicts of interest were fully disclosed?

Michelle Donelan: Richard Sharp was appointed chairman of the BBC following a rigorous appointment process in line with the public appointments governance code and the BBC royal charter. The advisory assessment panel included a senior independent panel member approved by the Commissioner for Public Appointments, who praised the process as fair and robust. In addition, there was pre-appointment scrutiny by the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, which confirmed Mr Sharp's appointment. I understand the current Commissioner of Public Appointments will be investigating.

T2. [903301] **Mark Pawsey** (Rugby) (Con): We have already heard about the RFU changes in the tackle law for rugby. We understand that they are in the interest of making the game safer, but we have heard concerns among players more broadly. Another issue is that the elite game is administered internationally, but the new laws will apply only at a community level. Many elite and community players believe that is wrong. Will the Minister agree in principle that the rules and laws of any sport should apply equally to all those who take part?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Stuart Andrew): My hon. Friend has spoken to me on a number of occasions about this issue. As I said to him, these national and international governing bodies are independent of Government, but he raises important points that I will be more than happy to raise in my next meeting with the RFU, and perhaps he and I can have a further discussion about this in due course.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

John Nicolson (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): Does the Secretary of State believe the public think it is ever acceptable for anyone to donate hundreds of thousands to a political party and then be appointed by that same political party to a plum public post—in the case of BBC chair Richard Sharp, having been interviewed, we now learn, by a panel including another Tory party donor? Rigorous—really?

Michelle Donelan: As I have already stated, there was a rigorous appointment process, in line with the public appointments governance code and the BBC royal charter. In addition, the House of Commons' own Select Committee confirmed Mr Sharp's appointment.

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): For some of the most vulnerable people in Darlington and up and down the country, terrestrial broadcast TV and radio serves as a lifeline, as we so starkly learned when the Bilsdale mast caught fire last year. Will my right hon. Friend commit to ensuring that broadcast TV and radio will be supported well into the future, so that everyone can enjoy these services?

The Minister of State, Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Julia Lopez): My hon. Friend is right to highlight the importance of terrestrial, particularly to the most vulnerable communities. We have committed to ensuring that it is in place until at least 2034, and we are supporting the continued use of spectrum for that purpose. We have also commissioned a study to ensure that we are fully aware of how TV habits are affecting this.

T3. [903302] **Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Ind): The advent of music streaming has been positive for new talent getting their stuff out there, but the big platforms and labels can hoover up all the profits, and we have heard heartbreaking stories in the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee about young musicians who cannot keep the wolves from the door in the cost of living crisis. Will the Government accept that the recorded music industry and streaming culture need a complete reset, and will they play their full part in getting all the players around the table so that we have fair pay for all?

Julia Lopez: I thank the hon. Lady for highlighting this issue. The Competition and Markets Authority has already looked into that and was not concerned about competition issues in relation to some of the platforms, but we are looking at this as an intellectual property question. The relevant Minister in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and I will have a roundtable on this issue, to ensure we are fully across it and to highlight its importance.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): The Secretary of State will be aware of the exemption proposed for artificial intelligence from copyright restrictions on text and data mining. I have been struck since I became acting Chair of the Select Committee by the weight of worry from different creative sectors, including music and cinema, that this could destroy the copyright protections that many creators have. Are Ministers looking carefully at that?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Paul Scully): I can confirm that we are looking carefully at this. We have had a range of reactions to the proposals. The Minister for IP, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman), welcomed the additional evidence, and the Government have now launched a period of stakeholder engagement on implementation options, taking into account the evidence received. We are confident that, together, we can come up with a proportionate response.

T4. [903303] **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): On the same topic, I hope the Minister saw Nick Cave's response when he was sent a song written in the style of Nick Cave by ChatGPT this week. Does the Minister agree with him that creating such music using AI is "a grotesque mockery of what it is to be human", and

"The apocalypse is well on its way. This song sucks"?

Paul Scully: I have not heard the song, but I will look it up. As I said to my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Damian Green), we are confident that we will design a balanced approach. We will work with the industry to develop the creative industries sector vision and set out our ambitions for the sector, including in that important area.

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): North Norfolk is home to some of the most incredible and beautiful heritage landscapes. We know that the benefits to our mental health are enormous when we have equal access to these surroundings. Will my right hon. Friend thank my constituent Laura Drysdale, who is director of the Restoration Trust in Cromer, for all her charitable work to help those suffering with mental ill health and support her National Lottery Heritage Fund bid for the Norfolk landscapes for wellbeing project?

Stuart Andrew: My hon. Friend highlights very well the benefits of our many heritage sites and the work done by many volunteers. We are incredibly proud them and grateful for their extensive work to make our heritage sites some of the best in the world to visit.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): I raise the plight of the Peacehaven and Telscombe conurbation, which has more than 23,000 people, with no further education provision, high levels of free school meals and pupil premium, and, despite improvements, below average rates of literacy and numeracy. Despite that, the county council wishes to downgrade the library from 900 square metres to 300 square metres and to reduce its opening times. Will the Minister join me in calling for libraries of an appropriate size in large towns? Will the Department publish statutory guidelines on the square meterage and opening times expected per population for large towns?

Paul Scully: As the hon. Gentleman says, public libraries are run by local authorities, so it is up to each local authority to identify the needs of local residents. DCMS has previously received representations about the relocation of Peacehaven library and we have engaged with the local authority to understand the plans and their implications. The Secretary of State has a statutory power to intervene by way of a local inquiry if she considers that a local authority is not providing a comprehensive and efficient library service. That is taken seriously, so if a complaint is received, the Department will challenge the council and evidence will be carefully considered before it is decided whether a local inquiry is needed.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Parish Churches: Family Attendance

1. **Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): What recent steps the Church of England has taken to encourage families to attend events at parish churches. [903285]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous): There are Church of England churches that provide breakfast and lunch clubs, as well as youth, children's and toddler activities, including messy church and much more besides. A vibrant children's and youth ministry is often a key component of church growth.

Kevin Foster: I thank my hon. Friend for his answer. The core of any parish mission is outreach to the community, with events such as the forthcoming family fun day at St Martin's church, Barton, which will offer local families a chance for free fun, with lunch included. What resources are the Church Commissioners providing to support parishes in that mission and to ensure that details of such events reach those who would most benefit from attending?

Andrew Selous: I commend my hon. Friend for drawing attention, for the second month in a row, to the great work done by his local churches—none more so than St Martin's church, Barton under the inspirational leadership of Father Nick Debney and Pamela Macey. On behalf of the House and the Church of England leadership, I warmly thank them for everything they do. I will send my hon. Friend details of the national churches strategic funding programmes, to which the diocese of Exeter can apply for St Martin's church and other local churches.

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMISSION

The hon. Member for South Norfolk, the Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission, was asked—

National Audit Office's Estimate

2. **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): What recent assessment the Commission has made of the National Audit Office's estimate. [903286]

Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk): In line with its statutory duties, the Public Accounts Commission sits formally to discuss the NAO's main supply estimate, taking evidence from the Comptroller and Auditor General and other NAO officials. On 1 March last year, the Commission approved the NAO's supply estimate for the financial year that will shortly end, and it also approved an adjustment in November to allow the NAO to enter into a lease in Newcastle. On 8 March this year, the Commission is due to consider the NAO's supply estimate for the forthcoming financial year, which will end in March 2024.

Mr Hollobone: The National Audit Office does superb work with penetrating analysis of public expenditure, but it now covers the greatest ever number of public sector organisations. Will the Public Accounts Commission take that into account when arriving at the estimate for next year?

Mr Bacon: Yes, it will. The National Audit Office is affected by inflation, which is now at 9.2%, as well as other cost pressures relating to its statutory role, including the greater work required by updated international audit standards and the fact that when more public bodies are created, they need to be audited. The Commission also notes that the NAO is competing against private sector audit firms in recruiting and retaining staff, and needs to take that into consideration. The Commission will discuss those issues in more detail when the NAO presents its main estimate on 8 March.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Churches and Cathedrals: Maintenance

3. **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): What assessment the Church of England has made of the steps needed to put the maintenance of churches and cathedrals on a sustainable basis. [903288]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous): The Taylor review of cathedral and church building sustainability was published in 2017. There is an urgent need for dialogue with the Government about it, because without a bedrock of basic maintenance and repairs funding, there is a real risk to many of our amazing church and cathedral buildings. In passing, I note that such issues are always easier to address with a full church.

Bob Blackman: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. My constituency is home to no fewer than 24 churches, including every branch of Christianity, but St Lawrence's church in particular is in dire need of repair. It is a very well populated church, but it does need additional funds to restore it to its previous good keeping. Can my hon. Friend tell me what help will be given to St Lawrence's church?

Andrew Selous: I have read up on St Lawrence, Little Stanmore: its baroque interior and internationally renowned organ—Handel was employed as a composer in residence—are real treasures. I will put my hon. Friend in touch

with the national church buildings department, which advises parishes on grants and support for refurbishment. I can also tell him that the Willesden area council of the diocese of London is able to distribute grants of up to £20,000 for urgent repairs.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): As the hon. Member said, a large number of churches and cathedrals in this country are in serious danger, including a number in my constituency. He also mentioned discussions between the Government and the Church of England on securing the future of churches. Will he say if those discussions are imminent?

Andrew Selous: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that point, and I think the answer is that they need a bit of a boost, if I could put it that way. I would welcome his support, and indeed that of hon. Members on all sides, because I think all places of worship—and the Church of England does have an enormous number of grade I and grade II buildings—are important in all of our communities, and we do need a serious national conversation about how we keep them going for the future. Other countries fund them from the state. Personally, I do not think that is right, but I do think we need a dialogue with Government as to how we go forward in this area.

RESTORATION AND RENEWAL CLIENT BOARD

The hon. Member for Broxbourne, representing the Restoration and Renewal Client Board, was asked—

Restoration of the Palace of Westminster: Sustainable Procurement

4. Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): What steps the board is taking to plan for a sustainable procurement policy for restoration of the Palace of Westminster. [903291]

Sir Charles Walker (Broxbourne): The delivery authority leads on procurement for the restoration and renewal programme. The delivery authority's procurement policy includes sustainability as one of the criteria to consider when making procurement decisions. The aim is to deliver a refurbishment programme that ensures efficient and responsible resource consumption, helps to develop construction and craft skills nationally, and increases social mobility—for example, through taking on apprentices.

Mr Sheerman: What a mess we are in with both Houses. What a mess restoration and renewal is in. I campaigned for putting a lot of the work on the river, but that pales into insignificance when we see the mess we are in. People locally—my constituents—say, “Quite honestly, you people in Parliament couldn’t organise a proverbial in a brewery!” The fact is that we look ridiculous in this House because, whether it is sustainable or non-sustainable, we simply seem to be making no progress at all.

Sir Charles Walker: Forgive me, Mr Speaker. I am not sure what the question was there, but I shall try to answer. I share the hon. Gentleman's desire with regard to the Thames, because I know we have a passion for

the Thames. I want to see the River Thames thrive: I want to see it thrive with fish for personal reasons, but I also want to see it thrive with commercial endeavour. Despite the hon. Gentleman's frustrations, the delivery authority is looking at conducting feasibility studies on using the Thames to deliver construction materials, and I can write to him further about that. I am not sure I can help him with his frustrations immediately, but perhaps in the future we will ease them somewhat.

Dame Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con): I often agree with the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman), and this is no exception. I would like to ask my hon. Friend—a very good friend—what on earth we are doing. Why are we not out of this place or making plans to remove ourselves to somewhere else while restoration and renewal carries on? Are we ever going to do it, or are we just going to wait until asbestos, a sewage leak, a fire or some other disaster befalls us?

Sir Charles Walker: I thank my right hon. Friend for her—incredibly helpful—question, and I shall try to answer it as best I can. The delivery authority is working tirelessly to deliver a programme to renew and restore the Palace of Westminster, and there are enormous complexities here, as she knows. I do not want to stray into politics, but ultimately any restoration of this place will have to be funded, and we do need to find a mechanism for funding that the Treasury feels comfortable signing off. As far as the plans are concerned, progress is being made, and I am more than happy to keep my right hon. Friend informed, despite her fierce questioning.

ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE

The hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood, representing the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission, was asked—

Political Donations and Donors: Electoral Law

5. Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): Whether the committee has had recent discussions with the commission on the strength and transparency of electoral law on political (a) donations and (b) donors. [903293]

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood): The Speaker's Committee has not held recent discussions on the matters raised. The UK has one of the most transparent political finance regimes in the world. However, the Electoral Commission has highlighted that reforms are needed to modernise and further safeguard our system, and it has made recommendations to ensure that voters can have greater confidence in political finance in the UK. Those include new duties on parties for enhanced due diligence, risk assessment of donations, and changes to the law to ensure that companies have made enough money in the UK to fund any donations.

Owen Thompson: While I welcome steps to improve transparency in donations to political parties, what more can the Speaker's Committee do to support improved transparency in donations to, and campaign activity of, non-party campaigners, and on increasing levels of foreign interference?

Cat Smith: The commission regulates the spending of organisations campaigning during the regulated period ahead of an election or referendum. It also regulates donations to political parties and candidates. Unless an organisation is engaged in regulated campaign activity, it will fall outside the commission's area of responsibility. The commission does not have a role in regulating spending on political activity more generally. The National Security Bill includes measures to tackle foreign interference in the UK's political processes, but could provide additional security by incorporating additional recommendations. That would include strengthening existing controls on donations and loans to political parties and campaigners, such as enhanced due diligence checks based on anti-money laundering regulations. I know the hon. Gentleman is an active and interested member of the Speaker's Committee, and I am sure that the Electoral Commission would be happy to meet him if he wishes to discuss the matter further.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Does the hon. Lady agree that the Electoral Commission should look at its own strength and transparency before it looks at others?

Cat Smith: If the hon. Gentleman would like to raise any particular concerns with the commission, I extend the invitation to him. The commission would be happy to meet him to discuss political donation. The commission has recommended that political parties be required to conduct enhanced due diligence checks, so that voters can have greater confidence in political party finance.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Church's Assets: Historic Involvement with Slavery

6. **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): Whether the commissioners have made an estimate of the proportion of the Church's assets that may have a link to a historic involvement with slavery. [903294]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous): The Church Commissioners have not tried to draw a direct line from historical investments to current assets, given the myriad inflows and outflows over 300 years. Our forensic accountants estimate that investments linked to the slaving activities of the South Sea Company were equivalent to several hundred million pounds in today's money. That is deeply shameful to acknowledge, and while no amount of money will ever be enough to repair the horrors of the past, the Church Commissioners have decided to invest £100 million over the next nine years in a better future for all, particularly in those communities affected by historical slavery.

Sir Desmond Swayne: Can my hon. Friend assure me that the not disproportionate £100 million will be spent to reduce the shocking persistence of slavery in the present?

Andrew Selous: The £100-million fund will enable impact investment grant funding and research in response to the findings in the Church Commissioners' report. An oversight group will be established to help the

Church Commissioners shape and deliver that response. Today the Church Commissioners, as award-winning ethical investors, punch well above their weight in combating modern slavery and human rights violations all around the world.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): While we cannot and should never ignore the Church's historical involvement with slavery, is it not better to focus on the missionary work that churches did over the years, with the spread of the Gospel and the best story ever told: that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners?

Andrew Selous: I do not think it is a question of either/or. When the chief executive of the Church Commissioners was on the "Today" programme recently explaining why we have done this, he was contacted later that day by a global majority heritage individual who had stayed away from the Church for 40 years and is now going to come back again. I say also to the hon. Gentleman that full churches do not tend to fall down.

Lichfield Cathedral

7. **Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): Whether he plans to visit Lichfield cathedral to see the work of Dean Adrian Dorber. [903295]

Andrew Selous: I look forward very much to visiting Lichfield cathedral, but sadly that may not be until after Dean Adrian Dorber retires. I know that the dean's work has been so significant that I will see many ongoing examples of his tremendous legacy when I do visit.

Michael Fabricant: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, because he will see the Herkenrode glass, which has been restored, and he will hear the magnificent organ, for which £6 million had to be raised to make it sound so beautiful. They are a reminder that a dean's work is not just worship, but fundraising, management and all the other factors in running a great and successful cathedral such as Lichfield. What sort of training is given? It seemed to me that poor Adrian Dorber had to learn on the job and then, with a little bit more investigation, Mr Speaker—it is a bit like being a Speaker, actually—that they all have to learn on the job. Can we not improve on that?

Andrew Selous: One might think that Lichfield cathedral was the only cathedral in the Church of England, because my hon. Friend is one of the very few Members who regularly stands up for his cathedral. Running a cathedral, as he rightly says, is not only a major spiritual undertaking to proclaim the good news of Jesus, but a huge management task, which is why we require all new deans to undertake a component of an MBA module before taking up office.

Blessings for Same-sex Couples

8. **Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): Whether the Commissioners have held discussions with senior Church leaders on allowing clergy to conduct blessings for same-sex couples. [903296]

Andrew Selous: With you permission, Mr Speaker, following my response to the urgent question on Tuesday, the advice I was given then was by the Church legal office, and I was yesterday asked to make a small

clarification. A simple majority in each of the three Houses of the General Synod could suffice to pass a measure and amending canon to change the definition of marriage in ecclesiastical law, but circumstances could also arise in which two-thirds majorities in the House of Bishops and the House of Clergy would be needed, and, as with all authorised forms of service, a two-thirds majority in each House would be required for the approval of the Synod as a form of service for the marriage of a same-sex couple. I apologise, Mr Speaker, but I was only informed yesterday. Given that I was answering questions today, I thought you would find it acceptable that I put that slight clarification on the record.

In answer to the question from the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine), it is the case that the General Synod of the Church of England can make its own decisions on these matters. Members of the Synod will have a chance to make their own views clearly known, having listened to the very forcible views expressed in this House on Tuesday. I repeat that the Church of England has apologised for past behaviours, and welcomes and values LGBTQI+ people unreservedly and joyfully.

Christine Jardine: I thank the hon. Member for that clarification and for his comments about welcoming the LGBTQI+ community joyfully. But can I ask him to

clarify then why it is that a man and a woman who do not believe in God and do not regularly attend church are welcome to marry in the Church of England—indeed, the Church’s website says, “God’s blessing is the main attraction for many couples”—but a couple in a same-sex relationship, both of whom may have worshipped in the Church all their lives and live in the spirit of Christian faith, are denied the same right in the Church, even though similar denominations in Scotland offer that opportunity? Can the hon. Member inform the House whether the Commissioners have discussed that inequality with the Church of England?

Andrew Selous: The hon. Lady is right to raise this issue. These matters will be very lively debated at the General Synod between 6 and 9 February. I can also tell her that each province in the global Anglican communion is autonomous. The majority of the provinces in the communion provide neither blessings nor marriages for same-sex couples: the Scottish Episcopal Church provides marriages, the Church in Wales provides blessings, and the Church of Ireland provides neither for same-sex couples, so the hon. Lady can see that there is a variety of practice within these islands. But I have heard what she has said and, more importantly, I will make sure that the General Synod is very well aware of her views and those of others in this House.

Business of the House

10.35 am

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House give us the business for next week?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Penny Mordaunt): The business for next week is as follows:

MONDAY 30 JANUARY—Committee of the whole House and remaining stages of the Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Bill.

TUESDAY 31 JANUARY—Opposition day (12th allotted day): debate in the name of the official Opposition, subject to be announced

WEDNESDAY 1 FEBRUARY—Remaining stages of the UK Infrastructure Bank Bill [*Lords*].

THURSDAY 2 FEBRUARY—General debate on LGBT history month, followed by a general debate on devolution in Wales 25 years on. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 3 FEBRUARY—Private Members' Bills.

The provisional business for the week commencing 6 February includes:

MONDAY 6 FEBRUARY—Debate on motions to approve the draft Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order 2023, the draft Benefit Cap (Annual Limit) (Amendment) Regulations 2023 and the draft Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order 2023, followed by a debate on a motion to approve the charter for budget responsibility: autumn 2022 update.

Thangam Debbonaire: I thank the Leader of the House for setting out the business. Ministers answering questions from MPs on behalf of our constituents should be a given—it is the most basic form of scrutiny in a parliamentary democracy—but, as we all know, this Government struggle with even the basics. Swerving scrutiny is now the norm. Last week the right hon. Lady said, as a justification for setting off on a pre-prepared political rant, that I had invited her to compare the Government's record in power against Labour's. I did not, actually, and she should not need to be reminded that that is not what these exchanges are about. I am happy to take her for a cup of tea and talk about Labour's record achievements: cutting NHS waiting times and crime; on educational attainment; the minimum wage; laws on equality and human rights; and the world's first climate change Act—the list goes on and on.

What I would like here, on behalf of the people we represent, is direct answers to important questions on the Government's failing legislative agenda and their utter disdain for Parliament. Admittedly, if the Prime Minister carries on as he is, the right hon. Lady might be able to dust off her "PM for PM" Tory leadership merch sooner rather than later—I'd like a mug—but until then Parliament requires her to represent the interests of this House, and therefore the British people, in Government.

Seeing as the right hon. Lady did not answer last week, let us have another go. First, on the Tories' sacking of nurses Bill, they should have published an impact assessment before it even reached the House, yet the final stages are due in the Commons on Monday and we still have not got one. That is despite her saying last week, publicly, that she thought impact assessments were very handy. Well, they are, but they are more than that; they are a

crucial tool for parliamentary oversight, especially when a Bill is being rattled through like this one. What are the Government hiding? When will we see their report on what the Bill's impact will be?

The Leader of the House's reassurance that the burning through of regulations under the retained EU law Bill will have good scrutiny simply does not wash with the people of Bristol West, or anywhere else. The right hon. Lady is Parliament's representative in Government, so why is she not backing MPs being given a proper say on behalf of our constituents over workers' rights to holiday or maternity pay, or over environmental protections? It is literally her job.

The Leader of the House could start by giving us the means to scrutinise properly. Last Thursday, I got no answer on the Government's half-baked dashboard for EU regulations, so perhaps I could get one this week. Do they have a plan to complete the dashboard? If so, by when? Do they have a plan to square the practical difficulties of getting through thousands of regulations before the end of the year? If so, what is it?

In questions to Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Ministers, my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) was told that the return of the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill was "a matter for business managers."—[*Official Report*, 12 January 2023; Vol. 725, c. 695.]

The problem is that when I have asked the Leader of the House about this before, I have got—you guessed it—no answer. Like everything else that they have lost down the back of the sofa, apparently it is Tory infighting holding the Bill up. I gather that Tory Back Benchers have had to be reassured that it will not be used as a device to crack down on hunting. They want to protect hunting? What a mess! Can the Leader of the House clear this up? When will the Bill be brought back to the House for its remaining stages?

While the Leader of the House is down the back of that infamous sofa, could she try to pull out the football governance White Paper? The Government committed in the last Queen's Speech to publishing proposals to establish an independent regulator of English football. Could she give my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) a birthday present and find them, please? Since that commitment, we have had flip-flopping, rides on the ministerial merry-go-round, and a promise from the Culture Secretary that the White Paper would be published "imminently". Labour has supported the introduction of an independent regulator for years. It is urgent for clubs, players, staff and fans. The Government have let them all down. Where is it?

Let me end by noting the fast-approaching 25th anniversary of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. The Labour party is immensely proud of its part in the peace process, as are many others across the House, of all political dimensions. Will the Leader of the House please allow a debate in Government time so that Members can reflect on what was achieved, and to allow representatives from Northern Ireland to share their views? Does she agree that this moment should not be left to the Backbench Business Committee and we really should have a Government debate?

Penny Mordaunt: I am sure the whole House will want to recognise that we have Holocaust Memorial Day this week. Let me place on the record my thanks, in particular, to all the survivors who help us and new

generations to understand what happened and, of course, to redouble our efforts to tackle antisemitism wherever it appears. I also thank the Holocaust Educational Trust. I know that many Members will have relied on it to take them to Auschwitz and elsewhere, and that will have had a huge impact on all Members of this House.

May I also place on the record my thanks to the ship's company of HMS Queen Elizabeth, who visited Parliament this week, for all they have done for the Atlantic Future Forum?

I remind colleagues that today marks 100 days until the coronation, and I encourage all Members to make use of that moment to bring our communities together and create new projects in our constituencies, which I know is a focus of His Majesty the King.

I anticipated correctly that the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) would not ask me today about our £150 million extra investment in mental health support, or the £50 million to supercharge the UK satellite industry, or the crackdown we announced this week on criminal gangs. I am shocked, quite frankly, Mr Speaker, at the suggestion that there are pre-prepared political rants in this Chamber.

I shall attempt to answer the hon. Lady's questions. I completely agree with her that we need transparency and truth on all the Bills that she mentioned, so I am grateful for the opportunity to correct some of the misunderstanding in what she outlined about some of them.

The Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Bill is not about nurses. Nursing unions have been hugely responsible when they want to take industrial action, and we have great confidence in the minimum service levels that they have put in place. Very explicitly, we are not taking these powers and bringing forward measures regarding nurses at all, and it is quite wrong to suggest that. Instead, we are focusing on where we have deep concerns about minimum service levels—in two blue-light services and in transport. I remind the House that under the current Mayor of London there have been nearly 100 strikes on public transport in London, and I do not think the commuting public, who rely on public transport, can go on like this. So that is what the Bill is doing, which is very well understood by everyone except, perhaps, those on the Labour Front Bench.

There is clearly an ongoing misunderstanding about the way in which the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill will work, and about the scrutiny that will be applied to it. Committees in both Houses are dedicated to looking at that, but there are clearly measures that we will want to continue; we have been explicit about, for instance, environmental protections and protections for workers, to which we are committed. Just last Friday we passed additional measures to protect workers' tips in the hospitality industry, and this week we have proposed measures to introduce a statutory code so that practices such as firing and rehiring no longer take place. Let me gently remind the hon. Lady what her own party did to its workers at their headquarters in July 2021, when it put many of its staff on very insecure contracts.

We will protect workers' rights and we will protect environmental standards, but there will be some EU law on our statute book that does not work for the modern economy, and that is what we will focus on and reform. I hope the hon. Lady will appreciate that, and will start

focusing on what our economy needs rather than misinterpreting the way the Bill will work and the scrutiny that surrounds it.

I am delighted that the Hunting Trophies (Import Prohibition) Bill, a private Member's Bill presented by my hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Henry Smith), completed its Committee stage this week. That is another step towards ensuring that we protect endangered species around the world which some people wish to go and shoot and bring back and turn into ashtrays: it is a huge step forward. We care deeply about the welfare of animals, which is why we introduced the important measures in the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill.

I have placed on record all the work that has been done by my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) on football governance, which is a subject close to my heart because I helped to save my club, Portsmouth, in the largest and fastest ever community buy-out in the country's history, and that club is thriving now. Improving football governance is a priority, and in the course of my work I have been looking at bringing it forward—I would say “soon”, but the hon. Lady has banned me from saying that. Further business will be announced in the usual way.

The hon. Lady made a very sensible suggestion about the Good Friday/Belfast agreement, which was an incredibly important moment for our nation and for Northern Ireland. I will certainly take up that suggestion and see whether we can accommodate it.

Tuesday was National Compliment Day, so I will end by paying the hon. Lady a compliment: these exchanges are always a pleasure.

Mrs Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con): The Modern Slavery Act 2015 states that the Secretary of State must appoint an independent anti-slavery commissioner, but the post has been vacant since the excellent Sara Thornton stepped down last April. May we please have a statement from the Home Secretary on the process and timetable for the appointment of the replacement commissioner?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my right hon. Friend for making that important point, and pay tribute to her for all the work she has done not just for the UK but internationally, putting this issue on the international stage and encouraging other nations to join in the leadership that she has shown. Home Office questions will not take place until February, so, on my right hon. Friend's behalf, I will write to the Home Secretary asking her to contact my right hon. Friend personally to discuss the matter.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I, too, pay tribute to the work of the Holocaust Educational Trust, the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust and all organisations and individuals who contribute so much to keeping alive the memory of the millions who were so shamefully murdered.

Today is known to some as Australia Day and to others as Invasion Day, and I pay tribute to the First Nations people of Australia and their long fight for recognition of the dreadful injustices they have suffered since European colonisation in the 1700s.

[Deidre Brock]

A Conservative Member, who is clearly bent on establishing himself as some kind of Conservative poundshop Farage, reportedly shouted something loathsome at Prime Minister's questions yesterday about the 200 asylum-seeking children who are allegedly missing. It was so despicable that I will not repeat it, but the Leader of the House must know its content through the outrage on social media. Will she join me in condemning his remarks, which by victim-blaming potentially 200 missing vulnerable children, marks a new low in dehumanising language towards asylum seekers? We all know behaviour in this place can be raucous and passionate, and that emotions sometimes run very high, but surely we would all join in deploring the language used to attack the poor and defenceless among us.

I have been approached about why important pieces of legislation, such as the media Bill and the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill, are still in parliamentary purgatory. What can the Leader of the House do to speed that process along? What does she have to say about these delays? The Government always have bucket loads of lame excuses for legislative hold-ups, but I think we know the true reason. A couple of weeks ago, she rather bravely tried to suggest parallels between her party, which is completely engulfed in sleaze and scandal, and mine—a case of whitabootery so bold it would make a sailor blush.

I am therefore pleased to see there will soon be an awayday at Chequers, where we are told that Tory priorities will be discussed. Perhaps the Leader of the House can arrange a statement to the House on those Government priorities, once they are finally agreed. She will not be surprised to hear that my party's overriding priority is independence, because we see that achieving the full powers of a normal, independent country is the best and, indeed, only way to achieve a fair and progressive society for all our citizens.

However, what priorities do the Government's actions suggest are important to them? Is it the ability to place donors on influential boards; the introduction of illiberal laws that crush inconvenient human rights and employment and environmental protections; the playing out of the mad dreams of a libertarian future using most of the population as guinea pigs who are unable to protest; or the batting away of the democratically agreed laws of another country's Parliament with the stroke of a pen? Perhaps we will finally get an insight into that eternal question: just what is it about the Houses of Parliament that first attracted so many wealthy people to stand for office?

Penny Mordaunt: I start by addressing the hon. Lady's serious point about asylum seekers, particularly with regard to their vulnerability and the vulnerability of children. Many Members have raised this issue, but one of the very sad things about the system—we recognise it is a broken system that needs reform, and we are introducing legislation to do that—is that keeping people in hotels for long periods of time increases their vulnerability. We have heard stories of gangmasters turning up at hotels where they know asylum seekers are staying to take people away. For obvious reasons, it is very hard to protect people in such an environment, so we have to address this. When we introduce legislation to tackle this issue, to get the system working more effectively

and to make it fairer for both the UK taxpayer and for the very vulnerable people who are being trafficked, I hope we will have support from both sides of the House. This is a serious matter, people need protecting and they need protecting swiftly.

The hon. Lady, again, invites comparisons. I hope she will forgive me, but I cannot let this exchange pass without quoting Rabbie Burns:

“O wad some Power the giftie gie us

To see oursels as ithers see us!”

I am sure the hon. Lady and her colleagues could deliver those lines much better than I have, but I wish the SNP had the gift to see itself as others see it, or as Audit Scotland and Scottish taxpayers see it in the week in which the Auditor General for Scotland, Stephen Boyle, called for greater transparency on the colossal underspend in the SNP's budget. Very often, Scottish National party Members come to this House asking for additional funding from the UK Government, but the SNP has underspent its budget by nearly £2 billion—that is the equivalent of 7,142 nurses. I am sorry to say that the areas of underspend were in education and skills, the economy, net zero and transport, and also in money given to the covid response.

The hon. Lady paints a picture of Scotland and of the people she represents that I do not recognise. I say to her that she is governing a great and dynamic country, one that stiffens the backbone and reinforces the soul. It is the nation of Fleming, Dunlop, McAdam, Watt, Telford—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. A Whip should not just walk through when people are addressing—

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab) Sorry, I did not realise.

Mr Speaker: No, but it would be nice if you did realise.

Penny Mordaunt: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Scotland is the nation of the Argylls and the Black Watch crossing the Rhine, the Scots Guards at Tumbledown and Shimi Lovat's commandos securing Pegasus bridge. The taxes sitting in the Scottish Government's accounts not being spent on education are paid for by grain farmers not grievance farmers, and by incredible communities and creatives. The people who elected the hon. Lady are incredibly resourceful and they do not match the SNP's vision of them as a nation of victims; they are a powerful force for good in the Union and the world. They march to the fife and drum, not the saddest tune played on the smallest violin.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): I recently attended a regional meeting with the English Football League to discuss the Government's fan-led review, and I was pleased to be joined at it by Harrogate Town's chief executive, Sarah Barry. The review represents a significant step change in how the football pyramid receives crucial funding. At Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport questions a few minutes ago, the Secretary of State announced that she would be publishing the Government's next steps within a fortnight. This topic has attracted much interest from colleagues on both sides of the House, so will the Leader of the House ensure that when that is published there will be sufficient time for a good debate on the issue?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this incredibly important issue; I was also at that meeting. There are people who say, “Why should we be regulating businesses?” I can tell them that if a branch of Tesco closed in my constituency, I could point to a Sainsbury’s a few metres away and say, “Don’t worry, there’s another supermarket there.” However, when Portsmouth football club was about to fold, I could not say to my constituents, “Don’t worry, down the road in Southampton is another football club where you might care to go to watch a game.” He is absolutely right: we want to make sure that these important community assets, for that is what they are, are protected. The next DCMS questions is on 9 March, but I shall make sure the Secretary of State has heard his question today.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): As Chair, may I say that I take pride in the fact that the Backbench Business Committee has been able to facilitate this afternoon’s important debate on Holocaust Memorial Day? There is an important message here: Back-Bench Members in all parts of this House think that that is an important and priority debate to have in such a timely way. On behalf of the Committee, I would very much welcome applications for debates in the main Chamber and for slots in Westminster Hall. We ask for applications to be submitted in writing to our Clerks, who are situated in the Table Office. The Committee meets on Tuesday afternoons to consider applications, where we ask Members to present their applications in person.

May I thank the Leader of the House for our meeting yesterday and for introducing me to the members and crew of HMS Queen Elizabeth, which was a real pleasure? May I also thank her for writing to the Levelling Up Secretary on my behalf following last week’s business statement? The crisis in local government funding is intensifying, particularly in my local Gateshead Council. Our leisure centre, previously a venue for top-level and international sporting events, is now, sadly, earmarked for closure, along with its swimming pool, which is situated next door. Gateshead International stadium could well be in the firing line; the home of Gateshead Harriers and Gateshead football club could be in the firing line because the local authority no longer has the revenue to support its maintenance, upkeep and running. So may we have a debate in Government time on the sustainability of our sporting and activity centres?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his work to facilitate this important debate on Holocaust Memorial Day. I know that many Members will want to contribute, and this debate provides an opportunity to do so.

The hon. Gentleman knows that, since the Christmas recess, we have had one debate on the importance of community sport. It is a subject that is very much recognised, and obviously we need facilities in which to do those activities. I know that the questions to that Department are not until a little later in the year, so I will write again encouraging Ministers to engage with the hon. Gentleman to see what other funding streams could be accessed for his constituency. We have offered him some further time next week for the Backbench Business Committee. I know that that is short notice,

but I hope that he will consider taking it up, because there are clearly bids from many Members on a whole range of topics.

Dame Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con): This Government have a fantastic track record on their commitment to achieving net zero. I am very proud of our determination to achieve net zero from the tailpipe by 2035. It is world beating, and I applaud the Government for their ambition, but can my right hon. Friend please have a chat with the House authorities about possibly offering more superfast chargers in the carpark here so that many more staff and people who come here each day can achieve their own net zero ambitions?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my right hon. Friend not just for that question, but for all the work that she has done in this area. She held the brief in ministerial office, but, on leaving that office, she has continued her interest and has worked on a number of policies to help move on this agenda. She is absolutely right: we cannot expect people, including Members of this House, to make those changes to their lifestyle—the kind of car they buy, how they heat their homes and so forth—unless we have the infrastructure in place, and unless we have the innovation and the support for that innovation to bring forward products that people will want to take up. I shall certainly take up that suggestion, and she will know better than I who I should take it up with.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): Further to the excellent points made by my hon. Friend the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, I wish to raise the issue of our public swimming pools being at risk of closure, as they have been excluded from the vulnerable sector designation by the Treasury for support with energy bills. Swimming pools face huge increases, including the fantastic pools at Inspire sports centre in Luton South, with which the Leader of the House is familiar. This will impact not only children learning to swim and our public’s health, but the development of our elite sportspeople, particularly those in my constituency who win medals in diving. I seek further advice from the Leader of the House on how we can raise this important issue—I was unable to ask about it earlier this morning at Digital, Culture, Media and Sport oral questions—and on what more we can do to ensure that we can save our swimming pools.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for raising that important point. I am very familiar with the particular pool that she mentions—I will probably have flashbacks later on in this question session, remembering my time there. This is an important matter not just for swimming but for sports such as diving—divers need warm water to do that at the level that they do in her constituency. I know that this is an issue of interest a number of Members, so I will talk to the Secretary of State to see whether something particular can be done for this sector. I know that she is very focused on protecting these community assets and on ensuring that, after the period of covid when people were not able to do these activities, we do everything we can to encourage people back into exercise and a healthy lifestyle.

Sir Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): I am full of good will this morning, Mr Speaker, having caught sight of your wonderful socks, the colour of Chorley rock.

[Sir Charles Walker]

I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests in relation to the Angling Trust. We stand on the threshold of something really exciting: we are about to establish a recreational catch-and-release big game tuna fishery in the south-west of this country. No longer will people have to travel to exotic climes to catch enormous fish, and where big fish swim, anglers follow, spending money on hotels, guides and restaurants. Can we have a debate to celebrate that fantastic development, to discuss how we can maximise the economic benefits to the south-west and to thank the Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood (Mark Spencer), for his perseverance in driving it forward?

Penny Mordaunt: I am happy to echo my hon. Friend's praise for the Minister and all the work done to bring this scheme forward. It is another example from a raft of schemes the Government have brought in over many years to support and help coastal communities. We introduced that focus, and I know that the south-west in particular has benefited from many such schemes looking at the opportunities for recreational fishing and the hospitality sector. If we were not excited enough about that already, we are even more excited after my hon. Friend's question.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Can we have a debate about the importance of our recording studios to our creative industries? If we do, there are two things in particular that we can discuss. The first is the BBC's selling off Maida Vale, which could still be run as a going concern; there are offers on the table and it ought to be kept as part of our musical heritage. The second is the fact that our recording studios, so important to our film, television and video games industries, are not eligible for the energy bills discount scheme, despite institutions such as libraries, museums and even zoos being eligible. If penguins in zoos are eligible for the discount scheme, should not Arctic Monkeys be too?

Penny Mordaunt: Very good. The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. I will speak to the Secretary of State at DCMS about the theme that is emerging from the question session today. I also thank the hon. Gentleman for putting on record the opportunity with that particular studio; there are many organisations that would be very interested, but unless they know about the opportunity they cannot start to be creative about how they might be the answer he is seeking.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): On Tuesday, I attended the funeral of Councillor David Jenney. He had been a local councillor for more than 15 years and done an immense amount of public service. In addition, he was the honorary agent to my Conservative Association: he would deal with the paperwork associated with elections, organise the distribution of leaflets and lead canvassing sessions. He would be out every Saturday with the listening team. He was an absolute star. Up and down the country, across political parties, there are people like David. Could the Leader of the House arrange a debate in his honour, entitled "The unsung heroes of our democracy"? May David rest in peace.

Penny Mordaunt: I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to David and to Barbara, his wife, who will have been a huge support to him in many of the things he did, including being mayor of Rushden for a time. I know he was much loved by the whole community. My hon. Friend is right; it is not fashionable to be involved in politics and the things we do on the doorstep on all weathers are not glamorous, but it is vital to our democracy. His suggestion for a debate is an incredibly good one and would be supported across the House.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I am a proud highlander, so let me try to strike a lighter and more positive Scottish note. My personal friend the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell)—that is almost longer than Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross—and I have both had the honour of serving in the Scottish Parliament. We know that there are meetings at ministerial level between Scottish Ministers and UK Ministers, but would the Leader of the House think about some sort of mechanism whereby Back Benchers of this place, the Scottish Parliament and other devolved institutions could meet and talk from time to time? I was once a member of the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body, which did a great deal of good in fomenting Irish-UK relations. Such a mechanism would lead us to a period of understanding and co-operation rather than strife and misunderstanding.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that suggestion and for the tone in which he always engages. I feel strongly that many Members will have ideas about what else we can do to make ourselves the best legislature in the world, and I know that you have that ambition too, Mr Speaker. We will very shortly bring forward a survey, which is supported by the shadow Leader of the House, the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), to look at what additional support and services we can develop to enable hon. and right hon. Members to do their job better and to support them in that kind of engagement. I hope that all Members will respond to that survey when it comes out. I think the hon. Gentleman's suggestion is excellent.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Today is Republic Day in India, and many millions will be celebrating in style there, as will the diaspora across the world. Very sadly, the BBC has chosen over the last two weeks to show what can only be described as propaganda videos on behalf of the opposition to the Government of India—particularly scurrilous and baseless attacks on Prime Minister Narendra Modi—and to quote the involvement of Jack Straw when he was UK Foreign Secretary. Can my right hon. Friend arrange for a debate, in Government time, on BBC impartiality? It is quite clear that this is a gross dereliction of the BBC's duty. I agreed with only one thing in the two shows: the final comment about Narendra Modi and the Indian Government being re-elected at the next election and probably the one after that.

Penny Mordaunt: My hon. Friend has very clearly got his concerns on the record. I know that they are shared by others in his constituency. The BBC, as he and all Members know, is governed by the royal charter—it is an independent body—and we also have in Ofcom a

regulator whose job it is to ensure that the BBC is robustly held to account for delivering its public service duties, including accuracy and impartiality. I would suggest that he engage with the BBC and Ofcom if he feels the need to, but he has got his concerns on the record today.

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): I place on the record my own comments about Republic Day in India. Millions and millions of people will be celebrating the 74th Republic Day today.

Tragically, the son of Ms Jayne Toulson-Burke, Mr Bob Toulson-Burke, passed away from dengue fever in 2016 while travelling in Asia. The NHS has said that there is presently no known treatment or vaccine for dengue fever, and warns that people at increased risk of the fever should avoid travelling to nations in which the infection is found. However, there is little information about the infection for people who are travelling to countries where it can be contracted. Will the Leader of the House grant a debate, in Government time, about raising awareness of dengue fever?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for helping to raise awareness of that important point by speaking about it in the House today—his points are well made. Health questions are not until a little further on, so I shall raise this with the Department. I think it would be an excellent topic for an Adjournment debate.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Last Friday, I met a GP at the Central Surgery in Barton-on-Humber in my constituency, and heard of the excellent work that he and the other doctors do at the practice. But I also have to recognise the frustration of many of my constituents about accessing GPs. Could we have a debate focused specifically on access to primary care? I hope that useful suggestions might come forth, rather than a political knockabout.

Penny Mordaunt: My hon. Friend makes an excellent suggestion. As I said, Backbench Business time may be available soon, and the merit of such a debate would be that we could look at the disparity between how certain areas operate their GP services; indeed, right down to a practice level. There are areas that are still managing to offer good access to a GP in a timely way, with face-to-face appointments where necessary, and in terms of the hours that they are operating. In others, that is not the case. Sharing good practice is an important part of getting services right for everyone everywhere.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): Water companies are dumping sewage into our rivers. They have failed to fix leaks in the summer, when we had a hosepipe ban, and the winter, when the water is turning into hazardous ice on our roads and pavements. Thames Water gave its chief executive a bonus of £720,000 on top of a £2 million salary. May we please have a debate in Government time about whether our water companies are fit for purpose?

Penny Mordaunt: This is an issue of huge concern to many Members across the House. That is why, in 2018, we fired a shot across the water companies' bows that led to the legislation and other measures brought forward to ensure that the infrastructure plans needed to end storm overflows are in place in a timely way. We are also

monitoring those overflows. When we came into office, only 6% of them were monitored, but it is now 100%. We take the matter very seriously indeed.

Some of Thames Water's work formed part of the arguments used to reassure Members of this House that the costs of those infrastructure plans would not be astronomical—they would be affordable—so that we could press ahead with an ambitious timetable for delivering them. I thank the hon. Lady for raising that matter, which is of huge concern to all Members.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): There were reports in the media saying that I was seething last week about the levelling-up fund. That is not quite fair—but it is fair to say that I was prickly. Our £18 million bid was unsuccessful. Most of that was about Gainsborough sports centre. Only between £1.5 million and £2 million of it was for Broomhill lido—a 1938 outdoor pool that closed in 2002. It is of huge benefit to the local area as a cultural and sporting attraction. Will my right hon. Friend advise me about what other pots of money and avenues might be available to the Broomhill Pool Trust to get the small amount of money needed to push it over the edge and bring that wonderful attraction back to the people of Ipswich?

Penny Mordaunt: My hon. Friend raises a subject close to my heart. I would normally say, "I shall write to the Minister who can advise him about further pots," but I can probably tell him now because I have a 1930s lido in my constituency that I am renovating. I know how much the lido will mean to his constituents—it is not just a leisure facility but part of their heritage. There will be other funds, and we should connect him to other projects that have been supported through the coastal communities fund to really ensure that he has got the best advice to take that forward. I will write to the Minister on his behalf, but I am also happy to assist him with anything that I have learned along the way.

Jon Trickett (Hemsworth) (Lab): In earlier comments, I found that the Leader of the House was trying to suggest that ambulance workers are not co-operating with management as nurses are. I recently visited my local picket of ambulance workers, and there was a protocol in place: when there was an emergency, the picket immediately and voluntarily went to see the patient. Will she withdraw her comments? Has she noted that this morning *The Telegraph* says that recent weekly statistics show that 2,837 more people than usual died, which is 20% higher than the average. Does she accept what is happening? There is not a shred of evidence that the strikes are causing these problems; it is a failure of management of the NHS by the Government.

Penny Mordaunt: Let me clarify for the hon. Gentleman that this is not about people not wanting to protect life. It is not about a moral judgement on behalf of those individuals. People who work in the blue-light sector and people who work in caring professions care deeply about the wellbeing of others. That is why they are in those professions. The problem is how these minimum service levels are arrived at and ensuring that we can have confidence in them and that they are also arranged in a timely way. Unlike nursing unions, which have a clearly defined and agreed way of working that covers the whole of the area affected by industrial action, the

[Penny Mordaunt]

other services that I have referenced do not. They are very fragmented, and arrangements are often worked out with local management, as opposed to across the nation affected. This is about protecting the public and ensuring that when industrial action takes place, we can still protect the public. It is most acute, I am afraid, in the transport sector. I hope that that clarifies the position for the hon. Gentleman.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): May I commend my right hon. Friend on her earlier Burns quote? Burns always sought to shine a light on hypocrisy. May I ask my right hon. Friend if we can have a debate in Government time on the environmental and socioeconomic importance of bus services that link rural communities with larger towns and cities? In recent months, the 101/102 service between Dumfriesshire and Edinburgh, which goes along the A702 corridor and through communities such as Biggar and West Linton, has been under threat. I commend the local community campaigners who have done so much to ensure that that service will be retained, at least for three years, but it highlights the devastating impact that the loss of such a service would have had on my constituents, and I am sure on others in rural areas across the United Kingdom. That is why a debate is very important.

Penny Mordaunt: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right—these services are incredibly valued. They are a lifeline for communities, and I commend him and all the campaigners who have fought to ensure that these services are protected. It is why this Government have invested £2 billion in mitigating the impact of the past few years and ensuring that we are maintaining existing bus routes. I point him towards the next Transport questions on 2 March to make this case again. I am sure that if he secured an Adjournment debate, it would be well attended.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): It is a little known fact that the famous Irish actor and Oscar nominee Barry Keoghan and I have something special in common: we are both care-experienced, and as care-experienced people, the odds of either of us making a success of our lives had all the cards stacked against us. I would like to take this opportunity to wish Barry the very best of luck. I will be rooting for him at the Oscars. I raise that as the Government's response to the independent review of children's social care is due imminently, and it is far too often that the voices of those who matter most are not listened to. As of last night, 11 councils across these islands have introduced protected characteristics for this, and more are set to follow. Would it not be fantastic if the UK was the first in the world to recognise care-experienced people in this way? Can the Leader of the House promise me and other care-experienced people, whether from my constituency, Dundee, Scotland or across these islands, that their voices will be heard when this response is published, with a debate in Government time to discuss the fundamental importance of this recommendation and of amending the Equality Act to implement it?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this incredibly important issue, and I join him in wishing Barry every success. The hon. Gentleman is

absolutely right. The response is due and will be coming forward imminently. He is absolutely right—we saw it during covid—that we need a continued focus on these services, because those being cared for and looked after do not have a voice, and we need to be a voice in this place. I will certainly take that up with the Secretary of State. We have also had a number of continuing scandals, as hon. Members will be sad to see, about the treatment of children in certain social care settings. That has to end, and I know that the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care is focused on that aspect, too.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): No woman should be made to feel intimidated by a male Member simply for speaking up for what she believes in. The recent behaviour that we have all witnessed in this place simply cannot be repeated. Can we have a debate in Government time on the behaviour of hon. Members in this Chamber?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. I also thank you, Mr Speaker, and other Members of this House who act swiftly when they see poor and intimidatory behaviour whether it occurs in this Chamber, online or through proxies online. We are elected by our constituents to serve them in this place. Whatever our disagreements, we must respect the fact that we are all elected Members standing up for our constituents. It is only through listening and courteous debate that we will end up with good legislation and focus on the issues that matter to everyone in this country.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): For many people in certain areas of Nigeria, terror and kidnapping have become almost a way of life. We have had statements and urgent questions in the past, and a debate on one occasion. However with the focus of this place and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office understandably on Ukraine and other parts of the world, would it not be important to have a statement or a debate on that benighted country, to keep our focus on Nigeria as well?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. We have all been horrified by the frequent reports of that kind of activity—whether the murder of priests, as we have had recently, the kidnap and ransom of particular individuals or brutal killings. It is an incredibly important country, as is our relationship with it. I will ensure that the Foreign Secretary has heard the hon. Gentleman's concerns. He will know that the next Foreign Office questions is on 31 January, but I will make sure that the Department has heard what he has said.

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con): I champion Doncaster whenever it is in the news for the right reasons. Unfortunately, this week it is in the news for the wrong reasons. Three places in Doncaster—Fullerton House, Wilsic Hall and Wheatley House—looked after some of the most vulnerable children and young people in our society from all over the country. While there, children and young people were abused. That should not have happened. My thoughts are with the families and victims at this time. I call for the perpetrators and anyone who knew of that to be brought to account.

The whole affair is extremely distressing. We owe it to the victims to come together to make sure that it will never happen again. It brings into focus one main issue: why are vulnerable children being placed many miles away from their families and loved ones? To me at least it seems bizarre and needs addressing immediately. Parents often have a sixth sense when something is wrong, but if their child is placed hundreds of miles away, visiting can be difficult—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am very conscious of this important issue. At the moment, a lot of inquiries are going on. I do not want to get into a debate because it is so important that the victims are contacted. I am concerned about where the case is within the judicial system. The general point that you have raised is quite right, but I am cautious of taking it any further. Could the Leader of the House briefly answer the point?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this issue and for sending a message to all those affected. This is an important issue for him as their constituency MP, and for many Members in this House. He will know the action that the Secretary of State has taken to date. I will make sure that the Secretary of State is aware of the concerns that Members have expressed and keeps all Members of this House apprised of what is going on to ensure that it is addressed.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): Further to the point raised by the hon. Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher), the horrific revelations this week concerning the Hesley Group in Doncaster, with reports of children being punched, made to sit in cold baths and having vinegar poured on open wounds as a punishment, are entirely unacceptable. Those homes continued to be rated good by Ofsted, despite concerns being raised, and local authorities were paying as much as a quarter of a million pounds a year for the placement of children in those homes. These revelations follow other scandals of a similar nature at Calcot children's homes in Oxfordshire, Achieve Care Homes in Bolton and others. I am not asking the Leader of the House to go into detail about the matters in Doncaster, which are rightly the subject of a criminal investigation, but will she help to secure a debate in Government time on the safeguarding of children in residential care, the role of Ofsted as the regulator and the grotesque profiteering of private companies off the abuse of vulnerable children?

Penny Mordaunt: I agree entirely with the hon. Lady's sentiments. Sadly, this is not an isolated case; it goes right back to Winterbourne View and the recommendations that Sir Stephen Bubb made in his report. We have to look at the volume of referrals going into care settings that we know are not appropriate for children, particularly those with behavioural and learning disabilities. We also have to look at what good care looks like. We are talking about a relatively small number of children and they should have the best care possible. I shall certainly make sure that the Secretaries of State who are involved in this hear what several Members have said today.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): I know that it is customary to request a debate at business questions, but I wonder if my right hon. Friend can advise me which Department would be best to respond to a debate on

the levelling up of hotel accommodation in Ilfracombe. The levelling-up Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Dehenna Davison), acknowledges the need to level up Ilfracombe, despite its bid being unsuccessful, and is coming to visit, but the Home Office is considering two further asylum centres in the town. What plans are there to process the applications of those asylum seekers already in the town, and when will we start reducing the number of tourist hotels being used, so that we can go back to providing accommodation to much-needed tourists? I understand that it is a priority for the Prime Minister—might he respond to a debate or make a statement on progress to the House?

Penny Mordaunt: This is not the first time that my hon. Friend has raised that matter, and I can confirm to her again that the Home Office is the Department that needs to respond to her concerns. What it boils down to is that we have to ensure the whole system is working effectively. She will not have long to wait before that piece of legislation is brought forward, but I will write again on her behalf to the Home Secretary to raise her concerns about how much-needed hotels for tourism and so forth are being used in her constituency and her other concerns about this matter.

Mrs Paulette Hamilton (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Erdington High Street has seven betting shops, and I am campaigning to oppose the latest planning application for yet another one. Birmingham City Council did the right thing by rejecting the application last July, but the gambling bosses have now made an appeal to the Government. Another bookies on our high streets is the last thing we need. After being let down by Ministers yet again when our levelling-up fund bid was rejected last week, will the Leader of the House grant a debate in Government time on the importance of investing in our high streets?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Lady is right that high streets are a lifeline. They are very important to the local economy, and they provide a place for people to socialise and for all sorts of services to be provided. As someone who has not had money granted in applications, I know that we are often successful in subsequent rounds and that the Department will be looking at the unsuccessful bid from her area and what could be done to improve it or ensure there is some other investment into her constituency. I will not comment on the specific planning issue, because Mr Deputy Speaker would chastise me for doing so, but the hon. Lady has got her concerns on the record today, and I wish her luck.

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): My inbox is full of correspondence from constituents who are concerned about NHS dental services. With the imminent closure of the dentist at Firthmoor Community Centre, 7,000 of them face the prospect of no dental provision. I know that my right hon. Friend takes the issue seriously and has been successful in campaigning for better provision across Portsmouth, so can she find Government time for us all to debate it?

Penny Mordaunt: I am sorry to hear that those providers are leaving my hon. Friend's constituency. He will know that we have put additional funding into dentistry:

[Penny Mordaunt]

about this time last year, an additional £50 million was made available to assist with the catch-up job that we had to do to get everyone dentally fit after the covid pandemic, and further funds have also been put in. It is also vital to have flexibility in commissioning to ensure that the money can be used to ensure that every dental chair and every dentist is occupied for the longest possible time. I had a meeting with the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien), yesterday and I know that he is looking at bringing forward further measures shortly to assist with that. I will make sure that he has heard the concerns of my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson).

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): People's Past People's Future, a community group in Rutherglen, recently organised a hugely successful event aimed at helping people to make new friends. Will the Leader of the House join me in thanking the organiser, Geraldine Baird, and VASLan for providing funding? Will she schedule a debate in Government time on the value of community groups in tackling loneliness in isolated groups?

Penny Mordaunt: I happily join the hon. Lady in praising Geraldine and the organisation VASLan. We know that by ensuring that people have that social engagement, we also ensure that they are healthier and we improve their quality of life. It is fundamental that everyone has a social network and support, and I thank her for her work to ensure that that is the case for all her constituents.

Brendan Clarke-Smith (Bassetlaw) (Con): I welcome the Government's commitment to sport and its many benefits, including those linked to health and wellbeing. This is a special weekend in Bassetlaw, as the men's team for SJR Worksop football club takes on Retford United in a game that we locally call "El Bassico". SJR Worksop also runs many teams for youngsters in our area, but unfortunately, at this time of year, it faces the challenge of finding suitable all-weather surfaces to play on. Despite its size, many youngsters from Worksop have to travel to neighbouring areas to find a 3G pitch to play on. I am therefore calling on the council to get its act together and help to provide our local youngsters with the leisure facilities that they deserve. Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate on the importance of public sporting facilities and their benefits to health and wellbeing?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising an incredibly important point and wish him luck in getting his local authority to focus on that unmet need and to make that investment. It sounds like an excellent topic for an Adjournment debate, for which he knows how to apply.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): The Leader of the House will be aware that, on Tuesday, the Royal British Legion published its report on the first three months of its cost of living payments. It has real concerns that 88% of the grants were for energy top-ups and 90% were issued to people of working age. It is also deeply concerned

that veterans living with disabilities or who are carers are falling through the cracks of the schemes. I am aware that there are Defence questions on Monday, but can she find time for the Minister for Veterans' Affairs to make a statement to the House on the support available for our veterans during the cost of living crisis? I have every confidence that all hon. Members want to support our veterans, but it should not be left to the RBL to introduce a grant system to support the people who have done such service for our country.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that important point. One of the factors that motivated the Government to bring in the armed forces covenant and the principles that sit alongside it, was that people should not be disadvantaged by the service that they have done for the nation. The notion that local authorities would send veterans who needed help getting, for example, white goods to SSAFA or the Royal British Legion, because they would take care of them, was absolutely outrageous and appalling. That is one of the reasons we brought in the covenant. We want the covenant and the principles that guide it to be very effective. In the slightly longer term, the hon. Gentleman will know that both the all-party parliamentary group on veterans and the Minister for Veterans' Affairs are doing some survey work—in particular, the APPG is looking at that financial aspect. But I will flag that issue with the Department. We are giving a huge amount in cost of living support and we want to make sure it is getting to the right people, which is why, whatever scheme we set up, we are always supplying local authorities with some flexibility, so they have the power to act where these big schemes do not reach everyone.

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): Not long after I was elected, Network Rail confirmed that £9 million had been ringfenced for urgent refurbishment works at Keighley railway station and that those refurbishment works would be completed by December 2022, yet to date no work has begun. It is vital that we get these urgent refurbishment works under way as soon as possible, as without doubt Keighley railway station is in the worst state of repair along the Airedale line. That is of course deeply frustrating for the many people who use the station daily and indeed those who work at the station. Can we have a debate in Government time to hold Network Rail to account, so we can ensure that promised schemes are delivered on time?

Penny Mordaunt: I am sorry to hear about the situation in my hon. Friend's constituency, not just because I know it will be putting his constituents at a disadvantage, but because I am planning to visit his constituency soon and would want to have that station in a much more improved fashion. I thank him for raising the matter. I will make sure that the Secretary of State has heard his concerns, but he will know that Transport questions are on 2 March and I encourage him to raise it then, too.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Most of us at some point or another have had cause to be grateful to hospice services—such as Ayrshire Hospice—which provide essential end-of-life care for around 300,000 people every year in the UK. However, the support provided to hospices via the new energy bills discount scheme will not be sufficient to protect hospices from

soaring costs across the board, which potentially threaten the very survival of this vital sector. Will the Leader of the House make a statement setting out her support for increased financial assistance for our hospices, which are so important in looking after our terminally ill loved ones?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady. The hospice sector is incredibly important, which is why we were keen to ensure it was placed at the heart of end-of-life services. Prior to that policy change, it was very much kept out of Government policy. We want these vital organisations not just for the immediate services they supply, but for the support to the wider family. Given that Health questions will not be until later in the year, I will make sure the Secretary of State has heard those concerns, and I hope she will raise these issues with the Scottish Government, too.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): We cannot wait till March to hear from the Secretary of State for Transport about the dangerous situation that occurred last night at London Bridge. The Leader of the House will be aware, because I have raised this here before, of the disastrous cuts to my local services, which are exacerbating the problem, with more people having to change at London Bridge. I have had people contact me about the dangerous situation with the crowding. I have seen photographs of the concourse, which is about the size of two football pitches, absolutely rammed with people, with escalators having to be switched off and people crowded on to platforms. It was an extremely dangerous situation, exacerbated by cuts that were agreed by the Department for Transport. There is no weaselling out of this: the Secretary of State needs to come here and answer for his decisions.

Penny Mordaunt: I shall certainly make sure that the Secretary of State has heard the concerns the hon. Gentleman has raised, but I would just say to him that he needs to speak—he knows what I am going to say—to the person responsible for providing good-quality public transport in London, who is the Mayor of London. I am afraid that he has been failing on all fronts, and I would encourage all Members who are concerned about the situation that happened at London Bridge to get in touch with the Mayor's office to ask him to improve those services.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): As we know, tomorrow is Holocaust Memorial Day, but the promise of “never again” is often broken—Mr Speaker reminded us of that at the start of business, and it is important that we focus on it. Around the world, religious minorities

are the target of genocidal activity, including in Myanmar, China, Nigeria and Afghanistan. Will the Leader of the House join me and other Members in making a statement to acknowledge the vulnerability of those groups, and to emphasise the urgent need for action?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for again raising that vital issue and mentioning some of the countries where it is a particular concern. He will know that the Foreign Office takes such matters incredibly seriously. That is why we have an envoy, why this is baked into the core work, and why there is activity in our embassies and high commissions in those nations. There is time next week if he can tempt the Backbench Business Committee to take up the issue. I thank him again for raising these incredibly serious matters, and for giving me the opportunity to send a message on behalf of the whole House of Commons that we will always keep our eyes on what people are having to endure, and we will always stand up for freedom of religion.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): North Shropshire is proud to be the home of RAF Shawbury and the Tern Hill barracks, but in the past week or so I have received a number of complaints from residents of those bases, complaining about the contractor, Pinnacle, which is responsible for maintaining their housing. One resident had a burst pipe on 17 December that was not fixed until 10 January, and there are reports of empty houses being left with leaks for so long that ceilings have collapsed. One constituent said:

“It is by far the worst experience of service and response issues (and previously we lived in service accommodation in Cyprus that had cockroaches and gas leaks!)”

This is clearly a serious issue, and I know it has been raised by a number of colleagues across the House. Will the Defence Secretary make a statement on what is being done to improve the performance of the contractor that is looking after our servicemen and women?

Penny Mordaunt: I am very sorry to hear about that situation. It should not be the case, and we owe our servicemen and women decent homes. The hon. Lady will know that we have Defence questions on 30 January, and I happen to know that the Assistant Chief of the Air Staff is coming to Parliament next week, and she might also wish to collar him. In addition to holding these companies and contractors to account, we want to give bases such as the one she mentions flexibility to resolve such situations themselves, because quite often they are prevented by bureaucracy from getting a plumber out. I hope that the hon. Lady will raise the issue with the Secretary of State at Defence questions.

Agricultural Transition Plan

11.47 am

The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries (Mark Spencer): With permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, in addition to the written ministerial statement tabled today, I would like to make a statement updating the House on the next steps that we are taking to shake off the damaging legacy of the bureaucratic EU common agricultural policy for good.

We will learn from the past, and help farmers to build and maintain profitable and resilient businesses by spending public money in a way that helps us to secure the public good, so that they can continue to produce the food we need and help to improve the state of nature. That is the right and smart thing to do with public money, as we also develop the markets that will draw on finance from all sources. Today we are publishing detailed information about what we will pay for in our environmental land management schemes, and how farmers can get involved this year and beyond.

Having kicked off our sustainable farming incentive last summer starting with soil health, today we are adding six more ways that farmers can be paid to take action in 2023, from protecting and enhancing the hedgerows that make up a vital network of habitats across our farmed landscapes, to making sure that we tackle pests, protect crops and support wildlife, so that more farms of all shapes and sizes can make doing their bit for the environment part of their business plan. Each year, we will add offers to the SFI, with the full set in place by 2025, so that farmers can choose more options for their businesses. That is vital for producing food, tackling the causes and impacts of climate change, and helping nature to recover.

We are making it straightforward and simple to get involved. We know that farmers need to plan for the months and years ahead as early as possible, so today we are publishing information on the work we will be rewarding by 2025 through the sustainable farming incentive and countryside stewardship, and sharing information on the next round of landscape recovery projects. We remain as ambitious as ever, as we move ahead through our transition and work with farmers to design a much better way of doing things.

All that will help us to build the resilience of our communities and to meet our environmental targets on air, water and waste, as well as nature, land and sea, guided by our commitments to reach net zero by 2050 and halt the loss of species in our country by 2030. We are also tackling the polluters who stubbornly refuse to help and threaten to undermine everyone else's hard work. Our aim is to back the frontrunners who can have the greatest impact and inspire others, as well as helping everyone to bring up their baseline and improve it year on year, harnessing the power of innovation and technology to help our farmers give nature a helping hand so that we focus on bringing their businesses into the future.

All the evidence we have, as well as plain common sense, tells us that making the shift towards a more sustainable, resilient food system is critical to feeding our growing population and meeting our commitments to halt the decline of nature by 2030 and reach net zero. That will fundamentally improve the lives of people across our country and around the world, and make

sure that every generation has a better future. The UK will continue to lead the way. I am sure that the whole House will join me in recognising the vital importance of the solutions our fantastic farmers bring to the table. I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman, Daniel Zeichner.

11.51 am

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): I thank the Minister for advance sight of the statement. It provides detail following announcements made not to this House, Mr Deputy Speaker, but to the Oxford farming conference some weeks ago. It will be scrutinised closely as farmers rightly try to work out what it will mean for them. With intense cost pressures on fertiliser, fuel and labour supply, many people are hurting and worrying. At the same time, the reduction in basic payments moves inexorably onwards. For people on the margins, especially in the uplands, the withdrawal of that essential support will make life harder and harder. Next year, half of it will be gone and the value of the other half will be eroded substantially by inflation.

So what is on offer today? Not nearly enough, I am afraid. There are more than 100 pages of complexity. There are lots of schemes, which are worthy in themselves, but in far too many cases, I fear they will be insufficiently attractive. There is a risk that take-up will be very low, as we have seen with the SFI so far, with just 224 paid out last year, compared with the over 80,000 receiving basic payments. I hope take-up improves—we want these schemes to work—but we have real doubts. Will the Minister tell us how much of the £1 billion already cut from farmers will go back to them this year through environmental land management schemes? How many people does he expect to take up the SFI in this calendar year? I welcome the reference to tenant farmers, but can he guarantee access to those schemes, because he will be aware of the issues highlighted in the Rock review?

There are also real questions about the environmental benefit. In the absence of a whole-farm approach, there is real risk, particularly on countryside stewardship, that the Government will pour money out to people to do pretty much what they already do and then intensify alongside that. Will the Minister tell us today what measures of environmental improvement are in place to ensure that public goods are really being secured in return for public money? Crucially, what impact does this all have on our food security? Will he tell us today whether we produce more or less food in this country this year as a consequence of these changes?

It is fully three years since we discussed the Agriculture Bill in Committee. I asked many of the same questions then and got vague answers. We will soon be halfway through the so-called transition. The Government have been good at cutting the funding to hard-pressed farmers, but frankly woeful at guaranteeing our food production here in the UK and enabling the switch to the more sustainable nature-friendly food production system we all want to see.

Mark Spencer: I honestly entered the Chamber with optimism. I thought today was the day we would get a positive Opposition able to join the people up and down the country who are being positive about this. I am sure

the hon. Gentleman is disappointed we have had positive comments from non-governmental organisations and farming organisations, which seem to be welcoming the plans.

Let us get to the points the hon. Gentleman made. He said we made announcements at Oxford, but what we announced at Oxford was the lifted payments for countryside stewardship. Today we are announcing the SFI, which is the other scheme. That is on the website now. There are six extra schemes in there, some of which—the low-input grassland and improved grassland schemes, for instance—are designed to help and support exactly those upland farmers he mentioned. There is also support through countryside stewardship to assist with the maintenance of stone walls, so there are lots of things for farmers to embrace.

The hon. Gentleman asks: can we do both? Can we keep the nation fed and improve the environment? We have full confidence that we can. Looking at the data and at history, this country gets about 1% more efficient year on year in the way we produce food. That means that in 10 years' time we can produce the same amount of food on 10% less land. I think we can do better than that. With investment in new technology, we can be more productive on the most productive land, and on the margins around those fields we can add true biodiversity and environmental output.

Let me give a practical example. If we convince farmers not to cut their hedgerows in August or September, as was traditional, but encourage them to cut them in February, that would provide a huge pantry of berries for small birds to feed on throughout the winter. Combining that with support for wildflower strips next to the hedgerows would encourage the development of lacewings and ladybirds, which eat aphids, which are the pests farmers use pesticides on to stop the damage to their crops. That would be a win-win by working with, not against, nature. That is what we want to encourage farmers to do, and that is how we will deliver food security, environmental benefits and better biodiversity.

George Eustice (Camborne and Redruth) (Con): I warmly welcome the inclusion of a new hedgerow standard under the sustainable farming incentive, and particularly the inclusion and recognition of Cornish stone hedges within it. Hedges are probably the single most important ecological building block in our farmed environment, and it is right that that is recognised.

However, to get the movement we need toward our 2030 species abundance target, we need widespread participation in the schemes, as the document published today outlines. It is very welcome that the Government have increased the payment rates already, but can he confirm that if we need to increase them further in the years ahead to get the participation rates we need, he will not be banned by antiquated EU laws around income forgone—those are still sitting in retained EU law—and that we will pay whatever it takes in the market to get the participation we need?

Mark Spencer: First, I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend, who was the forerunner of many of these thoughts and schemes. The work he did in the Department has led us to this point, and I pay tribute to it. He is right to identify hedgerows as the corridors of wildlife. They are a huge source of biodiversity and a place where wildlife

can thrive. We will, of course, do all we can to not only support individual farmers, but build that network of hedgerows and those corridors for wildlife.

All these schemes remain under review. One of the reasons we are here today and were not able to do this last year is because we were running pilot schemes with farmers and listening to the feedback they were giving us. The scheme we have today is in a much stronger place than it would have been if we had acted earlier. We will continue to have dialogue with NGOs and farmers to ensure we get the outputs we require.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): We obviously welcome the aims and objectives of today's statement, but it has been a tough year for farmers, with cuts to their basic payment alongside the increasing cost of doing business. My farmers tell me that the SFI schemes are too complex and cost too much up front to engage with. That is why we have seen such poor take-up rates so far. Will the Minister consider halting the cut to the basic payment scheme until our farmers have had time to get to grips with the complexities of this new scheme and participation rates have increased to an acceptable level?

Mark Spencer: We should be clear that we set out our plan to reduce basic payments over a seven-year period and we are trying to ensure that, as those basic payments come down, we increase the environmental payments at the same rate, so that we maintain the same budget. The hon. Lady is fair in her criticism that some of the schemes appeared to be too complex. We have listened to that, and the schemes we are announcing today are much more simplistic in their approach and much more flexible in their delivery. I encourage farmers in her constituency in Shropshire to take a new look. This is a new approach, which builds in flexibility, particularly for tenant farmers, to step in and out of the SFI, and I sincerely hope that her farmers will be able to benefit from the new schemes announced today.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call the Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee.

Sir Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): As a farmer myself, I thank the Minister, following the taster that we had at the Oxford farming conference, for his further clarification of the way that agricultural transition will be delivered. We are now able to capitalise fully on the freedoms we have outside the European Union to tailor our agricultural policy not only to the needs and objectives of farmers, but to the objectives of taxpayers.

English agriculture is very diverse in land type, topography, altitude and size, with many smaller farms relying on the support they get from the taxpayer. Can the Minister reassure me that this support system will not only help those farmers who need to change the way they farm to make it more sustainable and ecologically diverse, but support those upland farmers in places such as the North Yorkshire moors who have been delivering for generations exactly the public good that we want them to deliver?

Mark Spencer: I join my right hon. Friend in declaring my interest, and I pay tribute to him for his work as Chair of the Select Committee and the scrutiny that he

[Mark Spencer]

brings to this area of government. He is right to highlight the uplands. In these schemes, we have something for everyone. Whether someone is a small livestock farmer in the uplands or a huge arable farmer in the lowlands, there is something that they can engage with to improve their business and improve the biodiversity and environmental output of their farm. Of course, some of the SFI criteria we have put in place—particularly those regarding improved grassland and low-input grassland—are aimed specifically at sheep farmers to ensure that there is something they can participate in. I do not underestimate the economic value of the food they produce, or the impact they have on the tourism industry and on the mental health of people visiting that part of Yorkshire to unwind and enjoy the great landscapes that those farmers have created.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement and welcome the intentions of this policy. He said that the scheme would be open to all farms of all shapes and sizes. In County Durham we have a lot of tenanted smaller farms. As the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan) just said, a lot of them are struggling at the moment with diesel and fertiliser costs, and other things. Some of these decisions will need investment up front. Will there be any incentives or help for smaller farmers to make that investment? They will also need guidance; big agriculture businesses will have that already, but smaller farmers will need specific help.

Mark Spencer: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question. We have taken a number of things into account. Under the SFI, we have introduced a management payment of an extra £20 per hectare on the first 50 hectares, which will help smaller farmers who do not have the capacity in their business to employ a land agent, so that they have time to go into the agreement and are rewarded for doing so. That is very important.

The flexibility in the SFI scheme also helps tenant farmers. If they enter a scheme and, for some reason, they lose control of their land—if they are removed by their landlord or want to give it up, for example—they will not be penalised for leaving the scheme; they will have the flexibility to come in and out. I hope that helps tenants. We have engaged extensively with the Tenant Farmers Association, and the right hon. Gentleman may be familiar with the Kate Rock review, which looked specifically at the needs and desires of tenants. We have taken on board lots of those recommendations and built them into the scheme.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement—what a blessing it is to have someone who knows so much about farming at the Dispatch Box—and in particular for his emphasis on food security, which, as we can now see, has been too neglected for too long. It is clear from the current food price inflation and shortages in the shops that we need better food security. Perhaps he would like to visit the area of outstanding natural beauty around Dedham Vale, where we see good landowner co-operation and work by combined forces. Perhaps he would also like to contact Mr John Geldard, who is

leading a highly innovative co-operative scheme in Cumbria. Agri-environmental schemes can work at scale across many estates, and can be far more effective and far better value for the taxpayer than other schemes.

Mark Spencer: I would be delighted to visit both locations—I have known John Geldard and his son Richard for a number of years. My hon. Friend has drawn attention to co-operation between farmers. The third scheme that we are announcing is landscape recovery, which will involve huge projects over many hectares, with farmers and landowners coming together to contribute a positive environmental output. For example, if we want to reduce phosphate levels in the river Wye—this is an existing scheme—landowners can co-operate to reduce the input of nutrients. We will extend that to a further 25 schemes, subject to the quality of the bids. I am quite excited about it, and I think that non-governmental organisations, landowners and farmers will want to get together and deliver on the landscape recovery scheme.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I do not know what is going on in Sherwood and Sherwood Forest these days, but my local farmers in Huddersfield and I have been involved with the nature recovery network, and I am also a trustee involved in a scheme relating to John Clare's house in Lincolnshire. We know what it means to deliver public good: it means participation, involving the local community, parish and other councils, and charities. Is not the current problem the fact that no one really knows whether there will be serious money and resources for this plan, or whether people will still be required to co-operate to achieve it?

Mark Spencer: That is what today is about. It is about the announcement of that money and those schemes that can allow the farmers in the hon. Gentleman's constituency to gain the reward for the public good that they deliver. This is not only good for the environment, but good for farming businesses. The soil standards, for example, help the farming operation and ensure that we have good-quality soils not only for this generation, but for generations to come.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): Farmers in my constituency are passionate about supporting their environment and raising their livestock in a sustainable way, and will welcome the clarity of today's announcement. Many of them took part in pilots for these schemes. However, they report being unable to apply for the slurry infrastructure grant. Given the importance of water quality in North Devon's rivers and on its beaches, will my right hon. Friend please ensure that this vital support is accessible to all its farmers?

Mark Spencer: My hon. Friend has already lobbied me on this in private, and I pay tribute to her. It is important for us to help farmers on the journey towards improving their environmental impact, and that will include grants for new slurry systems and other infrastructure. There will be several rounds so that farmers can apply on several occasions. Today we are announcing a number of future grant schemes in order to give farmers time to think about them and plan for their businesses into the medium future.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I welcome the Minister's statement, and I think that all of us in the farming sector can take some encouragement from it. I should also declare an interest, as a farmer and a member of the Ulster Farmers' Union.

The farming industry plays a key role throughout the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, notably in my constituency, where, as a landowner and a farmer, I understand the importance of retention. In England farmers will receive sustainable farming resources to maintain incentives for a production agriculture sector, but in Northern Ireland, through the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, agriculture is devolved, at a time when there is no working Assembly. Can the Minister assure us that the devolved nations will not be left behind when it comes to farming incentives, given that their contribution in Northern Ireland is every bit as important as the contribution in the rest of the United Kingdom?

Mark Spencer: As the hon. Gentleman identifies, these are devolved matters. I am sorry that the scheme does not apply to his constituents, but we have a lot of engagement with the devolved Administrations, some of which are going in a slightly different direction. In those conversations we all recognise that we have to go in a direction that improves our biodiversity and environment. We will continue that dialogue to help support our friends and colleagues in the devolved Administrations and their constituents.

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): I declare my interest, as my parents are farmers and I previously worked as a rural practice surveyor. I welcome the statement and congratulate DEFRA on listening and making changes. It is worth noting that Janet Hughes, who is working behind the scenes, has been getting huge credit for her work to interact with farmers. Landscape recovery projects are a great mechanism for fostering collaboration between different landowners in creating that public good that we need to see. Will the Minister expand on today's announcement on the landscape recovery schemes, which will enable farmers to work together as bigger units to drive and deliver the public good that we all want to see?

Mark Spencer: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the landscape recovery scheme, which will deliver huge benefits to various parts of the country. It is a competitive process, and 25 schemes are available to be awarded. It will enable landowners, farmers and non-governmental organisations to come together to increase the amount of land in one package and to deliver a public good by building networks of improvement, with a single person having an overarching view of a whole landscape to make sure that we have, say, buffer zones next to rivers. That is a new concept, and the pilots prove that it works. I look forward to many more schemes coming forward.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Local, affordable and sustainable food production delivers real health and food security benefits to my constituents in Newcastle. We also benefit from the glorious north-east countryside and landscape, which is shaped by small-scale farmers. We have had six years of confusion and downright chaos on grants, subsidies, imports, food standards, etc. Will the Minister answer two simple questions? Will the

small-scale farmers of the north-east benefit and be better off as a consequence of these changes, and will our landscape be more biodiverse?

Mark Spencer: I am tempted just to say yes, but it is clear that this opportunity requires farmers to engage in the schemes and to put forward their own plans, so it is subject to farmers looking at the website and working out deliverable plans. I suppose it depends on how the hon. Lady defines "better off." If she defines it as attracting more Government subsidy, that is entirely possible under the scheme if farmers bid for and deliver the right environmental outcomes. Farmers have a choice whether to engage with the programme. We think it is very attractive and will help farmers not only to produce great food but to deliver great environmental outcomes.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement, and I welcome its intention. My right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) made an important point about the specific needs of smaller, tenanted farms, which are the lifeblood of our rural communities. I am reassured that the Minister understands the need for flexibility, but will he make sure that small tenant farmers are not unduly disadvantaged as a consequence of these proposals?

Mark Spencer: It is very much our intention to try to help and support farmers, whether they are owner-occupiers or tenants. There is something in the scheme for farms of all shapes and sizes, but we have an eye on the farmers that the hon. Gentleman describes. As he will be aware, the TFA is a powerful lobby group. The Kate Rock review is specifically looking at the plight of those farmers, and it is having an influence on Government policy.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): As environmental and climate change goals become ever more urgent, how will updates to the plan specifically increase the use of peatland for carbon capture and storage?

Mark Spencer: The hon. Lady raises an important point, because our peatlands are under huge pressure, particularly in the lowlands, where they are disappearing. We need to try to embrace and support the farmers who are farming that land, because they are very productive in growing vegetables, particularly in the Lincolnshire wolds. We must make sure that we continue to sequester carbon in the peatlands in her constituency, as they are a huge carbon sequestration asset. That is a huge priority that this Government will continue to monitor and support.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I share the Minister's excitement about the potential of the landscape recovery schemes, but we also need to leverage private sector finance if we are to reach net zero and halt biodiversity loss. What conversations has he had with colleagues in the Treasury, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, and across Government about ensuring that nature-based carbon credits actually have credibility? At the moment, it is difficult to quantify their value and to get people to be confident in investing in them.

Mark Spencer: As ever, the hon. Lady is very informed. This is a challenge that we have to get right, and we are putting a lot of work into making sure that we can measure these things in a right and fair way—this has to be applied in a global sense—and into engaging with the private sector to make sure it can help to support farmers and landowners to do the right thing to add to our environmental benefit, and so it is not just the taxpayer picking up the tab.

Ukraine Update

12.16 pm

The Minister for Defence Procurement (Alex Chalk): Equipping Ukraine to push Russia out of its territory is as important as equipping it to defend what it already has. Together, we will continue supporting Ukraine to move from resisting Russian forces to expelling them from Ukrainian soil. By bringing together allies and partners, we are ensuring that the surge of global military support is as strategic and as co-ordinated as possible.

The new level of required combat power is achievable only by a combination of main battle tank squadrons beneath air and missile defence, operating alongside divisional artillery groups and further deep precision fires that enable the targeting of Russian logistics and command nodes in occupied territory.

On 16 January, the Secretary of State for Defence announced in this House the UK's latest package of military support for Ukraine. The United Kingdom is committed to providing the capabilities Ukraine requires to drive further international donations and to secure lasting peace. The UK, our allies and partners are responding decisively to provide military and humanitarian assistance to Ukraine. The UK has led the world with the gifting of modern main battle tanks to Ukraine, and we are engaging international partners through a co-ordinated military and diplomatic effort.

The Secretary of State for Defence co-hosted a meeting of partners with his Estonian counterpart on 19 January to push forward international donations. The Tallinn pledge is an important declaration of commitment to Ukraine. The provision of tanks was also discussed at the meeting of the Ukraine defence contact group at Ramstein airbase on 20 January.

We welcome the decision by Germany to send Leopard 2 tanks, and by the United States to send Abrams tanks, to Ukraine, and we are delighted that they have now joined the United Kingdom, France and Poland in equipping Ukraine with this important capability. Our united resolve can and will prove decisive. In 2023, we are more determined than ever. We will support Ukraine for as long as it takes.

12.18 pm

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement. This is an important opportunity to discuss the developments of the past few days.

The UK remains united in its support for Ukraine. The first package of UK military assistance in 2023, with tanks, artillery, infantry vehicles, ammunition and missiles, has Labour's fullest support. We warmly welcome the announcements from Germany, the US, France and Poland that they will be sending tanks, and that Germany will grant export licences to allow others to follow suit. This will provide more of the equipment that Ukraine needs to win at a pivotal moment. This is an historic move from Germany in particular, and NATO allies continue to move in lockstep to provide vital support.

We also welcome the Tallinn pledge as an important statement of western unity and intent to provide Ukraine with the support it needs. The west is united and we move together at a vital moment for Ukrainian forces. We encourage the Government to continue to work

with NATO and European allies to deliver the support Ukraine needs to face down Putin's aggression. It is now our duty to make sure that Ukraine wins this war. Can the Minister say when he expects Ukrainian troops to begin their training with our Challenger 2 tanks, and when he expects those tanks, and the tanks being sent by NATO allies, to begin to arrive on the frontline?

Labour has argued for months that Ministers need to move beyond ad hoc announcements and set out a long-term plan of support for Ukraine, as they promised last August. Will the Minister commit today to ensuring that that is published before the one-year anniversary of Putin's invasion of Ukraine? The Prime Minister has rightly identified this as a window of opportunity for a surge in global military support for Ukraine. How will the Minister ensure that there is a surge in UK support? What further support do the Government plan to send this year?

The conflict is also depleting our stockpiles and Ministers are moving too slowly to replace them. What steps is the Minister taking to ramp up production of ammunition and equipment to restock our own armed forces and to support Ukraine? It took 287 days from the start of the invasion for the Defence Secretary to get his act together and sign a new contract to replenish NLAWs—next-generation light anti-tank weapons—for our armed forces and for Ukraine. How many more contracts have been signed to replenish UK stockpiles of the other weapons sent to Ukraine?

Finally, will the Minister now say what bearing these developments will have on the coming refresh of the integrated review? The Defence Secretary has said he will review the size of our tank fleet. Does the Minister think scrapping a third of our Challenger tanks in the original IR was a mistake? We are now at a critical moment in the war. The winter deadlock could soon give way to a spring offensive from Russia and further counter-attacks from Ukraine. As the first anniversary of Russia's invasion approaches, the UK and NATO allies must send a clear signal that we will stand with Ukraine for as long as it takes. Putin must be clear that things will get harder for him, not easier, this year.

Alex Chalk: I thank the hon. Lady for her remarks. She ended them by saying that the world must send a clear signal and she is absolutely right about that. I am pleased that this House, too, is sending a clear signal, as reflected by her opening remarks. She was also right to pick out the particular role of Germany, and she mentioned the historical context; this is a big move, it is a welcome move and it is the right move. I also wish to put on record that Germany has made a very significant contribution in providing munitions and support, and I hope that will not be understated.

The hon. Lady asked a number of questions, so let me turn to those. I am pleased to say that training is expected to start next week, on Monday. She asked when the Challenger 2 tank will be in theatre; the intention is that that will be at the end of March. Between now and then there will be a significant programme of training, not just for the tank crews who are to operate the vehicle, but for those who will be charged with maintaining it. I am happy to discuss that further in due course if questions arise.

The hon. Lady talked about a surge of support. I will come on to that, but I want to make the point, which I am sure is well understood in this House but bears

repetition, that this country has provided more military support than any nation on the planet apart from the United States. What does that mean? It means: 100,000 artillery shells; more than 200 armoured fighting vehicles; more than 10,000 anti-tank weapons; Javelins; Brimstones; NLAWs; night vision goggles; and plastic explosives. It means so much. We do all that and more. I also pause to note that this was the nation that ensured that a lot of that equipment was in theatre before the invasion started, because we saw what Russia's intentions were.

The hon. Lady rightly presses us on what will happen next. We have already trained 10,000 troops—we have been training Ukrainian troops since 2014. We will continue to do that in 2023, and indeed the funding is there for a further package of support, and it will include, for example, another 100,000 or so artillery shells.

The hon. Lady is right to mention restocking. She will understand that operational sensitivities mean that I cannot go into the detail of exactly what is going to be restocked and when, but she will know that Privy Counsellors, including from the Opposition, have been given a briefing on that—that is exactly what we should be doing to ensure that those who need to know these sensitive details are told what they properly can be told. That has taken place.

Let us pause for a moment to consider the IR. The original IR, which was framed before the Russian invasion, correctly identified that Russia was a threat. Of course in this refresh we look to recalibrate and consider what further steps need to be taken. The Secretary of State has been clear that we will review all matters, including tanks, to which the hon. Lady referred. I want to close by saying that the UK has been on the front foot and on the frontline in terms of providing support for Ukraine, and when it comes to main battle tanks we have done exactly the same. This nation will be unflinching in its support of Ukraine—we were in 2022 and we certainly will be for the rest of this year.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call the Chair of the Defence Committee.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): I very much welcome this update and the detail that the Minister has provided. It is not often one can say this in the House, but Britain and our allies are now mobilising in earnest for war. After so much international hesitancy, we are finally, nudged on by the UK, beginning to muster the serious hardware that can make a material difference on the battlefield. But we must move from talking about tactics to strategy. Does he agree that this war is no longer about just Ukraine—it is about a widening threat to the west? Does he agree that Putin is now the single most destabilising force in Europe and that the conflict has entered a more complex and dangerous chapter, with major security implications for our own defence posture, particularly the poor state of our land forces? It is unacceptable that our tank numbers have dropped from 900 two decades ago to just 148 today—that must be reviewed.

Alex Chalk: I welcome my right hon. Friend's important contribution. Of course we accept that Putin represents a threat; we said that in the IR. In the actions Putin took in February last year, he made it crystal clear that the rhetoric he had been developing prior to that period

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had been put into action. It is clear to us that unless we address this threat now, through the support for Ukraine, which is fighting a just war of defence, it is likely that that threat will only grow. On land forces, my right hon. Friend is extremely well acquainted with the future soldier programme to rebuild those armed forces. On a matter of detail, the tank number is not 148—it is 227.

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): I, too, rise to welcome this statement and I thank the Minister for advance sight of it. I will largely echo the comments of others, because clearly all of us in this place stand united behind Ukraine and welcome the steps that have been taken. I do not think any of us can underestimate the steps taken yesterday with the decision by Germany and how difficult a decision that was for the Germans. That is most certainly worth noting. I also note that there are concerns about this next wave of mobilisation of Russian troops, the suggestion that the Russians have drafted 500,000 new recruits into their army and how quickly they may be able to mobilise.

Although I welcome the moves we have made, there is, obviously, concern about the time it is going to take to get troops up and running and feet on the ground. I welcome the Defence Secretary's authorisation of the shipment of the 14 Challenger 2 tanks to Ukraine, although I note that Ukraine's most senior military commander, General Valery Zaluzhny, said that it needs some 300 western tanks and about 600 western armoured fighting vehicles in order to make a difference. Will the Minister outline whether we will be sending any further Challenger 2 tanks, beyond this initial squadron? I note that in 2021 the Government announced that they were planning to retire about 80 tanks from the UK's arsenal, so it is possible that some or all of those could be considered for repurposing for deployment to Ukraine, if they are fit enough for that? How is the Ministry of Defence assisting other NATO allies such as Spain that have not yet sent tanks but wish to do so?

Ukrainian forces will need time to learn how to operate this highly technical equipment, so how will UK armed forces collaborate with NATO counterparts to supply the necessary auxiliary equipment and training to make sure that Ukrainian forces can maximise that capability? Finally, what discussions has the Department had with allies to consider sending fighter jets to Ukraine in the coming weeks and months, so that we do everything we can to aid Ukraine's struggle?

Alex Chalk: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his remarks. He raises a number of very important issues. May I reiterate the point about unity across the House? He has demonstrated that, and I thank him for it.

The hon. Gentleman raised an important point at the beginning about the time taken to mobilise. No apology is made for that, because, unless the time is taken to properly train the tank crews and also those who support the equipment, we will not achieve the impact that we all want to see. One thing that I am encouraged by, and I am pleased to be able to update the House about, is the extent to which we will be training those maintenance crews on a five-week course, entirely separate from the tank crews themselves, to provide the kind of deep maintenance that is needed, by which I mean if a gearbox

or wheel needs to be replaced. We will be supplying not just the tanks, but the supplies and the training to ensure that those vehicles can remain on the road. The tank crews themselves will have a level of maintenance training, but there will be a deep maintenance training support package as well. In addition, there will be the ability to reach back to the UK. In other words, they will be able to communicate to the UK, "Look, this is an issue with this tank. Can you support us?" We will then provide that technical knowhow remotely.

The hon. Gentleman talked about the number of tanks. The thing that is so important, and that the Secretary of State was so clear about in his remarks in the House, is that the UK has a leadership role to catalyse other nations. That is what we intended to do and—I hope it is fair to say—that is what we have delivered. The number of tanks overall is now over 70. Two weeks ago it was zero, so we are making steps in the right direction.

The hon. Gentleman asked about other countries—Spain, for example. It is of course a matter for Spain, but I hope that it will take comfort from the fact that the United Kingdom and, indeed, Germany, as he rightly pointed out, have reached this decision, and it may be that other nations will see the way to make similar decisions. Ultimately, though, it is a matter for those other countries.

Let me address the point about armoured fighting vehicles—a point that is sometimes lost. This nation alone has donated more than 200 armoured fighting vehicles—the so-called dogs of war that we are familiar with from Afghanistan. These are big, heavy fighting vehicles with weapons capabilities that provide assistance on the battlefield.

On the issue of tanks overall, the Secretary of State has been clear that 40 tanks have been provided, which means that those existing hulls that were at low readiness will be brought forward to high readiness. That is about ensuring that our overall fleet—the fleet that remains—is more lethal and more ready for action.

As for fighters, we will just have to wait and see. This is an important step at the moment. It is one that we think has a way to go, especially as other nations will perhaps see their way forward as well.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): What further steps can be taken to reduce the effectiveness of the criminal Wagner organisation? Is the Ministry of Defence satisfied that all its expenditure on helping Ukraine is being fully reimbursed from the Treasury reserve?

Alex Chalk: Those are two very important points, for which I am grateful.

On the second point, yes, expenditure is being reimbursed by the Treasury. Indeed, when we look at the sums that have been allocated for ammunition, there is an additional £650 million to procure not just replacement ammunition, but deeper supplies. That is a very important point. It is a statement of fact that it takes time—of course it does—to replenish those stores, but the funding is in place to do so.

On the first point, as my right hon. Friend will appreciate, tactical decisions about precisely how equipment is deployed—it could be against the Wagner organisation in and around Soledar and Bakhmut—is a matter for

commanders on the ground. Our job, as we see it, is to ensure that those decision makers in the field have the equipment they need to push back against Russian forces, Wagner forces or whoever it is. If the Russians have their own difficulties over precisely who is in control and the politics within their ranks, that is a matter for them.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I thank the Minister for setting a new record for the shortest statement in history: four paragraphs and less than a page and a quarter.

I return to the point raised by the right hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), which is the effect of these donations on our Army's capability. We have seen the press speculation about the Chief of the General Staff's comments about the hollowing out of our capabilities in the Army. The Minister talked about 227 Challenger 2 tanks, but he knows that, operationally, it is far fewer than 100. What will he do to ensure that those alarm bells that have been sounded by the Chief of the General Staff are met with new capabilities so that we can meet our NATO commitments?

Alex Chalk: The Chief of the General Staff also went on to make the point that it could not be in a better cause. Indeed, it is important to make the point that weapons that we supply have the effect of degrading the very adversary who was noted in the integrated review. We are fighting this just war not only to stand up for the international rule of law, and to make a statement that might is not always right and that we cannot remake borders by force, but to degrade the forces of our principal adversary as identified in the IR.

The Secretary of State has said, in respect of our Challenger 2 tanks, that he will now, at his instruction, ensure that more hulls are brought to a greater state of readiness, so that, as part of our overall land fleet, we have Challenger 2 squadrons ready to deploy in the defence of this nation.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I thank my hon. and learned Friend and the Government for the exemplary way in which the UK Government have led on all this. They have made a very significant and considerable change in the atmosphere over the past few days. But what about France? What discussions are taking place with it? If we want NATO unity, it is now the odd man out because it is not sending tanks. Does the Minister agree that the side that can mass its forces with sufficient speed is the side that will turn the tide of the war? Should we not be doing more? Why are we not sending all our tanks that are available—all our Warrior vehicles? We can replenish our armoured vehicle fleet over time, but the Ukrainians need our stuff now. What else will those vehicles be used for?

Alex Chalk: Let me deal with the issue of France. It is, of course, a matter for sovereign nations to make their decision, and we would respectfully point out and welcome the decision of the French Government to provide Ukraine with the AMX-10 highly mobile tank. It is not their main battle tank, as my hon. Friend points out, but it is, none the less, one that has been used very recently in reconnaissance missions by the French army and was deployed as recently as the Barkhane mission in west Africa. That comes together with a

number of very sophisticated and lethal bits of ammunition. We would, of course, welcome further progress, but, ultimately, it is a matter for them.

My hon. Friend raises an important question that will doubtless be in the minds of many people, which is why not give more. That is something that we will keep under review, but we do have to balance it with the point that the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) made about UK sovereign capability and the ability for us to deploy tanks in the defence of our own borders. These are difficult judgments to make, but we are satisfied that our initial contribution, which has helped to galvanise and catalyse further international contributions, is the right donation to be making at this stage. We keep all these matters under review.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): I echo the concerns expressed by the Chair of the Defence Committee, the right hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), about the state of our land forces. It is vital that this is addressed in the context of the refresh of the integrated review. May I also echo the sentiment expressed by the Chair of the Intelligence and Security Committee, the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis), about the resourcing of all of this? Although providing this capability is the right thing to do, it will come at some cost and with some undermining of our defence capability. Will the Minister reiterate the point that I think he made just a moment ago that the costs will fall on the Treasury, and that the cost of deploying this additional capability will not fall on an already stretched MOD budget?

Alex Chalk: May I underscore that point and add that, as part of the support to the Ukrainians in respect of Challenger 2 tanks, we provide them with ammunition, spares and the technical support that I mentioned a few moments ago? We also want to support them to provide a lot of the spares themselves in the fullness of time—whether by using 3D printing or whatever it is—so that they can become self-sufficient. That is a very important part of sustaining this effort. As far as financial support is concerned, it was £2.3 billion last year and a similar sum this year. That is an important part of the support that we can provide, and it goes together with humanitarian support.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): The Ukrainian diaspora and the Ukrainian families who have come to my constituency will welcome this announcement and the UK's leadership on the issue. I particularly welcome what my hon. and learned Friend had to say about the maintenance of the vehicles and kit supplied, because that has been a problem in other theatres. Can he reassure me that, along with the focus on very high-level equipment—tanks, and indeed the question about fighter jets—we will not lose sight of the basic kit required in the day-to-day conflict?

Alex Chalk: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question and for the support his constituents have given the Ukrainian people. We sit here and talk about tanks and missiles, but some of the most important support we have given is through the people of this country who have welcomed into their homes Ukrainians fleeing persecution and aggression. On his specific point, we

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will continue to provide military support, particularly supplies for the tanks, and—I cannot remember what his second point was—

David Mundell: Basic kit.

Alex Chalk: Yes—that is essential. One thing we do not talk about as much, although perhaps we should, is winter kit. Much of the equipment we are providing is what helps with basic war fighting, to ensure that Ukrainian troops do not suffer from cold. We also provide night-vision goggles, medicines and other equipment to allow them to take the fight to the enemy.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Abrams tanks provided by the US Government could prove to be extremely expensive to run, as they rely on jet fuel. What discussions have Ministers had with our international partners about ensuring that the heavy armour provided can be easily maintained and is not a hindrance to Ukrainian forces?

Alex Chalk: It is not for us to discuss how the Abrams tanks should be maintained, but the hon. Lady makes an important point: heavy armour can be a liability if we do not ensure it is properly resourced and maintained. That is why we are working at the fastest possible pace to balance the urgent operational requirement of getting this equipment into the field with ensuring that it is an asset, not a liability. We have ensured that not only will the tank crews—who, incidentally, will be already experienced on tanks, albeit of a different type—be selected to be trained, but separate maintenance crews will have the skills and supplies to sustain Challenger 2 tanks in the field and take the fight to the enemy.

Sir Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): Will the Minister pay tribute to the workers at BAE Systems in Telford and elsewhere in the country who are working hard to deliver the new turret for Challenger 2, and who will have to pull out all the stops to supply support for those tanks? Has he considered whether, if we need to cannibalise some of our tanks temporarily and take them out of commission to provide spares to Ukraine, we are prepared to do that?

Alex Chalk: We have already identified the spares that are to be required as part of this package. Right hon. and hon. Members can have in their minds that not only is the physical tank being provided, but a container or something similar of supplies is coming with it. That has been identified as well. We have looked into our inventories to make sure we are in a position to properly support the Ukrainians, and there is a helpful and constructive dialogue with them about the number of munitions they require and the level of maintenance supplies needed to sustain them—informed, by the way, by the experience they already have in the field.

I pay tribute to those at BAE Systems and Rheinmetall BAE Systems Land in Telford, who will do an important job. I have been to see them myself. I want to emphasise one further point: yes, we will provide munitions and technical know-how, but we also want to pivot to a position where those operating the systems can independently

maintain them and supply the spares required. That is what the Ukrainians want, and that is the know-how we are going to assist them with.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that we should strongly support the comments of the Secretary-General of NATO when he says that this is an important time to end the Russian tyranny and to remind people that Ukrainians are the victims? They did not ask to be invaded and we should support them until the end.

Alex Chalk: I do, and the right hon. Lady paraphrases it very well. Those of us who look at history can look back at all sorts of conflicts and sometimes it is quite difficult to work out what the war aims were, but there is nothing complicated about this case. This is a war of invasion and a war of aggression; it is an attempt to demonstrate that the international rule of law does not matter at all and that might is always right. This nation will always stand up for basic principles of international law and justice. That is why the Ukrainians find in us a staunch ally.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): I thank the Minister for his statement and for confirming to this House that we will continue to lead the world in supporting Ukraine, as we have since the beginning of this war. Will he reassure me and my constituents in Southend West that we are doing everything we can to encourage other countries, particularly European countries that may not have done anything so far, to step up their efforts to contribute to ending this evil war?

Alex Chalk: I thank my hon. Friend, who stands up so well for her constituents. She is right that the UK cannot do everything on its own, but we can set a powerful example. We have significant capabilities that we can bring to the field and a powerful example that we can set. That is the approach we intend to take. Leadership comes from doing the right thing, and I am confident that we can expect the trend we have already seen, of other nations following our lead, to continue.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I was pleased to hear what the Minister said about the importance of the basic winter kits and so on. Given that we are trying to persuade other countries to be more generous and supportive as well, what role is the UK playing in trying to co-ordinate efforts so that what is supplied matches the need on the ground?

Alex Chalk: The hon. Lady is absolutely right that we need to ensure that co-ordination takes place. That is why the British Government were in the lead in Tallinn, as I indicated in my initial statement, where the Netherlands, Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, Denmark, the Czech Republic and various other countries were present, and that led to the Tallinn pledge. We were also present at Ramstein the following day, with the United States and various other countries. I think the pledges we are now seeing find their root, as it were, in those important meetings that took place. She is right that co-ordination is essential, and not just on main battle tanks, because main battle tanks operated by soldiers who do not have proper winter equipment, for example, will not be as effective

as they otherwise would be. There are all sorts of things going on that are perhaps not necessarily reported on with the same level of intensity, but are vital to ensuring that Ukrainians can fight and fight to win.

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): At Christmas time, I launched a campaign along with local residents to take generators to some of the worst affected areas in Ukraine. It was Christmas, people do not have a lot of money, and I was not quite sure how successful it would be, but today I can say we have raised nearly £18,000 and, thanks to this campaign and all the constituents who have been incredibly supportive, we now have 94 generators from North Norfolk in three Transit vans to take over to Lviv to be distributed. We talk a lot about people power around this country and all the people who have helped, so will my hon. and learned Friend thank my constituents for gathering together 94 generators, and Andrew Hadley and Rob Scammell, who have been superb and worked tirelessly on this project?

Alex Chalk: My hon. Friend paints a powerful tribute and I am happy to echo it. The people of North Norfolk have stepped up admirably, not only in providing generators, but in opening their hearts and their homes to people fleeing Ukraine, so I absolutely pay tribute to them. It is worth remembering that this country has provided not just generators, but ambulances and Sea King search and rescue helicopters in addition to medicines and so on.

There is one matter that I am happy to correct, by the way: I said £600 million for additional ammunition, but I think it is £560 million. In so far as that is material, I am happy to make that clear.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Minister agree that, if anyone wants to understand President Putin better, they should do what I have done and watch the brilliant new documentary by Norma Percy, "Putin, Russia and the West", which will be broadcast again on Monday on the BBC? It is very revealing about what we face. Does he also agree with me and other Back Benchers who have said that, while it is crucial that we send more tanks, and I applaud that—the gearboxes for the Challengers are all made at David Brown Santasalo in Huddersfield, and much else, too, so that is all good news—this is also about morale? The civilians across Ukraine need blankets, heat and food. Can we make sure across Departments that the folks at home, who support their troops and their President, are getting that kind of help with keeping warm this winter and feeding themselves and their children?

Alex Chalk: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his remarks and pay tribute to his constituents, who have been providing gearboxes for the Challenger 2 tanks. He is absolutely right to say that the support is not just military. Indeed, more than £1 billion of humanitarian support has been provided by the British Government, and there are those from North Norfolk and elsewhere who have been doing a huge amount besides—blankets are important, food is important, generators are important. I am proud that this country has provided tens of thousands of sets of winter clothing for Ukrainian troops. That means that General Winter—as some have

referred to winter and the impact that it can have on conflicts in that part of the world—should be on the side of the Ukrainians.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): I welcome the Minister's statement. The Liberal Democrats join the Government and other Opposition parties in opposing this dreadful invasion. The Minister mentioned the Wagner Group, which we know is an agent of Putin that is responsible for egregious human rights abuses and atrocities not just in Ukraine, but around the world, in Mali, Sudan and Syria. Will the Minister commit to proscribing the military units and mercenary groups that are carrying out those atrocities in Ukraine and elsewhere?

Alex Chalk: I thank the hon. Lady for her question and her support. Her point about the Wagner Group is one that is under active consideration by the Government as we speak.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): As co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Ukraine, I am overwhelmed by the support from across the House for the people of Ukraine, and I thank the Government for the amount of military assistance that they are giving. One of the outstanding issues of the war, and something that is maybe slightly newer in modern warfare, is the overwhelming use of drones—Russia's use of Iranian-supplied drones in particular is having a devastating effect on Ukraine. The use of drones is very lopsided; the Ukrainian military does not have the number of drones that the Russian military has. Have the UK Government considered supplying drones to Ukraine, and did that form part of the talks in Tallinn or Ramstein or with NATO counterparts?

Alex Chalk: We have supplied drones and will continue to do so.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I very much thank our Government and our Ministers for their stance to galvanise public opinion and get us all together, and to encourage all NATO countries across Europe and elsewhere to support Ukraine. As the anniversary of the conflict with Russia approaches, we are all very much focused on a long-term commitment to Ukraine, which there has to be. The Minister has indicated clearly what needs to be done. Has he made an assessment not just of military help—tanks and other matériel—but of long-term help? We in Northern Ireland have been supporting Ukraine, through Thales and our anti-tank weapons, which have become useful to the Ukrainians. When it comes to the long term, does the Minister accept that the Ukraine war is our war, that the Ukrainian battle for freedom and democracy is our battle, and that, whatever we do, in every aspect, we must do for ourselves as well as for them?

Alex Chalk: The point about unity is so important. If this war has shown anything, it is that the values of democracy, liberty and the rule of law are values around which many free nations coalesce, so there is that unity. Of course, we are not a participant in the war, which is a matter for the Ukrainians, but they are fighting for a principle, and we absolutely join them in sending the message that you cannot redraw international borders through the use of force and exert your will in some totalitarian lawless way. They will have our support for as long as it takes.

Crustacean Mortality in North-east England: Independent Expert Assessment

12.53 pm

The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries (Mark Spencer): With permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will make a statement on the independent expert assessment of crustacean mortality in the north-east of England in 2021 and 2022.

Last Friday, the Environment Secretary published the independent expert assessment of unusual crustacean mortality in the north-east of England in 2021 and 2022 on gov.uk. The report documents the findings of the independent crustacean mortality expert panel convened by the chief scientific adviser at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Professor Gideon Henderson, working with the Government chief scientific adviser, Sir Patrick Vallance. The expert panel was convened to provide an independent scientific assessment of all the possible causes of the mass mortality incident using all relevant available data. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the members of the panel for their work.

The independent panel concluded that pyridine or another toxic pollutant was very unlikely to be the cause, as was any link to dredging in the Teesside freeport; capital dredging was exceptionally unlikely. The panel considered a novel pathogen to be the most likely cause of mortality because it could explain four key observations: mortality over a sustained period, mortalities spread along about 40 miles of coastline, the unusual twitching of dying crabs, and deaths predominantly of crabs rather than other species. The panel's assessment followed a multi-agency investigation, co-ordinated by DEFRA, into the cause of dead crabs and lobsters that washed up on the north-east coast between October and December 2021.

Similarly to the independent expert panel, the DEFRA investigation identified no single, consistent causative factor. It could find no evidence of known pathogens and concluded that a harmful algal bloom present in the area coincident with the event was identified as of significance. I am considering carefully whether further analysis by the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science can ascertain conclusively the cause of this unusual mortality. I commend this statement to the House.

12.56 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement. I pay tribute to my hon. Friends the Members for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) and for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) for their work on this issue on behalf of fishers and communities in their region—my word, they have needed it. Mass crustacean die-offs are now a regular occurrence on the shorelines of Teesside and North Yorkshire, and have been since October 2021, hitting businesses along the coastline. Fishers have reported a drop of up to 95% in their catches and continue to report high levels of dead shellfish in their catches. Let us not forget that our northern coastlines bask in beauty and history, so not only are they hubs for the fishing industry, but tourism plays an important role in their local economies.

We are 15 months into this issue, and all DEFRA Ministers can tell us is that they do not know what has caused it, that they do not know what has not caused it, and that an unidentified pathogen may or may not be causing it. Why, 15 months on, do they still not know? Is it because we have a Conservative Government and a Conservative Tees Valley Mayor who have been missing in action? Is it because they are not interested in uncovering the reasons behind it, and are more concerned with trying to brush the issue under the carpet? Is it because their priority is protecting a narrow political agenda rather than the interests of the people of Teesside and North Yorkshire? Or is it all the above? What message does that send out to fishers in the region? Dither and delay while hard-working people pay. Why have the Government been stalling on committing to or allowing further investigation? What is stopping them? What are they worried about?

Today, we need answers from the Minister. Does he plan to put in place a support plan for businesses affected by the mass die-offs and the delay in determining the cause? Will he ensure that existing samples are preserved and secured so that further investigation and testing can be carried out? Can he assure the House that his Department will allow independent sampling and testing to take place? Why have all dredging areas not been sampled and tested, as revealed by annex D.4?

The latest investigation poses far more questions than it answers. The Minister has the opportunity to commit at the Dispatch Box to getting to the bottom of this, drawing on independent and expert advice. Will he do so? The problem needs to be identified and rectified, because falling back on probable causes or a possible mystery pathogen is not good enough. All that does is cause further alarm and more uncertainty about the future of the region's waters, and the jobs and livelihoods of local people.

Mark Spencer: I can honestly say that, sometimes, I find the response from the Opposition staggering. The hon. Gentleman has just demonstrated a complete and utter misunderstanding of how science works, and from the Member who represents Cambridge, that is absolutely outrageous—he is trying to play politics with this disaster. It is a disaster. There is a shared desire across the House to find out what caused the die-off. It has been catastrophic to the industry.

We have had the best scientists in the world looking at it. We are blessed with some of the best expertise in the world in aqua science. Unfortunately, because of how science works, it is sometimes difficult to identify exactly what is the cause. It is possible to rule out what it is not, and that is what the expert panel has done. The independent panel concluded that pyridine or another toxic pollutant was “very unlikely” as a cause, as was any link to dredging in the freeport. Labour Members may want to play politics with that, but that does not do fishermen in the north-east any good. Rather than trying to score cheap political points, they should support those scientists and the work that they are doing to establish the facts.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call the Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee.

Sir Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): The Labour party is perfectly entitled to its own opinions, but it is not entitled to its own facts, particularly scientific

facts. Will the Minister thank the expert panel, who have pretty much ruled out dredging, and particularly capital dredging, which had not taken place for nine months before the mortality event occurred? Will he assure me that CEFAS will be the first agency to be mobilised should we see recurrences and that, if it can find crabs—perhaps there are some in the freezer from when it happened—more can be done to try to identify the pathogen, which obviously needs to be tracked down?

Mark Spencer: I thank my right hon. Friend not only for his question but for the work that his Select Committee has done in trying to get to the bottom of the matter and establish the facts. CEFAS remains on guard and, should the worst happen and there is another event, it will step in. As he identified, there are crabs in freezers in the north-east that are available to be tested. However, we must be clear that it is entirely possible that we still will not be able to identify what that pathogen was or if it existed.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): It is a sad day for democracy that it took Mr Speaker to grant my urgent question to get a Minister to the Dispatch Box—albeit with a statement—on a tragedy that may be one of the worst ever to hit our sea and coastal communities. Just as the Government's original theory was inconclusive, so is their latest theory. Scientists still do not know what has caused this environmental disaster off the north-east coast; a disaster that is ongoing, with more die-offs and no sign of our sea recovering. What will the Minister do now to find out what the mystery pathogen is—if indeed that is what it is—and whether it could spread further? How will our sea be restored to health? Will he accept that as there is still no definitive cause, nothing can be ruled out, and that only a further in-depth, transparent scientific study will give our communities the answers they deserve?

Mark Spencer: First, the Secretary of State published the report in full as soon as she received it last Friday. She put it into the public domain, so it was available for anyone to read and make conclusions. She put out a written ministerial statement along with that for the world to look at.

I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman deliberately tries not to understand how science works or just wants to make his political point. That appears to me to be Tinkerbell politics, where we close our eyes and hope that we can find the answer. That is not how it works. We need to have the best scientists in the world investigating the issue, and that is what we have done. We have asked an independent panel to look at it and we have had the best scientists look at it. We have to accept the scientific results: that they cannot identify what it is. Those scientists remain on standby to investigate again if there is another event. Sadly, we must conclude that they have looked at the facts and ruled out many things, but that they cannot identify the pathogen at this stage.

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement. Crustacean die-off is deeply concerning to our north-east communities, and particularly to our fishermen. Will he outline what support the Government are delivering to the fishermen affected?

We have now had two reports that have failed to categorically identify one single cause. Will my right hon. Friend outline what more he considers it reasonable to do before we conclude that we simply do not know what single cause was responsible? Does he agree that conspiracy theories and political mudslinging from the Labour party are not helpful to Teesside?

Mark Spencer: May I say to my hon. Friend and to Opposition Members that that is how to hold the Government to account? We help the situation by trying to get to the facts in a calm way. He will be aware of the £100-million seafood fund that is available to help fishing communities up and down the country. I know that many businesses in the north-east have been bidding into that pot, and I hope that they will be successful.

It is worth saying that the independent expert panel took a thorough, evidence-based approach, assessing all the evidence on this matter. That included correspondence with the University of Newcastle on a number of occasions. The independent panel concluded its assessment of the incident using all the evidence available at the time. DEFRA and its partner agencies will continue to work with researchers and the scientific community to monitor the situation.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): In every other area of fisheries science and management, when facing something for which we do not know the cause, we proceed according to the precautionary principle. The Minister clearly does not know the cause of this incident. Last year and in the year 2020-21, English water companies discharged sewage into waters containing shellfish on no fewer than 59,079 occasions, lasting more than 432,695 hours. According to the precautionary principle, should we not be stopping that, instead of giving it the green light for another 15 years?

Mark Spencer: That is a slightly different topic. Of course, our scientists consistently monitor water quality throughout the rivers of the UK, and the good news is that water quality is going up in a number of areas. The Food Standards Agency—the most robust standards agency in the world—ensures that food produced in the UK is safe to consume and safe to eat, and it will continue to ensure that that is the case.

Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con): The coastline that we are talking about is where I, my family and my constituents all go for holidays and recreation. We play golf, visit the coast and take all the pleasures from it—it really is a fantastic part of the world. On the one hand, we have got the big worry about crustaceans. My understanding is that, although Opposition politicians are suggesting that die-offs have been continuing since October 2021, the Environment Agency has said that no further die-offs have occurred. I do not want people being put off visiting the coastline and enjoying the businesses there if the die-off is no longer going on. Can the Minister give any clarity about what is actually happening in the sea now?

Mark Spencer: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and, along with my hon. Friends the Members for Darlington (Peter Gibson) and for Redcar (Jacob Young), taking a keen interest in this topic over a number of months. He is right to identify that the scientists

[Mark Spencer]

concluded that there was a single, large die-off and the number of crabs now washing up on beaches is consistent with smaller events such as storms. There is no evidence that there is another large die-off taking place.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): The Minister said that the report concluded that

“a harmful algal bloom present in the area coincident with the event was identified as of significance.”

We were in the area at the time, but we did not cause it, and neither did the harmful algal bloom. The report says it is “unlikely” that it caused it. So we want to know why DEFRA made such a fundamental mistake.

The panel tells us that while they do not know what the cause is, the most probable is an unknown, unidentified pathogen, but the likelihood of that being the cause is rated as somewhere between 33% and 66%. That level of uncertainty would not satisfy any tribunal, so clearly further investigation is needed. I hope the Minister can give us an assurance that all the resources of the agencies will be deployed if there is a further occurrence.

In terms of assistance for the fishers, they need help with the loss of their livelihoods. The hon. Member for Redcar (Jacob Young) will tell the Minister clearly that the seafood fund will not help them. They need help with the loss of their income. Can the Minister come to the Dispatch Box and say what package he will put together for those fishers?

Mark Spencer: The hon. Member is right in identifying that the panel came to the conclusion that it was unlikely that an algal bloom, or a loss of oxygen in the water associated with an algal bloom, caused those crab deaths. Its conclusion was clear that the most likely event was a pathogen. The panel also concluded that it cannot be absolutely certain in a scientific form that that is the case. [Interruption.] I hope the hon. Member listened to what I said, and I did answer the question he just asked me. CEFAS is on stand-by. If, God forbid, there is another event of this nature, it will step in. We have those crabs in freezers that are worthy of investigation, but the scientists and I are doubtful that pursuing those will find us any more information. If there is another event, those scientists will jump to it and try to establish the facts as they see them.

George Eustice (Camborne and Redruth) (Con): My right hon. Friend is right to rebuke Opposition Members for suggesting that there has been any complacency over this issue on the Government Benches. I was the Secretary of State who commissioned the first joint agency investigation into this matter over a year ago in December 2021. It reported in May 2022. The Environment Agency analysed samples for around 1,000 different possible toxins. CEFAS explored crab tissue in multiple different parts of the country, including comparisons with Cornwall and Norfolk, to rule out that possibility. Can he say whether the independent expert panel has looked at the possible impact of electromagnetic forces from cables, which the original investigation was going to explore but did not really report on?

Mark Spencer: I am not aware of any investigation into magnetic fields by the independent panel. It is certainly something I can feed back to our friends at

CEFAS, who are the experts in this. I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend, who started this work as Secretary of State. With the progress we have made so far, frustrating as it is, we are more informed than we were.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): The Minister will be aware of the devastating effect this issue has had on fishing communities in the north-east. As the hon. Member for Sedgefield (Paul Howell) said, it is also potentially having an effect on tourism, after many years of cleaning up that coast to be an attractive tourist destination. Algal bloom was the first argument as to why this might have occurred. In his statement, the Minister said:

“I am considering carefully whether...the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science can ascertain conclusively the cause of this unusual mortality.”

To echo the hon. Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson), what next, Minister?

Mark Spencer: It is about taking advice from those scientists and working with them so that they can establish the facts behind what caused this disease. As much as the House and I want to find the actual cause of this die-off, we have to face the scientific fact that if that event does not repeat itself—I sincerely hope it does not—we may never find its cause. If it is repeated, those scientists are ready to jump into action at great speed to try to establish the facts.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): This is a classic case of environmental research that is contested. The independent panel's report has clearly come up with no theoretical explanation of why this has happened. The British Ports Association says that there are not sufficient quantities of pyridine to have caused mass die-off. That is also contested by academics, particularly Dr Gary Caldwell at Newcastle University, who says that there are. As Lord Benyon has said to the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee that there should be more testing, can we allow Dr Caldwell to undertake deep sediment samples? We can then rule it out if there is not enough of the pathogen to kill the crabs in these quantities, or determine that he is correct.

Mark Spencer: It should be clear to my hon. Friend that Dr Caldwell was in correspondence with the expert panel, and they exchanged a number of pieces of correspondence. The evidence that was put forward by that individual scientist was considered by the expert panel in coming to its conclusions.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I am on my feet because I have a crustacean industry in my constituency, and I also represent a constituent, Charles Clover, who is director of the Blue Marine Foundation. I have also read Jenni Russell's commentary about this in *The Times*, which I find to be compelling. I am disappointed by many of the exchanges that have taken place, and there has clearly been a huge breakdown of trust. May I just counsel my right hon. Friend that he has to recognise that DEFRA has lost that trust—certainly of local fishermen and local people—and he just has to go back to the beginning and start again? He has to get everybody into a quiet room and see whether there can be agreement about finding a way forward. I know that

he has been provoked, but this kind of argy-bargy will inspire no public confidence at all, and that is what is lacking at the moment.

Mark Spencer: I take at face value the advice of my hon. Friend. I think that DEFRA was and is seeking to have that trust. The way we establish the facts is to ask world-leading experts to look at those facts and come to a conclusion, independent of any interference or guidance from anyone else. That is what the independent panel did. It came to its conclusions and we put them into the public domain. We are as keen as anybody else is to establish what may have caused this disaster. We do not want to see a repeat of it, and we will do all we can to ensure that does not happen and to establish the facts as we can.

Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con): The Opposition have accused the panel of not seeking evidence from outside sources. The terms of reference suggest the panel looked at all the available evidence. Can the Minister please clarify?

Mark Spencer: The expert panel acted entirely independently. It took evidence and advice from all sources to try to establish the facts. That was all considered and is repeated in the report.

Shaun Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Con): This issue is important, and not just in the north-east but across the country as we look at environmental impacts. I do not disagree about challenging and questioning the science where we need to and forging that debate; what I take issue with is when individuals' integrity is questioned, whether that is the independent expert panel, who were referred to in quotation marks by an Opposition Member as "experts", or even Sir Patrick Vallance. This is absolutely outrageous. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that, as part of this ongoing work, he will ensure that the science is tested but the integrity of those involved is not questioned? When it is, it gives rise to anti-vaxxers, conspiracy theorists and everything else, and Opposition Members who have done that should be absolutely ashamed of themselves.

Mark Spencer: My hon. Friend is right to identify that. We are blessed in the United Kingdom with some of the best universities in the world. We have the world's leading experts in a number of fields, and their independence and professionalism should not be questioned. I should be clear at the Dispatch Box that I did not know who the members of that panel were until the report was published. That is the right way to have proceeded, and I thank those experts for their work and their efforts to try to get to the bottom of this terrible case.

Draft Mental Health Bill 2022

JOINT COMMITTEE ON THE DRAFT MENTAL HEALTH BILL

Select Committee statement

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): We now come to the Select Committee statement. Dr Dan Poulter, representing the Joint Committee on the Draft Mental Health Bill, will speak for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of his statement, I will call Members to put questions on the subject of the statement and call Dr Poulter to respond to those in turn. I emphasise that questions should be directed to him and not to the relevant Government Minister. Interventions should be questions and should be brief. Those on the Front Bench may take part in questioning.

1.20 pm

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): I first draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests as a practising NHS psychiatrist.

The Joint Committee on the Draft Mental Health Bill was formed on 4 July 2022 to scrutinise this important and urgently needed reform of mental health legislation. Our Committee has been working hard since that date. We held 21 meetings in just over 12 sitting weeks, spoke with more than 50 witnesses, received more than 100 submissions of written evidence, and engaged with affected communities through surveys, roundtables and a visit to the mental health unit at Lambeth Hospital. We are grateful to everyone who took time to contribute to our inquiry, to the officials and Ministers at the Department of Health and Social Care for their engagement with our work, and to our specialist advisers and secretariat.

Working on the Joint Committee was a collaborative process as we worked together through this complex topic and learned from each other's expertise. There were differences of opinion, which may be reflected in later debates in this place. However, the fact that we felt it important to agree the report unanimously is testament to the Committee's dedication to getting this once-in-a-generation piece of legislation on to the statute book. Our work was supported by an excellent team of officials and Clerks from both Houses. The Committee is grateful for their expertise and support in our work and in compiling the report.

The Mental Health Bill has been much anticipated. Detention rates under the Mental Health Act are rising. A disproportionate number of people from black and ethnic minority communities are detained. Our attitude as a society towards mental health has changed and reform is needed. We welcome the principles contained in the draft Bill, which introduces important reforms to improve patient choice, bring down detentions and reduce racial inequality. In our inquiry we heard concerns about implementation, resourcing and possible unintended consequences of the proposed legislation. Our recommendations address those concerns and are intended to make this important Bill stronger and more workable.

However, the process of mental health reform cannot stop or even pause with this Bill; there needs to be further consideration of fusion legislation of the mental

[Dr Dan Poulter]

health and mental capacity laws. During our evidence it became apparent that someone needs to drive mental health reform on behalf of patients, families and carers. We have recommended the creation of a mental health commissioner to oversee that process and to challenge the stigma that still exists around serious and enduring mental illness.

Proper resourcing and implementation will be crucial for the changes to work. Mental health services are under enormous pressure, and significant changes and improvements are needed to provide high-quality community alternatives to in-patient care, particularly ensuring that there will be a sufficient workforce to deliver the proposed changes. We welcome commitments from the Government to increase spending on health and social care, but most people we spoke to, including mental health providers, were still unconvinced that current resourcing or workforce plans are adequate. The Government must publish a detailed plan for resourcing and implementation on introducing the Bill, including the implications for the workforce. They should report annually to Parliament on their progress against that plan.

The independent review structured its work around four key principles that should shape care and treatment under the Mental Health Act. Those principles were: choice and autonomy, least restriction, therapeutic benefit and the person as an individual. These principles should be included in the Bill to ensure that they endure and become a driver of cultural change.

Tackling racial inequalities in the use of the Mental Health Act must be at the core of the reform. Black people are four times more likely to be detained under the Mental Health Act than white people, and 11 times more likely to be given a community treatment order. Those figures are rising. There has been a collective failure to address this issue. We now feel that the time has come for that to be addressed. Understanding of racial inequality must be included in the Bill. There must be a responsible person in every health organisation to monitor data on inequalities and oversee policies for change. We heard evidence that community treatment orders are ineffective for most patients and disproportionately used for black patients. We have therefore recommended that they are abolished for civil patients and reviewed for use with forensic patients.

On the important issue of the detention criteria, the draft Bill makes changes to the grounds on which someone can be detained for assessment and treatment, with the intention of moving away from a risk-based model and ensuring that detention will benefit the patient. Accountability is welcome, but we heard that it may lead to people being denied the help they need when they most need it, particularly patients with psychotic illnesses and those with chronic and enduring mental illness. We recommend some changes to the criteria and greater guidance in the code of practice to prevent that.

Too many autistic people and those with learning disabilities are detained in inappropriate mental health facilities, and for too long. Change to the way the Mental Health Act works for patients with learning disabilities and autism is long overdue. The Government's intention to address that, by removing learning disabilities and autism as conditions that can justify long-term detention under section 3 of the Mental Health Act, may lead to benefits in the longer term. However, we

heard that without proper implementation, those changes could make the situation worse, and potential displacement of people with learning disabilities into the criminal justice system could occur. There must be improvements in community care before people with learning disabilities and autistic people can be supported to live in the community. It is vital that reforms are not implemented until that is achieved.

Another pressing risk is that those communities may be detained, instead, under different legal powers, and possibly criminalised. That would be the opposite of what the change is intended to achieve. The Government must address that risk before the changes are implemented. We have therefore recommended the introduction of a tightly defined power to allow for longer detention periods in exceptional circumstances, with strong safeguards in place to prevent that happening unnecessarily.

On patient choice, patients should be able to make choices about their care and treatment. The draft Bill makes welcome changes in this area but does not follow through on a White Paper commitment to give patients statutory rights to request an advance choice document. We heard almost unanimous evidence supporting an advance choices document, and made a recommendation that advance choices should be a statutory right.

The number of children and young people experiencing mental distress has risen dramatically since the covid-19 pandemic. Children and young people continue to be placed in adult wards or in hospitals far from home due to the lack of appropriate care placements. The draft Bill misses a crucial opportunity to address that. We also believe that children should benefit from stronger protections in the draft Bill to support patient choice. This is a complex area and the Government need to carefully think through their proposals, consulting further where necessary about this Bill and how it will interact with the Children Act 2004.

In conclusion, it is 40 years since the Mental Health Act 1983. This draft Bill is needed. If the Government are willing to address our concerns in the ways that we have suggested, the Bill can make an important contribution to the modernisation of mental health legislation. Given our suggested amendments, we hope that the Government act swiftly to introduce the Bill to Parliament in this Session, so that it can be further scrutinised and improved.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): I thank all those patients, campaigners and experts who provided evidence to the Joint Committee. I give special thanks to Alexis Quinn, whose account of her own lived experience with autism touched many Committee members. I also thank the Committee members for what was an incredibly valuable experience and a true example of when cross-party working goes really well.

I am honoured to have worked on a once-in-a-generation opportunity to improve the rights of patients experiencing a mental health crisis, and to tackle the health inequalities enshrined in current legislation. For years the Government kicked updating this legislation into the long grass, and now the draft Bill still does not go far enough to tackle the health inequalities and racial disparities of those detained under the Mental Health Act. I hope the hon. Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) will agree that the Government should put patient voices at the heart of this legislation and take the Joint Committee's recommendations on board.

Dr Poulter: On behalf of the Committee, I thank the hon. Lady for all her work. We were lucky that we had her professional expertise as a frontline clinician, which added to our important scrutiny work. Given that it has been 40 years since there were any changes to the Mental Health Act, I certainly agree that the time has come to make those changes through a Bill. We urge the Government to take on board our well-intentioned recommendations and concerns to strengthen the Bill, and I hope we will continue to see a cross-party, collaborative process to improve mental health care for the patients who most need it.

The Minister of State, Department of Health and Social Care (Will Quince): I sincerely thank my hon. Friend and the Committee for all the work that has been put into this constructive and important report, and I also thank all those who gave evidence to the Committee. The Government are now considering the Committee's recommendations on how we can further improve the Bill and modernise the Mental Health Act. The Minister for mental health, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), gave evidence to the Committee in November, alongside the Minister for prisons, parole and probation, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds).

I am grateful to see that the final report reflects the support that these reforms have on both sides of the House. The Committee has clearly engaged fully with the complexities involved in this work. It is the Government's intention to take the next steps in getting this legislation right, so that people with severe mental health needs get the help and support when they need it, with their rights and dignity better respected. It is vital that we continue to progress the work we have started with NHS England and others to address the racial disparities that have for too long been associated with the use of the Act. Does my hon. Friend agree that the reforms proposed in the Mental Health Bill provide for an improved framework in which people experiencing the most serious mental health conditions will have far more choice and influence over their treatment?

Dr Poulter: I agree with the Minister. He is right to suggest that this is an important step forward and this piece of legislation will make a significant difference to patients, but it is part of a process, not the end of the journey. In particular, I draw the Government's attention to the potential unintended consequences of some of the well-meaning changes being proposed in relation to patients with learning disabilities and autism and to changing the grounds for detention; for example, it might be harder to detain patients who are the most unwell, with chronic and enduring mental illness and psychotic conditions. I hope the Government will take on board those concerns and ensure that what comes back to this place is a stronger Bill that works in the best interests of patients.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): I welcome this report, and in particular the section on racial inequalities, which have been highlighted in my constituency by organisations such as the Wandsworth Community Empowerment Network for many years. Is the hon. Member optimistic after hearing all the evidence from organisations that the inequalities affecting black and minority ethnic groups, especially in terms of culture and policy, will be improved?

Dr Poulter: I am optimistic that if the Government adopt the recommendations we have made, we will have a much stronger Bill that recognises that we need to improve the care that is available to all patients and, in particular, that will deal with some of the racial disparities we currently see in the implementation of the Mental Health Act. We know that black people—particularly black men—are disproportionately detained under the Mental Health Act and are disproportionately likely to receive a community treatment order, or a CTO, as I would term it in professional jargon. There is also a disproportionate use of depot medication for black men. That has caused challenges in building therapeutic relationships and building trust with black communities across London and elsewhere, and it has to be put right.

We have made several recommendations. For example, we believe that the evidence for CTOs is weak for all patients, and there is a disproportionate use of CTOs among the black community, so we have said that we think community treatment orders should not be applied in the civil part of the Bill. We have also recommended greater monitoring of how mental health legislation is used in each mental health provider, to ensure that providers, be they in London or elsewhere, have a proper understanding of how mental health legislation is used. Hopefully, that will start the process of rebuilding the trust of communities—particularly the black community—with mental health providers where it has been lost in the past.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): I draw the House's attention to my range of interests in this area, which were declared as part of the Committee's report. I thank my hon. Friend for his statement and join him in thanking all those involved in the Committee, in particular the Clerks and the staff, who were fantastic in supporting us as we put this report together.

Every 20 years or so, we go through a process of reviewing our mental health legislation. I am delighted at the work that has been done over the past few years through the Wessely review panel and driven by the Government, to make real changes in this very important area of law. Notwithstanding the huge step forward that the Bill will hopefully make in this area, does my hon. Friend agree that this is the beginning of a journey of continuous reform, rather than the end point?

Dr Poulter: The Committee was very lucky that we had the professional expertise of my hon. Friend, the hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan), a former president of the Royal College of Psychiatrists and some distinguished lawyers. I know that my hon. Friend has taken a great interest in this issue for many years, and he is right: this is the beginning of a process, not an end in itself. The Committee recognised that much needed to be done by a future Government to bring fusion between mental capacity law and mental health law, of which I know he was a great advocate throughout our work.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Committee for its recommendations and the hon. Gentleman for his presentation of this report. Each and every one of us recognises the importance of these recommendations, which are for both patients and staff, and they should be commended to all the devolved Administrations—in particular the Northern Ireland Assembly, as health is devolved. Will that happen, and if not, could he make sure that it does?

Dr Poulter: I thank the hon. Member for his question. As part of our work, we looked at elements of reform that are being considered across the devolved Administrations. The fusion of mental health law and mental capacity law is already well under way in Northern Ireland, so it may be a question of the UK Parliament learning from the Northern Ireland Assembly, rather than the other way round. We in this place will continue to watch with interest how the proposed changes to legislation in Northern Ireland progress, as they may improve what we do when we look in the future, I hope, at a fusion of mental health law and mental capacity law.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the hon. Member for his statement and all colleagues who participated.

Backbench Business

Holocaust Memorial Day

[Relevant documents: Third Report of the International Development Committee, From Srebrenica to a safer tomorrow: Preventing future mass atrocities around the world, HC 149, and the Government response, HC 992.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): The debate is well subscribed and many hon. Members want to speak, so I will have to introduce a time limit, which will start at seven minutes but may have to come down. I wanted to tell hon. Members that that would be the time limit—except for the right hon. Member opening the debate—so that they could prepare for it.

1.39 pm

Sajid Javid (Bromsgrove) (Con): I beg to move,
That this House has considered Holocaust Memorial Day.

I thank the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge), my right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) and my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Nicola Richards) for co-sponsoring the debate. I pay tribute to the incredible people at the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust, the Holocaust Educational Trust and many others for the work that they are doing this week and all year round.

I am extremely honoured to be leading this debate. Usually, my lengthy speeches from the Back Benches are reserved for when I resign from the Government, so this is a welcome change. I could not think of a more important issue on which to speak and I am pleased to see so many hon. Members on both sides of the House here today. Tomorrow will mark the 78th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau—a place of evil, atrocity and inhumanity; a place where more than 1 million men, women and children arrived but never left. More than 6 million Jews and others lost their lives during the holocaust, and countless more would carry the burden of their persecution.

Genocide is a dark stain on the conscience of humanity, and the hatred that drives it is a disease of the heart. After the holocaust, we vowed, “Never again,” but the killing fields of Cambodia, the butchery of Rwanda, the deathly silence of Srebrenica and the suffering of Darfur show that the disease of hatred lives on. Although those dark stains can never be washed out, it is our duty to shine a light on them in this House.

It is also an honour for me to be the first Muslim to lead this debate from the Back Benches. My late friend, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, once said,

“The test of faith is whether I can make space for difference. Can I recognise God’s image in someone who is not in my image, whose language, faith, ideal, are different from mine? If I cannot, then I have made God in my image instead of allowing him to remake me in his.”

At a time when I worry about communities becoming increasingly insular, and when too many young men and women are drawn to divisive voices, our responsibility is to spread the message of understanding and compassion between communities. That responsibility has never been greater.

The theme of this year’s Holocaust Memorial Day is ordinary people, but I will first mention a group of extraordinary people—the survivors of the holocaust.

I have been privileged to know many of them during my time in Parliament, as have many other hon. Members on both sides of the House. When I was Chancellor, I invited 12 survivors to have dinner in 11 Downing Street; it was an evening that I will never forget. That night, my family was joined by the late, great Zigi Shipper, who was full of energy, enthusiasm and optimism. As we were showing him out, I recall that he pointed at me and, turning to my wife, said, “What are you doing with that rogue when you could be with me instead?” May his memory be a blessing.

Zigi saw the horrors of Auschwitz-Birkenau first hand, but as the theme of this year’s Holocaust Memorial Day reminds us, we should not forget that the crimes of that place were committed by, and to, ordinary people. As the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust has said:

“Genocide is facilitated by ordinary people. Ordinary people turn a blind eye, believe propaganda, join murderous regimes”, and ordinary people are persecuted “simply because they...belong to a particular group”.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I would like to speak about one ordinary person—my great-grandfather David, who was in Lviv, Ukraine during the war. To survive, he needed a job, and to get a job, he needed a life number. He worked in a hairdresser’s, but he had to bribe the hairdresser and he did not have enough money to bribe them. His valuable belongings were hidden in a safe house and the person who owned the safe house would not give them up, so he could not afford the bribes. He lost his job, he lost his life number, and he was sent to Belzec extermination camp and killed. He was an ordinary person doing ordinary things, but betrayed by ordinary people.

Sajid Javid: I thank the hon. Member for everything that he has done and continues to do to fight hatred in our communities, and for sharing that about his dear family with the House. He makes the point so well.

In this debate, we should also reflect on our role as policymakers, because we know the familiar, sickening pattern of atrocities all too well. We are right to reaffirm our commitment to “never again”, but we as parliamentarians must also do more to prepare the political foundations and the policy framework to prevent the next atrocity. Our commitment to the truth must also be reinforced at home, including in how we counter misinformation and conspiracy theories. In the UK, we have seen a rise in anti-vaccine protesters carrying signs reading “vaccine holocaust” and wearing the star of David, and I must say that it angers me that any Member of this House would seek to connect the holocaust with UK public health policy.

To tackle persecution, our voices and actions are needed now more than ever. Research from the Community Security Trust shows that in the first half of 2022 alone, 782 incidents of anti-Jewish hate were recorded in the UK. As so often, that hatred is fuelled by the online world.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): The right hon. Gentleman is making a powerful speech on an important day, which reminds us what ordinary people are capable of—good and bad. He talks about antisemitic attacks. Recently, I visited a Jewish school in London where 10-year-old children told us stories about the

antisemitism that they had faced. Does he share my concern that we are still overlooking the potential for that sort of problem to exist and grow in our society?

Sajid Javid: Yes. I thank the hon. Lady for what she has said and I very much share her concern, as will hon. Members on both sides of the House. She rightly talks about young children, but a recent independent report that was done for the National Union of Students also found antisemitism, so it is an issue across society for people of all ages. She is absolutely right to raise that.

The hon. Lady and others will agree about the role of the online world in spreading hate. Recent research shows that every day in the UK, more than 1,300 explicitly antisemitic tweets are posted—some to Members of this House. It is no wonder that many British Jews are becoming increasingly frustrated at hearing words of condemnation alone when it seems that the perpetrators of that hate too often do not receive the punishment that fits the crime.

The fact that the Community Security Trust needs to exist should be a cause of deep sadness—although, when I was Home Secretary, of course I was pleased to secure multi-year funding for it. When Jews in this country have the freedom to pray behind high walls and security guards, can we call that freedom at all?

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the speech he is making. However, in some ways he has provoked in me a condemnation of the Crown Prosecution Service, because many of my constituents were threatened by protesters who drove all the way down from Bradford with signs saying that they were going to rape and kill Jews, but the CPS decided it would not prosecute, for reasons unknown to me or, indeed, the Home Secretary. Does he agree that these kinds of actions send out a terrible message, and that if these perpetrators are not brought to justice, people will continue to act in such a fashion?

Sajid Javid: Yes. My hon. Friend gives an excellent example of exactly why more needs to be done. I think that includes the entire criminal justice system, and he is right to share his example of the CPS. I do very much agree with him.

Another thing that certainly helps to reduce antisemitism and hatred of all types is education, which is crucial in the effort to tackle persecution and hatred. For example, the Anne Frank Trust reached something like 46,000 schoolchildren last year alone. The Holocaust Educational Trust does fantastic and excellent work with visits for schoolchildren from across the UK to the Auschwitz Museum.

As a Communities Secretary who fought hard for the establishment of a national holocaust memorial, I was personally delighted with the news from my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister yesterday about the new holocaust memorial, which will have cross-party support. It has been a long road, but that memorial will make an immense difference.

I want to end with the words of Anne Frank. She wrote:

“In spite of everything I still believe that people are really good at heart.”

[Sajid Javid]

The world is a complex and often unjust place, but if we can embody the spirit behind those words and work towards the common good, then the steady ship of progress will never veer far from its course. So let us stand together and reaffirm our commitment to fight for the common good, to shine a light on evil wherever it is found and to never, never forget the victims of persecution.

1.51 pm

Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab): My thanks to the right hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid) and others for co-sponsoring the debate, and to the right hon. Member for his excellent speech.

Holocaust Memorial Day has been a national day of commemoration for 22 years. We use the occasion to strengthen our collective memory of the holocaust, to ensure that the lessons learned are passed on, and to intensify efforts to bring safety and justice to those suffering persecution today. This year's theme—ordinary people—supports our purpose. Ordinary people were involved in all aspects of the holocaust. Ordinary people were victims, but they were also perpetrators, bystanders and witnesses. Ordinary people allowed this to happen, but some ordinary people also became extraordinary during the war. They acted in brave, dangerous and extraordinary ways to save Jews from the fate of extermination.

Roza Robota, imprisoned in Auschwitz in 1942, helped to smuggle explosives to members of the Jewish underground in the camp. When they blew up one of the crematoria in 1944, Roza was identified, horrifically tortured and then hanged on 6 January 1945. She was 23 years old.

Captain Frank Foley was a British spy in Germany. After Kristallnacht, he risked his life obtaining papers, forged passports and visas to help Jews escape. He visited concentration camps with batches of visas to get Jewish prisoners released. He hid Jews in his home in Berlin. He made it possible for an estimated 10,000 Jews to get out of Germany.

These stories and the testimony of every survivor help our understanding and educate us all. It is why I have spoken about my own family's experiences—my grandfather, who escaped to Britain from Vienna; my grandmother, murdered by the Nazis; my uncle, gassed at Auschwitz; my sister's husband, who survived through the Kindertransport. I want to keep their stories alive for my family and, through occasions like today, for others, so that we never forget.

My family were just ordinary people. As I prepared for today, I thought about my mother, whose own mother was murdered. My mother died when I was 10 and my oldest sister was 17. She never, ever talked about our grandmother's murder. Maybe it was too brutal and distressing. Maybe it was the culture of the time that when people died you were expected to put your feelings in a box and close the door on your loss. Maybe she felt guilty because she survived. Maybe she felt anxious to become accepted in Britain, and feared she might stir up antisemitism by making her Jewish mother's death a part of our lives. My mother's silence was not uncommon. Many survivors felt that they could never share their experiences. So we have no idea how this

brutal death affected her. The only clue is that, when my younger sister was born in 1947, she was named Marianne, after my grandmother.

My aunt survived the war in the Ardèche, protected by local people. My memories of her in the 1950s were of her waiting for her beloved husband to return. She convinced herself and us that he was still alive. Only when we were clearing her flat in Paris did we find papers with his Auschwitz number and confirmation that he had been gassed and killed. She had known that for years, but had never stopped hoping. She never admitted to his being a victim of the holocaust.

My dad never said much. We coped with our refugee status by working hard at becoming British—eating cucumber sandwiches and dried fruitcake became more important than recounting the past—but I think we lost something by their silence. Understanding the experience of ordinary people during the holocaust can be a powerful way to combat rising hatred today. Despite my parents' silence, my refugee Jewish identity has always been there, equipping me to fight the racist British National party and helping me to fight antisemitism in my own party.

Nine days before she was killed, my grandmother wrote to my uncle—her son—and said:

"I am sceptical that we shall ever meet again. Who knows when I can even write to you again",

and then twice she said:

"Don't forget me completely".

Ensuring that she is never, ever forgotten is why I am here today, and why I champion the brilliant work of the Holocaust Educational Trust and the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust.

We know how vital remembering the lives of ordinary people in our history is to understanding and fighting hatred and racism today, whether it is in our attempts to help the Uyghurs and the Rohingya Muslims, acting to support the Ukrainians—the documented incidents involving potential war crimes, vicious attacks on civilians and the shocking death of children horrify us all—or, and I welcome the remarks of the right hon. Member for Bromsgrove on this, the condemnation from us all when a Member of this House compared the vaccine roll-out to the holocaust as equivalent crimes against humanity.

The Holocaust Memorial Day Trust recently found that 5% of UK adults do not believe the holocaust ever took place, and over one in 12 believe its scale has been exaggerated. That shocking finding should make us all redouble our efforts to keep the holocaust history alive. That is why today matters. We, ordinary people, are using our voice today to remember and remind other people of the atrocities of the holocaust.

I close with the eloquent words of one of my political heroes, Martin Luther King. He said:

"Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter."

We must learn from his example, and never give up hope that we can make a world free of genocide. We have to work hard, together, for future generations and for those who suffered in the holocaust. For me, this is for my grandmother I never knew. May she never be forgotten.

1.58 pm

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): It is an honour to follow the first two speakers. To follow on from some of the early words of my right hon. Friend

the Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid), tomorrow in Worthing people who are Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, humanist and Christian will come together to mark their intention that things such as this should never be forgotten and, where possible, should never recur. The idea that the holocaust was the last major genocide we all know is wrong.

I have spoken before about the places where some of my grandfather's extended family died. The list sadly gets longer as research shows more and more people who were involved: Sobibor, Auschwitz, Mauthausen, Belsen, Ravensbrück, Dachau, Seibersdorf and Bytom. I do not know many of that side of my family. They are not close—they were not close—but they matter. The idea of education is that people like me can discover those links and that many other families will have a closer experience.

Every time I take people around the Palace of Westminster, I try to take them past the Kindertransport plaque by the admission order office. I show it to them to illustrate that what people may have disapproved of at the time, they are now proud of. It was not unanimous that those 10,000 children should have been able to come to this country from stations such as Prague, aged 5, 6, 7 or 8. I am glad we have the living proof of Alf Dubs, who in his lifetime has shown the importance of what was done following a debate in the House of Commons.

I wish to disagree with the Government about the location of the national holocaust memorial. My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) has tabled early-day motion 748, almost all of which I agree with. I have also tabled an amendment to it, stating that we should have the memorial

“in a place and manner consistent with the features and facilities listed by the United Kingdom Holocaust Memorial Foundation's ‘Search for a Central London site’ in September 2015 on page 6 and in the area illustrated and considered to be sufficiently central to meet the visions set out by the Holocaust Commission on page 10.”

That map on page 10 states that a site would be regarded as central London from the west of Regent's Park, to the east of Spitalfields and to the south of the Imperial War Museum.

I commend to everybody, whatever their views on the proposed location of the memorial and learning centre, that they visit the holocaust galleries in the Imperial War Museum, which reopened in the past two or three years. They are incredibly impressive. I think the way forward—I hope I will be supported by Baroness Deech and others—is for us to separate the learning centre from the memorial.

We should have a new competition for the memorial. It being adjacent to Parliament was not in the minds of the UK Holocaust Memorial Foundation, the committee or the Government eight years ago. If it has to be there, we could consider Parliament Square, where the Buxton memorial fountain was first placed before it was moved to Victoria Tower Gardens. I think that we could do it better, and that it would have more impact and be less of a threat if we did not have the learning centre and the place of gathering so close to the Palace of Westminster.

My last point is that the tributes to the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust and the Holocaust Educational Trust are genuine. Those people do mighty work, and they allow people to understand what is happening. We must ensure that that does not happen just on Holocaust Memorial Day, but on every day of every year in every

way, and that people understand the horrors of what we stood against, with the victims, around the time I was born.

One of the most difficult questions for people to answer is when would have been the right time to stand up, with force, against Adolf Hitler's Nazis in Germany. Should it have been in 1933 when he was elected Chancellor and was thought to be pliable by the bigger parties? Should it have been in 1935 or '36 when he started invading? Should it have been in 1938? It happened in 1939, although some people did not think that was right, but should it have been later, or ever, or never? The reason I am not a pacifist is because of the holocaust.

Mr Speaker: We now come to a maiden speech. I call Andrew Western.

2.4 pm

Andrew Western (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): It is truly an honour to make my maiden speech in the House in such an emotive and important debate. We must always remember the horrors of the holocaust, and do all we can to inform and educate ourselves and future generations about the dangers that exist when the judgment of decision makers is clouded by bigotry, hatred, racism and intolerance.

Given the matter before the House, I feel compelled to begin my comments about my constituency by first highlighting the rich diversity that we so cherish in Stretford and Urmston, and indeed in Partington, Carrington and Old Trafford. I am therefore pleased to share with colleagues that my constituency is home not just to those whose heritage can be traced back several generations locally, but, among others, to a large Irish diaspora, a considerable Muslim community, one of Greater Manchester's largest Sikh populations, a Traveller settlement, many Jewish and Hindu residents, and a longstanding and sizeable African-Caribbean community.

In 1997, the new constituency of Stretford and Urmston elected its first MP, and we were represented until 2010 by Beverley Hughes, now Baroness Hughes of Stretford. Like me, Baroness Hughes was leader of Trafford Council before being elected to this place, and until earlier this month she also served local residents as the deputy mayor of Greater Manchester. Hers is a formidable record of public service, and she remains fondly remembered by many of my constituents to this day.

Bev's retirement in 2010 saw my great friend and predecessor, Kate Green, elected. Kate was a much loved and admired MP, whose warmth, diligence and compassion quickly won her the support of local residents. You will know better than I do, Mr Speaker, that Kate was a respected and unusually thoughtful parliamentarian, thorough in her consideration of matters before this House, and compelling in the arguments she made to advance the many causes she supported. I am left in no doubt that I have huge shoes to fill.

It would be unforgivable for me not to refer in this speech to Stretford and Urmston's unique status as the birthplace of what is surely the greatest social advance in the history of our country: our precious NHS. It was at Park Hospital, now Trafford General Hospital, that the late, great Nye Bevan officially opened the first NHS hospital on 5 July 1948. I look forward to celebrating the 75th birthday of the NHS this year, and I can only concur with Bevan's words that day, that that was “the most civilised step any country has ever taken.”

[Andrew Western]

Another key element of my constituency's history is our industrial heritage, given the economic significance of Trafford Park. As the world's first industrial estate, Trafford Park's place in history is assured. Yes, it is home to some of the most well-known businesses in the world—Ford, Kellogg's, Westinghouse—but it is especially fitting in this debate that I share with colleagues that Trafford Park was also key to defeating fascism, with production almost entirely turned over to the war effort from the end of the 1930s. Indeed, it was at Trafford Park that the engines for both the Spitfire and the Lancaster bomber were manufactured—truly national service indeed.

Turning from Stretford and Urmston's economic and industrial heritage to our cultural and sporting identity, I should note that we are also home to the Trafford Centre, one of the country's largest indoor shopping and leisure destinations, and the provider of many jobs to our local economy. For those who seek a rather more cultured afternoon, the Imperial War Museum North offers an intellectual and educational experience that is second to none. A short walk away can be found the sporting Mecca that is Old Trafford, home to my beloved Lancashire county cricket club. It is a venue of international repute, and the site in 1993 of cricket's ball of the century, with Mike Gatting bamboozled by Shane Warne.

On the subject of sport, and as a lifelong Manchester City fan, I have to admit to being sorely tempted today to use the protective veil of parliamentary privilege to assert that there is in fact only one sport in Old Trafford, and they play it with a cricket ball. But whatever my own footballing allegiances, it would be remiss of me not to acknowledge the global standing of Manchester United as a hugely successful sporting institution, even if they are still below City in the league.

A more recent addition to the constituency has been ITV, which moved production to Stretford and Urmston in 2013. With it came perhaps Manchester's most famous global export, the cobbles of "Coronation Street"—the longest-running soap in the world. If soap opera has taught us anything, it is that from Weatherfield to Walford, Erinsborough to Emmerdale, and, yes, from Summer Bay to Stretford and Urmston, it is people and communities, not assets and institutions, who truly bind neighbourhoods together. People, that is, like notable former Stretford and Urmston residents Emmeline Pankhurst, L. S. Lowry, the philanthropists John and Enriqueta Rylands, "The One Hundred and One Dalmatians" author Dodie Smith, and the aviator John Alcock, born in Stretford, who piloted the first trans-Atlantic flight in 1919. All have helped to shape my constituency in some way, as have the friendly, hard-working and socially conscious people who are resident there now. I am humbled to be their voice in this place and hope to use my time here focusing on work to better support people out of poverty and to root out inequality.

Anybody seriously attempting to do either of those things must first recognise two simple facts: one, that a safe and secure home is the most fundamental element in unlocking anybody's potential; and two, that while we as politicians speak the language of addressing unfairness, we are not yet routinely bold enough to challenge that most dangerous of inequalities that is so detrimental to our economy and our future, and that

underpins our broken housing market—I speak of the generational inequality that is so entrenched in wealth and privilege up and down the land. I hope to say much more on that in future, Mr Speaker, but time and tradition prevent me from doing so today. I shall simply say that our housing crisis is, at its source, a crisis of basic supply and demand, the answer to which, however much we tinker at the edges, can only ever be to build, build, build. And why? Because:

"Housing is the first of the social services. It is also one of the keys to increased productivity. Work, family life, health, and education are all undermined by crowded houses."

Those are not my words, but those of Winston Churchill's Conservative party in its 1951 manifesto. Given that Churchill's grandson, Winston Churchill MP, represented both Stretford and Urmston's predecessor constituencies before 1997, those are words it feels fitting to associate myself with today.

So, that is me and that is my constituency, at least a little of it. I want to be an MP for everyone in Stretford and Urmston, but I want to be an MP fighting for a better future for Stretford and Urmston too. It is the honour of my life to serve such wonderful people in such a wonderful place that I am so privileged to call my home. I will give it my all, Mr Speaker, and I hope I will not let them down.

Mr Speaker: That completes the maiden speech. I must agree on the cricket; I'm not sure about the football, but it also held the rugby league world cup final.

2.13 pm

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the new hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western). I congratulate him on an excellent maiden speech, delivered in the very best traditions of the House. We wish him all the very best for his time serving his constituents.

It is a privilege to speak in this debate to mark Holocaust Memorial Day, a date that has become hugely important in our national life and in our parliamentary calendar. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid) on leading the debate and on his outstanding contribution, which struck exactly the right tone as we gather to remember the victims of the holocaust. I also want to put on record my thanks to him for the work he did in a succession of ministerial roles. He was consistently excellent and consistently reliable in fighting antisemitism. I think of his work in support of the Community Security Trust. I think of the work he did to ensure that Hezbollah was proscribed in its entirety. He has been a consistent champion for this cause and it is fitting that he opened the debate.

I also want to put on record my thanks and pay tribute to the tireless work of the Holocaust Educational Trust, the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust and other organisations that work in this area, as well as the remarkable survivors who are prepared to recall the tragic and unimaginable experiences that they endured to ensure that the horrors of the past are not repeated and that lessons continue to be learnt.

Holocaust Memorial Day is a moment to remember again the 6 million Jewish men, women and children murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators, and all those who were murdered by the Nazis, including Roma and Sinti people, gay men, disabled people, political

opponents and many others. We use this day to remember all those killed in subsequent genocides in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur.

As Members have highlighted, the theme for this year's Holocaust Memorial Day is ordinary people. That is a thought-provoking theme when we think about some of the survivors we have met in this House and the stories we have learnt about what people endured. There is nothing ordinary about that period of history; nothing ordinary about the scale of the suffering or the depth of the evil visited on Jewish people at the time. As we have heard, what really comes out from listening to the testimony of the survivors and listening the stories about family members, as described by the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) in her contribution, is that these were all ordinary individuals from ordinary families living in ordinary communities.

It was an honour to be at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office on Tuesday to hear the very moving testimony given by Manfred Goldberg, who spoke incredibly powerfully about the events of that period. He spoke about his family, his mother and father, and he spoke in detail about what he personally endured. What came across in his speech was his extraordinary spirit, his extraordinary capacity to hope and to survive, and his capacity, like so many of the survivors we have met, to look back not with bitterness but with grace and forgiveness, and to look forward to the future and play his part in helping to ensure that future generations of young people are informed, are taught and learn the truth about what happened during the holocaust.

In June, the all-party parliamentary group on holocaust memorial hosted Mala Tribich MBE in Portcullis House. I know a number of Members were there in that room when we listened to her testimony of what she endured, surviving Nazi deportation and finally being liberated from Bergen-Belsen. I listened in awe to her testimony, which was really powerful and remarkable—ordinary people enduring extraordinary evil and coming through it with extraordinary grace, strength and optimism for the future.

It is important that we put on record those survivors of the holocaust who sadly passed away this year. We remember Iby Knill BEM, Freddie Knoller BEM, Freda Wineman BEM and, most recently, Zigi Shipper BEM, to whom my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove referred. They all worked incredibly hard with the Holocaust Educational Trust to share their stories. May they rest in peace. We thank them for their courage and bravery for sharing their experiences.

We in this House have an extraordinarily privileged position and it is right that we mark Holocaust Memorial Day with debates such as this. It is right that we attend events, light candles and wear badges. That is all part of the collective remembering and marking of the event. It is our responsibility, I believe, to ensure that this is not just a one-day affair, but that every day that follows we try to use our extraordinarily privileged position to ensure that the horrors of the past are never repeated, and to face down and tackle antisemitism. That goes for all forms of discrimination, wherever it occurs, at a national level and most particularly in our own communities and constituencies—in our own parties, even. We must use our voices and actions to that end.

I would like to finish in that spirit by urging the Government to press ahead with the commitments they have made in this field. I am delighted to see the

Minister in her place. I know from our discussions that she takes these issues to heart and shares the strong commitment that the Government should continue to fight antisemitism and all forms of discrimination. I would encourage her to press ahead with the work on legislation to clamp down on boycotts, divestment and sanctions and the pernicious use of those avenues, because I believe they can be antisemitic. I look forward to seeing that legislation.

I do not want to make a contrarian point, given the remarks of the Father of the House, my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), but I do believe that the national holocaust memorial and learning centre should be built in Victoria Tower Gardens. There is a very strong cross-party consensus that that should be done.

There are other issues. Iran has effectively declared war on the Jewish people in Israel, and we should be doing everything we can with our international partners to ensure that Iran never acquires a nuclear weapon. There are so many other fields where there is practical action that we as a Government and we as politicians can take. It is a privilege to contribute to this extraordinarily important debate.

2.21 pm

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Lab): I would like to thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) and my friend the right hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid) for their contributions to today's debate, as well as all those who have spoken before me. In particular, I want to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western), who gave a magnificent maiden speech—although I disagree with his choice of football club.

I would like to thank and pay tribute to the Holocaust Educational Trust, as many Members have, and the Antisemitism Policy Trust for their vital work. I also thank the Community Security Trust, in particular Amanda Bomszyk and Jonny Newton, for continuing to provide protection to the Jewish community not just in my constituency, but across the country. I thank The Fed in my constituency for their "My Voice" project, which publishes the life stories of holocaust survivors and refugees who have made Britain their home. I hope to raise that in Parliament later this year, and I hope for the support of colleagues. On a final note of thanks, I pay particular tribute to Karen Pollock and Danny Stone, whose counsel is widely sought and respected across this entire Chamber, and indeed across both Houses. Their impact on me and my education should not be underestimated.

We are all ordinary people who today can be extraordinary in our actions. We can all make decisions to challenge prejudice, stand up to hatred and speak out against identity-based persecution. That is the message of the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust this year, and it was the story of so many during the holocaust. Genocide is facilitated by ordinary people. Ordinary people turn a blind eye, believe propaganda and join murderous regimes. Those who are persecuted, oppressed and murdered in genocide are not persecuted because of crimes they have committed, but simply because they are ordinary people who belong to a particular group. This is true of genocide the world over, but particularly in the case of the holocaust.

[*Christian Wakeford*]

During the rise of Nazi Germany, ordinary people had choices. Many ordinary people were in positions of power, using Jewish people to advance their disgusting ideology and taking advantage of the economic circumstances following the first world war. Many of those in power believed this ideology, but many others were ordinary people obeying orders given to them by evil people. Ordinary people were, for instance, policemen involved in rounding up victims, secretaries typing the records of genocide, and dentists and doctors carrying out evil selections.

Those who were persecuted were ordinary people too, whether Jews, Soviet civilians and prisoners of war, disabled people, Romani people, gays or many, many others. Like us, they all had families, hopes and dreams, and a want and need to get on in life, find opportunities, be happy, and to give and feel love. They wanted to read and write, to contribute and maybe even hold high office, to represent their families and communities and feel free—things we all take for granted today.

Ordinary people also stand by as genocide happens around them. They do not partake, but they also do not speak out, preferring to turn a blind eye and pretend they have not seen it. They were keen not to get involved in case they were next, watching as Jews were snatched from their homes, with anxiety heightened and thoughts swirling around their head: “I hope they don’t come for me next.” What the holocaust showed is that they will. Never in this Chamber or out there must we walk on the other side when it comes to racism and injustice. As a famous civil rights activist once said:

“We do not need allies more devoted to order than to justice”. I imagine Jews around the world would agree that antisemitism is the oldest racism and that it needs all of us here today to lead from the front and stand against those who wish to fan the flames of hatred and division to enhance their racist agenda.

We should all follow in the footsteps of the ordinary people who did not stand by—the righteous among the nations. Many of them will say that they are not extraordinary people, despite having done extraordinary things. They will say that they did not show superhuman bravery; they just did what was right. When Sir Nicholas Winton rescued 669 children from Czechoslovakia and brought them to the UK, thereby sparing them from the horrors of the holocaust, he simply said:

“Why are you making such a big deal out of it? I just helped a little; I was in the right place at the right time.”

I disagree with Sir Nicholas. He saved innocent children from a life of unimaginable trauma, torture and almost certain death, and gave them a life that at the time seemed impossible. I am sure we all agree that there can be no greater gift than the saving of a precious life.

We stand on the shoulders of giants in this Chamber today. Every single one of us, as leaders in our communities and constituencies, should wake up every day channelling the spirit of Sir Nicholas; doing the right thing, making the right choices, helping those who need it and standing tall in their corner when they need us. Leadership is about ordinary people rejecting division and hate. Leadership is about showing bravery in the face of adversity. Leadership is about choosing virtue over evil.

Earlier this week I visited the Terezín ghetto in Prague with the European Jewish Association. While there I heard at first hand from Gidon Lev, a survivor of Terezín,

about how it was the site of the original propaganda from the Nazis. When media gathered to the ghetto, the Nazis were keen to stress that while, yes, it may be a ghetto, people were actually being looked after, and children were being educated and fed. Of course, this was all a front for the despicable treatment that was really happening to Jewish people. It was only following the work of the Red Cross that what was truly happening was uncovered.

Fake news is something we must stand shoulder to shoulder against with our Jewish brothers and sisters, from the rapid development of artificial intelligence, the digital doctoring of pictures and videos of the time, to the holocaust denial spreading like wildfire across social media. Ordinary people are still duped by fake news about the number of people murdered in the holocaust. Decades-old theories—in some cases, centuries-old—that Jewish people are somehow puppeteers of the world’s events, that they run our media, music industry and our sport and are somehow plotting against us, continue to put Jewish lives at risk.

We must never lose sight of the story of the holocaust and how ordinary people in power systemically dehumanised Jewish people so that other ordinary people could murder them on a scale that is simply hard to fathom. In short, we must always remember, and never forget. It must never happen again—not to Jews, not to anybody, not on our watch.

2.28 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): This week, holocaust survivor Manfred Goldberg spoke movingly in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office about the “hell on earth” he experienced under the Nazis. The tragedy is that there have been a catalogue of horrors since the Nazis perpetrated their genocidal acts. In the ’70s there was Pol Pot’s terror in Cambodia. In the ’80s there was Saddam Hussein’s desecration of Kurds in Iraq. In the ’90s there were attempts to systematically exterminate Tutsis in Rwanda, while Bosnian non-Serbs suffered a similar fate.

There have been atrocities inflicted across the world, including in Asia, the middle east, Africa and Europe, and on victims from a range of religions and races—Muslim, Buddhist, Jewish, Christian and others. Still, in the 21st century, we see further atrocities where elements of the definition of genocide are present, including targeting of the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, of the Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang, and of the Hazaras in Afghanistan. In my work as the Prime Minister’s special envoy for freedom of religion or belief, I have heard many survivors speak of unspeakable suffering. They relay the same message as survivors of the holocaust: we must not only call out evil, but act to prevent it from happening again.

One way we can act is by formally recognising the genocide against the Yazidis and Christians in Iraq and Syria by Daesh, as the lower house in Germany did just last week. Recognition of genocide is one of the most significant things we can do as part of the UK’s atrocity prevention strategy. Another is to identify where there is risk of genocide. We must equip our diplomatic teams across the world to spot the early warning signs where a nation is at risk of genocide. The UK can be a leader among our allies and partners in setting up early warning mechanisms, and in using our diplomatic reach—a reach

that is still much regarded internationally, as I know from my work as the Prime Minister's special envoy—to resolve disputes and tensions where we are able to do so.

The International Development Committee's recent report, "From Srebrenica to a safer tomorrow: Preventing future mass atrocities around the world" sets out a road map for the Government to follow. I welcome the Government's positive response, not least the development of the mass atrocity prevention hub, and look forward to further progress to fulfil our manifesto commitment to implement the Truro review fully, including recommendation 7, which states:

"Ensure that there are mechanisms in place to facilitate an immediate response to atrocity crimes, including genocide, through activities such as setting up early warning mechanisms to identify countries at risk of atrocities, diplomacy to help de-escalate tensions and resolve disputes, and developing support to help with upstream prevention work."

I highlight Nigeria as one country with close links to the UK where I fear the risk of genocide is growing. Around 90 hon. Members attended the Open Doors 2023 world watch list launch here last week and heard how Nigeria is now the sixth highest country for persecution of Christians; indeed, it would be top if the list were based just on the number of recorded deaths. We must condemn in the strongest possible terms the ongoing attacks against Christians and moderate Muslims by Islamic extremists in that country, and call out the Nigerian Government's repeated denial of any such targeted religious persecution and their failure to act adequately to address it and protect the targeted.

Finally, we must do more work on educating the next generation about the importance of freedom of religion or belief, so that "never again" becomes a reality for their generation in a way that, sadly, as I have said, it has not for ours. This is the ultimate upstream prevention work, and it is vital. One of the main takeaways from last year's ministerial conference on freedom of religion or belief, which I was privileged to co-host, was the inspiration of the development of education toolkits for teachers to use in primary schools, to give even the youngest children an understanding of freedom of religion or belief and of the vital importance—

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Will the hon. Member give way?

Fiona Bruce: Certainly.

John Cryer: In the context of what the hon. Member is saying about education, will she join me in congratulating the HET, the CST and other organisations on educating people and also on combating antisemitism, including, sadly, in my own party and in other institutions?

Fiona Bruce: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. I will indeed congratulate the Holocaust Educational Trust later in my speech.

It is vital that we teach even the youngest children about the importance of not discriminating against others on account of their beliefs, just as they understand so well the importance of not discriminating against others on account of disability.

I have the privilege of chairing the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance, a growing group of 42 countries whose Governments, like ours, have formally committed to protecting and promoting freedom

of religion or belief around the world. It is our aspiration to see the toolkit that I mentioned, when it is developed, used in schools across our 42 countries. I am proud that the toolkit is currently being piloted in the UK, including in a school in my constituency.

As the years go by and our brave, inspirational holocaust survivors, with their testimonies, diminish in number, we must ensure that their voice is sustained, not least with young ambassadors. I pay tribute to the Holocaust Educational Trust for the excellent work that it does in that regard.

The alliance I chair is promoting the connection of young freedom of religion or belief ambassadors around the world. We are working towards a 2023 virtual global conference engaging young FORB ambassadors, and we want to involve three groups of young people: first, young people from democratic societies like our own who have not personally experienced persecution but care about the issue and want to do more; secondly, young people in the diaspora here in the UK with ties in countries such as Nigeria and direct concerns to relay; and, thirdly and critically, young people who live in countries where there is persecution and are experiencing it themselves—places such as Myanmar, where there is already strong interest from young people, and Hong Kong, where oppression on account of religion is an increasing concern.

As we plan this virtual global conference, I would welcome contacts from colleagues, all-party parliamentary group country chairs and others with young people from across the world who may be interested in engaging with the event late in 2023. This is a way in which we here can act. Indeed, we can all do something to make "never again" a reality for the next generation, and it is so heartening that, in this Parliament, elected Members right across the political spectrum are determined to do so.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. There are colleagues who have informed me that they are no longer able to participate in the debate, so I am going to extend the time limit to eight minutes and see how we go.

2.37 pm

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): It is an honour to rise today to commemorate Holocaust Memorial Day, both personally as a proud Jewish parliamentarian, and on behalf of my constituents in Warrington North, many of whom have made Warrington their home after fleeing the horrors of the holocaust and subsequent post-war genocides in Rwanda, Darfur, Cambodia and Bosnia, which we also commemorate today.

This Shabbat, Jews in synagogues around the world will be reading Parashat Bo, a Torah portion described by the former Chief Rabbi, Lord Sacks of blessed memory, as

"among the most revolutionary in the entire history of ideas"

and

"one of the most counterintuitive passages in all of religious literature."

In the passage—Exodus 10 to 13:16—Moses is addressing the Israelites before their release from Egypt. But his address is not about the freedom they will soon see, or

[Charlotte Nichols]

the society they will have to build, but—repeatedly—about education and the duty of parents to educate their children about what they experienced in Egypt. The passage reads:

“Vayomer Moshe el-ha’am zachor et-hayom hazeh asher yetzatem mi Mitzrayim”.

That is:

“And Moses said to the nation: Remember this day, when you went out from Egypt”.

What does “zachor”—to remember—mean? The Jewish concept of remembering is not passive, but active. We tell the Exodus story to our children. We re-experience it and understand it through the elaborate rituals of the Pesach Seder. We reflect on it in our recitation of the central daily prayer, the Shema, in the laying of tefillin—a physical ritual with which to commemorate liberation from Egypt daily—and in the mezuzah, which we hammer to our doorframes. To truly remember is to act. That is as true for the story of the Exodus as it is for the genocides that we come together to commemorate today.

The theme of this year’s Holocaust Memorial Day is “ordinary people”. We reflect on the fact that its victims were ordinary people, each with their own inherent human dignity, loves, hopes, fears and aspirations—not nameless, faceless statistics, which our inability to fully comprehend the enormity of these atrocities can reduce them to. We reflect that those who committed these genocides were ordinary people, that this capacity for evil is indeed in all of us, and it is a choice, just as courage is a choice. And we reflect on the indifference of ordinary people who stood by while it happened, which was necessary for that kind of industrial-scale murder and the mechanics of genocide to be sustained. There are, of course, stories of bravery, with the kind of heroics that we see commemorated at Yad Vashem by the “righteous among the nations”, but what makes these people extraordinary is the very fact that the vast majority of people—the ordinary people—did not care enough to stop genocide taking place.

However, to reflect on the holocaust, and on the genocides in Rwanda, Bosnia, Darfur and Cambodia, is not in and of itself true remembrance. This week I had the honour of sharing a platform with the holocaust survivor Joan Salter MBE, who has been turning reflection into action through her advocacy for contemporary refugees and her work with Freedom from Torture. We cannot commend historical actions such as the Kindertransport in debates like this and not condemn the inflammatory and hateful rhetoric used in this place and in the media about those fleeing persecution today, or about the LGBT+ and Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities.

I was also honoured, in my capacity as an ambassador for the charity Remembering Srebrenica, to sit with members of the Movement of Mothers of Srebrenica and Žepa Enclaves. As they spoke to me about the trauma of their sons, brothers and fathers murdered in the Bosnian genocide, they also told me about their fight for justice. Many of the bodies have still never been recovered. One mother told me that she felt “lucky”, as they had found one bone of their youngest son to bury. Many of the mothers do not even have that, as mass burial pits were excavated and moved to evade detection, which prolonged the agony of those left behind. One mother spoke at the International Criminal

Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia to plead for clemency for the soldier who she knew had murdered her family, for he had recently had a son and she did not want another child growing up without a father.

We cannot remember without justice, and a full and true accounting of all the decisions before, during and after a genocide, to learn, to change, and to ensure that “never again” is not an empty maxim, but a series of actions to which we can all commit ourselves. We know of cases—such as that of the “butcher of Slomin”, Stanislaw Chrzanowski—in which war criminals have evaded justice because of active collusion by the British police, the Crown Prosecution Service and the security services, who protected them and allowed them to live among the rest of us as “ordinary people”. It is time for an inquiry: the Board of Deputies of British Jews has called for one, but the Government have so far ignored its call. How can we have confidence that these things will not happen in future—perhaps with Russian war criminals—if we cannot account for how and why they happened before?

This is why education, and the education of children in particular, is so very important—from Moses and the Israelites in Parashat Bo to our contemporary society. The holocaust is rapidly fading from living memory, and so too, one day, will the genocides that followed it. The testimony of survivors, which the sterling work of the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust and the Holocaust Educational Trust allows so many to access and experience, is an important part of our collective memory, but the survivors cannot be expected to bear this responsibility themselves and to bear this burden alone. While Elie Wiesel was right when he said that if the holocaust was forgotten

“the dead will be killed a second time”,

we remember not for the sake of the past, but for the sake of the future.

The message from today, and from this week’s sedra from Exodus, must be this: through education we can aspire towards liberation, solidarity and community, and build empathy and understanding as we march together with all people on the path out of Egypt and refuse to go back. We observe, we remember, and, inspired by our histories and our faiths, ordinary people across all our communities will act. It is in education that a good society is won or lost.

2.44 pm

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): In a debate featuring successive powerful speeches, the one that we have just heard from the hon. Member for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols) has to rank among the most powerful, and I congratulate her on it. I also congratulate the Holocaust Educational Trust, because it is a sign of its success that in these debates, held year after year, such enormously influential contributions are made by new generations of MPs such as the hon. Lady, who I believe has been in the House only since 2019. Clearly the process is working.

I have spoken in two of these debates previously. I find that, as I age, time seems to race along more and more quickly, so it was with surprise that I found that it was fully 10 years ago that I last told the story of two ordinary people caught up in the holocaust. I think I may be forgiven for telling it again, after this lapse of time; I have the permission of my researcher, Nina Karsov.

Some people may see Nina around the Estate, not particularly noticing anything about this petite lady that would ever make them think that, at the age of two, she was thrown by her parents from a train on its route to Treblinka in an attempt to save her life. Somehow the three of them leapt from the train. There was deep snow. Nina, a toddler, landed in it and was badly frostbitten. Her mother was killed instantly in leaping from the train, and it took her father some time to find her in the snow. They got back to Warsaw, and were taken in by separate gallant Polish non-Jewish families.

When the Nazis were closing in on the part of Warsaw where the father was in hiding, he, in order to protect those people who would have been killed if they had been caught with him in hiding, made his way across the square to the top of another building and threw himself off it so that he could not be forced to divulge where he had been kept. Nina, however, was kept safely through the war, and many years later, was able to secure for the lady she called her Polish mother recognition amongst “the righteous”, which was clearly an honour richly deserved. It has to be said that both her Polish mother and Nina herself were then persecuted by the communist regime, Nina spending two years of a three-year sentence in a communist jail before Amnesty International successfully campaigned for her to come to this country. So that is one ordinary person whom one might bump into on the Commons Estate without knowing much about her.

One person who cannot be bumped into on the Estate is my cousin Chana Broder, who now lives in Israel. Chana, her parents Abraham and Rachel, and her grandmother Rivka were holed up in a ghetto in Siemiatycze in November 1942 when they were tipped off that the ghetto was about to be cleared, so they made a run for it. The grandfather was killed, but the other four got away. They were turned away from one place after another, and eventually somebody gave them shelter for a little while, but the people who saved those four lives, as I told the House on a previous occasion, were the Kryński family.

The father was Konstanty, the mother was Bronisława and the children were Krystyna and Henryk. They were a poor farming family, and they had known my cousins before the war. My cousins had had a little convenience store in the main square of Siemiatycze, and I visited it a few years ago—it is now a flower shop. The Kryński parents went to the shop in the days before the war and, because they were very constrained economically, my cousins would sometimes say, “Mr and Mrs Kryński, take what you need for now and pay us when you can,” little imagining that, a few years later, those acts of simple kindness would be rewarded by an act of outstanding bravery.

The Kryńskis took them in for months. They hid them while their farm was occasionally searched by German troops, and they got away with it because they had constructed a bunker underneath a barn, in which the grandmother, the two young parents and my four-year-old cousin, Chana, were able to stay throughout the day. They could not stand up, so they would just sit and wait until they could come out at night.

This went on for months, until the Russians overran the area. The family were able to get out, and they were then taken in by Canada. The grandmother sadly passed away very soon after liberation, but the young parents and the little girl were able to go to Montreal, where my

cousin graduated from McGill University. Both she and her mother subsequently moved to Israel, and she is still alive today.

Chana’s mother’s book, originally published in 1967 as “Out of the Depths” because of how the family had hidden underground, was republished in 2020 as part of the Azrieli Foundation’s holocaust survivors’ memoirs programme as “Daring to Hope.” For anyone who is interested in seeing how one ordinary family came through an extraordinary experience with the help of outstandingly brave people—the Kryński family were honoured with the presentation of the Righteous Among the Nations award in Siemiatycze on 24 May 2016—it is all there in black and white.

I hope not to have to tell this story again for another 10 years, and I do not think I will, because this debate has been so well informed by so many MPs of older and younger generations that we are in no danger at all of forgetting what happened.

2.52 pm

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I always enjoy hearing the stories of the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis). I do not care how many times I hear them.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for agreeing to this debate, and I thank the Members who applied for it. I particularly thank the right hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid) for his fine, thoughtful speech, which set the tone for the day.

I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western) for his cracking maiden speech. He has set a high bar, so I suspect it will be a full House for his next performance. I thoroughly enjoyed his excellent speech.

This debate is part of the wider commemorations for Holocaust Memorial Day, which was established following the visit of my former colleague Andrew Dismore, the former Member for Hendon, to Auschwitz with the Holocaust Educational Trust in 1999. He introduced a Bill following his visit calling for a day to learn from and remember the holocaust.

I can well remember my first visit to Auschwitz with the Holocaust Educational Trust and a group of sixth formers from Baverstock School, in the Druids Heath area of my constituency. It was a cold, bitter February day and a totally chilling experience, as I struggled to answer questions from these young people and keep my own emotions under control. I doubt that I have ever experienced anything quite like it since. So it is right that we have this debate and that we have Holocaust Memorial Day, so that we learn and remember.

The holocaust had a lesser direct impact on this country than on many other places, although we should remember that the Nazis invaded the Channel Islands and that many Jews living there were sent to the death camps. The bravery of Witold Pilecki, a Polish underground resistance leader who volunteered to be sent to Auschwitz and report on what was happening, should leave us in no doubt that the allies did receive reliable intelligence reports on the scale of the horrors. Britain also accepted about 10,000 mostly unaccompanied children through the Kindertransport scheme, which is something those who make light of the plight of unaccompanied refugee children today might do well to remember.

[Steve McCabe]

In 1991, at the behest of the Holocaust Educational Trust, the holocaust became part of the English national curriculum. We need to remember these horrific events because still today there are those who would deny and distort the reality of the holocaust. Some seek to minimise the numbers killed and others try to blame the Jews for causing their own genocide. Jewish colleagues of mine, and others in this House, have suffered the most antisemitic abuse and threats, usually only for being Jewish. Of course, too many people fail to understand why Israel remains so important to Jews today. Hundreds of thousands of holocaust survivors left Europe for a new life in the state of Israel, established just three years after Auschwitz was liberated.

Last year, I was privileged to visit Poland with colleagues from across this House on the “march of the living”. It reminded us that for 1,000 years before 1939 Poland was the great heartland of Jewish life, but by the end of the war, it was reduced to having a handful of Jewish people. One of the most powerful memories of that visit was hearing the harrowing testimonies of holocaust survivors. But the march also teaches us that the reality is that despite its grotesque scale, the holocaust failed, and since 1945 Jewish people have survived and thrived in Israel, the region’s only democratic state.

So let us continue to commemorate Holocaust Memorial Day, to be active and vigilant in the face of antisemitism and to be robust in our challenge of those who would seek to destroy the state of Israel or challenge its right to exist. Finally, may I welcome the cross-party support for the holocaust memorial Bill, paving the way for a new memorial and learning centre so that we will never forget?

2.59 pm

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I congratulate the new hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western)—I know his area pretty well—on his excellent maiden speech, which was delivered with confidence and poise. I hope that he has a very long membership of this place.

I rise to speak because I have been witness to genocide. I consider this remembrance of genocide—the holocaust and genocide since the second world war—to be hugely important. May I just say a little about my own experience to put it in context?

In April 1993, I was the British United Nations commander in Bosnia and I had been there for about five months. My job was to help deliver humanitarian aid, but the best way to do that is when there is no fighting, so I spent a lot of time trying to stop the fighting. At that time, the fighting around my base was pretty horrendous. The fighting was between Bosnian Muslims, Bosnian Croats and Bosnian Serbs. It was ferocious.

The European Community monitoring mission ambassador had arranged a ceasefire, but it was not working, so he asked me to go to the frontlines of all the belligerents to try to stop them fighting. On 22 April, I led about six armoured vehicles up into the mountains, above the Lasva valley, to try to do just that. I did not think that I had much chance of success, but I did as he asked.

The first people I met were Bosnian Muslim soldiers on the mountains. When I asked them to please stop fighting because a ceasefire was meant to be in place,

they said, “No, no, in the village of Ahmići, women and children have been massacred.” I said, “No, that can’t be. People don’t do that in 1993.” They said that it had happened. I said, “If I go there, look, witness and come back and tell you that it hasn’t happened, will you stop fighting?” They said yes. I took myself off the mountains. It took me about an hour to get to Ahmići. I approached it from the south, from the main road. The first thing I saw was a mosque with its minaret toppled—it looked like a rocket pointing to the sky. The rest of the village of Ahmići was largely destroyed. Houses were burned down.

I went about a mile to the end of the village, and asked my soldiers to check through. There were a few houses that had not been touched. Later, I discovered that they were houses owned by Bosnian Croats. Some soldiers said that they had crosses on the door to identify them, but I never saw that.

A third of the way down, we went into a house and saw the remains of a man and a boy burned at the doorway. The soldier said, “Come round the back, sir.” We went in the back of this house and there was a charnel—it was like a charnel house. When I first saw it, I did not understand what it was. Then the smell hit me. I was horrified. It looked to me like a couple of women and a few children. They were burned and on their backs. They had obviously died in agony. One had an arched back and their eyes were still there—gosh. We just rushed out and were sick. We went on and found the skull of a baby further down. Mostly, though, people were hidden because, after being shot, killed or burned, the roofs had come down on top of them, so we did not find many of them. A day or so later, I found a whole family: mother, father, son and daughter, all dead in a row. The daughter was holding a puppy. She was killed by the same bullet that killed the puppy.

We reckon that about 120 people were killed at Ahmići. I buried in a mass grave what we thought were about 104 people, mainly women and children—Bosnian Muslims, by the way. The holocaust is also about Bosnian Muslims.

I went on the international media and said, “This is genocide. It is the classic definition of genocide: deliberate targeting of a people.” They did not agree with me to start with at the United Nations, but a couple of years later they did, and Ahmići became part of the genocide and was defined as genocide.

I have given evidence in the war crimes trials—five trials, to be honest—and I am still in shock that it happened. My men could not believe it, and they too are still in shock. I am going back at Easter. I will be representing all of us in this House when I lay a wreath at the village of Ahmići for the 30th anniversary of the massacre. I also lay a wreath to the memory of Dobrila Kalaba, my interpreter. When we discovered the village, she interpreted for me. A couple of months later, the Bosnian Croats shot her dead. We put up a memorial to her. She was a Bosnian Serb.

I will finish by saying two things. If the theme this year is ordinary people, it is dead right, because ordinary people suffer, and ordinary people carry out some of these atrocities. Strange circumstances make ordinary people do very vicious things. I must say that I have met people, and even had dinner with them, before they carried out such things, and they were very normal people.

My final point is that the reason why we have this debate and why we must remember the holocaust is that memory fades. We must ensure that future generations do not lose the fact that man can be really inhuman to man.

3.7 pm

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): It is an absolute honour to follow the right hon. and gallant Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) and to hear again his powerful testimony about what he witnessed. He is right that we simply must never forget. His speech is one of many excellent speeches in this debate.

I will speak about the 1943 uprising at Treblinka, where very ordinary people with very little hope rose to destroy the machinery of death and to escape. Treblinka, as we know, was created for the sole purpose of exterminating the Jewish people. It was not capable of holding many people for long periods. There were no forced labour factories. In little more than a year, an estimated 925,000 people were murdered.

The people who fought back had personally seen tens or even hundreds of thousands of innocent people being murdered. They had been forced to cut off the hair of their fellow victims just before they entered the gas chambers and sort through the clothes of the newly dead. They had to pick through the ashes from every day's thousands of corpses to remove fragments of bone, which were crushed and burned again so that no evidence of this enormous evil would be left. They had been forced to do all that, to endure all that, and still they had the strength to plan, to work together, and to fight for their right to live.

I believe it is important that we understand just how difficult and extraordinary any form of resistance was within the camps, because we know that the control by the guards was almost absolute. All the prisoners knew of the immediate brutality that would be inflicted upon resisters if they were caught. But it was more than that. The Nazi regime sought to break the very spirit of the prisoners—not only their hope, but their solidarity among themselves. Chaim Rajchman, who survived Treblinka after taking part in the uprising, said that the victims

“were so abused, victimised...that they wanted to die... Our vision was overcast. We did not know what was happening to us... The whole world forgot about us. Our lives were worthless.”

Despite the devastating impact of years of unceasing trauma, courage and solidarity remained and could not be broken. In the summer of 1943, news came to the camp of the Warsaw ghetto uprising a few months earlier, so against enormous odds, plans for an uprising to destroy Treblinka began. The guards had built an armoury and selected a Jewish locksmith to work on the lock. He was able to make an extra copy of the key and pass it to the organisers. Others were brought into the conspiracy, including the Jewish boys of just 12 or 13 years of age who had been given the weekly task of cleaning up after the camp guards. The uprising began on 2 August 1943. Those brave, brave young boys smuggled guns out from the armoury underneath the rubbish in their carts. The barracks were set alight, and the main gate was attacked, but the towers could not be captured and the guards fought to maintain their brutal control. All that could be done was to run and hide.

Of the 840 people in the camp that day, only 200 fully escaped the pursuit, and just 100 survived the rest of the war. Let us remember that those who rose up in Treblinka

were ordinary people willing to die that day so that others would have a chance to live. They were not bound together by training or ideology, but were thrown together in the midst of utter horror. Their desire to survive and resist came from within and from each other. We must remember them. As a country, we must try to match just a fraction of their resilience as we stand against atrocities in our own time, because—as we know and as we have heard—people in this world are still systematically murdered because of their identities.

This year marks the 20th anniversary of the start of acts of genocide in Darfur—horrific crimes against humanity that have happened on our watch. In Darfur, hundreds of thousands of people have been killed, rape has been used as a weapon on a massive scale, and millions still endure forced displacement. Every year on Holocaust Memorial Day, we say, “Never again”, but I genuinely believe that saying and believing that requires us to act. Atrocities continue regularly in Darfur, and the people accused of those crimes against humanity have faced no justice. We need to recognise that, instead of being put on trial, some of those implicated in Darfur have built careers on the murder and destruction that they planned and organised. Many remain in positions of power and prosperity in Sudan today.

I absolutely welcome the Government's statement at the UN Security Council yesterday calling on the authorities in Sudan to act. I hope that justice for the atrocities in Darfur is a primary UK objective as we continue to support the movement of Sudanese people who wish only for peace and democracy. We must always remember the victims of the holocaust, and we can never rest content until justice is done for the victims in Darfur and those everywhere else in our world where genocide again threatens our humanity.

3.15 pm

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): My thanks to my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid) for bringing forward the debate and my commendations to the new hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western) on an excellent maiden speech.

I want to tell the House the story of an ordinary person who became extraordinary through her love and courage, who did not look the other way and who eventually laid down her life for her commitment. When Jane Haining was arrested by the Gestapo at the school where she worked in Budapest one morning in April 1944, she told the children in her care:

“Don't worry. I'll be back by lunch.”

She did not come back. Instead, from one of Budapest's police stations, Jane was taken to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Unlike the 12,000 Hungarian Jews who were arriving daily to the horror of Auschwitz, Jane's journey started not on the cobbled streets or Budapest or the Someşul Mic side town of Cluj but in the rolling farmland of my native Dumfriesshire. Her so-called crime, unlike the Hungarian Jews she arrived with, was not her ethnicity but her faith and courage. Like almost all who arrived at the camp at that time, Jane died within a few weeks—at just 47—in conditions that few can comprehend. She was the only Scot to die in the holocaust.

Jane had, in a very literal sense, given her whole life to others. As a young girl in Dunscore in eastern Dumfriesshire, she had given it to her younger sisters

[David Mundell]

for whom she had become the carer on the death of her mother. After her graduation from Dumfries Academy, where she had excelled in languages, she worked as a secretary in Paisley and Glasgow before finally finding her calling as a missionary in the Church of Scotland.

From June 1932, Jane was the matron of the Scottish Mission School in Budapest, a boarding house for Jewish and Christian girls. Life and work at the school was overtly Christian, but Jewish parents were keen to see their daughters attend the school not only because of the quality of the education but because of how the girls were accepted. As one commentator noted:

“Jewish girls who came here were not seen as second-class pupils. They were just welcome.”

That must have felt precious to the pupils and their parents as the persecution of the 1930s become more prevalent and pernicious.

Even before the start of world war two, the Church of Scotland had repeatedly advised Jane to leave Budapest, but she refused. After her final visit to her home in Scotland in 1939, she wrote

“if these children need me in days of sunshine, how much more do they need me now”?

It is a testament to Jane and a reminder of our capacity for good that her concern was always the children’s needs, not her own safety. Her courage and selflessness, though, cost Jane her life.

When the Nazis swept into Budapest in March 1944, Jane was arrested within a month. Her crimes, according to the Gestapo, included that “she had wept” when, as prescribed by law, she had sewn yellow stars on to the pupils’ clothes. Her sympathies for the Jewish people had been revealed to Nazi authorities by the son-in-law of the cook at her school, whom she had scolded for eating food intended for the girls in her care.

Jane was rightly recognised in 1997 by Yad Vashem as one of the righteous among the nations. She is also recognised as a national hero in Hungary. It was there in 2019 that I, as Secretary of State for Scotland, had the privilege of leading thousands of people through the streets of Budapest on the march of the living, an annual event to mark Hungary’s Holocaust Memorial Day, which movingly that year was dedicated to Jane and started in a street named after her.

Here in the UK, Jane is remembered with a cairn outside Dunscore parish church, and an informative exhibition within it. For those wishing to know more about her life, I encourage them to look to Mary Miller’s book on Jane’s life, “A Life of Love and Courage”, to find out more. While her life, like all those taken in the holocaust, cannot be restored, it can and must be remembered, and I would certainly like to see it remembered more fully and more widely.

As the holocaust and its victims move further into memory, it is right that we do more to ensure that current and future generations comprehend the scale of the horror, but also the impact of each individual loss, and through Jane’s example—the example of an ordinary person—remember that for all the evil in the world, if we do not compromise or look away then, like Jane, there is always something that each individual can do to combat it. As Rev. Aaron Stevens of St Columba’s Church of Scotland in Budapest eulogised:

“Jane Haining’s service and sacrifice shows that caring for people from different backgrounds in no way compromises our faith. In fact, it just might be the fullest expression of it.”

May God bless Jane Haining. She was truly a light in the darkness, and may her light shine even brighter in the future.

3.21 pm

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for allocating time for this important debate. I also thank the right hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) for jointly sponsoring the application, among other MPs. As a fellow Greater Manchester MP, I was particularly pleased by the maiden speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western). I am keen to associate myself with his remarks about cricket, because he and I are known to enjoy a match or two at Lancashire county cricket club, although I should declare an interest as a member of that club.

Before I go into the main segment of my speech, I pay tribute to the Jewish Representative Council of Greater Manchester and Region, as well as the Jewish Leadership Council, and in particular Marc Levy, for all the work they do in celebrating the Jewish community in our city region and shedding light on antisemitism for the vile racism it is. There are also such organisations as the Jewish Labour Movement, which has done a lot of work within my party, and I am grateful to it. Several Members on both sides of the House have mentioned the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust, and I have noticed that many, including you, Madam Deputy Speaker, are wearing a badge from the trust. The Holocaust Educational Trust is well known for all the work it does in educational establishments across the country.

We have come a long way since the horrors of the holocaust, but it is important to remember and reflect on the atrocities and the lives taken. I had the privilege of listening to the testimony of Ike Alterman at the Yom Hashoah commemoration at Bridgewater Hall in Manchester last year. His story of surviving in four concentration camps was remarkable. Although tragically his family did not survive, as one of the Windermere children he was able to build a life here in Britain from almost nothing.

At a local level in my constituency, I am grateful to Councillor Dena Ryness and Stockport Council for organising the civic event in my town for Holocaust Memorial Day, where we come together to remember all those people whose lives were tragically taken from them. I will be attending the event in my constituency tomorrow.

My constituency of Stockport is in Greater Manchester. The region has the second largest Jewish community in Britain. In Greater Manchester the Jewish community is thriving and outward-facing but, like Jewish communities in the rest of the country, it has to deal with appalling hate crimes, both in person and online. The hate has sadly persisted, and there was a report last year on the rise in crimes against the Jewish community in Greater Manchester, which was covered by local and national media and must be tackled.

In the Online Safety Bill, work has been done to clamp down on online racial harassment and bigotry, but it is clear that social media companies and tech

giants must go further and do a lot more to ensure that this issue is controlled. Bigotry is still bigotry, even if it is typed. I had the privilege of being on the Bill Committee. Lots of organisations got in touch with us. In particular, I highlight the contribution of Mr Danny Stone MBE, the chief executive of the Antisemitism Policy Trust. He was quite helpful to me and other Committee members on both sides of the House.

I recently visited the site of Europe's most recent genocide in Bosnia-Herzegovina, as part of the International Development Committee delegation. I heard at first hand real and growing fears that the renewed weaponisation of hate speech and polarisation will lead to even more violence. We must all reflect. It is clear that Governments across the world must do more.

Last year the International Development Committee produced the report "From Srebrenica to a safer tomorrow: Preventing future mass atrocities around the world". The report provides a concrete and practical road map for how Britain can show global leadership in preventing genocide and crimes against humanity. That includes establishing a national strategy on the prevention of mass atrocities and ensuring that all embassies, high commissions and diplomatic posts receive atrocity prevention training, with priority countries receiving specialist support and training and adequate resources.

Last week I signed the book of remembrance in Westminster Hall on behalf of the people of my constituency. Like everyone in this House, my message was "never again." In order for us to do good on our promise of never again, we must commit to more than just words.

3.26 pm

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden) (Con): I associate myself with the sentiment of the hon. Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) on social media companies doing more. They simply do not do enough, but they have the resources to do so. I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) for his moving speech. Every time I hear him speak about his experiences, there is never a dry eye. I congratulate the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western) on his maiden speech. He was doing so well up until the fifth minute—as a Manchester United fan, I am sure that we will have many sparring sessions inside and outside the Chamber, but I wish him well.

I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid), the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) and all Members who have contributed to ensuring that we have this really important debate. I pay tribute to the Holocaust Educational Trust for all its work, the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust and the Community Security Trust. I also visited a school in north London and got to see at first hand the sad situation of our children—and they are our children—who are struggling to be educated without fear. I wish we did not have to live in a society where that is the case. I am sure that we will all work together to make that so.

I thank Solihull Council, which had its civic reception this morning as part of its holocaust remembrance events. I urge all Members to spend some time going through the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust website, to read the stories of those who survived and those who perished—the mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, brothers and sisters.

"Never again." So many times we have heard that phrase, and when speaking not only of the holocaust but, sadly, of subsequent genocides, such as those in Rwanda, Cambodia and Srebrenica, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove said. I am a patron of Remembering Srebrenica. In the week that the doomsday clock moved 10 seconds closer to midnight, and when incidents of mass murder and atrocities are unveiled with too much regularity—whether in Ukraine, Xinjiang or in the stories of harrowing abuse suffered by the Rohingya communities—this debate seems particularly poignant. Sadly, that list was not exhaustive. One thing is clear: we cannot be complacent. We cannot assume that it will never happen again. We cannot forget.

The theme today is ordinary people. I want to speak about the extraordinary Paul Oppenheimer, who settled in my constituency after the war, in the village of Marston Green. He was born in Berlin in 1928 and lived in my constituency after the war for over 40 years. In 1940 his family moved to Amsterdam and, within six months of the German invasion, the persecution of the Jewish communities in Holland had started. He was only able to complete one term in the local grammar school before the Nazis banned Jewish children from attending non-Jewish schools. In January 1942, it was decreed that Jews could only reside in Amsterdam, and from April 1942 it was decreed that Jews must wear a Jewish star. The Nazis then went block by block, clearing Jewish families and taking them by train to the Westerbork transit camp, before they were sent on to other camps such as Auschwitz, Sobibor and Bergen-Belsen.

The Oppenheimers were exempt from wearing the yellow star by virtue of a small piece of fortune. In 1936, Paul Oppenheimer visited England with his parents. During their visit, his sister, Eve, was born, and therefore she had entitlement to recognition as a British subject. It was due to Paul's father's foresight in registering Eve as a British citizen that the whole family were treated differently, with blue exemption cards. They were kept in the slightly—slightly—better star camp, where they did not have to shave their heads, could wear civilian clothes and would often be protected from the random beatings and shootings, by virtue of that citizenship.

But they were not safe from the unsanitary conditions, and disease was rife. Paul lost his mother and father to disease in 1945, but he and his brother and sister eventually survived and found their way to England. Later in life, Paul checked to see what happened to those who were sent on transit trains to camps from Westerbork. Of the 34,143 people who left Westerbork for Sobibor camp, only 19 survived. Of the 58,380 who left for Auschwitz, 854 survived.

The thing about this story is that, in line with the theme of Holocaust Memorial Day this year, you would never have known it about Paul. He started as an engineering apprentice in Marston Green in my constituency and ended up working in an automotive company on braking systems for passenger cars. In fact, he was so good that his work on anti-locking brakes, which are standard in cars today, earned him an MBE in 1990. It was only when he got that award and journalists started asking him about his life that the horrors he had seen and his story became clear. Paul was the ordinary neighbour. He was the ordinary co-worker. He was the one who ploughed his efforts into rebuilding his life here in Britain. Paul settled in my constituency of

[*Saqib Bhatti*]

Meriden. He brought up his children just streets away from where I live. That is when it hits us how the extraordinary evil of the holocaust touched the lives of so many ordinary people.

As I conclude, I wonder about all the Pauls who did not survive and all the Oppenheims who did not make it to a place of safety, all the engineers who did not make it, all the doctors, intellectuals and artists, and all the great contributions that could have been made. They were not just a loss to their families; they were a loss to humanity, at the hands of a warped and evil ideology. Whether it is Xinjiang, the Rohingya community or Ukraine, one thing is clear: we must all come together and work with our international partners as a coalition of free, democratic countries and make sure that “never again” is not just something we say but something we live by.

3.32 pm

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) and the right hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid) on securing this Backbench Business debate. I thank the right hon. Member for Bromsgrove for his powerful speech.

I thank the Aegis Trust, the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust and the Holocaust Educational Trust for their constant work to ensure that we always remember the holocaust and all those who died and that we bring that memory into action for what is currently going on around the world. I thank Digby Stuart College at Roehampton University in my constituency for all the work it does on education about the holocaust, and I look forward to its commemoration event in May. I thank all the members of Wimbledon Synagogue for their warm welcome of me whenever I visit for events. I am sad that they have to have security outside the synagogue all the time. It is a reminder to me every time I visit of the growing antisemitism in our country, which has been highlighted by Members and is the reason for us holding this debate here and now.

I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western) on an assured and excellent maiden speech; I look forward to hearing from him many times in future.

I declare an interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on prevention of genocide and crimes against humanity, vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Bosnia and Herzegovina, and vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Ukraine.

My experience of working in Bosnia during the war and speaking to the relatives of those who died in Srebrenica drove my work with refugees before I became a Member of the House and drives my work now on the prevention of genocide, to ensure that when we say, “Never again”, we mean never again. We are also ordinary people but we have extraordinary power to make legislation to put that into action. This year is the 75th anniversary of the convention on the prevention and punishment of the crime of genocide, about which there will be lots of soul-searching during the year. I hope that all hon. Members will be part of that, as I am sure I will be: what legislation do we need to ensure that “Never again” means never again?

I join hon. Members in remembering the 8 million people killed during the holocaust and all the survivors, especially those we have lost recently, including Zigi Shipper, who we lost last week on his 93rd birthday. He was a survivor of the Łódź ghetto and the Auschwitz and Stutthof concentration camps. He arrived in the UK in 1947 and spent many decades sharing his testimony in schools across the country. He was awarded the British Empire Medal in 2016 for his work with the Holocaust Educational Trust.

I also pay tribute to all the ordinary people who shared their stories and who I read about growing up, because they had such an influence on me—people such as Anne Frank, Corrie ten Boom and Primo Levi. Their work educated me, shocked me, chilled me, connected me and inspired me. Indifference is all it takes for the spirit of the Third Reich to be resurrected. As holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel once said:

“Indifference, to me, is the epitome of evil.”

How can we ensure that we are not indifferent?

Last year, I visited the Srebrenica memorial with a cross-party group of MPs, including the right hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart). Some 8,000 people, mainly young men, were herded together, taken for a long walk and murdered. Their shoes and clothes were left and are displayed at the memorial, which is a chilling memory of each of them. I saw the video footage of the young men leaving on that walk—they looked like a group of young people going off with bags on their shoulders to walk through the forest for a picnic, not knowing where it would lead them. We met the grieving relatives—the mothers who will never forget and whose whole lives have been blighted by the terror. The row upon row of graves is a shocking sight.

Last September, I visited Kyiv where, on 29 September 1941, the 33,800 Jewish residents of Kyiv were gathered together near a train station and told that they would be taken to safety by train. Instead, they were taken to the edge of the Babi Yar ravine and shot. It was the largest massacre in the history of the holocaust up to then—33,771 people were killed and only 29 survived. Last year, I also visited the memorial to the holodomor, which was another horrific crime of state murder that aimed intentionally to wipe out the Ukrainian people. Some 7 million Ukrainians were starved over just 18 months from 1932 to 1933 on the most fertile lands in Europe. A third of all children in Ukraine perished as a result. In all those cases, the laws were passed by ordinary people and enforced by ordinary people, and led to the deaths of ordinary people.

Every year, we rightly stand here and say, “Never again,” but right now, around the world, atrocities are being committed in Ukraine, against the Rohingya people, against the Uyghur people, and in Tigray. There are several ways to take action to ensure that we mean never again. First, we can create a new pathway outside the UN Security Council to recognise potential and actual genocide. As the International Development Committee and the UK Government have pointed out, the Security Council is failing to act in response to mass atrocities, because Russia and China continue to use their veto to block declarations of genocide and referrals to the International Criminal Court. One way to do that would be to allow time on Report for the Genocide Determination Bill.

Secondly, the Government should take very seriously the recommendations of the “From Srebrenica to a safer tomorrow: Preventing future mass atrocities around

the world” report from the International Development Committee. That is a very welcome piece of work by parliamentarians, with strong recommendations about how we can support and strengthen the work of our UK missions. I welcome the new office for conflict, stabilisation and mediation and the mass atrocities prevention hub. These are great moves, but we need to go further to provide early warning and effective reaction to the risk of genocide in areas around the world.

There is always more to be done. My time working in Bosnia during and after the war taught me that we can never take peace for granted. We need to build peace every day. There are words in the playground or on the bus, there is discrimination in the workplace and there is antisemitism online. These must always be challenged and opposed. Holocaust Memorial Day is not just about speeches and gestures. It is about honouring the 6 million victims with our actions, not just our words. I would welcome all Members joining the all-party parliamentary group on prevention of genocide and crimes against humanity, and I look forward to working together to ensure that we, ordinary people though we are, can take extraordinary steps as legislators in the years to come.

3.41 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the speech of the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson). I pass on my congratulations to the new hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western) on his maiden speech. He will remember it forever, because we all do. We all do it once, and he will remember it forever. He is clearly going to be an asset to this House as well as to his party, and I look forward to debating housing issues with him over the time he is here. I wish his team every success tomorrow night.

I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid) for securing this debate, as we remember the 78 years since the end of the holocaust. For me and for most of us, it is incredible to think of 6 million people being murdered because they were people, and it is important to remember that the holocaust was not an isolated event. It was systematic state-sponsored persecution by the Nazi party and its affiliates. It began in 1933, when the Nazis came to power in Germany, and went all the way through to 1945, when the second world war concluded. I hope to take a bit of a different tack during this speech, because if we ask how we can understand how ordinary people could do such atrocities to ordinary people, we need to understand what led to it in the first place.

Antisemitism is not new, and it was not new in the 1930s. Jewish people have been subjected to antisemitism throughout Europe since the middle ages. The hatred escalated significantly after the great war, when the reparations on Germany and its allies were extreme, and we had the Wall Street crash and the depression, which led to rampant inflation in Germany and the collapse of the Weimar republic. This led to the rise of Hitler and the Nazi party as he assumed control of Germany.

It is unclear to me what was behind Hitler’s hatred towards Jews. Why did this man decide that he hated Jews? However, it is quite clear that Hitler held the Jewish community responsible for the defeat of Germany in world war one. Why? It is because someone had to be

to blame. That was clearly what we now call fake news—vicious propaganda, enabling the national feeling to be against the Jewish population of Germany and beyond. It was completely wrong, given that Jews were fighting on the side of Germany in defence of their country during world war one, including Otto Frank, who fought at the battle of the Somme.

After Hitler came to power, he wasted no time in using the Government to target and exclude Jews from German society, claiming they were inferior. Any book that contained ideas threatening to the Nazis was banned, and a concentration camp was immediately created for political prisoners, initially holding 200 communists. By 1935, the anti-Jewish movement had gained momentum. Jewish newspapers could no longer be sold, and Jews were stripped of their citizenship and other basic rights. In September 1935, the Nuremberg laws were passed by the German Parliament, which meant that many of the Nazis’ radical theories were institutionalised, and legal grounds were created to justify the prosecution and persecution of the Jewish community.

It is unimaginable in this day and age how the vast majority of Germans were coaxed into believing that Nazi ideology, but members of the general public were clearly unaware of the growing indoctrination until it was too late. They had adopted a strong stance against the entire Jewish community, and therefore could justify Hitler’s actions. Despite the shocking morals, Hitler was a calculated and systematic man, carefully thinking through his long-term plan before enacting it. He was able to persuade the German people by providing free radios that played only antisemitic programmes, ensuring that all children’s books depicted the villain as a Jewish character, showing posters blaming the Jews for every evil, and introducing strong censorship on all anti-Nazi media.

On 9 November, Kristallnacht, or the “night of broken glass”, took place. That was the terrorisation of Jews throughout Germany and Austria, which had recently been annexed by the Nazis. Hundreds of synagogues were destroyed and thousands of Jewish-owned businesses ransacked. The deaths of nearly 100 Jews took place on that dreadful night, which is often seen as the turning point in the persecution of German Jewry. The aftermath of Kristallnacht saw dozens of further discriminative restrictions. Jews now had to carry ID cards at all times and have the segregating “J” stamped on their passports. They could no longer head or own businesses, and they could not attend concerts or theatres. They had their driver’s licences removed, and all Jewish children had to be taken out of their schools to attend “Jewish-only” institutions. They had to be in certain places at certain times—all dictated by the Führer. Furthermore, more than 30,000 Jews were arrested on that night.

The whole House will be aware that in 1939 world war two was declared, as Germany took over Czechoslovakia and began the invasion of Poland. Simultaneously, the Jewish restrictions became even more constraining and discriminatory. By 1940, the Nazis had begun deporting German Jews to Poland, where they were forced into ghettos and concentration camps. They were brutally tortured and their human rights completely violated. Devastatingly, 1940 saw the first of an onslaught of mass murders of Jewish people.

The situation became graver and graver, and in 1942, the Nazis’ discussions were centred around their “final solution”, a despicable plot to kill every European Jew.

[Bob Blackman]

At that point, Jews were not allowed to own pets, leave the house without police consent, buy newspapers and eggs or attend school, among all sorts of further restrictions. Once Hitler took control of Hungary, a year before the end of world war two, he began deporting 12,000 Jews to Auschwitz every day to be killed. That continued until 1945, when Auschwitz-Birkenau was liberated. Sadly, 6 million Jewish people—two thirds of European Jews—had lost their lives. That shattered communities, and provided the few who outlived the war with experiences that scarred their lives for ever.

But before we get too comfortable, we should remember what was going on in this country. The British Union of Fascists was around before world war two, led by Oswald Mosley, an MP in this House, and he modelled it on Nazi Germany. The BUF was fuelled by antisemitism, inspired by the Nazis, and Mosley held huge rallies in this country, pushing a strong nationalist and fascist agenda. Unemployment was very high, poverty widespread, and homelessness rising. Someone had to be to blame, and Mosley blamed the Jews. It could have happened here. Sensible action took place by the Home Secretary, and once war broke out the BUF was banned and its members became enemies of the state. But we must never be too comfortable that this could not happen again, even in this country. I will end with one line from Zigi Shipper, who made this important point: do not hate.

3.49 pm

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): I thank the right hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid) for securing and opening today's debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western) on his fantastic maiden speech and look forward to hearing more of his contributions in the Chamber.

It is a great privilege to speak in this debate marking Holocaust Memorial Day 2023. It is an opportunity for all of us to reflect on the part that we play as parliamentarians in upholding democracy. I would like to place on record my thanks to the Holocaust Educational Trust for the important work it does in educating the public on the horrors of the holocaust and other genocides, and to the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust. I have signed the book of commitment again this year on behalf of my constituents, as have many Members. I would also like to pay tribute to holocaust survivor Zigi Shipper, who recently passed away, sadly, on his 93rd birthday. I would like to express my condolences to his family.

Each year's theme gives us pause for thought, and perhaps none more so than this year's theme of ordinary people. It was ordinary people who stood by and allowed the holocaust and other genocides to happen, taken in by propaganda or too frightened to speak up. They share some degree of responsibility. It is ordinary people who grow up to become authoritarian leaders or parts of the machine that perpetrates these massacres. It was ordinary people who fought back at great risk to their own lives, who provided shelter to the persecuted Jews, Roma, disabled and LGBT people, who resisted the regime in Nazi Germany and occupied Europe. It is ordinary people who have overturned corrupt regimes,

fought for change for themselves and others. It is ordinary people who are the victims of genocide and who are the survivors. Nothing sets victims apart from survivors other than some chance set of unique circumstances that allowed them to survive or unfortunately put them directly in harm's way.

Too many stories and names are lost to the passage of time, but all the seemingly small personal stories from those who experienced persecution or tried to resist, make one larger picture when they are pieced together. Those small pieces are meaningful—the stories of lives that were lived or stolen. They are just as important as the whole, and the whole is what we look to when we remind ourselves why we cannot be complacent and cannot allow history to repeat itself.

It is some of the lesser-known stories of ordinary people that I want to speak to today: two women who ended up in Rutherglen, in my constituency, at some point in their lives. Dorrieth Sim, who passed in 2012, was born Dorrieth Oppenheim in Kassel, Germany in 1931. Her early childhood was happy, comfortable and carefree. It was Kristallnacht, or night of the broken glass, in Kassel that marked the beginning of a difficult road for the young girl. Dorrieth was seven and a half when she boarded the Kindertransport and made her way to a new life in Scotland, having to leave her parents Hans and Trude behind. The only English she knew was "I have a handkerchief in my pocket."

Hans and Trude were deported to Auschwitz in October of 1944. They were never reunited with their daughter. She stayed in Edinburgh with her foster parents, until she married Andrew at 21. The couple lived in Rutherglen in their early marriage, as well as Dundee and Prestwick later. Dorrieth wrote a book in later life, titled "Handkerchief in my Pocket". It was very important to her that future generations of children understood what she, and so many children like her, had been through.

Rita Strassmann, later McNeill, was another Rutherglen resident who arrived in Scotland with the Kindertransport. She was born in 1930 in Hanover and was just nine when she was arrested by Nazis, alongside her mother. She was able to escape, with the help of her aunt, but unfortunately her mother was left behind. It was the last time Rita saw her. Years later she was given a small booklet—she forgets from where—that informed her of her mother's fate. She was shot as she was marched, with other victims, to Riga from the concentration camp she had been taken to. Rita said she did not do well at school. No doubt the trauma of leaving her mother behind, en route to a concentration camp, deeply affected her. She worked in a bank after school, and later as a receptionist for her husband's medical practice.

Rita and Dorrieth were friends. As adults, they both would go to meetings to connect with others who had come to Scotland on the Kindertransport. They both described feeling Scottish, but Rita said, "Still German blood in my veins, Jewish German blood in my veins." It is clear that those early traumatic experiences shaped them and can never be erased. They were two ordinary women who had experienced something so unthinkable and out of the ordinary to us here today.

I am sure many of us have ordinary men and women in our constituencies with a deeply personal connection to the holocaust or other campaigns of persecution. The men and women who fought for today's freedoms, while inspirational and brave, were ordinary people.

As ordinary people too, we must continue to uphold those values. We cannot allow the seeds of hatred to spread and grow. There will always be those who perpetrate hatred. Each one of us must take seriously our responsibility to call hatred out wherever we see it and show that we will not tolerate it.

3.55 pm

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I feel immensely privileged to be called to take part in what has been an outstanding debate this afternoon that has shown this House at its best. I particularly commend the contribution of my right hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart).

Before turning to the appalling events of the holocaust, I want to speak about another European genocide that took place in Europe in the 20th century: the holodomor. Ninety years ago, during the winter of 1932-33, the confiscation of crops led to the death of millions in the Soviet Union, mainly Ukrainian peasant farmers. It is hard to say how many Ukrainians died, but it was probably at least 7 million. The almost universal view of historians is that the famine was man-made, inflicted as a deliberate policy by Stalin to force Ukrainian farmers into collectivism. His regime wanted to break the resistance of Ukrainian identity and culture, which it viewed as a threat to Russian Soviet rule.

Entirely unrealistic quotas for agricultural production were set. When not achieved, all produce was confiscated, and mass starvation followed. At the height of the crisis, around 25,000 were dying every day. Bodies piled up at the roadside and at railway stations as people tried desperately to flee but never made it. With the return of Russian aggression towards Ukraine, surely now is the time for us to formally recognise the holodomor for what it was: an attempt at genocide directed against the Ukrainian people.

Turning to the holocaust, I want to talk about my constituent, Mala Tribich. She was born in 1930 in Poland. In 1939, her family were forced into a ghetto, but she and her cousin Idzia were taken in by a Christian family in another town. They lived in dangerous and vulnerable circumstances, constantly at risk of discovery. Idzia was moved to live with another family and was never seen again. Her death remains a mystery to this day. Back in the ghetto, Mala's family were living in increasingly appalling conditions, crammed in the corner of a room with many other families. Her mother and sister were taken away and imprisoned in a synagogue. They were brutalised, starved, shot at, and then taken away and murdered in nearby woods.

By this time, Mala was in the ghetto with her father and brother and had become caregiver to her five-year-old cousin, Hania. When the ghetto was liquidated in July 1943, the two children were put in line to board lorries going to concentration camps. Mala bravely asked one of the SS guards if she could return to the ghetto. Incredibly, he said yes, but as she turned to go back she was told that the permission to re-enter applied only to her, not to little Hania. Mala was faced with the agonising choice of either leaving this vulnerable little girl behind to certain death or staying with her, losing her family forever, and potentially losing her own life. In the end the guard relented, and they were both allowed back. The Nazis inflicted these appalling choices on millions of people during the holocaust.

Mala and Hania were in the ghetto for another year, until November 1944, when they were put into cattle trucks with no food or water and transported first to Ravensbrück concentration camp and then to Bergen-Belsen. They arrived to scenes of unspeakable horror, with bodies strewn around the camp and thousands dying of starvation and disease. Somehow, those two little girls survived and were liberated from Bergen-Belsen on 15 April 1945. Having gone through all that, Mala was still just 14 years old.

I feel that I just do not have the words to do justice to that story, but I wanted to tell it to the House today because I believe that one of the reasons the personal testimony of survivors such as Mala has so much power is that it reminds us of the individual people behind the horrific statistics—the ordinary people who, before the rise of the Nazis, were living such ordinary lives, just like us, with the same hopes and aspirations, no doubt the same anxieties and irritations, and the same strengths and weaknesses.

My 92-year-old constituent told her story to a gathering in Woodside Park synagogue at the weekend, as she has in hundreds of other settings over many years. She told it with incredible poise, dignity, courage and resilience. The gathering was hosted by the shul in partnership with the Barnet Multi Faith Forum, and people of all faiths and backgrounds were there to remember the holocaust and its victims, and to pledge to root out anti-Jewish racism wherever it emerges. That is a commitment I repeat to the House today, because we must never, ever let this appalling history repeat itself.

4.1 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for calling me to speak in this debate on Holocaust Memorial Day. Let me start by commending the right hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid) for introducing it—he set the scene very well and succinctly, with a focus on the issues—and all the right hon. and hon. Members who have made contributions straight from the heart. I have been moved by many of them.

I commend the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western) for his maiden speech. His words were well chosen, and they were the words of someone who will make good contributions in this House. I look forward to his speeches on housing or whatever it may be; I am quite sure that he will add much to our debates. I wish him well and we are very pleased that he is here.

I have always been a supporter and a friend of Israel—that is no secret. I was before I came here, when I was in the Northern Ireland Assembly, and now that I am here I am a supporter of the Friends of Israel. I unashamedly put that on the record.

I also commend the right hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart). His words, as always in this type of debate, were very pertinent. I understand why his soldiers followed him and why he could lead as he did. If I had been one of his soldiers, I would have followed him as well—I suspect we all would. I commend him for all that he does and for the service that he gave us in Northern Ireland. We recognise that he and others, gallant Members that they are, contributed much to the peace that we have in Northern Ireland. I thank him for that on the record.

The right hon. Member for Bromsgrove referred to how we are made in God's image. I believe that with all my heart. Whenever I speak as chair of the APPG for

[*Jim Shannon*]

international freedom of religion or belief, I speak equally for those with Christian faith, those with other faiths and those with no faith. That is what it is about, and that is what the right hon. Gentleman and others—including the hon. and gallant Member for Beckenham—referred to. It is really important that we recognise where we are.

I want to speak about ordinary people, which is the theme of this year's Holocaust Memorial Day. I think that is touching and very fitting. I want to illustrate it with a story from the youngest member of my staff, who just last weekend came to London with her boyfriend for a birthday present. They did a tour of Westminster through the tours office here and then they spent some four hours in the Imperial War Museum in Lambeth. The Imperial War Museum is not often mentioned, but it should be, and I want to try to illustrate that today.

The weekend with her boyfriend was, of course, always going to be something special for my young member of staff. I would not have been particularly aware of the Imperial War Museum—perhaps because, as I have said, it is not highlighted as often as it should be—but when she regaled us with what she did during that weekend away, she became fixated on the museum. She told us that while her boyfriend had been enamoured of the guns and tanks, as boys are, almost three hours of her time was spent in the section that commemorated the holocaust. Describing it to us in the office, which she did very eloquently and in great detail, she said that she had gone in expecting to see a focus on Anne Frank, but instead was struck by the mountains of, in her words, “ordinary people”. She took the time to read every single post, and to look up on her phone the accounts for which she wanted more background. She studied history at school, but she said that looking at these “ordinary people’s stories” had a greater impact on her than her history GCSE course.

What is most notable is the fact that visits to the Imperial War Museum are free, and so is the information that is so vital to our young people, in giving them a sense of the despicable nature of what history books cannot tell us in words alone. They are able to take in so many displays, each one telling vital individual stories that drive home, or give a glimpse of, the horror that was suffered by so many. For me, that has reinforced the importance of taking children to museums and showing them displays of this kind, to allow them to feel the repulsion and the revulsion and to understand exactly what the figure of 6 million—the 6 million who were murdered—means in an individual setting.

Earlier, I said to the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) that to get an idea of what that figure means, she could imagine walking from Stranraer to Orkney without meeting anyone. The population of Scotland is 5.6 million. It is like walking across Northern Ireland three times and a bit without seeing a single person. That encapsulates what it means to have 6 million people no longer here. It really hits home.

We must also underline the importance of those who said nothing and understand the role that compliance plays. Our young people need to understand that no man is an island, and that we all bear a responsibility to stand up for what is right against what is morally wrong.

In her succinct and powerful speech, the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) referred to the war in Ukraine. When I heard the girls in the office discussing it, some of them were a bit gung ho about us sending troops, while others said that we were doing what was right. One of them, however, said that she could not really take in the idea of her 17-year-old nephew having a gun in his hands. However, that is the reality of war. Good people must stand up and do the right thing, and for us ordinary people to do nothing can never be an option.

Many of my constituents, like those of other Members, have visited Auschwitz and come back incredibly moved and perhaps even a bit traumatised by what they have seen, but they have received the message of Auschwitz, which is, “It can never happen again.” One of my sons went there with his friends, and that was the visit that made the difference for them, as it did for my constituents who took the time to do the same.

When we think of films like “Schindler’s List” and other blockbusters, the human impact is clear to us, but some young people do not watch war films. We need to ensure that every child is educated, not just in the facts and figures, but in the individual stories that touch people’s hearts and change their outlook. I have said this before, but it bears repeating: we must continue to fund educational visits to Auschwitz, and also arrange visits to the Imperial War Museum here in London. It holds some treasures, but it also has a focus on history and on what we must make sure never happens again. There, people can see and touch the atrocity, and build the determination that it will never be repeated.

I have that determination, as, I think, has every other Member who has spoken today, but do our children have it? Do our grandchildren? If they do not, are we prepared as a Parliament to put our money where our mouth is and fund educational awareness for this world, and, in particular, this great nation of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

4.9 pm

Nicola Richards (West Bromwich East) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid) for securing this debate.

Nobel laureate and holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel famously said

“whoever listens to a witness becomes a witness”.

Seventy-eight years on from the liberation of the former Nazi extermination and concentrations camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau, as we gather here today to mark Holocaust Memorial Day, those words could not be more important.

As a society, we have taken the incredible work of organisations such as the Holocaust Educational Trust for granted. The trust and its incredible staff have worked day in and day out for the past 30 years to ensure that as many people as possible have the honour of being able to sit in awe and listen to a holocaust survivor tell their testimony. Today, through the Holocaust Educational Trust’s annual webcast, tens of thousands of schoolchildren from across the country logged on to hear the testimony of holocaust survivor Ruth Posner BEM.

It is sad but true that we are the last generations who will know the holocaust not as a historical period but as something that happened to someone we met or knew.

With holocaust survivors now in their 80s and 90s, we, the people who have heard their testimony, have become their witness. We must now carry the mantle of continuing their legacy.

If holocaust denial and distortion can thrive when there are survivors as proof, what will happen when there are none? If antisemitism and hatred can thrive even while survivors warn where it can lead, what will happen when there are none? And when individuals say that Jewish people should not have their own homeland, when survivors are still retelling how no other country would accept them, what will happen when there are none?

In the past month, we have seen the release of two shocking reports. First, two weeks ago, the Tuck report on antisemitism in the National Union of Students found that it was a hostile environment for Jewish students. I have heard stories from my Jewish staffer of what he and his friends experienced at NUS conferences, and it is truly shocking. Secondly, just last week, we received the campus antisemitism report from the Community Security Trust, which found that antisemitism at UK universities has risen by 22% to its highest recorded total. Put simply, Jewish students on UK campuses are receiving death threats and abuse while the National Union of Students, their supposed representative, invites an accused antisemitic rapper to its conferences. How can the Jewish community hope for a better future when this is what its children are having to put up with?

I pause to recognise the amazing work of the Community Security Trust and the Union of Jewish Students, which are on the ground at universities to protect and represent Jewish students. I also thank the Antisemitism Policy Trust and declare an interest as the co-chair of the APPG against antisemitism. Sadly, the work they do only becomes more important as time goes on.

I was recently at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and saw a Nazi-era antisemitic book that is currently on sale online. Just last year, we were reminded again that antisemitism is alive and kicking thanks to Kanye West, the now disgraced rapper turned Hitler fan. There is nothing cool, and certainly nothing acceptable, about that. I live in hope that, one day, he might realise that. He has more followers on social media than there are Jews in the world, which puts this debate starkly into context.

The theme of this year's Holocaust Memorial Day is ordinary people. It is strange to use the word "ordinary" in the same sentence as the word "holocaust." There is nothing ordinary about the unprecedented attempt to murder all European Jews and to extinguish their culture, history and traditions. This cannot be ordinary, yet the holocaust was only possible because ordinary people did not speak up when hatred was taking over.

It was ordinary people who met at the Wannsee conference to discuss the need for the final solution, which is the term given to the extermination of the Jewish population. It was ordinary people who rounded up the Jews of Europe and forced them into ghettos. It was ordinary people who drove the trains on their journey to the camps. It was ordinary people who thought of their work at death camps as just that—nothing more than work. They would finish their shift and go home to their families and children, who often lived just a few hundred metres away from the camp perimeter.

Most importantly, it was ordinary Jewish people who had their humanity stripped away for the crime of being Jewish.

As the late Rabbi Lord Sacks said:

"Jews were hated in Germany because they were rich and because they were poor, because they were capitalists and because they were communists, because they kept to themselves and because they infiltrated everywhere, because they believed in a primitive faith and because they were rootless cosmopolitans who believed nothing. Hitler believed that Jews were controlling both the United States and the Soviet Union. How could they be doing both? Because they were Jews."

I end this speech by paying tribute to Zigi Shipper BEM, who sadly passed away last week. I am proud to be, as Elie Wiesel put it, his "witness." I had the pleasure of meeting Zigi many times and I will never forget his charisma, strength and big smile, which he always had on display. I witnessed the eruption of applause when he finished delivering his testimony, having transported students in a school in London through time, painting a picture of the fragile child who was lucky to survive this all, not least the death march where he developed typhus. When he finished speaking, he was a legend, a mensch. He was one of the many capable of condensing the pain of those involved into a service to better the world. At the end, he was treated like a celebrity and he loved it. He high-fived all the students down the aisle of the hall on his way out, and those students will never forget it. I echo the words of his grandson, Darren Richman, who wrote:

"Shaping minds—in a very real sense—changing the world, and I have no doubt the world was a better place for having had Zigi in it."

May his memory be a blessing.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call our final Back-Bench speaker, Robin Walker.

4.16 pm

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is a great honour to speak in this debate, and I apologise to those Members whose speeches I may have missed, including the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western), who made his maiden speech. I congratulate him on that and look forward to reading it in *Hansard*. I was meeting a group of young people who have autism, and as we debate this issue of the holocaust it is striking to think that people we would now describe as neurodiverse were also victims of the holocaust.

As Chairman of the Select Committee on Education, I wanted to join so many Members who have spoken today, from so many parts of the House, in paying tribute to the work of the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust and the Holocaust Educational Trust, as they make a profound difference in our schools. The work they do in bringing the testimony of survivors directly to children in schools is vital in informing our understanding of one of the most terrible examples of human behaviour in history, but it is so much more than that; it inspires an understanding not just of history—my subject at school and university—but of poetry, literature, music and so much more that children can benefit from. The work they have done to make sure that the voices of that generation of survivors that we are sadly now losing are perpetuated and protected for the future is

[Mr Robin Walker]

essential, as we all recognise the importance of educating about the holocaust and dealing with the difficult issues it raises for the students of today.

The trips that those bodies have organised to take students directly to Auschwitz, to see for themselves the reality of the horror undertaken there, are also an important part of their work. In all our constituencies, up and down the country, events are taking place tomorrow that will bring together the pupils of today and the testimony of holocaust survivors, and civic and religious institutions. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid) said in his excellent opening speech, this is something that should matter to people of every religion and every community. It was fantastic to hear him speaking out in that way.

I wish to touch on a recent event we had in Worcester, which was a reminder that although the holocaust was a peak of the terrible antisemitism and mistreatment of Jewish people, it was not isolated in history as an incident of antisemitism, bias and appalling behaviour against them. We recently held an event to commemorate the expulsion of the Jews from Worcester in 13th-century England. We brought representatives of Jewish communities from across the midlands together in Worcester, at the site of the former Jewish ghetto, to unveil a plaque, and to hear a profound speech and an apology from the Bishop of Worcester for the role that the Church played in that incident. It is important to remember that context and the long history of antisemitism that built up to the terrible events of the holocaust.

Today there is a very small Jewish population in Worcester, but the lessons of the holocaust are relevant to everyone in my constituency. I am very proud that schools such as the King's School Worcester, RGS Worcester, Christopher Whitehead Language College and Sixth Form, and Nunnery Wood High School, will be holding holocaust memorial events and engaging in that event with our university, with civic dignitaries at the Guildhall in Worcester, just a few hundred yards from where that Jewish ghetto stood.

I very much look forward to hearing from Mindu Hornick tomorrow. She is a holocaust survivor who will be addressing that group. In paying tribute to the many profound speeches that we have heard from all parts of the House, I think it is very welcome that the Government have made the commitment about the holocaust education centre sitting at the heart of our democracy. That will benefit generations of schoolchildren in the years to come.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I just want to say to those on the Front Bench that the small number of people who are taking part in the holocaust memorial service in Portcullis House will not be able to be here for the wind-ups. I know that they will understand exceptionally why that is the case.

4.20 pm

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): Before I begin my speech, I wish to thank the right hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid) for the way he opened the debate, which set the scene for a day of powerful speeches, including the exceptionally good maiden speech from the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western).

It has not been comfortable listening to the speeches today. Hearing these other contributions has probably been challenging for all of us, but we do need to hear these things. We need to know and to remember exactly what happened. I am grateful to be able to stand here again today representing the SNP in this debate. I am grateful, too, for the support provided by the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust and the Holocaust Educational Trust, and to MPs for the work they do throughout the year, making sure that the lessons of the past remain at the forefront of our minds. That is ever more important as the years pass.

This year's theme of ordinary people should give us all pause for thought. We can all visualise these ordinary people—ordinary people living ordinary lives in ordinary places, until their world turned and suddenly they were snatched away and thrust into unimaginable horror. However, that did not happen overnight, and we have heard that very clearly today. These things creep up. There is a growing intolerance and a deliberate othering of groups until the tide has set. The uncomfortable truth that we need to confront is that these ordinary people were not only the victims of the holocaust; they were also the bystanders—the people who watched what was happening—and the people who carried out and facilitated these murderous acts of genocide.

Holocaust survivor and author Primo Levi said:

“Monsters exist, but they are too few in number to be truly dangerous. More dangerous are the common men, the functionaries ready to believe and to act without asking questions.”

That is what we need to guard most against, as that intolerance creeps forward. We need to be frank about that. There is a growing tide of intolerance, a growing enthusiasm for conspiracy and a growing denial.

We have heard today about the other genocides, which we must recognise and must remember. We also need to remember the plight of the Uyghur Muslims, who are so horrifically treated in China, and the Daesh genocide against the Yazidis, Christians and other minorities in Syria and Iraq.

I was fortunate to be at an excellent local event on Monday evening. I am privileged to live in a constituency where the majority of the Jewish population in Scotland lives, and our vibrant, diverse community in East Renfrewshire is far the better for it.

During a holocaust memorial event hosted by East Renfrewshire Council in Calderwood Lodge—the only Jewish school in Scotland, based on a joint campus with St Clare's Primary School, which means it is part of the only Jewish-Catholic joint campus in Europe—in that exceptional place, we heard from some exceptional young people, including the host, Kirsty Robson, who has worked very hard on holocaust remembrance since she was herself a pupil at Barrhead High not so long ago. We heard from current Barrhead High pupils, including Sol Duncan and Lily MacPherson. They are involved in the Lessons from Auschwitz project. We also heard from Samantha McKeown from Mearns Castle High School, who has been working with the Anne Frank Trust. All those young people were articulate, thoughtful and very clear about why we need to learn from the past.

We also heard from Gillian Field, one of the daughters of Henry and the late Ingrid Wuga, East Renfrewshire residents who have lived lives very far from ordinary.

After both arriving, separately, on the Kindertransport, they later fell in love and married, and they dedicated their retirement to talking to young people about their experience. The testimony of Henry and Ingrid Wuga has shaped many young lives all over Scotland, and their daughters Hilary and Gillian are now continuing that work, making sure that their testimony and lived memory are still spoken.

Clearly, neither the Wugas nor their daughters could by any estimation be described as ordinary, but the extraordinary efforts they make to share the reality of the holocaust really matter, and matter more and more with every year that passes. I cannot imagine how difficult it must be to tell the tale of what happened for someone who went through the holocaust. It is hard for us sometimes even to listen to those tales, but it is important that we make the effort to do so.

In my local area, this week is work experience week for S4 pupils. I am very fortunate to have had Charlie Henry-Newall, an S4 pupil at Williamwood High School, on placement with my team this week. Charlie was at that event with me and has also been my researcher for this debate; I place on record my sincere thanks to him for the insight and care with which he has performed that task. I also thank another young person who was at the event, a former St Ninian's High School pupil, Holly Edgar, who every year of her own volition writes an excellent blog post about holocaust remembrance for my website.

I would like to dwell on what I heard from someone else there that evening. Rabbi Moshe Rubin, the Senior Rabbi of Scotland, talked about a visit he had made to Auschwitz and the photographs he saw there—so many photographs, he told us, of ordinary people whose lives had been wiped out simply because of their identity. It was utterly devastating for us in the audience to hear from him that he looked at those photos wondering whether any of them were members of his family, who he knew had been murdered there, but then realised that he would just never know.

I visited Yad Vashem a number of years ago and saw pictures there of many victims of the holocaust; it was striking and stark, even with no family connection. It was actually quite difficult to look at the photographs, because there were so many of them, and they looked just like me and you and all the people we know. There were lovely little faces, young children with chubby cheeks whose lives had been snuffed out; young adults who should have had their lives in front of them; older people who had no chance whatsoever of surviving the horrors to come. The act of acknowledging and remembering the individual people, alongside recognising the incomprehensible number of lives lost, is really important. As well as the number, we must remember the individual.

I thought about that recently when a good friend of mine shared photos she had taken on a street in Holland during a visit. It showed brass cobbles called *Stolpersteine*, which means stumbling blocks, placed near entrances to paths. They are memorials to the people who lived there and were killed by the Nazis. This type of memorial is attributed to Gunter Demnig, who cited the Talmud saying that,

“a person is only forgotten when his or her name is forgotten”.

The names of the people remembered in my friend's photograph are Kaatje Engeland, Machiel de Brave, Leentje de Brave-Italiaander, Abraham van Leeuwen,

Esther Eva van Leeuwen-van Lier, Joseph Jules van Lier and Heintje van Lier-Buitenkant. They all deserve to be remembered.

I make no apology for concluding my speech by speaking once again this year about the life of the only Scot to be remembered as righteous among the nations. I was delighted to hear the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) speak so eloquently about Church of Scotland missionary Jane Haining. We could all do with listening to more contributions about Jane Haining and reflecting on the way she lived her life. Jane was a school matron in Budapest, as we have heard, and she refused to leave her charges, even though she had been repeatedly encouraged to do so. She knew the risks of her decision to stay there, but she stayed none the less. She said:

“If these children need me in days of sunshine, how much more do they need me in days of darkness?”

Jane Haining died at Auschwitz. She was a brave and principled woman; an ordinary woman who displayed extraordinary love and courage at the very worst of times. She deserves to be remembered, just as all those who were so cruelly murdered simply because of their identity must be remembered with love and as individuals. That is how we best halt creeping intolerance and hatred, and prevent it from happening again.

4.30 pm

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): It is an honour to speak for the Opposition in this important debate. Tomorrow, we will mark Holocaust Memorial Day and the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, when the full magnitude of the crimes committed by the Nazi regime were revealed to the world.

Holocaust Memorial Day commemorates the 6 million Jews murdered during the holocaust, alongside the millions of other people killed under Nazi persecution and during more recent genocides in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur. It is our intergenerational duty to tell future generations the truth about man's inhumanity to man, so that we can fight to prevent it from being repeated.

I congratulate the right hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid) on securing the debate and on his excellent leadership of it. I was particularly struck by his call for us, as policy makers, not just to reflect—as we have done in this excellent debate—but to do, by acting in the space of misinformation, fake news and the rising hate that we see in our communities. I hope he has seen during the debate, as I certainly have, that we have met his call to shine a light on the hatred we see today. There has been an extraordinary number of tremendous contributions. I will try to cover them all, but I will call on two in particular that illuminated the debate: the speech by my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) and that of the right hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart).

As we have heard, the theme of Holocaust Memorial Day this year is “ordinary people”, and there could not have been a more powerful or poignant introduction to such a debate than that of my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking, who exhorted us to keep those stories alive so that we can fight hate today. That must be right, and that idea subsequently coursed through the debate.

[Alex Norris]

The right hon. Member for Beckenham commanded the UN forces in Bosnia and, of course, played a leading role in Northern Ireland, so I stop and listen whenever he talks about human rights. I have bugged him personally to ask him different questions about his service. When he spoke today, it felt as if time stopped. It was a harrowing story—one that would be too much to ask anybody to retell or rethink, never mind speak about publicly—but it enriched the debate beyond imagination. We are so grateful that he was able and willing to do that.

On the theme of ordinary people, the other defining feature of the debate has been the extraordinary contributions that colleagues brought to life. I will name all the Members and their constituencies, because it is important to do so. The right hon. Members for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb), for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) and for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers); my hon. Friends the Members for West Ham (Ms Brown), for Bury South (Christian Wakeford) and for Stockport (Navendu Mishra); and the hon. Members for Meriden (Saqib Bhatti), for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) and for West Bromwich East (Nicola Richards) all mentioned stories connected to them, to their communities or to people who they have seen during their work as parliamentarians.

What I took from that is the extraordinary spread across all the nations and regions that make up our wonderful country. Those people came to our country from extraordinary suffering, enriched in their own ways, and kept those stories alive. As the hon. Member for West Bromwich East said, as they start to pass on, that is now our duty. My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) talked in the same vein about the Kindertransport, and about Eve Leadbeater, who came to Nottingham as a two-year-old on the Kindertransport. She spent her life in Nottingham as an educationalist improving opportunities for all our children there. She was a loved part of our community. She passed away last March.

I associate myself with the remarks from my hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson), and the hon. Members for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) and for Worcester (Mr Walker), about the work of the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust and the Holocaust Educational Trust. I hope that they have seen today's debate as an appropriate tribute for the work that they will do not just tomorrow, but on all the other days of the year.

I make special reference to my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western) and congratulate him on an excellent maiden speech. I have known him for a long time, not just because of our shared football and cricket preferences, but because he has been a brilliant council leader and someone I have admired for a long time. I cannot wait to see the impact that he makes in this place.

I will make a few points of my own. The numbers can overwhelm you: 6 million Jewish people murdered, more than a quarter of a million disabled people murdered, up to half a million Romani murdered, more than 1.5 million people in Cambodia murdered, and 1 million people in Rwanda murdered. As the hon. Member for

Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, those are overwhelming numbers, but each number is a real person: a mother, a father, a son or a daughter. They were people who loved and were loved. They would have been people who would have become their nation's Picasso or Byron; young people who did not yet know that they loved science but who would have made discoveries that would have transformed humanity; political leaders who would have fought for hope and inclusion; and people who would have started businesses that would have enriched the lives of thousands. All those lives and all that potential was taken away in the name of hate. The hon. Member for Meriden made that point well. It is our most profound responsibility that we remember them and that we honour their memory by each generation telling their story to the next.

That starts with our children. My hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols) gave a beautiful exposition of Exodus on that theme. I had the privilege of joining the year 9s of the Nottingham University Samworth Academy in Bilborough as they met Holocaust survivor Henri Obstfeld, who talked today's children through his experiences as a child. It was so powerful to see them engage with this wonderful man, to contrast what they heard from him with their own lives and to think about the world as they see it today. It gave me pause to reflect on my visit with friends to Dachau as an 18-year-old and contrast our freedoms as we travelled around Europe with the names and pictures of boys of a similar age who never had the same chances. The educational work that we see at NUSA Bilborough and across schools is a practical demonstration of what we mean by passing knowledge down the generations. I commend Mr Townsend, the teacher, and the school for taking part in the programme and wish them well for the Holocaust studies that they are undertaking over the next few days. We need that in every classroom in every school up and down the land. We also need it to be available to all of us.

I turn to the national Holocaust memorial and learning centre, which is a crucial way in which we can appropriately memorialise the Holocaust and cascade our knowledge down the generations. The project has been challenging to say the least, but I reiterate the commitment that I made in an urgent question on the matter in July on behalf of the Opposition and the commitment made yesterday and previously by my right hon. and learned Friend the Leader of the Opposition. We support the project wholeheartedly. We were encouraged and cheered to hear what the Prime Minister said yesterday during Prime Minister's questions about imminent legislation for the memorial. That is so welcome. We look forward to supporting that legislation when we see it. I hope that the Minister will say more about when we will see that.

I and hundreds upon hundreds of thousands of others have seen such work done well in this country already. Beth Shalom, the National Holocaust Centre and Museum in north Nottinghamshire, houses the country's only dedicated Holocaust museum. It was born of the Smith brothers—Stephen and my good friend James—who visited Yad Vashem some 30 years ago and identified the need to better understand, discuss and teach issues relating to the Holocaust in this country. From that idea and understanding sprung a whole museum and centre with permanent exhibitions, a learning space and beautiful memorial gardens. It is with great joy that I and, I think, colleagues read that funding from the Heritage Fund

alongside the Arts Council, the Pears Foundation and many other foundations and individuals will lead to a major redevelopment of that facility so that it can continue to meet the challenges of the current day in telling those stories of the past. I encourage all colleagues to visit and to urge their schools to either visit or engage with its online material. The remarkable Smith brothers also formed the Aegis Trust, which colleagues mentioned, in response to the crisis in Kosovo. They work all around the world to prevent genocide. It is with great pride that I can tell the House that their model in Nottinghamshire was used to develop the Kigali memorial centre, providing a place of remembrance and learning about that genocide. It has been visited by Presidents and Prime Ministers and is an important example of the work that we can do to tell the story as well as of Britain's place in the world.

When the other place debated the matter last week, it was said that it would be nice to think of this as a debate that we are having in the past tense, with antisemitism consigned to the dustbin of history; with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities facing no prejudice; and disabled people living without hate. But that simply is not the world that we live in. As colleagues have said, the Community Security Trust's findings were stark, with 786 antisemitic incidents across the UK in just the first half of 2022: the joint fifth highest it had ever recorded. In addition, there was a 22% increase in university-related incidents to a total of 150 in the last two years. I reflect with pain that we have seen that hate in the Labour party, and I restate our commitment to tearing it out by its roots.

We also see that hate crime against disabled people has increased by nearly 45% and that hate crime against Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities remains under-tackled and rarely understood in this country. As the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) said, we see these risks of genocide around the world, and as she put so powerfully, we must play our role in tackling that in any way we can. When we memorialise the holocaust, we talk about the past, but we feel the echoes in the present day. Tomorrow will be a solemn moment of remembrance, but it should also act as a call to action.

I will finish with my reflection on the theme of this year's Holocaust Memorial Day, "ordinary people". It is a reminder that while those who author murderous regimes are history's most evil people, their work is reliant on the mass participation of significant numbers of ordinary people—people who participate, people who turn a blind eye, people who share in the propaganda and people who stand by. That is, as Hannah Arendt said, the "banality of evil", and that is how such evil acts are committed by such seemingly ordinary people. It is important that our children and we as adults learn about this. I think about bystander training, because there are increasing levels of hate in our community. Having that bystander training means that people know what to do for the best. I still believe, as I know colleagues across the House do, in the fundamental goodness of people, especially our British people. They want to do the right thing, so we must support them by giving them the tools and resources to do so.

To conclude, this has been an outstanding debate: one about humanity's past, but that calls us to action in the future; one about sadness and grief, but also about the inspirational stories of defiance; and one that tells us about the worst in humanity but spurs in us the best.

4.41 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Felicity Buchan): It truly is an honour and I feel humbled to reply to this powerful and moving debate. I truly think that we have seen the Chamber at its best: serious, compassionate, collegiate and learning from the past, but looking to the future. I start by paying tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid) for securing this debate and for his powerful speech that set the right tone. I also pay tribute to him as the first Muslim to start this debate.

There have been so many powerful speeches. I feel bad at mentioning just a few, but I start by paying tribute to the maiden speech from the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western). It was an assured performance. I am delighted to hear that he has interests in housing, as I am one of the housing Ministers. I look forward to getting to know him in the future. There have been so many powerful testimonies about family members and constituents. I pay particular tribute to the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge), who gave such moving testimony about her own grandmother. She also talked about Frank Foley in the British embassy in Berlin, who bent the rules to get thousands of Jews out.

I pay tribute to the Father of the House, my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) who talked about his own extended family. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) who talked about the importance of upcoming Bills such as the boycott, divestment and sanctions Bill and the holocaust memorial Bill. The hon. Member for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols) gave a powerful speech, and I was struck by her words that we need to remember for the future. My right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) talked movingly about his staff member Nina Karsov, who works here on the estate. She was thrown from a train as a two-year-old on the way to Treblinka, somehow survived, but later was imprisoned for two years in communist Poland. If anything does, that shows that these tragic and dreadful events are not one-offs, but sadly happen again.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) gave an immensely powerful speech talking about his time as the United Nations commander in Bosnia, where he was witness to the genocide at Ahmići. He rightly said that ordinary people suffer, but they also carry out such atrocities.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) and the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) talked powerfully about Jane Haining, the only Scot to die in Auschwitz. Her devotion to the children under her care was truly remarkable. My hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Saqib Bhatti) talked about his constituent Paul Oppenheimer, an ordinary man with an extraordinary experience. I was struck by the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), who said how difficult it was to conceive of the numbers—6 million is a number, but it represents real people.

I was struck by the words of my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers), who talked about the enforced starvation of Ukrainians

[Felicity Buchan]

under Stalin in the Soviet Union. Many hon. Members talked about the importance of education, including my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker) and the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe). I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Nicola Richards), who talked powerfully about education. I was struck by her words,

“whoever listens to a witness becomes a witness”.

By joining and by contributing to this debate we are all playing our role in keeping the memory of the holocaust alive.

In the United Kingdom tomorrow, on Holocaust Memorial Day, we remember the 6 million Jewish men, women and children murdered during the holocaust. We remember hundreds of thousands of Roma and Sinti; the 250,000 disabled people who were murdered, and many more sterilised; the 10,000 to 15,000 men accused of homosexuality who were sent to concentration camps, and up to 40,000 more who were brutally mistreated in prison. We also remember the 1.5 million to 2 million murdered in Cambodia; the 8,000 Muslim men and boys murdered in Srebrenica; the 1 million Tutsi murdered in Rwanda; and the 100,000 to 400,000 men, women and children murdered in the ongoing conflict in Darfur, which the hon. Member for West Ham (Ms Brown) talked powerfully about.

As we have heard, the theme of this year’s Holocaust Memorial Day is “ordinary people”. Thankfully for all of us, there have been and are so many ordinary men and women willing to stand against hatred, and those who demonstrated extraordinary bravery in their efforts to protect and save Jews. Their selfless acts represent the best of humanity. Two women who epitomised that selflessness were Ida and Louise Cook. Between 1934 and 1939, these two women were regular visitors to the opera houses of Germany and Austria. But they also went there to save Jewish lives. They said,:

“The funny thing is we weren’t the James Bond type. We were just respectable Civil Service typists.”

When asked why they did it, they replied,

“because it was the right thing to do, nothing more, nothing less.”

There are countless other examples from many more genocides and tragedies. Those people are beacons of inspiration for us all. They should serve as a powerful reminder to everyone that people have choices. Unfortunately, just as there were people who showed the best of us, there were ordinary people who actively participated or were complicit. The choices that people make across the world today, tomorrow, next week and next month are the choices that will help us to live in a world without genocide. We would all like to think that we would have stood up as one of the “extraordinary”, but it is important to realise that we all have the capacity to look the other way.

I want to touch briefly on two topics, one of which is the UK holocaust memorial and learning centre, which the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) mentioned. I am delighted to say that the UK Government are committed to the creation of a new national memorial and that, at Prime Minister’s Question Time yesterday, the Prime Minister confirmed that the Government intend to bring forward legislation to remove the statutory

obstacle to the memorial being built in Victoria Tower Gardens. We will do that as soon as parliamentary time allows.

It would be remiss of me not to mention antisemitism in this debate. Antisemitism and hatred did not end with the defeat of Nazi Germany. We have heard that just last week, the Community Security Trust—the UK’s leading organisation monitoring antisemitism—published a report outlining a 22% increase in antisemitism on university campuses in 2020 to 2022 compared with the two years prior to that. That is truly unacceptable.

I pay tribute to the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust and its CEO, Olivia Marks-Woldman, to the Holocaust Educational Trust and its CEO, Karen Pollock, and to their teams. I should add that the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, of which the UK was a founding member, conducts vital work to strengthen, advance and promote holocaust education and remembrance. The Government are proud to have backed the IHRA’s working definition of holocaust denial and distortion in 2013, its working definition of antisemitism in 2016 and, more recently, its working definition of anti-Roma racism in 2020. The UK has the honour of chairing the IHRA next year, and I thank those working hard behind the scenes to ensure its success.

Sir Julian Lewis: Given that the Minister mentioned antisemitism in universities, may I draw her attention and the attention of the House to the excellent work of the Council for At-Risk Academics, which was founded in 1933 to rescue eminent academics who were being barred from German universities and has functioned ever since? Tomorrow, I hope to meet a young female academic who has been enabled to come to the University of Southampton by CARA, doing the work that it started back then. A lot of good work goes on in universities, including more than 100 of them affiliated to CARA that fund CARA fellowships to enable rescued people to continue with their academic career and one day, hopefully, go back to a free Afghanistan, among other places.

Felicity Buchan: I thank my right hon. Friend for updating the House on that important work.

Charlotte Nichols: I am grateful for some of the actions being taken by His Majesty’s Government that the Minister has outlined, but I want to push her on one more. In 1988 the Conservative Government set up the Hetherington inquiry, which led to the War Crimes Act 1991. That meant that for the first time, Nazi war criminals living in the UK could be prosecuted for war crimes, but those prosecutions have rarely taken place. I gave evidence in my speech of cases where the police, the CPS and British intelligence services covered up Nazi war criminals living in the UK. Could the Minister commit to making representations to His Majesty’s Government for an inquiry into this, as called for by the Board of Deputies, as one of the actions to take away from today, so that we can learn from this and ensure it never happens again?

Felicity Buchan: I thank the hon. Lady for her contribution. In the interest of giving my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove some time, I suggest that we sit down and talk about that following the debate.

We cannot allow one of the darkest chapters in history to be forgotten. I am reminded of the words of the Spanish philosopher George Santayana, who said in 1905:

“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Before I call Sajid Javid, may I say what an honour it is to have chaired this debate? I thank all hon. Members who have taken part. A few years ago, I went to Poland to visit Auschwitz. I cannot hear the haunting but brilliant theme music to “Schindler’s List” without reflecting on that visit and the possessions of those who had their lives brutally cut short in that concentration camp by acts of extraordinary evil. We remember them on Holocaust Memorial Day today, and we remember the extraordinary acts of courage of people who helped to defeat that regime and of people today who suffer at the hands of other rotten regimes around the world.

4.55 pm

Sajid Javid: I thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for your powerful words. I also thank my hon. Friend the Minister for her words on behalf of the Government about their continued strong commitment to fighting prejudice of all kinds, and especially for confirming to the House the desire to bring forward a holocaust memorial Bill as soon as possible. I thank the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) for his contribution. He showed, once again, that the whole House is united on the importance of what we have discussed today—of remembering the holocaust and subsequent genocides, and of learning from them.

I thank all right hon. and hon. Members from every party and both sides of the House who have contributed today; we have truly shown the House at its best, with everyone united in calling for an even stronger fight against prejudice and hatred. In particular, I congratulate the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western) on his excellent maiden speech, which was one of the best that I have heard. It was delivered with real confidence and he spoke eloquently about his desire to fight hatred and prejudice. I wish him all the very best in the House.

Clearly reflected in all hon. Members’ contributions was the theme set by the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust: the role of ordinary people in the holocaust and subsequent genocides. The 6 million people murdered

in the holocaust and the millions murdered in subsequent genocides were ordinary people, but many of the people who facilitated and perpetrated those murders were also ordinary people who were somehow corrupted. We were reminded by hon. Members that that could happen again if we do not do everything we can to fight it.

Many hon. Members also rightly referred to the extraordinary people—the survivors—many of whom are thankfully still in our midst. As was said, however, with the passing of each survivor, we can see that the responsibility on all of us in this House grows. Having listened to this excellent debate, however, I am very hopeful for the future.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I congratulate the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western). Although I did not hear his speech, it was clearly brilliant, given the tributes that he has received.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Holocaust Memorial Day.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. After the abominable Windrush scandal, in which black Britons were detained, deported, denied healthcare, denied housing and denied education, successive Prime Ministers and Home Secretaries came to this House and said they would accept in full the recommendations of Wendy Williams’s inquiry into the scandal and that they would compensate the victims.

This morning, from a written statement slipped out quietly, this House finds out that in fact only half the compensation has been made and that Windrush recommendations have been dropped. This tramples on the hopes of the Windrush generation and anyone who believes in our shared multicultural future. Have you had any indication at all that the Home Secretary expects to come to this House and make a statement in full about why she has now decided to deny the hopes of the Windrush generation?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank Mr Lammy for his point of order and for giving me advance notice of it. As he knows, the next business I am going to take is the Adjournment of the House, so there will be no statement today and the House is not sitting tomorrow. However, I do ask that the Treasury Whip on duty ensures that Home Office Ministers are made absolutely aware of the point of order he has made.

Midlands Metro Extension

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Joy Morrissey.)

5.1 pm

Shaun Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Con): It is a pleasure to bring this matter to the Floor of the House. I will start in perhaps a different way by paying tribute to the Minister on the Treasury Bench. He and I have known each other for some three years, since we were elected together. People often say in this place that it is not a meritocracy and that it is who you know that gets you where you are, but my hon. Friend is certainly one of those who works incredibly hard. I would say that he is probably one of the hardest working Ministers we have, so I just want to pay tribute to him in my opening remarks.

Now I have buttered up the Minister, I will proceed to talk about what is a really important and vital infrastructure development for my communities in Tipton and Wednesbury and within the wider Black Country. The case for the metro is known, but I want to reiterate it. When we look at the return on spend, according to the 2017 review, for every £1 invested in the metro, we receive from £1.37 to £2.48 back into the local economy.

The metro forms an important part of the broader development strategy for the Black Country, and the Black Country core strategy has identified allocated sites, such as the DY5 enterprise zone, and the possibility of developing high-quality housing as well as commercial floorspace over a 25-year period. It has also identified, as part of the Black Country garden city project and innovation zones, an opportunity for some 45,000 new houses over a 10-year period, with continued investment as a result of the metro. We need high-quality homes and housing, and the metro extension between Wednesbury and Brierley Hill—the part of the extension on which my comments will focus—has the potential to unlock and leverage some £6 billion of investment, particularly in high-quality homes and housing.

The scheme is intrinsically linked to the Merry Hill masterplan to ensure that the Merry Hill site and the broader Brierley Hill area continue to be developed with some 3,000 homes and 300,000 square metres of commercial opportunities. That is all part of what was originally announced in the 2017 plan. We know that for the communities in Tipton and Wednesbury, and of course in Brierley Hill, which is represented in so sterling a way by my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood), there is the potential, if we get this right, to unlock proper investment. My hon. Friend is a real champion for Brierley Hill—if anyone needs any information about it, they should speak to him, because he is the master of everything to do with Brierley Hill.

There is also an infrastructure case, and I will talk about the comparisons with bus journey times from areas in my constituency to Bull Street, which is one of the main termini in Birmingham city centre for the metro. I will give the Minister some examples on the basis of the proposed tram stops. Currently, a bus from the proposed Great Bridge tram stop takes 66 minutes, but with the new metro extension it would take 29 minutes to make the equivalent journey. Equally, from Horseley Road, also in Tipton, and Dudley Port, 71 and 72 minutes have been cut to 31 and 33 minutes respectively.

For public transport users, this is a vital project that will unlock our tourist attractions in the Black Country. Everyone knows about the fantastic Dudley zoo. Everyone from the west midlands has been to Dudley zoo, or the Black Country Living Museum, which has the best chips going. Its fish and chip shop is absolutely incredible, with chips fried in proper beef dripping. I honestly suggest that Members go along for our fantastic Black Country battered chips.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): What about the fish?

Shaun Bailey: And fish as well, as my right hon. Friend points out.

If we get this right, it will unlock a real opportunity to see the best of the Black Country and galvanise our communities. Whether people love it or loathe it, HS2 is a key part of the broader infrastructure journey for the west midlands. The metro extension from Wednesbury to Brierley Hill—should it be completed—will allow communities in the Black Country to access that infrastructure, with routes through to Curzon Street and on to the HS2 line. That means that my constituents in the Black Country and Sandwell, as well as those in Dudley, will have access to what is being billed as one of the key parts of our infrastructure journey—an infrastructure revolution, particularly for communities in the west midlands.

We must also look at the jobs case, with a predicted 393 temporary construction jobs on site each year across the proposed construction period, an estimated total of between 2,000 and 5,000 new jobs, and an increase in gross value added of between £0.7 billion and £1.5 billion. Clearly that case has been made. It has been made powerfully and endorsed by the West Midlands Combined Authority, which is completely behind the project and understands its importance to the region.

We must ensure that delivery happens, and I must highlight some concerns about that. The current Wednesbury to Brierley Hill track cost £41 million per kilometre to construct. The WMCA reported last year that the cost of the six to eight mile track has gone up from £448 million to £550 million, and we currently have a £290 million shortfall. Infrastructure costs money—we know that. There is a lot I could do with £448 million. I could have 20 lovely levelling-up funds, for example, in my towns. But we must ensure that when money like that is on the table, we see the delivery. There is so much contingent on this line of the metro coming online that we must ensure that it happens.

There is frustration within my communities about the delays and the uncertainty around the extension. My community knows that this project is vital to unlock the untapped potential of the Black Country. I am a loyal member of my party, of course, but my loyalties are not to the combined authority, a Mayor, or anyone in particular; they are to the communities of the Black Country, and to Tipton and Wednesbury in particular. Those communities want this project to be done, but a critical analysis of where we are with it is really important. My constituents are paying for the delays to it through increased congestion on their roads and increased difficulty getting around—I will highlight that point in a bit more detail in a moment.

I support the broader vision of this project, and when the Mayor of the West Midlands calls for investment zones on the Wednesbury to Brierley Hill line, I support

that call 100%. He is absolutely right. The Mayor understands that although the metro extension is one part of that, there has to be secondary investment as well. There has to be an offering for people to use the line from Wednesbury to Brierley Hill, and to want to get on it, and that means vibrant local economies in areas along the line in Wednesbury, Tipton, Brierley Hill and Dudley.

I pay tribute to the Conservative administration in Dudley, who have done a fantastic job over the years in banging the drum for that borough and securing investment into their towns. If we could replicate that in Sandwell, gosh only knows what we could do, but we have a bit of catching up to do. We finally have councillors on Sandwell Council, which is positive after years of not having any. The truth is that the potential of the extension is there to be unlocked, but delivery needs to happen.

Turning to the broader need for investment in our infrastructure, the point I want to make to my hon. Friend the Minister is that while the metro is obviously a key part of our infrastructure journey in the Black Country—pardon the pun—I do not want him to forget the other key components. Some 70.4% of my constituents drive. I have been making quite a lot of noise—as he knows, because I keep collaring him about it—about an area in my constituency called Great Bridge and a roundabout we call Great Bridge island. There are some lovely lions on the island. It is congested to the point where, frankly, someone is going to get killed. It comes off the A41 expressway from West Bromwich from a dual carriageway to a single-track road, and then extends up to Horseley Heath and Burnt Tree. The carnage on that road at peak times is ridiculous. My office is based in Great Bridge and I live about a mile directly up the road. At peak time, that journey can take me 40 minutes because of the congestion on the roundabout.

These may sound like parochial issues, but they are the issues that my community in Tipton care about. They cannot pick their kids up on time. They cannot get to work easily. We have many fantastic manufacturing exporting businesses, but this is starting to impact on how they get their goods out. It may sound like a parochial, get-a-petition-up local issue, but the broader economic impacts are there to be seen.

I need to make this point, too: the metro extension will not eradicate congestion on the roads. Anyone who suggests that is not being up front. It will not do that and nor should it be sold like that, because that is not the point of the metro extension. It will not do that when there is such a large number of people in my constituency who use their cars. We need to ensure that alongside the metro, there is a real plan for our roads in the Black Country. The number of A roads in my constituency is significant and they are in areas one would not expect them to be in—for example, off residential areas and near schools. We therefore need to ensure that alongside the metro—running in tandem with it, or parallel to it—is an effective roads strategy and investment in the Black Country. My hon. Friend the Minister was in Wednesbury today. Unfortunately, I was unable to join him, but I know he will visit Great Bridge and the island at some point. He might even stand on the island, Mr Deputy Speaker—you never know what delights we may have for my hon. Friend. When he does come to Tipton, he will see for himself the impact.

Alongside the metro extension, there are what I would call secondary investment needs—for example, the investment zone promised in the autumn, although I know we have not heard much about that. Whatever form that takes, it is really important that we have some sort of contingent secondary investment alongside the metro extension to Brierley Hill. I can think of some examples from the autumn: for example, the redevelopment of Wednesbury centre and the fight that continues to redevelop Tipton shopping centre. Many people in Tipton remember what Owen Street was like back in the day, when you could literally get anything you wanted. It is getting back to where it needs to be, but it needs a push, and hopefully the metro extension can do that. Great Bridge is a fantastic town and there is a fantastic high street in Tipton, but investment is needed to lift up the façade. Again, the metro will hopefully do that. Dudley Port and the Rattlechain and Coneygre road sites provide employment and jobs, leveraging our fantastic industrial infrastructure in the Black Country.

We need to ensure that there is a long-term operational model for the metro. I will be honest that I have been disappointed in the metro over the past 12 months. We have had cracks on the fleet, proposed strikes and other issues. Of course—we have to be up front with ourselves—the metro is quite heavily subsidised by the Government. It is absolutely vital that Midland Metro Ltd, which runs the metro, ensures there is operational delivery that works. I have been comforted somewhat, particularly with the issues with cracks on the fleet, that it acts quickly, but that should not be happening multiple times.

I also have to say that their engagement with me was somewhat lacking, until I had to have a bit of a moment, and then I finally got someone to talk to me. That is not good enough, and it trickles down from the combined authority too. It is vital that in our communities we are all joined up, and I find that sometimes with the project that is just not happening. We need to ensure that we have an operational model for the metro that works and focuses on offering a great service.

I have polled my constituents about their thoughts on the metro, and there is real affection for it. They value the fantastic customer service they receive from operatives on the metro, such as the conductors and drivers. I met some fantastic individuals when I visited the midlands metro depot in Wednesbury in my constituency who are really passionate about serving the community.

It is fantastic that Midland Metro employs roughly 80% of its staff from the Black Country, but if there is to be long-term sustainability moving forward, we must ensure that Midland Metro's operational model works and is commercially viable. That is the only way. It requires all stakeholders to be brought in and to communicate with one another. As I say, it is vital that the combined authority and Transport for West Midlands understand that too, so that we can move away from a model that sees quite heavy subsidies to the metro.

The broader point about transport infrastructure feeds quite well into the current dialogue around devolution. This is obviously a matter devolved to the West Midlands Combined Authority, and we have seen the advent of trailblazer devolution deals. Our Mayor has said much about the need for fiscal freedoms for combined authorities and the end of what he has termed the “begging bowl culture”. I actually agree with the Mayor on that. I think it is a sensible approach, but that perhaps there is a middle ground.

[Shaun Bailey]

There will always be projects, particularly infrastructure projects such as the metro extension, where a degree of bidding and Government support is still needed, because those are massive projects. The freedom to be a bit more agile is very important, particularly when it comes something like the metro extension. However, with fiscal freedom comes fiscal accountability. On the delivery of such projects, if fiscal freedom is going to come, the combined authority needs to accept that it is accountable when the delivery does not match.

The truth is that the metro still offers a great opportunity, more so because the project itself is ingrained now into the regeneration story of the Black Country. It cannot stand alone though; we need to ensure that other investments are covered. I have harassed my hon. Friend the Minister about needing a roads plan for the Black Country. I fully appreciate that that is a devolved matter, but I also know that the Minister is doing fantastic work on our roads. He is the leading light in his Department on these issues. I can see him furiously agreeing with me.

There needs to be a roads strategy for the people who use our roads and want to collect their kids from school or go to work and not spend 40 minutes trying to travel a mile. There needs to be an understanding as to how we can truly leverage this to maximise secondary investment. That means investment in our town centres. I appreciate that that is not in the Minister's portfolio, but I think it is none the less pertinent to the debate.

We absolutely need investment in areas such as Tipton and Wednesbury. That will ensure that once again there is a Black Country-wide strategy on this line and that we maximise the opportunities there. We also need an operational model that sees actual profits from the metro itself for long-term sustainability. That requires all stakeholders to come together. It requires the top of the chain to engage more effectively with stakeholders on this and to understand that we all have a role to play. We also have to scale our ambition and realise that the metro extension is by no means a panacea for the infrastructure challenges that we have in the Black Country today. We all know that.

I appreciate that many of these matters are devolved and that my hon. Friend the Minister really just oversees delivery, but I want to make sure of a number of things. First, will he guarantee that he will come and see the real capital of the Black Country, namely Tipton, to ensure that he understands the need to press on devolved administrations the importance of having real sub-regional strategies? We build these combined authorities, which is great, but there are sub-regions within them that have their own acute needs. Will he ensure that, as we continue to devolve further power and give further funding and resource to this project, it is scrutinised effectively? And will he instil with his colleagues, particularly in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, the need, where there are large infrastructure projects, to ensure that secondary investment runs parallel to them?

As I said in my maiden speech what seems like a long time ago—I think it was actually this month three years ago—my communities in Tipton and Wednesbury spent 50 years being forgotten. I made them a promise that I would ensure that their voice was always heard in this place and that they were never forgotten again. The delivery of this project sends a message to those

communities that they have not been forgotten, that they are a priority and that we realise, in this place and in the combined authority, that there is opportunity in the Black Country that can be unleashed. Delivery so far has been wanting. We have a chance, as does the combined authority, to ensure that we get through and deliver the project and that we unlock the potential of the beating heart of this country, the Black Country—as far as I am concerned, Mr Deputy Speaker, the best part of the United Kingdom.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): After the Ribble valley.

5.21 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Richard Holden): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West (Shaun Bailey) for securing this fantastic Adjournment debate. It has come at a particularly appropriate moment as I was in the west midlands just earlier today. I know that this is a vital project for him and for my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood), as well as for other Members in the region. I actually visited the Black Country Living Museum, but I have never been to the zoo, so I hope my hon. Friend might be able to take me there at some point.

I met Andy Street today, and I mentioned this and other projects to him. As Minister for roads and local transport, I am always keen to get out and about, and I pledge to visit my hon. Friend's constituency in the near future. He was very kind in his opening comments, and I pay tribute to him for the work he has done. I can tell the House that West Bromwich West may have been forgotten for 50 years under previous Members of Parliament, but it is now one of the few places I hear about in this House.

The Government are wholeheartedly committed to delivering on their vision of levelling up all areas of our country, not least my hon. Friend's constituency and the broader west midlands, ensuring that we have a transport network that caters for all users, helps to drive economic prosperity and minimises environmental impacts as far as possible. Responsibility for much of the transport connectivity in the west midlands, including the metro services, rests with the West Midlands Combined Authority and Andy Street, the region's metro Mayor. Our drive to create mayoral combined authorities has been key to joining up transport, economic development, housing and planning in our largest city regions, and empowering areas to deliver their plans for sustainable economic growth. I was glad that my hon. Friend mentioned that comprehensively in his speech, as it is his vision too.

The west midlands has an ambitious metro programme, and the Government have provided significant funding already. As part of the transforming cities fund, my Department agreed a settlement of £321.5 million for the west midlands. The region allocated £207 million of that funding to the extension of the metro, which is very important for the whole Black Country—it is an issue that my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley South has mentioned to me too. I recognise the importance of the project in enhancing transport connectivity in the constituencies of several of my hon. Friends and the wider region, and welcome the current plans to open the first phase of the scheme to passengers within the next couple of years.

My Department is keen to work with Mayor Street to understand the funding challenges involved in this scheme, and to identify potential solutions. The Government's funding support for the expansion of West Midlands Metro has not been limited to the Wednesbury to Brierley Hill scheme, but has included investment in a number of other key projects, and we will continue to work with the Mayor on those as well. West Midlands Combined Authority is currently exploring opportunities with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to make use of an in-year capital investment to fund strategically important projects, aligned with levelling up. The region's metro extension programme is among the projects under consideration, and I understand that a funding decision is expected imminently. My hon. Friend should definitely contact my colleagues in that Department as well. I shall also seek the views of my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley South, the oracle of Brierley Hill, on this matter.

I recognise the role that trams and metros play in our largest towns and cities, helping people to access jobs, education, healthcare and society more widely, which is why we supported our trams and metros throughout the pandemic, when the Government provided more than £250 million for the light rail system. That funding helped to keep services running and enabled key workers to get to work, and West Midlands Metro received over £13 million of it.

England's largest city regions, including the west midlands, are a key priority of levelling up and driving growth and productivity. Our ambition is for every region to have at least one globally competitive city at its heart. That is why we are investing £5.7 billion in transport networks through the city region sustainable transport settlements. We have agreed a five-year funding settlement from 2022, and I look forward to seeing all the transformational projects that it will bring about, particularly in the west midlands.

More than £1 billion is going to the west midlands. My hon. Friend spoke about enhancements to the metro, but, as he also mentioned, this is not just about the metro, although the metro is a part of it. Schemes proposed in the region include an upgrade of the depot at Wednesbury, which I understand the Mayor visited earlier today, and the integrated hub at Dudley Port, which I know is vital to my hon. Friend.

This investment programme represents the principal transport funding for eligible authorities to invest in their local priorities, and Mayors are responsible to their communities for delivering the agreed outcomes. We recognise that there will always be challenges, but I know that my hon. Friend will continue to work with me, and with local representatives, to address them. We in the Department are always willing to be flexible, while retaining—this was an important point made by my hon. Friend—the degree of transparency and oversight that must be maintained at all times to ensure that public money is always well spent.

I agree that the extension of the metro is vital for the west midlands and my hon. Friend's constituency. West Bromwich West could not have a more foot-slogging, hard-working, campaigning local Member of Parliament. He has addressed me regularly about these issues: he grabs me in the Tea Room, he corresponds with me by email and in person, and he collars me in the Division Lobbies. He really is battling for his constituency, and I wish him the very best of luck in getting more councillors of his ilk elected in Sandwell in the coming months.

My Department has provided significant funds to support metro infrastructure in my hon. Friend's region, and is committed to investing in wider improvements to its transport network over the coming years. I look forward to working with him to deliver for the people of Tipton, Wednesbury and beyond. There are acute transport needs there, and this is not a panacea, but it will be a big help. I want to go on working with West Midlands Combined Authority, and also holding its feet to the fire. With financial freedom comes financial responsibility: that important point was made by my hon. Friend.

My door is always open to my hon. Friend if he ever wants to go on pressing the case for his region and his constituents. Transport and regeneration go hand in hand. I hope that we can get this major scheme—which is important to the region, but also to the wider country—over the line, working together: my hon. Friend and me, Mayor Street, the councillors of Dudley and Sandwell, and my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley South and other Members across the region.

Question put and agreed to.

5.29 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 26 January 2023

[MR VIRENDRA SHARMA *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

International Day of Education

1.30 pm

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the International Day of Education.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. It is a huge honour to open this debate to recognise the importance of the International Day of Education, a day that is dedicated to raising the importance of education for all. As the UN Secretary-General said this week,

“education is a fundamental human right and the bedrock of societies”.

In my Chelmsford constituency, the vast majority of children and young people can access excellent education. In fact, in the Chelmsford district, 94% of our schools are graded good or outstanding by Ofsted. That is well above the England average, which is also high at 89%. Essex children outperform the national average in key areas such as early reading. Enriching out-of-school activities can also enhance educational attainment. During the school holidays, I am delighted that Chelmsford children from more disadvantaged backgrounds can also access enriching activities through the holiday activities and food programme, which I am deeply proud to have set up during my time as Children’s Minister.

However, during the pandemic, we saw so starkly in our country that when children cannot access school, their education suffers, as does their mental wellbeing. It is therefore good news that, on the whole, education for the children of Chelmsford and elsewhere across the country has now returned to what we consider normal, but that is not the case for so many children in other parts of the world. Currently, an estimated 222 million children are in need of urgent educational support across regions affected by emergencies and protracted crises. Some 78 million children are not in school or receiving any form of education. That figure of 222 million is an increase from 75 million in 2016.

The educational gulf is greatest in the world’s poorest countries. World Bank research from back in 2019 showed that pre-pandemic, 90% of children in low-income countries could not read proficiently. Education Cannot Wait’s report from last June reminds us that pre-covid, only 9% of crisis-affected early grade children achieved minimum proficiency in maths, and only 15% in reading, yet maths and reading are the vital building blocks on which all education is founded.

The covid pandemic further widened educational disparities, and girls are disproportionately affected. Nearly two thirds of the figure for global illiteracy is made up of women. The Malala Fund estimates that 130 million girls are out of school today. However, when

girls are educated, it strengthens economies and creates jobs. World Bank research shows that, on average, women with secondary school education earn almost twice as much as those with no education at all.

Educated girls tend to be healthier citizens who raise healthier families. A girl who has been educated is much more likely to ensure that her children are vaccinated, she is less likely to marry young or contract HIV, and she is more likely to have healthy, educated children. Each additional year of school that a girl completes cuts infant mortality and child marriage rates. Furthermore, when girls are educated, communities are more stable and can recover faster from conflict.

Investing in girls’ education is good for our planet. The Brookings Institution calls secondary schooling for girls the most cost-effective and best investment against climate change. Research also suggests that girls’ education reduces a country’s vulnerability to natural disasters. Save the Children estimates that universal secondary education for girls could avert 50 million child marriages by 2030.

This year, on the International Day of Education, we have been thinking particularly of the 3 million girls in Afghanistan who were previously in education but are now out of school, because the Taliban will not allow girls to attend secondary school or university. The recent ban on female aid workers will mean that even more Afghan girls are denied their right to education, as the Taliban insist that girls can be taught only by female teachers. That will mean that yet more Afghan girls face forced marriages and poverty. I am therefore concerned to hear from Save the Children that the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office is considering ending its “Supporting Afghanistan’s Basic Services” programme, which provides health, education, WASH—water, sanitation and hygiene—and nutrition to around 300,000 people. We must not pull the rug out from under the women and girls of Afghanistan.

We know that in many developing countries, girls face extra barriers in accessing education. During my year as an FCDO Minister, I travelled to 15 African countries. So many girls told me at first hand about the challenges that they face: the fear of violence, including sexual violence, on long walks to school; the lack of water and sanitation, which can make it impossible for girls to attend school when they have their period; and the constraints on family finances, which so often mean that any money that can be scraped together for school fees is reserved for sons.

However, I also heard from these girls their determination to learn. I met girls who dreamt of becoming doctors, teachers and even pilots. I also saw the many projects that the UK has invested in to help girls to overcome these barriers. Girls told me about the mentoring project in Malawi, where young women who have completed their secondary education give advice to other girls and help them through their own school experience. I saw the joy on girls’ faces when I opened a clean water well and lavatories in Lesotho. I remember the seriousness of the young woman in Sierra Leone who explained how our project to reduce violence had completely changed the culture of her school, ensuring that girls could learn without fear. And the whole community—thousands of people—came together to celebrate the launch of the Shule Bora programme in Tanzania. That programme has a special emphasis on girls, children

[Vicky Ford]

living with disabilities and those living in the most deprived areas. They came to celebrate because they knew what we know: when one focuses on helping the most marginalised girl to access education, every child is helped.

We should all be very proud of the UK's track record in supporting education in developing countries, and especially, in supporting girls' education. We have championed the campaign for 12 years of education for every girl. Each year, we host the Education World Forum, with delegates coming to London from across the world to discuss how to learn from one another and how to improve education standards in their countries.

During the pandemic, the UK co-hosted the Global Partnership for Education summit, raising \$4 billion for education in some of the world's poorest countries; our pledge was £430 million. During our leadership of the G7, the world's richest countries committed to getting 40 million more girls into school and 20 million more girls reading by the age of 10, with all that to be done by 2026.

Girls who are not in school do not have a voice of their own, so it is vital that the UK continues to lead from the front on girls' education and to use our voice for them. I urge the Minister to make sure that all FCDO Ministers—including the Minister with responsibility for development, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell)—continue to champion that cause. We need to champion it at the World Bank development meetings this spring, at the meetings of the UN's Commission on the Status of Women in New York in March and at other international fora. I also urge the Minister to work with other FCDO Ministers to publish, with urgency, the long-awaited FCDO women and girls strategy.

The UK is also a co-founding member of Education Cannot Wait. Its recent analysis indicates that 84% of out-of-school crisis-impacted children live in areas with protracted crises. The vast majority of those are in countries specifically targeted through ECW's investments, including Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Mali, Nigeria, Pakistan, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan and Yemen. The war in Ukraine is pushing even more children out of school, with recent estimates—according to UNICEF's report of 17 January—indicating that the conflict has impacted more than 5 million school-age children.

The FCDO tells me that ECW is already delivering quality education to over 7 million children across more than 30 crisis-affected countries. We will not reach the target that we have committed to of getting 40 million more girls into school without the work of ECW. All across the world, funding needs are growing due to conflict, climate change and the pandemic. Across UN-led humanitarian appeals, the education sector was funded at just 22% of what it needed in 2021—that is half what was achieved in 2018.

Next month, ECW will hold its high-level financing conference. If we are to help the 222 million children and young people to receive the education that they deserve—to unlock the potential of the world's children—we must unlock the financial resources to make it happen. Governments, the private sector, philanthropic foundations and individual donors need to work together to find the resources. I know that our official development

assistance budgets are tight—very tight—but UK leadership is key. If we step away from the promises that we have made to the children of the world, to the girls of the world, other donors may also step back and reduce or delay their investments.

Children across the world get just one chance at their education; they cannot wait. I therefore urge the Minister and the FCDO to dig deep into our pockets at the pledging conference next month and to make sure that Education Cannot Wait has the resources that it needs to deliver for our children.

1.41 pm

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): It is a real pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford). Much to my surprise, I found nothing in her speech to disagree with, but I promise not to make that a habit—just to reassure her and my hon. Friends. Two of the most significant points of substance that she raised were the importance of girls' education, and investment in that, and continuing to build a global alliance for more investment in girls' education.

I remember that in my time as a Minister in the Department for International Development, we began the process of putting substantial investment into girls' education. I remember how proud I was—as I am sure other Members were at the time—that Britain was willing to show global leadership on that issue. I pay tribute to Gordon Brown who, since stepping down as Prime Minister and being appointed as the UN special envoy for global education, has continued to do everything he can to build support for that.

The right hon. Member for Chelmsford also made an important point about Afghanistan and the international community's continuing outrage about the way in which women and, in particular, young girls are being treated there. She spoke of the need for her colleagues in the Foreign Office, if at all possible, to maintain funding for girls' education, however difficult that is going forward.

There is one thing that the right hon. Member for Chelmsford did not mention—I think I understand why, but she will understand why I raise it. I think it would be an even better statement on education to have a separate, dedicated Department for International Development, able to champion the case for investment in education globally, free of some of the constraints that the FCDO is under.

I hope that the House will forgive me if I make some parochial points now about the importance of more education investment in Harrow, where we are blessed with remarkable headteachers and teachers, as well as impressive students. One of the great privileges for me as the Member for Harrow West is to have the opportunity to go into schools and see that the future of the community in which I have lived all my life and that I love very much is in the safe hands of such impressive young people.

Nevertheless, it is clear that many of the schools still face real financial difficulties and that the governing bodies face challenges in recruiting headteachers and teachers, not least in maths and science, and also, increasingly, in other subjects, including humanities and English. I am struck by the comments of the executive heads of some of the academies that operate in Harrow about how difficult it has been on occasion to get a field of sufficiently talented applicants for the position of headteacher. As I say, they do a remarkable job none the less, but it would

be good to hear from the Minister—if not today, perhaps in a letter—the Government's plan to address the recruitment crisis in education.

Local authorities also need more funding for special needs education, and that is certainly the case in Harrow. Mr Sharma, you may recognise that there is a continuing difficulty with the fact that teachers who are appointed to jobs in inner London get a significant pay increase compared with teachers working in outer London schools. There is little difference in the cost of living in inner London as opposed to in outer London. It seems to me that the discrepancy in pay between teachers in outer London and their compatriots in inner London, which has been around for a long time, needs addressing urgently.

My last substantive point is that I want to encourage the Government to take a fresh look at investment in supplementary schools. We are lucky to have the Foreign Office Minister present, because she knows a lot about the Asia-Pacific tilt to which the Government are committed. I am struck by the need for us to invest in teaching the languages of Asia and the Pacific. Given the global significance of the Indian economy in years to come, it seems even sadder that we are seeing a decline in the teaching of the languages of modern India, including Gujarati, Bengali, Persian, Punjabi and Urdu. Among GCSE students in this country between 2015 and 2021, we saw a very steep decline: there was a 77% drop in the number studying GCSE Gujarati, a 66% drop in the number studying GCSE Bengali, and a 37% drop in the number studying GCSE Urdu. If we as a country want the full benefit of the trade deal that we hope to sign with India, having people who can speak the languages of that great country is essential. Too much of the teaching of those languages is left to very dedicated people in temples, mosques and Saturday schools across local communities.

To be fair, the Government have invested in teaching modern languages. They have recently invested some £14 million in teaching Mandarin and some £5 million in teaching Latin. Why not have a similar amount of investment in teaching the languages of modern Asia? We need dedicated funding, and we need specialist training available for teachers in those subjects. Why not have a flagship school programme to back teaching in that area? Why not offer a bit of funding to support the Saturday schools that do so much to keep up the level of GCSE studies? Where is the academic research programme to support such a programme of investment in these vital community languages?

With that, I apologise to the Front Benchers and to other Members of the House: due to childcare reasons, I cannot stay for the full debate, but I will certainly read the contributions of my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous), the Minister and others.

1.49 pm

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) on securing the debate. I thank her for making it possible for hon. Members who are passionate about this issue to make the case for every child in the world to have 12 years of quality education. Nothing could be more important, and nothing is less politically controversial, but because we all agree

how important it is, it does not get enough debate in this place. That is why I am so sincere in my congratulations to my right hon. Friend.

Over the last few years, I have had the privilege of chairing the all-party parliamentary group on global education—more recently, I have been co-chairing it—and I was also a co-founding chair of the International Parliamentary Network for Education. Regrettably, I had to hand on those responsibilities when I was given the honour of chairing the Treasury Committee. I am delighted that my right hon. Friend has embraced the opportunity that those marvellous groups offer to champion this important cause.

In my right hon. Friend's powerful opening speech, we heard about the important ways in which enabling every child in the world to get a quality education could make our future so much brighter. Growing the world's economies, making sure we are all healthier, and helping to tackle climate change are all powerful and provable implications of ensuring that every child gets a good education.

I will focus on those—particularly refugee children—whose education suffers because they have to flee conflict. I thank all the families in Worcestershire who have been so good about welcoming refugees from Ukraine into their homes. We are proud to have welcomed 1,000 Ukrainians into Worcestershire, and half of them are children who are being educated in our local schools. I thank the families, but I also thank the schools and teachers for welcoming those children into our educational settings.

I have a point for the Minister to take back to her colleagues at the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. There is rightly a payment to the school when it takes in a Ukrainian refugee child. If the child moves to another school after a short period of weeks, that payment does not follow them, and that has led to a few problems. The up-front lump sum gets paid to the school that receives the child, but if they are there for only a little while, the money does not go any further. The Minister will probably not be able to respond today, but will she commit to write to me about how that could be better tackled in the system?

I endorse the points that were made about those poor girls in Afghanistan. There is not a day when I do not think about how terribly they are suffering from not being allowed to go to school. The medieval cruelty of the Taliban regime in preventing their daughters from being educated is appalling. We must speak out about it whenever we can, because it is only by keeping that focus that we can ever hope for the situation to change.

It is not just girls in Afghanistan, but millions of children in countries all around the world—including our own—who are missing out on education. It is particularly difficult to educate children in refugee settings, which is why I commend the work I saw at first hand when I was the Minister responsible for that budget in the international sphere.

The work done to help children get an education is often delivered very rapidly by Education Cannot Wait, and I want to highlight the opportunity for the UK to continue to show its global leadership in this area with the upcoming replenishment of the Education Cannot Wait budget. I am sure the Minister and her officials will be carefully studying the results that Education Cannot Wait has delivered in settings around the world. I hope that the data still show the good impact and

[*Harriett Baldwin*]

powerful value for money that that funding produces, and that the UK can therefore lead on that important work and crowd in other countries to contribute to it.

To conclude my brief remarks on this incredibly important subject, I again thank my right hon. Friend for securing the debate. On behalf of my constituents, I also thank the Minister for the work the UK does to make the world a safer, healthier and more prosperous place by investing in education—not just in this country, but in countries that cannot afford to educate all their children. I urge the Minister to look particularly favourably on the work that is done for children in refugee situations by Education Cannot Wait.

1.56 pm

Mrs Helen Grant (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con): I, too, congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) on securing this important debate in recognition of the International Day of Education.

I am hugely honoured to be the Prime Minister's special envoy for girls' education. My role is to globally champion his message that providing 12 years of quality education for every single girl on the planet is one of the best ways of tackling many of the major issues facing the world today, such as poverty, climate change and inequality. Investing in girls' education is an absolute game changer: if we want to change the world for the better, girls' education is a great place to start. The child of a mother who can read is 50% more likely to live beyond the age of five, twice as likely to attend school themselves, and 50% more likely to be immunised. Girls who are educated are more able to choose if and when to have children, and how many children they have.

Girls' education is, of course, vital for women and girls, but it is also extremely important in levelling up society, boosting incomes and developing economies and nations. Tragically, the pandemic has been one of the biggest educational disruptors in our history, affecting 1.6 billion learners at its peak in 2020. It also created a global education funding gap of \$200 billion per annum. In poorer countries now, over 70% of children cannot read a simple text by the age of 10.

Many of those children are girls, many of whom will never return to school, or even start school, lowering their chances of future employment and decent livelihoods. Out of school, girls are at greater risk of violence, sexual violence, forced marriage, early marriage, female genital mutilation and human trafficking. All those factors are creating the very real risk of a lost generation of girls, and we must work hard and together to stop that happening.

We also need to work better and differently. The UK has played a leading role in education policy and financing: we put girls' education at the very heart of the 2021 G7 summit in Cornwall, giving it the priority and profile—as well as the financial and political commitments—that it needs and deserves. We also agreed two new, ambitious global targets: getting 20 million more girls reading by the age of 10, and getting 40 million more girls in primary and secondary school in low and low-to-middle income countries by 2026.

At the global education summit in London, also in 2021, we raised a landmark \$4 billion for global education with our international partners, which will help another

175 million children to learn. At COP26 in Glasgow that year, we made the important connection between girls' education and climate change, showing how girls' education can be very much part of the solution. That is because girls who are educated are much more able to participate in decisions, actions and leadership in relation to climate resilience, adaptation and mitigation.

We know that education interventions must provide more than just learning, and the UK will continue to be a gender equality leader, tackling the issues that prevent girls from getting to school and staying in school. No girl should have her hopes and dreams dashed because she has had to marry too early or become a mother due to a lack of family planning advice.

In my role as the Prime Minister's special envoy, I have been able to travel extensively to see for myself some of our education programmes and how they are changing lives for the better. In Ghana, in the hills of Aburi, I sat in on non-formal community classes where young mothers brought their babies to school. In Sierra Leone, I saw programmes that focused on improved learning, but also on special measures to address violence in and out of school and other safeguarding issues. In Nigeria, I saw how our teams on the ground have adapted programmes to respond to covid school closures. They achieved that through community-based learning programmes, the recording of radio and TV lessons, and accelerated learning programmes to help children catch up. I had the opportunity to meet virtually with schoolgirls and teachers affected by the conflict in Syria. I heard how education was providing a real lifeline and a space for children to see their friends, rebuild their self-confidence and self-esteem and develop the skills they need to break the cycle of poverty, while also providing them with a sense of hope and optimism for the future. I was inspired by the dreams of one young girl who hoped to become an architect to rebuild Syria for the future, and another who wanted to be a social worker to protect children from violence. These girls are our future, and ensuring their right to safe, quality education is essential.

The weight of the challenge on girls' education is significant, but our ability to make a change in the world—if we work together—should never be underestimated. We all must raise our game and rally the world behind the global targets that have been set and agreed. Achieving global targets requires a global response. Governments must prioritise education reforms, listen to civil society and not be afraid to partner with technical experts so that they can design their reforms around real evidence of what actually works. We need to urgently recover those learning losses caused by covid by focusing on foundational learning skills. Basic numeracy and literacy are essential for children to be able to stay in school and progress to higher levels.

We must listen carefully to our girls and hear what they say they want and need from their leaders—be it safer roads for walking to school, free sanitary products to help with confidence and school attendance, or separate toilets for privacy. Last but certainly not least, our global leaders need to speak out much more about the importance of educating our girls and to explain all the advantages for girls and women and for their children, their families, their communities and, of course, their nations.

2.4 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I am very happy to participate in this debate, as an English teacher of 23 years before I was elected to this House. The International Day of Education is an important date in our calendar, and the theme this year is:

“To invest in people, prioritise education”.

I pay tribute to the hard work of the teachers in my constituency. I am currently undertaking my annual visit to my local schools, and I am always impressed by our young people’s political engagement, which is both impressive and refreshing. I pay tribute to them and the staff, who work hard to deliver education in my constituency.

The United Nations General Assembly proclaimed 24 January as the International Day of Education in celebration of the role of education in peace and development. I thank the right hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) for securing the debate. Education is a human right, a public good and a public responsibility. The right hon. Lady reminded us that illiteracy across the globe disproportionately affects women and girls, and that educating women and girls provides huge and lasting benefits to their communities and children, and helps to avert child marriage, which is important for the future and prosperity of developing countries.

I agree with the point the hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) made about the FCDO doing international development work of such importance in this and many other fields. We really should be looking to restore the Department for International Development; everybody in this Chamber agrees that the FCDO does important international development work, but that merits a Department for itself.

The hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Mrs Grant) reminded us of the huge benefits of educating women and girls and of the vast scale—some might say the daunting scale—of the challenge. It is important that the international community works together to address it, if for no other reason—although there are many reasons—than the risk of violence to women and girls, which goes alongside being deprived of and facing barriers to education.

It is indisputable that inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong opportunities for all are inextricably linked to a country’s success in achieving gender equality and breaking the cycle of poverty that leaves millions of children, youth and adults behind. Today, 244 million children and youth are out of school, and 771 million adults are illiterate. Their rights to education and so much more are being violated. That is unacceptable.

UNESCO is dedicating this year’s International Day of Education to girls and women in Afghanistan who have been deprived of their right to education, and is calling for the immediate lifting of the ban restricting access to education. The hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin) said that global education commands agreement and support across the House—it is one of the rare occasions when we see that happening. I note her comments that children are being deprived of their education in far too many circumstances, both refugees and in a more general, global sense. The international community must continue to work to change that.

I want to focus on the situation in Afghanistan, which is alarming and bewildering to many of us looking on in the west. The Taliban regime is denying its daughters,

wives and sisters access to any form of schooling whatever. Today marks 493 days since the Taliban banned teenage girls from school, and 32 days since it banned women from going to university and working in national and international non-governmental organisations.

Currently, there are 2.5 million Afghan girls and young women out of school, 1.2 million of whom were denied access to secondary schools and university places following the regime’s diktat about women in education. Despite international condemnation, the Taliban regime justified that step on the basis that some women had not adhered to its interpretation of Islamic dress code, and that conservative traditions must be protected. It is an interesting conundrum that repressing, diminishing and controlling women in that way is such a priority for the Taliban regime, despite the fact that 28 million Afghans require aid, with some 6 million on the brink of famine—some 93% of Afghans do not have enough food, according to the UN. Winter temperatures are plunging as low as -17°C, and even lower in mountainous areas, so making it a priority to deprive women of their education seems bizarre to anybody looking on.

Amid all that, Save the Children had no choice but to pause its aid efforts in areas where it could not operate without its female staff, because women are essential to the safe and effective delivery of its services. Can it really be true—I cannot believe that I am asking this question—that the Taliban would rather its people died of starvation than women be seen to undertake useful work to assist Afghan civilians?

Being a girl or woman in Afghanistan under the Taliban must surely be a frightening, marginalising and desperate experience. In essence, Afghan women are back to being invisible in public life, imprisoned in their home and, where applicable, ordered to cover their ground and first-floor windows so that women inside cannot be seen from the street. Women can have the end of their thumbs cut off for wearing nail varnish. In such a regime, where women are viewed as chattels and the possession of male relatives, of no value as human beings, robbed of their dignity and their identity reduced to the clothes that they must wear, how can we be surprised that such a regime explicitly forbids the education of its women?

It is heartbreaking to consider that in the 20th century, until the conflicts of the 1970s, Afghanistan was seen as a progressive country. Afghan women were first eligible for the right to vote in 1919, only a year after women in the UK enjoyed that right and a year before women in the US were allowed to vote. As part of that, how women’s rights to education in Afghanistan have been rolled back is remarkable and frightening.

No society can truly prosper socially, economically or culturally unless there is access to education for all on an equal basis. Until the Taliban in Afghanistan understands that, the international community must continue to stress it and to engage on the issue when possible. I hope that the UK Government will play a leading global role in that international effort. Access to education is such a basic universal human right that denying it to women in Afghanistan or anywhere based on gender is incompatible with all that is right and decent.

As we commemorate the International Day of Education, it is right and fitting that we dedicate this day in 2023 to girls and women in Afghanistan who have been deprived of their right to education. Only a regime that seeks to control and tyrannise would fail to recognise that access

[*Patricia Gibson*]

to education for all its people has no downside for that society. We see that depriving Afghan women and girls of education goes hand in hand with the loss of so many other rights.

I know that all right hon. and hon. Members will seek to show solidarity with Afghan women and seek to restore their access to education. That should be a fundamental red line in all international engagement with the Taliban regime. Without access to education, the lives of Afghan women will be poorer, their children will be poorer, their communities will be poorer, the once great country of Afghanistan will be poorer, the climate will be poorer and the world will be poorer—poorer in ways that are beyond measure. We must stand up for Afghan women and girls and for the access to education that they need and deserve, with all the opportunities and fulfilment that go alongside securing that education. That applies to women and girls not just in Afghanistan, but across the world.

2.14 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. I refer the House to my entry on the Register of Members' Financial Interests—I am the co-chair of the APPG on global education. I thank my friend, the right hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), for securing this timely and important debate to mark the International Day of Education and for her excellent speech. As co-chairs of the APPG, we both care deeply about this topic and are working closely together to shine a light on the importance of inclusive and quality education for all.

As we mark the International Day of Education this week, it is staggering to note that 222 million children around the world are affected by emergency and protracted crises and in need of urgent educational support. This has grown from an estimated 75 million in 2016, as more children around the world are missing out on essential education time. We find these children facing some of the world's foremost challenges, from the war in Ukraine and the repression of women and girls in Afghanistan to the impact of food insecurity in the horn of Africa and climate-related disaster in the Sahel.

Education is every child's right. It is fundamental to creating a peaceful and prosperous world. My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) emphasised the value of education for all. Labour recognises the importance of quality, safe, inclusive and free public education as the cornerstone of the UN sustainable development goals. Education saves lives; improves nutrition and health; reduces child, early and forced marriage; and leads to more equal, respectful and open societies.

On visits abroad, I have seen the scale of the challenges we face in global education, in particular for women and girls. As the hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Mrs Grant) succinctly put it, girls' education is an absolute game-changer. She is absolutely right to make that point. Every day, girls face barriers to education caused by poverty, child marriage and gender-based violence, poor infrastructure, cultural norms and practices and fragility. Around the world, 129 million girls are out of school, including 32 million of primary school age, 30 million of lower secondary school age and 67 million of upper secondary school age. As eloquently

pointed out by the hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin), in countries affected by conflict, girls are more than twice as likely to be out of school than girls living in non-affected areas.

This year, UNESCO has dedicated the International Day of Education to the women and girls of Afghanistan. What is happening there is an absolute tragedy: the Taliban's barbaric ban on the participation of women in public life means schools and universities have been closed to Afghan women and girls, in violation of their fundamental rights and freedoms. Since the fall of Kabul, the Taliban has stopped 850,000 secondary age girls from attending school; as we have heard throughout today's excellent debate, the impact of that ban is devastating. At the same time, the world has watched in awe as brave girls and women in Afghanistan have protested and demanded the right to go to school in the face of repression by the Taliban. Afghanistan can never flourish while half its population is relegated from public life.

We must pay tribute to all those fighting for their right to education, but they need more than warm words and solidarity. The UK must act by working internationally to hold the Taliban to account for its escalating crackdown on women's rights and doing everything possible to support education for all in Afghanistan, including through the Global Partnership for Education, which is making up to \$300 million available in support of education for Afghan women and girls. Can the Minister say what steps the UK Government are taking with the international community to support women and girls' education in Afghanistan? More specifically, will she rule out reductions in UK funding to Afghanistan while negotiations between the de facto authorities and the diplomatic and humanitarian communities are ongoing?

The UK is, and continues to be, a vocal supporter of girls' education. But it is fair to say that the Government need to translate that rhetoric into results. According to analysis by the ONE Campaign, an estimated 7.1 million children, including 3.7 million girls, lost their education due to recent cuts to the UK's aid budget. Alongside cuts, we also have delays—most recently to the international women and girls strategy, which the Government confirmed last week has been delayed once again. We cannot allow ourselves to fail a generation of young people, and that is why Labour urges the Government to announce a strong and early pledge for the Geneva Education Cannot Wait conference next month.

Since its establishment in 2016, Education Cannot Wait has reached 7 million children and adolescents with quality education in some of the toughest crisis zones globally. UK funding has supported an estimated 1.5 million of those children, but the challenge has grown since then. Civil society, members of the public and many parliamentarians have called for the UK to pledge £170 million over the 2023-26 period: a 13% share of Education Cannot Wait's fundraising target. That would directly provide 2.6 million children in an emergency or protracted crisis with quality education, 60% of whom would be girls. Can the Minister confirm whether the UK Government will commit to make such a pledge ahead of next month's conference? If so, when can we expect the announcement?

It is imperative that the Government meet their own targets on providing quality foundational learning to the most marginalised, including girls and children with disabilities. Girls and boys in conflict zones, climate

shocks and natural disasters, and refugee settlements deserve to learn to read and write, do maths and prosper as much as any other child, yet just one in 10 of the 222 million children affected by crises are meeting required minimum levels for literacy and numeracy. Such extreme levels of illiteracy and innumeracy are an early warning sign that global educational goals, and related sustainable development goals, are in jeopardy. At the current rate of progress, it will take at least 40 years to achieve the sustainable development goal 4 target on learning.

In 2019, over half of children in low and middle-income countries were living in learning poverty, meaning that they were unable to read and understand a simple text by age 10. In sub-Saharan Africa, that figure is closer to 90%. Behind those numbers, millions of vulnerable girls and boys around the world await our collective action. From inside makeshift refugee settlements, the damaged walls of classrooms, and communities torn apart by war and disaster, those children are holding on to the hope that education will allow them to realise their dreams of becoming doctors, engineers, scientists, teachers or whatever other profession they seek to achieve.

As we mark International Day Of Education, I want to end by sharing the thoughts of young people campaigning for their generation's future. This week, I had the pleasure of meeting with the Global Partnership for Education youth leaders in Parliament as part of their youth action tour. The youth leaders are young people with lived experience from partner countries, and it was incredibly moving to hear directly from them about why we need to protect and increase education funding worldwide.

Another group of young people that I would like to highlight are Send My Friend to School youth campaigners. Each year, around 250,000 young people from across the UK take part in the campaign, meeting dozens of MPs. I have met their excellent campaign champions on a number of occasions. I am always inspired by the passion and commitment that they have for other children around the world, who are not fortunate enough to receive the kind of education that we do here in the UK.

I end with the following words from Jenson, aged 10, speaking on behalf of his classmates at Colne Engaine Primary School in Braintree:

"We think every child has the right to have an education. Reasons that stop children from going to school like natural disasters and disease, war and famine are not chosen by the children."

Let that ring true in all our ears and urge us to act now as we celebrate International Day of Education.

2.24 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) for securing this debate to mark International Day of Education. I pay tribute to her work to drive progress on education around the world, both in her previous ministerial role and through her continued efforts as the new co-chair of the APPG on global education.

My colleague, the Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), would have been delighted to take part in this debate, but he is travelling on ministerial duties. However, it is a pleasure to be able

to respond on behalf on the Government. I am grateful to all hon. Members for their contributions. The strength of feeling about the importance of global education is clear and unequivocal, as it should be. Colleagues will be aware of my commitment to this cause, as the former Secretary of State in the Department for International Development who published our first strategy on 12 years of girls' education back in 2020.

Education, especially for girls, is a top priority for this Government. Over five years from 2015, UK aid supported more than 15 million children, including 8 million girls, to benefit from a decent education. We continue to stand up for the right of every girl, everywhere, to access 12 years of quality learning. We know that that is the key to unlocking individual potential, as well as advancing prosperous, thriving societies and economies. In short, and as all hon. Members have said, it is one of the very best investments we can make. That is because not only do educated girls' earnings increase significantly, but they are less likely to be subjected to child marriage and domestic violence, and more likely to have smaller, healthier and better educated families.

Too many children around the world lack these opportunities and face many barriers: poverty; a lack of safe and accessible schools; and the twin threats of conflict and climate change. As my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin) has said, this is seen most shockingly right now for girls in Afghanistan. I reiterate the Government's condemnation of the Taliban's decision to prevent girls from returning to secondary school and women to universities. Through our joint G7 Foreign Ministers' statement and the UK national statement, we have repeatedly made that clear, and we continue to lobby the Taliban to reverse those destructive decrees.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford has set out, about 244 million children are out of school around the world and more than half are girls. About seven in 10 children in low and middle-income countries are unable to read by the age of 10, and that generation could lose \$21 trillion in earnings over their lifetimes as a result. Put simply, we face the real risk of a lost generation, and we cannot let that happen. That is why the UK is driving international action to tackle the education crisis.

In 2021, we hosted in London the global education summit, which raised an unprecedented \$4 billion for the Global Partnership for Education. We put girls' education at the centre of our G7 presidency that year and secured G7 endorsement of the two global objectives mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Mrs Grant): to get 40 million more girls into school and 20 million more girls reading by the age of 10 by 2026.

We support developing countries to help children to learn in a safe, inclusive and sustainable way. Of course, that begins, just as it does in every school in all our constituencies, with strong foundations: basic reading, maths and social skills—the building blocks on which all children everywhere can make progress in school and reach their potential so that they have choices later in life. That is why the UK launched a commitment to action on foundational learning last year at the UN summit on transforming education. We are calling on all Governments around the world to prioritise those basics, especially for the most marginalised girls.

[*Anne-Marie Trevelyan*]

We also support girls and young women to make their way into higher education and training, to boost their employment prospects. As part of that, we launched the girls' education and skills programme on International Women's Day last year. That innovative partnership between Government and major global businesses was initiated by my hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald in her role as special envoy on girls' education. I thank her for her relentless advocacy, her enthusiasm and the globetrotting that she does on behalf of the Prime Minister to bring these issues to light across the globe.

We want to continue to prioritise reaching the poorest and most marginalised girls, with a particular focus on reaching children affected by emergencies and protracted crises. On climate change in particular, the figures are bleak: 40 million children each year have their schooling disrupted by its impacts. For example, I met some children in the village of Mele in Vanuatu—a Pacific island literally the other side of the planet from here. I met them in December, and their school had been battered by sea storms unprecedented in the island's history. That was a real, practical and destructive event for those small children, who had not experienced that in their lives before.

Those climate threats are creating the sort of disruptions that are absolutely destructive and will cause damage for so many more children, so our focus on helping developing countries to adapt and become more resilient to the climate shocks we know they will have to face will be critical to protecting those children who are in education and enabling them to continue their education. We are supporting education for the poorest through UK-led programmes in 19 countries. That is complemented by our significant investments through the Global Partnership for Education and Education Cannot Wait, which supports children through emergencies.

It is of course important to leverage financing. That is why we are a leading partner in developing the new international finance facility for education, which is focused on lower middle income countries to help girls into learning. Meanwhile, the UK Girls' Education Challenge is the largest programme of its kind in the world. More than 1 million girls who were most at risk of dropping out are now staying in school and making progress, and over 150,000 with disabilities are able to attend school.

Our new position paper, which we published last month, is our road map towards addressing the climate, environment and biodiversity crises in and through girls' education. I reassure colleagues that we will be publishing the new international women and girls strategy in the coming months, which will be framed around the three E's of educating girls, empowering and championing the health and rights of women and girls, and ending violence.

Members have raised concerns about the reduction in the aid budget and its impact on education programmes. Colleagues are all aware that difficult decisions have been made to meet the 0.5% commitment, and to support those fleeing the war in Ukraine and insecurity in Afghanistan.

Harriett Baldwin: Will my right hon. Friend commit to writing to the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to make the point that the

money for Ukrainian refugee children in the UK, which I believe comes from the official development assistance budget, is not necessarily following that child if they move to a new school?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: My hon. Friend raises an important point, of which I was not aware; it has not been brought to me in my constituency. I will take it up with the Secretary of State and ensure that we understand where those issues are, the size of the problem, and how we can ensure that, whichever schools are looking after those young people who are here from Ukraine, they can have the support they need.

We are prioritising our 0.5% aid spending in line with the priorities that we set out in our international development strategy, which, of course, includes girls' education. The UK remains one of the most generous global donors, spending £11 billion in aid in 2021.

I reassure colleagues that, in relation to the Afghanistan crisis, FCDO officials are in regular contact with the NGO community to understand the impact of the Taliban ban on female workers. Where NGO partners have had to suspend activity, the FCDO is continuing to cover staff salaries and other critical associated operational costs, and we are encouraging UN agencies to do the same with their NGO counterparts.

As Members know, development is not just about aid packages. UK support to global education includes our valuable country partnerships, expertise, and power to convene others, such as through the global summit.

As colleagues have already said, and championed, we are proud to be a co-founder of, and leading donor to, Education Cannot Wait. Members have asked for details on the UK's future commitment to ECW. The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield, will announce the UK's future contributions—I am afraid that I cannot steal his thunder—at the high-level financing conference in February.

I will end by reaffirming the UK's unwavering commitment to global education, which remains at the heart of our work towards a more prosperous, stable and equal world. I know that all colleagues here today will continue to champion education as the most effective investment every nation can make.

2.33 pm

Vicky Ford: I would like to take a couple of minutes to thank all the Members who have taken part in today's debate.

It is clear from the work that my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin) did as a Minister, and the work that she has done as a Back Bencher to keep this issue on our agenda, how passionate she is. I thank her for reminding us that one of the reasons we do not talk about it enough is that we all agree about it. However, we must continue to highlight it.

In responding to my wonderful hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Mrs Grant)—who arrived overnight, not having had a night's sleep, because she has been championing girls' education on behalf of our Prime Minister—I want to get on the record all our congratulations for the announcement that we saw in the new year's honours list. Often, people say that an OBE is about not only one's own work, but the work of others—it is about a cause. But in this case she has been

such a champion, for so many involved in the cause of making sure that all girls get 12 years' quality education. I thank her for all she does; it was wonderful to see her name recognised.

The hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) made a really important point about languages. We often talk about the drop in European language learning, but he made an interesting point about the drop in other languages. If we want to make the world a smaller place and a better place, those languages are so important.

I thank the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) not only for giving us a teacher's perspective, but for using so much of her speaking time to focus on the situation for women and girls in Afghanistan. We absolutely need to make sure that women's voices especially are heard on this issue. They do not have their own voice; we need to make sure that women's voices are heard.

There is of course a special place in heaven for men who champion women's issues, so I thank the co-chair, the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous), for his passion for this work and for co-chairing the APPG, and indeed for mentioning the work of young people in this country through the Send My Friend to School campaign. Those intergenerational links, us to them—but also across the younger generation—are vital.

I thank the Minister for also reminding us of her passion, which she has had for many years. I like the phrase she used—the UK “is driving” international action, not “has driven”. We all want to make sure that we continue in the driving seat to press this forward, leverage those partnerships and work internationally. We all look forward with great hope to what the Minister of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), will promise and pledge at the summit next month.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the International Day of Education.

2.37 pm

Sitting suspended.

Planning

[MARTIN VICKERS *in the Chair*]

3 pm

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of planning policy.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Vickers. I will not talk for too long, but I want to raise some issues relating to planning policy, especially after the productive and fruitful discussions that my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) and I had with the Government.

For years, we have needed a planning system that is community-led and environment-led, and that drives regeneration. For years, we have not quite had the opposite, but we have certainly not had a policy that is as focused as it should have been on community, the environment or, frankly, levelling up and spreading wealth around our wonderful country. Indeed, in many ways the definition of “sustainability” has been the opposite of what it is in reality. Much development has been truly unsustainable, as many communities involved in bitter battles against distant developers know. There are residents' groups on the Isle of Wight, in the constituency of my right hon. Friend and across Britain that have despaired at the top-down, developer-led process, which seems so often to have ridden roughshod over the wishes of local people and the genuine needs of communities.

That is why last year we built an alliance of a hundred likeminded Conservative colleagues and tabled 21 amendments to the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill, as well as negotiating with Ministers and officials over a one or two-week period to secure what I hope is a workable change, and indeed what I think will improve planning considerably in this country. These are some of the things that I would like to touch on for the Minister today.

I will just say what we are against, because it seems to me that, unless people want a free market in housing, which in reality we have not had since world war two, they are described as nimbies. I find that level of argument pretty depressing, shallow and empty. I think what we were against—certainly, what I was against—was a couple of things.

First, there is the planning or development industry's addiction to greenfield, soulless, low-density, car-dependent, out-of-town development. Those sorts of developments—we see them a bit on the Island, but we see them especially in the home counties and counties such as Cambridgeshire—are socially bad, as they are not designed around communities. Effectively, they are soulless housing estates, plonked down in the middle of nowhere, or where the developers can get planning permission. They are also environmentally bad from a transport point of view, because they are almost entirely car-dependent. These isolated, car-dependent developments are truly unsustainable, because we know that detached houses are the most un-climate friendly form of housing. They are land-banked by large developers and are often built against the wishes of local communities.

The second thing that we found really difficult was the structure of the industry. There is sometimes a more sustained approach in the industry towards keeping share prices high than there is towards actual development.

[*Bob Seely*]

That is one of the problems. Because we have become over-dependent on private developers, we have effectively become hostages to their agenda. Yes, they build houses—that is their business model—but it is also their business model to keep prices high, to keep the value of land high and to limit the supply of land, because that is how they keep their share prices high, their profits high and, frankly, their bonuses high.

We have not had enough in the way of council-led affordable housing. I am a big fan of affordable housing and council housing, and I very much want the Isle of Wight Council to get on and develop its own council house company again. But because we have been dependent on private developers, we have something like 1 million outstanding planning permissions, including over 400,000 planning permissions on brownfield sites, which are just land-banked by the big companies, because then they can plan for profits for years to come. If we want to build more, we need a slightly different system from the one we had, or at least one where councils and housing associations can build more and have access to more land. I will come to that in relation to Camp Hill on my patch.

As a result of so much of the pressure for housing moving down to the south-east—in places such as the Isle of Wight, but it is perhaps even worse in the home counties—we have skewed infrastructure spending away from the north and towards the south and the south-east. Again, because the infrastructure is there, that drives jobs and growth. We have a never-ending funnel—a never-ending Hoover—of people from not only city centres to the suburbs but from north to south. That is bad for our country.

To give a snapshot of the £866 million allocated by the housing infrastructure fund up to 2018, half of it was directed to London, the east and the south-east, while the combined authorities of Liverpool, Manchester, Tees Valley, the West Midlands and the West of England received only £124 million. That is about a quarter of what was given to London and the south-east. At that time, over three quarters of the £2 billion allocated went to projects in London and the south-east. Up to April 2020, it was estimated that the same fund spent up to £700 million on roads for garden communities.

There is a problem in that, because so many of the planning permissions are given in the south-east on greenfield sites, that skews investment and the infrastructure spend. The reality is that that makes levelling up and investing in the great cities of the north and the midlands much more difficult. I will come on to that, because there are some fascinating pictures of declining populations.

After intensive negotiation with the Secretary of State and the Minister—it is a pleasure to see her here—we now have a much better deal that puts planning in a much better place. Before I turn to the wider issues of what I think we achieved with that, I will raise three issues with the Minister in relation to the Island. First, we would love more compulsory purchase powers. I know that the Minister will tell us that there is a compulsory purchase review out with the Law Society, which is looking at how we can make compulsory purchase more efficient.

In coastal communities, and maybe in levelling-up communities—if I dare describe them as such—we need that compulsory purchase power. It is way too difficult

for us and our councillors, whether they are Conservative, Labour or independent, to do the right thing. There are too many buildings on the Isle of Wight that stand empty for years, especially those that have an impact on our communities, for example in Sandown—funnily enough, I was talking to the Mayor of Sandown less than an hour ago about post offices.

The Grand Hotel in Sandown has been empty for years. It is a gorgeous art deco building next to what used to be Sandown zoo—it is opposite the beach and next to the dinosaur museum. It should be a really important site for us. That building has stood empty for years. The Royal York Hotel in Ryde is owned by the same guy. Those buildings stand empty, and there are many others. With the Ocean Hotel I will be careful what I say; I do not think there are proceedings live at the moment, but at the very least there has been extraordinarily unethical behaviour in relation to that building—it may indeed be criminal. It is empty and, because of the legal disputes surrounding it, it may well lie empty for years. It is slap-bang in the middle of what should be Sandown's tourism high street.

The more help that Government can give us, the better. They should give compulsory purchase powers to councils such as the Isle of Wight, so that it can force the sale of the Grand Hotel, the Royal York Hotel in Ryde or the Ocean Hotel—so that it can say to the owners of those hotels: “You have six months to a year maximum to develop, otherwise we force a sale.” We would use those powers to put those properties on the market, to be bought by people on the condition that they put forward planning within a specific timeframe and start realistically developing and completing within a specific amount of time. That problem is replicated across coastal communities and in some of our most deprived communities, up and down the country.

Secondly, I know the Minister will say that this is not her responsibility anymore, but I plead for quicker decision-making powers by Government. I give the example of Camp Hill—the third of our prisons on the Isle of Wight. The Minister was formerly Justice Minister, so she is probably bored of hearing about Camp Hill. I am bored of raising it. It has been nine years without a decision. The Americans put a man on the moon in less time than it has taken the Government to decide what to do with Camp Hill. I was thinking, half in jest, that if I set up as a squatter in Camp Hill, I would probably have ownership rights before the Government decided what to do with it, and if I could claim ownership of it, I could give it to the council. Can we please have a decision on Camp Hill?

We do not have many brownfield sites on the Isle of Wight—I think we have about half a dozen. Hopefully, the Minister will have some news about the greenfield funds, which I think she may have announced or will announce, but we will certainly be putting in for more money to clean up brownfield sites, because we have so few. Camp Hill is a really big potential brownfield site for us, and we would love to get access to it. I know the Minister is the Minister for housing and not a Justice Minister, but if the Government can sell that site to the Isle of Wight Council at a price that we can afford—in much the same way as they did for the Columbine Building, which is the hub of our shipbuilding industry in East Cowes—we can do good things with it. It is a brownfield site near Newport, and we can use the land

to build decent, affordable housing for Islanders young and old, rather than having to rely on speculative greenfield sites outside our towns and villages. I urge the Government collectively to have better and quicker decision making.

Thirdly, and specifically for the Island, the Secretary of State and his adviser kindly suggested that they would write to me to confirm two things as part of our negotiations last year. The first is that, from now on, there is an expectation that exceptional circumstance is assumed for islands. My understanding from the negotiations is that exceptional circumstance for islands would be specifically mentioned in the footnotes of the national planning policy framework, or NPPF, and that that would be almost the expectation. We do not have a bridge—we are not Anglesey; we are separated by sea—and it costs 30% more to build a home on the Isle of Wight than elsewhere, because of the cost of getting material over by ferry. We have a restricted industry on the Island that builds between 200 and 300 homes a year. A target of 500, 600, 700 or 800 would be crazy and unachievable, because we have only ever built that sort of number on two occasions in the last 50 years, so it would be incredibly helpful if we could see the letter on exceptional circumstance.

That was my understanding—it was very accurate, I hasten to add—of the conversation that we had. The letter was also going to set out what emergency powers the Government have to deal with unscrupulous caravan park owners and the planning lawyers who advise them, who game the system to build caravan parks and concrete over sites of special scientific interest on coastal islands, in very special areas of the Island or the country, and in areas of outstanding natural beauty and national parks. I think there was going to be some suggestion about what the Government could do on that.

Those are three very specific issues, which I hope the Government should feel positive about. First, we want the Government to be ambitious on compulsory purchase, because it is so important to so many parts of the country that when property developers do not do the right thing, we can force the sale of sites, especially high-value sites that have a significant impact on our communities and our economy. Secondly, can we please have quicker decision making, specifically on Camp Hill? The council and I really want to build affordable homes on that site for folks on the Isle of Wight. Thirdly, I remind the Government of the letter they promised me on exceptional circumstance and caravan parks.

More generally, I thought we had some great discussions at the end of last year, and we still have targets. I am just so fed up of hearing that Back-Bench MPs are docile sheep who trot through and vote for anything, or that we are an ungovernable rabble. Actually, the planning debate that we had showed this place working at its best. We respected the Government's agenda, the Government listened to Back Benchers, we had a negotiation, and we reached a better state afterwards than we had before. We were vocal about what we believed was right, the Government were vocal about what they believed was right, and we negotiated our way through. The Government avoided an unnecessary rebellion; we respected the Government's position, and the Government listened to us. That is neither MPs being docile sheep nor MPs behaving like some rebellious rabble; it is Back-Bench MPs, especially, doing their job, and Government Ministers doing theirs. I actually thought it was a pretty good process.

Anyway, the housing targets remain, but they will be advisory, which I think is where they should be. We need to take a pragmatic, reasonable approach to examining the true housing numbers, and where there are genuine environmental constraints, councils will be able to propose a reduced housing number. Again, I point to the Isle of Wight as a really good example of that, because we have finite space. By way of example, I remind the Minister that in many areas of the south and south-east, the population has increased dramatically—I know that is happening in her patch. Over the past 60 years on the Island, we have increased our population by nearly 50%; it is about 50% in 50 years.

At the same time, there has been a decline—not a relative decline, but an absolute decline—in the populations of Newcastle, Sunderland, Hull, Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham and Stoke. We have had two great trends over the past 50 years: a move from city centres to suburbs, and a move from north to south. A lot of the pressure in constituencies such as mine is due to the decades-long lack of investment, or lack of an attempt to drive prosperity, in many of those great cities. Newcastle is a fantastic and exciting city, Birmingham, Manchester and Liverpool likewise, yet they have all had declining populations since the late 1950s and 1960s. If we could reverse that trend and make those cities hubs that people will want to go to, because that is where the jobs and prosperity are, that would take pressure off communities such as ours, as the Minister knows.

The more we can get levelling up right, the better it will be for all of us, and the less pressure it will put on our communities. That means that more infrastructure money then goes back to northern communities and midlands city centres, which is where it should be in the first place. It seems entirely obvious to me that if one is developing a brownfield site in an existing community, the infrastructure spend is probably going to be lower. Widening single-track Victorian lanes in the east and north-east of the Isle of Wight—which is what is having to be done in my patch—costs a lot more than if it were happening in Liverpool and Manchester, because the infrastructure is there already. The more we invest in inner-city centres that have high-density populations, the better it is for those city centres, for Government services, and for communities such as mine.

The Government are also going to modify the existing five-year land supply rule to pretty much get rid of it. They are going to kill off the tilted balance, thank God—I think that is an incredibly pernicious thing. Again, rebalancing the economies of greenfield and brownfield use to regenerate empty buildings, disused sites and town centres seems to me economically, socially and environmentally important; it just seems to be an incredibly sensible thing to do. If there is more money for brownfield site clean-up, Isle of Wight Council will be very excited to hear it, so if the Minister has anything to say about that today, she is very welcome to say it.

I have gone on for a little bit longer than I thought I would, so I will wrap up.

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): More!

Bob Seely: More or less?

Mr Mohindra: More.

Bob Seely: I think we are in a good place regarding all the things that we negotiated. Obviously, we need to see them in the national planning policy framework, so I just want to check—I am sorry; I have been doing so much in the past week or so—is the new NPPF out now, or is it going to be out? We were promised that those changes would kick in come the new year. Have the changes in the NPPF happened yet, or is there going to be a date by which they will happen? Clearly, the Isle of Wight is now making its Island plan, and wants to use the exceptional circumstance assumptions that have been confirmed to it by Government, for which it is grateful.

We look forward to supporting the levelling-up agenda and the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill, so that we make sure that we get housing where we need it in the United Kingdom while respecting communities such as mine. We need housing for local youngsters and other local people. On the Isle of Wight, that means housing for Islanders of all ages. Some people are downsizing, and a lot of people are first-time buyers who are looking for affordability criteria of 60% of local rates, rather than 80%.

As much as is possible, we need to get housing associations on the Island building. I would pretty much rule out private sector housing estates. If we are to build housing on the Isle of Wight, it needs to be affordable, and for Islanders. If people want to move to the Island, they are very welcome to; that is what the back of the *Isle Of Wight County Press* is for, where there are all the ads for property. There is lots of property for them to buy on the Island. We do not need to build for people moving to the Island; we need to build to make sure that there are homes for young people. We need to engage housing associations. The more support there is for housing associations, and for building in existing communities, on brownfield sites, the more we can keep everybody happy. We can then build for our young people while respecting communities, who will not feel under attack from the threat of settlements being built on the greenfield around them.

The deal that we struck with the Minister and the Government is not perfect, but it is much better than what came before. I look forward to working with the Government on making a success of it.

Martin Vickers (in the Chair): I see that I do not need to remind Back Benchers to bob if they wish to speak.

3.21 pm

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely)—my good friend—on bringing forward this really important debate. I commend him and my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) for the excellent work that they have done on the issue for a significant time. Most of that work was done behind closed doors, as critical friends of the Government. It allowed me, as a Government loyalist, the space to contribute positively, in a small way, to making sure that the legislation was exactly as we wanted, without been seen as disruptive or disloyal.

As I have said many times in this Chamber, I come from a local government background. I was a councillor for 17 years before being elected to this place. Actually,

there was a bit of overlap because of the pandemic. In that time, I spent many years on planning committees. Most recently, I was chairman of a planning committee in Epping Forest. I was a dual-hatter: I was also a county councillor in Essex. During my tenure as county councillor, I was responsible for strategic planning. In all those years in local government, I thought that local plans were better than what preceded them: the regional development agencies, which were part of a clunky, top-down model imposed on our communities from Whitehall. Although the local plan process remains emotive and, I would argue, quite difficult, it is part of a journey, and part of the future legislation, which will improve the process.

I commend the Government for listening to the constructive criticism and feedback that people such as my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight have put forward. Top-down numbers are helpful, but they should not be a stick with which to beat local authorities. I am happy for provisions on the five-year land supply to be removed. I always thought that they were a tool that unscrupulous developers or applicants could use to put development in the wrong place. I think I speak on behalf of the whole House when I say that politicians are always conscious of unintended consequence. No politician, whatever their party, wants to put forward bad laws or policies. When it comes to encouraging councils to ensure a pipeline of future development, a hard five-year deadline would open up a massive can of worms; unscrupulous developers from around the country would get involved. Both my authorities' planning departments were a bit under-resourced, through no fault of their own, which meant that they were in some ways swimming against the tide, and finding that increasingly difficult.

My constituency of South West Hertfordshire is a beautiful part of the world. The Chilterns area of outstanding natural beauty is to our west, and we have the border with London to the south. We have the best of all worlds: we have very good transport links with London, but we retain that village feel. We are about 80% green belt, so pretty much wherever we look, we see prime green belt, farmland and trees. Part of the joy of representing South West Hertfordshire is that, waking up in the morning, I am more likely to hear a bird than cars. That is not to say we do not need further investment in transport—and I will continue to bang on about the train network and the tube in the south—but it is a nice place to live. As a conservative with a small C, part of my role as the elected Member of Parliament is to retain what we love about the community. Pressures that we experience in the home counties and London, particularly pre pandemic because of the draw for better-paid jobs, mean that we will continue to have these debates on local planning issues.

It is great to see the Minister in her place. My plea to her is to try to future-proof the local planning process. With the way people live their lives post pandemic, the south-east is less of a draw, because they can have a well-paid, good job with future career prospects without moving down to South West Hertfordshire or London. My generation, including a lot of my friends from the midlands, was drawn down to London. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for regeneration and development, I had a meeting with Birmingham City Council yesterday. After hearing about the exciting plans in that part of the world, I think that if I were an 18 or 20-year-old from there now, I would not necessarily

see the bright lights of London as the real draw. People can still have a good quality of life, with reasonable house prices and a good work-life balance, and live in a vibrant community with lots of future plans.

I represent half of the area covered by Dacorum Borough Council and most of the area covered by Three Rivers District Council. The two councils did a poll back in 2020, asking residents to name their favourite thing about living in South West Hertfordshire. Over three quarters of respondents across both council areas said it was the parks and open spaces. The silver lining of the pandemic is that people have really appreciated what is on their doorstep.

As someone who still commutes into London every day, I may be a rare breed. A lot of people are still getting back to working full time in their office space, after being perfectly set up over the last couple of years to work from home. Avoiding a two-hour commute there and back, which I have to do most days, is a draw. However, as well as saving on the commute time and transport costs, the quality of life aspect is important. Planning, by its very nature, should be focused on the health and wellbeing of communities. As a Conservative councillor, my view was that when planning is done badly, not only does it create an eyesore, but the negative aspects of poor development lead to unhealthy outcomes, which mean an additional burden on the state in future years. As a Conservative, one of my values is offering value for money. Where we can reduce the cost burden for future generations, we should be proactively doing that. The way we do planning is very much part of that mix.

Apparently, 1.2 million homes are lying dormant on brownfield sites. I referred earlier to the significant green-belt aspect of my community. Although there is always a draw to do what is easy—that is, if there is a piece of grassland, build on it—that does not mean it is the right thing to do. My hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight spoke about renewed emphasis on getting brownfield sites back into use. That is absolutely the right theme, which I hope my Government will continue to push.

Some of the regeneration in our communities is to do with not necessarily new homes, but the quality of what people see outside their windows. For someone driving to the local shops, being next to a derelict site where nothing looks to have happened for five or 10 years has a subconscious bearing on how they feel for the day. Although new development is a pain in the short term, people feel the benefit of those brand new hospitals or schools, or additional classroom space. That is what the planning process is meant to do. It is meant to make the next generation living in that area have an easier life than the previous one.

Strategic planning is absolutely required. We have had piecemeal planning, which we see occasionally from planning application appeals. Inevitably, those have led to a can of worms, with developments in the wrong place. They might make a lot of money for the developer at the time, but they have a significant impact on local authorities, especially when trying to offer a support network such as social services or NHS nurses, which have to go to out-of-the-way places that can be the wrong sites for such developments.

From January last year to September, across all the Hertfordshire councils, about 12,000 applications were received, with about 11,500 decisions taken and, of

those, 85% granted. The planning application process therefore does not seem to be the issue or a bottleneck. Planning remains complex, which it needs to be, with a lot of expertise required—I applaud the Government's drive for digitisation, because more people will engage in the process—but there should be more motivation to do the right thing, although I do not yet know how to do that. Putting in an application just to increase the property value, without developing it—I know loved ones who have done the same—might be helpful in the short term, but it is a false economy as regards what is available or in the pipeline to be developed.

In the south of my constituency, Three Rivers District Council is Liberal Democrat-controlled. For many years, since I was elected, I have pushed it to continue the momentum to get a local plan in place. As the constituency Member of Parliament, I would argue that the council is probably using the change in the forms in planning legislation that we are looking to make as an excuse not to get on and do it. In the north of my constituency, Dacorum District Council is Conservative-controlled, and it is just getting on with its plan, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) said at Prime Minister's questions. While that is difficult, it is absolutely the right thing to do.

My plea to the Minister is that where we think councils are using the situation to do the wrong thing, we need, whether by a quiet word, threats of sanctions or whatever—I do not know what tools she has in her armoury—to encourage such councils to get on and do their plan, because sitting one's head in the sand is not the solution for planning. We need to have those mature, if typically emotive, conversations and for decisions to be made. Politicians are elected to make decisions, even when they are sometimes difficult to make.

The Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill is in a good place. There is more to do, but I would not expect that to happen in this piece of legislation. I am sure future legislation will be coming down the pipeline through the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.

The demand for housing in this country cannot and should not be ignored. My hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight spoke about start times, and that is a big issue in my part of the world. While people will remain emotive about new development, typically such new homes are for the local community. When people move out of mum and dad's home, where will they live? In my part of the world, it means they have to move significant distances away.

Brownfield land is very much there, and we need proactively to get it back into use, even more so than now. The counterpart to that is some green-belt land. The Government should encourage regular reviews of green belt, because it has various spectrums—if it is prime arable land, absolutely we should retain it in the green belt, but if a site is on the edge of settlement, has been dilapidated for 20 years and is of no help or environmental benefit, we should identify it and make better use of it. With the right plan and policies in place, we can maximise the benefits of planning and keep our green spaces safe.

3.34 pm

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers.

[Robbie Moore]

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) on securing this important debate. It is important because planning policy impacts on everyone, and everyone has a view on it, whether that is negative or positive. Generally, it impacts on everyone's life.

I will pick up on some of the absolutely valid points made by my hon. Friend the Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Mohindra) about the fact that a lot of planning policy has to be community-driven. Sometimes, it has to be generated at the grassroots level, rather than top-down. As has been said, it is incredibly important that planning policy is community-led. It has to consider the environment and relate to the needs of what is required within a specific community. It is important that we develop houses that meet and enhance the health and wellbeing of the communities we all represent.

I take a keen interest in planning policy because I studied architecture at Newcastle University and, in my year in industry, worked for a great company up in Newcastle that was involved in master planning exercises for housing regeneration schemes. One of the schemes we got involved with was in a deprived area of Sunderland, Southwick, and looked at how we could enhance a community through the quality of build of houses being developed. Indeed, I remember when I was at university, I did my dissertation on Byker and how the built environment can support communities. That is absolutely what planning policy should be about.

There are a few issues I want to cover in my contribution. I will consider local plans and how we can ensure that the infrastructure we all like to talk about—whether that is roads, GPs, schools or parks—is supported and there to enhance people's quality of life with regard to housing. I will also touch on affordable housing and what an industrial strategy looks like when we are talking about employment use, and I will finish by talking about telecom masts.

My constituency of Keighley and Ilkley is going through a review of its local plan. Our local planning authority, Bradford Council, is looking at the local plan and will be putting it out for its second consultation in the not-too-distant future—I have been informed that that will happen shortly. One of the inevitable challenges is the drive to increase housing numbers across the whole of the Bradford district, which contains many different settlements, including not only Bradford city itself, but Keighley and Ilkley, which as towns are very different from the city. The complexity lies in the different make-up of those settlements and where the need is in those settlement areas.

Through the first consultation on the local plan, it became clear that the local authority seems to have an incredible will almost to offload some of those housing numbers to the easy wins—the easy wins being most of the outlying areas in the greenfield or in green-belt areas where it might be easier to get those planning applications through at a later date. The local plans are being developed at the moment that will create the next 15-year housing strategy, which will, we hope, be adopted later this year.

The concerns I have raised constantly are that the plan does not focus enough on prioritising brownfield development. We must refocus on those brownfield sites. Yes, they are more complex to develop—they may

have contamination issues, issues with highways, challenges from some of the old mill settlements and so on—when trying to create a clean slate to drive that private inward investment into some of those sites. However, that has to be looked at because, unless we actually have a brownfield-first priority, we run the risk of not only reducing the soul of a settlement where those brownfield site holes in a settlement have been identified, but not actually developing houses where that need is identified.

My concern is that, in several of the towns I represent, the housing numbers that have been proposed are dramatic. They are way over and above the need identified for those settlements. In some of the discussions I have been having with the local authority, I hear that it has allocated the housing numbers to those settlements based on the deliverability factor—that is, it knows it can deliver x houses in those settlements because can build it on greenfield or take green-belt land out of the green belt for housing, rather than having a proper focus on brownfield first.

I will give some examples. There is Silsden—I should declare an interest, because that is the town that I live in. It is in the middle of the constituency, and it has had a proposed increase in housing numbers of about 580. Silsden is a relatively small settlement that has grown and grown; as we speak, we have an application from Persimmon Homes for 140 houses, to which I have put in an objection. We have had a Barratt Homes development; we have had Countrywide looking at putting in a development; we have Linden Homes currently building on site; and Skipton Properties has recently built a housing development.

Bob Seely: My hon. Friend is making a great speech, and I thank him so much for being here. Is not one of the problems with these big property companies, apart from the fact that they land bank, that they are interested only in really big sites? Since the great crash 10 or 15 years ago, a lot of the medium-sized and smaller building companies have gone out of business. We need to motivate smaller companies, or find financial incentives for developing smaller sites in a way that is much more acceptable to smaller towns and villages. That is better than Persimmon Homes, which, apart from anything else, has a dreadful reputation for the quality of its build, just plonking down 100 homes here or 500 homes there, and almost taking over and swamping the village.

Robbie Moore: That is exactly the point that I want to come on to, because Silsden is being inundated with houses. A live application for 140 houses is being considered by Bradford Council. I am completely opposed to it, but it is one of about six planning applications made over a period of time, and some of those houses are still being built. The point is that there has not been a sensible conversation about the impact on infrastructure and, as my hon. Friend pointed out, the quality of the build.

The road infrastructure going through Silsden is not great at all. I drive through Silsden weekly, and the roads are tight and narrow. The pavements are not wide enough, let alone the roads. There are no conversations about the school, the GP services and the other facilities that the town needs in order to stay vibrant. Settlements sometimes need to grow organically; growth must be driven by the requirements of individual settlements. There sometimes needs to be a focus on brownfield sites

first, or on development of niche, smaller sites, which could be grown at an organic speed and delivered in line with settlements' need.

In Ilkley, the average house price is somewhere around £420,000. That is very high, but local plan proposals suggest that Ilkley needs to grow by another 314 houses. I am constantly pushing back, because the community and I need to see the requirement for Ilkley to grow by that number of houses over the next 14 years.

Just down the road, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), Burley in Wharfedale has grown hugely recently—by about 700 houses. The implications for the GP service are huge. It has been a real challenge to unlock money, whether through section 106 or the community infrastructure levy, to improve the infrastructure. I have been helping out my hon. Friend with that.

I will come on to the quality of the build, which my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight made a really good point about. I have mentioned Harron Homes in this Chamber before; the quality of its build has been shocking, and it is not great to say that. I will give another example. About 50 houses were built—again, in Silsden. Other Members from across West Yorkshire have made this point in this Chamber before. The site was finished, in the developer's eyes, yet there were huge snagging issues. The road was not even sorted out; in fact, sewage from the site had to be disposed of by a lorry that came in and emptied the tank, because the connection with Yorkshire Water were not sorted out. How can we ensure more enforcement against property developers when build is not of the quality that residents, and we representatives, expect? What can the Government do to put more pressure on developers to enhance the quality of houses, and of the master planning of the community that is being developed?

That brings me to industrial strategy. Inevitably, when it comes to planning, everybody likes to talk about houses, because that is quite an emotive issue, but I agree with the points that my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight made about the use of compulsory purchase powers. On North Street in Keighley, there are many empty buildings with fantastic architecture. How do we use compulsory purchase powers to unlock those sites, and force the owners to change them into housing, or get them into some sort of community use, so that they do not sit empty year after year? Those sites could be used by the town.

Dalton Mills is a fantastic building. It is an old mill—one of the biggest in Keighley—that has been redundant for many a year, although “Peaky Blinders” was filmed there. The quality of the site has deteriorated over many years, and last year there was a big fire—100 firefighters and 21 fire engines came. The building unfortunately suffered a huge amount of fire damage, although the façades seem to be structurally sound. It is a unique site just outside the centre of Keighley, but we are unable to unlock it because the landowner seems aloof—we cannot get in touch with him. We cannot get traction with some of these key sites. How can we unlock them, in planning policy terms, using compulsory purchase powers?

Let me turn to the speed at which local authorities operate. In order to drive growth and job creation, we want light industrial units in appropriate places, but it takes too long to get the planning applications through

the system and get those units built. I have been shown many examples in Keighley. About four years ago, a planning application was submitted to the local authority for eight or 10 light industrial units. It did not get any traction from the local authority until the early in the covid period. During the covid period, the units got built and occupied, and now those businesses are flourishing. The demand is there; we just need to increase the speed.

Of course we want to drive better connectivity, but telecom masts have to be in locations where they do not have an adverse impact on the beauty of a village, and they must not be too close to residential units. There needs to be a mechanism for putting pressure on organisations such as Clarke Telecom that drive some of the applications. We must ensure that they look at where the best sites are. I will give three examples.

Unfortunately, a telecoms mast was approved in Addingham. It has a huge impact; it does not look good on the drive into the village. There would most definitely have been a better site for it. Putting it elsewhere would not have affected connectivity. All the residents of Addingham are impacted when they drive into the village and see that ghastly telecoms mast. An applicant applied to put a telecom mast on a site in the middle of Ilkley that was not even part of the public highway; they just thought they could get away with it. They had to withdraw the scheme, which will now be reconsidered. I put a lot of pressure on them. There was an application for a mast on a roundabout in the heart of the beautiful village of East Morton. We want to drive connectivity, but we do not want random applications for masts all over the place, with applicants seeing what they can get away with. That is not acceptable.

We have covered loads of points. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight for securing this debate, because planning policy without doubt impacts all our constituents. Everyone is incredibly passionate about it.

The Government are absolutely going in the right direction, and I commend them for listening to the many concerns that I have raised about housing numbers. The key point that I want to reiterate before I close is that planning policy has to be driven by need. What we need, rather than local authorities aiming policy at quick wins, is to create housing where it is needed, and a “brownfield first” policy.

3.50 pm

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Vickers. I congratulate the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) on securing this important debate, and on the clarity with which he set out his position. I thank the hon. Members for Keighley (Robbie Moore), and for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Mohindra), for their contributions.

The Opposition are in complete agreement with the hon. Member for Isle of Wight on the need to reform planning. After a decade of piecemeal and largely inept tinkering, the planning system that the Government are presiding over is faltering on almost all fronts. It is failing to meet the housing, amenity and infrastructure needs of many, if not most, local areas; failing to play its full part in addressing various national challenges,

[Matthew Pennycook]

from the climate and environment emergency to improving public health; and failing to sustain what little public trust and confidence it still enjoys. There is no question but that it needs to be overhauled.

The hon. Member for Isle of Wight will not be surprised to learn that the Opposition agree that action is required on several of the planning issues that he identified—indeed, I would say that action is long overdue. Let me address a number of those in turn. The first issue is land banking. We appreciate that developers require a pipeline of planning consents to manage capacity in the face of inherent uncertainty, and that reference to 1 million outstanding planning permissions is therefore an overly simplistic and, in some ways, inaccurate critique, but Labour agrees that developers regularly make use of current and strategic land banks to game the planning system. That represents a serious problem, and robust measures are required to address it, as well as build-out rates more generally; certainly, we need much stronger forms of intervention than the useful, but ultimately inadequate, set of measures in the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill.

The second issue is brownfield land, which has been alluded to a number of times. Labour recognises that there are simply not enough sites on brownfield land registers to deliver the volume of homes that the country needs each year, let alone enough that are viable and in the right location. However, we absolutely support the prioritisation of brownfield land development, and agree that much more could be done to facilitate good brownfield development, not least by overhauling and repurposing Homes England.

The third is compulsory purchase. We are in complete agreement on the need for local planning authorities to have greater compulsory purchase order powers, and we have been clear at every stage of its passage that we support the CPO provisions in the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill, including those introduced in Committee on compensation in relation to hope value. Indeed, we have repeatedly urged the Government to go further and implement the proposals outlined in the second part of the compulsory purchase compensation reforms consultation, namely to disapply section 17 of the Land Compensation Act 1961 in certain circumstances and enable local authorities to acquire land at or closer to existing use value in order to increase the number of financially viable developments and expedite regeneration schemes on them.

The fourth is community participation, which has also been mentioned several times. Labour absolutely agrees that meaningful public participation in the planning system is essential. We believe that where it takes place, it helps to improve outcomes, and we want to see much more of it, particularly when it comes to engagement in the preparation of local plans. The problem is that the legitimacy of the planning system has been severely damaged in the eyes of the public over the past decade as a result of a series of changes, not least of which is the progressive extension of permitted development rights since 2013, and the slum housing—putting it bluntly—that it has so often been used to create. That has left communities with much less say over development in their area than they previously enjoyed. Various measures in the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill

undermine the status and remit of local planning, and deny or frustrate the right of communities to be heard, and that will only compound the problem. It was regrettable that members of the Conservative planning concern group ultimately chose not to join us in resisting them.

Where we fundamentally part ways with the hon. Member for Isle of Wight and his colleagues in that group is on the importance that we attach to, among many other laudible objectives, ensuring that the planning system is explicitly focused on meeting objectively assessed housing need. For all the rhetoric about seeking a fairer planning system, in recent months, what the hon. Gentleman and his group have convinced the Government, in their weakness, to adopt is a proposed national planning policy framework that will provide local planning authorities with myriad different ways of avoiding delivering the homes that people need. Whether it is the emphasis in the revised NPPF on locally prepared plans providing for “sufficient” housing only; the softening of land supply and delivery test provisions; the ability to include historical over-delivery in five year housing land supply calculations; or the listing of various local characteristics that would justify a deviation from the standard method, taken together, the proposed changes will give those local authorities that wish to take advantage of it the freedom to plan for less housing, irrespective of whatever target nominally remains in place.

It is true that the proposed changes to the NPPF are only being consulted on, but we know that they will almost certainly be enacted. The effect of the signal that they have sent, as was surely intended, is already evident; numerous local plans have been paused, explicitly on the basis that the proposed changes justify a review. Local plans have been mentioned at several points in the debate, and in her response, the Minister will no doubt highlight the need to bring forward more. We absolutely agree. It is an indictment of this Government’s performance that after a decade of plan making, 59% of the country still does not have an up-to-date local plan. Although the proposed changes to the NPPF may well increase local planning coverage across England, they will almost certainly do so on the basis of numerous development plans that will not meet the needs of their given housing market areas in full. The Government are making the entirely arbitrary figure of a 35% uplift to urban centres policy by placing it in the NPPF. They clearly hope that it will mean that England’s largest cities and urban centres will do the heavy lifting on housing supply, but most of the cities that it applies to cannot, or will be unable to, accommodate the output it entails.

Bob Seely: The hon. Gentleman agrees with us on some things, and disagrees on others; that is fair enough, but does he accept that the UK has some of the least dense cities on the planet? We are a very crowded, small island, and we need to increase density in our cities. The most attractive places in our inner cities tend to be those with the highest density, so high density is not a problem in itself. Actually, forcing higher density creates better-quality services, because it builds a market for those services. This is an incredibly sensible thing for the Government to do.

Matthew Pennycook: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. Let me be clear: I take no issue whatever with the drive to densify already developed urban areas, but as I argued, the cities and urban

centres to which the uplift applies are pretty clear that they cannot, or will not be able to, accommodate the levels of housing supply that it entails, not least because of the constraints imposed on them by a number of the proposals in that NPPF consultation—I do not know whether he is aware of that, or how involved he was in the negotiations that he mentioned—and the absence of any effective means of managing cross-boundary housing growth.

The net result of all these changes, as I think everyone here knows full well, is that the Government have consciously accepted that fewer houses will be built in England over the coming years. That decision entails a deliberate shift from a plan-led system focused on making at least some attempt to meet housing need, to one geared toward providing only what the politics of any given area allow, with all the implications that entails for the housing crisis and economic growth. These latest politically driven changes leave national planning policy, and the planning system as a whole, more confusing and contradictory than ever.

Local planning authorities remain under-resourced, overwhelmed, demoralised and consequently unable in large part to process applications at pace. England's planning structures remain dysfunctional; they are utterly incapable of managing housing growth at a strategic scale. Not only does the system as a whole lack a clear and overarching purpose but the unifying thread that ran through the 2012 NPPF—namely, the presumption in favour of sustainable development—has now effectively been jettisoned.

So I conclude by returning to my original point of agreement with the hon. Member for Isle of Wight. The planning system is indeed crying out for reform, but not the reform that he and his colleagues are pursuing and the Government have conceded to. Instead, it requires reform that the present Government are now incapable of delivering. It is high time that we had a general election, so that the present Government can make way for a Government who are serious about ensuring that the planning system and national planning policy are designed to meet housing need and boost economic growth.

4 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Lucy Frazer): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) on securing this debate on an incredibly important topic, which I know Members from across the House feel very strongly about. It touches all our constituents; indeed, it makes a significant difference to their daily lives. It is an issue that we have debated extensively in recent months, both in the main Chamber and outside it, and I am very pleased to have had a number of conversations with my hon. Friend and other colleagues who are here today, as well as with many other Members who are not present, in order to hear all their views and take them into account. I think that has left us with a much better Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill, which will secure the futures of our constituencies in terms of building houses that people want, and in the right places.

It has been a pleasure to work with colleagues from across the House, and I think that what we now have is a system that is shaped around the interests of communities,

whereby we will have beautiful designs in keeping with local styles and the character of an area, and developments and buildings that people want and welcome.

It is really important that we have local plans in place. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook), talked about these plans and he quite rightly said that at the moment only 40% of areas have a local plan, which means that speculative developments are imposed on communities. What we seek to do through the Bill is to secure a significant culture change in our areas, so that people do not resist development but seek it and indeed want it because it brings benefits to their area. I do not accept what the hon. Gentleman said, namely, that we are damaging the system; in fact, we will enhance it.

Many Members talked about community buy-in, which is at the heart of our Bill. I thought that my hon. Friend the Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Mohindra) got it absolutely when he said that it was important to retain our local communities, that we had vibrant communities across the country, that we had green spaces and that people recognised that these open areas were important. Indeed, they are essential to people across the country. He also quite rightly highlighted the issue that has developed in relation to the five-year land supply and the speculative development that has come from that.

All Government Members talked about community buy-in. My hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight talked about the bitter battles among communities and my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (Robbie Moore) talked about the need for development to be community-led, which is at the heart of what we want to do at the moment.

Indeed, two words sum up what we want; they are “local consent”. If we want a planning process that can endure, communities must be at the heart of it. We must hear their voices; we must listen to what they say; they must be involved in the process; the plans need to be shorter; and the documents need to be more accessible. And at the same time as communities shape local plans, we are clear that communities will retain the right to comment on individual applications.

We want all of this to be done more in digital form, so that people can access plans and engage with them, including commenting on them. We want to harness social media and digital channels such as email, so that we can increase visibility of and access to plans, and that is what we are doing through the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill.

Robbie Moore: I just want to make clear my point about commenting on planning policy. It is really important, in terms of transparency, that people can see, as a planning application is lodged, what other people are commenting on. Does the Minister agree with me that it is frustrating that Bradford Council, my local authority, has decided to take the step of removing from public view any comments that the public make on a planning application? It will not allow members of the public to see those comments and is using GDPR, as the reason for doing so. Yet other local authorities enable all their residents to see all comments that are made on planning applications. I wonder whether the Minister might comment on that.

Lucy Frazer: My hon. Friend makes an interesting point. I do think that, as a generic point, it is important that people feel involved in the process and, therefore, can comment on it and understand the views of the local community.

Mr Mohindra: The Minister is being generous with her time. In terms of the drive towards digital viewing, can she reassure me that, for those constituents who are not digitally enabled, there is still alternative provision for them to look at plans and offer their feedback?

Lucy Frazer: Of course. This issue always crops up when we talk about digitalisation. Of course we need to ensure that access is available for anyone when we digitalise. This morning I was in Buckinghamshire looking at a programme to digitalise its planning processes. It is very concerning that some statistics show that 50% of planning applications are invalid. This is a significant waste of councils' time and of people's time. It is blocking up our system and making sure that local planning officers cannot concentrate on getting things through the system.

I would like to turn to the question of the character of an area, because that is something that we have set out in the NPPF and that needs to be carefully considered. I did not know and was very interested to hear that my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley was an architect. I am sure that his skills will come to the fore as we introduce our design codes around the country. We are bringing them in to ensure that development is appropriate for the community, is well designed and looks good, so that people welcome the development that comes into their area.

Many Members, but particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley, also mentioned infrastructure. It is absolutely critical that we get infrastructure into communities, so that they see that development is not just about housing; it is about schools and GP surgeries and might be about other infrastructure as well. Some of the measures in the Bill will ensure that we get infrastructure faster. People might have an ability—will have an ability—to borrow up front. They might have an ability to ask for instalments—I am talking about funds from the developer up front. They might—they will—have the ability to ensure that they get an uplift. What happens is that the land value is x and, once planning permission has been given, the land value increases significantly, to x plus y . Why should the local council not get the benefit of the uplift as well?

Many Members talked about brownfield. Brownfield is extremely important. The Government encourage the reuse of brownfield land. National policy sets out that planning policies and decisions should make efficient use of land and give substantial weight to the value of using suitable brownfield land within settlements. We have taken a number of measures to support the redevelopment of brownfield land. For example, we require every local authority to publish a register of local brownfield land suitable for housing; we have introduced permission in principle to speed up housing-led development; we have revised permitted development and use class rules, to make the best use of existing buildings; and we have uplifted housing need in our most populated cities and urban areas.

My hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight talked about brownfield land funding money. We have introduced a number of funding initiatives, including the £550 million

brownfield housing fund, the £180 million brownfield land release fund 2 and the £4.3 billion housing infrastructure fund.

I am also pleased to say—I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight knows this—that three sites in the Isle of Wight were successful in their bids to the brownfield land release fund in October 2021. They were awarded nearly £950,000 to release local-authority-owned brownfield land for 71 homes.

I was interested to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley talk about the brownfield land that should be developed in his constituency. As someone who grew up in Leeds, I am familiar with many of the areas that he mentioned. Of course, local authorities must think carefully about the land that they are proposing for development, with a particular view to, and eye on, brownfield land.

My hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight mentioned compulsory purchase orders. He will know that we have already taken some steps in that area, with the Government's high street strategy, which was published in July 2021, and through further measures in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill. He rightly mentioned the Law Commission report and foreshadowed my reference to it. The Law Commission is undertaking an exercise to consolidate compulsory purchase law, to make it easier to understand, and to review CPO powers.

The shadow Minister talked about land banking. That is something that we are absolutely tackling in the Bill. He will know that we have set out measures so that developers have to set out trajectories of when they are going to build. He will know that we are taking steps to enable local authorities to take into account further planning permissions that are put forward on the same site. They can take into account, as a matter of discretion, whether the first set has been built out or not, and we have also already said that we will be going further.

I will touch on the discrete measures that my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight mentioned. He raised some specific planning decisions in his constituency. In view of the quasi-judicial role that the planning Minister has, I will not comment on any particular applications, but I completely understand his general point about the importance of Government acting speedily.

My hon. Friend also mentioned the NPPF consultation. He asked what stage we were at, and asked about exceptional circumstances. I would just reassure him that we launched the consultation on 22 December, and, within that, there is reference to the Island in the exceptional circumstances test. We will make it clearer that the outcome of the standard method is set out as an advisory starting point. However, we will also give more explicit indications on planning guidance and the type of local characteristics that may justify the use of an alternative method, such as islands with a high percentage of elderly residents or university towns with above-average numbers of students. Those are part and parcel of the consultation, which we will be considering in due course.

On the issue of caravans, I know that officials are looking into the points that my hon. Friend raised, but I think there are some particular issues relating to the planning permissions under which they were originally granted. However, I am very happy to discuss that matter further with him.

I will reiterate the overarching point about the planning measures that we have taken, which I touched on at the beginning of my speech. We still have a commitment to building homes and are still working towards a target of 300,000 homes a year. It is absolutely essential that young people get on to the housing ladder. However, we are trying to change the nature of planning to ensure that people get homes where they want them, that they are beautifully designed so that people want them, and that they are surrounded by the infrastructure that communities want and need. If we change that culture in our planning system, people will start to welcome development and we will not have this constant resistance to new housing.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight again for securing the debate, for using it to press home his individual and national concerns, and for his constant engagement over the last few months. Building homes is

central to how we level up the country, and we need to build them in the right places—in the south, but absolutely in the north. It is how we create economic growth, and we need to do this in the right way. I and my Department, together with the Secretary of State and hon. Members across this House, are continuing to work towards a planning system that we can all be proud of.

4.14 pm

Bob Seely: I thank everyone for taking part in this debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of planning policy.

4.15 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 26 January 2023

CABINET OFFICE

Conflict, Stability and Security Fund Allocations 2022-23

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Jeremy Quin): I wish to update the House on the publication of the annual report of the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF) for financial year 2021-22, as well as to announce the initial regional and thematic allocations for this financial year (2022-23).

The CSSF is a cross-Government fund which uses official development assistance (ODA) and non-ODA funding to enable the integrated delivery of National Security Council priorities. In 2021/22, the CSSF spent £858.7 million against a final cross-government allocation of £864.2 million, representing 99.4% spend. A further breakdown of spend against regional and thematic allocation, by Department and by discretionary and non-discretionary spend is included in the FY 2021-22 annual report.

The report outlines how the fund evolved to deliver against the priorities set out in the integrated review of security, defence, development and foreign policy, including through the introduction of two new portfolios: international state threats which aims to improve the UK's ability to detect and deter hostile state activity, and the gender peace and security portfolio, which seeks to use innovative approaches to addressing gender in post-conflict reconstruction work.

The report further demonstrates how CSSF programmes have delivered against the fund's core principles, including through further improvements in the monitoring and evaluation of results to ensure value for money and effective delivery.

During this reporting period, the fund continued to adapt to address the ongoing impact of the covid-19 pandemic and played an important role in the UK's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

A copy of this document will be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses of Parliament and published on gov.uk.

The CSSF has allocated £889 million to portfolios for financial year 2022-23. This includes some over-allocation, following best practice, to ensure full spend by the end of the financial year.

FY 2020/21 Allocations (millions)			
Allocation	Non-ODA	ODA	Total
Middle East North Africa	33.327	56.894	90.221
Eastern Europe, Central Asia	43.765	45.100	88.865
Africa (sub-Saharan)	34.759	37.000	71.759
Western Balkans	11.097	29.400	40.497
Overseas Territories	21.289	4.869	26.158
South Asia	10.172	30.145	40.317
Asia Pacific	3.526	11.200	14.726
Americas	0.000	8.000	8.000
Regional Total	157.936	222.608	380.544

FY 2020/21 Allocations (millions)			
Allocation	Non-ODA	ODA	Total
Counter Extremism	14.674	20.526	35.200
Serious and organised crime	8.531	12.620	21.151
Cyber	14.531	11.550	26.081
Multilateral Strategy	3.581	4.387	7.968
Gender, peace and security	0.578	5.000	5.578
Migration	1.156	5.000	6.156
International state threats	11.560	2.000	13.560
National Security Communications Team	3.581	0.000	3.581
Thematic Total	58.192	61.083	119.275
Peacekeeping	234.159	76.466	310.625
ANISOM	30.000	0.000	30.000
MOD UN Ops Africa	28.617	0.000	28.617
MOD UNFICYP	6.263	0.000	6.263
Non-discretionary TOTAL	299.039	76.466	375.505
Corporate delivery support & other (this includes joint funds unit and pilot activities)	6.936	6.934	13.870
Total CSSF	522.103	367.091	889.194

[HCWS525]

TREASURY

Charter for Budget Responsibility

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Jeremy Hunt): Today I have laid before Parliament the Charter for Budget Responsibility. The charter sets out the new fiscal framework announced at autumn statement 2022 and codifies the Government's commitment to responsible management of the public finances. The fiscal rules ensure that policy keeps the public finances on a sustainable path, requiring that debt falls as a share of the economy over the forecast.

The charter was first published in draft on 17 November 2022. No further changes have been made to the charter since it was published in draft.

A debate and vote in the House of Commons on the updated charter will be scheduled in due course.

[HCWS526]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Agricultural Transition Plan

The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries (Mark Spencer): We are undertaking the most significant reform of agricultural policy and spending in England in decades as we take England out of the EU's bureaucratic and damaging common agricultural policy. Today I am setting out detailed plans for the nation's farming sector, supporting farmers to be profitable and resilient as they produce food sustainably while protecting nature and enhancing the environment.

These plans build on the announcements made at the Oxford farming conference earlier this month. They provide clarity and certainty to farmers, allowing them to make business decisions and cover costs as direct payments are phased out while getting involved in environmental land management schemes.

The roll out of the sustainable farming incentive will be accelerated, with six additional standards added this year, meaning farmers can receive payment for actions on hedgerows, grassland, arable and horticultural land, integrated pest management and nutrient management. They build on the three existing standards to improve soil health and moorlands introduced in 2022—which nearly 1,900 farmers already have in agreements.

Farmers will also be paid to deliver more through an enhanced version of the countryside stewardship scheme, which will see around 30 additional actions available to farmers by the end of 2024. The expansion builds on the more than 250 actions farmers can take at present. The scheme has seen a 94% increase in uptake since 2020 and is now part of thousands of farm businesses. The next round of the countryside stewardship higher tier will open in February, with mid-tier following in March.

Countryside stewardship-plus will reward farmers for taking co-ordinated action, working with neighbouring farms and landowners to support climate and nature aims. The countryside stewardship scheme will also be improved so farmers benefit from greater flexibility over when they can apply and how they manage their agreements, with improved access for tenant farmers and increased access to higher tier options and agreements.

Applications for the second round of the landscape recovery scheme will open in the spring to support ambitious large-scale nature recovery projects, focusing on net zero, protected sites and habitat creation. We will take on up to 25 projects which could include projects creating and enhancing woodlands, peatland, nature reserves and protected sites such as ancient woodlands, wetlands and salt marshes.

Taken together, the environmental land management schemes will offer something for every type of farmer. This includes tenant farmers, with a range of actions relevant to their holding, especially through the sustainable farming incentive which has been designed with them in mind. The schemes will make food production more resilient and efficient over the longer term while contributing towards the UK's environmental goals on climate adaptation, biodiversity, water quality and net zero. Together this will safeguard the long-term prosperity of the farming industry and protect the environment for future generations.

[HCWS527]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Proceeds of Crime Act 2002: Appointed Person Report 2021-2022

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Suella Braverman): I am today laying before Parliament the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 (POCA) appointed person report covering England and Wales for the period 2021-22. The appointed person is independent of Government and scrutinises the circumstances and manner in which search and seizure powers conferred by the Act are exercised under particular circumstances.

I am pleased that we are now able to publish the appointed person's latest report. Having considered the circumstances in which the relevant powers were used, the appointed person is satisfied that the criteria required for justifying the searches without prior judicial approval were met and that the powers of search were exercised appropriately.

In 2021-22, there has been a decrease in the number of cases where search and seizure powers are used without prior approval, although we are seeing a number of new agencies report across the country that have not submitted reports previously. Notably, three separate cases related to the seizure of cryptoassets. Seizing cryptoassets without judicial approval is largely due to agencies having to move quickly before the assets are accessed from another device and moved elsewhere. Proposed reforms in the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Bill are designed to enable the seizure of cryptoassets in more circumstances than at present.

The appointed person has also recognised our progress against previous recommendations and has made no new recommendations for the period. This suggests that the powers are being used in accordance with the Act. These powers are important for agencies to act quickly in live operation to search and seize potential criminal assets, so we are pleased to see that they are being used appropriately. We will continue to monitor the way that the powers have been used closely.

Copies of the report will be available in the Vote Office.

[HCWS524]

Windrush: Lessons Learned Review Recommendations

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Suella Braverman): Today I am updating Parliament on Home Office delivery of the recommendations set out in the Windrush lessons learned review, published in March 2020.

Since my appointment as Home Secretary, I have made a commitment to resolving the outstanding issues related to Windrush and have met members of the Windrush Working Group both to hear their feedback and more formally at the most recent cross-government Windrush Working Group which I was honoured to co-chair with Bishop Derek Webley.

Since the injustices of Windrush came to light, there has been a concerted effort across the Home Office to right the wrongs suffered by those affected. This work continues and we are making sustained progress delivering on the recommendations and the commitments made in our comprehensive improvement plan.

In her report last year, Wendy Williams concluded that 21 out of 30 of her recommendations had been met or partially met. She acknowledged that the scale of the challenge she set the Department was significant and that change on this scale takes time.

Since then, we have made further progress in delivering against Wendy Williams' recommendations. For example, in June 2022, the "Serving Diverse Communities—Acting on Our Values" learning package was launched across the Home Office, starting with recommendations 24 (learning for senior civil servants) and 29 (diversity and inclusion). The learning package for recommendation 6—the history of the UK and its relationship with the rest of the world, will be launched in the coming weeks.

The Department continues to make progress on compensating those unfairly impacted. As of December 2022, the Windrush compensation scheme paid out or offered £64.08 million in compensation to Windrush victims across 1,417 claims. £53.98 million of this has been paid and over 59% of claims—3,025—have received a final decision.

The Home Office regularly reviews the best way to deliver against the intent of Wendy Williams' Windrush lessons learned review. As such, after considering officials' advice, I have decided not to proceed with recommendations 3 (run reconciliation events), 9 (introduce a migrants commissioner) and 10 (review the remit and role of the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration) in their original format. Extensive consideration has been given to how to deliver these recommendations in appropriate and meaningful ways: ensuring that individuals have opportunities to tell their stories; amplifying the voices of individuals engaging with the immigration system; and driving scrutiny of the Department.

On reconciliation events specifically, on the balance of expert advice received on how to approach this incredibly sensitive subject, I am persuaded that there are more effective ways of engaging with those impacted.

The Department has undertaken a significant programme of face-to-face engagement with the communities impacted by the Windrush scandal since 2018. Surgeries were held in community halls and places such as churches, mosques and care homes, as and where the need was identified. The engagement events were held in most major cities across the UK and including regions such as the west midlands, London and south-west. The events were hosted by senior members of the Windrush programme and provided individuals with the opportunity to speak to them about the impact the scandal had had on their and their family's lives. Over 3,000 people were reached through these events.

This engagement with communities is further supported by the £500,000 Windrush community fund which was launched in 2020 and provided funding to grassroots organisations and charities with grants of up to £25,000 each to promote the Windrush schemes in innovative ways. Regular dialogue hosted by senior officials are held in forums with external stakeholders from Windrush communities who provide feedback and scrutiny of our engagement and communication efforts. This type of engagement will remain an important part of our work. Further, I look forward to celebrating the contribution that the Windrush community has made to our country in the upcoming 75th anniversary celebrations.

Recommendations 9 and 10 relate to the establishment of a migrants commissioner and a review of the role of the ICIBI. As Home Secretary I remain committed to the importance of scrutiny, both internal and external. There are a number of ways in which we are inviting this challenge and scrutiny in a more efficient way. In October 2022, the Department established the Independent Examiner for Complaints. This office will ensure that customers who are not satisfied with the final response to their complaints have an opportunity to have their case reviewed independently by the IEC, helping the Home Office to identify learning and wider lessons from complaints to improve its service.

The IEC provides scrutiny of the Department's complaints procedure. Beyond this, I remain committed to the importance of scrutiny. I welcome the insight and

challenge that I and the wider Department have received from our colleagues in the Windrush Working Group. Professor Martin Levermore, in his role as independent advisor, has been constructively challenging and very supportive in the development of the Windrush compensation scheme. This has included proactively providing suggestions on improvements to the scheme, such as enhancing linkages between the compensation scheme and the Windrush status scheme, which the Department is now actively working on delivering.

External bodies are not the only source of scrutiny. As Wendy Williams identified, the very culture of the Department needed a fundamental shift, bringing policy development and service delivery into contact with those who are impacted by it, including those who might not agree with it. This is how we shift culture and subject ourselves to scrutiny and this is how we are changing.

I am proud of the efforts made by teams across the Home Office, but we know there is more to do. Many people suffered terrible injustices and the Department will continue working hard to deliver a Home Office worthy of every community served. Wendy Williams acknowledged that our ambition to achieve genuine cultural change requires ongoing reflection and a commitment to constant improvement. She acknowledged that the scale of the challenge she set the Department was significant and that change on this scale takes time. The Home Office keeps the Home Affairs Select Committee updated on progress against the recommendations and will continue to do so.

An update on each of the recommendations is provided in the table available as an online attachment.

Attachments can be viewed online at:
<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2023-01-26/HCWS523/>.

[HCWS523]

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Food and Drink Export Council

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Andrew Bowie): Today I am providing an update on the establishment of the Food and Drink Export Council (FDEC).

I am pleased to announce that the inaugural meeting of the FDEC took place on Wednesday 25 January 2023.

The UK Government previously announced their intention to establish the new FDEC in response to recommendation 13 of the Trade and Agriculture Commission. The Department for International Trade (DIT) and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) have worked in partnership with the devolved Administrations and industry to develop the remit and membership of the FDEC.

The FDEC is a collaborative expert committee which I co-chair alongside Ian Wright CBE, a leading figure in the industry.

British food and drink are among the best in the world and renowned for their quality and provenance. Exporting supports higher pay and more productive jobs. We are helping our farmers and food producers to seize the opportunity of the enormous global demand for British food and drink. The council has an 18-month term with a focus on harnessing the expertise and resource from Government and industry across the UK in a collective endeavour to increase agriculture, food, and drink exports. It brings together dynamic agriculture, food, and drink sector experts from across the UK with an onus on sharing knowledge, raising ambition, building capability, and effective collaboration. The full membership is listed below:

1. Ian Wright CBE (co-chair)
2. Andy Richardson, Volac
3. Anthony Mulley, Quorn
4. Dominic Goudie, Food and Drink Federation
5. Donna Fordyce, Seafood Scotland
6. Ewen Cameron, Scottish Development International
7. Grainne Moody, Invest NI
8. Helen Dallimore, Coombe Castle
9. Iain Baxter, Scotland Food and Drink
10. Keith Smyton, Welsh Government
11. Lee Hemmings, Belvoir Farm
12. Margaret Boanas, International Meat Trade Association
13. Michael Bell OBE, Northern Ireland Food and Drink Association
14. Nick von Westenholz, National Farmers Union
15. Patricia Dillon, Speyside Distillers
16. Phil Hadley, Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board
17. Rachel Gwyon, DIT
18. Sandra Sullivan MBE, Food and Drink Exporters Association
19. Tee Sandhu, SamosaCo
20. Tim Brooks, DEFRA

The launch of the FDEC reflects the UK Government's strategy to promote exports from all parts of the UK and level up the country. It is a genuine partnership which recognises and respects the unique and different approaches to supporting exports that have evolved across the whole of the UK. The FDEC has no remit to discuss strategic trade policy, negotiations of free trade agreements, or areas of devolved or reserved competence.

You can find out more about the FDEC here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/food-and-drink-export-council>.

[HCWS521]

PRIME MINISTER

Union and Devolution Policy

The Prime Minister (Rishi Sunak): It was announced on 11 October 2022 that responsibility for Union and devolution policy would move from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to the Cabinet Office under the then Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster.

On 25 October, I appointed the Secretary of State for Levelling Up as Minister for intergovernmental relations. This means that day-to-day responsibility for the Union and devolution policy will remain in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. The Union and constitution group will also have a presence in the Cabinet Office to support me in my role as Minister for the Union.

Strengthening the Union and delivering for all people and communities across the UK is a priority for all of UK Government. This change will allow the Levelling Up Secretary to lead the Government's day-to-day engagement with the devolved Administrations and drive forward cross-Government efforts towards delivering tangible improvements for people across the UK, including through levelling up.

[HCWS522]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Automatic Enrolment Earnings Trigger and Qualifying Earnings Band Review 2023-24

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Laura Trott): Automatic enrolment into workplace pensions (AE) has been a great success to date, with over 10.8 million people having been automatically enrolled and more than 2.1 million employers meeting their duties. Since the introduction of AE in 2012, total annual pension saving by eligible employees has increased by £33 billion in real terms. The Government remain committed to building on this achievement and to transforming the retirement prospects for millions of workers.

The main focus of this year's annual review of the AE earnings trigger and lower and upper earnings limits of the qualifying earnings band (the AE thresholds) has been to ensure the continued stability of the policy in the light of the impact of covid-19 and prevailing economic factors. We want to ensure that our approach continues to enable individuals, for whom it makes economic sense, to save towards their pensions while also ensuring affordability for employers and taxpayers. The review has concluded that all AE thresholds for 2023-24 will be maintained at their 2022-23 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 2023-24 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 review will be published and a copy placed in the Library of the House. It will be available on the www.gov.uk website, following publication.

[HCWS520]

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**not later than
Thursday 2 February 2023**

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