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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Tuesday 28 February 2023

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

The Secretary of State was asked—

Household Energy Efficiency Measures

1. **Siobhan Baillie** (Stroud) (Con): What steps he is taking to encourage households to install energy efficiency measures. [903783]

22. **Peter Gibson** (Darlington) (Con): What steps he is taking to encourage households to install energy efficiency measures. [903806]

The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Grant Shapps): The Government have made good progress, with 47% of homes in England now having reached the Government's 2035 target of achieving energy performance certificate level C and above, which is up from 14% in 2010.

Siobhan Baillie: I want to talk about radiator sludge, as I went to see ADEY Innovation Ltd, a company in my constituency, where I learned that dirty radiators increase energy bills by 7% and people may be getting 47% less heat through poor water quality. Yet in the Government's £25 million energy efficiency advice campaign there is nowt about the benefits of magnetic filtration and other affordable things that companies such as ADEY Innovation offer households. Will my right hon. Friend agree to work with me to include this advice and meet to discuss this?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend is right to worry about radiator sludge, and I fully support her in her concerns. I am pleased to tell her that in this Parliament and into the next we have committed £12.6 billion to campaigns to ensure not just that we tackle the radiator sludge, but that we do things throughout homes to improve their insulation and other technologies. I would be happy to meet her.

Peter Gibson: Retrofitting older homes can reduce carbon emissions, cut energy bills, make homes warmer, reduce reliance on gas and bring new green jobs to the north. However, the costs associated with retrofitting are currently prohibitive to achieving it on a large scale. What more can my right hon. Friend do to ensure that we bring down the cost of retrofitting homes?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend is right about the cost of doing this. I have described how we are getting towards half of homes having been improved, but he will be pleased to hear about the £4 billion extension of the energy company obligation through its fourth phase, ECO4, along with ECO+, which involves another £1 billion to assist with some of the economics of ensuring that all homes can be improved.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): Of course we all welcome as many energy efficiency measures as possible and encourage households to put them in place, but the fact remains that many middle-income and low-income constituents in my constituency are still struggling to pay their energy bills and are under great financial pressure. They are looking at how energy companies are making vast profits and now talking about giving vast bonuses to their chief executives and managers. People want something doing about that, and they want the Government and the energy companies to play their part more to ensure that an equal share is paid. We should have a windfall tax as well.

Grant Shapps: We have a windfall tax; it is at 75%, as opposed to just 19% for corporation tax elsewhere. It is worth explaining to the hon. Gentleman and to the House that the Government are currently paying about 50% of a typical household energy bill. Where are we getting that money from? We are largely getting it from taxing the gas and oil companies.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): Labour has a plan to upgrade our homes and eradicate fuel poverty with a warm homes plan to insulate 19 million homes over a decade. Does the Secretary of State regret the decision of the Liberal Democrat and Conservative coalition Government to cut the "green crap", as a previous Prime Minister put it? That left people in poorly insulated homes and with expensive homes.

Grant Shapps: I explained in an earlier answer that we have gone from having just 14% of homes in 2010 with an energy rating of A to C to having 46% today. So it is clear that these plans have been working, and I have just talked about another £12.6 billion to finish off the job.

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): There are people in my constituency and across the country who need a lot of advice on how to retrofit older homes in an affordable way. The issue is not just the cost of retrofitting, but good advice on how to do that. I declare an interest: I happen to live in an older home where such advice may be needed. How will the Government help many people in my constituency, and indeed across the country, get that sort of advice on retrofitting older homes?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend, who is in a neighbouring constituency to mine, will be delighted to hear that the ECO+ scheme—another £1 billion—is specifically aimed at trying to get to homes in the private and commercial sector that are sometimes harder to decarbonise. It is one scheme that he will want to consider, but, without wishing to give too much away, he should watch this space.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): We were insulating 10 times as many homes in 2010 as this Government are doing now. Everyone knows what has happened since the Secretary of State's Government decided to get rid of the "green crap". Will he adopt Labour's plan to insulate 19 million homes over the next 10 years? It has the support of the Construction Leadership Council, the Federation of Master Builders and the building trade as a whole. It will create new jobs, cut bills and play its part in reducing carbon emissions. Will he do it?

Grant Shapps: This is one of those slightly odd parallel universes: we are saying that we have gone from just 14% to 46% of homes with A to C ratings—[*Interruption.*] My right hon. Friend the Minister of State suggests we might even be hitting 47%. I have also stood at this Dispatch Box and talked about £12.6 billion of investment to go even further, yet the Labour party will not just say, "That is very good, and we'll support you."

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): The fact is that, in the last Tory manifesto, the Government promised to spend £9.2 billion on energy efficiency, but they have allocated only £6.6 billion of that, over £2 billion of which has still not been spent. The Lords have just described take-up of the boiler upgrade scheme as "disappointingly low" and Government promotion of the scheme as "inadequate". Does the Minister at least acknowledge that, at current insulation rates, it will take 92 years to retrofit the 19 million homes that need it and that if we are to bring down energy costs for people who are struggling with sky-high bills now, he needs to do a whole lot better?

Grant Shapps: There is still a considerable chunk of this Parliament left to run. As I have explained several times—I will say it again for the hon. Lady, who may have missed the point—we have already got pretty close to half the homes in this country being rated A to C—up from just 14%. We are well on our way to getting this job done. I appreciate her encouragement, but we will finish this off ourselves.

Energy Charter Treaty

2. **Olivia Blake** (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab): What discussions he has had with his EU counterparts on the potential scope of a co-ordinated withdrawal from the energy charter treaty. [903784]

The Minister of State, Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (Graham Stuart): I have not held discussions with EU counterparts on the scope of co-ordinated withdrawal from the energy charter treaty and note that the EU itself does not have an agreed position as yet. We are closely monitoring the situation on the ECT.

Olivia Blake: The energy charter treaty allows fossil fuel companies to sue Governments for loss of profits caused by decarbonising. Does the Minister agree that any treaty that punishes attempts to tackle the climate crisis is fundamentally wrong? Does he also agree with France, Spain, Germany, Poland, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Slovenia, the European Parliament and the European Commission that modernising the ECT is impossible and that it is time to participate in a co-ordinated withdrawal from this deeply damaging treaty?

Graham Stuart: We were firm proponents of modernising the treaty precisely so that it would not do what the hon. Lady described, but, as I have said already, we will continue to watch the situation closely.

Prepayment Meters: Forced Installation

3. **Dan Carden** (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): How many households had forced installations of prepayment meters in 2022. [903785]

15. **Ruth Jones** (Newport West) (Lab): How many households in Newport West constituency had forced installations of prepayment meters in 2022. [903798]

18. **Paula Barker** (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab): How many households had forced installations of prepayment meters in 2022. [903802]

The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Grant Shapps): I wrote to suppliers in January calling on them to halt the inappropriate use of prepayment meters and to provide transparency on the use of warrants in people's homes. Along with a number of other steps, that has led to the cessation of that practice.

Dan Carden: The Secretary of State will know that I wrote to all energy companies before the practice was suspended. The mixed bag of responses showed that a voluntary approach simply will not work. Utility chief executive officer Bill Bullen said:

"We will not commit to ending the forcible use of prepay. That course of action is simply not sustainable."

There is a suspension until 31 March, and compensation has been talked about. However, all that is about is Ofgem asking companies to look at whether the forced instalment was appropriate. Companies know that Ofgem is toothless. It is down to the Secretary of State to ban this practice and to set out how compensation will be given out.

Grant Shapps: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's moves in this sphere. To be clear to the House, I wrote to the suppliers and received reassurances that they would end the practice. I asked Ofgem—I have to say that I thought the wool had been pulled over its eyes—to not just take energy companies' word for it but go to the customers, which it is doing. I queried the fact that the courts were issuing mass warrants, which they have agreed to end. He talks about what happens next; he is right that Ofgem is looking at what further protections will be in place. Its work will conclude shortly with further announcements.

Ruth Jones: I thank the Secretary of State for his initial response, but constituents in Newport West will be disappointed by it. This Government are ducking their responsibilities on the control of energy bills, and are relying on the regulator to do the right thing. How can it be right that the installation of prepayment meters will recommence at the end of March? Why should those with the least have to pay the most to heat their homes and keep the lights on?

Grant Shapps: I take issue with the idea that the Government are somehow ducking our responsibility. As I mentioned, we are paying around half of household energy bills this winter. We took action—I will not repeat what it was—that brought the prepayment meter

scandal to a conclusion. That work, and what happens next, is being looked at very carefully. Ofgem will look at what happens if there is no fall-back solution when energy bills are not being paid. That is a complex issue, but more will be said about it soon.

Paula Barker: The news that British Gas broke into the homes of vulnerable people to force-fit prepayment meters is shocking, but bears little surprise to anyone who has had to interact with that company. The Government seem to cower from taking on the big energy companies as they continue to rip off the British people. Will those on the Conservative Benches finally act to protect such households and force energy firms to pay out and compensate now rather than at the end of the Ofgem review?

Grant Shapps: I do not think I could have been any more vocal about this issue. Indeed, we brought that practice, which the hon. Lady rightly describes as abhorrent, to a close. We are also not soft on the energy providers, particularly given the 75% taxation, which is at a level designed to ensure that we have been able to support, in part, the 50% reduction in people's household bills. As I said in answer to the previous two questions, we will return with more on this shortly.

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): Many on the Conservative Benches will be wondering what on earth Ofgem has been doing. It is supposed to be a regulator and to look after consumer interests, but it blunders around. It blundered around with the price gap, and it blundered around with its market entry strategy, meaning that energy companies could essentially put all bill payers' money on red in a casino. It has ended up with billions of pounds taxpayers' money being put into bailouts. Please can we have something more than the efforts by the Government to look at new non-executive directors—surely it is time to ask why the chief executive remains in post—and can we have better oversight of this regulator and regulators in general? They are getting away with ripping off consumers and allowing companies to do exactly the same.

Grant Shapps: I think it is always right that we keep what our regulators do under very close watch. My right hon. Friend the Minister of State has met the chief executive officer of Ofgem regularly, and I am meeting him shortly as well. We will continue to do that. I have called Ofgem out when I have been concerned and thought that it had had the wool pulled over its eyes by the energy companies, and I will continue to ensure that whatever happens will be appropriate for the future of this market. As my hon. Friend knows, we are undertaking a review of the way in which the energy markets operate at the moment.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Ind): What assessment has my right hon. Friend made of the potential for the Government's new five-point plan to tackle bad behaviour by energy suppliers?

Grant Shapps: There is no space for the sort of approach that we have seen from energy suppliers, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend for mentioning this. We have to have a situation where they respect their customers. Where there has not been the case, I am afraid that

suppliers need to ensure, as one or two Labour Members have mentioned, that they recompense their customers for the way they have behaved—outrageously, in many cases, including entering people's homes without their permission.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): The Secretary of State says that he has brought the scandal of prepayment meters to an end, but it certainly is not at an end. Indeed, the Government were repeatedly warned about this scandal but were effectively paralysed while thousands of vulnerable householders were disconnected by the back door. Customers now face more uncertainty as the moratorium on forced installations ends in just four weeks' time, with nothing in its place. Can the Secretary of State confirm that there will be no lifting of the ban until this rotten system has been reformed and that there will be a proper compensation scheme managed by the Government for every customer affected?

Grant Shapps: As I mentioned previously, there is a role for prepayment meters. For example, my son lives in a shared flat, and they find a prepayment meter a very good way to pay the energy bill. I do not think that an outright ban is the right way to go, but the hon. Gentleman and others have rightly pointed out the level of concern across the House, which I absolutely share, about prepayment meters being forced on customers. We will ensure that we do not go back to those bad old days that I was pleased to play an important part in stopping.

Emissions Trading Schemes: Carbon Leakage Protection

4. **Sammy Wilson** (East Antrim) (DUP): Whether he has made a comparative assessment of the adequacy of protection against carbon leakage for energy-intensive industries under the (a) UK emissions trading scheme and (b) EU emissions trading system. [903786]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Andrew Bowie): The UK has committed to protecting our industry from carbon leakage, and like other carbon pricing systems, including the EU ETS, we currently provide free allocations to at-risk sectors. We are undertaking a review of both free allocation and carbon leakage policy.

Sammy Wilson: Since it was set up in 2020, the result of the UK emissions trading scheme has been that the cost of carbon allowances has consistently been much higher than in the EU and other competitive countries, partly due to the fact that the net zero policy has led to a reduction in those allowances. That has led to heavy industries such as steel, aluminium and oil refining going abroad, with a loss of jobs and strategic industries. Given the impact that this is having, will the Minister commit first to rejecting the 50% reduction in allowances planned for 2024, and secondly to reforming the cost containment mechanism to make it easier to intervene in future?

Andrew Bowie: I hear what the right hon. Gentleman says. We currently give sectors at risk of carbon leakage a proportion of their allowances for free, to reduce their exposure to the carbon price, with those free allowances being worth billions of pounds per year at current prices. The 2021 “Developing the UK ETS” consultation proposed to guarantee this level of free allocation until 2026, subject to activity level changes. We will consult no later than the end of 2023 on the methodology for distributing free allowances and explore ways to better target free allocations at those most at risk of carbon leakage.

Energy Bills: Support for Businesses

6. Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): What steps he is taking to help businesses with their energy bills. [903789]

The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Grant Shapps): I mentioned before that we are paying around half of the household energy bill. We are also paying around one third of business energy bills right now through the energy bill relief scheme.¹

Tom Hunt: A few weeks ago I went to St Nicholas Street in Ipswich to talk to some of the local businesses, including Bar Twenty One and Hopsters. Bar Twenty One has made a fantastic start to business, despite the difficult climate. Those who run Bar Twenty One talked about pedestrianising the street, which I support. They also raised the issue of energy bills and their frustration at seeing a decline in wholesale prices but still not feeling the benefit of that. Will my right hon. Friend outline to me and to those businesses what steps he believes the energy suppliers should be taking to support businesses and get them on to fair contracts?

Grant Shapps: I really want to see a well-functioning energy market, and I have written to Ofgem about this. There is a request for information about the challenges facing non-domestic customers. As we see energy prices fall like a feather, having rocketed up, it is frustrating not to see those prices pass through. It is not the only frustration I have about the energy market—for example, it is 10 times cheaper to produce offshore wind than it is to buy gas right now, but we do not see that reflected in the prices. That is why we are looking at the entire operation of this marketplace.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): For the purposes of energy bill support, hospices are treated as businesses. They have seen a rise in their energy costs of 350%. They support some of the most vulnerable and needy people in our society, and the majority of their funding comes from private and charitable donations. Will the Secretary of State consider a special support fund for our hospices, so that they can keep caring for those who need it the most?

Grant Shapps: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to highlight the case of hospices. In my constituency, there is the Isabel Hospice, of which I am a regular patron, so I hear its concerns about issues such as energy prices. We have had a generous scheme in place and we have a further scheme that will continue to run. I will look at his specific concerns.

Energy Bills: Alternative Fuels

7. Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con): What steps he has taken to provide energy bill support to households that use alternative fuels. [903790]

The Minister of State, Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (Graham Stuart): Alternative fuel users have received significant support this winter: first, by direct subsidy of their electricity bills per unit; secondly, through £400 of additional payments across the winter; and thirdly, by £200 paid automatically, for the vast majority, by their electricity supplier, which began on 6 February and finished, I am pleased to say, today. A small minority will need to apply and that portal will open soon.

Mrs Drummond: Many people in Meon Valley use heating oil for their heating, and many have contacted me concerned that they have not received Government support yet. Some are having to wait because they are having to apply by phone. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that support is being rolled out and, crucially, that it will be received by those who are eligible in time for it to be of use this winter?

Graham Stuart: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend's efforts to highlight the issue throughout the winter to make sure that the funding gets to the people who need it, when they need it. It has been challenging to make sure that every group across the country—domestic and non-domestic—gets it. I am pleased that the vast majority of people who are on alternative fuels have received that payment or credit this month, and that the portal will open imminently. We will follow the process for those who do not have an electricity supply for the £400 from the EBS scheme, which we are getting out as quickly as we can.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Under the scheme to which the Minister refers, the Government have rightly provided £600 to customers in Northern Ireland, where there is a high incidence of off-grid energy users. That statistic is even higher in my constituency of Na h-Eileanan an Iar, which, by dint of being islands, are more geographically distinct. Can we have a consistency of approach from the UK Government? Rather than just paying £400 and asking people to apply for another £200—knowing, as we all do, that some will fall through the gaps—we need a consistency of approach, given the statistics and geography in support of that, which pays my constituents £600 as well.

Graham Stuart: The hon. Gentleman has used every corridor and voting Lobby opportunity to lobby me throughout the winter on this issue. I am pleased to say that his constituents will have received, through their electricity supplier, the £200 in addition to the £400. The small minority who do not have an electricity supply will be able to apply on the portal very soon. The net effect will be the same as we have seen in Northern Ireland—I think his constituents are in the same position—where people have each received £600 of direct subsidy with the direct subsidy of per unit energy use to boot.

1. [Official Report, 12 June 2023, Vol. 734, c. 1MC.]

Energy Price Guarantee: Fuel Poverty

8. **Simon Lightwood** (Wakefield) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of the rise in the energy price guarantee in April 2023 on levels of fuel poverty. [903791]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Amanda Solloway): The energy price guarantee has been supporting households and will continue to do so from April '23 by limiting the amount that suppliers can charge per unit of energy used.

Simon Lightwood: The latest figures from 2020 show that, in parts of Lupset and Thornes in my constituency, more than two in five households were in fuel poverty. People are being left unable to heat their homes, have a shower or cook a hot meal. Since 2020, fuel poverty has continued to rise and the crisis has only got worse. Can the Minister explain to my constituents what is fair about those in fuel poverty facing even higher bills, when wholesale gas costs are falling and energy companies' profits are continuing to rise?

Amanda Solloway: The Government announced in the autumn statement that the energy price guarantee will continue from April '23. An analysis for 2022, which was published today, shows that 350,000 households in England were kept out of fuel poverty as a result of the support offered to households with energy bills.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): I welcome the Minister to her new role. Her Department's responsibility is to tackle fuel poverty, so the planned rise in the price cap is the first big test. If it goes ahead, the number of people in fuel poverty will jump by almost 2 million, which is why many people, including those from leading energy charities, are telling her Department to stop the cap rising. Will she and the Secretary of State now do their jobs and tell the Chancellor to cancel the rise?

Amanda Solloway: To reiterate, the Government have been looking at this issue incredibly closely. The analysis so far for 2022 shows that 350,000 households in England were kept out of fuel poverty.

Edward Miliband: I am afraid that is no answer to the question. We have millions of families across the country, and we have bills going out this week. People do not want sympathy or warm words: they want certainty from the Government.

This is a political choice, because the Government are saying that they cannot afford to do any more to help families, but at the same time, they refuse a proper windfall tax and bung billions of pounds in handouts to the oil and gas companies. Is not the truth that the reason people are sick and tired of this Government is that they put the balance sheet of fossil fuel companies ahead of the family budgets of the British people?

Amanda Solloway: I remind the right hon. Gentleman that we have been paying half of household energy bills, and that we will continue to look at this.

Energy Bill Support: Heat Network Customers

9. **Matthew Pennycook** (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of energy bill support for heat network customers. [903792]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Amanda Solloway): Heat network consumers have been supported throughout the winter through the energy bill relief scheme, with discounts on their heating and hot water bills, and the energy bills support scheme, paid primarily through domestic electricity bills.

Matthew Pennycook: The Minister will know that the energy bill relief scheme has not succeeded in limiting commercial gas prices to 7.5p per kilowatt-hour as intended, and that the energy bill support scheme alternative fund only went live last week. The result is that, faced with staggeringly high energy bills, most heat network customers are receiving woefully inadequate financial support, and some have yet to receive any support at all. Can I urge the Government in the strongest possible terms to look again at how we might properly protect the half a million customers served by communal and district heating systems?

Amanda Solloway: From April, under the successor to the energy bill relief scheme, the Government are committed to providing support that is in line with support to other domestic consumers. The Government are working on the successor to that scheme, and if anybody has any issues, of course, they can contact the energy ombudsman if they are concerned.

Renewable Energy Production

10. **Philip Dunne** (Ludlow) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase renewable energy production. [903793]

The Minister of State, Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (Graham Stuart): I am pleased to tell my right hon. Friend that growth in the renewables sector continues year on year, with the latest data showing that 3.4 GW of new renewable electricity capacity was installed last year alone. We will build on that further: we have now taken our highly successful contracts for difference scheme and put it on an annual basis, so allocation round 5 will open next month.

Philip Dunne: Oil and gas producers benefit from an investment allowance for investment in renewable projects in the UK, but existing renewable generators do not. Will my right hon. Friend make representations to the Chancellor, so that he can level up that anomaly and enable my right hon. Friend's admirable renewable energy ambitions to be realised?

Graham Stuart: I thank my right hon. Friend for that question. As he knows, tax policy is a matter for the Chancellor, but I am working closely with him, along with the Secretary of State, to ensure that the electricity generator levy strikes the right balance when supporting households and businesses struggling with their energy bills. It is worth remembering that, as I have just mentioned, our main mechanism is the CfD, which provides support for renewable generators in a way that is certainly not true of those in the oil and gas sector.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Earlier this month, the pan-European EVOLVE project found significantly greater potential for marine energy in British waters, which would obviously help us achieve our net zero targets and offer a quicker route to round-the-clock renewable and carbon-free energy. Why are Ministers being so timid about backing that cutting-edge energy technology?

Graham Stuart: I take it that the hon. Gentleman is talking about tidal stream. I am delighted to say that we are the world leader in tidal stream, and that in allocation round 4—the last round of our CfD—tidal stream was included for the first time. We have greater deployment than any other country in the world, but I am like the hon. Gentleman: I share his enthusiasm for that technology, and hope to see even more from it in future.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Following on from that point about tidal stream, MeyGen in the Pentland firth is the largest consented tidal stream site in the world. To date, that site has produced 70% of global tidal stream generation, but inflation pressures have now put that project at a crossroads. It has the chance to remain the world's leading project through a genuine scale-up, but what is required now is a £40 million ringfenced pot in AR5. Will the Government do the right thing, step up and back tidal stream, allowing Scotland to continue being a world leader?

Graham Stuart: I am proud of the fact that we are a world leader, and of course it is only thanks to the CfD scheme, which relies on levies across the whole of GB, that we are able to realise the renewable potential in Scotland. If the separatists had their way, we would not see the development that I hope to see in offshore wind, tidal and other technologies thanks to the whole of the UK, and Great Britain in particular, working together.

Alan Brown: I am really disappointed by that answer. I was hoping that the Minister would give some commitment to tidal stream going forward. If he is talking about the whole UK and how Scotland benefits, he needs to start backing the Acorn carbon capture cluster, too. Scotland could generate up to 300,000 hydrogen jobs within the just transition, and part of that relies on the Acorn cluster getting the go-ahead. Also, Acorn is required for Scotland to meet its 2030 emissions targets. Instead of blunder and bluster, when are the Government going to step up and back Acorn?

Graham Stuart: We are the world leader, and the largest deployment of tidal stream in the world is in Scotland. We will shortly be making more announcements about allocation round 5. We will also be making announcements in the next few weeks about hydrogen, carbon capture and the future there, and I have already committed in the House to accelerating our approach to that.

Solar Power

11. **Caroline Lucas** (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): What assessment he has made of the potential contribution of solar power to UK energy security and the 2050 net zero target. [903794]

The Minister of State, Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (Graham Stuart): Solar is a cheap and versatile technology. It is a key part of the Government's strategy for net zero and I share the hon. Lady's enthusiasm for it. We are aiming for up to 70 GW of installed solar capacity by 2035, and that represents a fivefold increase in our current capacity.

Caroline Lucas: I welcome the Minister's enthusiasm for solar and the progress that has been made so far. According to Solar Energy UK, the rate at which solar panels are being put on to domestic roofs is still only half of what is needed to meet the Government's own targets. I know that he wants to do much better, so is it not time to pick up the pace and give us a real rooftop revolution by making solar panels mandatory on all suitable new homes? Will he do that?

Graham Stuart: More than a million homes now have solar panels installed. According to data from the microgeneration certification scheme, a total of 130,596 solar panels were installed on UK rooftops last year alone, and that is more than 2019, 2020 and 2021 put together, but like the hon. Lady I want to see us go further and faster.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): Energy security and food security should have equal billing, yet the proliferation of solar farms across thousands of acres of agricultural land is taking away from our nation's ability to produce food. Warehouses up and down the land want to put solar panels on their roofs, but find they cannot because of the grid connections. What steps are being taken to ensure that the solar revolution can come on rooftops, not agricultural land?

Graham Stuart: The planning system is designed to seek that balance with the need to secure a clean, green energy system. It is worth noting that ground-mounted solar has probably the lowest levelised cost of any form of energy in this country. The Government have clarified the definition of "best and most versatile" agricultural land as constituting lands in grades 1, 2 and 3a, and we do everything we can to incentivise that solar should go on brownfield land or land of lower agricultural value.

2050 Net Zero Target

12. **Lia Nici** (Great Grimsby) (Con): What progress he has made on meeting the 2050 net zero target. [903795]

The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Grant Shapps): The Government continued to make good progress on our pathway to net zero in 2021. The UK's net territorial greenhouse gas emissions were estimated to be 427 million tonnes. That is 48% lower than they were in 1990.

Lia Nici: I know that the Secretary of State and Ministers know the importance of carbon capture, usage and storage, not only to be able to reach our net zero targets, but for the huge job opportunities available in my constituency of Great Grimsby. Can my right hon. Friend please tell me when track 2 of the CCUS cluster sequencing programme will be launched?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend did a terrific job, I recall, as a Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Whip briefly in the past year. She is absolutely right about carbon capture, utilisation and storage. We have the potential for 78 billion tonnes of CO₂ to be stored. The answer to her track 2 question is: very shortly.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): While I welcome the grants of up to £5,000 that the Government are making available for boiler replacement, as the Secretary of State will know, a heat pump will cost £8,000 to £15,000, so many of our constituents would not be able to afford it even with that grant, and 90,000 such grants do not constitute a plan to decarbonise the 23 million homes in this country that have gas boilers. When do the Government intend to come forward with such a plan?

Grant Shapps: I think heat pumps are rather like the solar panels we were just discussing in previous questions. When I had my solar panels installed 12 years ago, they were extremely expensive and had a very long return, although they have finally returned on that; they are now much cheaper. I think we are seeing the same process with air source heat pumps. I note that two suppliers, Octopus and British Gas, have announced £3,000 and £2,500 air source heat pumps—after the Government £5,000, I should say—which means they start to become within reach of ordinary boilers. There is clearly much more to do, but I absolutely share the right hon. Member's enthusiasm for them.

Onshore Wind Farms

13. **Afzal Khan** (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): How many onshore wind farms have been established in England since 2015. [903796]

The Minister of State, Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (Graham Stuart): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. Since 2015, 10 onshore wind projects totalling 30 MW have been consented for development in England, of which three have become operational.

Afzal Khan: The Government's onshore wind ban has raised bills for every family by £150 each. Keeping this ban in place would mean bills are £16 billion higher in 2030 compared with Labour's plan to double onshore wind. Will the Secretary of State apologise for the dogma of his Government that has led to more imported gas and raised bills, with energy companies making record profits and families paying the price?

Graham Stuart: The hon. Gentleman is a very fine Member of this House, but I really would warn him against reading out the screeds produced by his party centre. In 2010, just 7% of our electricity came from renewables; it is now heading its way to half. Onshore wind has an important part to play, and we are looking at ways in which we can enable communities that do support onshore wind to go ahead and deliver it.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): Alongside onshore wind, does my right hon. Friend agree with me that in this country we have a tremendous opportunity in front of us to seize first mover industrial advantage in

the new floating offshore wind industry, particularly with respect to the Celtic sea? Does he agree with me that crucial to doing that, and to building domestic supply chains and domestic capability, is alignment of the Crown estate leasing process, the contract for difference and interventions such as freeports?

Graham Stuart: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right on every single count.

Tees Freeport: Net Zero

14. **Alex Cunningham** (Stockton North) (Lab): If he will have discussions with Cabinet colleagues on the potential contribution of the Tees freeport to meeting the UK's net zero targets. [903797]

The Minister of State, Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (Graham Stuart): I continue to discuss with colleagues the contribution that all parts of the country can make to help meet the UK's net zero targets, including freeports. I was delighted to visit last year and see the transformation being delivered by Mayor Houchen. For instance, SeAH Wind's £400 million factory investment for offshore wind monopiles will sit alongside the £107 million South Bank Quay on the Tees.

Alex Cunningham: Well, we will see what that transformation really brings. I am actually blocked out from any face-to-face briefings by the Tees Mayor, even from his social media, so I have to rely on news releases and third parties for information about the site, thus my question today. It is absolutely critical that the Government work across Whitehall to support this initiative and ensure that the benefits derived are delivered to the community with well-paid jobs in the net zero sector, not just profits for a few local businesspeople. Can the Minister confirm that, despite countless promises of 30,000 jobs, just one company has so far signed a contract to set up premises at the Tees freeport?

Graham Stuart: I have known the hon. Gentleman for a long time, so it is disappointing to hear his words. He is right to say that we need co-ordination across Government, including local government, and that is why it was particularly disappointing—and I hope the hon. Gentleman would condemn them—that Labour councillors voted against plans to bring £18 million of investment to Teesside. [Interruption.] They voted against the establishment of a new body that would bring £18 million of investment to Middlesbrough.

Mr Speaker: Stop.

Graham Stuart: They put ideology and party difference over the interests of their constituents.

Mr Speaker: Order. Minister, when I say stop, I mean stop.

Hydrogen Sector: North-west England

16. **Andy Carter** (Warrington South) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support the development of the hydrogen sector in the north-west. [903799]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Andrew Bowie): The Government are supporting hydrogen projects around the country, including in the north-west, with capital support from the £240 million net zero hydrogen fund, support through the hydrogen production business model and through the cluster sequencing process. As my hon. Friend is aware, HyNet North West is included in the track 1 cluster.

Andy Carter: My Warrington South constituency is home to one of the largest aluminium can recycling plants in the UK. It takes used beverage cans and turns them into brand new cars. It is eager to transition its furnaces to hydrogen and is part of the HyNet carbon capture and storage programme. What Government support is available to major industrial manufacturers such as Novelis to help it to reduce its emissions?

Andrew Bowie: The Government have a range of policies to incentivise and support industry to invest in innovative, clean technologies, including low-carbon hydrogen. Those include the £170 million industrial decarbonisation challenge, the £350 million industrial energy transformation fund, the £26 million industrial hydrogen accelerator and the £55 million industrial fuel switching competition. If my hon. Friend were to invite me, I would be delighted to visit Warrington to see that world-leading aluminium plant as it transitions to hydrogen.

Mr Speaker: And they are playing rugby tomorrow night.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Are the Government taking hydrogen seriously enough in the north-west and other regions? We have built a network of hydrogen filling stations for trucks across the UK and hydrogen has enormous potential. What is the Minister doing to work with our leading universities on the development of hydrogen energy?

Andrew Bowie: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. The Government take the potential of hydrogen incredibly seriously and we are very positive about the benefits that hydrogen will bring to this country as we move towards a clean, green, renewable future. That is why we are working with BP, Equinor, Scottish Power, Octopus, RES and research institutions across the country to maximise the potential for hydrogen.

Topical Questions

T1. [903808] **Boris Johnson** (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend—[*Interruption.*] Oh sorry, question 1. If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Grant Shapps): I know my right hon. Friend is new to this House. This winter, as I mentioned, the Government have been paying half the energy bills of most British households. In these difficult times, that has been an extraordinary intervention that we are all very proud of. But it has taught us a valuable lesson—we can never again be held to ransom by energy tyranny. That is why we want to have the cheapest wholesale electricity in Europe, to be on a path to net zero, and to put Putin and his ilk in a position where they can no longer have any sway over our energy security.

Boris Johnson: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his continuing commitment to Great British Nuclear, but is it not vital that we reaffirm the target of 24 gigawatts by 2050 and that we accelerate the tech selection process, so that small modular reactors, whether made by Rolls-Royce or anybody else—it would be wonderful if they came from this country—are on contract with Great British Nuclear by the end of the year, so we can get back to the nuclear tradition that this country once had and undo the baleful, luddite, “Atomkraft? Nein, danke” legacy of the Labour party? [*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. I have the greatest respect, but these are Topicals and I want to get everybody else in as well. And I agree—nuclear reactors from Lancashire could be fantastic.

Grant Shapps: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. He will know, as will the whole House, that every single nuclear reactor currently operational in the UK was given permission under the Conservative party. He is right to champion Great British Nuclear and we will get the nuclear industry going again. Indeed, I was the first Energy Secretary to put money—£700 million—into nuclear power since 1986. I have appointed our first ever—

Mr Speaker: Order. It is the same for the Secretary of State. It is everybody's questions, not just yours and the former Prime Minister's. Let's go to Ed Miliband for a good example of a quick question.

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): It is important to welcome ex-party leaders to their place, Mr Speaker. My only advice is that it is important to not want your old job back.

Can I ask the Secretary of State to tell the House which member of the new Department's ministerial team in April last year described onshore wind farms as “an eyesore” on the hills?

Grant Shapps: I was just having a debate about whether it was me or my hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie), the Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero. The point is that they have to be done with local consent. That is why a proper energy mix that includes not just wind farms but nuclear for about a quarter of our energy production is so important and why we have just appointed the first ever nuclear Minister, who some are calling “Atomic Bowie”.

Edward Miliband: The problem is that the right hon. Gentleman is not the cheerleader for clean energy; he is the roadblock. We have had three wind farms in the last eight years. His own Department says 79% of the public support onshore wind. Let me ask him, plan and simple: will he bring the local planning regime for onshore wind in line with all other infrastructure—yes or no?

Grant Shapps: The right hon. Gentleman calls me the roadblock, but perhaps he missed me saying that I was installing solar before it was fashionable to do so. I absolutely want more onshore and offshore wind in this country. We are ensuring that we are helping with that process, but it has to be with local consent.

T5. [903812] **Mrs Flick Drummond** (Meon Valley) (Con): Safran Helicopter Engines in my constituency is a leader in developing sustainable aviation fuel use. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that the changeover in departmental responsibilities will help such companies to progress?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend will be interested to hear that the Jet Zero Council, which I helped to co-establish, has already taken place since the departmental change. Indeed, on the first day in this job, I co-chaired the Jet Zero Council. We want to get to guilt-free flying that includes widescale use of sustainable aviation fuel.

T2. [903809] **Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): The Secretary of State did not answer the question earlier about compensation for vulnerable customers disconnected from prepayment meters. What is he going to do about it and will he promise that every single one of them will get compensation?

Grant Shapps: As I was trying to explain earlier, it is a work in progress. We will make sure that those who suffered are recompensed. What happened was indeed a scandal. I could not have acted faster in this job to fix it and I described the three different parts of activity I undertook, which brought it under control.

T8. [903815] **Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): Offshore wind is a great British success story, but fiscal and regulatory action is urgently required if the UK is to remain an attractive place to invest. Can my right hon. Friend thus confirm that, ahead of the Budget, he is working with the Treasury to introduce new tax incentives and to reform capital allowances so that the UK can compete with other countries, such as the US and those in the EU?

The Minister of State, Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (Graham Stuart): I am sure my hon. Friend is as delighted as I am that the United States and the EU are now following our lead in developing renewables, including offshore wind. We work closely with the Chancellor to ensure that the UK remains, as it has been consistently under this Government, the best place in the world in which to invest in offshore wind.

T3. [903810] **Dan Carden** (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): The Rosebank oilfield in Scotland is the largest undeveloped oil and gas site in the UK. It is set to unleash 200 million tonnes of carbon emissions—the equivalent of the emissions of the 28 lowest-income nations across the world. It is marine-wrecking and climate-wrecking. Will the Government put a stop to it?

Graham Stuart: Seventy-seven per cent. of our energy today comes from fossil fuels. We will be using about a quarter of the gas we do today in 2050 under net zero. The idea that importing that, with higher emissions attached to it, rather than producing our own, is ridiculous environmentally, ridiculous economically and ridiculous in terms of maintaining the skills in the North sea that we are going to need for the transition, with hydrogen, carbon capture and other industries coming forward. I ask the Labour party to change its mind.

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): I have been hearing from Hillingdon Council and Harrow Council about their ambitious plans to improve my constituents' access to electric vehicle charging. Does my hon. Friend agree that it should be a higher priority for the Mayor of London to improve access to environmentally friendly transport, rather than imposing a ULEZ?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Andrew Bowie): I could not agree more. Frankly, if the Labour Mayor of London were to focus more on that, rather than imposing yet another tax on the hard-working people of outer London, he might actually not be failing this great capital and its people as much as he is, unlike the two Conservative councils that are acting positively to increase the availability of and accessibility to electric vehicle charging points across the region.

T6. [903813] **Dame Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I listened carefully to what the Secretary of State said about prepayment meters. Could he confirm that forced installations will not go ahead until the penalty on prepayment meters has been abolished—yes or no?

Grant Shapps: There has been a long-term difference in the price of prepayment meters, which I specifically asked Ofgem to look at. I am meeting the Ofgem CEO to discuss its response shortly.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): The Minister will be aware that aspects of the tourism and hospitality industry, such as catering and leisure, are intensive energy users. Therefore, can he confirm that they will qualify for support under the energy and trade-intensive industries scheme due to be in place from April?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Amanda Solloway): I thank my hon. Friend for his tireless work to support the hospitality and tourism sector across his constituency. The energy bill relief scheme has provided much-needed support for high energy costs over winter. We continue to work closely with the sector.

T7. [903814] **Helen Hayes** (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): Many families in my constituency who are terrified about their increasing energy bills cannot simply turn down the heat come 1 April. They include families with disabled children, whose winter payment will long since have been spent. Why do the Government think that it is acceptable for energy companies to continue to rake in sky-high profits, while families on low incomes with disabled children continue to struggle?

Grant Shapps: I sometimes worry that some Opposition Members do not properly set the context. The reason that we are paying sky-high bills is that Putin invaded a democratic neighbour, which pushed up energy bills. This Government have stood by the public by paying half of everyone's energy bills. Judge us by our record. We will say more shortly.

Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con): Could my right hon. Friend include fertiliser manufacturers, such as Neatcrown Corwen Ltd in my constituency, in the Government's support for high, intensive energy businesses?

Andrew Bowie: Yes. Representing a rural constituency myself, I understand just how important fertiliser manufacturers are. The energy bill discount scheme will start on 1 April, providing eligible businesses with a discount on high energy bills until 31 March 2024. The list of eligible sectors has been published, and I am delighted to confirm that it will include manufacturers of fertilisers and nitrogen compounds.

T9. [903816] **Mohammad Yasin** (Bedford) (Lab): Last summer, I attended the opening of Infarm, a vertical farm facility in Bedford, focusing on locally grown food to help us to improve our domestic food security and to reduce our carbon footprint. Within six months, the company announced that it was closing, citing energy prices, supply chains and the rising cost of materials. Given the empty shelves in our supermarkets, what action is the Secretary of State taking to ensure that businesses that are trying to ensure our food security can operate?

Andrew Bowie: I am afraid the hon. Gentleman has not been listening to what we have been saying for the past hour. We are determined to ensure that we move towards net zero in a sensible and measured way, leading the world as we do so while ensuring food security across the country.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): Contracts for difference have been successful in driving down the cost of renewable energies. However, industry bodies and developers are warning that the draft strike prices for allocation round 5 are too low. Can my right hon. Friend commit to a review of strike prices to ensure that the allocation round is a success for renewable energy technologies such as floating offshore wind?

Grant Shapps: It is worth reminding the House that contracts for difference has been a world-beating way of creating the world's second, third and fourth largest offshore wind farms. There have been some pressures on the previous round, due to inflation because of the war. We will keep the next round in mind.

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): Can the Secretary of State confirm whether the responsibility for industrial decarbonisation rests with his Department or the Department for Business and Trade?

Grant Shapps: As with everything in government, we share responsibilities. The clue is in the name—the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): I welcome the Government's inclusion of seafood processing in the energy bills discount scheme, which replaces the EBRs at the end of this month. Before the energy crisis, there was the energy-intensive industries extension scheme, which included poultry, pork and milled grain processing, but not seafood. Would my right hon. Friend or one of his Ministers agree to meet me and representatives from the sector to help to address the shortfall?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend will know that the energy-intensive industries discount of 80% has helped many very energy-intensive industries this winter. We have consulted on raising it to 100%, along with

other amendments. I will be pleased to ensure that my hon. Friend has the appropriate meeting to discuss the matter.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The Secretary of State will be aware of the additional tax revenues that have come to the Treasury in recent months. Will he have discussions with the Chancellor to ensure that small businesses in particular, which face very high energy costs, remain as competitive as possible in the current environment?

Grant Shapps: It is absolutely right that our businesses need to compete globally. Again, Putin is the reason for these high energy costs. We have stepped in to support families. The money has to come from somewhere; our answer has been the oil and gas companies, but of course we need to make sure that the balance is right with the taxpayer as well. The hon. Gentleman can be assured that we are working on it with the Chancellor all the time.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Knauf, a major manufacturer based in Immingham, seeks to build a hydrogen-ready combined heat and power plant to reduce its emissions. The project may stall, however, because Northern Powergrid has told Knauf that it cannot provide a connection until 2031. Could the Minister intervene and try to overcome the problem?

Andrew Bowie: Yes, I would be happy to intervene. I am very happy to meet my hon. Friend and the company concerned to see what we can do to resolve the issue.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): As the proud host venue of COP26, the Scottish Event Campus in my constituency well understands the challenges of reaching net zero, but like many businesses in the events sector, it is facing astronomical energy bills. Would a Minister be willing to meet the Scottish Event Campus to discuss those bills and its ambitious plans for reaching net zero through investment in the campus?

Andrew Bowie: I would be absolutely delighted to meet the hon. Lady and the Scottish Event Campus. We are doing everything we can to support businesses that are struggling with energy bills at the moment. It is just a shame that, as a result of the Scottish Government cutting local authority budgets north of the border, Glasgow City Council will not be able to do as much as it would like to support the Scottish Event Campus as we move forward.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): Leisure centres such as Kidsgrove Sports Centre, and particularly those that have swimming pools, are feeling very nervous about the end of the energy support that they are receiving today. What discussions has the Secretary of State had with the Treasury to ensure that support continues so we do not lose these community assets?

Amanda Solloway: I understand the concerns of all consumers dealing with high energy costs, but we have given over £7.2 billion towards this, and we will continue to do so.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): In its progress report last June, the Climate Change Committee noted that only about 40% of the Government's plans for getting to net zero were credible. In some areas, including farming and industrial electrification, they had no plans at all. What are the Government doing to develop credible plans in those areas?

Graham Stuart: We are under a legal duty to ensure that we move to net zero, and I am delighted that we are continuing to make progress. The hon. Lady will see announcements from the Government by the end of March on our net zero plans.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): Domestic heating generates 14% of the UK's carbon dioxide emissions, but blending natural gas with just 20% hydrogen would be the equivalent of taking 2.5 million cars off the road. We are already lagging behind Germany, France and Chile, which have decided to blend up to 20%, while Italy, Canada and Australia are close behind. Can the Minister assure me that the Government's decision on blending hydrogen in our gas network will be a positive one so that we can stop tailing our European counterparts?

Graham Stuart: A plethora of announcements, on a number of issues, will be coming out of the Department in the coming weeks. Hydrogen is an important area in which we are a world leader; it is my intention, as I know it is my hon. Friend's, to ensure that we remain in pole position.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Analysis by E3G has found that a third of the funding pledged for this Parliament to make buildings

energy-efficient and to decarbonise heat has not been spent by the Government. What steps are the Government taking to ensure that that money is allocated and spent, and that leaky buildings are addressed swiftly?

Grant Shapps: As I said at the beginning of questions, we are working continuously to try to upgrade all buildings in this country, both domestic and non-domestic. We have a range of programmes; I will write to the hon. Lady with the full set of programmes that apply in non-domestic situations.

Mr Speaker: We come to the final question, from Barry Sheerman.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Secretary of State, and do the Government, agree that leisure centres are critical to all our communities, and especially to young people? I understand that the cost of the energy for heating pools is hitting even the Prime Minister, with his very large pool in north Yorkshire. May we have some emergency action to help communities with energy bills that are likely to bankrupt them?

Grant Shapps: The energy support that we have been providing, including through the energy bills discount scheme, is designed to do exactly that, but we will keep a close eye on it to make sure that it helps in the right places. We are all suffering as a result of high energy costs. The reason is Putin, and we should never forget that while we build our own energy security in this country, with the cheapest wholesale electricity prices by the middle of the next decade.

Tributes to Baroness Boothroyd

12.35 pm

Mr Speaker: I informed the House yesterday that there would be an opportunity today for Members to pay tribute to the former Speaker of the House, Baroness Boothroyd.

When Baroness Boothroyd announced that she was to retire as Speaker of the House of Commons in 2000, there was an audible groan among Members. “Be happy for me,” she appealed, with a twinkle in her eye, but it was not a happy occasion for many of us, who had held her in such deep affection. So yesterday, when her passing was announced formally, there was shock and sadness all around, because Betty was one of a kind. She was not only the first woman Speaker, but a force to be reckoned with.

The only child of two textile workers, Betty was born in Dewsbury, Yorkshire. She was first a dancer in the popular Tiller Girls troupe, before turning her attention to politics—and thank goodness she did. Having worked as an assistant to Labour MPs, including Barbara Castle, and spending time in the United States observing the Kennedy campaign, she contested four seats unsuccessfully before finally, in 1973, being elected in West Bromwich, a seat that she held for 27 years.

As well as being an effective and active constituency MP, Betty served as an assistant Government Whip, and as a Member of the European Parliament at the same time as being an MP, as well as being a member of Labour’s national executive committee—where she met my father, Doug Hoyle, who was on the opposite side of the NEC in those days—and, of course, becoming Deputy Speaker, under Speaker “Jack” Weatherill.

But all that changed in 1992, when Betty was elected to the role that she was made for, and that we all remember her for: that of Speaker. It was a role that she held for eight years. She was there when I was elected as the Member of Parliament for Chorley in 1997. She was there again in the House of Commons, supporting me when I was elected Speaker in 2019. She was forthright, fair, strong and certainly no pushover. She commanded respect across the House, and we knew it and gave her that respect. She was expert in keeping us all in check one minute, and then offering help to a newcomer the next, be it an MP, a staff member or, indeed, a Deputy Speaker.

As I am a proud Lancastrian and Betty was a proud Yorkshirewoman, there was always friendly rivalry between the red rose and the white rose, but we were always united when it came to the south. When I became Speaker, she regularly, and rightly, offered me advice, whether I wanted it or not, but it was always well-meaning—well, I hoped it was, anyway. “Lovey, you’re doing very well, but...” she would tell me during our many calls and meetings. She was quite interesting when she telephoned. She would ask, “Is that you, Helen?” “No, it’s Jo.” “Well, I don’t want you; I want Helen—you’d better get her.” Then she would say, “Just tell him I want dinner tonight, because I’ve some advice for him.” That was Betty, and that was why we loved her.

Like me, Betty believed in the formality of the role of Speaker and the attire that goes with it, apart from the wig, which she refused to wear—a tradition that I have gladly continued.

Let us begin to think back. Betty was known for travel, both professional and personal. Cyprus was her favourite holiday destination, a place where she famously took up paragliding in her 60s. But she was also the perfect host in Westminster, be it at a singalong around the piano in Speaker’s House with parliamentary colleagues—Speaker’s House was well known for its receptions—or welcoming international guests. Who can forget Madam Speaker walking down the steps of Westminster Hall in 1996 holding the hand of Nelson Mandela, the South African President. She was there to make sure the House was truly represented. That sense of humanity is what endeared us all to Betty.

One of Betty’s trademark appeals to Members who took too long to get their words out during Prime Minister’s questions was, “Time’s up!” Well, Madam Speaker, we are devastated that your time is up, but on behalf of us all, let me say that you will never be forgotten. You made history, so please rest in peace.

12.40 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Penny Mordaunt): I rise on behalf of His Majesty’s Government to pay tribute to a remarkable figure. I know how many will be affected by this sad news of her passing and I know that the whole House will want to send their thoughts and prayers to her dearest. I was two months old when Betty was elected to this place on her fifth attempt. By my reckoning, fewer than 30 of our current right hon. and hon. Members were contemporaries of hers—I can see many of them in the Chamber today—yet we all knew her. We knew her before we arrived here. We knew her before she wrote to us, talked to us, encouraged us and made us laugh.

There are few political figures who get cut-through with the public, but she was one of them. It was not just her features or her fantastic voice that were recognised; we all knew what she stood for. Hers was a character that was forceful enough to transcend time, Parliaments, partisanship and generations. It was who she was and what she did; her trailblazing legacy not just as the first woman Speaker, but the first from the Opposition Benches. She was of a generation who took ground for women’s progress. She had been inspired by vinegar and gunpowder. She was a moderniser—she demystified. Her 50-year parliamentary career and all she did for national life, in particular for women, inspired and paved the way for future generations, but also she commemorated and got credit for those who had gone before her. She felt keenly that the privileges of this House were dearly won in toil and sacrifice, and the monument to the women of the second world war stands in great part because of her.

But it was not just her considerable achievements that made her recognisable; there was something more. It was how she made us feel. Like the Pennines from which she hailed, she gave our nation backbone. She gave us courage, because she reminded us that we were no cowards. Her warmth, entertainment and no-nonsense approach helped to restore trust. She made this place accessible, and she commanded us with the salty glamour of a pub landlady: “Time’s up!” Her gritty pragmatism sat comfortably alongside her optimism and hope and a deep faith in future generations.

She gave us confidence and pride in this place, and that was no accident. She wanted to give all a chance because she had cherished every chance that she had

been given. For me, that care was evident in a particular letter she wrote to me after I had proposed the Loyal Address in 2014, and I was so grateful for it. She concluded that she wanted me to “flourish”—not just to be successful or to do well or to get on, but to flourish, to excel, to be all I could be, to have a ruddy good time doing it and to understand what my purpose was. She knew her purpose: “I speak to serve”, she said, and she served us well. May she rest in peace, and may these tributes to her remind us all of the responsibility and the opportunity it is our privilege to have. Thank you, Betty.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Leader of the House.

12.44 pm

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the Leader of the House and an honour to lead the Opposition’s tributes to a giant of our Labour party and of this House: Betty Boothroyd. Our condolences must go out to her friends, family and all who knew her. I hope that we can spend this afternoon joined in celebration of a wonderful life well lived.

Born in Dewsbury—a part of the world I know well—Betty’s story is one of a proud working-class Yorkshire lass taking on the many challenges stacked against a woman from her background. She was a Labour woman who rose to the very top of her game, but she set a profound example to all women of this House who came after her, and we all thank her for it. Her story starts with humble beginnings, knowing all too well the challenges of growing up poor, witnessing her parents dropping in and out of insecure work in the textile industry. She enjoyed occasional holidays to Blackpool, but she strived for more. At 13, she won a scholarship to Dewsbury technical college, but it was her passion for dancing that she first pursued. What a joy it has been to see the beautiful black and white pictures from her stint as a member of the Tiller Girls dance troupe, which clearly instilled in her the art of performance—a trait that served her well in this place, especially during her eight years in the Speaker’s Chair. What a performer, Mr Speaker.

It is Betty’s career change from dancing to politics for which we remember her so fondly today. She worked hard and made the most of her opportunities. Her former boss, Barbara Castle, for whom she was a secretary, wrote that the moral of Betty’s career was that

“You never know what people are capable of until you give them the opportunity to show it.”

Maybe others could not have seen where Betty’s capabilities would take her, but I like to think that she knew her potential, and she worked damned hard to realise it and never gave up. That characteristic stood her in good stead during the four unsuccessful election campaigns in which she stood as parliamentary candidate. All of us who have stood in election campaigns will know what that feels like; it shows true Yorkshire grit.

Following Betty’s success in the West Bromwich by-election, she quickly became a Government Whip and then a Deputy Speaker, but she did not settle for that. As some of her friends told me this morning, she chose to go for gold. Her landslide election as the first and, so far, only female Speaker of the House of Commons rightly earned her a place in history as well as in our hearts. More than that, she will be remembered for how

she carried out her duties: her trademark warmth and wit, and her firm but fair approach that defined her years as Chair. Dare I say that she also brought a swathe of glamour to the role? She spoke about the need to take pride in yourself and to turn yourself out every day looking the best you can—I am a bit nervous delivering these lines, but I hope she would be proud of her legacy, and I did apply my lipply very carefully this morning.

I met Betty only once—when she was in the Chamber to witness your election, Mr Speaker—and had a lovely chat with her, which was a real treat. Perhaps what I admire most about Betty, however, was her unapologetic admiration for the House of Commons. She upheld standards and kept order during the challenging debates of her times: on the European exchange rate mechanism, and the Maastricht treaty, which some hon. Members here no doubt remember well. She stood up for the role of Parliament and championed MPs scrutinising Government, particularly after Labour’s ’97 landslide. As she looked back on her time as Speaker, she said

“I couldn’t let Parliament down. I love Parliament, and I was its servant and not its master.”

She did love Parliament. She did not let it down. She lifted it up, and she is lifting it up still. She is one of Parliament’s greatest servants. We thank her, and we remember her incredible life today.

12.48 pm

Mrs Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con): It is with great sadness that all of us will rise today to pay tribute to the late Baroness Boothroyd, and our condolences are with her family and friends.

To go from high-kicking on the theatrical stage to mastery of the tumultuous stage of the House of Commons is quite a journey. As the woman who broke that glass ceiling to become the first woman Speaker in 700 years, Betty Boothroyd will always have her place in history but, as the shadow Leader of the House said, for those of us who served in this Chamber when Betty was Speaker, we remember not just her historic achievement but the manner in which she conducted her role. She always knew the right point to intervene with a witty remark, a sense of humour, a gentle put down or a strong rebuke, and from Betty the rebukes could be very strong.

When I came to this House in 1997, there was a new Conservative Member who had been very successful in business. Indeed, he had been fêted as a very successful businessman. On the day on which I and a number of my colleagues were called to make our maiden speeches, he rose time and again but was not called. In fact, it was some weeks later that he made his maiden speech. I always thought that was just Betty saying, “It doesn’t matter how important you have been elsewhere, it is what you are in here that matters.” It was about her love of this House of Commons and her belief in Parliament.

For so many years of her life, Betty devoted her time to politics, to social justice and to where her heart was in politics—the Labour party—but she really loved this place and she believed in democracy. She supported this place when she was Speaker, she upheld its traditions and its standards, and she enhanced the role of Speaker of this House of Commons.

But she was not just a strong Speaker, she was a woman of warmth, fun and entertainment. I remember the soirees in Speaker’s House that brought together

[Mrs Theresa May]

friends and MPs. The singing around the piano has already been mentioned, and it created a great sense of camaraderie among those who would otherwise have been exchanging sharp remarks across the Chamber. She brought people together. Her warmth was important, and she reminded us of the importance in this place of humanity, which she showed so well through everything she did.

I consider it a privilege to have known Betty Boothroyd, and I consider it an honour to have served in this Chamber under her Speakership. May she rest in peace. We will always remember a remarkable, amazing, impressive woman.

Mr Speaker: I call the Mother of the House.

12.52 pm

Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham) (Lab): That was an excellent tribute from the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May). Perfectly put.

This is, indeed, a sad but very proud moment as the House pays tribute to Betty Boothroyd. A proud moment for all of us women in the House, as she was the first and only woman Speaker, and she was brilliant in the Chair. A proud moment for Labour, as she was a woman from a working-class, Yorkshire background who blazed a trail for Labour in politics. And a proud moment for the House, as she was an icon for Parliament. She was admired and respected not only in this country but abroad. I went to the United States when she was Speaker, and all anybody wanted to ask me was whether I had ever met Betty Boothroyd and what she was like.

Members have mentioned the odds she defied to get into this House. Four times she stood for election and four times she failed, but she stood again and got in the fifth time. She was utterly resilient, and nothing smoothed her path. Let us remember that it was not an asset for getting into Parliament to have been a secretary, it was not an asset for getting into Parliament to be a woman and it was certainly not an asset for getting into Parliament to have been a dancer, but she overcame all those odds.

This was at a time when Parliament was overwhelmingly male-dominated. She joined the Commons when only 3% of MPs were women and 97% were men. She not only got into Parliament, but she got her voice heard. She did this through a combination of charisma, commitment, having more energy than anybody else and bottomless resilience. She was smart, she was tough and, my goodness, she had to be. In an overwhelmingly male House dominated by a Tory majority, she was elected Speaker as a Labour woman. Again, it was her determination and rigour: she was always the best briefed, best prepared person in the room.

In the Speaker's Chair, yes, she had a fantastic sense of humour and a great personal warmth, but—let us not mince our words—she ruled this place with a rod of iron. She did that by always being ahead of the House. She missed nothing, and she expected from all of us the high standards to which she held herself. She expected the House to be boisterous, but she had no time for oafish, loutish behaviour. When a Tory MP, Tony Marlow, shouted across the House that I was a “stupid cow,” he made a big mistake. It is not that everybody else was not saying it, but Betty heard him. He was at the far end of

the Chamber and she was in the Chair, but she heard him. She forced him to withdraw those words, ruling that “stupid cow” is unparliamentary language.

She wanted Parliament to be admired and respected. She was always at her best, and she expected us to be at our best, too. I was in awe of her but, frankly, I was also in fear of her. We had to be on time, in the right place and know what we were doing and saying. She would probably be saying to me now, “Why on earth, after 40 years in Parliament, are you still reading your notes?”

She was immaculate and glamorous, which has left its mark on me, as it has on the shadow Leader of the House. I always think about what Betty would think I should be wearing, I hope she would approve of my attempt to be respectful while being a bit stylish. She was always immaculate and glamorous, never a hair out of place. That is why she did not want to wear the wig. It was not modernisation. She wanted to look absolutely immaculate.

She would probably be telling me to shut up now. She wanted people not to go on too long. My sympathies go to her family and her many friends on the loss of this remarkable woman. There will be another woman Speaker, but there will never be another Betty Boothroyd.

12.57 pm

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): I came into Parliament in 1984, when Jack Weatherill was Speaker of the House of Commons. I had the great pleasure of voting in the election after he ceased to be Speaker, and I came to the conclusion that Betty Boothroyd was the right person for the job. I am not sure that many other Conservative Members voted for her, but she never forgot. We always maintained an extremely good relationship. She was a great Speaker: every one of the tributes we have heard has not only added to her reputation and the lustre of her career but has been extremely accurate.

Occasionally, very occasionally, I go into the Library. I always go into the same room and sit in the same green chair. As I look up, I see the list of Speakers. Of course I see your name, Mr Speaker, and I see your predecessor's name, and so on. The name I always notice is Miss Boothroyd. As the first lady Speaker of the House of Commons, very much in line with what others have said, she not only made her mark but she was a wonderful person.

It would not do for me not to mention the Maastricht treaty, on which I had to deal with her as Speaker. I cannot remember precisely whether it was under the Chairman or the Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means but, at a very important moment, we moved a motion of censure. As I recall it, the decision went in our direction, as a result of which she then had to come in and take over to make the decision that was needed. It was a tie, and she of course made the appropriate decision and that was that. She did exactly what I have heard in these tributes so far: she took the initiative, intervened at the right moment and did the right thing. She was really a remarkable person.

I caught up with her on a number of occasions, because she would come down towards the House of Commons and one would get into a conversation with her. I noticed that she was getting a little older. We might sit down and have a quiet word, and I just said to her, “I do hope you have given up that smoking.” She

did smoke quite a lot and it was a matter of concern to me as I saw her getting older and I thought that perhaps this was not a good thing for her to be continuing to do. I want to end on this note: she was a great Speaker, a great lady and a great ornament to this House of Commons.

1 pm

Margaret Beckett (Derby South) (Lab): Over the past 24 hours, a number of people have asked me when I first met Betty Boothroyd. To be perfectly frank, I cannot remember, but I know it was at least 48 years ago, because that was when I came into this place, to which she had not all that long been elected. Reference has been made to various parts of her record. I think it was a journalist who said, “Why should Betty wear the wig, she’s got perfectly good iron grey curls of her own?” As has been mentioned, that was very much her attitude.

I well remember Betty going into the Whips Office and hearing nervous traditionalists from the Tory Benches murmur that they were not sure that their party would ever allow a woman into that nest of information and power that the Whips Office always represented. Of course, that has turned out not to be the case, but although Betty was not the first woman Whip, it was thought of as quite a revolution when she went into the Whips Office.

I also had the pleasure of serving with Betty on the national executive committee, although, like your father, Mr Speaker, she and I were not always of the same point of view. But there was a great degree of mutual respect and, as time went on, very real friendship. Certainly when I was Leader of the House of Commons, I met her constantly as the Speaker. She was hugely helpful, sympathetic and understanding, but, as has been mentioned, there was always this very strong determination to see respect for the House of Commons. She was one of the Speakers who insisted that Ministers come to this House to give statements. We are talking about a Labour Government, by the way, and I am sorry to say that not everybody was always as respectful of the demands of this House. I am afraid that that crosses parties and it is true of Conservative and Labour Governments, but Betty was always very clear that the House comes first, statements must be made first to the House and the House must be treated with respect.

Betty was also a staunch and loyal friend. It was not known for a long time that when Mo Mowlam was very ill indeed and having to rest frequently during the day, Betty gave her sanctuary in Speaker’s House, looked after her and generally showed her great affection, as well as friendship.

I remember when Betty was elected Speaker. What has not been mentioned is that one of the reasons her campaign was successful was that on the Conservative Benches it was led by John Biffen, a much respected former Leader of the House who, like others, was held in great affection here. The fact that he, among others, was such a staunch advocate for Betty’s Speakership was one reason she was successful. I felt slightly sorry for Peter Brooke, who perhaps had expected to be crowned Speaker, as the Government’s own candidate. However, it was clear not only that Betty was going to win, but that everybody was going to be very happy about it, except perhaps Peter Brooke, poor man.

Betty was a revelation in the Chair. She had a rich and robust voice that went with a rich and robust character. As people have said several times, she was a performer, and she performed as Speaker—and she performed extremely well. One thing that has not been mentioned so far is that one of the roles of Speaker is, as you will know, Mr Speaker, to represent this House overseas on occasion. I always thought how fortunate we were to have Betty as the emblem and the representative of this House, and how much it added to our prestige as a country to see her in that role.

Betty was dedicated to this House. She was something of a traditionalist. I do not object to that, but I know that some colleagues perhaps were sorry when she did not support all the modernisation changes that were proposed—

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Any.

Margaret Beckett: No, I do not think that is fair; I think she supported some of them.

Betty was certainly—the word was used a moment ago—an ornament to this House, but she was much more than that. She was a very, very formidable figure. I do not think there is any doubt that, to young women in the outside world, she was a representation of the fact that, yes, women can get anywhere and they can do the job, not only well, but much better than many of the men who have had that post. So I share the view that she will be remembered for a very long time. She will be remembered with affection, as well as respect, and that, I think, she would always have welcomed.

1.6 pm

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): If I may, Mr Speaker, I will share with the House just two personal anecdotes of my experience with the late, great Betty Boothroyd. The first occurred in May 1997, on the day of my swearing in—at least, I hoped it would be the day of my swearing in, because I had inquired, checked and double-checked that on that day the new intake MPs were to be sworn in. As it was my first time, my father, Sam, had come from Swansea in south Wales. He had caught the train on time, it had arrived on time and I had picked him up on time, so I knew that something was bound to go wrong. No sooner had I got him settled in the Gallery than the then Deputy Chief Whip told me that there had been a change of plan and the previous MPs were to be sworn in on that day; the new MPs would be sworn in on subsequent days. However, he said that I could go and have a word with the Speaker’s Secretary—the gentleman at the time who was standing by the Chair. I did that, and he understood and said, “You can go on the end of the queue and be sworn in when all the pre-existing MPs have done so.”

For the benefit of anyone watching these tributes who does not know the procedure, I should say that one lines up, takes the Oath at the Dispatch Box, signs the register and shakes hands with the Speaker, with whom one has a gentle exchange of words. In my gentle exchange of words, I said that I was so pleased that it had been possible to be sworn in on that day as my father was 84 and he had come 200 miles to see it. Betty paused, looked up at the Gallery, spotted this gentleman with silver hair who was beaming and looking very proud of being part of this wonderful occasion, and said, “Is that him up there?” When I said that it was, she

[*Sir Julian Lewis*]

said, “Well, strictly speaking, we are not allowed to make reference to anyone outside the boundaries of the Chamber itself. But as it is a special occasion, let’s give him a wave.” So Betty the Speaker and I gave my dad a big wave.

The second anecdote I would like to share is from June 2000. As a result of a debate on the armed forces, I was in the proud position of welcoming four second world war veterans of the Fleet Air Arm, all of whom had been decorated with distinguished service orders, conspicuous gallantry medals or, in one case, the distinguished service medal for their participation in near suicidal attacks on the German battlefleet going up the channel in 1942 or on Japanese-supplying oil refineries in Sumatra in 1945. I thought that it would be nice to get some extra tickets so that they and their wives could attend Prime Minister’s questions. I went along to the Speaker’s Office and, when I explained the situation, the member of staff graciously said, “Yes, of course you can have these extra tickets, but why not bring them round, because I am sure Madam Speaker will want to see them.”

Not only did she want to see them, not only did she give them a personal tour of the Speaker’s apartments, but at the end of it all she made a little oration to them that was perfectly judged. We must remember that, in their day, these elderly gents had been heroes of the second world war, but many, many years had gone by and most people of that generation did not even know about the channel dash raid or the Palembang oil refineries raid. She said, “I want to thank you, because, without what you and your comrades did, we would not have a free Parliament today.” Impishly, she added, “And with my views, I would probably have ended up in a concentration camp.” Quick as a flash, Pat Kingsmill DSO said, “Yes, but we would have been in there right alongside you all the way.” I could see the backbones of these four elderly gentlemen straightening because of the way that they had been inspired by the empathy, the kindness and the dignity of this wonderful woman.

I close by reminding the House that I was one of hundreds of MPs. Those are my two anecdotes, and if some of those hundreds were here, they could tell many more.

Mr Speaker: Let us go to somebody who is a serving neighbour.

1.11 pm

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): I was sitting in this spot, behind Betty Boothroyd, when she was elected as Speaker. A picture of that day has gone round, which unfortunately reminds me that a lot of colour has gone out of both my hair and beard in the meantime. Imagine having to share a borough and the local media with an international star!

It is sad to lose a long-standing good friend, but really we should be celebrating an extraordinary groundbreaking life. She brought the Speaker’s role into the modern world. She respected tradition, as has been said, but did so with style. It was a role made for the televising of this House. One could almost have described it as traditional values in a modern setting.

Betty controlled this place with firmness and humour, but without either patronising or belittling colleagues—a tradition, I am pleased to see, Mr Speaker, that you have restored. With that mixture of charm and toughness, she was a mailed fist inside a stylish velvet glove. That served her well inside the Labour party, where she was a formidable figure in restoring the Labour party to common sense, battling away, hour after hour, in national executive and committee meetings. She provided the venue for the moderate group’s pre-meeting before the NEC meeting. Food and drink may have been involved as well. I am not sure whether my right hon. Friend the Member for Derby South (Margaret Beckett) or your father, Mr Speaker, were on the invitation list for those gatherings. That was all good training for her time in the Whips Office, during the years recently recreated in the play “This House”.

We also have to consider how she even got to this place. The battle for a seat—a number of seats—was enormously difficult for a working-class woman without some of the resources that were available to trade union candidates, for example, in those days. She fought in Leicester South East, Peterborough, Nelson and Colne and Rossendale before becoming the Member for West Bromwich.

Betty showed that perseverance and grit can win through. She broke barriers so that others who followed would not have the same struggles. She was one of a kind and a real pioneer. West Bromwich, Sandwell, the Labour party, the wider west midlands, Parliament and the public will miss her, but will remember how she changed this Parliament and this country for the better. May she rest in peace.

1.14 pm

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): I wish to pay tribute to a wonderful human being and perhaps touch on some of the things that happened outside this Chamber, before I became a Member of Parliament, when I was sometimes sitting upstairs here. I vividly remember hearing her say, “Time’s up”—that is not a poke at you, Mr Speaker—and “Reading”. She hated people reading questions. Perhaps that is something that we should learn, as we would get through more questions. To be fair, she could understand people better when they spoke from the heart, rather than from something that was pre-written for them.

She was brilliant with the staff. We have heard so much, quite rightly, about what happened in this Chamber and in Parliament itself, but she was also enormously proud of the staff in this great House. She had time for everybody. I was working for Sir Teddy Taylor when I was on crutches, recovering from an injury. She had no idea who I was, but she stopped me and said, “What have you done, young man?” I was 40-odd at the time and was thrilled to be called a young man. I explained to her what had happened. She said, “You keep in touch with me as to what goes on.” When I was elected in 2005, she stopped me again, even though she was not in this House then, and said, “You’ve made it, young man, congratulations.”

Betty came regularly to the Tea Room and sat at her table. If anyone wanted to talk to her, that was fine, otherwise she would not interrupt at all. She was there to give advice. She liked the atmosphere—the ambience—of

the place. The key for her was people—people from any background who had this opportunity in life, as she had, along with the likes of myself and many colleagues in the House today.

There was another part of Betty that has been touched on just fractionally today, which was Cyprus. Like my family, Betty loved Cyprus. She would go to Cyprus at any time that she could when it was warm—she did not like it in the winter. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) said earlier on, she also liked her ciggies, but if anyone mentioned that she was still smoking, she would say, “I have cut back. I am not smoking anywhere near as many as I used to.” That was rubbish. Sneakily, the ciggie was always there, even in her latter years, and even if she was down by the pool or on the beach—we have heard about the paragliding and things like that. Covid restricted her, and that really hurt her, because she could not get away to see her friends in her beloved Cyprus. Betty was immaculate. There was not, as we have heard, a bit of lippy out of place. To say that a lady of her years looked so immaculate by the side of the pool is not to belittle her or her age. She was just as proud as punch to be there in the sunshine with her friends.

From me, as probably the last speaker from the Conservative Benches, I say thank you to her for being a wonderful human being and for giving people the courage all those years ago to step forward. As the Mother of the House has said, it was so difficult for women then not just to fight a seat, but to get selected to fight a seat. For her to come through all that and to still have time for everybody else is something that her family and her loved ones should be very proud of, and we will miss her dearly.

1.18 pm

Dame Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): I speak as a current serving Member of Labour’s NEC who has some insight—more from history than personal experience—of the kinds of times that Betty went through when she was a servant of the Labour party NEC. I also speak as someone whose first vote in this House was actually in that Speaker’s election, so I started off pretty well in the 1992 to 1997 Parliament with a win, but I do not think that we won a single vote after that for the length of the Parliament.

Betty was, as we have heard, born to a working-class family of textile workers in Dewsbury, the daughter of a millhand and a weaver. She later said:

“I came out of the womb into the Labour movement.”

Her mum and dad, Mary and Archie, were both members of the Labour party and the textile workers union when she was born. Despite being a fun-loving teenager, she was—perhaps inevitably, given that background—always serious about her politics. She said that her parents were politically minded because they were mill workers in Dewsbury during the depression years.

Betty was famously a keen dancer, as we have heard, and a chorus girl who, rumour had it, even performed at the pantomime. But in the end, she chose Parliament, and she persisted so that, finally, Parliament also chose her. She did not become an MP easily, as we have heard—no woman did back then. It took her five attempts over 16 years before she was finally successful

as the 95th woman ever elected to this House of Commons. During that struggle, she even began referring to herself as

“the girl most unlikely to succeed”,

but on 24 May 1973, she was successfully elected in a by-election, and she served her voters faithfully in the constituency of West Bromwich, and its successor constituency, West Bromwich, West, until 2000. I certainly do not envy my right hon. Friend the Member for Warley (John Spellar), who had to try to get local coverage in the newspapers with Betty also vying for that space.

The Parliament that Betty entered in 1973 was almost entirely bereft of women. When she first came to this place, only 4%, or 19, of the 635 MPs were women. That figure was to fall even lower in the February 1974 election—of which today is the anniversary, by the way—which returned 23 women, of whom 13 were Labour and, of course, Betty was one. Three other women were elected in that election and I think we ought to remember them. Maureen Colquhoun was of the same generation as Betty, and although she had a very different parliamentary career, hers was equally as important. Jo Richardson was also returned, as was Audrey Wise. They were all formidable Labour women. It just shows what you had to be in that time to get anywhere near this place.

When I was elected to Parliament in 1992, my first ever vote was in that historic Speaker’s election, which was only the third in a century. As we have heard, Betty was the first—and, so far, the only—woman to be elected Speaker in 700 years of parliamentary history. It is a tribute to her personal qualities and the regard in which she was held that she broke that glass ceiling when women made up less than 10% of that House of Commons. It is perhaps why she appealed in this place, when we were all listening, for people to vote for what she was and what she represented rather than for how she was born. That was, I think, a pitch to the 90% of people in this place, during that election, who were not women.

Betty was not John Major’s choice or the Conservative choice in that election—as we have heard, Peter Brooke was—but 72 Members of the governing party voted for her, which just shows her reach. When John Major realised that his pitch for Peter Brooke had failed, and that, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Derby South (Margaret Beckett) said in her tribute, people were very happy about it, he was extremely graceful in his tribute to her. He observed that she had “made history”, and said to her:

“The House trusts you. It believes that you enjoy in abundance the qualities necessary to protect and sustain the House, and to safeguard its rights.”—[*Official Report*, 27 April 1992; Vol. 207, c. 20.]

She repaid that trust in spades in the eight years during which she presided.

Betty was, as has been referred to in some tributes, the owner of a famously loud voice, which, of course, you need if you are in the Chair, Mr Speaker. She stamped her personality on the role and became a national treasure. She got rid of the wig, rightly assuming that her abundant shock of impeccably sculptured grey hair was a suitable alternative. She presided with, I think, great authority, wit and charm over some very difficult periods—not least the trench warfare over the

[*Dame Angela Eagle*]

Maastricht treaty. She was probably the nearest thing to regal that any non-royal could be, which befits the highest commoner in the land, which of course our Speaker is. She was always impeccably fashionable, as perhaps befits the daughter of textile workers. She was clear in interviews that her dress sense had come directly from the expectations of her father for her to be presentable as she was growing up.

Betty was, in private, an astute observer of the political scene, personally kind and thoughtful, and good at putting new Members at their ease while keeping them on the straight and narrow as far as procedure went. She was a stickler for tradition and a staunch protector of the rights of the House, as we have heard. There was a moan of great shock when she announced her resignation in 2000. Nobody had expected it. I was in the Chamber when she announced it, and there was dismay around the place, which forced her in the end to stop speaking from her prepared notes and just say, “Be happy for me!” She had decided to go at a time of her choosing after feeling that she had served the House to the best of her ability for as long she wished to do so.

Betty regarded herself as a democrat. She was pro-EU, as I think the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) said in his remarks. She was a child of the Labour party. She was a Labour icon. She was, as I mentioned, one of that group of formidable women who came into the House in the 1970s. She was, above all else, a servant of Parliament. We will not see her like again, but those who knew her know what a privilege that was and what a magnificent and unique parliamentarian we were lucky enough to know and work alongside.

1.27 pm

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): We all owe a great debt of gratitude to Betty. I was lucky enough to be here during part of her speakership, but unfortunately, as I had lost my seat in 1992, I was not able to participate in her election or her first term as Speaker.

I think it worth reinforcing a point that has already been made. In 1992, the Conservative Government, who had been re-elected, sought in a sense to change the system. Instead of having a Speaker elected from the Labour party, which would have been the norm, the powers that be decided that they wanted a former Cabinet Minister, Peter Brooke, as the Speaker. It is worth paying tribute to all those on the Conservative Benches who decided that that was not to be—that it would not be fair; it would not be right; and, indeed, that they ought to elect somebody who had spent most of her time on the Back Benches rather than in Government.

It is a pity that there are not more people here today, but if there comes a time when there is a vacancy in the future, colleagues should remember that they should follow their own instincts and judgment rather than be driven by the pressure from the Whips or the establishment. Betty Boothroyd really rewarded the trust that people put in her. She was an independent Speaker—nobody would ever criticise her for being partisan.

It is a pity that her successor did not necessarily live up to the example that she set so well. I remember that when she retired, she was a shoulder upon which many

of us could shed a tear when we were in despair at what was happening in this place, and I thank her for those words of consolation during that period. I say to constituents who come here that the best Speakers are the ones who hardly ever speak, and she epitomised that. She used the expressions on her face to keep control in this place, and it is a pity that her immediate successor did not follow that same edict.

1.30 pm

Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab): I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Warley (John Spellar) that today should be about celebrating a long life well lived, which is how I remember Betty. She is probably, of her generation, one of the most loved and will be longest remembered for her contribution to politics, particularly here in Westminster. I have strong memories of her keeping us in the most definite order and ensuring that the traditions of the House were well respected. The fact that she was the woman who broke a piece of the glass ceiling by becoming our first female Speaker earns her that well-deserved place in history, but it was not simply that she secured the position; it was how she used it.

She brought her theatrical talent from her time as a Tiller girl to the task of being Speaker of the House. Some of us will remember that those were the early days of televising the House. Her strong, charismatic and theatrical manner and her occasionally very funny approach to the role made her a national treasure and helped Parliament, because it helped to grow interest in what was happening in Parliament, so that people started watching us on television.

It was tough to be a woman in the House when she was first elected as one of 23 women MPs. She was, I think, one of the generation who felt they had to outperform the men to make any progress. I would not describe her as a sister, but I do remember that she was responsible for the most revolutionary thing in those days: she introduced vending machines to sell tights. Those of us who were the revolutionary feminists and always caught our tights on the wood right across the Palace were really grateful for that. She also made sure that there were more women’s lavatories close to the Chamber.

Her success in securing the position was radical, but she was a very firm traditionalist. What we wore, how we dressed and how we behaved in the House were all really important to her. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle) said, she looked regal in the Speaker’s robes. I remember that the very first time I spoke in the House, I was sitting around where I am now. I made my maiden speech and sat down, knowing that after we have listened to a couple of Members, we can go out and have a cup of tea with our adoring family who have come to watch us. I did that and then came back into the Chamber and sat in a different place. I did not realise that there was a tradition that we have to sit in the same place from which we have spoken, and I got right well told off by her, which was very deflating but typical of Betty. I do not know whether others remember the time that Simon Hughes was very long in asking a question—

Mr Speaker: Always!

Dame Margaret Hodge: Always. Betty said to him:

“This is so time-consuming. Come on, Mr. Hughes: spit it out.”—[*Official Report*, 18 March 1997; Vol. 292, c. 719.]

He then sat down, completely deflated.

I also remember that she loved having good fun. I am lucky enough to play the piano, and we had a sing-song in her rooms where we sang “Pack Up Your Troubles in Your Old Kit-Bag” and “I’m Forever Blowing Bubbles”. That was another side of Betty that we all felt warm about.

My predecessor was Jo Richardson, who was a close friend of Betty Boothroyd. She used to chat to me a lot about Jo when I was trying to get to know my predecessor better. We named a school after her, the Jo Richardson Community School in Barking. Betty graciously came and opened the school and enthralled all the children with her theatricality.

The final thing I want to say is that she was always kind. She was kind to all of us personally. I remember that when I was having a particularly difficult time in the House in relation to fighting the antisemitism in the Labour party, she was one of the most supportive women to me; she gave me the courage to be resilient in that situation. Betty earned her place in our history books. She was a vibrant, passionate and strong woman. She loved her life in Parliament, and we loved her.

1.35 pm

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Representing a Yorkshire constituency, I know that we are not short of warm, brilliant women with sharp wit and a hearty laugh, but Baroness Boothroyd led the way as an iconic parliamentarian and a role model to many of us, with a life well lived.

Last month, I was fortunate enough to chat with Betty on the closing night of the musical bearing her name at the Royal Exchange Theatre in Manchester. I spotted her across the theatre. At that stage she was in a wheelchair, but she was immaculately dressed, and most strikingly, she had a large portcullis brooch proudly displayed on her jacket. It was a real pleasure to see her beaming with joy as her story was told in full musical technicolour, particularly as I know that Betty loved the theatre and a good song and dance. At one stage in the play, her character descended from the gods in a huge Speaker’s Chair, and I could see she loved that—she was beaming.

Although she included “There’s No Business Like Show Business” as one of her songs on “Desert Island Discs”, we all know that it is in politics that she had an immeasurable amount to contribute, and we thank her for that today. On behalf of my constituents in Hull North, I would like to express our thanks for all that she did and send our condolences to her friends and family.

1.37 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): Baroness Boothroyd was a true trailblazer, as we have heard from everyone who has spoken today. I had the enormous privilege of eating lunch with her quite a few times in the Members’ Dining Room. From the very first time as a new MP to the last time—I cannot recall when that was; if I had known it was going to be the last time, I would have made sure I kept that memory forever—I was awestruck at how sharp and engaged she was, as well as how immaculate

and glamorous she always was, even into her 90s. She certainly kept us all on our toes, and she was never, ever off duty.

She had always been a woman on top of her game, and with her fierce personality, she took everything in her stride. Coming from a trade unionist and staunch Labour family, she made her mark immediately in Parliament, standing up for ordinary working people in her maiden speech. She represented the best of us here in the Labour party, and she then went on to represent the best of this House, as the first and still the only Madam Speaker.

As the ambassador of Parliament internationally, while overseeing the administration of this House and bringing coherence and order to proceedings on a daily basis, she was an anchor for our proud democratic traditions, always acutely aware of the fine balance to maintain when representing the UK’s legislature and democracy as a whole. The speakership was coming under increased scrutiny when she stepped into the role, given its wider public recognition as a result of proceedings being televised, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) said, but Betty took it all in her stride, standing up for power, authority and integrity and also immaculate style in the office of Speaker. She made quite the impact and served as an inspiration to all of us in this House who have gone before and who are still here. We will never see her like again.

1.39 pm

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): I rise to speak in tribute to a person who, more than anyone else, has had a profound impact on my life. I absolutely idolised Betty Boothroyd as a young child. Pre-1997, I remember that there were more Members called John or Jonathan than there were female MPs. As a young girl of four or five years old, it was absolutely transfixing watching Betty Boothroyd on television, not only because she was the first, and to date only, female Speaker of the House, but because of the way that she commanded this Chamber of often braying, oafish men and because of the respect that they held her in. I found her charisma magnetic and I loved her wit.

I used to come home from school and want to watch Betty Boothroyd on television. Although I had little concept at that time about politics or what her job actually was, she was a character I was obsessed with. At my nursery, children were allowed to go in fancy dress on their birthday and I had demanded that my parents allow me to dress as Betty Boothroyd. So there is a picture of me on my fourth birthday dressed as Betty Boothroyd to go to nursery. As I said, she was an idol.

Watching Betty Boothroyd when I was growing up, and wanting to understand more about the job that she did, was what got me interested in politics in the first place. She had an impact on not just me but, I am sure, young girls up and down the country, who will have seen her as a role model. She smashed through the glass ceiling and did it with wit, style and charisma, which was absolutely magical. I also saw the play that my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) referred to at the Royal Exchange Theatre, although sadly not on the same night as Betty. It really captured that camp and that performance that made her beloved up and down the country.

[Charlotte Nichols]

I never actually met Betty Boothroyd. On one occasion, when I was a newly elected MP, she came into the Tearoom and I saw her and welled up. I was so starstruck by seeing this woman in the flesh who had had such a profound impact on my life that I could not get anything out—I could not even introduce myself to say hello. Yesterday, when I heard the news, I knew that I would now never get that opportunity.

What I have taken away from the tributes that I have heard today from people who had a personal relationship with her is that she would probably have loved it if I had told her that story. It is important for all of us, when we get the opportunity to meet our heroes, to say hello and tell them how much they mean to us, because we never know when we are next going to get that opportunity or if, as in my case, we will ever get it. I hope that her friends and family, and all the people listening to these tributes, know how much she meant to me and to everyone in this House and around the country.

1.43 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is with great sadness that we gather today to pay tribute to Betty Boothroyd. On behalf the Democratic Unionist party, and particularly our leader, my right hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson), I express our sincere condolences to her family on the loss of this giant of a lady—she was truly a political giant.

I never had the privilege of sitting under Betty Boothroyd in this Chamber, but after listening to right hon. and hon. Members, I suspect that I would have been chastised and brought into line regularly by her, as I am by you, Mr Speaker, on many occasions. I love tradition and history and I am impressed that she loved history as well. I never met her, but I often saw her in the House of Lords—everyone knew her. She certainly had presence, poise and stature; to be honest, I was probably in awe of her, because I knew her reputation. She was a big character and a personality.

What a legacy Betty Boothroyd has—we celebrate her many achievements. She was the first woman Speaker and the only one so far. She was the original groundbreaker who smashed any and every glass ceiling with her wit, authority and presence in this Chamber. She was always respected, yet one of the major moments of her time in the role that has stayed with me was her refusal of Gerry Adams' request to come to the House to make a statement. She told him in no uncertain terms, "If you don't take your oath, you won't take your place here." She was absolutely right. That is the stuff of legend to those who watch Governments roll over in deference.

Betty Boothroyd was a wonderful lady and a lovely woman who will go down in history in the annals of this place. She was a parliamentarian in every sense of the word, and a woman of worth and lasting value to this place, to her party and to her family, who will miss her. We honour her memory in this House today and in the days and years to come.

Mr Speaker: I thank all hon. Members for their contributions. I will break tradition in a way that Betty would not have liked by saying that the Speaker's secretary at that time, Sir Nicolas Bevan, has been watching all the proceedings—he knows all the stories and I could see him nodding when many of them were being told. There is a clear message to Maxine Peake to get "Betty! A Sort of Musical" on the road again.

Betty was absolutely rigid in keeping and upholding the values of this House. She would take on a Member of Parliament and she would take on Governments and the Opposition—it did not matter who it was. She even took on the press: poor Nigel Nelson had to sit in the Red Lion pub, because he was not allowed in the House. She put those papers into the filing cabinet and I came across them when we were having a clear out. They were quite amazing, including her letters to the editor—the poor editor, who had to write back. I said to Nigel, "I think you need to come and read this," which he did. It was an amazing moment, and what amazing tributes we have had.

Multi-storey Car Parks (Safety)

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

1.47 pm

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to increase the minimum required height of guarding in multi-storey car parks; to make provision about increasing the height of guarding in existing multi-storey car parks; to require 24 hour staffing of multi-storey car parks; and for connected purposes.

Unfortunately, I never met my constituent Gabriel Jack Santer, known as Gabe. He died, aged just 15, on 3 October 2020 when he fell from the top of an open-roofed multi-storey car park. It was a Q-Park on the corner of Hanover Street and Gradwell Street in Liverpool city centre on a bleak, wet and windy Saturday night. The inquest at the end of January 2021 recorded an open verdict.

Gabriel was, by all accounts, a lovely, popular, friendly and lively boy. His teachers thought him destined for stage or screen, because he was a natural entertainer with a fine sense of humour. He was kind, never cruel; he was a sensitive young man, who was solicitous and caring. He was friends with many and scorned by none of his peers at school or from skateboarding. Now he is gone and very much missed by his family and friends.

Agonisingly, Gabe's family will never know what was in his mind around the time of his fall from that place, but they know one thing for sure—his death was as preventable as it was senseless. Had the barriers atop the car park been higher or designed to prevent people falling or climbing over them, Gabe could not have fallen as he did on that night. Had there been staff on site to watch what was going on and to check on safety, he would not have fallen.

As it happens, the barriers in the place from which Gabe fell were a few inches below the legal minimum. Even so, almost two and a half years later, there is no indication that Q-Park is to be pursued by any enforcement authority for that failure to adhere to the guidance in approved document K of the building regulations, even though it led to the death of a 15-year-old boy.

Gabe's father, my constituent Johnny Santer, is determined to ensure that Gabe's death will not be in vain. He wants to make sure that no other person finds it so shockingly easily possible to fall or jump from an open-roofed multi-storey car park, and I want to help him achieve that aim. That is why I seek the leave of the House to bring in a Bill, the Multi-Storey Car Parks (Safety) Bill, to ensure that the minimum height of barriers is increased substantially; that existing car parks have to be retrofitted with safer barriers adhering to new, higher standards; and that provision is made for the staffing of such sites to ensure that people do not fall.

After Gabriel's father came to see me following Gabriel's inquest, I was shocked to discover that the building regulations' requirements for the height of barriers set a minimum height for guarding the rooftop of only 1.1 metres, or just around 3 feet. That is too low to stop anyone from accidentally falling, and it is certainly too low to stop anyone who is determined to jump. Multi-storey car parks must be attractive to those seeking to take

their own life. They are easily accessible; one can reach the top floor easily, without needing to explain one's presence; they are generally unstaffed, so there is unlikely to be anybody asking, "What's going on?"; and the barriers only have to be 3 feet high to meet the requirements set out in the building regulations. In addition, such low barriers make it easy to fall accidentally in certain circumstances.

So how much of a problem is there—how general is it? The answer is not entirely clear. I tabled a written question, and was told that the Government do not collect figures to indicate how many people die each year in the way that Gabriel did. In a written answer on 5 September 2022, the Government confirmed that they are

"aware of some fatalities",

but did not state how many or give me a number. However, it seems to be a more frequent occurrence than one might hope or expect. A simple search of newspaper reports, while hardly comprehensive, none the less indicates that there is a real problem. It shows that there were at least 17 deaths by falling from multi-storey car parks in England over a 12-month period—in 2022. There may well be more deaths that have gone unreported in the media, and there are also likely to be instances of very serious injury caused by people falling or jumping from those easily accessible, high and dangerous places.

If Mr Santer's experience is anything to go by, owners and operators of multi-storey car parks are not exactly open to the idea of increasing safety measures above the minimum requirements set out in approved document K. Gabriel fell from a Q-Park roof. Q-Park is the third largest car park operator in Europe, with over 3,500 car parks under its control, yet when Mr Santer asked that company for all the information it held about his son by way of a freedom of information request, he was told that such requests need only be met in respect of "living persons"—what a shockingly insensitive response in the circumstances. When my office got involved, Mr Santer did receive some basic information thereafter, but it did not take long for Q-Park and its associated companies to shut up shop, demanding that Mr Santer communicate with them only via their lawyers.

It has become clear that Q-Park is not willing to take any voluntary steps to ensure that barriers are at a height that would prevent falling and jumping from its roofs, nor does it seem inclined to do anything much to improve safety unless it is made to by a change in the law. Indeed, there was a death by falling from the rooftop of a Q-Park in Sheffield in May 2012, which resulted in a regulation 28 report to prevent future deaths being sent by the Sheffield coroner to Q-Park Ltd and Sheffield City Council's planning department in May 2014. That report set out concerns about the low height of the barriers and the ease of using the crash barrier by the perimeter wall as a step up to the top of the perimeter wall. Despite Sheffield City Council offering to facilitate improvements, and nine years after that prevention of future deaths report was sent by the Sheffield coroner to the company, Q-Park is still refusing to make any of the changes mentioned in that report when pressed by Mr Santer, and that is not encouraging. Gabriel died six years after the report was sent to Q-Park, which had done nothing to deal with the issues it highlighted. That shows that Q-Park will only do the absolute minimum to comply with guidance on safety.

[Maria Eagle]

It is therefore up to us in this place to require that improvements be made to the safety of multi-storey car parks. It seems clear that, if Q-Park is to take those safety concerns seriously and finally increase the height of its barriers, the legal minimum height must be increased, and a requirement to retrofit existing car parks must be included in the law. In addition, having car parks staffed can only increase safety levels. If Mr Santer is to achieve his goal of ensuring that Gabriel did not die in vain and that some good can come out of this terrible tragedy, the law must be changed. It is for us to do so.

In a written answer from June 2020, the Government confirmed that they have no current plans to make any such changes. It is in those circumstances that I seek leave to bring forward legislation to increase the safety of guarding at multi-storey car parks, as I have outlined. Should I receive permission to introduce such a Bill, and should that Bill receive Royal Assent, I think it would be appropriate to refer to it as Gabe's law. He was a fine young lad with so much promise, who died too soon and so needlessly.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Maria Eagle, Dame Angela Eagle, Sir George Howarth, Ian Byrne, Kim Johnson, Peter Dowd, Mick Whitley, Tony Lloyd, Barbara Keeley, Sir Mark Hendrick, Mike Amesbury and Ashley Dalton present the Bill.

Maria Eagle accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 17 March, and to be printed (Bill 256).

Opposition Day

[13TH ALLOTTED DAY]

NHS Workforce Expansion

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): We now come to the first Opposition day motion, on the subject of expanding the NHS workforce. I have to inform the House that Mr Speaker has not selected the amendment.

1.57 pm

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House condemns the Government's failure to train enough staff to tackle the worst workforce crisis in the history of the National Health Service with a current shortage of 9,000 hospital doctors and 47,000 nurses; notes reports that the draft NHS England workforce plan calls for a doubling of medical school places to address this crisis; calls on the Chancellor of the Exchequer to use the upcoming Spring Budget to end the 200-year-old non-domiciled tax status regime; and further calls on the Government to use revenue generated by ending that regime to adopt Labour's plan to expand the NHS workforce by doubling the number of medical training places, delivering 10,000 more nursing and midwifery clinical placements, training twice the number of district nurses each year and delivering 5,000 more health visitors.

To anyone who has needed medical care in recent months, it is blindingly obvious that the NHS is desperately in need of more staff. Doctors and nurses are overworked, hospitals are understaffed and the staff are burnt out. Patients are waiting longer than ever before, and 13 years of the Conservatives' failure to train enough staff has broken the NHS, leaving patients to pay the price. In the words of the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), Labour has a plan; where is the Government's?

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): The point I have been trying to make in recent months is that we should try to learn from the experience of Europe, where they have very effective social insurance systems and much more effective outcomes, so when the hon. Gentleman says he has a plan, I think we would all like to know what the plan is. Is it radical reform, or is it just more and more taxpayers' money thrown into the NHS?

Wes Streeting: I am grateful beyond words for that intervention. I will outline Labour's plans immediately and return to the right hon. Gentleman's challenge—proposing a social insurance system—a little later in my remarks.

The point of this debate is that there is a serious shortage of staff. Labour has a plan to address that shortage, whether that is measures for retention of the staff we have or our plan for the biggest expansion of the NHS's staff in history. The Conservatives have no plan, so let me outline what Labour's plan is. We will double the number of medical school places so that we train 15,000 doctors a year. We will train 10,000 new nurses and midwives every year. We will double the number of district nurses qualifying each year and train 5,000 more health visitors. In a formula that will become familiar in the run-up to the next general election, we are clear about how we would pay for it, too. We will pay for it by abolishing the non-dom tax status, because patients need doctors and nurses more than a wealthy few need a tax loophole.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Does the shadow Secretary of State agree that it is not just about cash; it is also about the huge recruitment issues? For example, the North Middlesex University Hospital has 800 patients a day into accident and emergency, and it is suffering because even if there is the budget, there simply are not the staff to employ to put on the frontline?

Wes Streeting: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and it is why current staff in the NHS are right to say that retention is urgent and that we need measures from the Government immediately to deal with retention. By definition, if we have a shortage of staff, retention is not enough, and that is why Labour has put forward a fully costed, fully funded plan for the biggest expansion of NHS staff in history.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the £1.3 billion that the NHS spent on agency staff last year could have been used to recruit proper, full-time NHS staff?

Wes Streeting: I wholeheartedly agree. It is why we are in the worst of all situations: the shortage of staff means not only that patients are receiving poorer care, but that we are paying over the odds as taxpayers for the Conservatives' failure to recruit and retain the staff we need.

We are not alone in thinking that the biggest expansion of NHS staff in history and doubling the number of medical school places is the right solution. Amanda Pritchard, the chief executive of NHS England, has rightly said that we need greater investment in training to stop excellent British students being turned away. The Royal College of Physicians has called for medical school places to be doubled, and now the NHS is formally asking the Government to fund it. Why are the Government refusing to fund a doubling of medical school places, which the NHS and the Royal College of Physicians say is necessary, and which patients can see through experience is desperately necessary?

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con) *rose—*

Wes Streeting: Perhaps the hon. Member can tell us.

Dr Evans: I am grateful to the shadow Secretary of State for bringing me in on this point. Training is really important. As someone who has been a medical student, I know that one of the most important things to look at is how many people will be on one's firms. We do not want 12, 15 or 20 people all coming into a cubicle to see a patient. Although I welcome the idea of expansion, can he talk me through what the ratio will be on ward rounds for medical students being trained?

Wes Streeting: I am glad that finally Government Members have noticed that Labour has got a plan and are asking how it will work; I wish that Government Ministers would join in. The proposal we set forward to double the number of medical school places is based on modelling put forward by the Royal College of Physicians, which understands perfectly well the points the hon. Member makes. I have had excellent meetings with university vice-chancellors, who are keen to roll up their sleeves and help. The reason we set out a plan this far from a general election was for two reasons. First, we

want to give medical schools and NHS employers time to prepare for the expansion. Secondly, we hope that the Government adopt this plan to give the next Labour Government a head start. I very much hope, as this motion says, that the Chancellor will take our plan and incorporate it into his Budget, and I will cheer him if he does so.

I will tell the House how ludicrous the situation is today. There are medical schools in England today that are exclusively training international students, many of whom will leave upon graduating, while at the same time we are turning away thousands of straight-A students from our own country who want to help the NHS. Brunel University is training 100 new doctors, with not a single UK student. Chester University has deferred the launch of its medical degree by a year because the Treasury will not give it a penny. Local NHS trusts and charities have chipped in to fund 20 UK medical student places at Three Counties Medical School at Worcester University, because the Government are refusing to fund a single domestic student. Despite pleas from the NHS, the Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education, the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), has threatened to fine medical schools if they increase their offers to applicants next term.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con) *rose—*

Wes Streeting: I am almost certain that the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) will not agree with his universities Minister.

Mr Bone: The hon. Member is making an interesting speech. On the point about retaining people from overseas going into medical training, who he said will then qualify and leave, does he think there is an argument for having an arrangement of the sort they have in the airline industry, whereby someone who is trained here then has to work here for a certain number of years, or otherwise repay the cost? Does he think that would help the situation?

Wes Streeting: There are a couple of challenges with that approach. First—I want to be clear about this—having international students come to study at UK universities is a wonderful thing. It is wonderful for British students who mix with cohorts drawn from across the world, and it is wonderful because they contribute to the cultural and intellectual life of our universities, and of the towns and cities in which they live while studying here. It is a wonderful thing because they often return to their countries with fond memories of Britain, which is an extension of our soft power and diplomatic influence. Those are all great reasons why we should cherish, embrace and welcome international students, and it is why I hope the Home Secretary does not win the argument inside Government to restrict further access to international students. Finally, I should say that international students also pay an enormous amount to come and study here in the UK, and they subsidise home students.

I want to be clear about how much I welcome international students, but it is an absurdity that people are coming to this country to study in medical schools that have no British students. It is an absurdity, when we have a chronic shortage of doctors, nurses, midwives and allied health professionals, that we see straight-A students from our own country being turned away,

[*Wes Streeting*]

while university medical schools are being told they can only recruit international students. That is the depths of stupidity that this Government are plumbng.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the shadow Minister for his thoughts. The poaching of junior doctors by Australia, for example, for better pay and working conditions, as opposed to fractured shift patterns here, is a major issue. It is not just about expanding the workforce, to which he has referred; it is also about having a careful and concerted campaign to retain staff here. Does he agree that has to be part of the thrust of this debate?

Wes Streeting: I wholeheartedly agree with the hon. Member. I will talk about this later in my speech, but it is why the Government have to resolve this pay dispute with existing NHS staff. The danger is not that they walk out for another day of strike action, but that they walk out of the NHS altogether for countries that treat them better. What an absurd position to be in. It is also absurd, by the way, that we still have doctors retiring early for no other reason than that the pensions rules create an active financial disincentive to work up to normal retirement age, as many of them would like to do. It is completely absurd.

Dr Evans: Will the shadow Secretary of State give way?

Wes Streeting: I am happy to give way to the hon. Member again, but may I gently suggest that he would be better off lobbying current rather than future Ministers?

Dr Evans: As the hon. Gentleman sees himself as a future Minister, what is his solution for the pensions position for consultants?

Wes Streeting: I am delighted that the hon. Member asks. I had a good meeting with the British Medical Association pensions committee recently. There are a number of ways in which this matter could be resolved, one of which might be a tax-unregistered scheme, which we have seen used successfully in the judiciary. [*Interruption.*] I am perfectly fine with having a tax-unregistered scheme. I think the difference between the Opposition and the Government is that the Government have an army of civil servants to do the modelling. That is what I would like the Government to do. I say to the hon. Member again that it is no use lobbying the next Government—lobby the current Government.

Turning again to the international picture, the NHS is having to recruit from countries on the World Health Organisation's red list—countries that desperately need the few doctors and nurses they have—because our Government cannot be bothered to train their own. I think that is unethical, immoral, a disgrace and a kick in the teeth for the UK students who desperately want to be the doctors, nurses, midwives and allied health professionals that our country needs.

The Chancellor is refusing to budge, I believe, on cost grounds, but Labour's plan before the House today would cost £1.6 billion a year. We have shown how we would pay for it: scrapping non-doms would raise more than £3 billion. If the Chancellor needs any tips about the non-doms system, or if perhaps he is worried that

non-doms might flee the country, he need only knock on his next-door neighbour's door to see a case in point. He will find out how the system works, and that when people are asked politely to pay their taxes here, they do not flee the country.

Inaction also has costs. The NHS spent an eye-watering £3 billion on agency staff last year. One hospital was so desperate that it paid £5,200 for a doctor to work a single shift. Does that not sum up the approach of this Government: penny wise and pound foolish?

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making a remarkable speech. My constituent Marjorie Dunn spent seven weeks and a day in Harrogate Hospital last year, and in that time she saw NHS nurses leave the service and she was treated predominantly by agency staff—mistreated, I have to say, by agency staff. It is a disgrace. When she was eventually moved to a recovery hub run by Leeds City Council, she got excellent treatment there. She had broken her pelvis and been told she would never walk again, but it was the council physiotherapist who got her up and walking again. Is it not right that we should be supporting local authorities such as Labour-run Leeds to get such facilities as well as the NHS?

Wes Streeting: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I very much enjoyed my visit to Leeds with the shadow Chancellor to look at the work the acute trust is doing with Leeds City Council to speed up delayed discharges. He is absolutely right about the impact of the churn of staff on a ward—because they are not regular staff on a contract of employment at a particular hospital or medical facility—and it can be quite distressing for patients to see the faces and names change every day and to constantly be explaining once again what their experience in the hospital has been, if indeed the staff have time to stop and talk.

I am really struck by the fact that one of the biggest issues that staff raise with me is the moral injury. The fact is that they are busting a gut and working their socks off, and they go home at the end of the day deeply demoralised, distressed and depressed because they know that, despite their very best efforts, they are not providing the quality of care that patients deserve, through no fault of their own. That is why, even above the issues of pay and of terms and conditions, which I think many of us would understand in and of themselves, I think the straw that is breaking the camel's back is the moral injury. Unless we address that, we are going to lose the brilliant staff we have, before we even start to think about recruiting the staff we need.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way before my knee does. Clearly, he is a man with a plan. Is it not incredible that we do not have a plan for dealing with cancer—the Government have dropped the 10-year cancer plan—particularly at a time when 50,000 patients a month are having to wait more than two weeks between diagnosis and seeing a specialist? We need a plan that incorporates workforce recruitment and retention.

Wes Streeting: I apologise for keeping my hon. Friend bobbing—the last thing the NHS needs is another patient, so I hope the exercise has been good for his joints rather than the straw that breaks that camel's back.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I think cancer treatment is in many respects the canary in the coalmine, because it is an area where speed really does matter and where early detection can make a huge difference to the success of the outcomes. It is why, when we were in government, we had a cancer guarantee. By pursuing that cancer guarantee and making sure that patients received timely access to both diagnosis and treatment, the rising tide for cancer patients lifted all ships, and we saw a general improvement in the NHS, so that by the time we left government we had the lowest waiting times in history.

I am deeply anxious that within those waiting lists, which stand at a record in excess of 7 million now, will be a huge amount of undiagnosed cancer. As I know from personal experience of going to accident and emergency with something else, it is often in A&E departments that cancer is detected. I worry how many cancer patients like me will arrive at A&E, see the waiting times and walk away with a cancer undiagnosed. It certainly keeps me awake at night, and it should keep Ministers awake at night too.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on an excellent speech. Is he aware that Macmillan Cancer Support has today published research showing that 2022 was the year in which all national cancer targets were missed in at least one month? That is truly shocking, and it is why we need an NHS workforce plan urgently. Does he agree that it is about time the Government came forward and produced such a plan?

Wes Streeting: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend. Unless the NHS has the staff it needs, patients will not get the timely care they deserve. It really is as simple as that. We have a plan; the Government do not, and they are very welcome to take ours.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): The shadow Secretary of State is making a very good speech. On the issue of cancer, around half of cancer patients need radiotherapy, but barely a quarter get it. One reason is that the workforce in radiotherapy is small—6,400 people. At the moment, the number of posts vacant in radiotherapy centres is 30% higher than the number of new graduates leaving college and coming into the professions that make up that workforce. We also found in the Radiotherapy UK survey that 80% of the workforce in radiotherapy centres reported that either they or a colleague had considered leaving. Does he think that the cancer workforce is essential to a cancer plan that will actually save lives?

Wes Streeting: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and I have been following his work and that of the all-party parliamentary group on radiotherapy in this area, because he raises issues that ought to be taken very seriously. I was very grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) for coming to meet me about these challenges in particular. Of course, this has to be at the heart of a serious plan to improve cancer outcomes.

There is no doubt but that Labour's workforce plan—supported by the NHS, supported by the professions, supported by so many members of the public—would

make a difference. In fact, our inboxes have been filling with people welcoming the plan. It was a particular surprise to me to see one piece of fan mail that said:

"Despite my obvious political allegiances it would be remiss of me not mention the fact that Labour has pledged to double the number of medical school places and recruit additional health visitors and district nurses."

It goes on to say that it

"is something I very much hope the government also adopts on the basis that smart governments always nick the best ideas of their opponents."

Well, what luck that this particular fan of Labour's policy joined the Government just two weeks after he sent the email. It is, of course, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, who I must say I thought was an excellent Chair of the Health Committee. It is almost as if he had learned from all his mistakes when he was the Secretary of State for Health.

This is Lent, a period for atonement and a time for forgiveness, so I make this pledge today: if the Chancellor realises the errors of his ways and comes to this House to double the number of medical school places in the Budget and adopt Labour's NHS expansion to deliver the biggest expansion of the NHS workforce in history, I will cheer him on from the Opposition Front Bench during the Budget. I will cheer him on—

Dr Luke Evans: Come across!

Wes Streeting: Well, I need the help of the hon. Gentleman and Conservative Members, because my pleas seem to be falling on deaf ears. That is why I have taken the trouble to circulate this email to every Conservative Member, so that they can collar the Chancellor in the voting Lobby this evening—no doubt when he is voting with us, because he agrees with us—and I look forward to their assistance in helping him to see the error of his ways. In all seriousness, it is time that the Chancellor put his money where his mouth is, abolished non-doms and used the proceeds to train the doctors and nurses that the NHS needs.

We know the consequences of the current NHS crisis. Earlier this month, I met Samina and Minnie Rahman, who lost their loving husband and father on Christmas eve after calling for an ambulance three times. The family were initially told a nurse or paramedic would call them back, as it was deemed Iqbal did not require an ambulance. Forty minutes later, when his condition worsened and his family were unable to lift him into their car to drive him to hospital, they phoned 999 again. This time an ambulance was sent, but was then diverted to a higher-priority call. When Iqbal stopped breathing an hour after the first call, his family called 999 a third time, and an ambulance eventually arrived 24 minutes later. The paramedics spent 90 minutes attempting to revive Iqbal in front of his family, but they were unable to. That story is tragic and awful for the family who lost a husband, a father, and a grandfather. Perhaps most depressing is that this case is no longer surprising. The hour and a half that Iqbal waited for an ambulance was the average amount of time that patients with conditions such as heart attacks and strokes waited in December.

The West Midlands Ambulance Service has apologised to Mr Rahman's family, but they want the Government to take action. They are calling for change to ensure

[*Wes Streeting*]

that no other family must endure what they have been through, and they have three asks. First, they want an independent review to establish the number of deaths and serious harms caused by ambulance delays. The Government have rejected figures from the Royal College of Emergency Medicine that claimed that up to 500 people a week were losing their lives this winter due to long waits for emergency care. They also rejected figures from the Office for National Statistics on the number of excess deaths suffered in the past year. Well, Mr Deputy Speaker, “ignorance is bliss” is not a responsible approach to the crisis in emergency care. Sunlight is the best disinfectant, so I hope the Minister will commit to establishing the true scale of the harm caused by the crisis in the NHS.

Secondly, Minnie and Samina ask the Government to instigate Cobra-style meetings to deal with the public health emergency of ambulance delays. That is already happening to deal with the fallout from industrial action, but we need the same level of action for non-strike days. Thirdly, Minnie and Samina have asked to meet the Health and Social Care Secretary, so that he can hear at first hand about their experience, and see the trauma it has caused. The Secretary of State is not able to be here this afternoon, but I hope the Minister will convey that request to him. I gently remind her that I passed on Zaheer Ahmed’s request to meet the Secretary of State after his five-year-old nephew passed away following multiple failings by the health service, but that meeting is yet to be arranged. I think the least we can do as public servants is listen to those we serve, especially those who have suffered in the most unimaginable way. I hope the Secretary of State will meet those families, and that they are able to spur the Government into taking the action we need.

One promise of the NHS is that it is there for us when we need it. That has been completely fundamental in this country for as long as many in the Chamber can remember, but that promise is now broken. People are frightened that the NHS will not be there for them in an emergency. It is not hard to understand why. Look at the news today that more than 1.5 million patients waited for more than 12 hours in A&E last year, which is estimated by the Royal College of Emergency Medicine to have seen 23,000 people lose their lives.

This is not just about emergency care. Patients in need of an operation or even a GP appointment do not know whether the NHS will be there for them when they need it. That is why so many people are voting with their feet, and with their wallets, and going private. Of course most people in this country cannot afford to pay, so they have no choice but to wait and worry. Restoring that promise of an NHS that is there for us when we need it should be a basic task for any Government, but this Government do not even have the ambition, let alone a plan to get there. Instead, the Health and Social Care Secretary said last month that a world where patients are seen within four hours at A&E is “too ambitious” and “not achievable”. But it was achieved until 2015. It was certainly achieved under the last Labour Government.

The target for ambulances reaching patients with strokes or heart attacks has almost doubled to half an hour. If someone wants to see a GP, there is an “expectation”, not a guarantee, that they will be able to

do that in two weeks. Two weeks! I remember Tony Blair being attacked because people were forced to see a GP within two days—what people wouldn’t give to be in that position now. Millions wait longer than a month. The Government missed the goal so they moved the goalposts. They have accepted that the NHS will not be there for all of us when we need it. That is what managed decline looks like. That is what brings about the end of the NHS. It is not calls for a different model from the right hon. Member for Gainsborough and others; it is this: slow, irreversible decline. That is what the end of the NHS will look like, and that is why we desperately need a change in Government.

Catherine West: Does my hon. Friend remember when the NHS had an 80% approval rate among UK citizens back in 2008? Now look at it—approval is under 50%, perhaps 38%.

Wes Streeting: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend. We delivered the highest levels of patient satisfaction in the history of the national health service. Now patient satisfaction is at its lowest level since at least 1997. There is a second basic promise of the NHS which, if it is not broken, is under attack today like it has not been for years. When I went through my treatment for kidney cancer I had lots to think and worry about—every cancer patient does—but the one thing I never had to worry about was the bill. That is the thing that people love most about the national health service, but those who have never believed that healthcare should be provided to all, regardless of their means, are using this crisis to attack that principle. The right hon. Member for Gainsborough called the NHS the

“the last example of collective planning and socialist central control”—[*Official Report*, 22 September 2022; Vol. 719, c. 840.]

and even today called on the Health and Social Care Secretary to look at insurance based systems instead.

The hon. Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) has a Bill before the House this week that would extend user charging. The Prime Minister himself pledged last summer to charge patients who miss GP appointments, although he has since ditched that pledge—indeed, he has ditched an awful lot since he became Prime Minister. Two former Health Secretaries have joined in. The right hon. Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock) has proposed charging for missed GP appointments. The right hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid) went further and suggested charging patients to see a GP, or even to attend A&E. If he were here, I would happily give way to hear an explanation as to how that would work. The most deeply cynical thing about this, is that the right hon. Members for West Suffolk and for Bromsgrove are the people who bear much of the responsibility for the mess we are in today. They ran down the NHS. They refused to train the staff needed to treat patients on time. Now they say that timely care, free at the point of use, as we enjoyed 13 years ago, and as we have enjoyed for much of the past 75 years, is no longer possible—that we cannot afford it any more, that it is not achievable. That regressive, miserabilist argument cannot be allowed to win. Not only is it unjust, but it is wrong, so let us take it on in its own terms.

Why do patients who are ill enough to need to see a doctor miss appointments? Very often it is because the appointment clashes with work, they are unable to

travel, they did not receive the letter, or it arrived too late. The answer is to change the archaic and maddening way that patients are forced to book appointments, and build a new system around patient convenience. If patients could choose whether to have an appointment face-to-face or over the phone, if they did not have to wait on hold at 8 am to book an appointment, then wait for a call back that can come at any time of the day, fewer appointments would be missed. Why is it that those who attack NHS managers as being wasteful bureaucrats want to install far more of them? Because that is what an insurance-based system would mean. One-third of US healthcare costs go to insurance company overheads and providers billing patients. Is that really what the proponents of an insurance system want—more administration, more bureaucracy, and less money spent on delivering healthcare?

What would happen if we charged patients to see a GP? People would stay away. In some cases, yes, that would mean people who did not need to see a GP would not take up an appointment. But it would also mean that many people who needed to see a GP but could not afford the price stayed away. More conditions would go undiagnosed, and left to become more serious until the patient had to go to hospital instead. It would mean worse outcomes for patients, a less healthy society, and greater cost to the taxpayer. While we might save £39 on a GP appointment, it costs far more for patients to go to A&E, which costs £359 on average. Not only are those proposals unfair, but they would mean more bureaucracy, more late diagnosis, more expensive and less effective hospital treatment—exactly the opposite of what the NHS needs. Such proposals are wrong on fairness, wrong on efficiency, and wrong on health outcomes. Those in government have no plan for the NHS, and there are even worse ideas sitting on their Back Benches.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does he agree that the lack of support for a workforce plan, and the deliberate running down of the NHS, will prevent it from being able to take on and take up changes in technology, innovation, processes and treatment that could ensure better healthcare with less cost, enabling the NHS of the future to provide the support and treatment that the British people deserve?

Wes Streeting: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend. This really is the crux of it after 13 years of Conservative Government: either the NHS is in the mess it is in today through deliberate policy choice, deliberately running down the NHS because they do not believe in it, or the NHS is in this state through negligence and incompetence. *[Interruption.]* Perhaps the Minister would like to tell us whether it is negligence and incompetence, or deliberate policy choice. *[Interruption.]* Apparently, it is the pandemic. I wondered how long it would be before we ticked that box on the health debate bingo card.

If the NHS was in its worst crisis in history and we had the longest waiting times in the history of the NHS because of the pandemic, why were NHS waiting lists at their longest historic level before the pandemic? Why were there 100,000 staff shortages before the pandemic? Why were there 112,000 vacancies in social care before the pandemic? I will tell you why, Mr Deputy Speaker.

For the entire time they have been in government, whether pre-pandemic or post-pandemic, the Tories have not had the first clue what to do with the NHS. They took a golden inheritance of the shortest waiting times and the highest patient satisfaction in history, and they have squandered it over the last 13 years to the extent that people dial 999 and an ambulance does not come, people ask to see a GP and there are not enough appointments, and cancer outcomes and cancer waiting time targets are not met—not a single one. That is their record. It is the consequence of their choices and it is one of many reasons why this country needs a change and a Labour Government.

The right hon. Member for Gainsborough asked what reform under a Labour Government looks like. I say to him that it is not the model of funding that is broken, but the model of care. The NHS diagnoses too late, by which stage treatment is less effective and more expensive. We focus too much of our spending on hospital care and not enough on primary care, social care and prevention. The reform our health service needs is shifting that focus out of the hospital and into the community, because if we can reach people sooner we can catch illness earlier and even prevent it in the first place—better for patients and better value for money for the taxpayer. That is what a real reform argument looks like.

Of course, we need to retain the necessary NHS staff. There are 133,000 vacant posts in the NHS today. The number of fully qualified GPs is falling, with an extra 140 patients per doctor compared with five years ago, and midwives are leaving faster than they can be recruited. There is no NHS without the people to staff it, so that is the great gamble the Government have taken on the industrial action in the NHS. It is not just that staff walk out for a day on strike; it is that they walk out of the health service altogether. By ignoring the nurses and the ambulance workers for months, the Government have allowed 140,000 appointments and operations to be cancelled, and risk putting off thousands of staff from continuing their careers in the health service.

Have the Government learnt their lesson? Of course they have not. In two weeks' time, junior doctors are set to walk out on strike for 72 hours. It will mean huge disruption to patient care, yet there has not been a single meeting or minute of negotiation between Ministers and junior doctors. Why on earth are they not trying to stop yet more disruption to NHS care? Instead of ignoring staff, the Government ought to be doing everything they can to retain them in the health service. That means getting around the negotiation table and resolving the dispute on pay; it means getting around the table and fixing the pensions dispute; and it means listening to staff about their everyday experiences and making sure that, finally, they can see some light at the end of this miserable tunnel.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. On the lack of workforce, does he agree that another area is the mental health service, which is getting worse across the board? Individuals and families are suffering, but there also is a knock-on effect on the police. A fifth of their time is spent helping people with mental illness. The economy loses £100 billion every year through mental illness.

Wes Streeting: I am really grateful to my hon. Friend. He is absolutely right to talk about the mental health workforce. Labour is committed to an extra 8,500 mental health workers, which would mean dedicated mental health support in every school, and community mental health hubs that would reduce pressure on GPs and ensure people get seen sooner. It would ensure support for young people in school before they reach crises in mental health. We would pay for it by abolishing the carried profits loophole, a tax loophole that benefits private equity fund managers. It is not on the Order Paper this afternoon, Mr Deputy Speaker, but if the Government want to adopt that plan in the Budget too, they are very welcome to do so.

Whether it is more mental health staff, more doctors, more nurses, more midwives or more health professionals, the NHS is in crisis and only Labour has a plan to fix it. The Chancellor knows it is the right thing to do—he said so himself. The NHS backs it. Medical schools have the capacity to train more doctors. Thousands of straight-A students want to help the NHS and the NHS needs their help more than ever. The only thing standing in their way is this Government. I challenge them today: double the number of medical schools places, so that we train 15,000 doctors a year; train 10,000 new nurses and midwives every year; double the number of district nurses qualifying every year; train 5,000 more health visitors; and pay for it by abolishing the non-dom tax status, because patients need doctors and nurses more than a wealthy few need a tax loophole. That is the choice the Conservatives face in the Budget. We have a plan; they do not. They are welcome to nick it. Patients across the country would thank them and us if they do.

2.35 pm

The Minister for Social Care (Helen Whately): I am grateful for this chance to come to the House and talk about the NHS workforce. I am happy to begin with something that I expect is a point of agreement with those on the Opposition Benches: praising our fantastic NHS workforce and all they have done through the pandemic and are doing now as we recover from covid. Hon. Members will not be surprised to learn that my colleagues the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care and the Minister for Health and Secondary Care, who has responsibility for workforce, are today focused on discussions with the Royal College of Nursing, so it is my particular honour to speak on behalf of the Government today and to take a moment to re-set the tone, and indeed raise the bar, in this debate.

I am very happy to talk about our NHS workforce at a time when we have record numbers of doctors and nurses working in our health service. I am equally happy to talk about our social care workforce, the very people the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) seems to forget time and time again. I note that they are forgotten in his motion again today. In contrast, the Government are working with our whole health and social care workforce, not only training record numbers of doctors and nurses, and recruiting a whole host of healthcare professionals into the NHS, but bringing historic reforms for the social care workforce—all that despite the global pandemic, which created the most challenging backdrop any Government have faced for decades.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Helen Whately: I will make a bit of progress, so that there is the opportunity for Back Benchers to speak.

We have heard and will no doubt continue to hear about how we have been in power for 13 years so far, so it is only right to look at some of the figures since 2010. Since 2010, we have 35,000 more hospital doctors and 46,000 more nurses and health visitors, not to mention a nearly 50% increase in medical consultants and a near 60% increase in paramedics. That is what we have done.

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): I am very grateful to the Minister for giving way. In addition to the excellent point she made about the absence of social care in the motion, does she agree that the figures the Opposition have chosen to use in the motion do not give the whole picture at all? They do not include vacancies filled by bank staff, very often from the same hospital.

Helen Whately: My hon. Friend makes a very good point about the selective use of figures by Opposition Members.

Karin Smyth: I want to pick up the point about social care, on which, as the Minister knows, I am very keen to see progress. Her Government shelved their social care plans. The former Prime Minister said he had fixed social care, leading the entire country through that dance. He promised people that it was fixed and that people in their older age or with disabilities could be secure, so it is rather shameful for her to raise that point without then saying—maybe she will go on to do so—when we will actually see any progress on social care. Why have her Government shelved their plans?

Helen Whately: On the contrary, we have already made progress on some things in our social care White Paper published just over a year ago. We will soon publish next steps, particularly focused on workforce reforms. I have been talking to several stakeholders involved in exactly that area over the last few weeks. If the hon. Lady is patient she will see some of that coming forward.

I was talking about some of the things that we have done to vastly increase the number of healthcare professionals in the NHS. As part of our ambitions for the future, more than 26,000 students were accepted on to nursing and midwifery courses in England last year—a 28% increase on 2019.¹ We are on track to meet our manifesto commitment of 50,000 more nurses by 2024. Much as we continue to strive to go further and faster, those are the figures as they stand. We might wish to make a comparison with Labour-controlled Wales, though it is sometimes hard to do so because it does not collect crucial data such as vacancy rates. One has to wonder why. That is the same Labour-run Wales where patients are twice as likely to be waiting for treatment as in England. Some 50,000 people are currently waiting over two years, while here in England we eliminated two-year waits last year.

I will move on from the situation in Wales, as I am sure Opposition Members will be glad to do so. The Leader of the Opposition has said that he thinks we are hiring too many people from overseas in health and care. The same gentleman spent several years campaigning for a second referendum on freedom of movement. Whatever his views this week, it is the work of a responsible Government to look at every available option

1. [Official Report, 14 March 2023, Vol. 729, c. 3MC.]

to give this country the health and care workforce that it needs. Alongside training more doctors and nurses, recruiting from overseas and giving people from other countries a chance to work in the NHS is the right thing to do.

Chi Onwurah: I am pleased to hear the Minister say that it is the Government's duty to look at every available option. During the pandemic, I take it that she clapped on her doorstep for the NHS workforce who did so much to get us through it, so why will she not look at the option of abolishing the non-dom tax loophole, to fund more nurses and doctors and a better NHS in future?

Helen Whately: A responsible Government take a responsible approach to funding our public services, including the NHS. Later I will come to exactly the point about the Opposition's proposals to use that funding pot again and again for the health service.

Coming to social care and international recruitment, we have put care workers on the shortage occupation list. As a result, social care employers have already been able to offer care worker visas to more than 34,000 people. I welcome international nurses joining our nursing and midwifery register, and I make no apology for continuing to encourage bright and talented international doctors to come and work in the NHS. In fact, that is the very idea of the points-based immigration system that we have so successfully implemented.

As well as recruiting the best and the brightest, it is vital that we retain them. Ultimately, our goal is to make sure that the NHS is one of the very best places to work in the world; both my parents were NHS doctors and, believe me, I have had plenty of conversations about why sometimes it is not. What is most frustrating is when the system prevents them from giving people the very best care.

It is not simply all about pay, as Opposition Members might have us believe. The hon. Member for Ilford North talked about nursing pay, but he will understand that we are currently in talks and now is not the moment to play politics with this issue. We are pleased that the Royal College of Nursing has paused strike action. We have no doubt that both sides are committed to finding a fair and reasonable settlement—one that recognises the vital role that nurses and nursing play in the health service, the wider economic pressure facing the United Kingdom and the Prime Minister's priority to halve inflation.

Wes Streeting: Will the Minister give way?

Helen Whately: I will not, as the hon. Gentleman had a long time at the Dispatch Box.

Our talks are focused on pay, terms and conditions and enhancing productivity. We are hopeful that we will find a pragmatic way forward. We also know that pensions and the interaction between pension, pay and taxes matter. In general practice, we are consulting on changes to the pension scheme so that clinicians who want to stay in the NHS will not have to worry that they might lose out financially. Going beyond pay, from my conversations with staff I know the importance of their day-to-day experience at work, and of having the resources

and the support that they need. We will continue to press ahead with supporting the mental health and wellbeing of NHS staff.

As we work to support our workforce, we must move beyond discussion just about numbers and pay. In the NHS we have one of the largest workforces in the world, with many hundreds of organisations within it. It is an entire ecosystem. We have an incredible opportunity to do things differently at real scale, with bold new ways of working. Take our surgical hubs, which are getting hundreds of thousands more patients quicker access to procedures. Community diagnostics centres are bringing diagnostic care nearer to home without the need even to visit acute hospital sites.

We are empowering our community pharmacists to do more. We have already introduced a range of new clinical services in community pharmacy, including blood pressure checks and minor illness referrals from GPs and NHS 111. This year we will introduce more services, including a pharmacy contraception service. Just as these innovations are good for patients, they are good for the workforce too, freeing up more time for colleagues to do what they do best.

On training, the Opposition motion calls for an expansion of medical school places. I will not pre-empt the upcoming NHS workforce plan, but I can say that it will set a clear direction for our workforce, making sure that we have the right people with the right skills in the right places over the next 15 years. It was this Government—through the Chancellor when he was Health Secretary—that expanded medical school places from around 6,000 each year to more than 7,500—a 25% increase in just three years. In fact, that was such a substantial expansion that it saw the creation of five new medical schools in England, one of which in east Kent I visited earlier this month. There, they are not only training more future doctors but innovating in how they do so, preparing medical students to work in the NHS of the future.

Equally, it is not for me to tell the House what will be in the spring Budget. In the current fiscal environment there are far fewer public spending elements that can be traded off against health and care spending compared with previous decades. Yet even when faced with tough choices in the autumn, including very real pressure on public finances, this Government made a deliberate choice to prioritise health and social care, including investment of an additional £14 billion over the next two years.

When it comes to the spring budget, I can guarantee to the House that our sums will add up, unlike those of the hon. Member for Ilford North, who seems to be banking on what he believes will be an inexhaustible pot of non-dom taxation, including for his uncoded and unfunded reorganisation of primary care. He did not mention that much earlier—a policy so roundly mocked by the sector that we woke up to it on the "Today" programme and found it had been put to bed by "Newsnight".

Since the business investment relief scheme, introduced in 2012, non-doms have invested more than £6 billion in the UK. They play their part in supporting the vital public services that we all depend on. Even a former Labour shadow Chancellor has said that scrapping non-doms would probably end up costing Britain money—to be fair, that seems to be the Labour party's main objective, with £90 billion of unfunded spending commitments to date, and counting.

Grahame Morris: It is not correct that Labour's spending plans are unfunded, and I hope that the Minister will put the record right. On the cancer plan, there is information out there that the incidence of cancer is increasing. To get value for money, would it not be sensible for the Government to invest in precision radiotherapy, as a treatment that improves patient outcomes in a cost-effective manner? That would get the best value for money for the taxpayer.

Helen Whately: I know that the hon. Gentleman feels very strongly about the issue; we have talked about radiotherapy. He will know that we have invested more than £160 million in improving radiotherapy equipment. This year, we are investing an extra £50 million in the cancer and diagnosis workforce. We are continuing to work hard with the NHS on reducing the backlogs that we have seen since the pandemic, when people did not come forward for cancer treatment as they would have in normal times.

Aaron Bell: The Minister mentioned non-dom status under the previous Labour Government, and what they said about it. Is she aware that Alistair Darling said that "such a charge could discourage men and women—doctors and nurses, business men and women—from coming to this country...and we do not want to turn them away"?—[*Official Report*, 9 October 2007; Vol. 464, c. 171.]

Gordon Brown considered a five-year cap and abandoned it. Ed Balls said that it would end up "costing Britain money". The supposed heir to Blair is sitting at the Opposition Dispatch Box, opposite the Minister. Is it not surprising that he has not learned more lessons from new Labour?

Helen Whately: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. We hear about this source of funding again and again—we hear that non-doms will provide all this money—but plenty of the shadow Health Secretary's predecessors in Labour have said that they do not think the policy he suggests would generate any more income whatsoever.

It will imminently be time to give Back Benchers an opportunity to speak, so let me end by saying that it has been an honour to open this debate on behalf of the Government and to respond to the array of misrepresentations from Labour Front Benchers. The NHS exists to care for patients, and they should always be our first priority, but the NHS's greatest asset is its workforce.

From a lifetime of talking to staff, I know that what they want is to care for patients in a way they feel proud of. They can do that only if they themselves are cared for, feel valued, are looked after and have enough colleagues to support them. The Government are working flat out on every one of those areas. We are hiring more staff, harnessing new technology, joining up health and social care, and building bridges between parts of the system like never before. I know how tough it has been and, on too many days, how tough it still is on the frontline. I am determined that we will continue to do what is right by health and social care staff, for them and for the people they look after.

2.51 pm

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): May I start by expressing my thanks to all health and care staff across the UK? I pay tribute to them for the work

they do year in, year out—especially during the pandemic, when they literally risked their lives to care for us and our loved ones. Sadly, some of them paid the ultimate price. Others who are suffering with long covid face losing their pay or their job, and we should be ashamed of that.

The covid pandemic had a massive impact on all four health services across the UK. The two biggest challenges are the backlog and the workforce we need to deal with it. However, there were underlying problems before covid. We had 10 years of Tory austerity: up to 2010, the annual average uplift in NHS funding was usually between 3.5% and 4%, but for most of the 2010s it was less than half that.

Scotland spends more than 6% more per head on health than England. That money covers things like free prescriptions. The shadow Health Secretary, the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), talked about not charging for GP appointments. Free prescriptions, in the same way, ensure that people take their medication, so that we do not let diseases get out of control and they do not end up costing more in hospital later.

We also spend a massive extra 43% on social care. That allowed us to provide free personal care, valued at £86,000, when we heard about the potential care cap in England. Providing free personal care, which in Scotland includes people younger than 65 if they have a need for it, allows people to live independent, high-quality lives in their own home for as long as possible. I am sure that there is not a person in this Chamber who will not want that when their turn comes.

Scotland has the highest number of nurses, care staff, GPs and consultants per head of population in any of the UK nations, but all the national health services are facing staff shortages in both NHS care and social care. Even where staff numbers appear to have increased, the problem is that demand is growing quicker. That is because we are an ageing population—and, sadly, we are not ageing well. From the age of about 50, we start collecting diseases. The NHS gets us through and helps us to manage, but many people, particularly in deprived communities, can spend 20 years or more in ill health. The NHS is struggling to cope. We need to invest in a wellbeing approach to every person who lives in the UK—every child born—so that they do not end up a bunch of old crocks like many of us in this Chamber.

Safe staffing is vital. It is not hospitals or machines, but people, who deliver treatment and care when we are ill. The staffing issues have multiple causes. The decade of austerity meant many public sector pay freezes and caps, which made jobs seem unattractive. Caps on public pay and benefits take money out of local economies—many of us know of dead high streets. It is a pointless approach, because less tax goes back to the Government and it strangles the economy. Giving people enough to live on, with decent benefits and decent public sector pay, injects money into local economies and stimulates growth, which we keep hearing is the big thing that this Government believe in.

Another cause is Brexit. There was a 90% fall in EU nurses coming to the UK after the vote in 2016—not even the loss of freedom of movement in 2021, but the vote. Since the formal loss of freedom of movement, care providers have suddenly had to deal with the Home Office. Many MPs in this Chamber will know just how difficult that is, with the cost of visas, the administrative

burden and the general shortage of workers because of Brexit. Health and social care is having to compete with almost every other sector in the economy, so paying people badly simply will not wash.

Of course, there was also the pandemic. I was back in the NHS in the first wave in 2020, and I know that staff were incredible. They felt empowered. We were able to sit around a table, whether it was physical or virtual, work out what needed to be done, make a decision and move on in a way that staff on the frontline are rarely empowered to do. The problem is that this has gone on for three years now. Staff are suffering from exhaustion and burnout, but instead of having people clap for them, they get negative media complaining about staff and GPs and suggesting that GP practices are shut or that a phone appointment does not count.

I became quite ill and ended up in the hospital across the road in autumn 2021. When I finally got back to where I live, I had three GP consultations, two specialist consultations and just one day in a hospital, going through tests, before my medication was organised. Frankly, with my lifestyle, that suited me down to the ground. I did not need to hang around in a clinic, risking infection with covid. The job got done. Let us stop denigrating phone appointments. GPs are not stupid. If they speak to a patient on the phone and need to examine them, they will arrange that.

We have to realise that it is not just about the media; as politicians we have a duty, too. I have to gently point out to the shadow Health Secretary—particularly as my own husband was a GP—that GPs are not just gatekeepers for the NHS. They provide long-term continuity of care, they examine the patient, they are advocates and they guide the patient to the right service. Imagine someone with back pain. Were they digging the garden? Do they need to see a physio? Do they have a slipped disc, do they have a kidney stone, do they have a leaking aneurysm—or do they have metastatic cancer? How is a patient meant to disentangle that without a GP?

Wes Streeting: Let us be clear about this: I have never disputed GPs' expertise or the important role that they play in diagnosis. But if the hon. Member thinks GPs are so fantastic, why are there so many fewer now under the SNP in Scotland?

Dr Whitford: That is not true—and 99% of our trainee posts last year have already been filled. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman should look at the statistics. We have more GPs per head of population than any of the other nations in the UK, including Wales, which his party runs.

So what do we need to do about this? Clearly we need to train more staff, but we must also not only increase the number of both nursing and medical student places, but look at the cost of studying and the student debt that those people will be left with. We do not have tuition fees in Scotland and our nurses receive a bursary of £10,000 a year, which means that we are investing £20,000 in every student nurse in Scotland.

Karin Smyth: The hon. Lady talks a great deal about the inputs of the SNP Government in Scotland, but very little about the outcomes there. Does she not agree that, rather than carping about the contrast between how good things are in the rosy land of Scotland that

she portrays—which is not a true picture, as we know from what is happening with the SNP leadership election—and how bad they are in Wales, England and indeed Northern Ireland, we should start learning from the different ways in which the different Governments are providing services and working people? We need to stop carping about those differences, learn from each other and recognise that outcomes are different, rather than just talking about the inputs. Is that something on which she might want to work with other people?

Dr Whitford: I think I have spent the last eight years demonstrating the different approaches that Scotland takes. The Minister talked about community pharmacies, which have been providing minor ailment care in Scotland since 2005. Our optometrists are allowed to refer people with cataracts directly to hospital, whereas in England, they are often made to go through a GP. So I am sharing and have shared ideas in that way. However, there has been a 5.8% increase in the uptake of nursing jobs in Scotland, so we also have more nurses per head of population.

Wes Streeting *rose*—

Dr Whitford: I should like to make some progress. The hon. Gentleman had a very long time at the Dispatch Box and I think there should be more than just the three of us.

It is important to recognise the impact of the loss of the nursing bursary in 2016. The number of nursing student applications fell in England after the bursary was cut, so perhaps this is one of the ideas that I am sharing. The numbers recovered to some extent in 2019, when the bursary was brought back, but it is only £5,000, and tuition fees are more than £9,000 a year. Nurses in England are graduating with debt of about £50,000, and they need to begin paying it back immediately, which means that the money is coming out of their salaries. Perhaps that could be looked into.

If the number of medical students is increased, it is necessary not only to ensure that there are places on the ward where they can learn—this was mentioned by the hon. Member for Bosworth (Dr Evans), who is no longer in the Chamber—but to expand and fund the training places in hospital they will occupy after they graduate. There was a real problem last year when the extra medical students who were graduating could not find foundation jobs until the last minute. If graduates do not go through the foundation scheme, they cannot practise as doctors. We also need to invest in middle-grade specialist training in order to create consultants.

We need to recruit more from overseas, because progressing from student to consultant or GP takes nine or 10 years, while progressing from student to consultant surgeon takes about 15 or 16 years. Adding more student places will not solve the problem in the short term. We must, however, avoid recruiting from low and middle-income countries on the World Health Organisation red list. That is simply unethical, and is being reported as direct recruitment from trusts in England. We should be ruling that out. It should not be allowed and I think the Government could tackle the matter.

We have, unfortunately, lost freedom of movement, and it is clear from what Labour is saying that it will not return. That is a challenge for us in Scotland, because

[Dr Whitford]

we need people: we are facing a huge demographic challenge. The Government should put all health and social care roles on the shortage occupation list, and reduce visa costs and hassle. Forty-nine per cent. of overseas GP trainees in the UK report these issues, and 17% of those say that they may leave. The obstructive process of dealing with the Home Office is driving doctors away. The Government should perhaps also waive the NHS charge for staff who work in health and social care.

However, I agree with all the Opposition Members who have said that what is most important is retaining staff, because otherwise we will lose experience. Some decent pay would be a start, and after the pay freezes and after covid, those staff certainly deserve it. The Government are keen to rave about the independent pay review body when it suits them, but to ignore it when it does not. Nurses in Scotland were already being paid between £1,300 and £2,500 more than those in the rest of the UK, and to catch up with what is being paid to Agenda for Change staff in Scotland, the UK Government will need to provide a 14% pay rise for the coming year. If they did give a decent pay rise to the incredible staff who work in the NHS, devolved nations would also be able to fund a decent pay rise for their staff. Both Scotland and Wales are limited by having no real borrowing powers.

We need a review of the pay, terms and conditions and support for junior doctors, of how their rotas are managed and of their quality of life, because we need to understand why they are leaving the UK—part of that is wanting the adventure and experience of working overseas, so perhaps we should consider building that into our training schemes, giving junior doctors a flexible year in which to do research, work as a volunteer or work in another country—and, of course, we need reform of the mess that is the NHS pension. The lifetime and annual tax allowance system is penalising senior staff who do extra work. Many are refusing extra roles such as that of clinical director or educational supervisor. They are turning down the overtime that is critical to clearing the backlog, going part time, or even retiring earlier.

The Scottish Government and, I am sure, the Welsh Government are offering pension recycling and “retire and return”, but that is all the devolved Governments can do. The problem lies in the Treasury. This system was introduced in 2015, supposedly to deal with tax evasion and avoidance. It is nonsensical to apply it to a public sector defined benefit scheme. Pensions cannot be played with that way. The problem is that increases in the pension pot are being counted as income. Staff have no way to predict that, and end up being faced with vast bills simply for being able to work some extra weekends.

We also need to maintain the wellbeing projects that were started during the pandemic. All NHS staff are still facing a huge amount of stress this winter, which is made worse by the staff shortages and the increased demand resulting from covid, influenza and other respiratory infections. The covid data from 2022 shows that there was no respite. Unlike in 2020 and 2021, hospital admissions stayed relatively high, even between the peaks, which means that staff have literally been running non-stop for nearly a year and a half. As has

been said, staff are willing to work hard—they have always worked hard—but the problem is that when they go home at night feeling they did not do a good job and when they feel that their ward is not safe, that undermines both their commitment and their ability to do the job. The General Medical Council reports that burnout and dissatisfaction are the two main factors driving senior staff out of the NHS.

However, we must not forget social care staff. I was surprised that they were not mentioned in Labour's motion. The standard measure of NHS performance in all four health services is the four-hour A&E target because it assesses the flow through a hospital from admission to discharge. It started to deteriorate in England in 2013, following the changes introduced in the Health and Social Care Act 2012, but it fell in all four health services in the later phases of the pandemic as hospitals tried to restart elective work. NHS Scotland is also struggling after covid, but let me gently point out, notwithstanding the snide comments from Tory and Labour Members, that Scotland is still the best-performing of the four nations in this regard.

Struggling A&E performance is driven not by A&E issues but by the back-pressure of patients who are waiting for beds—in other words, by delayed discharges. The lack of care workers to deliver home care is what is actually driving the A&E issue, and this should be the thermometer to test the temperature of the entire acute system. There are currently more than 160,000 vacancies for social care in the UK. We cannot fix the NHS without fixing social care, so we need a workforce plan for NHS and social care. As in Scotland, we need to respect care staff: pay them a minimum of the real living wage, not the pretend living wage; pay sleepovers when they carry them out; and pay travel time. To have them doing all these things unpaid is undermining their take-home pay.

In Scotland, care staff are now registered and getting access to professional training and development. This is part of our plan for a national care system, but care staff need decent pay. They also need recognition and respect for the very tough job of looking after our loved ones. I cannot imagine anyone in this Chamber who could do the job. They need a career path so that good staff who enjoy delivering care can remain in the care sector and not just use it as a stopgap until they can get a better paid job on the till in a supermarket.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): The Front Benchers have taken an hour and a quarter out of the time available for this debate. The Opposition have indicated that they would like to wind up at 4.30, meaning that the wind-up speeches should start at around 4.05. I think there are 11 Members standing. I am not going to set a time limit, but doing the maths, if all colleagues wish to get in, we are down to five minutes. It is up to you. If you choose not to allow your colleagues to speak, you can take longer.

3.11 pm

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is a pleasure to catch your eye a little earlier than I did yesterday evening.

I welcome the speech from the SNP Front Bench. It is good to see Scotland is having its say in this debate. I disagree with a lot of what the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) said, but it is good to see that she is standing up for her Government. At the start of this debate, there were no Welsh Labour MPs in here at all. I see that a couple have popped in now. It is interesting, given what Labour claims it is going to do for the NHS in England, that no Welsh Labour MPs have put in to speak in this debate to defend their record in Wales.

I also note that the hon. Lady, in praising how things work in Scotland, did not refer to the recent report by Audit Scotland that said that the plans to hire GPs in Scotland were not on track, the target for more mental health staff was at risk and the number of operations was still 25% below pre-pandemic levels. It was described as an ever-increasing crisis in the Scottish NHS, with the double whammy of nursing vacancies going up at the same time as staff are leaving, yet the man responsible for the NHS in Scotland, Humza Yousaf, is standing to be the next leader of the SNP. Wikipedia does not inform me as to the hon. Lady's preference in that election—perhaps she has not endorsed anybody yet—but I find it extraordinary that the man responsible for presiding over the state of the NHS in Scotland is putting himself forward to be the next leader of the SNP. It is an astonishing succession failure from Nicola Sturgeon to have such a weak field vying to be First Minister of Scotland, which is a very important job. But as I say, I respect the fact that the hon. Lady is here standing up for what she believes in and standing up for her Government in Holyrood.

Turning to the motion, as I said in my intervention on the Minister—I congratulate her on her speech—I reject some of the premises of the motion and some of the statistics involved. It is pretty rich to be lectured by the Opposition, given the backlogs they left in 2010 when they had no covid to contend with. There is no mention of covid in the motion. They left a 20,000 backlog in elective surgery that successive Governments got down to 1,000—a 95% fall—before the pandemic. *[Interruption.]* If the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) does not think the pandemic is relevant in the context of backlogs, I don't know what to tell him. Under the Labour Government there was also a lack of productivity growth in the NHS—it was at less than 1% a year—which we have got back up to 1.7% since 2010. The hon. Gentleman spoke about IT, and I agree with him on that—I used to work in IT—but the Labour Government wasted £12.8 billion on IT for the NHS, which was a complete disaster and exposed as such by the Audit Commission.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): I do not quite understand this backlog the hon. Gentleman is talking about. I remember when it took three years for somebody to get a knee replacement or a hip replacement. Under the Labour Government it took six to eight weeks. Not 68 weeks; six to eight weeks. Across all elective surgery, we put those lists well and truly through the floor. Surely he can acknowledge that.

Aaron Bell: When Labour left office, more than 20,000 people were waiting over a year for elective treatment. Before the pandemic—this was not acknowledged properly—the number of people waiting

more than 52 weeks for elective treatment had fallen by 95% in England, to just over 1,000. Those are the statistics. The hon. Gentleman can argue with them if he likes, but they are there in black and white.

As I said, it is interesting to see the lack of contrition about the state of the NHS in Wales, which is a complete mess. I will refer to that in detail later, but only yesterday the NHS Board in North Wales was put into special measures for a second time. I accept that there are challenges everywhere—in Scotland, Wales and England. Indeed, if we look at the comparisons across the continent, we can see that these challenges are international in nature, because everybody is recovering from covid, but I believe that this Government are tackling the challenges, and the workforce challenges, head on.

Ashley Dalton (West Lancashire) (Lab): I am really glad that you have consistently raised the issue of covid. Could you suggest why it is that services such as the overnight children's A&E at Southport and Ormskirk Hospital in my constituency, which was closed, allegedly due to covid restrictions, still remains closed to this day?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. I gently say to the hon. Lady that expression is through the Chair. This is a mistake that even those who have been here quite a while make. It is “the hon. Member”, not “you”.

Ashley Dalton: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Aaron Bell: I welcome the hon. Lady to her place and congratulate her on her recent election. I believe that her predecessor, Rosie Cooper, is now responsible for the issue that she has just raised, so perhaps she will have some luck if she speaks to her about that—*[Interruption.]* Have I got that wrong? I do apologise. By the way, I would like to pay tribute to Rosie Cooper, because I did not have the chance to do so when she left. She handled herself with great dignity in the face of some very unacceptable circumstances, and I pay tribute to her. I see several by-election victors on the Opposition Benches and I congratulate them all. I cannot speak exactly to the hon. Lady's NHS trust. I am sure that if she writes the Minister or speaks to the NHS trust directly, she might get some answers as to what is going on in Southport, but if she will forgive me, I represent North Staffordshire.

Before I detail the work that the Government are doing, I would like to praise the work of everybody in the NHS—as the Opposition Front Benchers did—and particularly those in North Staffordshire who working in our hospitals and GP surgeries, our health visitors and clinical staff, and those who support those people. It has been a difficult winter—after a difficult few years—with covid and flu peaking simultaneously in December. I am pleased to report that the most recent figures from the integrated care board for Stoke and Staffordshire show that ambulance handovers hugely improved in February, compared with where they were in January, which was unacceptable, as I said in the House at the time. There has been an 8% increase in primary care appointments, compared with a year ago, with 73% delivered face to face—higher than the national average—and waiting times for surgery are falling, including for cancer treatment at the Royal Stoke Hospital. I pay

[Aaron Bell]

tribute to everybody working at the coalface in the NHS, because I know what difficult work it is and we are all extremely grateful.

Turning to NHS workforce expansion, this Conservative Government are strengthening the NHS workforce. In hospitals we have 5,000 more doctors and 10,500 more nurses compared with October 2021. Compared with 2010, when the last Labour Government left office, we have 37,000 more doctors and 45,000 more nurses in our hospitals. We are also building up the workforce in primary care, recruiting 26,000 more primary care staff by March 2024—a target that is on track, unlike the target in Scotland. In Newcastle-under-Lyme, the number of doctors, nurses and other clinical staff based in GP surgeries has increased by 46% since September 2019. That is 55 additional full-time equivalent people. So we are seeing a growth in Newcastle-under-Lyme as well.

Workforce expansion is also about retention, as the Minister said. Times are tough for everybody, given what Putin's war in Ukraine has done to inflation, but we have always prioritised NHS workers, especially those earning the least. A million workers received at least an additional £1,400 in their pay packets in the last year, and we accepted the independent pay review in full. During covid in 2021, we protected healthcare workers, giving them a pay rise during a wider public sector pay freeze and when private sector wages were falling. The full-time basic salary of a newly qualified junior nurse at the bottom of band 5 is now over £27,000, and experienced nurses or midwives at the top of band 6 are earning £40,588. On top of that, they get excellent pension provision, so we are looking after our NHS staff by paying them and retaining them.

More generally, we are also increasing the number of beds across the hospital estate. A new ward with 28 beds recently opened at the Royal Stoke University Hospital, but I know Tracy Bullock wants more, and I will speak to the Minister about that. We will need more beds for next winter, because the Royal Stoke is under incredible pressure, not least because of the burden of the New Labour private finance initiative contract that costs them a fortune to maintain. A previous Health Secretary ranked the worst 10 PFI contracts, and I believe that we were 11th or 12th at the time. The hospital has to live with that burden, and I raise it again with the Minister today; we want what went wrong before to be put right.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): I hope the hon. Gentleman will not mind my encouraging the Minister to look, in addition to the case for more investment in his local hospital, at investing more in Northwick Park Hospital, which serves my constituents. It needs a 60-bed intensive care unit to improve the quality of critical care and, crucially, to help attract more critical care nurses and other medical staff.

Aaron Bell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point; I am sure the Minister has heard it. I will not say any more about that specific case, because I do not know his constituency that well—although I did work in Harrow once upon a time.

We had 120,000 more GP appointments every day in January '23 compared with January '22, and we are delivering the biggest ever catch-up—it is a necessary

catch-up—over the next three years, with an extra £45.6 billion in funding to help us recover from covid. That will mean 9 million more scans, 9 million more checks and 9 million more procedures for the people who need them.

We know what Labour would do. It claims to have a plan funded through non-dom status, but I doubt that would raise the money, not only for the reasons I gave in the Opposition day debate at the end of January, but because it has already committed that money to breakfast clubs and various other things. There is a never-ending magic money tree that pays for all Labour's commitments —[*Interruption.*] I know that the shadow Health Secretary and others have made many unfunded spending commitments. Labour's answer is always more money, and the answer to how that will be funded is always a non-dom tax, which would not even raise the money Labour claims, as Ed Balls said, as Alastair Darling said, and as Gordon Brown found out for himself.

Andrew Western (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Aaron Bell: No, I have already spoken for 11 minutes, so I must get to the end—I have heard your strictures, Mr Deputy Speaker.

The NHS in Labour-run Wales has a shocking record of failure. As I said earlier, the health board in north Wales is once again under special measures. Since 2009, the Welsh Labour Government have consistently failed to meet the 95% four-hour target. England and Scotland, as the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire said, do a lot better on that measure. Patients in Wales are twice as likely to wait for hospital treatment, with 21.3% waiting after a referral by a consultant compared with only 12.8% in England. Perhaps the shadow Minister will explain, when summing up, whether he approves of Labour's record in running the NHS in Wales or condemns it, as we do.

We also know about Labour's record in government here in Westminster. As I said earlier, the elective surgery figure is a fact. Instead, we are investing record sums in our NHS. We are investing in its buildings and equipment but most of all in its staff. Having delivered for this country throughout covid, having vaccinated us and got us out of lockdown—which I recall the shadow Health Secretary opposing before Christmas 2021—and back to work, we are now helping the NHS to recover. I am proud to support this Government.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. We are now down to about three minutes a head if all colleagues are going to speak; it is entirely up to you.

3.23 pm

Andrew Western (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I rise to support the motion before the House today. Our NHS is in crisis. It is a multifaceted crisis, but at its source it is a workforce crisis caused by years of Tory neglect. Colleagues have ably set out the scale of the issues facing the health service: a shortage of 9,000 doctors and 47,000 nurses; crises in midwifery, dentistry, general practice and mental health services; and more than

7 million people waiting months for NHS treatment, with 400,000 waiting over a year. The waiting times are the worst since records began. The system is on the brink of collapse, and the Government know it. The draft NHS workforce plan calls for a doubling of medical training places, yet the Government cut the number of medical training places this summer, in the teeth of the worst workforce crisis in the history of our NHS.

I am grateful to all our NHS workers. This situation has arisen through no fault of theirs, but it is a huge issue none the less. It is a huge issue in Stretford and Urmston, where the national shortage of GPs is seen in microcosm at one local medical centre, with some 16% of patients waiting more than 28 days for an appointment. That is outrageous, but the scary thing is that it is not unique. It is far from an outlier nationally. It is simply not good enough. The Government tell us not to worry, and that they will guarantee an appointment within two weeks—never mind the fact that under the last Labour Government the wait was two days or the fact that this Government have no plan to achieve it.

We have heard various excuses from the Government. No doubt we will hear more about covid, the weather or striking workers—anything but the Government—but waiting lists rose consistently between 2012 and 2019. The 18-week treatment target has not been met since 2016. Cancer patients have been waiting longer for treatment every year since 2010. Performance on the two-week cancer referral waiting time target has fallen to record lows. Performance declined between 2013 and 2018, and it has fallen further since the pandemic, but the problems are deeper seated than that.

I will raise a specific issue from my constituency and broaden the debate somewhat by talking about access to orthodontics. The family of a constituent have been in touch with me. This teenage girl waited almost two years for a referral, only to be told when finally referred that the waiting list for treatment is two to four years. She is almost 15. The near-constant pain at the back of her jaw causes headaches, and her overcrowded teeth are also affecting her mentally and socially at a difficult age. When her parents explain the situation, they are told to give her painkillers to manage the problem—painkillers for up to four years. The waiting list could take her past the age of 18, meaning she may not be able to access services at the end of her wait. This is a broken system and we need to take action now. Only Labour has a plan to take the action needed.

Ultimately, politics is about choices. I know what side Labour is on, and it is clear today what side the Conservatives are on. Labour chooses to scrap non-dom status, while the Conservatives protect the super-rich instead of providing an NHS workforce fit for the future. The Conservatives had a chance today to break from the long-standing truth, proven time and again, that the longer the Conservatives are in power, the longer NHS patients will wait for the treatment they so desperately need. It saddens me, and it will sadden my constituents, that they seem unwilling to do anything about that today.

3.28 pm

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I will try to skip the partisan rhetoric and get to the crux of some of the issues.

I start by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Aaron Bell) for mentioning PFI, because I also represent a hospital that, the last time I checked, spends 14% of its annual budget on repaying Labour's PFI deal. That is incredible and a detriment to all my constituents, although it is a lovely building.

The workforce question is important, and we all want happy, healthy staff in our NHS and our wider health services. We all understand that they are under untold pressure from covid, the cost of living challenge and short staffing, but my message to the shadow Minister is that saying that, and saying that we want things to be better, is not a plan. It is nice to talk about, but it does not fix anything.

The motion is a little misleading, because it does not mention that we have 37,000 more doctors, 45,000 more nurses, record levels of recruitment and record staff numbers in our NHS. Truth be told, we have shortages in everything in our economy. We will debate the economy a little later, and we could discuss many of these things in that debate because we have a wider challenge of economic inactivity and getting people into work. This is a much bigger systems and process question than just chucking in more resources and adding more training courses. That will not fix this issue.

We have record funding and record staffing in our NHS, and this Government have taken a lot of action to try to increase them. People often talk about a reduction in the number of applications, but they miss or neglect to mention that Government action, including the nursing bursaries, has led to an increase in the number of actual people doing actual nursing courses because it removed the targets, enabled more funding to flow into the system and created more spaces on nursing courses, which has led, in part, to a 25% increase in the number of people studying nursing. We can all talk rhetoric and point fingers, but the Government action was, in many ways, effective. The truth is that the issue is more fundamental than just staffing, and the shadow Minister, probably deliberately, misses that point.

I want to raise two things. First, we should not forget care. I do not understand how we can discuss this issue without talking about care. The Government's proposal on integration is essential. The NHS, even in one county, is not one organisation—it is all sorts of different organisations trying to work together, including a care system that does not share the same data or the same processes. So much of the burden and the pressure on staff comes down to the fact that these things do not work together properly.

Ambulances are taking elderly patients with care issues to A&E. Hospitals are discharging to care homes and increasing the likelihood of people ending up back in hospital, which is also a care issue for the most part. These things are interconnected, so I am aghast that the Opposition neglected to talk about care in their motion.

Where I agree with the Opposition is that we need a joint workforce plan across health and care, not least to try to overcome some of the stereotypes of working in care, so that, when people consider a career in care, they can clearly and overtly see the pathways through the system into a health service that provides a wide range and scale of opportunities. It would be a huge step forward if we could jointly recruit across health and care into a wide-ranging and exciting set of careers.

[Ben Bradley]

Discharge funding has been helpful, and the Government have improved care capacity in Nottinghamshire and the ability to get people out of hospital into care. However, there is still a whole-system issue: data and process need reform, as much as anything else. I agree with the shadow Minister on community-based care but, again, saying we would like more of it is not, in itself, a plan.

Secondly, no amount of money or reform will fix the system. Demand, and public expectations of our health service, have gone through the roof. Capacity has increased, but it is never enough because we expect our health service to provide, for free, everything we want in an increasing range of services. That is not possible or feasible when we have increasingly complex and expensive needs, an older population, more working-age disabled people, more lifelong and chronic illness and more mental ill health. The NHS was never set up to deal with that or the range and complexity of services, which were never envisaged.

Most of us agree that basic healthcare, free at the point of use on and through our NHS, is absolutely right and is fundamental to what many of us feel and believe about Britain, but it cannot grow forever at the expense of services, education and infrastructure. At some point we will need to have a conversation—it will be a brave Government who have that conversation—that draws a line around a basic set of services and expectations that people can access for free, and we will need to have a proper conversation about how we do the rest, because it is not sustainable to keep chucking more money into a pot and to keep expecting hard-pressed NHS staff to offer and deliver more and more when we know they will never catch up with increasing public demands and expectations. Staffing and funding are at record highs, yet the gap grows and waiting times grow. At some stage, we will need to have a proper discussion about what the NHS is for and whether our expectations are realistic, because the NHS does many things that are perhaps not what it is for.

I know you are keen for us to wrap up quickly, Mr Deputy Speaker, so I will finish with a few points. I have touched on some big, long-term questions, but we could quite quickly change some smaller things that seem like simple common sense to most people. We still deliver paracetamol on prescription, but it costs 30p at Boots. It costs £35 to go through all the different appointments and all the different systems to get paracetamol on prescription from the NHS, at the cost of tens of millions of pounds a year. Why do we do that? Why do we add that burden to our health system?

The 111 service was set up as an advice service to help people to figure out where in the system they needed to go, but now it calls ambulances. A few weeks ago, an ambulance technician told me a story about ambulance staff being sent out on a category 2 “stroke-level emergency” because a 111 call handler had ticked the wrong box on the decision tree—the caller had actually rung to say they had been picking up ice and had cold fingers. And we wonder why there is not the capacity and the space in the system! We need to reform the 111 service so that it follows the same decision tree as the 999 service or directs people back into 999. We need to give ambulance staff the ability to say no to people who call every day

and to people who are not having emergency, critical conditions or problems and live near a hospital and are sat next to somebody who has a car and could drive them there. People have this impression that they can jump the queue. All those things would relieve pressure on A&E and on NHS staff, and they seem like simple and obvious things to do.

My final point is on the need to have an honest conversation. I agree that staffing and the need for more capacity and support to tackle waiting lists are huge priorities, and the Government are working on them, but we cannot continue to grow the health service forever. Everybody knows that—my constituents certainly do. This is a much more wide-ranging systems and process issue and a much more wide-ranging issue about our expectation of what a health service can realistically deliver. That is not something we are going to tackle today, but it is a conversation I have no doubt we will have to return to in the very near future.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. Only Opposition Members are left now to contribute. I am not going to impose a time limit, but if nobody exceeds five minutes, at least they will allow everybody to get in and have roughly equal time.

3.36 pm

Simon Lightwood (Wakefield) (Lab/Co-op): I am pleased that the Labour party has tabled this Opposition day debate this afternoon. Like Members from across this House, I have been inundated with emails from constituents who, despite the heroic work of NHS staff, have had terrible experiences with the health service this winter. Let me share just a couple of accounts from Wakefield. A constituent contacted me after his wife had faced a gruelling 15-hour wait in Pinderfields A&E. Another was forced to wait for 11 hours while suffering with a twisted bowel. Another attended A&E after being unable to get a GP appointment for excruciating muscle pain. They waited for 14 hours on a metal chair before being sent home. Unfortunately, that person is not alone.

Many people across Wakefield are struggling to get GP appointments too. Patients at one surgery in Wakefield were sent three text messages in one week to tell them that routine appointments were not available. When people cannot see a GP and cannot get to see a practice nurse, they do not get the—sometimes essential—early treatment they need. That adds pressure to the NHS in the future and can have serious consequences for people's health. This is shameful, and it is no surprise that on the Tories' watch public satisfaction with the NHS has fallen to its lowest level since 1997.

Before I was elected to serve the people of Wakefield, I was immensely proud to work for the NHS for several years. It is blindingly obvious from the discussions I have had with former colleagues that the biggest issue right now is with the workforce, but it does not have to be this way. Labour has a fully-costed, fully-funded plan, which is not a sticking plaster but the long-term solution that the NHS needs: doubling the number of medical school places; training 10,000 extra nurses and midwives every year; doubling the number of district nurses qualifying each year; and creating 5,000 more health visitors. This is a really exciting plan for the future of the NHS, not only delivering what is so

desperately needed, but investing in people's careers too. And it is people's careers that are at the heart of this.

I do not know whether Members saw the damning BBC article by Jim Reed yesterday following the Healthcare Safety Investigation Branch report, which monitors safety in the NHS in England. The article said that many staff cried during their interviews. One NHS worker gave the following account to the BBC:

"I spent four hours with an end-of-life patient. There was no hospice or district nurse available, so I had to make the choice to give them meds for a peaceful, expected death and prepare the family.

I felt ashamed that I could not stay till the end, but I had to move on to the next job as I had done all I could."

Another paramedic said:

"The bad sides give me nightmares, flashbacks and fear, but they can also make me hyperactive, sleepless and sometimes not care about the danger I put myself in".

It is no wonder that more than 40,000 nurses left the profession in England last year, leaving chronic shortages. Many of those who have left recently were only recently qualified—nurses who had spent years in training, but could no longer tolerate the pressure and burn-out. Many of those who stayed are having to take time off. Almost a quarter of all absences are due to anxiety, stress and depression, with hundreds of thousands of days lost each month. It is a real reminder to us here that what we decide now has far-reaching implications for the future.

The good news is that Labour has a plan to tackle the crisis. It is a plan that will be paid for by scrapping non-dom tax status, an unfair tax rule that gives tax breaks to the rich and that can no longer be justified. I know that people across Wakefield agree that we need nurses much more than we need non-doms.

I hope that the Government will adopt the motion and deliver Labour's plan to tackle the workforce crisis. If the Government will not listen, I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) will be ready to implement our plans under the next Labour Government, who will put patients first and get our NHS back on track.

3.40 pm

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): A healthy population and economic growth are two sides of the same coin, but, because the Conservative Government have failed to invest in our health and social care services, the ticking time bomb of ill health is starting to explode, and the Government wonder why they cannot get sustainable economic growth.

I welcome this motion today for two reasons: first, because it focuses on recruiting many of the staff that our NHS needs; and secondly because it focuses on training more district nurses and more health visitors, which would help us to shift the focus of healthcare in this country away from urgent and reactive care towards community and preventive care.

I wish to touch on GPs, dentists and social workers today. GP appointments have become increasingly difficult to secure, with some patients now resorting to DIY doctoring, by carrying out medical treatments on themselves. Our GPs are not to blame. They are overstretched and understaffed like every other part of

our NHS, but the Conservative Government have repeatedly broken their promise to recruit more GPs, so where is the plan to turn that around?

There is now a crisis in this country on access to dentists, in part because of the lack of staff. The Government's response last year was to create a one-off, time-limited £50 million emergency fund for dentists to create emergency catch-up appointments, but the uptake has been modest in most regions. In the east of England, just 13.7% of the allocated funding has been spent, and in my own constituency of St Albans that money created zero new appointments—absolutely zero.

To make matters worse, dental practices are now being penalised for under-delivery, because the funds will be clawed back from their frontlines instead of being ringfenced. The *Health Service Journal* reported last week that there is due to be a record Government underspend of £400 million on dentistry this year, while patients face an access crisis. Will the Government commit to ringfence this funding for NHS dentists to ensure that it is not clawed back?

The Government's disastrous dental contract has created this access crisis. Not only has it created a two-tier system between rich and poor, but children's life chances are being set back because of the impact of poor oral health. Our children, more than anybody else, need good teeth to set them up for later in life, but eight in 10 NHS dental practices are not taking on children.

Last November, I visited the Royal London Dental Hospital and its Tooth Fairy Project, a dedicated new surgical centre for children waiting too long for operations, which removes problematic teeth or performs multiple fillings. It was a fantastic facility to see, and the staff were extraordinary, but the statistics on child tooth extractions are terrifying. I have had cases in my own constituency of St Albans where parents simply cannot get NHS dental appointments for children. I have also been made aware of just how bad the situation has become in other areas, such as North Yorkshire, where only half of children managed to see an NHS dentist last year. In fact, last week, I was told that, in Harrogate, if a person was lucky enough to find an NHS dentist taking on any new patients, they face a two-and-a-half-year wait to see them. That is a shocking state of affairs. A Minister should visit places such as Harrogate in North Yorkshire to speak to patients and dentists and see the situation for themselves. The Government must urgently reform that broken dental contract, ringfence unspent funds and retain our experienced dental practitioners so that more patients can see a dentist when they need to.

When people cannot see a GP or a dentist, they end up in A&E. More than ever, the Government need to get around the table and agree a fair deal with all our NHS staff. We know why A&Es are under so much pressure. It is, in part, because people cannot get out of hospital when they need to as social care is collapsing as well. The number of vacancies in social care stands at 165,000, and it is rising alarmingly: in the past year alone, it increased by 55,000.

The Liberal Democrats are calling for the introduction of a carers' minimum wage. We would pay £2 per hour more than the current minimum wage for all carers, meaning that by April this year, the hourly pay would be £12.42. A staggering 850,000 care workers would benefit from that increase in pay, and more than 80% of

[Daisy Cooper]

them would be women. Social care needs serious solutions from a serious Government, so will the Minister seriously consider introducing a carers' minimum wage?

Our health and care services are one ecosystem. Whatever claims the Government make about how much they are spending and what they are trying to do, the British public can see that it is too little, too late. Targets are being missed left, right and centre, and everything that the Government say is worlds apart from the lived experience of our constituents, who are struggling to get the help that they need. Never again will the British public trust this Conservative Government with their NHS or their care services.

3.46 pm

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): Having spent most of my career in NHS management roles before becoming an MP, I often reflect on my own motivation for choosing two such unpopular careers—ones that, like the England manager job, virtually everyone can do better. One of our colleagues said recently that NHS managers are utterly useless and overpaid, which is what many of our constituents might say about us. As someone who has always been a manager and active in the Labour party, I was often told rather gently by my colleagues that I was too political to be a manager in the NHS, and my colleagues in the party often say that I am a bit too managerial to be an MP, so I think I am somewhere just about right.

The truth is that the NHS is an intensely political construct. NHS managers do not have the neutrality cloak of civil servants or the freedom of many business leaders. The lack of clarity around the role of NHS management is, I think, problematic, and it often leaves managers isolated and less able to do the job that we crucially need them to do. The Secretary of State's pledge to cull managers yet again comes at a time when the challenges faced by the system are the greatest that we have ever seen, even without taking the pandemic into account. Industrial relations are at an all-time low, capacity and demand are massively out of kilter, the physical estate is crumbling, with £10 billion-worth of backlogs, and morale is at dangerously low levels.

We need much better management, but managers need to be clear with us. Ten years on from the Francis report and the introduction of a duty of candour, we—the public, Members of Parliament and patients—have to know where and when our system is and is not safe. We have to be informed about the trade-offs between cost and quality, and we should be active parts of the discussion about the future of technology and big data in healthcare. I am disappointed that the Minister has again trotted out the figures of inputs but has not addressed the crucial issues. We did not do that before the pandemic, and it is quite extraordinary that the Government are still not receiving the messages from the frontline.

The increased recruitment to NHS unions, more support for strikes and the reality of people's experiences all tell us the same message. The Government's current response is all about getting rid of the current crisis: the money that they are putting in is too little and too late to be of real value, and instead of collaborating with local authorities, which are now worrying about the pick-up

rates, they are fragmenting many local relationships. The uncertainty about payment by results and the faltering steps towards better collaboration mean that the deckchairs are still moving, and for our constituents, things are not improving.

Our focus in government, of which I am enormously proud to have been a part in an NHS trust and then as a manager, was on patient choice. That was not because we think that the NHS is a market, as is often said, but because we think that the NHS needs a stronger patient voice to co-produce individual care, and because we are asking people to pay more in this age of long-term conditions and co-morbidity, so we have to ensure that they have more local accountability in the system. The system is not accountable locally.

I repeat my comments about Scotland and Wales. The Welsh waiting lists are not acceptable. The Scottish waiting lists are not acceptable. None of this is acceptable. As politicians, we all need to start addressing some of the underlying issues we share and start learning from one another.

I am proud of my time in the NHS and fully aware of the scale of the task ahead, but with good clinicians, good managers and, dare I say it, good politicians, we can develop a longer-term plan and turn this around, should we choose to. The workforce is the right focus to start with, but other improvements in quality of care can happen if we trust the local. Let us build improvements where we can and work with the willing. Let us rejoin the dots destroyed by the disastrous Lansley reforms.

I recently received an updated joint strategic needs assessment from my local authority—the plan for my constituency. These are all things I worked on over 10 years ago, and it is utterly heartbreaking to see. Cervical screening coverage for all women in Bristol is lower than average. Bristol is below the national average for HPV vaccination in boys and girls. Breast cancer rates are 16% higher in Bristol than the England average, and the prevalence of osteoporosis is rising much faster in Bristol than in England. One in four attendances at A&E for falls is a resident of my constituency. I remember the old falls service 10 years ago. This is not a new disease to be eradicated; we do not need a new cure. These are all entirely, and fairly cheaply, preventable problems of public health.

The local NHS priorities are now excess weight management, harmful use of alcohol and falls in old age—all public health preventive work—but with child and adult social care taking up more than 60% of local authority revenue budgets, public health has been hollowed out and is entirely reliant on the voluntary sector. People living with profound disability and ill health are dying earlier and in worse condition. The next debate is about employment. Let us get those people back to better health and back to work. Let us help them care for the older people and people with disabilities they need to care for, but crucially, let us give them their life back. The Government need to join the dots. Instead of bad-mouthing and culling more management, let us give local government and the NHS the tools they need to do the job.

3.52 pm

Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab): I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I would like to begin by placing on

record my solidarity with the junior doctors who are set to stage three days of strike action over pay later this month, as well as with members of the ambulance service whose dispute is still ongoing.

The Royal College of Nursing has now suspended its planned strike action to allow for the commencement of pay negotiations with the Government. There can be no doubt that our nurses deserve a fair pay rise that truly reflects the extraordinary work they do, but I must warn the Health Secretary that the cost of living crisis is being felt in every profession in the NHS at the moment, and I hope he will give serious consideration to the warnings issued by other health unions regarding the dangers of entering into unilateral talks with a single union. He must understand that any deal he reaches with the RCN will have broader implications for the entire “Agenda for Change” pay band system and risks prolonging disputes with other parties even further. I urge him to act in the best interests of patients, health workers and the NHS itself by inviting all unions that are in dispute around the table and by working to find a resolution on an NHS-wide basis.

I have been proud to stand with striking health workers on their picket lines over the last few months and to learn more about what has driven them to take strike action, some for the first time in their lives. In every instance, pay has been the immediate catalyst for a dispute. Far too many people working in our NHS are struggling to make ends meet, and the scourge of low pay is deterring far too many bright and determined young people from seeking a career in the health service in the first place.

However, while the cost of living crisis was an issue for everyone I spoke to, most people seemed more concerned with the state of the NHS itself than with their own personal circumstances. They had got used to real-terms pay cuts under the past 13 years of Conservative misgovernment, but none had seen the NHS in such a state as it is today, crippled by gaping staff shortages, crumbling facilities and the highest backlog in its history.

Those discussions led me to reflect on how much has changed in the 13 years that the Conservative party has been in charge of our health service. Conservative Members may not want to admit it, but when Labour left power, our national health service was world leading by any metric. In fact, a 2010 Commonwealth Fund report singled out the NHS for its efficiency and shorter waiting times. That is a far cry from today when 7.2 million patients are being prevented from moving on with their lives because they are waiting for treatment, and delays in emergency care cause hundreds of deaths every week.

In 1997, it fell to the Labour party to save a health service that had been driven to its knees by the mismanagement, arrogance and carelessness of the

Conservative party—and so it proves again today. The plan that has been put to the House by my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), the shadow Health and Social Care Secretary, will help to lay the solid foundations for the recovery and revival of the NHS. I hope that when the Chancellor comes before this House to deliver the Budget, he looks as favourably on it as he did when it was first announced, when he called for it to be adopted

“on the basis that smart governments always nick the best ideas of their opponents.”

In recent years, he has made great political capital out of his support for the NHS, even if that has often been at odds with his deeply questionable record as Health Secretary. On 15 March, he has the opportunity to show that he cares more for nurses than for the super-rich by backing Labour’s plans to end non-dom status.

It seems increasingly likely that soon enough, Labour will be responsible for the stewardship of our health service, so I urge my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North not to let his ambitions falter. These plans are undoubtedly a step in the right direction, but it is also crucial to engage meaningfully with those on the NHS frontline about what more needs to be done to support the NHS workforce in the immediate term.

In that vein, I ask my hon. Friend and the Secretary of State to listen to the EveryDoctor campaign group about its practitioner-led plan to revive the NHS, which includes steps to strengthen mental health support for NHS staff; to remove the locum fee caps that restrict our ability to maintain safe staffing levels during periods of extreme crisis; and to cut red tape in the Home Office so that people can start the job that they came to this country to do. I also ask my hon. Friend to guarantee that confronting the immediate pressures facing the NHS workforce will not prevent our party in government from making the bold, structural reforms that we promised in our last manifesto, including ending privatisation in the NHS.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order.

ROYAL ASSENT

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

Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Organ and Tissue Donation) Act 2023.

NHS Workforce Expansion

Debate resumed.

3.57 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I am honoured to speak in the debate and to follow my good friend, my hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mick Whitley). I, too, place on record my thanks and appreciation and solidarity with all groups of NHS workers, who go above and beyond in keeping us safe and looking after us. In the limited time available, I will concentrate my remarks on the NHS cancer workforce, particularly the NHS radiotherapy workforce. I declare an interest as the vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary groups on cancer and for radiotherapy.

It is important to think about the impact of the Government's plan—or lack thereof. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), the shadow Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, on being a man with a plan; I hope that the Minister is a woman with a plan to address the real crisis in cancer services and to take the opportunity afforded by making the best use of and expanding our highly dedicated and highly skilled radiotherapy and cancer workforce.

Our performance as a nation is lamentable: cancer patients have been waiting longer for treatment every year since 2010, partly due to problems with workforce recruitment and retention. Performance on the two-week cancer referral waiting time has fallen to record lows and the 62-day waiting time standard for cancer treatment following a GP referral has not been met since 2014. It is really important that the potential of radiotherapy, and of the workforce, is not overlooked by Ministers. They must take steps to address the cancer backlog and improve patient survival rates.

I refer the Minister and hon. Members to an excellent article by Martyn Brown—not in the Labour-supporting *Daily Mirror*, but in the traditionally Conservative-supporting *Express*—that highlights some of the shortcomings in the radiotherapy service. In that article, Bryan Robson, the former England and Manchester United captain, expounds and explains the value of precision radiotherapy. It is quite bizarre that a treatment capable of achieving cures for as little as £3,000 to £7,000 is delivered by fewer than 6,500 specialist staff across the whole of the country. The demands are increasing: Cancer Research UK estimates that the number of cancer patients per year will jump from 384,000 to over 500,000 by 2024. Many of those patients will need radiotherapy, but at present, the workforce levels and the provision of equipment will not meet that demand. I remind the Minister that, among those people who will be diagnosed with cancer, deaths are projected to rise by a quarter.

International standards show that at least 53% of cancer patients need radiotherapy, but here in the UK, we are miles off that target. Only 27% of patients had access to radiotherapy in 2019, and that figure got worse during the pandemic. There is a crisis in cancer care; there is a lack of treatment capacity; and there is a workforce crisis in radiotherapy. The Royal College of Radiologists estimates that the NHS would need to employ 480 radiology consultants overnight to clear the backlog of CT and MRI scans within a month. Numerous

workforce surveys point out that the workforce do not have the equipment to meet future demands, and 94% of respondents to one survey did not feel that the Government understood the impact of the current situation on the radiotherapy workforce. If we lose our radiotherapy workforce, we lose the radiotherapy service. If we do not give those people the tools to do the job, we will never have a world-class cancer service.

4.2 pm

Kate Hollern (Blackburn) (Lab): We are here today because, for a decade, the Government have failed to invest in the workforce of the NHS. Just as an example, there are more than 3,000 posts unfilled for ambulance drivers and paramedics, the highest level for five years. The Government have failed to train the staff, which in turn has fuelled record waiting times for ambulances and poorer outcomes for patients. There are 3,334 vacancies. Quite often, the Government will say, "It's Ukraine, it's covid"—it's anything but Government failures—but the truth is that that figure of 3,334 vacancies is nearly double what it was a year earlier, and three times higher than in September 2020. Heart attack and stroke victims waited an average of an hour and a half for an ambulance and of course, with those illnesses, every minute matters.

We have talked about investment. The Minister has said that there will be an extra £14 billion for the NHS over the next two years, but she fails to accept that, because of the Government's poor planning, trusts have been backed into a corner. The North West Ambulance Service has spent over £15 million on private ambulances in the past year—how many staff would that money fund? We are talking about short-term fixes, rather than long-term plans. That is not the only example. NHS trusts across England increasingly rely on expensive agency staff. One organisation is shelling out as much as £2,500 for a single agency nurse shift. We have nurses on picket lines to oppose the pittance they get. The NHS paid more than £3 billion to agencies to provide nurses and doctors at short notice during 2021-22. That was a 20% increase on the year before, when health services paid out £2.4 billion on short-term fixes, leaving long-term problems. Temporary staff have vital roles in providing safe care, but they should not be continually used to offset a shortfall in permanent staff. Sadly, my fear is that that will become the norm.

Trusts in England spent £6 billion on bank staff in 2021-22, taking the total spend on additional staffing to around £9.2 billion. Published analysis suggests that one in three NHS trusts paid an agency more than £1,000 for a single shift, while one in every six trusts paid more than £2,000. That is a disgraceful indictment of the health service. You almost think people are trying to privatise it through the back door—underfund it, destroy it and let the private sector pick it up.

That comes amid a record nurse shortage across the NHS. We have heard about the additional staff we have, but I would like to know where they are, because we have 47,000 vacancies for nurses. Again, we have a short-term fix and long-term pain. This crisis cannot go on and we need to understand that it is a Government failure. I welcome the shadow Secretary of State bringing this debate forward, because the situation has become urgent and it needs serious discussion and serious plans. It is disappointing that the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Aaron Bell) was critical of Scottish and

Welsh Members being here. It is interesting to see the Government Benches: there is no one here to defend the record because it is indefensible.

It is not just about ambulances and nurses. The hon. Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper) mentioned district nurses, dentists and GPs. According to the BMA, we now have 2,078 fewer GPs than we had in 2015, despite Ministers telling us we have thousands more. Where are they? They are certainly not in Blackburn. Then we come to cancer patients. Again, we hear constantly about covid. Someone close to me, through a late diagnosis and a lack of treatment, sadly died in 2017. Had he got that diagnosis earlier, he would still be here today. That brings me on to Macmillan and cancer support.

Cancer waiting times in England have plummeted to the worst on record. Last year was the first in the 13-year history of Government records in which all national cancer targets in England were missed for at least a month. In a system that has already reached breaking point, we need the Government to take measures now to address cancer workforce shortages and to put urgent plans in place to help cancer services. As my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) says, 3.3 million people will be living with cancer by 2030. We need our workforce capacity to grow by 3,371 nurses.

Macmillan was encouraged by the Chancellor's commitment to work with NHS England to develop a long-term workforce plan and to publish workforce forecasts for the next five to 10 years. Sadly, we have already lost 10 years, and too many people have paid the price—patients who through failure of treatment have lost their lives, and staff who are burned out. We have ambulance staff on stress medication, and nurses concerned about how they will manage to feed their families. Is that an NHS to be proud of? It is certainly something I am not proud of. I was always proud of the NHS in the UK, which was held up as a great example across the world. We are now embarrassed by the state of the NHS. I watched a programme last week about hospitals with burst sewer pipes and not enough nurses to make sure that patients were saved. It is disgraceful. This Government must bring forward not the gloss of “We are doing this, this and this”, but a serious plan identifying serious role shortages, a plan to fix it and to make sure the resources are put in place to carry those promises through.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): We have two speakers left before the wind-ups. I should imagine that the wind-ups will start at about 4.20 pm, if those Members stick to five minutes, so anybody who has taken part in the debate so far should head back to the Chamber.

4.10 pm

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): Staffing in the NHS is at crisis point. Not many days pass before I find myself retweeting a job being advertised by the North Tees and Hartlepool NHS Foundation Trust. These jobs include many senior roles such as consultants, specialist paediatric nurses and theatre staff, but we of course need staff across the trust, and they are not easy to come by. In recent times, nurses have been recruited from as far afield as the Philippines, and they continue to play important roles in our two local hospitals. On Teesside, we desperately need the staff to provide the

services to address some of the worst health inequalities in the country. Apart from training the staff, we need them to have a good place in which to work, and I hope that our new diagnostic centre in Stockton town centre will provide the best of working conditions and technology. However, as I always say in health debates, it is a new hospital that we need in Stockton if we are really going to get to grips with those health inequalities.

I would like to concentrate on the staffing and funding challenges facing the palliative care sector. People with a terminal illness rely for their end-of-life care on specialist palliative care workers employed mainly by charitable hospices, and also on generalist health and social care workers. GPs and district and community nurses also play a particularly important role alongside hospice at home services in caring for the increasing numbers of people dying at home. I admire each and every one of them—it is not a job I could do—and we need to ensure that staff get the ongoing support they need, including ongoing professional development, to help to deliver the care that is needed.

Despite the fact that every health and social care worker is likely at some point in their career to be involved in caring for people experiencing dying, death or bereavement, for many, palliative care and end-of-life care training is not currently a compulsory part of either initial training or continuing professional development. This must be addressed to ensure that the entire health and social care workforce are able to provide the end-of-life care we need. Marie Curie, with which I have had the privilege of working over my time in Parliament, has worked up recommendations for the current challenges. It proposes a long-term funding settlement to enable the palliative and end-of-life care sector to attract and retain a workforce sufficient to ensure no one misses out on the care and support they need at the end of their lives.

In the next 25 years, the number of people aged 85 years and over in the UK will almost double—I hope that I will be one of them—so demand for palliative care and end-of-life services will increase due to larger numbers of people living longer, with multiple and complex health conditions, and it is important that every person at the end of their life receives the care and support they need. However, as this debate has laid bare, there is a real crisis in training and recruitment across the NHS, and it is reflected in the palliative care sector. The failures in training and recruitment are damaging our ability to deliver care to some of our most needy people—people at the very end of their lives. Only Labour's plans will put it right. It is time for that general election.

4.14 pm

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): It has been a long wait to speak—and it is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham)—but I tell you, Mr Deputy Speaker, that the longer the Conservatives are in power, the longer patients in Putney, Roehampton and Southfields will have to wait for healthcare treatment. The Conservatives blame everything, from the weather to the pandemic and even NHS staff themselves, but it is the 13 years of their failure that has broken the NHS and brought us to the state that we have outlined in this Opposition day debate.

[Fleur Anderson]

More than 7 million people are waiting for months, even years, for treatment, and held back from working and living their lives to the full. I declare an interest because my parents have been on waiting lists for their operations for a long time, as have other family members, one of whom sent me a message before the debate:

“Long term pain is very debilitating, and not waiting in pain for many months would have been better for my mental and physical health.”

That is the toll that being on a waiting list and waiting for treatment is taking for 7 million people across the country right now. There are more than 133,000 vacancies across the NHS, which is an all-time high, and the NHS is short of more than 47,000 nurses, 9,000 hospital doctors, and 4,200 GPs.

I knew the situation was bad, but I did not realise how bad until I spent the afternoon at my local A&E at St George's Hospital back in January. The staff are providing excellent care, under what are increasingly very difficult circumstances. Everyone I spoke to said that it was the worst time they have experienced, and they have been through covid. The winter ward opened in St George's last winter, but had to stay open all last year. There is now no more space on the A&E ward, and they are having to take on corridor care for the first time ever. They do not want to have to do that, but that is the state they are in.

Let me briefly highlight some gaps in our community care, in the social care plan, which I hope soon to be hearing about from the Government. First is the critical bed shortage for those with eating disorders. Second is the care shortage for Korsakoff dementia patients. Third is frail patients—those who have had a stroke or a fall and who need much better support. Fourth is those with functional neurological disorder and the need for bed-based neuro-rehab treatment. I have raised that issue in previous debates, and people who are treating those with FND have got in touch to say that yes, there is a critical gap. Finally, there is the impact on breastfeeding support and end-of-life care because of the shortage of district nurses and health visitors, as outlined in Labour's plan. The Royal College of Nursing has issued an unprecedented warning that district nurses are “critically endangered” and face extinction by the end of 2025 if urgent investment is not made. It makes financial sense to have more care at home, rather than people going into hospital, but the past decade has seen a 47% reduction in the number of qualified district nursing staff in England. That is why we need Labour's plan.

By the end of Labour's time in office, public satisfaction with the NHS was at an all-time high of 70%. It is now at a 25-year low of 36%. Currently, four in 10 people attending A&E wait for four hours to be seen. Under Labour, 95% of A&E patients were seen in under four hours. Things can be very different. As has been highlighted, the Chancellor, the right hon. Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt), has said that Labour's plan was “something I very much hope the government also adopts on the basis that smart Governments always nick the best ideas of their opponents”.

Labour Members hope that those good ideas—Labour's plan—will be nicked. Labour will double the number of medical places, will deliver 10,000 more nursing and midwifery clinical placements, will train twice the number of district nurses per year, and will deliver 5,000 more

desperately needed health visitors. Labour's plan is fully costed and fully funded, and the Minister is welcome to it. Will she take it and save our NHS?

4.18 pm

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I commend the powerful contributions from my hon. Friends the Members for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western), for Wakefield (Simon Lightwood), for Bristol South (Karin Smyth), for Birkenhead (Mick Whitley), for Easington (Grahame Morris), for Blackburn, for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) and for Putney (Fleur Anderson), as well as the hon. Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper). We also heard speeches from the hon. Members for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Aaron Bell) and for Mansfield (Ben Bradley), although most of the parliamentary Conservative party seem to be absent today.

Before he became Chancellor, the right hon. Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt) sent an email in which he addressed Labour's NHS workforce plan. He said:

“Smart Governments”—

chance would be a fine thing with this lot—

“always nick the best ideas of their opponents.”

It has been interesting to watch those on the Government Benches tying themselves in knots to try to unpick our workforce strategy when they know that their Chancellor privately supports it and will, in all likelihood, be forced to swallow his pride and nick it sooner rather than later. They do so to try to mask the depressing truth: they have no plan and have not had one for years.

The NHS has a current shortage of 9,000 hospital doctors and 47,000 nurses. Staff are at breaking point and patients are being failed on an unprecedented scale. Some 7 million people—let that sink in—are waiting months and even years for treatment. Heart attack and stroke victims are routinely waiting over three hours for an ambulance. Patients are finding it impossible to get a GP appointment when they need one. The system is in crisis and the Government will not even admit it, let alone address it. I do not know what cloud cuckoo world the Minister who opened this debate is living in, but it is not the one that my constituents live in and I suspect it is not the one her constituents live in. The reality is that they have cut medical school places and wasted precious time trying to force through an unworkable and unethical Bill to sack striking nurses. They have had 13 years and the best they can do when faced with an acute workforce shortage is threaten to sack NHS staff, an idea that would be farcical if it were not so dangerous.

In the absence of a coherent Government strategy, there are already rumblings on the Tory Back Benches about the future of the NHS. Just a few months ago, a former Health Secretary said he thought that the NHS should start charging for A&E and GP visits. The absolute brass neck of it! To neglect a service for 13 years, fail to train the necessary staff, systematically mismanage it, and then pretend there is no alternative but to charge patients money to fix the mess they made. Not on Labour's watch. The core principle of the NHS—a publicly funded service, free at the point of need—is non-negotiable. The problem is not the NHS; the problem is how it has been managed by this out-of-touch and out-of-ideas Government.

It is worth saying it over and over again: Labour has a plan to build an NHS fit for the future. We would double the number of medical school places to 15,000 a year; double the number of district nurses qualifying each year; train 5,000 new health visitors; and create 10,000 more nursing and midwifery placements each year. We would train 8,500 mental health professionals and put hubs into the heart of our communities, so that people can access vital mental health treatment within a year. That would come alongside a 10-year strategy for change and modernisation within our NHS. It would be funded by abolishing the non-dom tax status, because patients need treatment more than the wealthiest need a tax break. I hope that in her response the Minister will give clarity on why the Government have decided to side with the non-doms rather than the nurses.

Aaron Bell: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andrew Gwynne: I will not give way.

I appreciate that scrapping the non-dom tax status might be awkward for the Chancellor's relationship with his next-door neighbour, but I fail to see how he, or indeed any hon. Member on the Government Benches, can justify inaction. In fact, I fail to see how anyone can look at the state of our national health service and vote for non-doms over NHS staff. On that, I will give way to the non-dom-loving hon. Gentleman.

Aaron Bell: I would like to inquire whether the Labour party takes donations from non-doms, because the Leader of the Opposition and the shadow Chancellor have refused to rule it out. Does the Labour party take donations from non-doms?

Andrew Gwynne: The point is that we will tax them. I do not know what the hon. Gentleman is getting at. Perhaps he should give an intervention on something he knows about, rather than something he does not. Siding with the non-doms is the position of this Tory Government.

When the Minister stands up to speak, she will rehearse the lukewarm excuses from a Government allergic to accountability. She will blame the pandemic—we have heard it before—even though waiting lists were at a record high before covid hit these shores. She will blame striking NHS staff, conveniently ignoring that her Government do not have the decency even to talk to staff about pay. For months, she could have averted the strike action. She will blame anyone but herself and her Government. She will not mention the 13 years they have had in power. Instead, she will talk as if she has only just started on the job. “A plan is coming,” she will say, while this rudderless Government flip-flop around behind the scenes and patients continue to wait in agony.

Why should the people of this country have to settle for such mediocrity? The NHS is an institution that, if run properly, can and should be the envy of the world. Things do not have to be this way. The last Labour Government left office with the lowest waiting times and the highest patient satisfaction on record. That golden legacy has been torched by the Tories. I do not trust the arsonists to put out the fire, and neither do the British public.

If after telling Conservative MPs to vote against our plan, the Chancellor does decide to nick our workforce strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North

(Wes Streeting) and I will be delighted, because it will prove once and for all that there really is no point in this clapped-out Government if all they do is dither, delay, U-turn and nab Labour's policy anyway.

In closing, I suggest that it would be much better for this zombie Government to move out of the way, call a general election and let the next Labour Government get on with the job of rebuilding our country after 13 years of Tory managed decline. Until then, Labour's message to patients is clear: the cavalry is coming. We will give the NHS the staff, the tools and the technology that it needs to thrive. That will come alongside a relentless mission to improve patient standards and reform the systems within the NHS that are currently failing patients. We will build an NHS fit for the future; we have done it before and we will do it again. I commend our motion to the House.

4.27 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): Let me first pay tribute to all the wonderful staff across the NHS who day in, day out give their all for their patients. I should mention doctors and nurses but also cleaning staff, porters, receptionists, radiographers, physios and many others who make such a difference to patients' experience.

It is disappointing that, once again, the Opposition have used the debate to talk down the NHS and not to recognise the incredible achievements and progress made: treating more patients than ever before; working on our plans to eradicate cervical cancer; progress for people with HIV, who are now able to have a normal life expectancy; reducing stillbirths by 21%; and reducing neonatal deaths by 17%. Those are just some of the achievements of our incredible staff for patients in this country.

Anyone listening to Opposition Members would think that life under the previous Labour Government was a health panacea. When we came into government, MRSA was rife across the NHS, with wards and hospitals closed, operations cancelled and patients dying from infection. *Clostridium difficile* was the same—in 2008, there were 8,300 deaths. Deep cleaning was needed across hospitals to keep them open and try to prevent infections. The Labour Government's pledge to end mixed-sex wards failed; the then Health Secretary, Alan Johnson, announced that they had “got it wrong” when they could not manage it. Elderly women were sharing bays with young men, separated by just a curtain—there was no dignity for patients at all.

Then there was the PFI scandal, as my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Aaron Bell) pointed out, with £300 billion of debt for the taxpayer for projects worth just £54.7 billion. There was a £26 billion IT scheme that never saw the light of day. Undeterred, the Labour leader is now doubling down on his “fit for the future” plans for the NHS. When Labour was last in government, its “fit for the future” plans closed hospitals up and down the country, with plans to close the Princess Royal in Haywards Heath in my constituency. Between 2003 and 2010, in the last six years of the Labour Government, 26,000 beds were closed. That was the legacy of the last Labour Government for the NHS.

[Maria Caulfield]

There are three precious elements of the NHS. There is the building infrastructure, which we are putting £10 billion of capital funding into this year—that is part of the 40 hospitals that we are now building to create better infrastructure for the future. We are also introducing state-of-the-art facilities, with over 90 rapid diagnostic centres and over 90 surgical hubs now open. We are eliminating our two-year wait for procedures, and are on track to eliminate our 18-month wait from April.

Of course, our staff are the most precious element of all. We are not pretending that things are perfect. As the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) said, there are pressures, backlogs and delays in England, Wales and Scotland. It is pointless to play politics with the issues; those are the facts.

Let me list exactly what we are doing now to invest in our staff. We are on track to deliver 50,000 more nurses across the NHS by next year. We have 38,000 more nurses than in 2019. We have record numbers of staff in the NHS, with more than 1.25 million members of staff—41,800 more than a year ago. We have 4,800 more doctors and 10,900 more nurses. Last year, we had 72,000 people training to be a nurse, 9,000 people training to be a midwife and 30,000 people training to be an allied health professional. We had a 16% increase in students accepted on nursing and midwifery courses. We had 3,400 people starting a degree nurse apprenticeship, earning while they are learning and not accumulating student debt. We had student nurses supported with a student bursary of £5,000 a year.

Last year, we had over 19,400 non-UK nurses and health visitors joining the NHS. We had 11,600 non-UK doctors. We have funded 1,500 more medical places each year—a 25% increase over three years. We have five new medical schools, which are in Tyne and Wear, Essex, Kent, Lincolnshire and West Lancashire. We have 7,630 new entrants to undergraduate medical courses. We have introduced medical degree apprenticeships. With regard to retention, we have suspended until 2025 the rules on nurses who retire and the restricted hours that they can do, and we are consulting on removing pension barriers.

We are developing a workforce plan, as set out by the Chancellor. We are working with midwives, with Birthrate Plus, on staffing ratios in maternity units. We are on track to have 27,000 more mental health workers. We are rolling out mental health support teams in our schools. We are introducing Oliver McGowan training on autism across healthcare. We have had 3,000 undergraduate student dentists over the past few years. We had an increase of 539 dentists providing NHS services in the past year. In England, we have 2,500 pharmacists entering training each year. We have had a net increase of 1,400 pharmacists a year since 2016, and we are increasing the number of pharmacy technicians.

I could go on, because that is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to our investment in our staff. I will take no lectures from Opposition Members, because RCN statistics show that Labour-run Wales has 2,900 nurse vacancies and is spending £140 million on agency nurses. In fact, the emergency medicines workforce census this year says that there is one consultant in Wales for every

7,784 patients at A&E. [Interruption.] Opposition Members may laugh, but in Wales there are simply not enough staff to cope.

I will finish by addressing Labour's non-dom tax plan, which is as much use as an ashtray on a motorbike. Labour Members' non-dom tax plan for transforming the health service would raise just £3.2 billion. Not only have they spent that 10 times over, but their flagship policy—the shadow Secretary of State wants to scrap GP partnerships—will cost more than £7 billion, and buying them out and tearing up GP contracts will cost £1.7 billion a year. The Opposition are economically illiterate. [Interruption.] The shadow Secretary of State has said on the record that he wants to abolish GP partnerships. Perhaps he wants to clarify that and say it is not what he wants to do, but I do not see him rising to intervene.

This Government will not fall for the fairytale Labour party policies. As I have said, we are delivering now—not in the future—the many ways in which we are increasing our NHS workforce. We are focused on tackling covid backlogs, improving our services for patients, and increasing our NHS workforce in England. Let us see what happens in Wales with the Labour plans, but we value each and every one of the members of the NHS who deliver for patients day in, day out.

Question put:

The House divided: Ayes 224, Noes 0.

Division No. 179]

[4.35 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (<i>Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy</i>)	Cooper, rh Yvette
Ali, Rushanara	Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Ali, Tahir	Coyle, Neil
Amesbury, Mike	Creasy, Stella
Anderson, Fleur	Cruddas, Jon
Ashworth, rh Jonathan	Cryer, John
Bardell, Hannah	Cummins, Judith
Barker, Paula	Cunningham, Alex
Beckett, rh Margaret	Daby, Janet
Begum, Apsana	Dalton, Ashley
Benn, rh Hilary	Davey, rh Ed
Betts, Mr Clive	David, Wayne
Black, Mhairi	Davies, Geraint
Blackman, Kirsty	Davies-Jones, Alex
Blake, Olivia	Debbonaire, Thangam
Blomfield, Paul	Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Bonnar, Steven	Dixon, Samantha
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben	Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Brock, Deidre	Dodds, Anneliese
Bryant, Sir Chris	Doogan, Dave
Buck, Ms Karen	Dorans, Allan (<i>Proxy vote cast by Peter Grant</i>)
Byrne, Ian	Doughty, Stephen
Byrne, rh Liam	Dowd, Peter
Cadbury, Ruth	Duffield, Rosie
Callaghan, Amy (<i>Proxy vote cast by Peter Grant</i>)	Eagle, Dame Angela
Cameron, Dr Lisa	Eagle, rh Maria
Campbell, rh Sir Alan	Eastwood, Colum
Campbell, Mr Gregory	Edwards, Jonathan
Carden, Dan	Elmore, Chris
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	Eshalomi, Florence
Champion, Sarah	Esterson, Bill
Charalambous, Bambos	Farron, Tim
Cherry, Joanna	Farry, Stephen
Cooper, Daisy	Fellows, Marion
	Ferrier, Margaret
	Fletcher, Colleen

Flynn, Stephen
 Foord, Richard
 Fovargue, Yvonne
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gibson, Patricia
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Girvan, Paul
 Grady, Patrick
 Grant, Peter
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Haigh, Louise
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hanna, Claire
 Hardy, Emma
 Harman, rh Ms Harriet
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Helen
 Hendrick, Sir Mark
 Hendry, Drew
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hollern, Kate
 Hosie, rh Stewart
 Howarth, rh Sir George
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hussain, Imran
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Dan
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, rh Mr Kevan
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Keeley, Barbara
 Kendall, Liz
 Khan, Afzal
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kyle, Peter
 Lake, Ben
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Chris
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewis, Clive

Lightwood, Simon
 Lloyd, Tony (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Lockhart, Carla
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lucas, Caroline
 Lynch, Holly
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Mc Nally, John
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonagh, Siobhain
 McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 McDonnell, rh John
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGinn, Conor
 McGovern, Alison
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McLaughlin, Anne (*Proxy vote cast by Peter Grant*)
 McMahan, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 Mearns, Ian
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Monaghan, Carol
 Moran, Layla
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Helen
 Morgan, Stephen
 Murray, Ian
 Murray, James
 Nandy, Lisa
 Newlands, Gavin
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Nicolson, John (*Proxy vote cast by Peter Grant*)
 Olney, Sarah
 Onwurah, Chi
 Oppong-Asare, Abena
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Kate
 Oswald, Kirsten
 Owen, Sarah
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, Bridget
 Powell, Lucy

Qureshi, Yasmin
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reed, Steve
 Rees, Christina
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reeves, rh Rachel
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robinson, Gavin
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Shah, Naz
 Shannon, Jim
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sheerman, Mr Barry
 Sheppard, Tommy
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, Alyn
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Sobel, Alex
 Stephens, Chris
 Stevens, Jo
 Stone, Jamie
 Streeter, Wes
 Stringer, Graham
 Sultana, Zarah

Tarry, Sam
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thompson, Owen
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Trickett, Jon
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Wakeford, Christian
 Webbe, Claudia
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitford, Dr Philippa
 Whitley, Mick
 Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, Hywel
 Wilson, Munira
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Winter, Beth
 Wishart, Pete
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:

**Mary Glindon and
 Tonia Antoniazzi**

NOES

Tellers for the Noes:

**Lilian Greenwood and
 Mark Tami**

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House condemns the Government's failure to train enough staff to tackle the worst workforce crisis in the history of the National Health Service with a current shortage of 9,000 hospital doctors and 47,000 nurses; notes reports that the draft NHS England workforce plan calls for a doubling of medical school places to address this crisis; calls on the Chancellor of the Exchequer to use the upcoming Spring Budget to end the 200-year-old non-domiciled tax status regime; and further calls on the Government to use revenue generated by ending that regime to adopt Labour's plan to expand the NHS workforce by doubling the number of medical training places, delivering 10,000 more nursing and midwifery clinical placements, training twice the number of district nurses each year and delivering 5,000 more health visitors.

Labour Market Activity

4.50 pm

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House is concerned that the number of people out of work and economically inactive is higher than before the pandemic, that thousands of older people have left the labour market and that there have been significant increases in the number of people out of work due to ill health or mental ill health; notes that recent employment support schemes have underperformed and underspent; condemns the Government for its failure to get more people into work; regrets that this failure is contributing to low economic growth and falling living standards; and therefore calls on the Government to get Britain back to work by reforming disability benefit assessments, devolving employment support to local areas and providing specialist and targeted help for those with long-term ill health or aged over 50 to grow the economy and boost both public finances and household incomes.

I ask the House to endorse this motion for one simple reason: it is time to get Britain back to work, and to extend opportunity to everybody who wants to find a decent, fulfilling job. It has always been the Labour party's view that unemployment is never a price worth paying.

Let me say at the outset that this debate is not about the technical definition of unemployment. I anticipate that the Secretary of State will refer to the employment figures, and no doubt there will be interventions from Conservative Members telling us that our constituents have never had it so good. I accept that unemployment is at 3.7% of the working-age population, but the cause of low unemployment is not a booming jobs market.

In the last year or so, we have registered some of the lowest growth rates in the G7. The reality is that we are one of the few major economies not to have returned to pre-pandemic employment because of a rising tide of economic inactivity, despite there being around 1 million vacancies in the economy. Across other major economies, labour market participation rates rebounded as restrictions lifted, yet here employment is lower than before the pandemic. Our labour force growth effectively ground to a halt, and we suffered the biggest employment rate fall in the G7—a labour market loss of almost 4%, which is equivalent to 1 million people. Economic inactivity has risen by around 600,000.

Some of that is early retirement among the over-50s, but an increasingly common reason for leaving the labour market is sickness. When we consider both the number who are unemployed and the number who are inactive but who say they want help to work, there are around 3 million workless people in this country who could be in jobs. Indeed, some think-tanks suggest the figure could be as high as 4.7 million. Even though we have a UK unemployment rate of 3.7%, we in fact have a hidden unemployment rate of around 12.1% when we add the people who are inactive and want to work.

This means that 13.4% of the working-age population of Barnsley are involuntarily inactive, according to the Centre for Cities. These are men and women who, with the right help, want to work. It means that 12.9% of the working-age population of Middlesbrough, 12.4% of the working-age population of Doncaster and 12.7% of the working-age population of Mansfield are inactive.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, since the Government came in and cut English for speakers of other languages

courses, women from black, Asian and minority ethnic communities in inner-city areas, in particular, have not been able to get into employment? We see that in the figures.

Jonathan Ashworth: My hon. Friend makes an important point. I also see that phenomenon every day in my Leicester constituency. There are people who want to work, and who could work if given the right help and support with the English language—particularly women from Bangladeshi and Pakistani-heritage communities—but, because of the cuts that have made ESOL more difficult to access, they are not being given that support and help.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Is my right hon. Friend aware of the study by the Office for National Statistics showing that there could be a significant increase in the overall levels of employment and productivity if there were greater encouragement to work from home, particularly for women who are having to choose between caring and working? They face a cliff edge, but they want to do both. Why are the Government not doing something about that?

Jonathan Ashworth: My hon. Friend, typically, anticipates a point I will be making later, but it is clear that certain members of the population could be encouraged to return to work if the correct flexible option was in place, along with appropriate help with childcare or indeed social care. Many people are caring for loved ones—parents and so on.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): The Institute for Public Policy Research estimates that six out of 10 people who are economically inactive because of illness are economically inactive because of mental health problems. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that changing the conditions of work, for example, with good childcare, with proper jobs, with proper wages and so on, is the way to deal with this problem?

Jonathan Ashworth: The hon. Gentleman makes an entirely reasonable point. We are seeing more and more people being forced out of the labour market, or not able even to enter it in the first place, because of depression, stress or anxiety. If we reform the way in which we deliver employment support, we can get many of these people back to work, because being in work will be good for them in terms of managing their mental health. Obviously, that is not necessarily the case for everybody, but it will be for a significant proportion. The problem is that there are many who want to work, yet under the Government's approach, which focuses just on the unemployed via the jobcentres, only one in 10 out-of-work older people or disabled people are getting any support. We reject that approach.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is making a good speech. For someone with a disability or a long-term condition, simple adjustments in the workplace, such as having a sit-stand desk, so that an office worker does not have to sit down all day, a vertical mouse, to help somebody who has problems with their wrists, or an ergonomic chair, to help somebody with a bad back, can make all the difference in how they are able to manage their health and how happy they can feel in the workplace. Lots of people do not know that they are entitled to ask for reasonable adjustments and

that very often these items are available through the Access to Work programme. Does he agree that the Government need to do far more to publicise the support that is out there, so that not only can people get into work, but those in work can maintain their health and stay in work longer?

Jonathan Ashworth: My hon. Friend hits the nail on the head. It is not just that lots of people are not aware of the Access to Work scheme, but some people who apply for Access to Work are then faced with the most ridiculous waiting lists. A constituent of mine accepted a job and was told that there was a 26-week waiting list for an assessment. I raised that case with the Department in my capacity as a local constituency MP and I am pleased that the Department has looked at it again, but lots of people will not go to their local MP asking them to intervene, and we want to get people into work. It is no wonder that the disability employment gap is widening.

As a country, we should be aiming for the highest level of employment in the G7. That would mean living standards raised for every household. The reason we want to extend the opportunity of decent work to all is even more fundamental: when one in five people who have left the labour market in the past two years say that they would like to work, we have a responsibility to help them. Behind every statistic is a story of opportunities missed, talents wasted and extraordinary potential left untapped, none more so than for the now 1 million young people not in education or employment. Increasing numbers of young people are out of work for reasons of mental health. We know the long-term scarring effects of worklessness at a young age; it risks a life on the margins. To do nothing for this group of young people, as is, in effect, the case now, means writing them off. Its means tolerating a situation where only about 4% of people in the employment and support allowance support group return to work each year—to me, that is fundamentally unacceptable. It is a massive social cost and it has a massive economic cost as well, as we will see, because the Office for Budget Responsibility is predicting that the health-related benefit bill will increase, costing us £8 billion extra.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Most Conservative Members would agree with much of what the right hon. Gentleman has said, so will he offer a bit of guidance as to how the Government should go about contacting people in these positions who might want to get into work? What kind of offer does he think would be best to make so that we can engage with them?

Jonathan Ashworth: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for that. I will outline a very detailed plan in my remarks. I hope it finds favour with him, because we want to grow our economy, as he does, and getting people back to work is good for them as individuals, it will make our economy more productive, it will sustainably raise living standards—not by going for growth through inflation—and getting people back to work is surely a good thing. I hope he stays in the Chamber, as I am sure he will, to listen to my speech.

The Government say that they gave us kickstart, but it failed to deliver the 250,000 jobs for young people promised. They say that they gave us restart, but it is expected to help less than half the number of people that Ministers said it would, and it is underspent by around

£900 million. However, my argument is not simply that the Minister is doing nothing. It is also that what the Government do do, they do not do very well.

The Local Government Association estimated that the Government—I think that this is last year's figure—spent £20 billion to deliver 49 different employment and skills-related schemes administered by nine different Government Departments and agencies and, yet, despite all that money, these organisational geniuses have still given us a situation where we have 1 million vacancies, 3 million workless, and the worst employment recovery in the G7. That is surely not good enough for £20 billion-worth of expenditure.

What has been the Government's answer? It is more of the same. They brief newspapers there will be more daily interviews for the three-month unemployed in the intensive work search group, even though the failure-to-attend rate for weekly appointments is already high. It will no doubt mean more CV writing classes, more applying for jobs online that turn out to be duplications and, of course, more sanctions. Of course there should be conditions applied to unemployment—[*Interruption.*] We have always been in favour of conditions for unemployment benefit—as many of these hon. Members will find out when they go to the jobcentre after the next general election—but what we need for this country is a plan that widens access to employment support for all who want to work, that brings together health and employment support, that addresses the cost and disincentives of moving into work for parents with childcare needs, for example, and that takes account of the different economic needs of the country.

Beth Winter (Cynon Valley) (Lab): My constituency of Cynon Valley has some of the highest levels of economic inactivity in Wales and, indeed, the UK. I welcome Labour's proposals to fix this broken employment support model. Indeed, I am pleased that, in Cynon Valley, we are piloting some innovative economic models under the community wealth building approach. However, turning to the UK Government, is my right hon. Friend at all concerned about the pilot announced in a written statement yesterday, requiring claimants to attend face-to-face interviews daily for a fortnight, with a threat of sanctions for non-attendance? Is that not a model to discourage claims? Is he also concerned that, following the closure of many jobcentres, jobcentre workers, who are themselves accessing food banks, are now being forced to require claimants to undertake these interviews and to make life-impacting decisions based on economic benefit?

Jonathan Ashworth: The problem is that the Government are one-trick ponies. They think that that is the answer to getting people back to work, but what we need is a plan to deal with the economically inactive, not just to apply conditions for those receiving unemployment-related benefit on universal credit.

Different parts of the country face different economic needs. In broad-brush terms, in coastal and some former industrial areas, we tend to see lower labour market participation rates and relatively fewer vacancies. In many parts of London and the south-east, we tend to see higher labour market participation, but also relatively fewer vacancies. In major cities such as Birmingham, Leicester, Coventry and Liverpool, we tend to see lower labour market participation, but often higher vacancies.

[Jonathan Ashworth]

The point is that different economies have different economic needs. Different labour markets have different economic needs. Instead of nationally contracting to deliver one-size-fits-all employment schemes designed from behind a desk in Caxton House, and instead of forcing Mayors—in the words of Andy Street—to go with a “begging bowl” to Whitehall, we should shift power and resources to local communities because, as the leader of Nottingham County Council, the hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley), said in a very good Red Box article a few weeks ago:

“Local leaders are too often hampered by the Whitehall knows best approach...Employment support programmes are commissioned based on national guidelines, not local needs...Fixing economic inactivity needs a radical pro-devolution mindset.”

I absolutely agree with him.

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his kind words and for giving way. I should mention that I co-wrote that article with Adam Hawksbee of Onward.

The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. He mentioned Mansfield’s statistics and the high levels of economic inactivity. These schemes are best built with local employers and training providers so that they can be bespoke for those needs, with the flexibility that was mentioned earlier; I am sure he would agree with that. Will he join me in calling on Ministers to pilot that in the east midlands when we get our combined authority next year?

Jonathan Ashworth: Absolutely. Of course, a Labour Government will definitely deliver more resources. I hope that we can pilot that in the east midlands combined authority, as well as in the Leicester area—the hon. Gentleman will know what that is a reference to.

Samantha Dixon (City of Chester) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is making an eloquent point about the devolution of this policy area. I draw his attention to the work that Cheshire West and Chester Council has done with work zones across our borough and in my constituency. That work has been really effective not just in getting people into work, but in enabling those in low-paid work to get up the skills escalator. The sort of short-term rigid national contracting that we are seeing from the Government is actively working against the devolution and skills that local employers and local people need. I would be very pleased if he agreed.

Jonathan Ashworth: I agree. May I welcome my hon. Friend to her place? This is the first opportunity that I have had to do so. She brings to this House great experience in local government. She knows that local authority leaders, working in partnership with the business community, with those who provide skills, and with civic societies, trade unions and so on, can do a much better job of getting people back to work, which is why we should be shifting resources, be it to the east midlands combined authority, the Cheshire region or elsewhere.

Where that has happened in pockets—such as in Andy Burnham’s Greater Manchester, through the working well initiative—there have been great successes, so we need to shift resources. That is the key to providing a

form of universal support, which my friends at the Centre for Social Justice have rightly called for, to help people with complex barriers to return to work. We endorse that approach.

Hywel Williams: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way—he is being very generous. We have a Labour Government in Wales. Would he support the devolution of the administration of social security to that Labour Government?

Jonathan Ashworth: The hon. Gentleman is tempting me into very choppy waters by offering to disrupt the way in which we provide social security across the country, but I will resist the temptation to go off course.

At a time when local areas should be given more resources to deliver employment support, the Government are cutting resources. Not only did they announce out of the blue in December that they were cutting a scheme that helped those with health conditions to move into work in the west midlands and South Yorkshire—they then U-turned on that a couple of weeks ago—but, as I heard from the Salvation Army when I went to visit an employment project in East Ham this morning, they are also leaving the voluntary sector with no answers about its future because of decisions about the shared prosperity fund.

The shared prosperity fund, which is the successor to the European social fund, helps to fund schemes that support people with complex barriers into work. The European social fund money ends at the end of this year, and there is then a nine-month funding gap until the people and skills element of the new shared prosperity fund kicks in. How does the Secretary of State expect to get more of the economically inactive into work when that funding gap means that voluntary organisations in all our constituencies have no idea how they will fund their work for the best part of a year? That is not the way to go about it, and when the Department leaves those voluntary organisations with no funding, it does not suggest that the Government are serious about getting people back to work.

Margaret Greenwood: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Jonathan Ashworth: I will, but then I need to make progress.

Margaret Greenwood: My right hon. Friend is making an important point about the shared prosperity fund and the funding gap that so many providers in our constituencies face. I have seen in my constituency the fantastic work they do. The people working in those charities and organisations have huge expertise. Does he share my concern that, if their jobs do not continue, we will lose a wealth of knowledge that is tailored to our local communities, which would be devastating for so many people looking for work?

Jonathan Ashworth: It is a crazy situation. In fairness to the Secretary of State—I do always wish to be fair to him—decisions on the shared prosperity fund are made by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, but for a Government who say that focusing on inactivity will be a feature of their Budget, the fact that one Department does not seem to know what another is doing does not exactly fill one with confidence.

Shifting resources out of Whitehall would provide greater opportunities to better join up and co-locate employment advisers in health services, mental health services, addiction services and primary care. We know that increasing numbers of people are out of work, not just for depression and anxiety but for traditional musculoskeletal conditions, and if we are to get people back into work, they need to be supported into work. They need to be given the support to thrive once they are in work. This is urgent, because we do not want the increasing numbers who are leaving work as the short-term sick turning into the long-term sick. We know that, once someone is out of work beyond three months, they risk being out of work for a considerable time.

Obviously, some of this is to do with access to the NHS, given that there are 7 million on the waiting list. It is about access to primary care, to help people manage their health conditions, but there is also a role for employment advisers. Indeed, the new frontier of social security reform, in my view, is bringing together health and welfare in a way we have not before. That also means giving people proper occupational health support. In fairness to the Government, a few years ago they endorsed Dame Carol Black's report on occupational health, and they piloted a Fit for Work occupational health scheme, but they pulled the plug on it before it had time to properly bed in and develop. That was possibly an incredibly short-sighted decision, given the numbers out of work today for reasons of sickness.

We need to reform sick pay, as Labour has consistently called for. We need to ensure that fit notes are about not just signing people off but sign-posting people to help. We need to give people flexible work options, so that they can stay in work. We also need to support women to stay in work with the menopause, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) has outlined today. My hon. Friends the Members for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) and for Leicester West (Liz Kendall) have been elegant and brilliant champions for this.

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): Elegant!

Jonathan Ashworth: They have been articulate and fantastic champions. I always praise my fellow MPs from Leicester. The Government need to take this agenda seriously, because we know that increasing numbers of women in their 50s are being forced out of the labour market but would stay in work if given the right flexible options.

We also need to tackle the barriers in the social security system that prevent people from moving into work. People should not be trapped on welfare, abandoned to going nowhere. That brings me to childcare. We know that childcare can make the difference between a parent rejoining the workforce and staying at home to look after their children. For some parents, childcare may not be available where they live, but for many parents—particularly those on the lowest incomes—childcare costs can be an insurmountable barrier to work. That should not be the case.

A lack of childcare, or a lack of support paying for it, should not stand in the way of a parent returning to work, yet low-income families often have that choice taken away from them. The design of the universal credit system means that childcare costs are based on payment

in arrears, but as childcare usually needs to be paid up front, in advance, parents often have to choose between taking on debt or turning down work. It is pushing more families into debt. The Government's answer is that people can go to their work coach and ask for a flexible support fund grant, but it should not be the case that a poorly understood and difficult handout scheme administered by the DWP is there to address the failings in the DWP's own policy. We need to fix this.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Jonathan Ashworth: I will give way to my hon. Friend—the hon. Member.

Chris Stephens: I will take hon. Friend. There is another problem, which is that lone parents face the choice of working reduced hours, because if they increase their hours they will lose out on state support.

Jonathan Ashworth: Absolutely. It beggars belief that people are being trapped out of work because of the current system. It needs fundamental reform.

Part of the problem is the way in which the amount of childcare that can be reimbursed has been capped. A family in 2009 who received working tax credit and needed full-time childcare of 50 hours a week would have been reimbursed for 38 of those hours. Today, the same family on universal credit would be reimbursed for only 27 of those hours—at a time when we want to support more parents into work. Fixing childcare not only is the right thing to do, but will help the economy. The Centre for Progressive Policy has said that if women had access to adequate childcare services, they would generate up to £28 billion for the economy. Why are Ministers not fixing it?

Finally, the social security system should support, not hinder, people's journey into work, but too often the system disincentivises work and makes even trying it too much of a risk. The work capability assessment acts as a barrier for people and the assessments can be arduous, lengthy and stressful. Many people with ill health simply do not want to risk going through that process again if they move into work and something goes wrong. Instead, we should guarantee that people in that position, who move into employment with the help of employment support, can return to the benefits that they were on without the need for another lengthy assessment process.

This is a plan to get people back to work, but where is the Government's plan? They spin that they are working on something, but they cannot even tell us whether their existing policies are making a difference. I have been asking them about those policies and this is what they have told me. When I asked how much funding was allocated to each jobcentre, I was told:

"The information requested is not available."

When I asked if they could tell us how many people had secured a job at the end of taking part in sector-based work academy programmes, I was told:

"This information is not available."

When I asked how many people got jobs after taking part in the DWP's mentoring circles, I was told that the information "is not collated".

[Jonathan Ashworth]

When I asked how many times people on universal credit have been asked to meet a work coach, I was told:

“No such specific assessment has been made.”

When I asked how many universal credit claimants were undertaking training or education that counted towards their work-related requirements, I was told:

“The requested information is not held.”

When I asked how many universal credit claimants were employed as carers, I was told:

“The requested information is not held.”

When I asked what the average amount of time is between receiving jobseeker’s allowance and receiving a job offer, I was told:

“The information requested is not...available.”

When I asked how many people stopped receiving employment and support allowance as a result of gaining employment, I was told:

“The information requested is not...available.”

When I asked how much money from the flexible support fund has been used to assist jobseekers with the cost of childcare, I was told

“The information is not available”.

When I asked how many individuals were awarded payments for childcare from the flexible support fund, I was told that the information requested is not available.

This lot are supposed to be getting people back to work, but a plan for jobs is not available. That is probably why the Secretary of State—the shadow shadow Secretary of State—now copies our welfare reform plans. We propose welfare reforms to benefits, and two days’ later we read in *The Times* that he is adopting them. We call for deeper links between health and employment services, and a week or so later he copies us. We put forward reforms to get the over-50s back into work, and a few weeks’ later he nicks them. I even went to the shop where I get my suits from—this is absolutely true—and the people said that he had recently been in there.

People say that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, so why does the copycat Secretary of State not move out of the road and let us take over? Let us get Britain back to work, because Labour is winning the battle of ideas. I commend our motion to the House.

5.19 pm

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mel Stride): It took the right hon. Gentleman a little bit of time to get going, but he certainly got going at the end of his speech—he was both Pinky and Perky at the finish there, which was good to see. I am afraid that I cannot accept the motion as it stands, of course, but I can reassure him that it makes fair points, highlighting the challenges that exist around employment, unemployment and economic inactivity. I welcome the opportunity to have a debate about those issues this afternoon. However, where the motion falls short is that it is entirely wrong, first, to deny the very considerable progress that the Government and previous Conservative Administrations have made in these areas, and secondly, to suggest—as the right hon. Gentleman does—that the Government have somehow been sitting on their hands. Nothing could be further from the truth.

It is this Government and my party that have seen 3.7 million more people in employment since 2010, with 2 million of those being women. We have seen 1.3 million more disabled people in employment since 2017—these are simple facts. We have seen long-term unemployment decline by 12% since before the pandemic, and as the right hon. Gentleman recognises, unemployment stands at 3.7%, which is a near-historic low. Under this Government we have also seen payroll employment at a record level, and of course we saw this Government in action under the then Chancellor, now the Prime Minister, at the time of the pandemic. The Government intervened in the labour market, to the extent that all those economists who said that we would be back to the unemployment levels of the 1980s, up at about 12%, were disproved by the actions of this Government.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Ind): Would the Secretary of State extend his gratitude and congratulations to the frontline jobcentre staff who provided the statistics that he has just used? After thanking jobcentres such as Blackfriars Road in my constituency, can he then explain why they are being closed?

Mel Stride: It is a fact that we are going through an estate rationalisation programme, and there are very good reasons for that. During the pandemic, we stood up a lot of additional jobcentres for which we do not now have a requirement, and it is also important that we make sure we have an estate that is fit for the 21st century, with the right technology, job opportunities and so on. However, I join the hon. Gentleman in congratulating and thanking those very hard-working frontline staff—the work coaches in our jobcentres up and down the country—who do an extraordinary job. I will pay further tribute to them a little later in my remarks.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mel Stride: I give way to my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood).

John Redwood: I am very grateful to the Secretary of State, who is right to point out the excellent record on employment, which is a great strength of our economy. Is he, like me, a bit worried about the fall in self-employment more recently, and will he have a word with the Chancellor? I think some of that is to do with changes in tax rules that now impede the self-employed in getting contracts from companies.

Mel Stride: My right hon. Friend makes a really important point, and this Government are absolutely committed to encouraging self-employment. I think it is fair to point out that in the past some apparent growth in self-employment has been due to individuals incorporating themselves for tax purposes, and it may be that more recently some of that effect has started to unwind. However, I totally agree with my right hon. Friend, and I am sure the Chancellor has heard his words, because he has made the point many times before that it is really important that we support the self-employed.

Abena Oppong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): I have noted down some of the things that the Secretary of State has said the Government have done. I do not see anything about what the Government are doing to

tackle the shameful waiting list for Access to Work support. Will he tell us what the Government are doing right now to rectify that problem, and will he admit that the Government have let people down?

Mel Stride: The hon. Lady points to an issue that is a focus within the Department. We have taken on more staff, and we are in the process of taking on still more staff. We are also looking at processes and, in the longer term, examining processes that will increase the rapidity of supply of that particular set of support.

I will now turn to where the motion is clearly so wrong.

Geraint Davies: A moment ago, the Secretary of State claimed that 500,000 more people are in payroll employment than before the pandemic. Am I not right in saying that the Office for National Statistics says that 400,000 fewer people are in overall employment, because the payroll does not include the massive reduction in self-employment that he has so briskly avoided noticing? Will he now set the record straight: 400,000 fewer people are now in work overall than before the pandemic?

Mel Stride: I think it is the hon. Gentleman who has misunderstood what has been said here. There is a distinction between payroll employment, which is clearly those who are on PAYE employed by an employer, and somebody who is self-employed, which is a totally different matter. The statistic, or the fact that I presented, was simply that the level of payroll employment is currently at a record high in this country.

John Redwood: I want to clarify that I think there is an issue with capacity in things such as plumbing, jobbing building and that kind of thing. We are short of capacity there, and we need to look at why those trades have been afflicted by some of this decline.

Mel Stride: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right, and that is why we have stood up important programmes, such as sector-based work programmes, and it is why skills and apprenticeships are so important—[*Interruption*]
—as are skills bootcamps, as an hon. Friend reminds me.

This motion is wrong on unemployment and employment, but it is also wrong on economic inactivity, because while it is true that economic inactivity rose during the pandemic, it is also true that, with the notable exception of the United States, in most countries it has gone back down to broadly where it was before the pandemic. That has not happened in the UK. It is not true to say that working-age inactivity rates have not been on a long-term decline. They have in this country, and the trajectory has been downwards. The level of economic inactivity in the UK is lower than in the United States, France and Italy. It is below the EU average, and it is below the average of OECD countries.

While there has been some softening in recent months on the level of economic inactivity in the United Kingdom, I accept that there is a lot more work to be done, which is why the Prime Minister has asked me to work across Government to review how we approach these issues, particularly in respect of disability, the long-term sick and those who are over 50 and have retired early.

Before I come to those cohorts, let me state clearly what lies at the heart of this Government's success on unemployment and employment: the key Conservative belief that we should make work pay. The universal credit

roll-out has been a huge success, despite the fact that the Leader of the Opposition suggested as recently as 2021 that it should be scrapped. We have enhanced universal credit by improving the taper, dropping it from 63% to 55%. We have increased the work allowance by £500. In terms of making work pay, for the very lowest paid we will be increasing the national living wage by 9.7% this April. We have stood up a number of important programmes that have helped to encourage people into work, among them Restart and our youth offer.

Chris Stephens: The Secretary of State says that the route out of poverty is work and making work pay, but the example I gave to the shadow Minister is one that came up when I was on the Work and Pensions Committee, of a lone parent not taking additional hours because they would lose state support. What are the Government proposing to fix those sorts of issues?

Mel Stride: I think the main point—I do not know the specific example to which the hon. Gentleman refers—is that under UC the whole driving principle is that work always pays. As someone gets into work, the benefit is tapered away, but none the less work always pays. That is why we are looking, in part at least, at these very low levels of unemployment and very high levels of paid employment.

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): The Secretary of State says that work always pays, so why is the clawback rate for universal credit so high? The effective rate of tax for every pound someone earns when on universal credit is about 73%—far beyond what any of us pay in here, and we are in the top 5% of earners in this country. Why does he think it is fair that someone on universal credit should be paying an effective rate that is so high, given the clawback?

Mel Stride: It is true that at certain levels of income, marginal tax rates are very high. To improve that situation, we have reduced the taper from 63% to 55%. I would like us to go still further, and if we had the finances we would almost reduce it altogether, but that is not the reality of where we are. None the less, a substantive point remains that people are always better off under UC if they are in work, within the UC benefit environment.

Angela Richardson (Guildford) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Labour party has a shambolic record on making work pay in this country, not least because 1.4 million people spent most of the 2000s trapped in out-of-work benefits under Labour?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and the 1.4 million figure is depressingly true. Under the last Labour Government, over 1 million people were parked on long-term benefits. Of course, when we talk about unemployment, we know that every Labour Government in history have left unemployment higher at the end of their term in office than it was at the beginning.

Margaret Greenwood: I very much appreciate the Secretary of State giving way. He was saying that he had been tasked to work across Government on tackling this issue. Adult education has a really important role to play in building people's confidence—it can be particularly important for people who, perhaps in midlife, have had to give up work to look after a family member who was ill or whatever, and later find themselves struggling to

[Margaret Greenwood]

get back into work and having really lost their confidence—yet the Government, as part of what they call their reorientating the vision for non-qualification provision in adult education, have plans that could actually remove some of the very non-vocational courses that people who may feel daunted at the prospect of having to go for a high qualification would none the less get. Could he please speak to his colleagues to ask them to look at this issue again?

Mel Stride: If the hon. Lady would drop me a line about the point she raises, I would be very happy to raise that specifically and to consider it myself as well.

Could I turn to economic inactivity, and to disability and sickness? This Government have been acting, and we will come forward with further measures very shortly, which I am sure will be of interest to the right hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth). For example, our Work and Health programme has now been extended to September 2024, bringing an extra 100,000 people into support. We have rolled out health adjustment passports to facilitate more structured conversations between those seeking work, those seeking to employ them and employees in jobcentres. We have been co-locating employment advisers alongside therapists in NHS talking therapies. For those with autism, which is often a very considerable barrier to employment, we have funded no less than 28 different initiatives across local authorities.

Charlotte Nichols: I am very interested in what the Secretary of State says about the links between poor mental health and economic inactivity, but one thing I find particularly surprising in this context is the fact that the Government—the Home Office in particular—are specifically blocking research into new therapies and new medicines. Would he perhaps have a word with the Home Office, and get it to reschedule the drugs that we could be looking at for curing people with such conditions?

Mel Stride: The hon. Lady is tempting me to plunge into the Department of Health. I certainly hear what she has to say, but let me make a general point about mental health. The most important thing—and, to be fair, the right hon. Member for Leicester South made this point—is that we intervene at the point in the health journey that is as close to the labour market as possible and that we do so as early as possible. What we know is that the longer we allow those conditions to develop and persist, the more difficult it becomes to bring those individuals back into the workforce. That is very much at the heart of the approach I am taking in the work I am carrying out at the moment.

We are also providing more support to those who are waiting in the work capability assessment queue, promoting Disability Confident among employers and promoting Access to Work with disability employment advisers up and down the country. All of that has led to 1 million more disabled people in work since 2017, meeting our 1 million target five years early.

Looking to the future, the White Paper probably contains lots of ideas on health and disability that the right hon. Member for Leicester South has pre-empted and pre-judged—perhaps he has come to similar

conclusions to those that we have already come to but are unable to speak about at the moment—so he should be a little patient.

On those in early retirement, who have increased significantly in recent times, we have taken action: with a £20 million fund we substantially increased the number of one-on-one sessions in jobcentres; we focused on skills, rolling out 50-plus champions across jobcentres up and down the country; our midlife guarantee ensured that those in that age group are confident in seeking work, understand their potential skills gaps and, critically, have looked closely at finances so that they know whether they can survive comfortably through to the end of their lives or perhaps would benefit from taking on some work. I will have more to say about the over-50s in time.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con): Members of the House often hold jobs fairs, which are too often focused on the unemployed and youth sectors—I hope to mention my own jobs fair later. Does my right hon. Friend agree that there is also a need to have jobs fairs to encourage the elderly—by which I mean the over-50s, so I am elderly by that definition—to get back into work where it is suitable for them?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The constituency and part of the country that he represents has quite a preponderance of more elderly residents, and there is certainly scope for over-50s jobs fairs. Indeed, there have been successful examples of those up and down the country, sometimes involving support from the Department for Work and Pensions.

I am aware of time, Madam Deputy Speaker, and of finishing by about twenty to six, so let me turn and say something about work coaches. These are truly brilliant people. They are people who know that work is not just a job; they understand that work is about improved health outcomes and self-esteem, and a greater sense of pride. They know it is about not just individual growth, but growing the economy, which in turn allows us to provide more tax revenues to fund those public services that we all know are the hallmark of a civilised society. Our work coaches are right at the centre of all that, and I want them to do even more to support people. I want to reward them for the work they do, where they are particularly successful.

I have laid before the House a written ministerial statement setting out how greater support will be provided to claimants, with two weeks of additional intensive support at the 13-week and 26-week stage of the universal credit journey. That will include more one-to-one support, as well as support in groups. I also want to reward job centres and those individuals who exceed the aspirational targets that we have rightly been setting. I have been carrying out that work through a series of pilots. We started with four, and yesterday I announced that that is expanding to 60. I am confident that the innovation, approach, support and confidence that we are giving our work coaches in those pilots will lead to even better outcomes and an enhancement of even more lives.

Far from being complacent, this is a Government of powerful interventions around covid, and more recently the cost of living crisis, to support people up and down the country. It is a Government of large-scale ambitious programmes to get people into work, and allow them to progress within work. It is a Government who are about

creative thinking and innovation, piloting new approaches so that we can ensure we are even more successful in the future. As we met the challenges of the past, so we will continue to meet those challenges in the future.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Before I call the SNP spokesperson, colleagues will see we have a limited amount of time. I intend to start with a five-minute time limit. I hope if we keep to five minutes everybody will be able to get in. If I need to take it down further I will, but I hope I will not need to.

5.40 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I will try to be concise in my remarks to allow as many Members in as possible. The SNP will be supporting the motion.

We heard from the Secretary of State some of the old buzz phrases—I had my bingo card ready—such as “work is the best route out of poverty” and so on. I, too, am waiting for him to answer the questions from the right hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth). We will see if the Minister’s response gives me those. I want to make a number of points, some of which were touched on by the Secretary of State.

I and a number of hon. Members have a real concerns about the ways the Government are trying to force people into work and to force them to increase their hours. There are also concerns about the current sanctions regime. We have had Westminster Hall debates fairly recently, to which the Minister responded. The number of sanctions being issued is spiralling. My understanding is that the only time there is a reduction in the number of sanctions is when DWP staff are taking industrial action. Those who face being sanctioned should not have to wait for industrial action in order not to be scared of getting a sanction.

I agree with the Secretary of State about the great role that DWP staff are undertaking. I hope he will consider that and offer them a decent pay rise. Even in his own Department there are an alarming number of staff who, in a survey with their trade union, indicate that they have to use food banks. That is a ridiculous situation. It is also ridiculous that DWP staff themselves are saying they cannot take on additional hours because they would then lose the benefits they are being paid by the state. I hope Ministers will listen on that point. During the Work and Pensions Committee inquiry into childcare costs—I was a member of the Committee until fairly recently—there were examples of lone parents who had to stick to the number of hours they worked. They were unable to increase their hours because that would have meant they lost universal credit payments and other benefits. That should not be happening.

On the very real concerns about the sanctions regime, it is deeply concerning that people not only get sanctioned but lose their associated cost of living payments. That only puts people into more poverty and should not happen. There is very clear evidence that sanctions do not work. The Institute for Fiscal Studies—not necessarily a friend of the SNP; it is often quoted by Conservative Members—said in a recent report that the sanctions policy currently produces

“fiscal savings indistinguishable from zero”,

yet we are still subjecting people to untold anxiety and harm.

The Secretary of State touched on the pilot. There are a number of questions that I hope Ministers can answer regarding the concerns about the pilot. The DWP—I nearly said the DUP; I’ve made that mistake before—is now starting a pilot that forces thousands of UC claimants into compulsory attendance at jobcentres 10 times over a two-week period. If someone has been a claimant for 13 weeks and fails to attend, they could be sanctioned and risk losing their benefits. That would plunge often very vulnerable people deeper into poverty. I understand that the jobcentre innovation pilot is to be introduced in 60 jobcentres, with the potential to impact thousands of claimants.

The Department has been clear that there are no extra staff to deliver the additional work, which means that yet more pressure will be heaped on the overworked, underpaid and highly stressed civil servants working in the jobcentres. The Public and Commercial Services Union believes that that will increase the risk of poverty and make claiming benefits more difficult. Martin Cavanagh, the PCS DWP group president, said:

“Our members will see through this pilot for what it is – a government hellbent on making it more difficult for people to claim benefits and which will increase the risk of poverty for those customers who fall foul of this pilot. Asking more customers to travel more often into jobcentres does nothing to help our staff or their workloads and does nothing to help the customers find the work that they need.”

It is important that Ministers respond to those concerns from the Public and Commercial Services Union.

Disability employment increased during the pandemic, but it now seems to be reducing. I think that one of the reasons is that during the pandemic people were able to utilise technology to work from home. As we have eased out of the pandemic, we have seen a massive move to force people back into offices, factories and all those places. When the Government look at disability employment, I would like them to incentivise employers to help workers work from home, because that would certainly help and be of benefit to those with disabilities. That comes up time and again when the Work and Pensions Committee looks at those issues, and I hope that Ministers will look seriously at it.

Rising insecure work and in-work poverty need to be tackled. I am concerned when I hear Ministers justifying sanctions in cases where people refuse zero-hours contracts. Zero-hours contracts do not suit everyone. I hope that the Department will look at that again. If someone refuses a zero-hours contract job, it is because it does not suit them; it does not suit everyone to be in that position. We have waited over six years for the Government to introduce an Employment Bill to address the issues around insecure work, such as people in insecure contracts being texted by their employer and being told that the first one who arrives at work gets the shift. That is the sort of practice that I hope Government Ministers will condemn, and I hope that they are working with colleagues to eliminate such practices, because they are wrong and are increasing insecure work and in-work poverty.

I hope that Ministers will liaise on some of those important issues. We need to look at how to be a fair work nation with fair work policies, so that people will be attracted back into the workplace. I hope that Ministers will look at and respond to my points. I will leave it there to allow other Members to speak.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Due to the fact that there has been a withdrawal from the debate, the good news is that we will start with a six-minute limit on speeches.

5.49 pm

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con): I am glad to have the opportunity to speak in this debate, not only because it highlights the Government's proud record of increasing labour market activity, but because it raises the fundamental problem with Labour's political philosophy: its historical and financial handcuffing to the union movement.

Unions are undoubtedly a good thing. In the early 19th century, if they had not been formed, they should have been. At a time of social immobility, they dealt with a huge and important social injustice: the dislocation between the bargaining power of the master and that of the servant—we just have to use the language of the time to make the case that there was a huge imbalance in bargaining position and therefore a need for unions. Times have changed, however. Nowadays, information on pay and opportunities is universal: I could go online today and look at employment opportunities in Bogotá as well as those in Bridgend. At a time of full functional employment, which is what we benefit from at the moment, other options for staff are available as well as combined bargaining.

The role of unions has moved away from the proud position in which they began. They are now more focused on the rights and privileges of members. In some cases, although not all, they are focused on things like the defence of anti-competitive Spanish practices or the prevention of increases in productivity and of modern work practices unless they are linked to increases in pay. All those things harm the economy.

It is perfectly rational, of course. If I were a London tube driver, would I join the union? Of course I would! Through union control, its members have got salaries of between £55,000 and £60,000 a year and 43 days of holiday. But does that help the economy? Is it good for society as a whole? No.

Chris Stephens: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way, but—with as much respect as I can muster—I say to him that it is not a bad thing that trade union-organised workplaces have higher pay than non-unionised workplaces. Surely the fact that people have more money means that they can spend money in the economy and help the private sector.

Jerome Mayhew: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. The question is: at what cost does this come and who pays the price? It is the young, the unemployed and the old who are outside the club of unionisation. They are the ones who pay the price, and the evidence is in the data.

It is an extraordinary fact that every Labour Government in history have ended up destroying employment, leaving more people out of work than when they came into power. The figures hide the real cost of Labour being in hock to the unions. I mean “in hock” literally: since 2010, it has received £142 million. That is excluding individual contributions to Opposition right hon. and hon. Members, and not even mentioning the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner), so actually the number is a lot higher.

Raising employment barriers skews what would otherwise be a much more sensible employment policy for the Opposition. The costs are paid by those outside the club. Look at youth employment. In 2010, Labour left office with youth unemployment at about 20%. Right now, even after a global pandemic, youth unemployment is at 11.3%—almost half. Look at the long-term unemployed. In the 2000s, as we have already heard, Labour left about 1.4 million people unemployed for longer than 12 months. Today, the figure is 270,000, roughly a quarter of the number under the terrible record of Labour. Look at the people who are harder to employ—those, perhaps, with disabilities. Under this Government, there are 1.3 million more people with disabilities in employment than before 2016. That is the proud record of this Government. This Government do not pontificate about pay and employment; they get on with creating a dynamic labour market, supporting those most in need, not the union paymasters.

We have created a labour market not just by removing barriers to employment, but by having a benefits system that always makes work pay: the universal credit system, the destruction of which the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) made the key plank of his 2019 election manifesto. Labour Members all fought the last election on the basis that they wanted to get rid of universal credit, and the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) continued that policy. In October 2020, when he was already leader of the Labour party, he said that “in the long term” universal credit needed to be replaced

“because... it traps people in poverty.”

However, given what we have heard from the hon. Member opposite, that now appears to be Labour policy.

Jonathan Ashworth: I am the right hon. Member.

Jerome Mayhew: Right hon. Member: he is quite correct. It seems that we agree on the concept behind universal credit. When did he experience that damascene conversion?

The Government are providing extra help, not for the unions but for the young, the disabled and those who are termed “the old”—meaning those over the age of 50, which, in my view, is hardly old. For the young, we have halved youth unemployment. We have the kickstart scheme, which the right hon. Gentleman criticised earlier, saying that it did not help 250,000 people into employment. However, it did help 160,000 into employment, including many of my constituents. As for the disabled, 1.3 million more have been employed since 2017. For the old, we have the age-friendly employer pledge and the 50PLUS champions. This is a work in progress, but it shows the direction of travel of this dynamic Government.

More widely, we are boosting support for 600,000 people on universal credit by securing greater access to job coaches. It is this Government who have doubled the number of job coaches, increasing it by 13,500 to give more help to unemployed people wishing to get back into work. I have seen this lately in my constituency. The Jobcentre Plus in Fakenham does amazing work, and the staff say the job coaches are wonderful and do a fantastic job.

There is a great deal to do. There is, for instance, post-covid recovery. We are experiencing a reduction in economic activity, and that position needs to be improved, but I trust that this Government—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order.

5.56 pm

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): More and more people are being pushed out of work owing to ill health: 2.5 million working-age people are now economically inactive owing to long-term sickness. Given the current stalling living standards and the cost of living crisis, it is unsurprising that many of those people want a job, but the current system is preventing them from re-entering the labour market by not providing the right support, and that is happening on multiple fronts.

The aim of the Restart scheme was to help people who were long-term unemployed as a result of the covid pandemic to get back into work, but a recent evaluation by the National Audit Office found that the programme would support fewer than half the anticipated number of people but would cost 35% more per person. Meanwhile, the work capability assessment regime has disincentivised some people with disabilities from trying to get back into employment because of the risk of losing their benefits when a reassessment of personal independence payment is triggered. I understand that there has been a revision of operational instructions to mitigate that, but the problem has not been eliminated for many people in receipt of the benefit.

As we heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth), there are also problems with the functionality of the work capability assessment process. Not only are many cases overturned on appeal, but the process itself can be drawn out and difficult. One of my constituents has been waiting for her assessment since April last year, which means that she has been receiving a lower rate of universal credit until it is completed. She has had her appointments cancelled three times, apparently because of lost paperwork. That is unacceptable.

Another constituent told me about her experience of being assessed through the work capability assessment regime for her universal credit. She is a registered nurse, who is currently unable to work owing to health problems. She told me this about one call that took place as part of that assessment process:

“I came off the call in tears and my daughter was very concerned about my state of mind after this call. I was made to feel that I was not worthy of these benefits and made to feel I was claiming something that I shouldn't be getting. The way I was treated makes me very concerned for other people not strong enough mentally to deal with this abuse of power.”

A third constituent recently told me:

“I feel like I am being made to beg for help.”

It is critical that people are not penalised for trying to obtain paid work. Someone claiming personal independence payments who get a job that does not work out within a year should be guaranteed the ability to return to the exact benefits they were on before, with no fresh benefit assessments required, and, crucially, there must be improved targeted support for people with long-term mental and physical health problems. The current system is trapping people out of the workplace when hundreds of thousands of people are in need of a stable income, so I hope the Secretary of State will agree to reform the disability benefit assessment, as Labour is proposing to do. If not, can he explain how he can listen to the experience of my constituents and defend the current system?

Unpaid carers are another group who have become locked out of the labour market. Although the majority of carers are of working age, many carers have had to

reduce their hours at work or quit their jobs entirely because of their caring responsibilities. Carers UK has estimated that nearly 2 million people in paid employment become unpaid carers every year, but a survey by Carers UK found that two thirds of unpaid carers had to give up opportunities at work because of their caring. Women were much more likely to be affected, as were people giving more hours of unpaid care. In the same survey, a quarter of unpaid carers said that they needed better support to return to, or maintain, paid work.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): I know the work that the hon. Lady has done in relation to unpaid carers and the support she has given to my private Member's Bill on carers' leave. Does she agree that one of the ways of encouraging people back into work is changing the carer's allowance? It creates a cliff edge that disincentivises unpaid carers from entering employment. Does she agree that it needs to be changed?

Barbara Keeley: That is something that Carers UK has campaigned on repeatedly. It certainly does need looking at.

The Government have failed time and again to provide the necessary support for carers. I think I am right in saying that the Secretary of State, when he was talking about his review, did not mention carers. Again, that is disappointing. The carers action plan for 2018 to 2020 was shamefully void of funding provision and ambition for support for carers, and it pales in comparison to the national strategy for carers that Labour published in 2008. The last Labour Government pledged £255 million for new commitments to support carers. That included £150 million to increase significantly the amount of money provided by central Government for breaks from caring. Such breaks can be a lifeline for carers and allow them to continue in employment. That funding for breaks appears to have disappeared.

Labour also committed funding to enable carers to combine paid employment with their caring role and to re-enter the labour market after their caring role had finished, through flexible working opportunities and increased training provision. There was a commitment to working with Jobcentre Plus to deliver improved information and establish a training programme for carers. In contrast, the Government's carers action plan merely promised to consider dedicated employment rights for carers, and said that the Government would work to increase opportunities for carers returning to the private sector. Those measures are woefully inadequate and demonstrate a failure to support this country's 10 million carers.

Unpaid carers are repeatedly forgotten by this Government, despite the enormous social and economic contributions they make, so will the Minister—and indeed the Secretary of State, when he is back at his place—work with colleagues across Government to ensure that the benefit system works for, rather than against, people making claims? Will he commit to improving the current regime, which sees too many unpaid carers and too many people in receipt of disability benefits being locked out of employment?

6.3 pm

Angela Richardson (Guildford) (Con): This Government rightly recognise that increasing workforce activity is an essential part of growth, as we work hard to halve

[Angela Richardson]

inflation this year. The labour market has been recovering since the pandemic and we have seen the employment rate rising across the UK. The employment rate in December was 0.2 percentage points higher than in the previous three-month period, and the number of payrolled employees increased by 102,000 in January this year, to 30 million. However, in recent years, we have seen a rise in economic inactivity, including in my Guildford constituency. I am pleased to see that this is now falling as our economic recovery continues. The latest figures from the Office for National Statistics show that the economic inactivity rate across the UK decreased by 0.3 percentage points to 21.4% in October to December 2022.

This Government have been reviewing labour market participation across our economy and are looking for ways to support, encourage and incentivise those who are currently economically inactive to re-join the labour market. It is right that we provide the necessary support to encourage those who may have long-term sickness or caring responsibilities, or are over the age of 50 to return to the workplace when they can. We have seen a rise in people aged 50 to 64 leaving the workforce, accounting for the largest increase among all age groups since the start of the pandemic. I welcome the dedicated 50PLUS champions put in place by this Government, backed by £22 million of funding, to improve bespoke support for those in that age group.

The pandemic also had a significant impact on the mental health of people across our country, and mental health represents an important factor for many economically inactive people. I welcome the measures that the Government are taking to provide support where it is needed in this area. First, they are rolling out an NHS England mental health support service nationally, backed with £120 million, providing mental health support together with employment advice. It will help those already in work to stay in work and help those temporarily out of work to return to the workplace. Alongside that, a £6.4 million investment in a new online service to help employers to support employees experiencing difficulties with their mental health is welcome.

This Government are taking the right steps to reduce economic inactivity. I look forward to seeing the positive outcomes of those measures.

6.5 pm

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): The argument I want to make today is that having a properly functioning social care system, and far more flexibility at work for families who look after elderly or disabled relatives, is essential for ensuring people in their 50s and 60s can work, and that that is especially true for women.

The latest census data, out in the last month, shows there are now at least 5 million unpaid family carers in England and Wales. The highest proportion of unpaid carers in any age group are women aged 50 to 59. One in five of all women in their 50s are now caring for an older, sick or disabled relative—a quite staggering figure. Not far behind are women aged 60 to 64: 18.7% now have caring responsibilities.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I am sure you will agree that women in their 50s and 60s are in the prime of their life. We have huge experience at work and in bringing up our families. But too many women in this age group

struggle to hold down paid work with their caring responsibilities. In total, 2.6 million unpaid carers have to give up work or reduce hours because they cannot get the help they need to look after their loved ones. They lose their income, businesses lose their talents and the economy loses their contribution. Where on earth is the sense in that?

Since the covid-19 pandemic, as hon. Members have mentioned, some 350,000 more people aged over 50 are economically inactive, with research by the Health Foundation and others showing that ill health is the single largest reason. However, the second largest reason is looking after family and the home. If we want our economy firing on all cylinders, if we want growth at the top of the G7 league table, instead of languishing at the bottom, as we have seen after 13 years of this Government, we must use the talents of everyone in our country. For people in their 50s and 60s, that means dealing with the issue of care and the crisis in our care system.

Labour's plan for tackling the issue has two main strands. First, we will bring forward a new deal for care workers to ensure that frontline staff get the pay, training, terms and conditions they deserve, so we tackle the terrible recruitment and retention problems that have led to a staggering 165,000 shortages in social care—even more than in the NHS. That would make the single biggest difference to the care system, which in turn would make the single biggest difference to people in their 50s and 60s, who cannot hold down jobs because they also need to care for an elderly or disabled loved one.

Secondly, Labour will help unpaid family carers better balance work and family life, by bringing in the right to flexible working from day one, and by having a proper system of care leave, just as we have parental leave for new families. Just as importantly, we will work with businesses and trade unions to ensure that family-friendly working for those caring for older and disabled relatives moves to the top of the agenda because, as many good businesses already know, it helps to improve recruitment and retention. It increases productivity, too.

When the welfare state was created, average life expectancy was 63. It is now 80, and one in four babies born today is set to live to 100. Back then, women stayed at home to look after their families. Now we care for our loved ones and we go out to work. We live in the century of ageing and, as we all live for longer, we will need to work and care for longer. We need to modernise our welfare state to put social care on an equal footing with the NHS, and we need to ensure that care as a whole—childcare as well as social care—is as much a part of our economic infrastructure as the roads and railways. That is what families want, it is what businesses and our economy demand, and it is essential for women's equality. That is what a future Labour Government will deliver.

6.10 pm

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): Women make up nearly half of the UK workforce, and keeping them in the workforce is vital for productivity, for the economy and for women's self-belief and financial stability, but there are huge barriers for many women to overcome. There are an estimated 13 million perimenopausal and menopausal women across the UK, of whom only 14% are receiving treatment. Far too many women are suffering symptoms without the right support, and that is having a huge impact across society—nowhere more

so than in the workplace, with research last year showing that one in 10 women are leaving their job and one in four are reducing their hours. These are loyal and experienced employees, and the impact on business and society is enormous.

Women who have worked all their lives are suddenly overwhelmed by the symptoms and are forced to walk away from their career. Not only will they potentially claim benefits for the first time, in their 40s and 50s, but they are storing up problems for further down the line. Depending on how many years they have worked, their national insurance contributions may well not be sufficient to claim a full state pension, so many will need to rely on pension credit when they reach pensionable age. Although these benefits should absolutely be available to those who need them, better awareness among employers to support women early on and to help them to remain in the workplace would, without question, reduce the number of women leaving their job.

That is why I am delighted that, today, the Labour party made a commitment to enhance menopause awareness in the workplace when we are in government. This announcement shows that, on this side of the House, we truly understand that keeping women in work, especially through the menopausal and perimenopausal years, not only helps women and employers but helps the economy. It is essential that we do more.

6.13 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): A pilot starts today that will force thousands of universal credit claimants to attend a jobcentre 10 times in two weeks. To put that in context, a claimant living in Shotts will have to get on a bus to Motherwell, costing £3.50 a day, to attend these meetings. They run the risk of being sanctioned if they do not do it, and that is as we are seeing the highest cost of living increases in 40 years. I find it hard to see the sense in this. People who are sanctioned will fall further back, as they will be able to claim less and less from the UK benefits system. It does not make sense. Many times in this Chamber I have heard Ministers and Government Back Benchers say that the only way out of poverty is work, but it is not when someone is on a zero-hours contract, earning the minimum wage and that does not cover their costs.

It also does not work when someone is further sanctioned for not getting on a bus that costs £3.50 a day, which comes out of money they do not really have, to attend the local jobcentre, where there are no additional staff to help them into work because the Government are not going to put more workers behind this. All this comes at a time when the Public and Commercial Services Union is already out on strike because of the workload that its members face in trying to get people into work. None of this makes sense in the world in which my constituents live and in respect of the benefits that they claim. In my opinion, and that of many of the folk in my party, it is criminal that this Government refuse to give young people the same benefits as other workers. If we want to get people into work and keep them in work, they need to be well paid for it and they need to be fit to work.

That leads me to some of the ridiculous things that happen to folk who are disabled, where one of the worst problems we have is on statutory sick pay. Many disabled people, having fought through the Access to Work legislation and trying to get things made easier for them

to attend work, find that sometimes they cannot work because they have become unwell because of their disability. Instead of being able to keep in work, they find that statutory sick pay, at £96-something a week, going up to a whole £109 a week, for only 28 weeks, is ridiculous. The waiting time that these people are forced to keep to in order to get SSP makes things even more difficult, so what do they do? They leave work because they can see no way forward. This has to be urgently addressed.

The Government could naturally make things easier by applying a fair work policy, as they do in Scotland, and attaching it to Government contracts to ensure that anyone who is given a job that is funded by Government is paid a reasonable wage. As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) said, if people are paid more, they spend more and the economy benefits. This is not rocket science, but pure common sense.

At this point, I want to examine what this Government have done. They have never brought forward the stuff that they said they would do on workers' rights. They have never brought forward what they said they would do in an employment Bill. They have never done what they promised for quite a long time. They have had consultations, which they are very good at, but they do not carry through. In terms of one such consultation, I am really looking forward to the health and disability White Paper and the overhaul of the work capability assessment. Disabled people must be treated with dignity, fairness and respect, as we do in Scotland under the new Social Security Scotland work.

A constituent of mine was diagnosed as terminally ill four years ago, and was hauled in for a work assessment and practically asked why she was still here and whether she thought that she would die soon; this was in order for her to keep going on her personal independence payment assessment. I know that does not relate exactly to what is on the Order Paper, but I have questioned Ministers on it. This Government need to get their act together and treat people who want to work with dignity, fairness and respect, as we do in Scotland, and make it easier for them to work.

6.19 pm

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): When we look at the financial reality for millions of people up and down the country, it is clear to see why we are struggling to maintain a workforce in Britain today. The system for working people is broken and urgently needs to be fixed. We can take the cost and availability of childcare as just one example.

The Women's Budget Group has highlighted that 1.7 million women are prevented from taking up hours of paid work, which they would like to do, due to childcare issues. That is almost £30 billion lost to our economy every year. We know that this does not show the full picture: many grandparents are helping out, cutting down their working hours, or leaving work entirely to support their children and grandchildren. This is not just about childcare, but about other caring responsibilities, which we know fall disproportionately on women. With a broken childcare and social care system, is it any wonder that in the north-east there has been a 15% rise in women between the ages of 50 to 64 falling out of the workforce since 2020? That is not to mention the increase in new mums dropping out of the workforce, with 29% of those nationally dropping out of work due to family commitments.

[Catherine McKinnell]

I am pleased that Labour's shadow Education Secretary has spoken so passionately about the need to transform our childcare into a modern system that supports families and allows parents more flexibility to re-enter the workforce. This system needs to be fixed. We also know that women are struggling at work due to perimenopausal and menopausal symptoms, and that they do not get the help or support they need. Last year, Research Without Barriers warned that up to 1 million women in the UK could be forced out of their jobs because their employers are failing to support them as they go through the menopause. As my brilliant hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) said, that is bad news for women, bad news for businesses, and bad news for the economy. So I, too, welcome the proposals set out by the Labour party today for greater support for women experiencing menopause.

Sadly, our amazing but overwhelmed NHS has been left unable to do its part to help people get back into work. Last year, the Bank of England's chief economist warned that lengthening NHS waiting lists were a factor in fewer people being in work. The over-50s lifestyle study by the Office for National Statistics found that 18% of adults aged 50 to 65 who have left work since the start of 2020 did so due to waiting for medical treatment. That is nearly one in five, with this figure rising to 35% of people who said that they left their previous job for a health-related condition. That is not to mention that these people are often waiting in pain, unable to live their lives to the full. This is damaging the economy too. It is shocking and it needs to be resolved. That is why expanding the NHS workforce is so crucial. The inability of the Government to get a handle on these waiting lists and delays is not only bad for health, but impacting our economy, and we need those workers back in the workforce.

We are seeing this workforce crisis not just in the NHS, but in social care and across many businesses, and especially in hospitality in my area. Newcastle's famous Geordie night-time economy is well known, but the sector is struggling with the recruitment and retention of staff. The NewcastleGateshead Initiative found that, in 2022, there were 26,000 unique job postings listed in hospitality, 30% of which were in Newcastle. In its most recent tourism and hospitality business survey, staffing was raised as the biggest challenge by 67% of respondents. On top of covid recovery, soaring energy bills and rising food cost pressures, these labour force issues are holding businesses, our cities and our regions back.

Even those who are in work are falling into dire straits due to the crippling cost of living. A constituent contacted me this week. She said that both parents are in work. They have four children and their mortgage has gone up by £300 a month, on top of the increase in their energy bills. Sadly, they are far from alone, with potentially thousands of people in my constituency being penalised by the mortgage premium that we have seen since the disastrous mini-Budget. Add to that food inflation, which this morning reached 17.1%, adding a further £811 hit to family finances. My constituent described how, due to the Government's economic failure, "good, hard-working people are being crippled."

Those are her words, not mine, and the Government need to listen.

For too long we have been held back by successive Conservative Governments' mishandling of the economy, mismanagement of public services and failure to invest in our people and communities. What kind of business thinks that it can fail to invest in its people and its infrastructure but still turn a profit after 13 years? None. We have immense potential as a country, but too many people are left crumbling under the current strain. Whether in childcare, social care or NHS waiting times, that all has a knock-on impact on our economy.

The Centre for Cities warns that it is even worse than the figures show: 185,000 people across the north-east are part of a hidden unemployment figure—they are not included in the numbers—because they are not actively looking for work. For too long people have lived under low pay, low productivity and a lack of investment. It is time to put an end to people struggling to get by.

6.25 pm

James Murray (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op): Yesterday, the Leader of the Opposition and the shadow Chancellor set out details of what would be Labour's first mission in government. The goals of that mission are clear and unashamedly ambitious: to secure the highest sustained growth in the G7, with good jobs and productivity growth in every part of our country.

We know that continuing on the path on which this Government have set our economy will cost people dear. If we continue on that path, we will be poorer than Poland by 2030 and poorer than Romania by 2040. We are being left behind, and people are feeling the impact as they find themselves worse off in their daily lives because of low economic growth under the Conservatives. That is why our mission to achieve the highest sustained economic growth in the G7 is so important: to ensure that everyone in our country is better off.

In setting out the details of our plan, we have made it clear that economic credibility and stability are the bedrock of our approach. Under our plan, we would seize new opportunities for Britain, including catalytic public investment through our green prosperity plan. Under our plan, we would fix the problems that hold back economic growth across the UK by supporting people of all ages and in all places in the country to develop the skills that they need to fulfil their potential and contribute to a growing economy. It is crucial that everyone in the UK can play their part in growing our economy, as my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall) set out in her excellent speech. That is why this debate is such an important part of our approach to the economic future of our country.

When it comes to ensuring that everyone can play their part, it is clear that something is not right when we have near-record vacancies while hundreds of thousands of people who want to work are not being given the support they need to do so. It cannot be right that more than 1 million people are out of work, even though they want jobs, while employers are struggling to fill more than 1 million vacancies. We know that is the result of rising economic inactivity and the Government's failure to respond to it.

The situation has become more acute in recent years. There are now half a million more economically inactive people of working age than there were before the pandemic. Across London, which includes my Ealing

North constituency, 22,400 more people aged 50 to 64 became economically inactive between the start of the pandemic and last September. As greater numbers of older people have been leaving the labour market, we also know that many people are becoming economically inactive as a result of ill health or mental ill health. Long-term sickness has risen fastest in younger age groups, with the biggest increase being for mental health. We all know that the longer a young person is left without work because of ill health, the greater the risk to their life prospects. That is why we need a Government who will help those who want to work but do not have the support that they need.

As the shadow Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth), set out, we have a plan to reform the way in which people receive help to get back into work. We would reform employment support and the work capability assessments regime, and fix the Access to Work scheme. We would ensure that there is help for the over-50s, so that those who have recently left the labour market have support and guidance to help them back into work. We would ensure that there is specialist help for those with long-term ill health by building on targeted programmes, including those that join up with the NHS.

Crucially, we would focus on locally delivered services by giving local partnerships the freedom to decide how best to design services, with a focus on tailored support that meets the needs of the local area. Under our plans, combined authorities and local areas would take control of employment support budgets. We would move away from rigid national contracting and ensure that the resources needed to help people find work are closer to the communities that we serve.

Those are our clear principles for reform. It is clear that reform is urgently needed, as the Government already spend billions on employment support programmes that are failing. Making these reforms happen and supporting people of all ages and in all places to contribute to a growing economy is a crucial part of our mission. As the Learning and Work Institute has estimated, increasing employment to the highest in the G7 over the next decade should boost our economy by £23 billion, improve the public finances by £8 billion and raise household finances by an average of £830 a year. That is why today's debate is so important. By following our plans, the Government could get Britain back to work, help to grow the economy after more than a decade of stagnation and make sure people in every part of our country are better off.

6.30 pm

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): It is a pleasure to contribute to the debate and to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North (James Murray). It is a shame that so few Government Back Benchers seem to be interested in labour market activity, especially given that so many of them will be in need of these services in the not-too-distant future. I take issue with what the hon. Member for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew), who is not in his place, said about trade unions being the problem in the economy. It is not trade unions that are the problem in the economy but an intransigent and uncaring Government who will not sit down and negotiate and who will not deal with the underlying causes of industrial unrest.

Chris Stephens: It is also bad employers, and they should be tackled too.

Andrew Gwynne: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. What is reckless for the economy is a disastrous mini-Budget which has left millions of householders with mortgage rates higher than they would otherwise have been that are locked in for the future, as well as higher inflation and spiralling energy costs as a consequence. That is the real impact of this Conservative Government on the economy.

In the north-west today, there are 57,000 more people who are economically inactive between the ages of 50 and 64 than there were in 2020. We hear a lot from this Government about growing the economy, but there seems to be no appreciation of the fact that, unless we get people back to work, the economy will remain stagnant. I represent brilliant, talented and hard-working people who are effectively being shut out of accessing the labour market because of long-term sickness or because the support just is not there to get them through the door.

Denton and Reddish straddles two local authorities, Tameside and Stockport, so I see two of everything. Sadly, that means I have seen two almost identical rises in the economic inactivity of my constituents since 2019. In Stockport, we have seen a 2.1% rise, and in Tameside, that figure sits at 1.7%. Across both local authorities, there are over 12,500 people currently claiming universal credit because they cannot access a job that pays sufficiently. Let us be clear: these are not people who have decided that work is not for them and have dropped off the grid—these are people who want to contribute but are finding that the door is locked.

Let us take long covid as an example. I speak with personal experience on this subject, because I suffered from, and indeed still have some of the symptoms of, long covid after my first bout of covid in 2020, and it is of great interest to me in my other role as shadow public health Minister. We know that there are around 2 million people living with this condition in the United Kingdom—that is 3% of the population—but there has been no meaningful effort from central Government to ensure that reasonable adjustments are being made in the workplace, and it can be done. Mr Speaker and those in the Speaker's Office accommodated me. I found that bobbing up and down was exhausting and basically wiped me out, and a simple, reasonable adjustment was for me to hold up the Order Paper so that I could be called to speak. For everybody else, however, it is business as usual, with long covid sufferers being forced to navigate a system that has not adapted to their needs.

The Government have failed to provide specialist help for those with long-term ill health, to invest in upskilling or to target employment support at hard-to-reach groups. Instead, they have outsourced large sums of money to deliver schemes such as kickstart and restart, which are massively under-delivering. They are obsessed with slogans, but not bothered about whether they deliver on their promises. In the last 13 years, regional inequalities have widened, health inequalities have soared and our economy has flatlined. Despite that, Government Ministers still parrot the phrase “levelling up” without an ounce of shame or self-awareness. We can do much better.

[Andrew Gwynne]

Labour's plan will devolve employment support, overhaul work capability assessments and provide targeted help for the over-50s and those with long-term ill health, which would be truly transformative for the people I represent. My constituents are tired of warm words with little substance. It is time for the Government to move out of the way and let Labour get on with the job of breaking down the barriers to opportunity and getting our economy firing on all cylinders again.

6.36 pm

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I will start by putting my remarks in the context of our economic situation. We are predicted to have the worst growth of any G20 nation bar Russia, which is, of course, heavily sanctioned. We have flatlining productivity, which is not down to the unions, as was perhaps being suggested by the hon. Member for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew)—far from it. If we compare the UK with France, for example, France has much stricter employment legislation but 20% higher productivity. We need to look more closely at the sort of legislation that we have.

Before the pandemic, millions of people were missing from the labour market, particularly the over-50s. Some 8.9 million are now economically inactive, which is more than half a million more than pre-pandemic levels. Of those, 3.5 million are 50 to 64-year-olds, which is more than 300,000 more than before the pandemic. It is a real shame that we have that huge untapped potential, as many of those people—1.7 million economically inactive people—want a job.

We have heard from many Opposition Members about the challenges that, sadly, women in particular face as a result of not having childcare. My hon. Friend the Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson), the shadow Secretary of State for Education, has outlined what we would do in power to introduce a much more modern approach to childcare. Without that system, we will not be able to bring more women into the workplace. We need parental leave; we need to introduce support from early years to the end of primary school; and we need to see the introduction of breakfast clubs. Many of the wider carer responsibilities of family members also, all too often, fall to women. They need to be brought back into the workplace.

On health, we have heard about the stress, anxiety and depression that many people face. They also need to be helped back into work. We also have issues with the disincentives for people who have left the labour market to get back into work. Medical professionals, teachers and many others across society felt devalued and disincentivised to work, so they left their workplace and took early retirement. We need to bring those people back into the workplace.

One reason for those issues is the Government's dismal record on education, retraining and lifelong learning. We had the Second Reading of the Lifelong Learning (Higher Education Fee Limits) Bill yesterday, which will finally seek to implement lifelong learning, but that should be seen in the context of a decade of failure in that area.

We have lost so much of adult learning since 2010. Only one in three adults report any participation in learning, which is the lowest level in 22 years. Indeed,

Government spending on adult education—retraining and so on—has fallen by 47% over the past 10 years, and the IFS reports that apprenticeships will be 25% lower in 2024-25 than in the corresponding period in 2020-11.

Many people feel locked out of the system, which has an impact on not just individual families, but society. Such inactivity is costing our wider economy so dearly. The Learning and Work Institute says that increasing employment to the highest level in the G7 would boost the economy by £23 billion, improve the public finances by £8 billion, and raise household finances by an average of £830 per year. That is why, as part of Labour's mission to secure the highest sustained growth in the G7, we are intent on getting Britain back to work. We have plans to fix the Access to Work scheme through improved targets for assessment waiting times and providing more indicative awards for those looking for work.

I will briefly illustrate my speech with an example of one individual who has to apply for Access to Work funding every year. If you met him, Madam Deputy Speaker, you would realise that that is quite ridiculous. The people of Warwick and Leamington have the potential, and many have the skills. They are people who want to work, but they need a Labour Government, and they want a general election now.

6.40 pm

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): The Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, of which I am a member, took evidence on supporting people into work only last week. A few issues stand out, which I want to raise. We need to address people's opportunity to work, their ability to work, and their prospects for work. For all the hand-wringing about the challenges of getting over-50s into employment, the barriers are widely known. Caring responsibilities dominate the lives of many people who simply do not have the option to take up a full-time job or longer hours. Indeed, many people in their 50s are caregivers in both directions: to their children or grandchildren, and to older relatives.

Only the Government can address this issue by finally tackling the two areas they have so long claimed to have answers for: childcare and social care. A number of right hon. and hon. Members have forcefully made the case for tackling those areas today, but the Government have not yet acted, despite 13 years in office. With one in four adults experiencing mental illness, long-term mental health conditions and chronic pain conditions keep far too many people from reaching their potential. They are burnt out and, in many cases, unable to contribute.

There is so much more we can do to support people and give them the tools to overcome their health challenges, such as the exciting international research into the potential benefits that psilocybin can bring to people suffering mental ill health, including treatment-resistant depression. We are stuck behind the curve, and I call once again for the Government and the Minister to make representations to the Home Office to that effect—to reschedule psilocybin, so that our universities and scientists can bring the UK to the forefront of this research that can offer hope of ending people's enduring misery. Similarly, much chronic physical pain may be addressed through cannabinoids, and it is in the power of Ministers to make those more available in order to improve the conditions of people's lives and enable them back into work.

But what jobs are available for people to begin, move into, or return to work in? One in six new jobs are in the hospitality sector, which offers flexible opportunities and is welcoming for marginalised groups, including former prisoners and people with learning disabilities. However, that sector has struggled to return to pre-pandemic levels, and soaring energy bills remain a terrifying prospect, not least for our pubs. Without a sector deal for hospitality to maintain those businesses and the millions of jobs within them—without people having the ability to take those jobs up—all these debates about increasing the workforce will be hollow. I call on the Government to address those three challenges, and to look at what they can do to restore the union learning grant, so that we can actually have lifelong learning in this country again.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the shadow Minister.

6.44 pm

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have spoken in this debate, but particularly my friend the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) and my hon. Friends the Members for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley), for Leicester West (Liz Kendall), for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell), for Ealing North (James Murray), for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) and for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols). I thought they all made comprehensive and excellent cases in support of a Labour Government.

The Minister for Employment (Guy Opperman): I am not sure the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) did.

Alison McGovern: I do apologise. I had written down the hon. Member for Glasgow South West. He can, I am sure, opine on his opinions about the possibility of a Labour Government at a later date, but I had included him in my list of friends.

On the subject of a Labour Government, I have served in opposition for 12 years and nine months—just three months shy of the age of the last Labour Government—and I am not proud of having been in opposition for that long, because it has been painful to watch events in our country and know that too often voting in this House on behalf of my constituents can do little in reality to help them.

I have learned a few things, having been here for 12 years and taking part in many debates on our country's economy. I have learned that whenever the Tories are criticised on their economic record, they rely again and again not on their own record, but on a cheat sheet handed out to them by the Whips. On employment, there is one thing in particular that they always come out with: according to them, every Labour Government have left office with unemployment higher than when they started—so they tell us, as if the food banks do not matter and as if child poverty does not matter.

Were this a unique failing of Labour Governments, it might be a serious charge, but the problem for those on the Government Benches and the thing they never tell us is that it is not; the very same accusation is also true of Tory Governments, and we have had a lot more Tory Governments about which that is true. The record of the Conservative party on unemployment is far worse

than that of the Labour party. This ridiculous accusation about Labour Governments that I have heard again and again over 12 years in trying to defend the indefensible reveals a political truth about work: Governments who are not able to respond to events and who are not seen to help people do better at work do not last long.

I bet I know what it says next on the Whips handout, and we have heard it again today. It will say, “Unemployment is at a record low of 1.2 million people, or 3.7%.” Historically speaking, and taken technically, the International Labour Organisation measure of unemployment looks low, but that figure hides a multitude of sins in our economy—1.7 million of them, to be precise. That is the number who, despite our so-called low unemployment, want a job, do not have a job, but are not actively looking right now. It is classified as inactivity, but I say that if it looks like people are being given up on, it does not matter what kind of unemployment it is; it is still throwing people on the scrapheap, at the very time our country needs them most.

Those 1.7 million people include parents who cannot get childcare, women over 50, more than 50,000 of whom are looking after a loved one, and far too many people who are ill and on waiting lists and their carers, knackered out by not being able to get the support they need. I thought we heard compellingly from my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish about the impact of long covid and the Government's failings. We also heard with absolute clarity from the hon. Member for Leicester West about how this issue is not just damaging our economy, but is a feminist case for change.

We have altogether nearly 3 million people out of work, and all those people will be right to wonder if the Tories, as usual, have given up on them, because the theme of Conservative Governments over the past 12 years since 2010 is of slowly giving up—giving up on building the living standards they promised and building opportunities across the whole country; giving up on increasing productivity as they promised; giving up on older people, ill people and disabled people; and, giving up on building back better and levelling up. All their empty words never had substance. More importantly, they never had belief in the British people, while demanding that the British people believed in them.

In 2015, the Conservative manifesto promised to deliver the highest employment rate in the G7, but mysteriously that commitment disappeared from future manifestos. In 2017, the Conservative manifesto pledged to get 1 million more people with disabilities into employment over the next 10 years. The 2019 manifesto removed that target and replaced it with something vague, and something vague is all that people with disabilities have had. There are three-word slogans all the time, yet all we get is very little help.

The truth is that, whatever recent changes to our economy have been caused by the pandemic, we have deep flaws in this country that have been created by previous generations of Tories and made worse by the current crop. On skills, because of long-standing low ambition, we have 5 million people lacking basic skills, but now, to make matters worse, nearly one in five people are working below their skill level, including 27% of people in London. In our nation's capital—our so-called success story—27% of people are working below their skill level. What a waste of time, what a waste of talent, and what a waste of our country's potential.

[Alison McGovern]

On care, childcare is unaffordable and unavailable, and social care is in chaos, leading to the dreadful situation—as I have said, my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester West made this case—of women’s economic progress going backwards.

On disabilities, never mind creating the inclusive workplace that we need, the Government cannot even get the basics right. Crucially, everyone can see that some places in our country are still suffering from dreadful unemployment—actual ILO statistical unemployment—despite the UK picture. From Blackpool to Peterborough, the Tories are ignoring the very places they claimed they would level up.

But who cares if some places fall further behind and who cares if people are too sick to work, as long as the headline numbers look okay, eh? Money has been thrown at kickstart and restart, but we have seen no real progress and no real learning—just a waste of time, money and effort. Does anyone believe that if there was real commitment from the Government there would now be the ability to deliver after 12 years of failure? I do not even think there is such commitment any more; nor even the pretence of it. We have wasted time and talent, and broken communities everywhere, because the Tories have given up now. They have given up on people, as we have seen from their failed schemes. They have given up on places, as we have seen from the towns and cities that have fallen further behind. They have given up on skills and growth, and given up on government. It is a triumph of not caring.

I tell you one thing, Madam Deputy Speaker, if 12 years in opposition has taught me anything, it has taught me never to give up, and that is why we will not. We will not give up on our towns and cities. We will not give up on the fact that our country needs proper care, childcare and social care, and we will not give up on disabled people. Harold Wilson said that unemployment above all else made him political. Anyone who grew up in Merseyside before the advent of the last Labour Government knows exactly what he meant, and this is personal to me. We will not stand by any longer and see low ambition and the tick-box culture of the Tory DWP run people down. We are bigger and better than that as a nation. If the Government think that a few attack lines from the Tory Whips Office will keep them going until the general election, I say, “Bring it on!”

6.53 pm

The Minister for Employment (Guy Opperman): Can I start by adding my tribute to Betty Boothroyd, who was a role model to so many in this House? As a former chair of Women2Win, I can certainly say that she made a massive difference to so many candidates. Can I also urge colleagues to get behind World Book Day this Thursday?

Unlike the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern), I would like to thank all colleagues who have contributed to this debate. I am certain that my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens)—I know he will be in trouble because I have called him an hon. Friend—is most definitely not a Labour party member, is definitely not a Labour MP and is strongly advocating the SNP cause.

The UK labour market remains in a strong position, with payroll employment at a record high. There were 30 million people on company payrolls in January 2023. There are also 2 million more women in work than in 2010. Unemployment remains at a very low level, with long-term unemployment 12% lower than it was pre-pandemic, and unemployment below the pre-pandemic level of 4%.

However, on inactivity, we know that levels of vacancies remain high, and increasing the labour supply is a key priority of this Government. The Prime Minister has tasked the Secretary of State to look in detail at the workforce participation programme, including how to address economically inactive cohorts. We need to reduce the number of people leaving employment into inactivity, and encourage those who are economically inactive and can work back into the labour market. Many today have made pitches to the Chancellor, who will be reporting back on these matters in 15 days’ time. I am sure he has taken due note of that. The point on historic levels of economic inactivity was made at great length by Labour Members. I entirely accept that the current rate is approximately 21.4%, but it is fair to note that in 2010 it stood at 23.3% under the previous Labour Government.

The hon. Member for Glasgow South West and the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) raised issues about the innovation pilot that we are carrying out, which has just begun. I urge them to read the written ministerial statement by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, which gives details of who is excluded from that particular pilot. It particularly deals with the fact that anyone with exclusions—basically, only claimants who are work-ready will be dealt with under that pilot. I have already met some of the job coaches and managers who are driving the pilot forward at Crawley, where I was yesterday. This is fundamentally about one thing: providing more support. The hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw raised concerns about travel. That is what the flexible support fund is for: it covers any travel costs in those circumstances, and there are no questions whatsoever but that that can be addressed in those particular ways.

Many points were made by those on the Labour Front Bench, most of which were dealt with by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. It is interesting that the shadow Secretary of State is now committed to conditions and sanctions—a genuinely amazing flip-flop given his position barely three weeks ago in the debate on uprating. He is resembling more and more a kangaroo in how he turns around and flops away to his next policy.

On flexible work options, as hon. Members know, the Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake) is introducing flexible working legislation. In 2010 there was no paid-for childcare for the 15 or 30 hours; there was no 85% universal credit childcare worth £1,108 per month for two or more children, with support provided by the flexible support fund on an ongoing basis.

On the disabled, I totally rebut the arguments made by the shadow Minister. The Government are committed to improving the lives of disabled people and those with a health condition, and we will deliver the most ambitious disability reform agenda in a generation. We set a goal to see 1 million more disabled people in employment between 2017 and 2027. The most recent data show that

between the first quarter of 2017 and 2022, the number of disabled people in employment increased by 1.3 million, meaning that that goal was met after only five years. I urge employers up and down the country to get behind the Disability Confident campaign.

On the 50PLUS campaign, the Government are already providing more than £20 million of funding for an enhanced offer for people aged 50-plus, and there is an opportunity for multiple older worker fairs, which are happening every single week up and down the country. I have met the 50PLUS champions in Bolton, Hackney and various other places. They are doing a fantastic job to roll out and explain the situation. We are doing so much to try to bring more people back into the workplace. In addition, the Midlife MOT looks at wealth, work and wellbeing. It has already been rolled out to jobcentres, and been introduced on a private sector basis and online.

We are committed to helping people to progress while in work, and we are therefore extending the jobcentre support provided to people in work and on low incomes, to help them increase their earnings and move into better-paid quality jobs. That in-work progression offer is being expanded on an ongoing basis. The youth offer sees youth hubs, and so much support from youth employment and employability coaches who provide flexible support to young people with significant complex needs and barriers, to help them move into employment. The jobcentre offer provides localised support up and down the country to nearly 800 jobcentres. It is different for each individual jobcentre, and from Banff to Brixton to Basildon, there is a different approach on an ongoing basis.

Sir Alan Campbell (Tynemouth) (Lab): *claimed to move the closure (Standing Order No. 36).*

Question put forthwith, That the Question be now put.

Question agreed to.

Main question accordingly put.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House is concerned that the number of people out of work and economically inactive is higher than before the pandemic, that thousands of older people have left the labour market and that there have been significant increases in the number of people out of work due to ill health or mental ill health; notes that recent employment support schemes have underperformed and underspent; condemns the Government for its failure to get more people into work; regrets that this failure is contributing to low economic growth and falling living standards; and therefore calls on the Government to get Britain back to work by reforming disability benefit assessments, devolving employment support to local areas and providing specialist and targeted help for those with long-term ill health or aged over 50 to grow the economy and boost both public finances and household incomes.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

ELECTRICITY

That the draft Electricity Supplier Obligations (Green Excluded Electricity) (Amendment) Regulations 2023, which were laid before this House on 8 February, be approved.—(*Ruth Edwards.*)

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

RATING AND VALUATION

That the draft Non-Domestic Rating (Rates Retention: Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2023, which were laid before this House on 9 February, be approved.—(*Ruth Edwards.*)

Question agreed to.

FINANCE

Ordered,

That Mr Nicholas Brown be discharged from the Finance Committee and Mrs Sharon Hodgson be added.—(*Sir Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

High Street Bank Closures

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

7 pm

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): It is a privilege to secure this debate. I am pleased to see the Minister in his place. I thank him, ahead of his response, for being here to discuss this vital issue, which I know is important to Members across the House—they feel strongly about it. I must also place on record my heartfelt thanks to the charities and organisations that have provided briefing material ahead of tonight's debate, including Which?, Link and the Social Market Foundation, among many others.

Colleagues representing rural, semi-rural and urban constituencies alike will all be familiar with the worrying trend of bank closures on the UK's high streets. In the late 1980s, over 20,000 bank branches were open across the UK. Today, just 5,000 bank branches remain—a 75% decrease since 1980. Since 2015 alone, well over 5,000 bank branches have closed. On the eve of St David's Day and as a proud Welsh Labour MP, I am particularly stunned by the statistic that Wales has lost an astonishing 43% of its bank branches between 2015 and 2019.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour for giving way, and I congratulate her on securing the debate. She knows my constituency well and mentions the sheer number of banks that have fallen. In my entire constituency, there is now one bank left for 58,000 constituents. Does she agree that one of the pressures is the number of charities that rely on the banking sector? If there are no local branches, it makes it so much harder for charities to undertake their work and use local bank services. There is a real problem around the banking charter that the Government need to address.

Alex Davies-Jones: I completely agree with my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour. He will know the impact of the latest announcement of a bank closure in Talbot Green, which is used by our constituents. That is having an impact on local charities and local charity shops on our high street, because they deal in small petty cash. They do not deal in card transactions. I will come on to talk about that issue.

As I said, I secured the debate when I learnt of the latest closure in my constituency. Talbot Green, home to just under 3,000 people, will lose yet another high street bank branch, with Barclays set to close in May. Having already lost HSBC in 2021, as well as Lloyds previously, Talbot Green's residents will be left with no dedicated high street bank whatever. Across my communities and the many communities neighbouring my constituency, the story is the same: residents are abandoned by their banks and are now forced to travel unacceptable distances to their next nearest branch. In Tonyrefail, Barclays closed in 2015 and Lloyds closed in 2016. In Church Village, Lloyds closed its doors in 2021, leaving the entire village with no dedicated bank at all. Even in Pontypridd town centre, where thankfully several high street branches remain open, the loss of the HSBC branch in 2021 is still part of a worrying trend.

Too many of my constituents are now left with no high street banking presence in their communities. Consider this example: a constituent in Tonyrefail, who does not drive and who is a member of a bank whose nearest branch is now in Pontypridd town, would now be forced to travel for over an hour each way on public transport, catching four buses in total for a return trip.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech that picks up on issues around the whole country. Does she agree that there is a particular problem for people who are disabled and immobile? Even when they are able to get public transport, they may find themselves in a large town centre, some distance from a bank branch and facing considerable difficulties getting to the door of that bank.

Alex Davies-Jones: I completely agree. For someone who is disabled, elderly, otherwise vulnerable or just does not have a car, the closure of bank branches can be truly devastating. Across the country, it is a similar picture. In some parts of the UK, customers are facing an astonishing 40-mile round trip just to access their bank. That is not good enough.

We all know that face-to-face access to high street banks is a vital service for the most vulnerable in our society. For many constituents who do not use the internet regularly or, in modern-day Britain, do not have reliable enough broadband, online banking is not an option. I fully appreciate that the way consumers spend money has changed and that digital payments now dominate transactions—in part, accelerated by the pandemic. That in itself is no bad thing. Making commerce easier and more convenient for customers and businesses alike should be good for our economy and our high streets. As Labour's shadow Digital Minister, I have seen at first hand what a digitised economy that works everyone could look like.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): In addition to digital banking, what does the hon. Member think of community banking hubs, given that, in my part of Devon, Axminster lost its last bank in November and Honiton is set to lose its last bank, HSBC, this June?

Alex Davies-Jones: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. Community banking hubs are an answer to a problem, but they are not the only solution. We are seeing a real need for a presence on the high street, because banks support so many local businesses. A community banking hub can help customers, but it will not support local businesses and local charities, which my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) mentioned. That is why we desperately need some sort of presence on our high street.

Far from working for everyone, as I have mentioned, the seemingly never-ending stream of high street bank closures is leaving behind the 5 million adults who still rely on cash to a significant extent for most of their purchases. As the cost of living crisis continues to cause immense pressure for thousands of people across the country, there have been reports that cash usage has increased, not decreased, because it makes budgeting feel easier. That makes the decline of high street banks even more worrying, and risks inflicting yet more misery on vulnerable people who are already struggling.

Matt Rodda: My hon. Friend is again making an excellent point about the importance of cash purchasing. Does she agree that this is a huge issue for certain small businesses that still trade in cash? Even though, as she rightly says, the digital economy is progressing, we all know that in certain sectors of the economy cash is the only means of transaction.

Alex Davies-Jones: I completely agree. I come from the proud market town of Pontypridd. As I will go on to talk about, for many traders it is not profitable to operate with purely card payments. They operate in very small monetary values and cash is a main aspect of their business model, so it is absolutely vital that we have that presence on our high street.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) for securing this debate, and I spoke to her beforehand. I represent a rural constituency where we have had 11 bank closures. It has been horrendous. The people of my constituency have always responded to the consultations, but they have meant nothing. Does she agree that it is incredibly stressful for the elderly, who are unaware that they are a target for online scams because they do not have the banks to fall back on? They cannot safeguard themselves and they need the local branches, or access to somewhere. This House must regulate a standard duty of physical care on those banks that will not regulate themselves.

Alex Davies-Jones: I agree. As I have said, the high street bank is not just where customers can get money or cash out. It is a place with a trusted professional they can go to for information about the services that a bank provides. There is a real person—not someone at the end of a phone in a call centre—who they can trust and seek reliable and trusted advice from. That is a valuable resource for so many in our community.

I mentioned the digitised economy, which fundamentally relies on digital infrastructure to support it. In rural and semi-rural constituencies, which many of us represent, we require decent mobile signal and broadband, but often it is very poor. Many businesses tell me that they do not feel able to make the switch to card payments or online banking because they do not have the infrastructure to support them reliably to carry out their business.

Banks are more than just a place to withdraw cash; they are the centrepiece of our high streets, providing support for the community groups, small businesses and charities that rely on their presence. A small business in my constituency that may not feel able to accept card payments and is therefore reliant on cash will no doubt depend on its local branch for business banking and cash deposits. When branches close, it is not just consumers who will suddenly have to travel significant distances to the next nearest branch. Local businesses will travel, too, taking with them much-needed local jobs. Really good jobs are going elsewhere because of bank closures on the high street.

Such a time-consuming inconvenience is a major barrier to the growth of our local economies and high streets. It threatens the livelihood of small local businesses altogether, furthering the risk of a decline of our high streets. I am very fortunate, as we all are in Pontypridd and Taff Ely, that we have an incredible range of small and independent businesses. Many of those businesses continue to rely on cash payments; countless small

businesses across my constituency have told me that they cannot justify moving to card payments because they do not feel that broadband in the area is reliable enough.

In Ponty town alone, from the traders running stalls outside on Market Street to the historic units inside Ponty market, retailers need us to retain the local bank branches that underpin so many small businesses. Without the high street banking infrastructure to support them, we risk losing our incredibly important small businesses, many of which have been trading for generations and should be there for generations to come.

Since I was elected to this place, I have been a vocal champion for our high street, for footfall and for the opportunities that are needed to regenerate Pontypridd and Taff Ely. The local businesses in the communities I represent have already suffered a serious blow under the pandemic and are now being hit further by the cost of living crisis. Closure of these crucial bank branches will only decrease footfall further.

A bustling industrial economy once nestled in the valleys of Pontypridd and Taff Ely. I passionately believe that, with the right infrastructure and the right policies, we can return to our previous heights of economic success and prosperity. I pay tribute to the work of Rhondda Cynon Taf Council and our Welsh Labour Government for their fantastic growth-focused initiatives, which will benefit the local economy in my constituency and across south Wales. For example, the Metro project and the refurbishment of YMa, our arts and culture centre, will bring added footfall to our town centres.

But that is not enough. Local organisations in my constituency, such as the Pontypridd business improvement district, are doing all they can: they do incredible work to regenerate Pontypridd town centre and the wider community. Those initiatives are extremely welcome, but without action from the UK Government to tackle the epidemic of high street bank closures, our local economy will still fundamentally be held back and our high streets will suffer as a result.

The current industry guidance from UK Finance revolves around the access to banking standard, which is designed to

“minimise the impact of bank branch closures”.

However, I strongly believe that that guidance just does not go far enough. Simply providing best practices for how a bank should go about informing customers of its intention to close a branch does little for my constituents.

Unfortunately, this hands-off approach seems consistent with the previous attitudes of this Government. In answer to written questions on the issue, they have told me:

“The decision to close a branch is a commercial issue for banks and building societies and the Government does not intervene in these decisions.”

I must say, however, that I strongly believe that the closure of a branch is not simply a commercial issue. It is, profoundly, a community issue—and it is our communities that pay the price for closures.

The Government have stated that post offices are an adequate alternative for communities whose dedicated bank branches have closed, because, under post office banking arrangements, customers’ in-person needs can be met at a post office branch. That may be true, but sadly in Pontypridd and Taff Ely we have lost multiple post office branches as well. Like high street banks, post

[Alex Davies-Jones]

offices are a vital piece of our community infrastructure. I have genuine concerns that, without banks and without our post offices, thousands of my constituents will suffer profoundly if we do not act.

Jim Shannon: One thing we have seen increasing in my constituency is credit unions. Have credit unions in the hon. Lady's constituency had the opportunity, as those in mine have, to reach out and spread their wings to fill the gap?

Alex Davies-Jones: I agree that credit unions can plug some of the gap. The Welsh Government are exploring opportunities with Banc Cambria, which would be a national bank for Wales with a presence on the high street, but until it is established and until our banks have a statutory duty to provide a service to our communities, services will be sadly lacking. Businesses, communities and constituents will suffer as a result.

Matt Rodda: I am grateful that my hon. Friend is being so generous in giving way. Is she aware that another issue for customers of some banks or building societies is that the software does not always work with post office software? If a member of the public wants to cash a cheque or take money out, it is not always possible with every single bank or building society.

Alex Davies-Jones: I agree. If the infrastructure does not line up, that can cause problems. It can make simple transactions arbitrary and time-consuming, especially when people are having to deal with numerous other transactions during their day. Besides, there are functions that building societies and credit unions are unable to fulfil, such as those connected with mortgage issues or people's concerns about fraud involving their accounts. People need that presence on the high street and in the community. They need these trusted individuals who can support vulnerable customers and, indeed, the ordinary customer who just has a query and wants a chat about their account.

The Minister will no doubt be aware that the Social Market Foundation and the Treasury Committee have expressed concern about the over-reliance on post offices as a stop-gap. As I have said, such stop-gaps are unsustainable, and put far too much pressure on already overworked postal staff who, despite the vital service they provide, are not trained banking specialists. We need that trusted expertise on our high streets. The Committee also found that post offices were not an adequate environment for many requirements of face-to-face banking, especially for more vulnerable customers, not least because a post office does not provide the privacy and dignity that many bank customers deserve and rightly expect.

While post offices must be commended for the role they play in providing basic banking services, shifting face-to-face banking in rural communities to post offices is clearly not the right answer for everyone. We need to focus on protecting dedicated high street bank branches instead, and in that connection I cautiously welcome the provision in the Financial Services and Markets Bill—now in the other place—for banks to potentially share face-to-face branch services, although the exact mechanism for that is yet to be determined. Independent organisations such as Link are already involved in creating

those “shared services” in some parts of the UK, and I pay tribute to the work that they do to ensure that high streets can continue to thrive. However, the Bill represents a clear opportunity to enshrine this community-driven model in law, and an excellent opportunity for the Government to address the issues that I have raised tonight.

I urge the Minister to provide the House with any clarification he is able to offer on how these shared services might work in practice, as well as the criteria by which communities that are eligible for them are now selected. None the less, research by *Which?* suggests that since the Government introduced the Bill, a shocking 390 bank branches have closed in the UK. It is clear that immediate action is needed, and I therefore urge the Minister to set out a timetable for the shared services to be brought online.

High street banks are the lifeblood of local economies and, indeed, whole communities in constituencies such as mine. They must not be allowed to disappear completely, and they must play a central role in the regeneration and levelling up of former industrial communities such as mine. The unprecedented rate at which they are vanishing from the high street is not only holding local economies back, but making life challenging for the most vulnerable people in society who depend on easily accessible face-to-face banking.

I look forward to the Minister's comments on the issues I have raised, especially the commissioning of shared banking services, as I am sure that thousands of my constituents will be very interested in what he has to say. The impact of bank closures on our high streets will be—indeed, already is—truly devastating. I sincerely hope that the Minister has listened to my concerns and will finally decide to take action.

7.17 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Andrew Griffith): Let me begin by thanking the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) for securing the debate and raising an important issue that I know is of concern to many Members' constituents. She is clearly a vocal and passionate champion for her high street, which does her credit. May I also prematurely wish her a happy St David's Day?

Our local high streets are of the utmost importance in towns throughout the country. They are the beating hearts of communities and form an intrinsic part of the social fabric of our cities, villages and communities. I know that, in joining this debate, all Members will be thinking of their own constituencies and the many conversations that they will have had with people there about—and often standing on—their local high street. I also know from speaking to my own constituents in rural West Sussex that there are legitimate concerns about the decline of our high streets, especially among vulnerable, elderly or isolated people who rely so heavily on what the high street provides. Let me therefore say at the outset that the Government recognise the vital role that the high streets play in society, and that we are implementing policies and directing resources toward protecting them, because that is the right thing to do.

I am proud to be part of a Government that are providing long-term, enduring support. How are we doing that? We are doing so through a combination of direct funding, tax cuts and legislation. The Government

have provided a comprehensive package of around £400 billion of direct support. The towns fund and the levelling-up fund are together investing £8 billion in regenerating local communities and high streets. In May 2022 we introduced the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill, bringing in new legislation to introduce high street rental auctions that will tackle decline by bringing vacant units back into use. We sometimes refer to them as the broken teeth of our high streets, and it is welcome that these measures are being put forward. Just months later, at the 2022 autumn statement, we announced a package of business rate support worth £13.6 billion, including an increased 75% relief for retail hospitality and leisure properties. If the hon. Lady's constituency is anything like mine, that will have been a lifeline for so many small businesses on the high street. Under this policy, businesses can claim up to £110,000 each in 2023-24. It is a tax cut worth over £2 billion for more than 200,000 local businesses.

I am here as the City Minister to respond to the hon. Lady's specific point about the closure of local bank branches and how this impacts the high street—I accept that it does. The difficult fact is that the way people are banking is changing. Innovation has led to more online banking, which for many—not all—is more convenient and quicker than banking in branch. It liberates people and allows them to work at different times of the day or night, or perhaps to juggle childcare responsibilities, because banks were never always open. We know that anecdotally, as well as from the data. The industry body UK Finance found in 2021—that is already some time ago—that 86% of UK adults made contactless payments, 72% banked online and 57% banked on their mobile phone. That is not just young people; the latest data shows that more than 70% of people aged over 65 use online banking. We should not be dismissive of the so-called silver surfers. None of that is to deny the fact that there are significant minorities that are excluded from those figures.

In that context, local bank branches are simply receiving fewer visitors than they once did, and I think it is incumbent on all Members to recognise, as the hon. Lady did, that banks and building societies have difficult decisions to make about how best to provide services to those who need them and to support communities. Members should also recognise—this is certainly the view on this side of the House, although I respect other views on the matter—that it is not the role of the Government to intervene in these decisions; nor do we have the powers to do so.

The hon. Lady gave the example of the Barclays branch closing in Talbot Green. According to Barclays—I am not here to defend its actions in any way, but we should look at the data—91% of the people who used that branch also banked using alternative means. Only 35 customers used that bank regularly as their only way to do banking. So although bank branches are an important part of the community, we need to be careful that we do not follow the behaviour of our constituents rather than leading it or maintaining it.

I will come on to the measures that the Government are taking in the Financial Services and Markets Bill—with, I think, the broad support of the House. I am very concerned about access to cash, and we are legislating on that. I took the liberty of looking at the hon. Lady's

constituency, and according to Link there are 97 cash machines there, more than three quarters of which are free to use. Those are probably the ones that we all care about most on behalf of our constituents. That is a substantial number, offering people at least the ability to access cash.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned credit unions. The Government support the credit union sector in order to have a greater diversity of provision. The Smart Money Cymru and Dragonsavers credit union both serve the constituents of Pontypridd, and I salute them. This Government will do whatever we can to improve the viability of the credit union model and ensure that we have appropriate, proportionate regulation that promotes the growth of credit unions and the mutual sector more generally.

Some 99% of personal banking customers and 95% of business banking customers—this is measured by the relationship with the banks with which they do business—can do their banking, although not all of it, at one of the more than 11,500 post office branches across the country. While I understand that that will not always be the perfect answer, that is a substantial lifeline for banking services. It also puts a substantial amount of revenue into the Post Office business, and if we do not make a success of it, we might be sitting here on another evening having another debate about the loss of post offices in our communities.

Matt Rodda: The Minister may be interested to know that the issue in my constituency was with the Nationwide building society, with many of its members unable to use the post office, which affected thousands of people.

Andrew Griffith: I thank the hon. Member, as I thank all hon. Members for their contributions to the debate. The issue we are debating is why we have urged all banks seeking to close branches to examine the Financial Conduct Authority's guidance to ensure that, when they do make closures, they carefully consider the impact. I hope that those procedures have been followed in the case of the hon. Member for Pontypridd, and I encourage her to contact the FCA if she is concerned. Where firms fall short of expectations, the FCA can and will ask for closures to be paused.

We are taking strong steps on access to cash. We must not impede innovation. People and businesses are embracing the benefits of new services. Some small micro-services are benefiting, and some female entrepreneurs are setting up businesses without the overhead of having to have access to cash. Many people do like to tap and go, so that flexibility is important. As I mentioned earlier—the hon. Lady was also kind enough to mention it—the Financial Services and Markets Bill will protect access to cash, both withdrawals and deposits, because that gives businesses the confidence to take cash safe in the knowledge that they can deposit it, hopefully not too far away. It will be the first time since the ancient Celts first started minting coins in this realm that there will be a statutory right to access to cash.

I must not digress, but I recently visited the Royal Mint in Wales—

Alex Davies-Jones: It is in my constituency.

Andrew Griffith: I congratulate the hon. Lady and pay tribute to all those who work so hard to deliver such fantastic products.

To conclude, this Government are alive to and care about the changes that are happening to our high street. We want a financial services sector that serves all. We understand the challenges that these changes

can bring. We welcome innovation, we want to support our economy, and we want to support our local high streets.

Question put and agreed to.

7.28 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 28 February 2023

[CAROLYN HARRIS *in the Chair*]

Eating Disorders Awareness Week

9.30 am

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Eating Disorders Awareness Week.

It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Harris. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting the debate, and all colleagues across the Chamber who have supported it.

Across the United Kingdom, an estimated 1.25 million people have an eating disorder. That includes binge eating disorder, bulimia, anorexia and other specific feeding or eating disorders—indeed, any disorder that avoids or restricts the intake of food. Left undiagnosed and untreated, eating disorders can be a silent killer. Anorexia has the highest mortality rate of any mental illness, and results from one study have shown that a third of people with binge eating disorder are at risk of suicide.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Increasing awareness and our understanding of the causes of eating disorders are crucial to providing the right care. Eating disorders are still hugely misunderstood. Does the hon. Member agree that Ministers must fund more research on that, because just 1% of mental health research funding is directed to eating disorder studies?

Wera Hobhouse: I completely agree. Indeed, the all-party parliamentary group on eating disorders inquiry on research funding found how crucial it is, and in particular that eating disorder research should be ringfenced. Some progress has been made, and the eating disorder charity Beat has made good progress on the issue, but more research needs to be done.

For too long, sufferers have been left feeling trapped and alone. Here in Parliament, we have been raising the alarm for some years about this rising epidemic, which still needs more urgent action from the Government. However, I want to acknowledge the good working relationships the eating disorders APPG has had with various Ministers. I hope that will continue, and that today's debate helps us to make progress together.

The theme for this year's Eating Disorders Awareness Week is eating disorders in men. Eating disorders do not discriminate. Many people think that eating disorders affect only women, but at least one person in four affected by an eating disorder is a man, and 89% of men and boys aged 16 to 18 in my county of Somerset worry about how they look. Those experiences are often overlooked.

Toxic stereotypes are pervasive, and half of respondents to a recent survey of men's experience carried out by Beat did not believe that someone like them would develop an eating disorder. One male sufferer in five has

never spoken out about their struggle. That is why the debate is so important. We must encourage men to speak up and get the help they need.

Other rigid perceptions of eating disorders persist. Eating disorders are frequently misunderstood and viewed as a lifestyle choice. Contrary to popular belief, eating disorders are most common among people with severe obesity. Too many people are still being turned away from treatment because their body mass index is too high. To imply that someone seeking help for an eating disorder is not skinny enough is a terrible mistake that can lead to added suffering, and I commend Hope Virgo for her tireless campaign, Dump the Scales, which has made a significant difference.

Owing to those perceptions, people with eating disorders face a postcode lottery in trying to access specialist treatment. Beat has found large inconsistencies in the availability of treatment for binge eating disorders. Only 12 of the 51 providers in England that responded to Beat's freedom of information request offered all three services for binge eating disorders recommended by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence.

In some areas, treatment for people with bulimia is being rationed according to the frequency of bingeing and purging episodes. In others, treatment is simply not available. The Somerset and Wessex Eating Disorders Association, also known as SWEDA, has seen a 150% increase in people seeking help for eating disorders compared with pre-pandemic figures. Its children's service has been overwhelmed with young people and their parents desperately trying to get support.

Eating disorders can take years to recover from, and many children and young people need to continue their treatment into adulthood. Young people miss out on so many educational and social opportunities. These years are stolen from them, and that is not to mention the potentially irreversible effect on their physical health. Again, this affects girls and boys, men and women—eating disorders do not discriminate.

Sir George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): I thank the hon. Lady for securing this important debate. She will be aware that the variation of eating disorders called T1DE—type 1 diabetes with disordered eating—is a growing problem that affects young men as well as young women. The right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) and I have been co-chairing an inquiry into that variation of eating disorders. I will not pre-empt what our report will say, but one thing is clear: professional support, both psychological and physical, is vital to these young people, who could otherwise end up seriously ill if they do not take their insulin—in some cases, it is fatal.

Wera Hobhouse: I thank the right hon. Member for his intervention. As I mentioned, eating disorders manifest themselves in different forms. We need to increase our understanding of the different types of eating disorders, and much more specialist treatment needs to be available to cater for people's different needs. I thank him for mentioning that specific form of eating disorders among people who are suffering from diabetes.

As I mentioned, eating disorders result in years being stolen from young people, and they can take many years to recover from. Some of the figures are just staggering. A third of people with eating disorders recover fully, a

[Wera Hobhouse]

third never really recover, and a third get worse. For the third that never really recover, it is a lifetime sentence of a life that is not as good as it could be. That is why early intervention and understanding the symptoms of eating disorders are so crucial. The earlier someone receives intervention for their eating disorder, the more likely they are to make a full recovery. The longer symptoms are left untreated, the more difficult it is for the person to recover.

Healthcare should focus on prevention before cure, and early access to the right treatment and support can be life-changing. Some 75% of SWEDA's staff and volunteers have lived experience of an eating disorder, which is another aspect of this issue that is so important: we need to hear from more people who have lived experience of an eating disorder. Their speaking up and leaving behind the stigma that is still associated with eating disorders is so important, and I commend everybody who has come forward and talked about their lived experience. I understand how difficult that can be, but we need them to do it. All those working for SWEDA say that they wish they could have accessed help long before they were offered it. That is why such organisations are so important: they offer specialist therapy and support to people with eating disorders and body image issues before they become ill enough to need more intensive treatment.

However, those organisations cannot cope on their own. Waiting times for eating disorder patients are out of control, and waiting lists for children's eating disorder services have doubled since March 2020. From 2021 to 2022, only 61% of urgent cases started treatment within a week—well below the current NICE standard of 95%. I hope the Minister will be able to respond to that. For adults, there are not even targets in place. *The Independent* has revealed that more than 80,000 adults with eating disorders are waiting to be seen for therapy—a record number—while just 30% of adults got treatment within four weeks of their referral. Again, I hope that the Minister will refer to adult eating disorder services, where we do not have any waiting list targets or targets for support. It is very important that adult services get the same support as children's services, where we have made progress because there are targets.

Data from the eating disorder charity Beat showed an average delay of three and a half years between someone's eating disorder symptoms emerging and their accessing treatment. That is simply not good enough. Targets are crucial if we are to tackle this epidemic. An access and waiting time standard for adults would provoke significant extra funding and focus. If we want to encourage people to seek help, we need to give them a guarantee that they will be seen.

Having clear standards can facilitate service improvements. Standards introduced in 2015 for waiting times for children and young people's eating disorder services have been crucial in driving service improvements. However, similar standards have been lacking in adult services. Shockingly, sufferers are reaching the point of emergency hospitalisation before they can access care. Again, that is not good enough. It also costs a lot more money if we reach people only at that crisis point.

Clinicians have reported a significant increase in the proportion of young people first presenting when they are already severely ill. NHS figures show that hospital

admissions for people with eating disorders in England have risen by 84% in the past five years. For children and young people, there was a 35% increase in the past year alone—and among men and young boys, hospital admissions have risen by 128%. There is an increasingly alarming picture that eating disorders in men and boys are being overlooked and not treated early enough. That is why today's debate is so important.

Tragically, people are losing their lives. Take the terribly sad death of Zara Taylor after two years of struggling to get the right treatment for her eating disorder. An investigation by the *Health Service Journal* found that at least 19 lives were lost to eating disorders in England over the past five years. At least 15 of those were deemed avoidable and resulted in coroners issuing formal prevention of future deaths reports. Coroners described patients' safety risks being missed or poorly managed because of limited knowledge of eating disorders among doctors and health professionals, and delays in accessing appropriate treatment. That is why it is so important to have more research into eating disorders, and focus on the more specialist and rare forms of eating disorders. Those same failings were among the key issues identified five years ago by the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman in its report "Ignoring the Alarms". Surely, we need to do more and to do better.

I was disappointed that the Government decided against publishing a 10-year cross-Government mental health and wellbeing plan for England. Instead, they have developed and published a major conditions strategy that would include mental health alongside other groups of conditions, including cancers, cardiovascular disease and dementia. That is not helpful. Compared with physical health, mental health has been a Cinderella service; for years, we have been asking for parity. If everything is put together again, we run the risk of losing special attention to mental health.

Can the Government not see that for targeted and varied issues we need targeted and varied strategies? I point them to Hope Virgo's eating disorder manifesto, which calls on the Government to implement an evidence-based national eating disorder strategy, with a plan outlining how they will tackle the huge rise in people affected by eating disorders.

I want to single out Hope Virgo for her tireless campaign. She has made such progress in helping us to understand what it is to suffer an eating disorder and access services. She has continually engaged with us and Government in order to achieve improvements. She has done fantastically well. The strategy that she calls for should integrate obesity and eating disorder prevention plans, given the overlapping factors between the two. The Government should also look at reforming treatment approaches. I hope they are looking seriously at Hope Virgo's manifesto and strategy.

A recent University of Oxford study found that using the integrated CBT-E—enhanced cognitive behaviour therapy—approach over the current in-patient approach reduced readmission rates for people with anorexia by 70% over a year. That means that we need to treat this as a mental health condition first and foremost, and to treat people's physical health as a result of the mental health issues. If we do not tackle the mental health issues, we will not cure the physical problems.

The strategy should also include better training. According to Beat, 20% of medical schools do not include eating disorders in their teaching at all, while those that do provide less than two hours on the topic. Training should be compulsory in order to spot early signs of eating disorders. Many participants in a 2021 Beat survey reported having a negative experience when they first sought help from a GP. There are many brilliant practitioners in the NHS delivering excellent care, but I want every doctor to complete their training with the knowledge and skills to best support people with eating disorders.

The crisis in the NHS has decimated mental health services. Staff shortages are growing. According to the National Audit Office, between 2021 and 2022, 17,000 staff left the NHS mental health workforce. The Royal College of Psychiatrists 2021 workforce census shows that since 2017 there has been a 30% increase in the number of vacant or unfilled consultant posts in England. That is not good enough. How we can encourage specialists into services is a big question that the Government need to answer.

Eating disorder psychiatry has one of the highest numbers of vacancies, with just 28 full-time consultants. We need significant investment in staff retention. The RCP's members report high workloads and poor work-life balance. NHS trusts should be supported to meet important improvement targets for retention. I hope that the Government will keep their commitment to publish an NHS workforce plan and that they will bring that forward early, along with adequate investment.

Mental health services need proper funding. This financial year, only 13.8% of local health spending has been allocated to mental health services, although mental illness accounts for 21.3% of the total disease burden in England. The money spent on young people's eating disorder services has not kept up with the number of young people who need treatment. I support the NHS Confederation's call for £12 million of additional funding to be made available over the next year to get children and young people's eating disorder services back on track.

The funding that is provided needs to reach frontline services. An inquiry by the APPG on eating disorders, which I am proud to chair, found that 90% of the additional NHS funding given to clinical commissioning groups for children's services did not reach the services to which it was pledged. We wrote to CCGs at the time, and the answers that we received were not satisfactory. The Government must ensure that their funding pledges are not empty words and that money is getting where it is needed. A one-off boost for children's mental health services is not enough. Soaring demand for underfunded services will lead to children missing out on care.

We are all aware that the NHS is in crisis. We hear harrowing stories about ambulance and A&E delays, but the impact on mental health services has received little attention. I hope that today's debate will make a difference and that we will hear more about the crisis in mental health service provision.

The Liberal Democrats firmly believe that physical and mental health should be treated equally in the NHS. Eating disorders are an epidemic. The sooner we realise that, the sooner we can treat them with the

attention they deserve. No one should be condemned to a life of illness, nor should anyone be dying from an eating disorder in 2023.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Carolyn Harris (in the Chair): Order. Members should be aware that I intend to begin calling the Front Benchers at 10.28 am. I call the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, Caroline Nokes.

9.48 am

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Harris. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) on having secured this important debate and thank the Backbench Business Committee for having agreed to it.

I will not repeat the statistics, because the hon. Member for Bath covered them brilliantly. She highlighted the scale of the problem and the fact that it is growing more among young men; of course, Eating Disorders Awareness Week 2023 particularly highlights the challenge for young men. I will focus on some constituency cases that I have come across recently, and on some areas where we can do better to raise awareness in order to start to tackle the root causes, thereby hopefully helping future generations of young people.

I say young people, and we all know that eating disorders are most likely to impact on 17-year-old girls, but the stark reality is that they can endure into much later life. I remember meeting groups of women in this place who were well into their 40s and still suffering from eating disorders. That is not to paint too negative a picture, because we know that people can recover from eating disorders. With the right support and, crucially, early intervention, eating disorders can be tackled successfully. However, we also know that more and more people are suffering from eating disorders in this country today and that covid exacerbated that. Being locked down in our own homes, confronted with image after image on social media, undoubtedly contributed to the problem.

Margaret Ferrier: Social media algorithms will serve to those with eating disorders more and more content that encourages harmful and dangerous behaviours. That is particularly worrying for younger and adolescent sufferers. Does the right hon. Member agree that platforms cannot be allowed to continue to profit from that via advertisements, and that the Online Safety Bill provides the perfect opportunity to address that?

Caroline Nokes: That was exactly what I was going to ask the Minister: can we please make sure that the online safety legislation is used as a tool to oblige social media platforms to clean up their acts when it comes to profiting from legal but undoubtedly extremely harmful forms of advertising to people who are already suffering from very serious medical conditions? When it comes to eating disorders—specifically anorexia nervosa, which is the most lethal mental health condition there is—we have to make sure that we do not trivialising or dismiss them, regarding them as something that happens only to young girls and they get over it. The stark reality is that eating disorders kill more people than any other psychiatric illness.

[*Caroline Nokes*]

We have seen from the evidence provided to all Members by the Royal College of Psychiatrists the increase in incidence, but we also know that waiting times are up hugely. I return to my initial point: early intervention is crucial. When somebody with an eating disorder asks for help, that is the time to give it to them, not 12, 24 or even more weeks later. We know there is a huge challenge with transfers from children's to adult services. Too often, sufferers will fall through the cracks and be forced to go back to the beginning of a waiting list.

I want to highlight the case of one of my constituents—I will not give her name—who is currently suffering from a severe eating disorder and has been for years. She had been in children's services for years but recently turned 18, which brought with it the challenge of finding her appropriate support. She is currently in an adult mental health bed in a secure ward. The stark reality is that she and two other girls in the area covered by the Southern Health NHS Foundation Trust were competing for the one bed available at Leigh House, which is the Hampshire-based specialist support unit for eating disorders. There we have it: an 18-year-old in an adult secure mental health unit, and a real challenge among clinicians to decide whether they will try to treat the physical symptoms of the eating disorder or the mental health conditions, and whether a mental health condition should take precedence over the physical problems.

I then heard from the trust that my constituent was having to be transferred every single day to be force fed with a tube because staff in the mental health unit were not able and did not want to do that. I believe that at just 18 someone is still a child. We know that with eating disorder sufferers development is often slower and young people are more childlike. Yet they are effectively forced to live in an adult mental health ward while suffering from a severe eating disorder and needing specialist help. Furthermore, training is crucial and support for staff who treat people with eating disorders is equally so. It is incredibly gruelling and, in no uncertain terms, a hideous process to have to force feed someone. We cannot imagine the impact that has on staff.

On social media content and algorithms, what does the Minister believe we can do to better protect young people? What can we do to give them the tools they need to be more resilient and to understand, when they are being pushed social media content, what is good and what is not—what is harmful and what is less harmful? I am proud to have stood repeatedly in this Chamber and called for personal, social, health and economic education to be a mandatory part of the curriculum, and proud that a Conservative Government have achieved that, but we also need to ensure that teachers are better equipped to teach PSHE, and I repeat my call for it to be mandatory up to the age of 18. It is not good enough to say that young people have to stay in education—school or college—or training until they are 18 but not to equip them with crucial life skills between 16 and 18. I get that the good colleges will do that, but many will not, so I ask the Minister to work with her colleagues in the Department for Education to ensure that the highest possible quality PSHE is delivered by teachers who feel and, indeed, are equipped to deliver it.

I want to talk briefly about stigma. I am conscious that this Eating Disorders Awareness Week we are highlighting eating disorders in boys and men. Stigma is still a huge challenge and it is undoubtedly worse for men and boys. When we look at the statistics, we see that one in five does not even say to anybody else that they think they might be suffering from an eating disorder. How on earth can someone get help if they cannot even talk about it?

It is incredibly difficult for young men to find their way in the world. They are under massive pressures through body dysmorphia or through the images they see, which are wholly unrealistic and unachievable. There are fitness apps on which the proponents will be taking significant amounts of steroids to achieve a physique that is, to be frank, virtually impossible for the ordinary person—the ordinary man—to achieve, and we know that over-exercising is every bit as much a part of eating disorders as not consuming calories. I am particularly aware that we need to find mechanisms to support young men, through the education system, so that they recognise the challenges around over-exercising, the dangers of steroid abuse and, frankly, the wholly unrealistic male body image that is being promoted to them.

I visited April House in Southampton, a specialist over-18 eating disorder unit, years ago now. That is to my shame: I should go back and say hello again. What was striking was that in a room of women, there was one man, and his particular problem was running. Every single day, he was running a marathon, and he could not rest mentally unless he had run those 26 miles every single day. Let us all just imagine what that was doing to his body and how incredibly weak and damaged he was by it. If we do nothing else today, let us encourage more men to speak up, encourage people to be braver, and ensure that we speak with a united voice from this Chamber. This is not a party political issue; it is absolutely a cross-party issue that we have to do more to support eating disorder sufferers.

9.57 am

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I am delighted to participate once again in this debate in Eating Disorders Awareness Week.

An eating disorder is a cruel and distressing illness both for those who live with the disorder and for their families, who are so often at a loss as to how best to support their loved one who is experiencing the illness. As we have heard, an eating disorder can affect anyone, regardless of gender, age, ethnicity or social background, and the impact of this serious mental illness, affecting 1.25 million people across the UK, is profound. The causes are complex, and there is no quick fix to resolve this condition. There is no doubt that, as we have heard, the gap between the onset of the illness and the start of treatment is simply too long. While family members shrink into the grip of the illness before the eyes of loved ones, families are left feeling helpless to understand what is happening and how best to provide the support that is so obviously needed.

One innovation, or new measure, that has not helped the charities and those on the frontline seeking to support people living with this condition or in danger of developing an eating disorder is calorie information on menus, which has become mandatory in England.

Although we all understand the good intentions behind it, I believe it is a misguided measure. The eating disorder charity Beat is urging the Scottish Government not to follow suit on that, for very understandable reasons.

My first knowledge of the issue of eating disorders was through the story of Karen Carpenter, who died at the age of 32 in 1983 because of illness related to her eating disorder, and then Lena Zavaroni, a Scottish singer and entertainer who died in 1999 at the age of 35 because of issues surrounding her long battle with anorexia. Both those young, beautiful and very talented women spent almost all of their short lives battling with this condition, and they ultimately lost their lives to it.

Those are two very high-profile examples of deaths from eating disorder. Many people will have heard their stories and about their struggles. Sadly, it is the case that, for anyone who develops this condition, the mortality rate is frighteningly high: it is the highest mortality rate of any mental illness. As we have heard today, eating disorder does not come alone; it is accompanied by other mental health conditions such as depression, self-harm and obsessive behaviour.

Wera Hobhouse: Is it not also important that we look at athletes? We have heard that a lot of eating disorders are combined with over-exercising. It is important that we look at those highly successful and high-performing people, who are in danger of developing an eating disorder.

Patricia Gibson: Indeed. We have talked about the overlap and common ground between eating disorders and obsessive behaviour. That territory certainly includes issues such as athletes who are very conscious of body image and how to maintain it.

We have heard that eating disorders are often incorrectly, and perhaps almost exclusively, associated with young women. Stereotypes around the disorder mean that often men who are living with this condition can be deterred from seeking the help that they need. They can also have their difficulties and struggles misdiagnosed. That is why this year's Eating Disorders Awareness Week theme is eating disorders in men. In fact, one in four people with eating disorders are men, and it is important that we raise awareness around that so that people understand this is not restricted to women.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Even though men are in the minority of those affected, an important issue, and one that I too struggle with in my gender, is that many males, and young males, fail to get help, and fail to admit and acknowledge their problems. That is not the case in every other walk of life—if the car is not working, we take it to the garage; if the television is not working, we get the TV repair man—but we sometimes struggle to get males to understand that if help is needed, they should seek help and get it.

Patricia Gibson: Other health statistics show that men are notoriously poor at asking for the help they need, which is why they often have undiagnosed conditions. The creation of a gender stereotype around eating disorders makes it all the more difficult to break the barriers if young men develop this condition or are in danger of developing it. We need to be aware of that.

I am glad that the Scottish Government have made available support to the eating disorder charity Beat, to help to provide additional support and services across Scotland for those who are affected by this cruel illness. All medical courses in Scottish universities are discussing with Beat how to deliver, or are already providing, further training on this complex condition, of which we need to continue to develop our understanding.

Those living with the condition and their families have seen this illness tighten its grip on individuals and families who were already struggling with it during the covid pandemic. Many of those affected were left to the mercy of the awful online forums, which advise those living with the condition on how best to avoid food without family members noticing. In preparation for this debate I checked, and those online forums still exist. They are still operating and advising people how to fool their families into believing that they are eating when they are not—that is simply appalling. It is absolutely disgraceful that such sites can be hosted with apparent impunity, effectively promoting self-harm, which can and often does lead to death. When the Minister responds, I really hope she will address that.

This is a very serious condition. We work to try to remove any websites that host hate speech or incite hatred of any kind; these forums are equally dangerous, in my view, and they ought not to continue. They have been in operation, to my knowledge, for at least 20 years. There seems to have been no progress in tackling them. The takeaway for me today is that the Minister should at least tackle that element of the problem, while we all work together to try to improve treatment and diagnosis for those affected.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Carolyn Harris (in the Chair): Order. I have to impose a five-minute limit on speeches.

10.5 am

Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) for securing the debate and other Members who have spoken. I also pay tribute to Members who are not with us today: the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), with whom I have worked on this topic, and my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher), who has valiantly led a campaign to recognise the need for a men's mental health strategy. We have very much a cross-party agenda on the issue. I am pleased to work with those colleagues from the red wall, from the deep red flag of the hard left and from the deep orange of the hon. Member for Bath.

This is a totally cross-party issue, as we have heard, because this condition affects all our constituents and all our constituencies. It affects people of all ages and, of course, of both sexes. I recognise and agree with the points that have been made about unhelpful stereotypes. Some stereotypes are, of course, helpful in the sense that they point to a general truth, from which there will be many exceptions.

I spent most of my career before Parliament working in prisons, where there is a clear difference between how the two sexes express the distress that is caused by incarceration. Men tend to externalise their distress through fighting and violence against others; women internalise their distress through self-harm. Those are

[*Danny Kruger*]

generalisations—there are many women who fight and men who self-harm—but they have some validity and are relevant to how we approach this particular mental condition.

There are different ways in which men and women and girls and boys express distress and mental health conditions. The fact is that the outworking of eating disorders is in many ways the same: extreme ill health and enormous distress to the sufferer or patient. I recognise the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) about the distress experienced by the staff who work in eating disorder clinics. It is a very distressing condition.

As we have heard, a quarter of eating disorder sufferers are men and boys. The sources are complex—not being an expert, I do not want to stray too far into this—but it is worth acknowledging that it seems to be generally agreed that the source of eating disorders, and anorexia nervosa in particular, is a need for control. There is, of course, a perfectly healthy desire to be fit and healthy. It is appropriate that people want to control their appetites—we, not our appetites, need to be in charge—but we see that healthy desire to manage one's health, fitness, food intake and exercise regime spilling over into a different sort of control, which itself becomes controlling. We become slave to a different sort of appetite.

I want to speak up for the men who come forward and identify themselves as suffering from eating disorders. That is a very brave thing to do. The other stereotype that we have discussed, which is entirely true, is that not enough men talk about mental health and their own mental health conditions. As we have heard, a fifth of male eating disorder sufferers have never spoken about their condition to anybody. We therefore need to raise awareness. I pay tribute to Beat, Hope Virgo and other campaigners for their commitment during this Eating Disorders Awareness Week to the cause of men's mental health and eating disorders in men.

We know that the result of not coming forward early is that diagnosis comes later, and therefore treatment is so much harder. It is also disappointing to read in the research that the majority of men who receive treatment for eating disorders or ask for help are disappointed with the service they receive. I dare say that that is the same for women. There is obviously a fault in the provision of services.

What to do? I endorse the points that have been made about the need to raise general public awareness, which is the purpose of this debate as much as anything. People need to be able to recognise the signs and symptoms in their loved ones and friends, school friends, students and colleagues. We need more training for doctors, particularly GPs, to recognise the symptoms and signpost to good treatment. We need more services before hospital, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North said, and we need more acute services. I pay tribute to the Cotswold House unit at the Savernake Hospital in my constituency, which is a tremendous in-patient unit. In practice, it is under-resourced, because there are not enough beds, as my right hon. Friend said.

I will end with this point: crucially, we need more support for step-down services. It is not enough just to get somebody back to the appropriate weight. It can

take months and months for people to be healthy again and to be free of treatment, so we cannot just say, "You get the acute treatment, then you're back to health, and you're free." We need to support people for many months more, and we need more provision in the community for that step-down service.

10.10 am

Olivia Blake (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Harris. I thank the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) for securing the debate and for all her work on the APPG, which I am proud to be a member of.

I want to start by recognising the amazing work carried out by eating disorder specialist NHS workers and campaigners in my city and around the country, who continue to provide life-saving care and vital early intervention under increasingly difficult circumstances. Recently, I spoke to frontline workers about the situation in Sheffield, and what they reported was extremely concerning. Numbers of referrals are still up, having increased every year since 2015. The South Yorkshire Eating Disorders Association—also known as SYEDA—has a four to five-month waiting list for its services, which it fears is deterring people from seeking help.

The tsunami of eating disorders that health workers warned the Government about during the pandemic is not going away; if anything, it is getting more severe. That is because this crisis is not new. In 2017, the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman for England published a damning report, which concluded that "NHS eating disorder services are failing patients".

Yesterday, six years later, the same ombudsman concluded that urgent action is still needed if the Government are to prevent more people from dying—a stark condemnation.

What needs to change? First, services must no longer be forced to choose between investing in early intervention and emergency support. NHS figures show that hospital admissions for people with eating disorders have risen by 84% in the last five years. Meanwhile, more than 8,000 adults are waiting to be seen for therapy—the highest figures since records began. Early intervention is the most effective form of treatment, so it is no surprise that, as it becomes harder to access, the number of critical cases is increasing. Investing in early intervention would be transformative for patients and services.

Next, we must increase training for all healthcare professionals. On average, UK undergraduate medical students receive less than two hours on eating disorders. I welcome the fact that the ombudsman is now encouraging pharmacies to take part in training programmes, as they play a crucial role in preventing more harm.

Finally, we must be consistent in having a fully funded access and waiting time standard for adults seeking help, as we now have for children. We also need a treatment pathway specifically for avoidant/restrictive food intake disorder so that people are not left undiagnosed and untreated. That needs to be commissioned through the NHS.

But we cannot stop there. To truly address the crisis, we need a root-and-branch review of eating disorder provision. We need a holistic approach, with preventive, community-based, tailored support centred around the needs of each individual patient. We need to adopt innovative forms of treatment and to launch well-funded research programmes into the most effective treatment.

This crisis could, and should, be an opportunity to rebuild our approach to how we support and treat the 1.25 million people in the UK who suffer from an eating disorder. I therefore urge the Minister to look at the transformative work groups such as SYEDA are doing to help build an alternative framework for care nationally.

I want to turn now to an issue that has been raised with me and that I have written to the Department about. I have been hearing worrying reports from eating disorder specialists, researchers, medical staff and parents of young people about the rising use of restraints on children with eating disorders in general medical wards by staff with no training in mental health. I have heard harrowing stories of staff having to close the entire ward just for one patient because the use of restraints is so disruptive and distressing. In other cases, I have heard of security guards being brought in to restrain patients because the staff were not trained to provide this sort of care.

The use of restraints and restrictive interventions can have long-term consequences for the health and wellbeing of patients, as well as a negative impact on the staff involved. I have also heard that these interventions have been used far too early and without following guidance, such as that from NICE.

Under section 6 of the Mental Health Units (Use of Force) Act 2018, medical staff are required by law to record the use of restraint in all medical settings, but the Act does not apply to patients being treated for a mental health disorder in general medical settings. I am extremely concerned that that means that we do not know how prevalent the use of restraint is for children currently stuck in a medical ward awaiting a tier 4 bed. I hope the Minister will consider applying the recording requirements that apply to the use of restraints in mental health settings to patients who are currently in non-mental health settings. Will they meet me to discuss this further?

In my city, Sheffield Children's Hospital has recognised this as an issue and has already started recording restraint, recognising the difference between the services it provides for mental health and non-mental health conditions. That is so important. It is a national scandal waiting to happen that people are being forcibly restrained when it is not needed.

10.15 am

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): It is a genuine pleasure to serve under your guidance this morning, Ms Harris. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) on securing this debate, which she has led very well. It has been a helpful debate, and I associate myself with the comments that everyone has made. I also add my thanks to Beat, Hope Virgo and all the others leading the campaign to increase awareness and improve provision for people suffering with eating disorders.

Eating disorders are, of course, a range of mental health conditions that have a physical consequence, with maybe two thirds of those suffering from them having a physical illness as a consequence of their mental health condition. It is a privilege, and deeply moving, to work alongside, support and serve sufferers and their families in my communities in Cumbria. I feel

deeply affected by not just their struggle with their condition but, sometimes, their struggle to access the services they need.

As has been mentioned, covid has had an impact on the prevalence of eating disorders, with something like a 55% increase in referrals during that period, and an increase of more than 80% in the number of hospital admissions, and I want to remark on what we do in response to those admissions. In our communities in Westmorland, anybody needing tier 4 hospitalisation for an eating disorder will be placed in a bed in Manchester, Edinburgh or Darlington if they are lucky and there are sufficient beds in those places. In many cases, as the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Olivia Blake) mentioned, people—often young people—end up hospitalised on the wrong kind of wards, where they are supported by lovely, wonderful people who are just not trained to support them. Therefore, the experience not just of that person in their suffering, but of the people caring for them and the other people—often young people—on those wards, is harrowing, deeply distressing and inappropriate.

As has also been noted, it is worth mentioning that the use of BMI as a measure to decide whether someone can access services is dangerous and foolish. We would not say to a person with cancer, "Come back when you have more cancer"—we would treat them.

Caroline Nokes: This will be a very brief intervention. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about BMI—we really have to move away from it. It gives a misleading impression of wellbeing. Can we please remember that it is designed for a Caucasian male's body type? We know that the majority of sufferers of eating disorders are women.

Tim Farron: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for a helpful intervention. That is absolutely true. We would not say to a person who presented with cancer, "Come back when your tumours have spread." If someone is presenting with an eating disorder, we need to believe them and allow them to access the right support immediately. That needs to be changed urgently.

At the other end of the spectrum, at tier 1, and particularly for young people, what are we doing to build resilience so that people do not develop eating disorders in the first place? In Cumbria, there is nearly nothing in terms of provision for adults, while we spend a grand total, through our public health, of 75p per child and young person on tier 1 resilience support, and that is for all mental health conditions, not just eating disorders. We need to prevent people from getting into these circumstances in the first place—for their sake and for everyone else's.

Let us be positive: it is important to welcome the access waiting time standards. They are a good thing. However, they are mostly not being met. In north Cumbria, 26% of routine referrals of young people and 11% of urgent referrals of young people are not being treated in that timescale. In south Cumbria, 23% of routine referrals are not being seen within the four-week standard. While there is better news for those meeting the standards for urgent referrals, the total declared for Morecambe Bay hospitals trust is 12 individuals with an urgent eating disorder need. That is baloney. I personally know more people than that who are struggling, which

[*Tim Farron*]

tells us either that the data is faulty or that it is hard to get into the system because BMI is used as a gateway to access those services.

More generally, this speaks of a lack of parity when it comes to care, treatment and taking seriously issues relating to mental health, particularly where young people and eating disorders are concerned. If one of our young people were to break their leg on a football pitch on a Saturday afternoon, they would be straight into hospital and the healing process would begin that day. If something invisible in them breaks, it could be weeks or months before they get support, or it could never come. It may come dangerously, or even fatally, too late, and that is wrong.

What are our collective asks? We need increased awareness. It is right that we focus on men, who are less likely to come forward and yet make up a huge proportion of those in need, but help should be there for everyone, and I urge people to come forward and access it. We also need more support for families, who are massively hit by the consequences of eating disorders for their loved ones.

We mentioned the waiting time standards for young people and children—I am glad we have them, although I wish we met them—but there are no standards for adults, and it is about time that there were. Research funding needs to be increased so that we can understand the causes and cures and tackle this range of diseases head on. We need to be utterly intolerant of dangerous images and things that lead people into this dangerous area and cause such ill health.

Medical training needs to be improved so that we can refer our referred accurately. We need to tackle the BMI gateway. When tackling obesity, for example, we need to remember that there is a danger of things such as like calorie references being well-intentioned but counter-productive. We need to ensure that money allocated to integrated care boards for eating disorder support is actually spent on that. Finally, services must be commissioned adequately and close to home.

10.22 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is always a pleasure to speak in Westminster Hall, and I thank the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) for securing this essential debate. She has made it her passion in the House—in Westminster Hall and the main Chamber—to highlight these issues, and I commend her for that. Her enthusiasm and energy for the subject are worth noting. This is an emotive issue and, like other hon. Members, I have recently been fighting a case for a constituent who needed in-patient care and could not be seen in Northern Ireland.

According to a report published by the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority in its review of eating disorder services in Northern Ireland, approximately 50 to 120 people develop anorexia nervosa and 170 people develop bulimia nervosa every year in Northern Ireland. That is a significant number. Thanks to the office of former Health Minister Edwin Poots, and thanks to his energy and commitment, a young woman who was a constituent of mine at the time went to St Thomas's across the way. He saved her life—I have no doubt about that at all. Her mum and dad were extremely

concerned about her, and I was concerned because I know the family very well. Today she is a married woman with two children and she has a life like everybody else because action was taken. That is a true story and shows what can be done. In another case—I know the mother and the young girl herself well, but I will not mention any names—my constituent needs advanced help.

We want to address the issue of stigma, discrimination and shame. It is clear that eating disorders are becoming more prevalent, and there are a number of reasons why people believe that is the case. I have heard of those who blame filters on social media, which make vulnerable people believe that a flat stomach, perfect abs and enhanced proportions are real. As the hon. Member for Bath said, that mostly affects men, but some girls want that as well. Others have highlighted that eating disorder forums accessible on the internet and on social media give tips on how to eat as little as possible.

I had a parent tell me before Christmas that a school classmate pledge was the reason why her daughter dropped to 6 stone at a height of 5 feet 9 inches. The classmates decided that none of them would eat Christmas dinner and that they would weigh themselves several times a day. That is peer pressure. Again, that illustrates what the hon. Lady has said in this important debate. This parent said her daughter went to the GP and was found—at 14 years of age—to have damaged her heart and to be in danger of starvation, yet she felt the schoolyard pressure to fit in with other dieting 14-year-olds. We need to get things in place because boys and girls could destroy their health, or even kill themselves, if they do not have access to mental health services. The mental health aspect is really important.

Mr Gregory Campbell: My hon. Friend is outlining some harrowing cases from his constituency. Does he agree that some progress has been made in the wider context of the debate but that, as in other walks of life, we need to ensure that more progress is made to get to a better place?

Jim Shannon: I thank my hon. Friend and colleague for that intervention. Yes, I fully agree. As always, and I say this not because he is my friend and colleague, he brings wise words to Westminster Hall. I thank him for that.

On mental health, it is also known that early recognition and early treatment are associated with improved outcomes, so it is vital that all healthcare professionals are able to identify those at risk. There is an onus on them to do that, and patients should be able to access care quickly.

However, this is not simply a disease of young girls or indeed of young people in general. As others have said, one person in four with an eating disorder is a man, and the eating disorder charity Beat launched the United Kingdom's biggest survey to date of men's experience of eating disorders. Of those who took part, one in five had never spoken about their struggles—that happens—and four in five felt that raising awareness would help more men get treatment sooner. I ask the Minister, what has been done to promote awareness and to signpost available help—not simply for worried parents, but for worried brothers and sisters and for family members and friends who can see that things are not going well for their loved one?

I read an article on the National Eating Disorders Association website with the heading “Nine Truths about Eating Disorders”. I am not sure whether I have time to mention them all, but I will do my best—I will talk really fast, and nobody will be able to understand. *[Laughter.]* No, I am not going to do that.

The article states:

“Many people with eating disorders look healthy, yet may be extremely ill... Families are not to blame, and can be the patients’ and providers’ best allies in treatment.”

The third point, which I want to emphasise, is that an “eating disorder diagnosis is a health crisis”—

that is what it is, and we should be under no illusion that it is anything else—

“that disrupts personal and family functioning.”

The article continues:

“Eating disorders are not choices, but serious biologically influenced illnesses... Eating disorders affect people of all genders, ages, races, ethnicities, body shapes and weights, sexual orientations, and socioeconomic statuses... Eating disorders carry an increased risk for both suicide and medical complications”

Others have mentioned that. The article goes on:

“Genes and environment play important roles in the development of eating disorders... Genes alone do not predict who will develop eating disorders.”

The ninth and last truth is:

“Full recovery from an eating disorder is possible. Early detection and intervention are important.”

I want to finish on this point. I am thankful for Eating Disorders Awareness Week, but I say with the greatest respect to the Minister—it goes without say that I greatly admire her, and we are dear friends—that we need an action plan. Will she put her shoulder to the wheel and implement what is necessary to effect change in the way we fund this area and approach this killer, because it is just that? Will she do so as a matter of urgency?

10.28 am

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): It is pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Harris, and I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse), who has campaigned tirelessly on the issue and brought the debate to the House today.

The hon. Lady talked about the focus on men and why that focus is important—one in four of those affected by an eating disorder is a man. We have heard some statistics today, including that there has been an increase of 128% in hospital admissions of men for this issue, so it is right that we should highlight it this morning. We have also heard that men are notoriously poor at asking for help, so it is important that we have so many male MPs here this morning, speaking out and raising awareness.

I want to talk about the BMI issue, which was mentioned by the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron). I remember having my BMI measured during a health screening process at my previous place of work. At the time, I was six months pregnant, but I was a slim six months pregnant.

Jim Shannon: You are still slim.

Carol Monaghan: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that comment. However, I was told that my BMI showed that I was obese. I said, “I’m not obese, I’m pregnant”,

and they said, “No, you are obese. You’re showing up as obese.” And they gave me a leaflet on obesity. It seemed that I could not break through that mindset. Those carrying out and promoting these tests sometimes have absolutely no understanding of what obesity is about. I was able to speak up for myself quite capably, but there may be others for whom it is different, so I totally agree with the comments about BMI.

The hon. Gentleman talked about the importance of intervention and how it makes such a difference. He spoke about a young lady in his constituency who is alive today because of an intervention to help her. All of us have to hear those types of stories.

I am a teacher by profession, and over the years I worked with a number of young people who had eating disorders. It was interesting that most of them wanted to get better; they understood that there was an issue. It was often high-performing young people, as well; eating disorders represented an element of control for them. We saw that early intervention made such a difference for them. It was important that teaching staff and other people in a young person’s life were able to recognise the signs early on, and did not put them down to, “She’s just doing a bit of extra exercise”, or, “He’s just trying to achieve that body.”

Unrealistic expectations are put on young people. We have heard from a number of Members this morning about the impact of social media. I would add that some TV programmes also have an impact. I will name one in particular: “Love Island”. It shows beautiful young people with perfect bodies wandering about all day, scantily dressed. If young people aspire to those unrealistic standards, it is not good for anyone. The producers of such programmes need to take responsibility for their impact.

The NHS digital survey asked children and young people aged between 11 and 19 a number of questions, including, “Have you ever thought you’re fat when other people said you were thin?”, “Have you ever made yourself deliberately throw up?” and “If you eat too much, do you blame yourself?”. The responses were really worrying. Among 11 to 19-year-olds, 12.9% screened positive, meaning that they answered yes to two or more of those questions. Among 17 to 19-year-olds, the screening positive figure was 60%. If that is what young people are thinking, then we are at crisis level.

The waiting times to receive help are too long. We heard from the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Olivia Blake) about a 2017 report on eating disorders that referred to patients being failed, and how that situation really has not improved. We also heard harrowing stories about patients being restrained, which I think all of us here were quite disturbed by.

The right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes), who is Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, talked about the impact of shortages in services on those affected by eating disorders, and mentioned that it would not do young people any good to be treated in adult services. We must provide appropriate treatment in appropriate settings.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) talked about two very prominent women, Karen Carpenter and Lena Zavaroni. I will talk about a colleague of mine who had an eating disorder. She was getting over it when, sadly, she had a heart

[Carol Monaghan]

attack and died. We do not talk enough about the long-term impact of eating disorders on physical health. We know that the heart is affected by them.

As time is short, I will scoot through my speech and get to the asks. First of all, we need action on social media companies that target vulnerable individuals. We also need the removal of calories from menus; their inclusion was aimed at tackling obesity, but unfortunately the message is hitting the wrong people. We need better input to mental health services, and we absolutely need signposting for families who are going through the trauma of having a family member suffer from an eating disorder.

Finally, I thank the hon. Member for Bath once again for securing this debate, and for giving us all an opportunity to speak about the issue this morning.

10.34 am

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): What a pleasure it is to close for the Opposition with you in the Chair, Ms Harris. I thank the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) for bringing forward this debate; I am honoured to be part of it again. It is a shame that we have to be here every year talking about this issue, but it is a testament to how seriously we take it. We will be here until we see the issue resolved.

This is normally the point at which I mention a few comments from Labour Members and say, "Didn't they do well?", but every single contribution and intervention was valuable. I learned new things on a topic that I thought I already knew very well. I hope that this debate will not just be filled with words about what needs to change, but that there will be something tangible—some action—at the end.

Across the UK, as many as 1.25 million people are living with an eating disorder. That is a staggering number, if we actually think about what that means. We have heard about the considerably high mortality rates; anorexia claims the most lives of any mental illness. With timely and appropriate treatment, people can go on to live healthy and fulfilling lives, so how many of those deaths are avoidable? That is the truth that we have to face.

I welcome the fact that we have opportunities in this place to mark Eating Disorders Awareness Week, but we have to do so much more all year long to challenge the stereotypes and assumptions that so many people still hold about eating disorders. It is so important to remember that eating disorders can manifest themselves in a variety of ways—through people eating too much or too little, or even restricting what they eat. To echo what has been said, we must never forget that eating disorders can affect people of any age, gender, ethnicity and socioeconomic background.

We have heard that one in four people with eating disorders is a man. It is staggering that it is still so difficult for boys and men to come forward and talk about their issues with eating. In my work in A&E, I see younger and younger people—especially boys—talking about their struggles with food and body image. They often cite social media and peer pressure as the source of those struggles.

I always like to thank the charity Beat for its incredible work. It works so hard to combat the negative stereotypes and misleading perceptions of eating disorders, which are sadly all too common. As was said eloquently today, people experiencing an eating disorder can often find themselves in mental health hospitals. To pick up on the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Olivia Blake), about the use of restraint, I have written to the Minister on that topic. I look forward to having a meeting about it, and to seeing the end of the inappropriate use of restraint. Mental health in-patient settings must be a place of safety, where patients and their loved ones can expect to be treated with dignity and professionalism. However, that is clearly not always the case.

For the families of those with eating disorders, the situation is crippling. They have an all-encompassing fear of the unknown when it comes to what their loved one will eat that day. They are concerned that they may have to give up their job, or even not care as much for their other children because they are obsessed with what one child is eating. They know that the child could lose their life at any moment.

It has been agonising to listen to the recent reports of the death of 19 eating disorder patients in in-patient settings; serious concerns were raised about their care. Lives should not be needlessly lost because of poor care and a lack of understanding of eating disorders. My heart goes out to their friends and families. Far too many families—not just the families of those with eating disorders—have lost loved ones in mental health hospitals. How many more people will lose their life before the Government get a grip on safety in in-patient settings? We need a Government who will get serious about mental health and eating disorders. As we have said time and again, access to proper treatment can be life-changing. Prevention is important, and early intervention provides the best chance for recovery. Think of those families who have lost loved ones, knowing that it could have been prevented, and that we in this place have not yet done enough to save these lives.

Targets on accessing treatment are being routinely missed. In 2016, a clear standard was set that 95% of children and young people experiencing the most urgent eating disorder cases should receive treatment within one week. Since then, however—I accept that the Minister has not been in post that entire time—the Government have missed the target; I hope the situation will improve. Disappointingly, only 60% of urgent cases were seen within one week last year. That means that four in 10 children and young people were not seen at the point of desperation. Children and young people are being left on lengthy waiting lists, unable to access support. Meanwhile, their families are helpless, and are trying their best to support their children without vital help from mental health professionals.

Wera Hobhouse: Does the hon. Lady realise the mental health impact on those who see a sufferer suffering and not getting the intervention they need? Families see what is happening to their loved one. They are waiting with them, and their mental health is deteriorating at the same time.

Dr Allin-Khan: Without a shadow of a doubt, not investing in a person with a mental health need often has a knock-on impact on four, five or six members of

the family. Ultimately, we then need to use more mental health resources to serve their needs as well. It makes no economic sense, and no moral sense either, so I thank the hon. Member for her intervention.

The strain that an eating disorder places on an entire family is immense. As I say, parents often have to stop working to care for their child around the clock. How can the Government continue to fail young people with mental health needs? This cannot go on. For how long do the Government think it is acceptable for young people to be stuck on waiting lists for mental health treatment? Eating disorder psychiatry and child and adolescent psychiatry are two of the three psychiatric sub-specialties with the highest consultant vacancy rates. Where is the Government's workforce plan? Patients are suffering.

After more than a decade of Tory mismanagement, patients are being failed, waiting lists are soaring and services are struggling to cope. I do not like to make eating disorders a political football—they are not—but the truth has to be told: the Government have failed thus far on their commitment. If they cannot get a grip and improve services, Labour will. We stand ready with a bold plan to recruit 8,500 additional staff in order to provide mental health treatment within a month for all who need it. Labour will put prevention and early intervention at the forefront of our approach to mental health. We will place a mental health specialist in every school, and we will place an open-access mental health hub for young people in every single community. The Government can no longer continue to neglect mental health services.

10.43 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Harris. I thank the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) for securing this important debate. Both as an MP and as chair of the all-party parliamentary group, she has long been a champion of those with eating disorders.

Improving treatment for eating disorders is a key priority for the Government and a vital part of our work to improve mental health overall. We have heard from right hon. and hon. Members from across the political divide about how urgent this issue is and how many of our constituents are affected by it. It is national Eating Disorders Awareness Week, and raising awareness is an important part of improving the outcome for those suffering with this serious and often life-threatening condition. It can affect anyone of any age, gender or background.

As has been mentioned numerous times, Beat has done tremendous work in this space. It estimates that 1.25 million people live with an eating disorder in the UK. Of those, one in four is a man. I am really pleased that this year's national Eating Disorders Awareness Week is focusing on eating disorders in men. I think that every Member who spoke in the debate covered the fact that men are often reluctant to come forward and ask for help. There is a stigma around eating disorders, particularly for men. It is important that healthcare professionals recognise that this is also an issue for men, so that if a man or a young boy seeks help, that is taken seriously.

It is vital that we recognise that these issues affect men, so that we can break down the stereotypes and help men to speak up and get help, because having an eating disorder is devastating, and not just for the individual. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) highlighted, it can also be devastating for those around them, whether family or friends. We know that recovery is possible, which is why it is so important that people come forward to ask for help and support, and get timely access to the right treatment that can save their lives. That is why, under the long-term plan for the NHS, we are investing £1 billion extra in community mental healthcare for adults with severe mental health illness, which includes treatment for eating disorders. The extra funding is being used to enhance capacity for new and improved community eating disorder teams, covering the whole of England.

Hon. Members have raised concerns about long waiting times in their communities. Integrated care boards, which were set up in July, now commission services. We will hold them to account for their timelines, but hon. Members can also hold their local commissioners to account. The funding is given to them for mental health services. We do not dictate how it is spent, because that will be different for different communities, and the prevalence of eating disorders will be different in different parts of England. We expect commissioners to commission those services and to ensure capacity and timeliness for their local population, but if Members of Parliament feel that is not being done, we are happy to meet them to discuss how we can improve things locally.

Since 2016, investment in children and young people's community eating disorder services has risen every year; there has been an extra £53 million per year from 2021. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) highlighted, the pandemic continues to have an impact on the mental health and wellbeing of many people, and has caused a large increase in demand for eating disorder services. Services were almost closed, or certainly severely reduced, for nearly two years during covid, and covid itself had an impact, and there is now a tsunami of people coming forward. Data shows that the number of children and young people entering urgent treatment for an eating disorder in 2021 increased by 11% on the previous year, to over 2,600, and in the year before that it increased by 73%, from around 1,300 to close to 2,400, so there are more referrals than ever before.

A number of Members, particularly my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North, mentioned online safety. I reassure colleagues that we are working with Ministers from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport on the online safety legislation, but also on other issues, because there is so much work that needs to be done to ensure that online influence is reduced where it is causing significant harm.

To return to the funding being made available, this is the first Government to really put mental health on the same footing as physical health. I am proud that we are creating parity of esteem, not just in planning services but in funding services. As part of the £500 million covid recovery plan funding for the mental health recovery action plan, we have invested an extra £79 million to expand young people's mental health services, which has allowed 2,000 more children and young people to access eating disorder services. We have

[*Maria Caulfield*]

delivered this, with over 4,000 more young people entering treatment for an eating disorder than did in the previous year.

A number of Members talked about setting targets for children. We have indeed set targets for children's eating disorders services. For adults, NHS England has consulted on setting a target for mental health services. I am particularly keen for that to be introduced as quickly as possible. I am meeting NHS England's clinical lead for mental health services in the coming days and hope to be able to update Members on progress on that, because what gets measured gets done. While we may not be meeting the target for children yet, because of the sheer scale of demand, at least we have a target, and we know which parts of the country can and which cannot meet it, and I am keen that we do the same for adults.

The issue of BMI was raised, and I take the points made extremely seriously. Let me be clear: rejection for treatment on BMI grounds should not occur. If there are instances where that has happened, I am happy to address them; that practice is not in line with any guidance, including National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidance, so it should not be happening. If there are examples of it happening, we are very keen to hear about them. If it is happening at a local level, I urge hon. Members to contact their local commissioners to find out why, because the guidance does not recommend that practice at all.

The hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Olivia Blake) raised the issue of restraint, which I was concerned to hear about. We introduced new legislation in 2018 on restraint in mental health in-patient settings. If there are loopholes in that legislation, I am very keen to look at them. Restraint should not be happening at in-patient mental health settings, but if someone is outside of that setting and it is happening, we need to look at that. The rapid review across in-patient mental health settings is looking at the safety of those services. We will be looking at the results of that review in the coming weeks. I am clear with hon. Members that this Government sees mental health services as a priority.

Sir George Howarth: The Minister may recall that I intervened on the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) about the problem of type 1 diabetics with eating disorders. Is the Minister aware of the two trials taking place, one in London and the other in Bournemouth in the west country? Once an evaluation of the success of those integrated approaches is available and published, will she undertake to look at it, because it could have some indications as to how to treat other kinds of eating disorders as well?

Maria Caulfield: Absolutely; I will look out for the results of those trials. I am keen that we use evidence-based medicine, and if something has proven to be effective in clinical research, it absolutely needs to be rolled out. An hon. Member touched on the lack of research into eating disorders. The National Institute for Health and Care Research does have funding available, so I would encourage clinicians, researchers and charities that want to undertake research into eating disorders to apply for

funding for those trials. We need more research into eating disorders, particularly around men and high-risk groups, such as diabetics.

Wera Hobhouse: Will the Minister respond to the concern raised that Government money had been made available but did not reach the frontline, as a freedom of information request by Beat showed? How do the Government intend to tackle that and ensure that money reaches frontline services?

Maria Caulfield: The Government have made huge amounts of funding available, for both mental health and eating disorders. More funding than ever before has gone into those services, but that funding needs to reach the frontline. That speaks to my point about local commissioners: where funding is given to a particular area, commissioners are supposed to use that money to commission services at a local level. If that is not happening in some parts of the country, then I am happy to meet with those commissioners and Members of Parliament to find out why.

We want to ensure that funding is going to the frontline to make the difference that we need it to. We are the first Government to prioritise mental health, and the first to set targets for eating disorder referrals. We are the first Government to set a standard of recruiting 27,000 additional mental health workers. We have started to roll out mental health teams in our schools, and when I spoke to the Royal College of Psychiatrists yesterday, for the first time it said that it had filled all its training posts in the last year.

We are making significant progress, but patients need to feel that. That is the next step. I am happy to work with the hon. Member for Bath and the APPG on eating disorders to make sure that is happening on the ground, because, as someone said, it is great to talk about it, but we need to see the impact for patients.

I hope that reassures right hon. and hon. Members about how seriously we take this issue. I look forward to working with everyone across the House to make eating disorders a bigger priority for clinical work. Good progress has been made, but there is a lot more to do.

10.55 am

Wera Hobhouse: It has been a real pleasure to listen to all the contributions today; I thank everyone who contributed to the debate. It was wide-ranging, reflecting the wide-ranging issues associated with eating disorders, from body image and social media to access to services, waiting times and the need for early intervention and diagnosis, as well as the need for research funding and more specialists in the field.

This is a cross-party effort to eradicate the epidemic of eating disorders. The good news is that eating disorders can be treated and full recovery is possible, but we need to do a lot more to make that happen. We need to increase our knowledge about the many different types of eating disorder. We need many more specialists and specialist services, and mental health and physical health services need to be integrated, as has been made clear today. Eating disorders are a mental health condition, as well as a physical health condition. If the two are not treated together, then we are failing patients.

Eating disorders do not discriminate; we must encourage everybody to come forward to seek help, especially boys and men. That was the main topic of the debate. Early diagnosis and treatment can make a life-saving difference. As we have heard many times, men do not like to come forward or talk about physical problems, but it is important for men of all ages to come forward and seek help.

I thank everybody who contributed, particularly those tireless campaigners, including Hope Virgo, who has been mentioned several times, and the eating disorder charity Beat. Without their tireless efforts, awareness of eating disorders and treatment would not be what it is today.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Eating Disorders Awareness Week.

UEFA Champions League Final 2022: Independent Review Findings

11 am

Ian Byrne (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the findings of the independent review report on the UEFA Champions League Final 2022.

It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Ms Harris. I declare that I am a proud member of the Spirit of Shankly football union.

I want to start by paying tribute to the magnificent efforts of the Liverpool supporters who saved lives through their actions in Paris. They also fought for the truth regarding the events that took place there and refused to be beaten by the lies and smears of UEFA and the French Government, which were straight from the Hillsborough playbook. We need to remember that this could have happened to any set of fans in Europe.

“Due to the late arrival of fans, the match has been delayed.” That was the message on a screen in Stade de France that made so many of us feel physically ill when we saw it. Lies were once again relayed to a watching world after so many of us had just experienced our worst day in football since Hillsborough, all because of the disgraceful organisation by UEFA and the French authorities. We knew immediately that another cover-up was in motion. After all, we had been here before.

I was sent this by Nick Braley, a Hillsborough survivor:

“As a Hillsborough survivor, I naively expected the policing to be focused on safety, especially given Paris’s history of terrorist attacks, including one at the Stade de France just a few years ago. Instead, I was met with complete disorganisation, aggressive and violent policing which resulted in my being kettled and ultimately bounced along a line of riot shields of Parisian police officers. Thirty-three years ago, I escaped a life-threatening crush at Hillsborough and now I faced a situation where one slip or trip and I could have again witnessed deaths at a football match. These things happen. People make mistakes and they need to learn from them, only here, again, I had to observe the police and authorities invent a pack of lies as they tried to pass the blame onto innocent people rather than take responsibility for their own failings. Thirty-three years ago, the police did all they could to fabricate a false narrative and here we are with the French authorities doing exactly the same. Please don’t let them do this, make them take responsibility and please ensure that lessons are learned for the safety of all future sporting fans.”

That is why this report matters so much to so many people.

Eight months since it was commissioned by the general secretary of UEFA, the report into what really happened at the UEFA champions league final in Paris on 28 May has finally been published. To my eternal relief and to the relief of thousands of Liverpool and Real Madrid supporters who experienced the horror that evening, it is a world away from the UEFA-led cover-up that we saw on the evening of 28 May. The report places the blame correctly and firmly at the doorstep of those responsible for the game, which could have led to countless lives being lost. The report is clear: the fans bear no culpability. The investigation panel concludes that the “overarching organisational failures” by UEFA and the French authorities were at the root of what went so terribly wrong that evening.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman has a love for the beautiful game and a love for Liverpool, and I commend him for that. Even though I am not a Liverpool supporter, I very much enjoy that. Does he not agree that the fact that there was no loss of life was only by the grace of God and that this should not lead to UEFA being excused from making amends to those fans whose experience was traumatic and for whom the beauty of watching the beautiful game has been forever tainted by fear and anxiety? Will he further agree that a mea culpa—a simple apology—will not be acceptable to any of the fans, the hon. Gentleman or me?

Ian Byrne: I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman.

The report exonerates Liverpool supporters of any blame or responsibility. In fact, it backs up the statements made by so many supporters, including myself, when I stated that if it were not for the efforts and understanding of the Liverpool supporters that night, people would have died because of the failings of UEFA and the French authorities. I thank the chair of the panel, Dr Tiago Brandão Rodrigues, and the members of the panel: Mr Ronan Evain, Ms Amanda Jacks, Mr Frank Paauw, Mr Daniel Ribeiro, Mr Kenny Scott, Mr Luís Silva, Professor Clifford Stott and Mr Pete Weatherby.

Sir George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): My hon. Friend is bearing powerful witness to those events and what has subsequently happened. Does he agree—I am sure he will—that UEFA and the French authorities now need to be held accountable for their failures to properly manage that event, and for all the ensuing risks that he so powerfully described?

Ian Byrne: I agree 100% with my right hon. Friend, unsurprisingly.

I thank the panel for their diligence and tenacity in seeking the truth and laying the foundation for justice. Their work is beyond reproach, and they collectively deserve the thanks of every single football supporter in Europe, because, when implemented, their recommendations will make the European game safer for all. The importance of supporters leading the fight for the truth to be laid bare in the report is incalculable, but this was a truly collective effort.

I place on record my thanks to Liverpool football club and Professor Phil Scraton for pulling together witness statements to inform the panel and for their ceaseless support. Thanks must also go to the many journalists across the world who have done so much to aid the quest for truth. So many have contributed, but I personally thank David Conn, Dan Austin and Rob Draper in the UK and Pierre Etienne Minonzio from *L'Equipe*. What a difference it made to have excellent journalists who sought to find the truth—unlike in 1989, when the gutter press printed lies and smears.

The panel report pinpointed many organisational failures, but I will reflect on some of the most damning. The UEFA model for organising was defective, in that there was

“an absence of overall control or oversight of safety and security.”

That is an astounding failure, for which those responsible must be held accountable. The French policing operational strategy was based on the lies and smears of the Hillsborough disaster. It is inexcusable for a major police force to base its operational strategy for policing

a huge global event—including the use of tear gas and pepper spray on innocent supporters and its failure to protect supporters from local gangs—on old smears and lies. To date, there has been no apology or acknowledgment of its errors. Without that, how can anyone have confidence in the ability of Paris to safely hold a global sporting event again?

UEFA presented to the French Senate inquiry a completely misleading view of what it knew of safety problems at previous events at Stade de France. That was unacceptable. UEFA and the authorities also sought to deflect responsibility; the report highlights that

“The public response of UEFA in the aftermath of the problems on the night and in its subsequent evidence to the Senate was striking in its orientation to protect itself.”

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): UEFA's initial response to the report said that it was committed to learning from the events, as my hon. Friend has quite rightly said, and co-operating closely with supporters groups, among others. Some parts of the report spoke about the impact on disabled people of UEFA's failings at last year's final. One of the recommendations said that there should be,

“fuller and more proactive engagement with disabled supporter organisations and the respective clubs to determine needs and requirements”.

Does my hon. Friend agree that UEFA must come through on that recommendation and should regularly report on its progress in that area?

Ian Byrne: Absolutely. I thank my hon. Friend and I will touch on that point in a minute, because we have the fantastic Ted Morris from the Liverpool Disabled Supporters Association in the room.

The report states:

“It was a serious error for UEFA to assume it could avoid accountability for a foreseeable near disaster at its flagship event”.

That statement is utterly damning. Now that we have the report, what happens next? Two of the foremost campaigners for the truth about Paris are Joe Blott, the chair of the Spirit of Shankly and the Liverpool Supporters Board, and Ted Morris, from the Liverpool Disabled Supporters Association. They are clear about what should happen next. I am proud to have Ted Morris sitting in the room with us. Joe Blott said:

“UEFA and all authorities must now accept all 21 recommendations cited in the report and act upon them. They must apologise for the lies and smears they used to shift responsibility from themselves to innocent fans and they must formally retract the untrue statements made about supporters. UEFA must ensure that this never happens again and do everything in their power to enable all supporters to attend football matches secure in the knowledge that their safety is paramount and will not be compromised.”

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that what is most worrying about these events is that they were entirely foreseeable, given what had happened at European football matches involving numbers of different sets of fans in recent years? Does he worry, as I do, that the lessons will not be learned as speedily as we want them to be, precisely because attention was not paid to the near misses and evidence that something like this could take place until it was too late?

Ian Byrne: I thank my hon. Friend for that point, which is painted clearly in the report. I wholeheartedly agree with everything she just said.

Ted Morris says:

“We do not seek recrimination or blame; that is for others to address. We do, though, ask UEFA to take on board the panel recommendations and make the necessary adjustments to allow disabled supporters to follow their chosen team in Europe, without having to overcome so much prejudice and navigate to so many hurdles.”

I want to finish by asking the Football Association, which abandoned Liverpool supporters in 1989, not to back the vested interests of UEFA, but instead to back the interests of supporters. As our representative at UEFA, in 2023 the FA must save the game and its supporters. We need the FA to provide leadership and show courage to ensure that our demands regarding Paris are met in the halls of UEFA. The FA must heed the findings of the report and act upon them, for the sake of English football and its supporters.

I urge the Government to keep the political pressure on President Macron and Aleksander Ceferin of UEFA to ensure a full apology is made and that the report's recommendations are met. The Government have a duty to Liverpool supporters and to all football supporters in the UK to ensure that this never happens again. Nothing can erase the dreadful events of that night in Paris. We know of at least two Hillsborough survivors who have taken their own lives since Paris, with thousands of others traumatised. The impact of the actions of UEFA and the French authorities cannot be overestimated, but we must hope that lessons have finally been learned, and that no supporter will ever have to go through what we did. That would be a fitting legacy for the many who suffered that night in Paris.

11.12 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stuart Andrew): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Harris. I, too, thank the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne) for securing time for this incredibly important debate, and for his ongoing efforts, and those of other hon. Members, to bring these important matters to light.

I know the personal impact that these events have had, as the hon. Member rightly mentioned. Tribute must be paid to Liverpool supporters for their actions in Paris and their continued commitment to ensure action is taken. The hon. Member is right to highlight the horrible memories of that day that the debate will have brought up. I recognise my duty and that of the Government on the safety of not just Liverpool fans but football fans in general.

I add my thanks to all those involved in the independent report, including the panel. It is clear in the report that Liverpool fans were subjected to appalling mismanagement of an event that should be a highlight of any football supporter's life of following their club. Immediately after the conclusion of the final, the Government made that very point and were clear that UEFA should launch an independent review to understand what took place. I welcome the outcome of that review, which draws on the evidence of fans who were present at the match and reflects their experiences. It should not have been needed, though.

It is clear that the mistakes that were made in organising the final were nearly disastrous. The expert panel concluded that the behaviour of Liverpool fans was a key reason that that mismanagement was not fatal. I commend their action and welcome the judgment of the report that the fans behaved faultlessly under extreme pressure and duress. As I am sure hon. Members will agree, those supporters should never have been put in to that position. It is vital that lessons are learnt from this near-disaster and that action is taken to prevent it from happening again.

UEFA has recognised that it made a series of mistakes in its handling of the event and has apologised to fans who attended. In consultation with the Football Association, my Department is in touch with UEFA to understand how it intends to respond to the review and to press for timely action in response to the report's specific recommendations. I welcome UEFA's commitment to implement the recommendations, its engagement with fans' groups last week and the further apology offered by its general secretary. It is vital that UEFA continues that dialogue with supporter organisations and that an action plan is published as quickly as possible. The Secretary of State will meet with the French Sports Minister in the coming weeks to discuss the French Government's response to the independent review.

Alison McGovern: I thank the Minister for what he has just said. Through him, I also thank all UK Government officials and Ministers who made themselves available on the day to deal with the difficult situation. I am full of admiration for our diplomats and UK Government officials, who responded so quickly. On that point, will the Minister explain the link between the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the Foreign Office? European football competitions happen all the time, and our ambassadors and diplomatic teams need to be aware of that and offer support to UK sports fans when they travel to Europe.

Stuart Andrew: I assure the hon. Lady that colleagues in the Department regularly engage with colleagues in the Foreign Office. In fact, in the run-up to the World cup, I met with Foreign Office Ministers and the Qatari ambassador, because we were seeking reassurances that fans would be safe when they travelled to Qatar. We have regular engagement, and I can assure the hon. Lady that we will continue to do so.

Government Ministers met their French counterparts at the time of the final, as the hon. Lady just mentioned. The meeting was to understand how the French Government intended to respond to their part in the mishandling of the event and to refute their assertions that Liverpool fans were at fault. Ministers made it clear then that an independent review was needed to establish the facts of what happened. The Secretary of State will further press French Ministers on the action that her Government will be taking in response to that review.

The Government will also reflect on the lessons that can be learnt from the horrific events witnessed in Paris last year. That will inform planning for the UEFA champions league final in 2024 at Wembley, as well as our UK and Ireland bid to host Euro 2028. The UK has a strong record of hosting safe and successful major

[Stuart Andrew]

international sporting events, and we will continue to ensure that the measures we already have in place to support safe spectator experiences continue to be aligned with the highest international standards.

In September 2019, London successfully secured the rights to host the UEFA champions league final in 2023. That was postponed to 2024 because of covid. Around the world, it will be the biggest club football match of 2024 and one of the most-watched sporting events.

Ian Byrne: I thank the Minister for his response to far. I impress on him the importance, whoever ends up in that final—I hope it is Liverpool—of fans having a voice in the shape of that final and proper engagement. They are the ones who go to matches and have the experience, and they do not get listened to enough. We did not get listened to in Paris, and our voices are often not heard, as my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) mentioned. It is important that the Government commit to ensuring that, whoever is in that final, the supporters will be sat down at the organisational table and listened to.

Stuart Andrew: I am not aware of whether that happens, but I will absolutely make a personal commitment to ensure that we look into it. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to say that we should ensure that the voices of fans are listened to, so I will take that forward.

As we saw when delivering the event in both 2011 and 2013, the 2023 champions league final will generate employment and volunteering opportunities in the events and hospitality sector. It will also enable a significant source of income for many businesses, but fan safety will be the priority for the Government, and we will continue to work with the police, the FA and all other relevant stakeholders to review any further action that is necessary to maintain the welfare of supporters. I can give hon. Members my personal commitment that I will look into this issue very carefully.

I thank hon. Members for their contributions to the debate. I thank the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby for his work in highlighting the experience of Liverpool fans at the champions league final last year, and for pushing for more action to improve the management of major sporting events. No supporter should ever have to go through what fans were subjected to on the night of last year's champions league final. The Government will work with all relevant stakeholders to ensure that the recommendations of this important report are implemented, and I will be happy to continue engagement with hon. Members to make sure that that is delivered.

Question put and agreed to.

11.21 am

Sitting suspended.

South West Water: Performance

[SIR GEORGE HOWARTH *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Simon Jupp (East Devon) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the performance of South West Water.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir George. I am delighted to have re-secured this important debate; colleagues will know that it was postponed from 8 February because of the President of Ukraine's visit to Parliament. The debate is an opportunity for colleagues from across the south-west to debate the quality of our local water company and hold it to the highest possible standards.

I put pen to paper ahead of this debate after a stroll along Sidmouth beach on Sunday. The water was glistening in the sunshine as I wandered from where I live near the Byes along the River Sid to the seafront and around to Jacob's Ladder. We must do all we can to protect our rivers and coastline, and it is in that spirit that I secured the debate, because all is not well in our waters.

Excess rainwater and sewage are ending up in our rivers and the sea from storm overflow discharges from combined sewer overflows, or CSOs. Those mechanisms are meant to be emergency safety valves to stop sewage backing up into our homes and streets but, to put it simply, the infrastructure cannot cope with the growing population and heavier storms. Our sewage systems are old, many of them dating back to Victorian times, and water companies have been relying on storm overflows far too often, without adequately addressing the issues behind their continued use. South West Water needs to invest more in infrastructure to protect the public from poor water quality, rather than protecting its company bonuses.

In recent years, a spotlight has been shone on storm overflows and CSOs. Water tourism is booming across our region, including windsurfing in places such as Exmouth and Sidmouth in my constituency. However, there is another reason why people have finally started talking about the issue: the Conservative Government have put in place a plan to improve our water, giving us all an opportunity to hold water companies to account.

Last summer, the Government published their storm overflows discharge reduction plan, which requires water companies to deliver their largest ever environmental infrastructure investment—£56 billion in total. For that, I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice) and my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow). We have a plan in place, and I and other colleagues present will not be shy in holding South West Water to the highest standards.

Of course, in a perfect world, we would stop sewage spills completely and immediately. Sadly, that is virtually impossible in the short term; because of the pressure on our water infrastructure, we would risk the collapse of the entire water network, and the eye-watering costs involved mean we would need not just a magic money tree, but a whole forest. The people of East Devon are already facing the challenge of high inflation driven by Putin's war in Ukraine. Energy bills are impacting the

cost of living across the south-west, including in my constituency, and fuel and food prices have shot up over the past year.

The Government cannot in good conscience legislate to let water bills reach astronomical levels—they are already high enough, especially in the south-west—but some of our political opponents seem to think otherwise. The Liberal Democrats have accused Conservative MPs of voting to pollute our waters and seas. That is frankly ridiculous. Why would any of us vote to put sewage in the sea? I live by the sea in Sidmouth, and I love where I live. I am calling on South West Water to invest in infrastructure in our town and across East Devon.

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): It is not only ridiculous; it is incorrect. The legislation we have passed is the first ever to address this issue, and it is leading to meaningful action. Let us be clear: it is incorrect to suggest that any Member of Parliament voted to allow sewage to flow into our rivers or on to our coastline.

Simon Jupp: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I am proud that the Conservative Government introduced the Environment Act 2021. It is a landmark piece of legislation that provides a domestic framework for environmental protections following our departure from the EU. It places statutory obligations on water companies to upgrade our Victorian sewerage infrastructure, and my Conservative colleagues and I fully supported the Bill so that it could become law. Let us not forget that this is the first Government in history to crack down on sewage discharges.

Political argument and debate have been pushed aside for taunts and jibes by people who really should know better. Claims have been misinterpreted and twisted in often vicious ways with, I am afraid to say, dark consequences. Those present will know that that has led to colleagues facing threats and abuse in the street and on social media. I was really upset to hear that one hon. Member recently received faeces through their letterbox as a result of this politics. That is unacceptable, and any Member here today who repeats those claims should be ashamed of themselves.

We all want healthy seas and rivers, clean bathing waters and thriving coastal environments and marine species, but previous Governments have ducked and dived on the issue for far too long—including, dare I say it, the Liberal Democrats when they were in coalition. Brushing aside attempts to muddy the water, a key reason that this issue receives so much more publicity now is that we finally have the data to hold our water company to account. In 2016, the proportion of storm overflows monitored across the network was 5%. By the end of the year—or perhaps sooner—that figure will reach 100%. We are getting a fuller picture of when and for how long each storm overflow operates.

I urge the Minister to ensure that water companies—not just those in the south-west, but across the country—maintain those monitors and fix any faults immediately. We deserve the full picture all year round. If they do not do so, the Environment Agency should step in with enforcement action—and if it needs resource, so be it. New data is shining a spotlight on the performance of water companies. We have stronger legislation, an ambitious timeframe with an eye on the cost of living, and a revolutionary level of data.

Colleagues have gathered here today to discuss the performance of South West Water in particular. I do not need to remind them that the company is currently rated one star for environmental performance by the Environment Agency; it is the joint worst in England. I know that colleagues of all political colours here today are disappointed and frustrated by that. Our communities in Devon, Cornwall and parts of Dorset and Somerset deserve so much better.

As politicians, we must do what we can to hold the leadership of South West Water to account. I have met the company many times since my election as the MP for East Devon in 2019. It is always keen to talk, and for that I praise it. Some colleagues will remember our meeting with the chief executive in Westminster in December, which I chaired. We were told that South West Water's overflows halved from 2021 to 2022 across the bathing season. That was positive news, and not before time, but last summer was particularly dry—the Environment Agency declared an official drought across our whole region—so it may be that mother nature had the most influence on that reduction.

South West Water must be clear and transparent about its progress on its plans to reduce storm overflow discharges. It is launching an updated website with better and more timely information, which is welcome, but it did not take that decision off its own back. The Government's storm overflows discharge reduction plan stipulates that water companies should publish information in near real time. That is further evidence that it is Conservative policies put in place by this Government that have introduced the framework that demands that water companies buck up their ideas.

However, it is not just in the corridors of Westminster that the companies have their feet held to the fire. I am pleased to be working alongside stakeholders in East Devon, including Sidmouth Town Council and many others, and I continue to press South West Water urgently to fix specific local problems as and when they crop up. I secured compensation for residents in Clyst St Mary in my constituency after foul flooding overtook the entire place, despite South West Water at first refusing to pay compensation. That was not company policy, but it certainly should be now.

Engagement between politicians and South West Water is an important first step. Under powers granted by the Environment Act, the water regulators can launch criminal and civil investigations into sewage spills. Ofwat can fine companies up to 10% of their annual turnover, which is potentially hundreds of millions of pounds, and the proceeds will now be channelled directly into work to improve water quality. That is another major step, which I very much welcome and I know that colleagues will too.

It is important to note that, as a result of those policies put in place by a Conservative Government, South West Water was fined £13 million last year alone because of missed targets. Although such financial penalties are indicative of the company's poor performance to date, they prove that the regulator now has some teeth.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): My hon. Friend has rightly outlined that one of the reasons we can have this debate and there is so much focus on this issue is that monitoring has increased so significantly. This situation has not just started in the last few years; it has been happening for decades, if not since the 19th century. It is just that we now know what is going on.

Simon Jupp: My hon. Friend makes a very good point.

I know that colleagues are awaiting the outcome of Ofwat's investigation into water company sewage treatment works and Ofwat's separate enforcement case against South West Water. However, we do not need an investigation to tell us that awarding massive bonuses and handing out lucrative payouts to shareholders at the same time as releasing sewage 42,000 times into our waters is grotesque. The south-west deserves so much better, and water companies such as South West Water must demonstrate a link between their performance and their generous bonuses, through Ofwat's licencing conditions.

Given South West Water's low environmental performance score, I am sad to say that I struggle to see why bonuses even exist within the company. We pay the highest sewerage bills in the country; our money should not be used to reward failure. The Government subsidise water bills in our region by £50 per household every year. Despite huge pressures on our public finances, that Government support will continue thanks to Conservative lobbying. However, the support is discretionary on public finances. That is why I have called on South West Water to commit to funding the support itself should it ever be withdrawn by the Government. I am sad to report that South West Water has so far refused to make such a commitment.

Colleagues will be aware that the Government recently accepted an amendment to the UK Infrastructure Bank Bill that sought to ensure that water companies set out costed and time-limited plans to reduce discharges before they receive funding from taxpayers. The Government listened to the arguments that were made and agreed. We are not playing politics with pollution; we are making sure that water companies clean up their act.

As we can see from this debate, this is clearly a cross-party issue, and I am pleased that the Government are working on it with all parties. We have the legislation, the investment plan and the means to hold water companies to account. We need South West Water to continue to step up, to invest and improve our sewage infrastructure, and to stop the sewage discharges.

I am proud that this Conservative Government have launched the toughest ever crackdown on sewage spills. Under the Environment Act, water companies are forced to embark on huge investment to update our Victorian sewage infrastructure. As I say, we are enforcing that with bigger fines of up to 10% of a company's annual turnover, with the money raised ringfenced to improve water quality.

As I have said in this debate many times, we are holding South West Water to account. Many of us in the Chamber are working with local councillors and campaign groups to deliver better services for our constituents, improving our bathing waters, protecting our natural environment and maintaining the vibrancy of our coastal communities.

I look forward to hearing colleagues' contributions as we debate the performance of South West Water. For me personally, its performance to date can be summed up in one word: shameful.

2.43 pm

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir George, and I congratulate the hon. Member for East Devon (Simon Jupp) on his contribution.

Like other Members, I received an email ahead of the debate from Pennon Group, which owns South West Water. It reads:

"We wanted to provide you with the most recent information so that you are able to have an informed debate".

Although that could be thought of as an act of kindness on the part of the water company and Pennon Group, I for one would rather be informed by what my constituents are writing to tell me about than by what a lobbyist suggests I should think. I will be informed by constituents and bill payers.

Since my election last June, the comments and complaints have flooded in. We have heard that South West Water has permitted sewage to flood out on to our beaches and into our rivers. I am pleased that the Minister is present, because I want her and South West Water representatives to hear about some of my constituents' experiences.

Just this month, an Axminster constituent wrote to me:

"I'd like to know why our water bills are going up when SWW are performing so badly and why it's okay for the CEO to get such massive bonuses. We don't get to choose our water supply like we do for other utilities and SWW has been given a free pass to rip us off. We've been told for years our bills are high because of ageing pipes and the size of our coastline, so why did the CEO of SWW get such a large bonus when we have such high bills?"

A second constituent wrote to me in January, after the cold snap, to explain how their access to water had been disrupted by burst water pipes. The constituent, who is from Seaton, wrote:

"I simply have to write to express my disappointment and disgust over the lack of care and co-operation shown by South West Water. If SWW are serious about customer care and 'saving every drop' then SWW would be making more of an effort to actually monitor those leaks which are reported to them but they are not responsible for. As a paying customer all we ever seem to get from the SWW leak team is 'It's not our problem.' Surely you have a duty of care for your paying customers?"

Those are just samples of the correspondence that I have received from constituents, as I am able to bring only a few examples to bear today, but I will add one more. In December, a constituent from Beer wrote:

"Why is it that South West Water is able to charge rates that provide for update and maintenance of the sewers and drains and yet only spend 37% of their allocated budget on doing this? Is it because Pennon used some of this budget to return over £1 billion to shareholders last year? When will the government get to grips with the individuals running the water companies and pass legislation to stop the destruction of the environment from the continual discharge of untreated sewage, even in dry conditions?"

All this shows the huge discontent among our constituents, who have simply lost faith in South West Water's ability to properly deal with the situation at hand. We are seeing sewage dumped in our rivers and on our beaches over thousands of hours, putting at risk not only the health of the public but our wildlife and biodiversity. The scale of the problem should not be understated. People feel that they are being ripped off by a company that continues to hike bills but pays out huge bonuses and large shareholder dividends while it fails to perform even its most basic functions effectively. It is clear that the company is not being run for the benefit of south-west communities and that the current regulator, Ofwat, lacks the teeth to properly police its actions.

We heard from the hon. Member for East Devon that the regulator has some teeth. If that is true, the Government permit them to be kept in a glass on the bedside table. The company is not being run for the benefit of our constituents. My message to South West Water is simple: fix the problems, focus on delivering a quality service for our constituents, and do not pat yourselves on the back for a job done so shoddily.

2.48 pm

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Simon Jupp) on leading the charge for Devon MPs by raising this matter with South West Water and Ministers. He has ensured that we are up to date about what is going on and what needs to be done to address this issue.

I start from a position that so many of us share across the south-west and, indeed, the whole country: we suffer under an antiquated, Victorian-era system that needs to be modernised and improved quickly. We need to encourage our water companies to offer us not just words and reports, but meaningful action on the ground. It is with huge disappointment that I follow the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord), who did not offer a single suggestion as to what water companies can actually do.

Richard Foord: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Anthony Mangnall: The hon. Gentleman has had his chance to give his speech.

In the course of my remarks, I will point out some of the flaws, but also some of the things we expect water companies to be doing in our constituencies. I hope South West Water and all other water companies will be listening to the debate, because today we can set the standards. Today we can set out our knowledge of what is being done across the country, and ensure that the standards are in place, and that the fines and action are taking place.

Where is South West Water to date? It is absolutely right that it has met its mains repairs and unplanned outage performance commitment levels; it is absolutely brilliant to hear that it was the top performer for internal sewer flooding performance; and it is quite welcome to hear that its sewer collapse performance and prevention was better than its commitment. Those are all welcome steps, but it is not just about recognising successes: it is about seeing the failures, talking about them and seeking to address them, and it is absolutely right that we talk about those failures today.

The first failure is that water supply interruption performance targets were not met. South West Water also did not meet the deadband score for the compliance risk index, which measures the risk of companies not meeting the requirement of drinking water quality regulations. Perhaps most egregious of all, South West Water's pollution incidents performance was the second poorest in the country. The company has a customer satisfaction rating that is 78.4% poorer than the median of other water companies—it is ranked with one star. If we are concerned by the actions South West Water is taking, we should also be concerned about how it is viewed by the public. We must ensure there improved confidence in water companies to address and tackle the issue with meaningful results to ensure we see

improved water systems, cleaner waterways, enhanced monitoring, and meaningful action from the ground up to enhance wildlife biodiversity.

According to the email we received from South West Water, which by all means is not the only source of information sent to Members of Parliament ahead of the debate—in fact, there was a great deal more—we should reflect on the fact that South West Water has delivered on 80% of its 44 operational delivery metrics and is now looking towards 100% monitoring, but although it talks about bathing water status, it does not necessarily go far enough on our rivers. The company talks far more about keeping our beaches clean, when many of us who are wild water swimmers, such as myself, like to swim in rivers all year round and are deeply concerned about the monitoring systems that are in place.

South West Water has invested billions of pounds over the last two decades to protect and enhance the rivers and coastal waters of the region, but the problem is that people do not recognise it; they do not see it or know it, and too often they do not feel it. That is one reason that I am taking matters into my own hands in my constituency in south Devon. Not only have I met representatives of South West Water and had conversations with them about their new WaterFit programme, which is due to go live in the coming weeks, with a new website specifically designed to give up-to-date, real-time, understandable and digestible information to members of the public about the quality of our water; I will also be getting representatives of South West Water to come to Brixham on 30 March and to Totnes on 27 April to discuss their plans to ensure that action is being taken, so that people can have some confidence and understanding about what needs to be done.

It is clear that a pollution incident reduction plan is working in respective constituencies across the south-west, but we must be able to show that there is an increasingly downwards trend in pollution. My hon. Friend the Member for East Devon was right to say that last year was a dry year, and therefore we must take the data with which we are presented with a pinch of salt, but let us use this opportunity to speed up the way in which our water companies deliver their projects.

I have three suggestions as to where we might go. The first is about where we are building. There is a shortage of houses across the south-west. There are a huge number of development projects across our countryside and rural areas attached to towns, but all too often we are building staggering amounts of houses but are not taking into account the infrastructure. When the infrastructure is not taken into account, hundreds of new homes flood our sewerage networks, meaning that they can no longer cope so pollute our waterways and beaches as a result. It must be a stand-alone policy that for any development plan to go forwards, the infrastructure must already be in place, rather than leaving it to chance.

Secondly, it is absolutely right that Ofwat should be able to issue sizeable fines, but all too often the fines take too long to implement, and there is a certain level of opaqueness around where they end up. It must be clear and certain that fines from water companies are put back into ensuring that waterways, beaches and coastlines are clean, and that the process happens in a speedy manner.

Richard Foord: The hon. Member suggests that some solutions should be offered by other parties. I will give him one: scrapping Ofwat. It has been found to be a toothless regulator, which the Government have permitted to be toothless. The hon. Member should advise the Government to get a regulator with teeth.

Anthony Mangnall: There was no question there. If the hon. Gentleman could not be bothered to put that point in his speech, that is hardly my problem.

Let us use the body that we have in place, and ensure that that leads to meaningful action; that can happen. If the fines we want to see water companies pay for failure of duty can be issued, we can restore confidence in the network by seeing that money go back into the system. We need the regulator to be enforced with teeth for meaningful action. Scrapping it and then looking for a replacement, which is inevitably what will happen, will not lead to any better levels of responsibility from water companies.

In my constituency, I have seen £5.3 million invested in our waterways. It is clear that more money will be needed and invested. We need to ensure that monitoring is 100% all year round, and that we keep an eye on that. Some of us swim all year round, so we want to see that the monitoring is in place. I am acutely aware of campaigns across my area—from the Friends of the River Dart groups to those on our beaches such as Surfers Against Sewage—to ensure that bathing water status is protected.

This is an important issue on which the Government have taken meaningful action. We must be clear about the progress we have made to date. We cannot click our fingers and ensure that things happen immediately, because this takes time. Not only would it be impossible to click our fingers and say to a water company that it must do everything immediately; it will lead to serious implications for the existing network, with flow back to people's houses.

We must be clear about that. The steps that we have set to 2030, 2035 and 2050 are the right steps. They are measurable, with report indicators to come back to Government to justify their actions. Through those mechanisms, we can hold the water companies to account to ensure they are delivering on time, at speed and at price—and that they are not pushing that back to consumers.

We all want to protect our coastlines, which is why the Environment Act 2021, the Agriculture Act 2020 and the Fisheries Act 2020 contain enforceable legislation to ensure that we look after our waterways, enhance biodiversity, and keep this a green and pleasant land to live upon.

2.58 pm

Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Simon Jupp) for this timely debate. It is clear from the contributions across parties that we all feel strongly that this issue must be gripped and grasped.

The water industry is fairly heavily regulated. It has Ofwat, the economic regulator; the Environment Agency, the environmental regulator; and the Drinking Water Inspectorate, the drinking water regulator. The key is to make those regulators work effectively together, and to understand the underlying problems. As has been explained, finding a problem and imposing a penalty is not enough. We have to ensure that the problem itself is rectified.

South West Water did not perform well under Ofwat. The December 2022 report, which my hon. Friend the Member for East Devon referred to, set out that South West Water had fallen below its commitment level in five separate areas: customer satisfaction; the number and duration of water supply interruptions; water quality; the second highest number of pollution incidents in the country; and treatment work compliance, resulting in the £13.3 million fine.

Given that Ofwat set other targets, one asks why those have not been met and acknowledged. There is an allowance for investing in improvements, and South West Water had the second lowest investment. Given that it has some of the biggest problems, why is it the second lowest spender? It spent only 46% of its allowance—why? It is incumbent on South West Water to explain that to us. I certainly hope Ofwat will dig a little deeper into the reasons and look at what we might do differently to ensure the right level of investment. As has been said, the Environment Agency, the second regulator, looked at six metrics, and South West Water got only one star—the lowest rating—on environmental performance.

My hon. Friends have already set out what the Government have rightly done to shine a light on the problems and inadequacies, and to put in place a remedy, but we need more than just fines. We need to unpick how we will drive forward the change that is needed and understand better the cause of the problem. We regularly blame the low settlement figure on privatisation, given the geography of the south-west, but other than the continuing Government contribution to our water charges, for which I am extremely grateful, I am not aware of any work that has been done to look at the underspend. Is that argument justified, and how can that investment be put back? South West Water may well say that it cannot be done, but until we know what the figure is, we cannot assess its responsibility since privatisation and identify where more help needs to come from the Government. Ultimately, although our water is in private hands, it is a public good. It may be that the Minister can help me by providing some figures on that.

The second thing we clearly have to look at post privatisation is the role of the shareholder. Do we feel that, in this case, the shareholders have been complacent? What happened to corporate governance? What happened to the obligation to be concerned about businesses' impact on their environment? What happened to their social responsibility? It seems very strange that there is a tick in the box in South West Water's accounts, yet there are these incredible shortfalls.

Richard Foord: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Anne Marie Morris: I will not.

We then have to ask whether the three regulators were asleep on the job. Why is it only now that the Conservative Government have shone a light on the problem that they have suddenly woken up and begun to take steps? Further work needs to be done.

Are there some peculiarities about the geography of the south-west—its size, our farming communities, which inevitably lead to a degree of run-off, and the housing developments? As has already been explained, the challenge is that our water company has no ability to say, "No, the system we currently have cannot accommodate this

new housing.” We know that there is pressure for housing and that we need that housing, so where should the responsibility lie for making the right investment so that the water and sewage system is fit for purpose? It seems that there needs to be a much greater investment obligation on the developer; it should be obligated to work with the water company to ensure that that investment can be made in the context of the existing infrastructure.

South West Water has clearly recognised that much more needs to be done. Like my hon. Friends the Members for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) and for East Devon, I have had regular meetings with South West Water. We are at the point where South West Water is listening and, as my hon. Friend the Member for East Devon made clear, the level of investment has gone up significantly. The question is: is it enough? We ought to look closely at the numbers—the investment that has been put in, how that falls short of what could have been put in as agreed with the regulator, the rewards for shareholders and the bonuses for executives. Does it feel right? Does it pass the smell test? Right now, the jury is out.

Richard Foord: On that point about investment, will the hon. Lady give way?

Anne Marie Morris: I am afraid not. Remember that one of the key shortfalls was the lack of communication. South West Water’s communication has definitely improved. The WaterFit app, which my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes referred to, will be one of the first in the country, and it would be a good start. I understand that there is also now a programme for interaction with schools, and young people are asked for their views about the right way to improve water quality. All that is very good, but communication has to be converted into action. We need to look at where we go from here. South West Water is a private company, but it is for public good.

Richard Foord: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Anne Marie Morris: I am afraid not. When we looked at some of the shortfalls in the railways, the Government stepped in, because they recognised that the sector was not working. I give credit to the Conservative Government for going above and beyond anything that had been done before. Is there yet another step that needs to be taken to ensure that the public get the quality of water they need and deserve, given its significant impact? It is what we, as human beings, are mostly made of, and it is a key driver of our health and wellbeing. It matters fundamentally. This issue has been of great interest to the Minister, and she is to be credited for the work she has done. Does she think the Government could look at going further, alongside what they could do by working further with the three regulators, to improve water quality in the south-west?

3.8 pm

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship once more, Sir George. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in the debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for East Devon (Simon Jupp) on securing it and for raising such important issues in his opening remarks. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord) on raising important points, and I welcome him as a new friend to the Opposition Benches.

In a nutshell, we have a water crisis in this country. People up and down England are simply and rightly sick and tired of the impact that sewage discharges continue to have on our streams, rivers, seas and local economies. They are sick and tired of leaks, burst pipes and poor-quality water. It is clear to all of us that Ministers need to get a grip of this crisis—sooner rather than later.

Today, we have had the opportunity to look at and address the evidently poor performance of South West Water. Colleagues will know that Ofwat—the regulator—and the Environment Agency publish annual reports measuring water companies’ performance against their performance level commitments and environmental obligations. In their most recent reports covering performance in 2021, both regulators gave South West Water their lowest performance rating. As we have already heard, that is a matter of huge concern for the hon. Member for East Devon. It is also of concern to my right hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) and my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard). They who would have liked to have been here but, due to prior commitments, they are unable to attend.

South West Water was also criticised for a lack of capital investment, as has been mentioned. Across the water sector, poor planning, a lack of investment and neglect of our vital infrastructure has left us with a system that leaks more than a trillion tonnes of water every year and spills raw sewage into our natural environment hundreds of thousands of times a year. As a result of Ofwat’s assessment, South West Water will be required to pay a fine of £13.3 million in the form of lower bills for consumers. The repeated and unacceptable failures of water companies are devastating whole regions in England, our coastlines, and the livelihoods and health and wellbeing of our people.

Richard Foord: Let me show the scale at which this affects the region. Does the hon. Lady know that there are more than 350,000 hours of dumping in South West Water’s areas, including on to our prestigious blue-flag beaches, three of which are among the 10 most affected beaches in Devon?

Ruth Jones: I did know those figures, but I am grateful that the hon. Gentleman has put them on the record so that I do not have to.

Last week, we had an urgent question in the House from the right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes). Again, we had Ministers making empty promises and the same old tired excuses. The failure of Ministers to act means that the water companies know that they can laugh all the way to the bank. Why? Simply because the Government are not stepping up to show the required leadership. All the while, local people are suffering, whether that is because they cannot enjoy their local beauty spots or take a walk down the river, or because of the effect on the coastal businesses that are reliant on seasonal tourism to provide jobs, opportunities and livelihoods.

Anthony Mangnall: I can think of 56 billion reasons that show that the Government have acted on this issue: they have required £56 billion of investment from our water companies. I will not be the first to defend water companies, but does the hon. Lady not think that goes further and faster than the action any other Government have taken in the last 20 years, let alone the last 50 years?

Ruth Jones: I gently say to the hon. Gentleman that there has been 13 years of Tory government.

Anthony Mangnall: Is that enough?

Ruth Jones: I am just saying to him that it has been 13 years, and what have we seen? We have not seen the improvement we need, which is why we are scrutinising the situation. That is our job and we will be doing that diligently.

Local people are on the frontline. They are the folk who have to manage the effects of Tory Ministers' inaction, which is important because water shortages are exacerbating over-stressed and polluted water suppliers. The system is creaking at the seams with over 1,235 Olympic-sized swimming pools-worth of water leaks last year alone. Plugging the leaks will require £20 billion of investment and Ministers must make the water companies, including South West Water, act now.

The hon. Member for East Devon talked about what the Environment Agency can do and its need for more resources. I am glad that he has recognised that need because a lack of resources has left the Environment Agency unable properly to scrutinise the practices of water companies. I hope the Minister will touch on how she thinks the scrutiny of their practices can be improved.

It is unforgivable that rivers in England are essentially being used as open sewers. Not one river is in a healthy condition, with none meeting good chemical standards and only 14% meeting good ecological standards. That is the record of 13 years of Tory government. The people of the south-west deserve action but, more than that, they need and deserve clean water. The Minister's Department is full of brilliant civil servants, but, with a lack of ministerial direction, no progress has been made on delivering good ecological status in 75% of English water bodies by 2027.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for East Devon for bringing this matter to the House and I say to him that, in the Labour party, he has an ally in calling for action and real change. Under a Labour Government, we will see the water companies held accountable and services improved. We are watching, and we are waiting for action. If the Tory Ministers will not act, they need to get out of the way, because we will.

3.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): It is a pleasure to serve under your leadership today, Sir George. Of course, I would like to begin by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Simon Jupp) for bringing the subject of the performance of South West Water to us today. I know that many colleagues have been waiting to express their views, and we have heard them very clearly from Members today. There are others, I know, who could not make it, but who would very much reiterate some of the things that we have heard. I also must thank my hon. Friend for approaching the issue in an incredibly measured way. It is very serious, so I thank him for that.

As hon. Friends and Members will know, I make absolutely no secret about my disappointment with the poor performance of South West Water and the impact

that it has had on the environment. It is very serious, and I met with the CEOs of all of our lagging water companies—basically those with poor performance—back in December, and had a specific meeting with the chief executive officer of South West Water in January. I have made it very clear that we need to see rapid improvement in their performance. We have all the data, whether it is about pollution incidents, storm sewage overflows, leakage, and so forth, so, rest assured, I am in really regular contact over this issue, and I do think we are making some progress.

The data is stark. South West Water has been one of the worst-performing water companies due to its high levels of total pollution incidents, which were, as has been pointed out, significantly above the industry average for total pollution incidents in 2021. It is completely unacceptable in this day and age, and I have made it very clear that urgent steps must be taken to tackle that.

I did want to say, though, that, actually, there are some positive actions being taken by South West Water, and indeed all of our water companies. We need them to be effective, and doing the job they are there for, to provide clean and plentiful water. I must say that I welcome South West Water's steps to deliver its WaterFit project. That is a £45 million shareholder investment launched in April 2022 to reduce storm overflow discharges, alongside its existing £330 million investment in waste water.

I recognise, also, its success in putting in 100% of its event-duration monitors to track storm sewage discharges in the south west. That is something that we have asked all water companies to put in, but it is ahead of the game, so we will know exactly what is happening. Data is all, in this situation.

I would also say that it is all very well for Members of the Labour party to stand up there, and be seen to be more righteous than others, but, in fact, their record on putting in any kind of monitoring was virtually non-existent. Some 5% of monitoring for storm sewage overflows went in place in 2016, started by this Government. It is 90% covered now, and it will be at 100% by the end of this year, so we will really be able to see what is going on, and then action can be taken.

Ruth Jones: I thank the Minister for giving way. While we all agree that data is crucial, there is the "So what?"—never mind the Ofwat—question. With all the data, what are the Government doing about it? It is action, not data, that we need.

Rebecca Pow: I thank the hon. Lady for that. I was going to mention it later, but what I was going to say was that it is a shame that the Labour party does not actually look at what is going on. It has been referred to by all of our colleagues. In the water industry we have the most significant project and spend that has ever taken place, directed by this Government, to tackle this whole issue once and for all. I am happy to share the very extensive list of things that are taking place and that will set us absolutely on the track we need to be on.

Also, however, I am a little concerned that we do not want to mislead the public. There are some wonderful bathing waters around the south-west and I, too, love swimming off the coast there. Last year, 93% of our bathing waters, which are mostly off the coast, were classed as good and excellent. That is an excellent record, and it

has only improved under this Government. We should not forget that. Obviously, we have to make them all perfect, but this Government have a good record.

To go back to the Labour party, it is all very well for Labour Members to spout on about what they would do and what we are not doing, but the EU took the Labour Government to court over the state of water and they still failed to act. We need to look back at others' records—we are the Government putting things right.

South West Water has now committed to reducing its average number of discharges through overflows to 20 per year by 2025. That is definitely a step in the right direction, but the public clearly want to ensure that that happens, and we will be on its case. I have also been assured that by continuing on its current trajectory, the company will deliver the absolute lowest number of pollution incidents in the sector by the end of this year. Innovative solutions are being brought forward to include drought resilience in the south-west, which has also been touched on. That is clearly very important.

To be clear, we need our water companies to improve in the way that we need them to, and to be successful, because we want them to stand as successful businesses that people want to invest in. We need that huge investment in the industry, so we want to see the companies operating correctly. That is why we have all the strict measures and Ofwat as the competent regulator, which I will get on to in a minute. Where performance does not improve, the Government and the regulators will not hesitate to hold water companies to account, including South West Water.

The Environment Agency is focusing on South West Water permit compliance. It is prioritising high-spilling storm overflows for investigation. South West Water has now installed the event-duration monitoring I mentioned on all its sites, bar six or seven complicated ones, which will be under way. Since 2015, the Environment Agency has brought 56 prosecutions against the water companies more broadly, securing fines of more than £142 million. As the House is aware, following South West Water's guilty pleas, on 29 March it will be sentenced for 13 criminal offences that took place between 15 July 2016 and August 2020. It is certainly being held to account.

Ofwat, as the economic regulator of the water industry, will play its role in holding companies to account for not meeting their commitments. Rightly, since South West Water has been shown to be such a poor-performing company, Ofwat required it to present its improvement plan setting out steps to improve performance. As touched on today, South West Water will have to return £13.3 million to customers as a result of not meeting water performance commitments, including those on pollution incidents.

The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord) made a blatant comment along the lines of, "Let's get rid of Ofwat", but that is too simplistic. As was said by my hon. Friend the Member for Newton Abbot (Anne Marie Morris), we need to ensure that the regulator, too, is functioning absolutely to its right capacity. Given that, in our strategic policy statement last summer, we put the environment at the top of the agenda, Ofwat has to ensure that clean and plentiful water is provided, and to demonstrate that that is not have an adverse impact on the environment. Customer service is obviously right up there as well.

In 2019, Ofwat asked companies to link executive pay to delivery for customers—yes, we might have thought that that was there already, but it is now. Similarly, Ofwat is exploring ideas and other options relating to dividends and pay. That includes changes to companies' licences or ensuring that fines for misdemeanours come out of dividends and do not impact customers. I think that is what my hon. Friend was getting at. This is all on the radar, and she is absolutely right that it has to be fully functioning.

Anthony Mangnall: I apologise for interrupting the Minister because she is making an excellent speech, but it is worth making this clear for anyone watching from across the south-west. Last year Ofwat and the EA launched what is, I think, the largest criminal inquiry into water companies. Will the Minister reassure me and all our constituents that when fines are issued, they will be clearly presented to the public, people will know exactly where the fines are going, and there will be an uplift in the quantity of those fines?

Rebecca Pow: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. That was coming later in my speech, but I will touch on it now because customers are rightly asking those questions. We are determined to improve the water environment, and that is why we announced at the end of November that we would channel future revenues from fines and penalties handed out to water companies that pollute rivers and the sea into projects that will improve the water environment. That seems to be extremely popular, and it is the right thing to do. We will announce further details later in the year. We are also consulting on raising the whole bar to a fine of £250 million and, for the EA, civil sanctions. As has been said, Ofwat already has the power to charge a water company 10% of its turnover, and the EA has unlimited fine powers through the criminal courts for taking action, so strong powers are already there; they just need to be used.

Contrary to what the shadow Minister and the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton say, this Government are taking crucial steps to improve the whole water landscape, particularly the transparency of storm overflow operations, and to require water companies to make major investments in this area. Last week the Secretary of State asked water companies to get back to her with clear plans for every storm sewage overflow and the upgrades, starting with the ones in bathing water areas and those near our highly protected nature sites, because it is of critical importance that we do not pollute those waters.

I have mentioned that monitors are going in, which will mean we have 100% cover by the end of the year. As my hon. Friend the Member for East Devon said, we want those monitors to go in, and water companies will have to show clear plans of where they are going and when they are in. The monitors are for what we call event duration. The first ones will show how long the overflows are used, so we will have that data, and there is a requirement to publish near-real-time information about how often they operate, so we will have all that clear information. Water companies will also be required to put in monitors to monitor the water quality both above and below storm sewage overflows. That will determine what is in the water, which is information we need. We will consult on that shortly. You will see, Sir George, the picture I am building of a comprehensive list of work.

[*Rebecca Pow*]

I want to be absolutely clear, particularly to the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton, that, as several colleagues have said, nobody in this Government voted to legalise sewage discharges into water courses. In fact, the Government put forward a raft of new laws to reduce the use of storm sewage overflows through our landmark Environment Act 2021. I hope we will get over the misinformation that has been spread, which has genuinely not helped anyone at all.

Independent fact-checkers have shown that a lot of the Liberal Democrat information that has been put out there has been incorrect and has not been credible. In fact, the plans that the Liberal Democrats suggest would not have stopped or banned sewage discharges; would cost up to £20,000 per household, which is absolutely unrealistic; and would take 1,000 years to raise the billions of pounds that they say is needed. I hope I have been clear that that is not credible.

The Government have put in place sensible, costed plans to tackle the issue, including in respect of storm sewage overflows, and we have introduced powers that allow us to direct underperforming water companies. We have in place a really comprehensive package. The improvement of water quality remains an absolute Government priority, and that is backed up by the comprehensive package we have announced.

Richard Foord: If the Government are so very keen on holding water companies' feet to the fire, why did it require a Liberal Democrat amendment to the UK Infrastructure Bank Bill for the development of costed, time-limited plans to be a condition for the lending of Government funding to water companies for investment in infrastructure?

Rebecca Pow: That is a bit of a red herring, because all the things I have just outlined involve costed plans and the monitoring of plans. Water companies will now have to produce drainage and sewage management plans. Previously, they had to produce only drainage plans, but now they have to produce sewage plans, so we will know what comprehensive infrastructure is required.

My hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) touched on the important issue of housing. We must ensure that the development that we all need and the housing that people want are linked up correctly to our water system. A lot of work has been going on in that respect, and I am sure that my hon. Friend welcomes the fact that what we call sustainable urban drainage systems, or SUDS, will now be mandatory. The right to connect surface water to public sewers will be conditional

on companies putting in sustainable urban drainage systems. That will help to separate the storm water so that it does not go down our sewage pipes. That has been talked about for a long time—it was one of my pet subjects when I was a Back Bencher—so I am delighted that the Government are making it a reality.

The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton read out lots of gruelling letters from his constituents, but it is quite interesting that South West Water has just introduced a scheme called WaterShare+. One in 14 households in the south-west have become shareholders in South West Water, so they will be able to play an active part in holding their water company to account and making sure it is a socially responsible business. I believe South West Water is taking note of what comes its way from its customers. It needs to put it right, and I genuinely hope it will.

All water companies must clean up their act, and the Government have demonstrated that we have the most comprehensive plan in the history of the water industry to make that happen. We will work with the water companies and Ofwat to make sure that happens, but will not hesitate to take action using all the powers now available if we do not see the improvement that we need.

3.33 pm

Simon Jupp: I thank the Minister for her laser-like focus on water quality in the south-west. Her efforts are very much appreciated, and it is good to know that the Conservative Government are sorting out solutions, not criticising from the sidelines.

The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord) echoed concerns that I have heard from constituents in Sidmouth, West Hill, Ottery St Mary, Budleigh Salterton and Exmouth. My hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) outlined the steps he is taking to work with his communities to ensure that South West Water is held to account. Importantly, my hon. Friend the Member for Newton Abbot (Anne Marie Morris) highlighted the need to back up fines with investment to solve the problems that cause the fines in the first place. The hon. Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones) rightly made a plea for plugging the many leaks across the south-west. I know that South West Water is listening to this debate; it should know that we are watching closely.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the performance of South West Water.

3.35 pm

Sitting suspended.

Police Training: Entry Routes

4 pm

Sir George Howarth (in the Chair): I will call Dr Kieran Mullan to move the motion, and I will call the Minister to respond. As is the convention for 30-minute debates, there will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered police training entry routes.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir George. I am grateful for the opportunity to discuss an area of policing that is important to all our constituents: the question of how we recruit people into the police.

Why is how we recruit people into the police so important? It is because our model of policing—policing by consent—has at its core the idea that our police forces are not separate from us; they are us, drawn from our communities and all parts of our society. I am proud to have grown up as a policeman's son, and the fulfilment I know that job gave my dad was based on serving the public. It is a job that requires resilience, courage and a strong belief that injustice should be stood up to. It is not enough just to think that criminality is wrong; police officers need to feel a calling to stand against people who undertake it. When other people look the other way, police officers have to be willing to run headlong into conflict and confrontation. I was honoured to follow my dad's footsteps and volunteer as a special constable, and that experience, along with speaking to people across the policing family, helps to inform my views.

Policing has no doubt changed. We ask our police forces to think more about prevention, to engage with young people and to try to get them inside, rather than just to keep them in line. Although others and I would argue that good beat police officers have always built good relations with their communities—it was not necessarily called stakeholder engagement before, but it happened none the less—this is a much more distinct formal part of the role.

There is no doubt that the crime we have been fighting is changing. Often the person stealing now is not stealing from a shop, mugging people or burgling homes, although these things still go on, and they are not from the local community. They are stealing from behind a computer, often in another country. However, we should not overstate the change and forget the fundamental need for the police to be active in communities and neighbourhoods, and to be among people. They need to be on the high street at 1 pm and 1 am, on housing estates, outside pubs and outside football matches, and vital to doing that effectively is ensuring that police officers reflect their local communities.

However we change the structure of policing going forward, there will always be times when the police need to turn up in numbers and with force, with people happy to step out of the office and on to the frontline. That is why I and more than 100 Back-Bench colleagues were concerned about plans to end the recruitment of men and women to our police forces unless they had or wanted to get a degree. I thank the Cheshire police and crime commissioner, John Dwyer, and other police and crime commissioners who are similarly concerned about

this issue. I am absolutely delighted that the Home Secretary responded to those concerns positively and stopped that happening, but that is just the first step in what needs to be a concerted effort to ensure that policing always remains open to as wide a range of people as possible, while looking to ensure that policing and its people move forward with changing demands as patterns of criminality change.

Cheshire Chief Constable Mark Roberts, Northamptonshire Chief Constable Nick Adderley and Stephen Mold, the police, fire and crime commissioner for Northamptonshire, were among those who feared the demise of the traditional non-degree entry route, and they expressed their views clearly in a piece they wrote for *The Times* earlier this month. They accepted that

“recent events have reinforced that change is necessary and that a more robust approach to recruitment, development, vetting...is needed.”

However, they argued in the article that

“it is crucial that the non-degree route remains”, adding that

“the public want to see the most effective, trained and competent police service possible”.

I agree: we need the best possible people from all walks of life and different backgrounds. Everyone should feel that they have an opportunity to join the police and succeed. As I said, police forces need to reflect the populations they service.

The reality is stark: tens of millions of people do not have degrees. A blanket decision that the entire future police population should have them would create a force potentially divorced from the experiences and lives of the people they seek to police. A degree-only police force would, by definition, not reflect the population. Those who advocated that introducing degrees would attract a different sort of recruit were right, but there are two sides to the coin. No matter the actual content of a degree and whether it is more or less academic than people expect it to be, calling for one will inevitably put off people as well as attract them.

At a time when we are prioritising concerns around representation, identity and the trust between police and communities, it is crucial that we remain receptive to individuals from diverse backgrounds and walks of life joining our police forces. Speaking to those involved in police recruitment across different parts of the country, I have heard how the degree route has certainly attracted new and different interest, but there has been a lack of interest from existing groups, too. The impact may be different in each area—there is no one size fits all—and that is why a mandated national approach would have been wrong.

In my time, I met many special constables who had years of experience on the beat as effective police officers. It would be misguided to insist that they need a full degree to transition to being regular officers. Similarly, there will be people from other walks of life who could more readily be transitioned into the job than through the degree-only routes: former members of our armed services stand out, and police community support officers are another example.

It is essential that training and education remain integral components of the profession. In fact, I join others in urging the college to consider awarding professional educational credits for various type of

[Dr Kieran Mullan]

training that officers undertake throughout their careers, which include, but are not limited to, law exams, public order training, firearms training, supervisory roles, child protection, cyber specialisms and other unique skills. By providing educational credits that lead to a level 6 qualification—that is, a degree—over time, we can motivate and incentivise new recruits to strive for recognition and reach their full potential, if that is how they want their career to progress, and they can do it in a manner and at a pace of their choosing. That can be important for some people—for example, those who have childcare responsibilities and want to flex the way in which they progress their qualifications.

It is misguided to attribute the recent differences in training experience and diversity statistics solely to the use of newer models of entry. It is likely that there are a wide variety of factors at play, because all sorts of elements of police recruitment focus and approach have changed at the same time. There is no reason to think that similar improvements could not have been achieved through the traditional entry route. I understand that forces that made the transition to degree-only have seen recruitment success in the short term, but I would caution against concluding that it works as well in the long run. Are we confident about the long-term retention of those recruits? I have heard from existing officers that some of those recruits are perhaps keen to get a degree in policing as a stepping-stone, or that the job in the long run turns out not to be what they expected. The need for many officers to be focused on the frontline means that policing will always be a relatively flat organisation, without room for high-flying promotions for everyone. Are we confident that all our new recruits understand that?

I must add that I have taken into account the concerns that alternative entry routes can lead to police officers being away from the frontline for extended periods. By upholding traditional entry routes, chief constables can adapt a more balanced approach to recruitment, which can allow them to mitigate that short-term impact at the same time as increasing police numbers.

There are some concerns about creating a two-tier system, but I do not think that that view holds water. In my experience, police officers are comfortable with the job being one that presents different opportunities for different people. Many officers never take their sergeants exam or think about being a detective, and they are just as valued as those who take the exams and seek to progress their careers in different ways. That is the nature of policing—it always requires many people who are happy to step up and deliver on the frontline. That is why I and others were so concerned, and why I welcome the steps that have been taken.

I encourage chief constables who may have felt that the change was inevitable, and that they did not have a choice, to take the opportunity to make their views known. I encourage the college to revisit the issue, with a fresh perspective and in listening mode. Flexibility is often a positive thing. I hope that we can use this opportunity to continue to help policing move forward in a way that allows our police forces to be drawn from and within the communities that they seek to serve. I

look forward to seeing how the proposals develop, and I know that my Back-Bench colleagues will follow developments closely.

Sir George Howarth (in the Chair): Before I call Darren Henry, I remind him that the Minister needs to be left with enough time to respond to the debate.

4.8 pm

Darren Henry (Broxtowe) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir George. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Dr Mullan) for securing this Westminster Hall debate and allowing me to speak.

Policing is a profession that I admire greatly. Police officers dedicate their lives to ensuring that we as citizens feel safe in our own communities. As a veteran, I believe that the commitment and values of police officers are similar to those of people who serve in the armed forces. As the roles have very similar purposes, it is inevitable that a lot of the skills learned and developed are directly transferable.

This similarity made me realise that we need a clear and accessible route to encourage veterans to enter the police force, so last year I organised a meeting with my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty), who was then Minister with responsibility for defence people and veterans; my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse), then Minister for Crime and Policing; the police and crime commissioner; and the chief constable of Nottinghamshire police. At that meeting, we all discussed this military-to-police scheme.

The military service leaders pathway to policing course was the result. It allows individuals leaving the armed forces and serving in their resettlement period to join a 12-week programme that fast-tracks them to the second year of the police constable degree apprenticeship. Nottinghamshire police has its first cohort in training from the Royal Navy, the Army and the Royal Air Force. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich for securing this debate, because we need to make sure that as many people as possible are aware of the police training entry routes. We also need to continue to seek new entry routes into the police force where possible.

4.10 pm

The Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire (Chris Philp): As always, Sir George, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I thank and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Dr Mullan) on securing this important debate. Essentially, I have little to add to his comments. I agree with everything that he said about the importance of policing reflecting the communities that it serves, and the importance of making sure that people from all backgrounds can access policing, serve the public and keep us safe.

This is a good time to pay tribute to the police officers who serve our communities up and down the country with bravery and dedication. I am sure that the Members here will want to join me in thanking police officers for their service, which often involves them putting themselves in the line of danger, as we saw with the tragic incident of the Police Service of Northern Ireland officer who was shot just a short time ago.

Turning to more positive news, I am pleased to say that our programme to recruit additional police officers is going well. By 31 December last year, we had recruited 84% of our target of 20,000 extra police officers to be recruited by March. As I have said to the House previously, we are on track to have a record number of police officers in England and Wales by next month—more police officers than we have ever had at any point in our country's history. I am sure that our constituents will be very happy to hear that.

Of course, it is important to make sure that police officers represent the community more broadly. Of the new officers recruited by December 2022, 43% were female, which is a substantial increase from the previous figure of 36%, and 11% were from ethnic minority backgrounds, which is an increase on the 8.3% of the current workforce who are from ethnic minority backgrounds. The diversity of the police workforce is improving.

Regarding entry routes, I completely agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich. He acted as a very passionate and powerful advocate on this issue a few months ago, expressing his concern that we would lose the initial police learning and development programme or IPLDP—the so-called “ippledip” entry route—whereby people could join the police without a degree, and without having to obtain a degree. My hon. Friend and others expressed concern that the change would limit the accessibility of policing, and that we would lose people who had the potential to become very effective and capable police officers. The Home Secretary and I listened to those concerns, which is why the Home Secretary announced just two or three months ago that the IPLDP entry route would remain open, alongside, of course, degree-based entry routes, until such time as the College of Policing has developed a new and improved replacement non-degree entry route. It is doing that work at the moment. We are doing that because we completely agree with the points that my hon. Friend made in his excellent speech.

Both my hon. Friend and my hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Darren Henry) referred to the armed forces. I strongly agree that drawing from the armed services for policing is a good idea. As my hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe said in his excellent speech, the values of both services are very similar. I pay particular tribute to the police and crime commissioner for Nottinghamshire, Caroline Henry, who worked with my hon. Friend, my predecessors and the previous Minister for the Armed Forces—my right hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan)—to establish the pilot scheme that is now running. I believe that work is under way with the College of Policing to expand that scheme and take it nationwide. I will certainly do everything I can to ensure that happens as quickly as possible. It is an excellent route, and we should do everything we can to facilitate and encourage it.

Questions were raised around whether the officers being recruited are likely to be retained. I am pleased to say that survey data from the new officers is generally positive. Between 70% and 80% of newly recruited officers have had a positive experience and, critically, intend to make policing their long-term career. We cannot be complacent—we have to ensure that they have a good experience—but that survey data encourages us to believe that the people we are recruiting view policing as a long-term career, and have had a positive experience of it so far.

Dr Mullan: I recognise those statistics; they paint an initially positive picture, and I do not want to take away from that. For me, the question is whether those officers will still be there in five years' time. It is not so much about whether they are setting themselves a goal, and want to stick around in the short term. Will they be there five or 10 years from now? That is my concern.

Chris Philp: It is certainly our intention for those recruits to commit to long-term careers in policing. We do not want a fast turnover; we want them to build their skills. Policing offers a number of opportunities. People tend to start in emergency response or on neighbourhood policing teams, but there are a huge number of interesting specialisms that can be developed thereafter, whether they become a detective in the criminal investigation department or a specialist in investigating a particular type of crime, or undertake firearms training. That is besides the regular career progression that comes through promotion.

We are keen to ensure that all police officers are valued and looked after. That is why I chair the Police Covenant Oversight Board. The police covenant is rather like the armed forces covenant; it ensures that serving and retired officers are properly looked after, for all the reasons my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich referred to in his speech and question. I completely share his views.

This is an important issue. We will have a record number of police officers in the near future. I am pleased that both the entry routes that we have discussed are open; that is right. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for assiduously, energetically and persistently lobbying and campaigning on this topic. His personal intervention made a real difference in securing a change of policy and keeping the non-degree entry route open, when it had been previously decided that it would be closed down. He can take that away as a personal accomplishment.

I look forward to working with hon. Members from all parties to ensure that the police force, having reached record numbers, maintains them, and continues to serve and protect our constituents the length and breadth of the country.

Question put and agreed to.

4.18 pm

Sitting suspended.

Leaseholders and Managing Agents

4.30 pm

Sir George Howarth (in the Chair): We are expecting a Division at any moment. When it is called, there will be a 15-minute suspension to enable Members to go and vote, but if there are two votes, there will be a 25-minute suspension, so do the maths.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered leaseholders and managing agents.

I am grateful to present this debate under your chairmanship, Sir George, because I know that you have significant involvement with your local leaseholders in Knowsley, for which they are very grateful. Saying the word “leasehold” to any Member of Parliament is likely to begin a long conversation on one of two things: fire safety or service charges. I could have phrased that better: it would be more accurate to say “unsafe homes caused by fire safety defects” and “rip-off service charges by unscrupulous managing agents”.

For many people, the issue of leasehold crystallised after the tragedy of the Grenfell Tower fire and the subsequent purgatory that hundreds of thousands of residents throughout the country found themselves living through as they waited to have their own buildings’ fire safety defects remediated. They are still waiting. It was about much more than cladding and EWS1 forms. Residents who found that their homes had been constructed without internal fire stopping, or with inappropriate materials or inadequate fire doors, were unable to sell their property and move on with their lives because construction companies, project managers, surveyors, developers, freeholders, building control, the National House Building Council and managing agents all sought to pass responsibility among themselves. Nobody wanted to pick up the bill for remediation.

In truth, the debate about a wholesale reform of leasehold goes back much further. In the modern era, it starts almost exactly 50 years before 14 June 2017, with the Leasehold Reform Act 1967, which gave qualifying long leaseholders of houses the statutory right to buy the freehold of their homes. In 1969, a problem arose: the Lands Tribunal ruling in *Custins v. Hearts of Oak Benefit Society* noted that the 1967 Act treated the open market for the reversion of the lease as including marriage value. That is why the Government promptly and rightly reversed that decision with section 82 of the Housing Act 1969. They did not wish to artificially increase the cost for people wishing to buy the freehold of their own home.

To see the injustice of marriage value, one need only to consider the price difference on the open market between a leasehold flat with a 125-year lease and the same flat with a share of freehold. The difference is nil, yet the first is on a yo-yo tender, whereby an owner, such as the Duke of Westminster, sells for the full market value, only to receive the entire property back at the end of the lease, allowing him to sell it all over again or, more often, to receive a large payment to extend the lease when the reduction in the term risks being so short that no lender will advance a mortgage on it and the property becomes unsaleable by the leaseholder, who sees the value of their asset diminishing to zero.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for introducing this debate. May I, through him, point out that it is not just the traditional landlords, but some great charities? Wellcome went to the first-tier tribunal to get a judgment, but that decision should have been made by Parliament, not highly expensive lawyers arguing in court, given that it risked a knock-on effect on every other residential leaseholder who wants to extend their lease.

Barry Gardiner: I am most grateful to the Father of the House, who is also co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on leasehold and commonhold reform, for his knowledge, his campaigning over many years and his intervention.

In the Housing Act 1974, which still related only to houses, and the Leasehold Reform, Housing and Urban Development Act 1993, which gave leaseholders the right, if more than 50% of them wished to, to purchase the freehold interest in their block, the concept of marriage value was sadly reintroduced. Marriage value has been at the heart of many of leaseholders’ problems for more than half a century, simply because the freehold title of the property is worth more to them than to anyone else by virtue of the fact that they live in it. The law allows the freeholder to benefit from that asymmetry and impose considerable extra costs on any leaseholder who wishes to purchase or extend the lease on their home. When the Government come to legislate for leasehold reform—they have promised to do so and I look forward to that—I trust that they will understand that it is that fundamental injustice that has kept leaseholders prisoner to the vagaries of their freeholder and, often, the outrageous services charges imposed by their managing agents.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing such a vital debate. Here we are again. The National Leasehold Campaign—

Sir George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. The Division bell has gone. If the hon. Member finishes his intervention, he might get a response when we come back, but he should be brief.

Mike Amesbury: Isn’t it time to abolish, rather than polish, the leasehold system?

Sir George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. The sitting is suspended. If there is one Division, we will suspend for 15 minutes; if there are two, it will be 25 minutes.

4.36 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

4.46 pm

On resuming—

Sir George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. I think most people have now returned, so we can restart if people are ready to do so. Barry Gardiner was about to deal with an intervention from Mike Amesbury.

Barry Gardiner: Indeed, Sir George. My hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) is no stranger to witty epithets, and his suggestion that we should stop polishing and start abolishing was absolutely right.

Before I turn to some egregious instances of service charges and call out by name some of the managing agents that have played fast and loose with the Landlord and Tenant Act 1985, which provides that service charges must be “reasonable” and that services and works must be carried out to “a reasonable standard”, I wish to acknowledge some of the individuals who have championed the cause of leasehold reform over many years.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): Does the hon. Member agree that part of the problem is that rogue agents and freeholders believe they can act with impunity, and that it is incumbent on us to ensure that the regulations are in place to hold them to account and penalise them when they behave in an immoral way? They include Block Management, an agent in Ipswich, and Railpen, which is a freeholder that has behaved in a gross fashion and let down in a most egregious way almost 100 of my constituents.

Barry Gardiner: I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman has managed to get those condemnations on the record. I am sure that his constituents will be most grateful, as I am, for his doing so. He is right. The trouble is that the law is there: it is the Landlord and Tenant Act 1985, which makes it clear that unreasonable charges should not be levied, and that services and works have to be done to “a reasonable standard”. It is all there in statute; the trouble is that it is not enforced and that the mechanism for enforcement has gone awry, as I will come on to.

I already paid tribute to the Father of the House, whose long-standing campaign on this issue is an inspiration to us all. He co-chairs the all-party parliamentary group with my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), who has also done so much on this issue. Not with us at the moment is my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), the Chair of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee, who has done a huge amount over the years.

It is about not just those in this House; outside of the House there are many more. I pay special tribute to Charlotte Martin, who founded, with Nigel Wilkins, who is sadly no longer with us, the campaign against residential leaseholds, and who did so much, with Neil Mulcock, to usher in the Commonhold and Leasehold Reform Act 2002.

Stephen McPartland (Stevenage) (Con): While the hon. Gentleman has a glass of water, I want to ask whether he agrees with the comments that my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt) made about Railpen and the terrible impact it is having on leaseholders’ mental health up and down the country, including in the constituency of Stevenage. There have also been issues with the building that started the original campaign, as highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Itchen (Royston Smith).

Barry Gardiner: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. He highlights something that is really important to us all: the mental health problems that this issue causes. It is not just a financial issue; it has both physical and mental health implications.

There was one more person to whom I was going to pay tribute. If I left her out, I would be in deep trouble, because it is my own head of office, Jackie George, who keeps a database of more than 7,000 leaseholders in my constituency and who keeps in touch with them regularly.

In 2017, the then Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid), committed the Government to act on leasehold abuses. Specifically, he committed them to legislate to prohibit the creation of new residential long leases on newly built or existing freehold houses, other than in exceptional circumstances; to restrict ground rents in newly established leases of houses and flats to a peppercorn; to address loopholes in order to improve transparency and fairness for leaseholders and freeholders; and to work with the Law Commission to support existing leaseholders. The Government said that would include making buying a freehold or extending a lease “easier, faster, fairer and cheaper”.

In April 2018, the Government announced that managing agents in the sector would be subject to regulation by an independent body and that a code of practice would set out minimum standards for key areas of activity, including service charges. In October 2019, the then Minister for Housing, the right hon. Member for Tatton (Esther McVey), confirmed in a written statement the Government’s intention to take forward those measures. In 2020, the Law Commission published its report and recommendations.

It is not good enough to say that the Government have been busy with other priorities. Since 2017, we have had seven Secretaries of State and nine Housing Ministers, yet leaseholders are still being ripped off.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I hope to give the hon. Gentleman a chance to clear the frog in his throat, and I congratulate him on securing the debate. Does he agree that the current arrangements, whereby there is no limit on the amount paid in service charges, insurance, ground rent and forfeiture charges, have left leaseholders at the mercy of the unscrupulous? Although we must allow the free market to prevail, that does not preclude the House and the Minister introducing and implementing fit-for-purpose regulation to protect the average leaseholder, who wants a fair bill for a fair service. That is not too much to ask for.

Barry Gardiner: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Leaseholders are not asking for special favours; they simply want equity and justice.

The Government’s survey reported that more than 70% of leaseholders regretted buying a leasehold property. In London, and in my constituency of Brent North, the leasehold model accounts for more than 90% of properties sold. I do not believe that my constituents should have to wait a moment longer for basic rights over their own homes, the right to manage, and the right not to be subjected to unreasonable and sometimes fabricated service charges and then bullied into submission by managing agents who threaten legal proceedings and, ultimately, forfeiture.

For my constituents and millions like them throughout the country, the delay is imposing financial penury and severe impacts on their mental and physical health, as the right hon. Member for Stevenage (Stephen McPartland)

[Barry Gardiner]

said. The impacts include those on the residents of Williams Way in my constituency of Brent North, from where one resident wrote to me saying:

“My wife cried last night when I shared a few things about all of this. Management fees have increased: £5,600 in 2020 to £8,400 in 2022—I cannot afford to pay this significant increase. That is a 50% increase. Water storage has increased from £564 in 2020 to £1068—an 89% increase. The insurance premium charged at £5,820.76 in 2021 increased to £20,726.23 in 2022—a staggering 256% increase. A detailed explanation has not been provided.”

Hallmark Premier Estates is the managing agent there, but it is not providing a premier service—just as it is failing to do in Parkside Place in Barham village, where the insurance premium, which was £22,738 in 2021, has risen 108% to £47,415. No wonder I was told yesterday that the landlord would be replacing Hallmark as the managing agents for “unspecified reasons”.

One leaseholder in Lawns Court said:

“I have lived in my flat for 39 years, but I find I can no longer struggle to keep it - the service charges for my one-bedroom flat have risen from £1600 per annum to over £5000 per annum. That is a 212% increase.”

The managing agents there are Aldermartin, Baines & Cuthbert.

At the Living City development in Colindale in my constituency, leaseholders were advised in March last year that after the constant failure of the communal hot water supply to the building over three successive winters, they would receive a rebate on their service charge, only for that offer to be countermanded in October last year. Residents noted that their insurance cover appeared to be paying for associated commercial units, and found that the premium had been increased by 100%. Lift maintenance is also charged, conveniently, on a day rate rather than a job rate: the lift fails, and a day rate is charged to fix it. Strangely, it fails again the following day, and another day rate is charged to fix it again—and so on, day after day, until astronomical charges have been incurred, with the managing agents able to take a management fee every time, of course.

I have written to all these managing agents, challenging them to justify their service charges and other fees, and to none have I been writing longer than Freshwater and its associated companies—at the last count more than 150 linked under the same beneficial ownership. It is because of Freshwater that in 1999 I launched my original campaign for what became the 2002 Act. One of its leaseholders wrote to me from Barons Court in my constituency, saying:

“Dear Barry, every double bed apartment now costs £6000 up from £2600 per year a 130% increase in service charge and we had to pay for the Waking Watch. The management company will not tell us how much commission they receive from the insurance premiums. We arranged our own fire tests and paid for critical remediation work.”

The name of the company FirstPort is well known to many Members. Since 2013, my constituents in Chamberlayne Walk have been challenging unreasonable service charges by FirstPort management services. I say unreasonable but, in fact, the word “fraudulent” is closer to the truth: it even charged for the management of surrounding land that it did not own and was not its to manage. One resident wrote to me about a typical example of its practice, saying:

“I was charged £1725.88 for internal and external decorations (painting of the windows). My windows are UPVC - no redecoration was required.”

Another wrote to tell me:

“The back fill of the stack pipe which causes water to come up into my kitchen sink and has flooded my kitchen on many occasions is still an issue after 15 years of reporting it.”

Yet another person explained:

“My flat is a one-bedroom flat, one of the smallest on the estate and I was charged £2861 for redecorations - almost double the costs levied on the larger 2-bedroom flats this matter remains unresolved.”

FirstPort’s response to those and the more than 500 more complaints like them that I have received is to make no response and ignore things for as long as possible—for months and years, not days and weeks. There is a lack of accountability and transparency over what the residents are charged for and whether the costs are reasonably incurred and reasonable in amount. There is a total failure to provide leaseholders with a breakdown of service charges. Many of my constituents can wait more than 20 months for accounts to be finalised.

Even when FirstPort admits that refunds are owed to the leaseholder because of double counting, overcharging or charging for services not provided, the requests for the return of the overpayments are often ignored, or the returns can take many months to be made. FirstPort also charged multiple administration penalty charges of £60 each when someone queried the costs. One resident ended up being billed for more than £400 of admin charges and was then browbeaten into paying because of the threat of legal action.

In 2019, Nigel Howell, the then chief executive, conceded to me that it was unlawful for his company to impose late penalty fees on leaseholders who had disputed their charges—but not all leaseholders have been refunded. Nigel Howell also confirmed to me that his company had charged costs for areas not under FirstPort’s management and promised that a 20% refund would be given in the following year’s accounts. Strangely, Nigel Howell was removed from his post as chief executive.

After years of suffering, one brave, resilient resident finally took FirstPort to the tribunal. FirstPort sought to rely in its defence on two factors: it tried to rely on the payments made by leaseholders—in other words, by paying up they had intimated consent; and, especially ironic given the FirstPort practice of delay, it tried to rely on the length of time the leaseholder had taken in bringing the challenge to the tribunal.

On Friday 13 January, the last working day before the hearing, I received the following email in my office from my constituent at 5 pm:

“They are settling all of the claim. Their lawyers harassed me all week and made the offer on Friday afternoon, just hours before the hearing this Monday. They did not want this case heard as they have been lying to Barry. They owe money to 202 families.”

Of course FirstPort did not want the case heard in public: section 27A(5) of the Landlord and Tenant Act 1985 states that

“the tenant is not to be taken to have agreed or admitted any matter by reason only of having made any payment.”

Tenants often pay expressly disputed service charges to avoid the risk of forfeiture and preserve their home and the value of their lease.

Of course FirstPort did not want that in the public domain, but it now is, and 200 other families have now been given heart that it is possible to take FirstPort on and beat it. Already, 42 other leaseholders on the estate have signed up to a class action. But the point is that this should not be happening. A code of conduct for managing agents will not do any good. The 1985 Act already provides that service charges must be reasonable and services and works must be carried out to a reasonable standard. The problem is the whole imbalance of power between the leaseholder and the freeholder.

Leasehold tribunals were intended to be a cheap, efficient way of resolving normal disputes between reasonable people without enormous legal costs, but landlords have intimidated leaseholders by engaging vast arrays of lawyers and threatening them with forfeiture and bankruptcy. There is a way to end this misery, but it is not with a new code of practice. Companies do not obey the existing primary legislation; they will not abide by a new code of practice. The way to end this misery is not with the safety regulator. Company law allows companies to avoid their obligations, go into administration while the directors set up new companies and repeat their scams all over again. This misery will end only when we have an end to leasehold. Our country has put up with a feudal system of land tenure for almost 2,000 years. It is time it stopped.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Sir George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. I am going to impose a five-minute limit on speeches, in order to get everybody in.

5.4 pm

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner). I agreed with pretty much everything he said. I am delighted to speak in this debate, because the issue is so pertinent to constituents in Warrington South. I am keen to hear from the Minister about progress on the promised reforms to leasehold that we expect to see announced in the King's Speech.

My noble Friend Lord Greenhalgh, when he was the Minister responsible, made a promising start to the process when he brought in the first stage of leasehold reform, to crack down on exploitative freeholders by removing escalating ground rents. Now it is time to ensure that the next stage of reform delivers for those who are currently trapped in the leasehold system.

The north-west has one of the highest proportion of leasehold dwellings in the country, next to London. The most recent statistics for 2019-20 put the proportion at around 31%—the highest region outside of London. Throughout my time as the Member of Parliament for Warrington South, residents have raised issues regarding leasehold time and again. There are issues in Chapelford, Edgewater Park, Chaise Meadow—I could list endless developments in Warrington South that have been built over the past 20 years under the leasehold system and where problems have been raised.

Although I of course welcome the Secretary of State's proposals to address the problems associated with leasehold sales, I say to the Minister that there is a growing worry among many of my constituents that the difficult situations they find themselves in may not be completely addressed by what we have heard so far. The constituents I talk to

are concerned about those who have purchased properties in the past 20 years or so and are stuck with problems of ever-increasing service charges, although they receive very little for those charges, as the hon. Member for Brent North said.

If anything, the problems are growing and getting worse. That applies in particular to those who purchase leasehold houses rather than flats. Colleagues may recall that I raised this issue in a speech in the Christmas Adjournment debate, with particular regard to Steinbeck Grange in my constituency. I pay tribute to Mike Carroll, one of the residents who lives there, who was the first constituent to contact me when I was elected. He has persevered for about 14 years in trying to tackle this problem. He has said that it has affected his life so significantly that he has occasionally had to think hard about how to continue with the fight. He has been browbeaten at every opportunity and has required a tremendous effort to keep going.

Residents not only have to pay fees but run into difficulties when they try to approach the freeholder. They are faced with complicated, protracted processes, in which they cannot even get information about the leaseholds for their homes without having to spend money. If those constituents are trapped in leasehold, it makes selling those properties incredibly difficult. A number of solicitors have approached me in Warrington to say that they had been asked to act for people buying the properties and had advised them not to. Developers had then recommended solicitors who disappeared overnight, so that the process could go through. That strikes me as a real scandal.

The Competition and Markets Authority looked at this situation for two years and did not really conclude anything. I say to the Minister that that was a missed opportunity for a deep dive into what is going on, not just with developers but with freeholders. Will he ensure that the proposals that the Department brings forward in the next Session address these problems? It is vital that people wanting to get out of leasehold can do so without facing extortionate fees that either leave them trapped in leasehold indefinitely or result in their being short-changed when they leave the system.

That legislation is desperately needed. I want to see a solution, my constituents want to see a solution, and I sincerely hope that the Department will take heed of that when they present their leasehold reforms in the King's Speech.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Sir George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. I am going to have to start calling the Front Benchers at 5.23 pm, so I will reduce the speaking limit to three minutes.

5.10 pm

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir George. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) for securing this important debate. In my three years as a Member, I have had to speak on this issue so many times—I have joined long-standing Members in the queue of MPs talking about it—so this almost feels like *déjà vu*. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Warrington South (Andy Carter), who outlined many of the issues we are seeing up and down the country.

[*Florence Eshalomi*]

I will focus on the role of managing agents in the building safety crisis, which has impacted so many of my constituents in Vauxhall since the Grenfell tragedy—and, six years later, it is still happening. Just yesterday, I held an online surgery with a group of leaseholders whose managing agent has raised their annual service charge from £1,000 a year to over £30,000 a year. When I saw the email come into my inbox, I replied straightaway, because I could not believe those figures. That staggering increase was justified by fire safety problems but the agent will not even disclose the details of the defects to the leaseholders. I ask Members to pause for a second and think about what it would be like to receive such an email. Imagine the stress of being charged a thirtyfold increase in the middle of this cost of living crisis without any proper explanation.

The sad reality is that that case is not even rare. Since becoming an MP three years ago, I have had many constituents come to me in desperation because their managing agents are refusing to share the basic information about their building—somewhere they call home and have to sleep every night. The issue has been exposed by the cladding scandal. Agents were commissioning EWS1 inspections on behalf of freeholders, leaving leaseholders unable to sell their flats and liable for thousands of pounds of fire safety problems that they did not cause. Many agents would not even publish those reports.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): In my constituency of Twickenham, we do not have many high-rise blocks of flats, but we have quite a lot of low-rise blocks. I have had two cases come to me relating to two different blocks of flats in Twickenham, in which managing agents have wrongly commissioned fire safety assessments for buildings under 18 metres. In one case, the report has been shown to be flawed. The residents cannot sell their homes; they are trapped. In the other block, residents are potentially being charged up to £800,000 for remedial works that are not needed.

Sir George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. Interventions should be brief, particularly given the time pressure.

Florence Eshalomi: I thank the hon. Lady for making that important point. That is the real insult that leaseholders face up and down the country: being forced to pay for the management of a block, even if the agent is not providing a worthwhile service. It is a slap in the face.

The sums we are talking about are not cheap; most end up being hundreds of pounds every year for leaseholders. We have to be clear that not all managing agents are like this; some are professional and diligent, and a number of them do a lot of great work. But the fundamental problem is that, whether agents are good or bad, leaseholders have no power to hold them to account. They do not even have a proper regulatory body that they can appeal to to enforce standards. Current arrangements leave leaseholders on the hook for almost everything, without having a say in how their building is managed.

The root of the conflicting motivations at the heart of this issue is the managing agents' role. The problem is that, ultimately, they are not employed by the people who are paying—the leaseholders. We need freeholders to be accountable, and we need to ensure that they take responsibility.

I will leave my remarks there, but I hope that the Minister will hear the pleas from Members this afternoon. Instead of giving us warm words and telling us that he has heard us, he needs to outline a concrete plan for what he and the Department are going to do to empower leaseholders in a system where managing agents can be properly held to account, and we need a clear timescale for that work. My constituents in Vauxhall and leaseholders up and down the country cannot afford to wait any longer.

5.14 pm

Stephen McPartland (Stevenage) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, and I am grateful to the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) for securing it.

We have spoken about leaseholders in this House for a number of years now, and one of the things that I always try to get across is that leaseholders are mentally, physically and financially broken. We talk about stuff in these debates, but they have lived it. I remember that during covid, when everybody was being told to stay at home, these leaseholders were being told to stay at home—and to keep their children at home—in buildings, flats and apartments that they had been told were unsafe and could burn down at any moment. When everybody else was being told to stay home in order to stay safe, they were being told that the safest thing for them to do was to get out. These people have been completely through the mill.

We have secured huge concessions from the Government, with over £10 billion in the Building Safety Act 2022. We have been back and forth, and I am delighted that the campaign led by many people in the Chamber, and by my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Itchen (Royston Smith), was successful in persuading the current Secretary of State to work with us to help to support these leaseholders. But what frustrates me is that, some years on, there are tenants still trapped in buildings such as Vista Tower in Stevenage, where the freeholder is Railpen. We know what is wrong with the building, and the Government have the money there to help to fix it. Why has it not been fixed? What is the delay? The building is there, and we know that—allegedly—it needs these works for it to be safe. The freeholder and the management agents need to work with the tenants to get the work done, but there are just delays. Leaseholders up and down the country are still trapped.

There is this weird combination of management agents, freeholders and leaseholders. We are talking about leasehold reform. My understanding was that, under the Building Safety Act, the freeholder was the backstop if nobody else was going to be responsible. If we are going to abolish freehold, we cannot be in a position whereby freeholders and management agents can just wait out all the current leaseholders, so that they then become responsible for all these bills in the future. We need to ensure, when we talk about leasehold reform, that leaseholders are at the heart of it. Leasehold reform should be for leaseholders, not to try to tidy up some property laws, or for freeholders, management agents or vested interests.

I would love to meet the Minister and officials to talk about how we can get the buildings that are out there at the moment made safe, so that leaseholders can all feel as though the jobs are being done.

5.17 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair today, Sir George.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) for introducing the debate and setting out clearly why leaseholders are at the mercy of freehold managing agents who—unsurprisingly—put the interests of the freeholder above all else, from ignoring building defects to rinsing the leaseholders through service charges. That can be done through the padding of bills, the use of preferred contractors, commissions and organising buildings insurance.

I can recall one example in my constituency where the insurance company for a block of flats just happened to operate from the same address as the managing agents and the freeholder. Under what other contract would someone be expected to pay all the costs but not actually be able to see the terms of the contract? Yet that is what we see with these insurance deals. Thankfully, that is being investigated by the Financial Conduct Authority. This may well provide us with yet another payment protection insurance-style scandal.

This is another outrageous example of the way that the dice are loaded against leaseholders, and the fact that anyone can set up as a property manager in this unregulated sector is unacceptable. Although leaseholders have the option, of course, of going to court to dispute charges, they will never get their legal costs back, even if they are successful. There could be the most egregious charges, and they could be thrown out of court as totally unreasonable, but it is still the leaseholder who ends up paying the bill for that legal action.

I also think that estate management companies on new-build estates, whether they are leasehold or not, need to be tackled, because the opportunities to inflate charges exist there almost as much as they do in a block of flats. Much as with leasehold itself, I do not accept that these arrangements are needed at all. The fact that developers choose not to pay a sum to the local authority for the financial commitment that is needed to maintain communal areas, instead saving themselves money by passing on the charge to homeowners, is another example of the rapacious nature of many in this sector. Not only do they make a saving at the start of the development, but they create an additional income stream by charging for communal services.

This situation will not end well. Sooner or later, residents who pay for the same service twice—once through their council tax and once through their service charge—will demand an end to this double-charging. However, as with leasehold, the guilty parties will have long since left town. These residents have even fewer rights than those in leasehold properties, but the central issue is the same: a system that puts power in the hands of those who have no business being involved with these people's homes at all.

Finally, on leasehold more generally, the linking of ground rents to the retail price index is becoming a real issue, with inflation so high. It even makes some of the outrageous ground rent doubling clauses seem reasonable in comparison, and it is putting people in real hardship.

It is five years since we were promised that this feudal system of ownership would be ended, yet millions of people are still trapped in leasehold. We repeat our plea

yet again—I am sure the Minister will hear this time and again today—for the Government to please get on and deliver the work of the Law Commission so that we can say goodbye to leasehold once and for all.

5.20 pm

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): In the interest of time, I will keep my remarks short and go straight into an example.

In the first quarter of 2022, one of my constituents paid just under a whopping £1,000 in electricity bills for a one-bedroom flat. She is obviously extremely concerned about how she will afford her bills when the energy price cap rises again in April. The electricity account is held by the freeholder of the building, which is a private company, and it is a commercial account. My constituent, who is a leaseholder, wishes to change her account type—indeed, she says that the majority of the units are residential anyway—but she is facing difficulties.

In particular, the energy provider has said it cannot have direct relationships with the leaseholders unless individual meters are installed. The managing agent has confirmed that the cost of installing individual meters would be passed on to the leaseholders and would be around £1,000 or £2,000. However, building-wide energy efficiency improvements are generally understood to be the freeholder's responsibility. As a leaseholder, my constituent can make some energy efficiency improvements to her home, but at the very least she needs permission from the freeholder for major works.

Again, the leaseholder is trapped in this bureaucratic quagmire between an opaque rock and an even more oppressive hard place, thwarted by complex buck-passing that ends up with them being financially liable or financially disadvantaged, without rights or agency. That is because, essentially, a residential building of leaseholders is run almost entirely at the landlord's discretion. I understand that leaseholders can dispute decisions and costs, which can amount to millions of pounds, but they will never get their legal costs paid, even if they are successful. On the other hand, the landlord almost always gets their legal costs paid as administrative charges under the lease. I repeat that the system does not work for residents.

Appointed managing agents have failed significantly, over and over again, to point out building defects in new blocks of flats. The truth is that there is a clear commercial incentive for building defects not to be highlighted. Indeed, if one were cynical, one might believe that a prime task of a developer-appointed manager is to ensure that the defects of a building are not revealed within the timescale of the warranty, after which date the cost can be placed on leaseholders' shoulders.

In my constituency of Poplar and Limehouse, people view the Westferry Printworks debacle and the history of controversy as illustrating systemic priorities that lie in serving billionaires rather than the interests of local people. I appeal to the Government to put local people in need at the heart of their planning and housing agenda, and once and for all to end the scandal of leasehold for millions who have bought their home but do not feel like they own it.

5.23 pm

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Sir George. I start by declaring an interest: my wife is the joint chief executive of the Law Commission, whose work I intend to cite in my remarks.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) on securing this really important debate. He has a long-standing interest in the matter and, in opening the debate, he made a powerful case both for regulating managing agents and reforming the leasehold system. I also thank the hon. Member for Warrington South (Andy Carter), the right hon. Member for Stevenage (Stephen McPartland) and my hon. Friends the Members for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) and for Poplar and Limehouse (Apsana Begum) for their excellent contributions. Above all else, they served as a valuable reminder of the scale and scope of the problem that we are considering this afternoon.

There are, of course, good managing agents who work hard to ensure that the residents they are responsible for are safe and secure and their homes properly looked after. However, the case for doing more to protect leaseholders from poor service and, indeed, exploitation at the hands of unscrupulous managing agents is as watertight as they come. We have heard numerous specific examples in this short debate of the kind of abuses that leaseholders across the country are routinely subject to by their managing agents. It is clear that relying on incremental improvement and the sharing of best practice to improve matters is simply not good enough. Government action to address those practices and improve the lives of leaseholders is necessary and long overdue.

The Government clearly recognise that there is a case for properly regulating managing agents, along with other property agents. As my hon. Friend the Member for Brent North mentioned, in 2018 the Government tasked a working group, chaired by the noble Lord Best, with bringing forward detailed recommendations on how a new regulatory framework should operate. The working group's final report, which made a series of proportionate and sensible recommendations, was published in July 2019, yet in the intervening 43 months the Government have seemingly done nothing to implement the recommendations.

The Government's failure to act on the recommendations has had very real consequences. The burdens that homeowners have long laboured under because of the dysfunction of the property agent market and the inherent flaws of the leasehold system have become more acute over recent years as a result of the building safety crisis and surging inflation, the combination of which has pushed many already hard-pressed leaseholders to the brink of financial ruin.

Time is short, and I will finish by touching on the issue of leasehold reform, because the deficiencies of the leasehold tenure are often the root cause of the abuse and poor service that so many homeowners experience at the hands of their managing agents. Although we may wish ultimately to go further than the Government in important respects, Labour is committed to fundamentally reforming the leasehold system, and we will support in principle any legislation that comes forward to that end. Significant reform is therefore dependent only on whether and when the Government

will finally publish the second part of their legislative agenda in this area. Despite being announced two years ago, there is still no sign of a Bill.

I would therefore be grateful if the Minister could provide answers to the following questions. Will the promised second leasehold reform Bill definitely be in the King's Speech later this year? Will the Government make available the necessary time to ensure that it receives Royal Assent before the end of the Parliament? Will the Bill include all the recommendations made by the Law Commission in its three residential leasehold and commonhold reports of 2020? Will the Government commit to ensuring that the Bill receives prelegislative scrutiny by the Select Committee, so that we get this important legislation right? I hope that the Minister can answer yes to each of those simple and straightforward questions and give concerned leaseholders watching the debate the reassurance they so desperately seek.

5.27 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Lee Rowley): Thank you for the opportunity to talk about this hugely important topic today, Sir George. I congratulate the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) on securing the debate. We have covered a significant amount of ground. I am not sure that I can do justice to the issue in the seven or eight minutes that I have if I am to allow the hon. Member a few moments to comment at the end, but I will try to cover as much as I can.

I am grateful to all hon. Members who have contributed. As hon. Members will know, there is a significant overlap between the people who are in the Chamber today and those who have stood up for their constituents and taken their concerns to the Department over the last few months. As hon. Members will know, we have been in correspondence on a number of occasions, and I am grateful to them for highlighting issues, particularly in my part of the portfolio, around building safety, in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. I am grateful for their time and the efforts that they go to on behalf of their constituents in both those areas.

We have discussed two broad areas today. One is the broader situation with regard to leasehold and the reforms that are coming in, and the other is the more specific question of building safety. I will try to take those in two buckets, if I may, then talk about some of the specific points that hon. Members have raised. As numerous hon. Members have highlighted, we made a series of commitments from 2018 onwards on leasehold in general. Reform in this area is necessary, is important and needs to happen. That covers a number of things raised by the hon. Member for Brent North, and other matters.

As my predecessor, the noble Lord Greenhalgh, indicated, the Government have committed to abolishing marriage value at the earliest possible opportunity. On service charge transparency, the Secretary of State has highlighted the fact that we are absolutely committed to providing more information, for exactly that reasons that the hon. Members for Poplar and Limehouse (Apsana Begum) and for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) indicated: the importance of transparency in those discussions, so that people know what they are paying for when they are given bills and charges.

I have heard the comments about managing agents. We recognise that, as in all systems, particularly ones where there are multiple individuals and entities involved, there are people who are exemplars and who do things well, there are people who do things less well, and there are people who do things badly. It is important that we call out bad practice and we take the opportunities where we can and where it is proportionate and reasonable to do so, both now and in the future, to be able to reduce the propensity for bad practice. I know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities will make that clear when we bring forward more information about our proposed leasehold reforms in due course.

In answer to the questions raised by the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook), while I cannot anticipate what will be in the package, we are committed to bringing forward those reforms. We have said that we want to undertake reform in this Parliament. There is still time to do that and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will provide more information in due course, when he is able to do so.

Andy Carter: This is a brief intervention. I have invited many of my hon. Friend's predecessors to Warrington South. None have made it, because they have not been in position for long enough to get there. May I extend an invitation to him to come and meet some of the leaseholders who are facing problems in Warrington South, so that he can hear directly from them before the final piece of legislation is put forward?

Lee Rowley: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his kind invitation to the north-west. I will speak to the Housing Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), who has been in post for a couple of weeks, because she is taking forward these specific points on leasehold and I want to ensure the right conversations are had with the right people.

I will respond to a few points on building safety, for which I am responsible in the Department; I am happy and keen to hear more about the issues that have been raised. Important points about significant increases in insurance were made, which we recognise and understand. The Association of British Insurers was asked to look at the issue a number of months ago and find a solution. I meet the Association on a regular basis—I did so most recently at the end of last week—and I will continue to do so. We hope that it will be able to bring forward a scheme on insurance in the coming months.

There was reference to lending. I hope hon. Members are starting to see a change with regard to building safety. I met all six big lenders before Christmas and we have come to an agreement with them through UK Finance. The market should now start to become more functional and successful again. I am receiving data from each of the banks on a regular basis—indeed, just a couple of days ago, I looked at the data I received from Santander and Barclays—in order to understand what is going on and how we can separate out, as much as we are able, the challenges that are known, understood and need to be remediated over a number of years, so that people can live their lives and get on with making choices about where and how they want to live. I welcome views from hon. Members in the months ahead about whether they have seen those changes.

I am conscious that I need to conclude in about two minutes. On building safety, my right hon. Friend the Member for Stevenage (Stephen McPartland) has been a stalwart; I give him huge credit for making progress on the issue with colleagues across the House, irrespective of their party. He made a vital point about lived experience; people have seen this, lived it and breathed it for many years. As the responsible Minister, I have tried to make visits. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt), who is no longer in his place, indicated, I visited Cardinal Lofts and spoke to residents. I went to Wicker Riverside in Sheffield within a few weeks of becoming Minister, talking to leaseholders and people who were at the forefront; I appreciate the challenge and difficulty they face. That is reason why my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is keen that we make progress. From the work we are doing on Vista Tower, my right hon. Friend the Member for Stevenage will know how important it is for us to call out bad behaviour and for us to make progress.

Finally, the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi) raised a case where charges have increased exponentially. Without knowing any of the detail, I would be very happy to receive additional information on that. I would be very happy, in principle, to come and visit, or to speak to those leaseholders. It is important, as a Minister, and for the Department, that we look at the macro level, at the changes and how that is occurring, and check that it is working in individual areas, so I would be very happy to see more information on that.

To conclude, these are hugely important issues that affect people's lives, so I absolutely appreciate the points that have been made regarding both leaseholds and the reforms needed in general. I understand the urgency, and I hope that we can say something more corporately on that soon, particularly on building safety. We need to make progress on remediation, on top of the good progress that we have already made, but there is a long way to go. While I am in post, I am committed to trying to make as much progress as possible so that the people who are affected can get on with living their lives again, as we all want them to.

5.35 pm

Barry Gardiner: I am very grateful to all hon. and right hon. Members who have spoken in this debate. It is clear that there is a compelling case for wholesale reform in this area. The hon. Member for Warrington South (Andy Carter) has done himself no harm in Steinbeck Grange today. I am quite sure, but the point that he made is one that we all share. It was ably made by the right hon. Member for Stevenage (Stephen McPartland) as well. He said that that resident had said that he had to reassess his life.

For so many people, that is what is happening. Millions of people in this country are having to reassess their lives and the possibilities that they thought were open to them—even on changing jobs—trapped in their own homes, unable to sell, unable to move to a new job, or trapped in a one-bedroom home, unable to have any more children. Their plans are on hold. Their lives are on hold.

It is really interesting to hear the case that my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi) made about a 3,000% increase in service charges. I am glad that the Minister has agreed to take up that case and look into it further, because it is astonishing.

There are two key points that I want to follow up. The first is the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), who talked about the scandal of managing agents often being at the centre of a web of companies all linked to the same beneficial owners.

In Wembley Central Apartments in my constituency—I am not sure that I will get this entirely right—St Modwens and Sowcrest were the joint developers. Sowcrest sold to a Canadian company, which then sold to Wembley Central Ltd, which is established in Jersey. They claim that it is for them to do the remediation work on the building, yet Sowcrest was the original freeholder and the developer itself. Those are the sorts of entangled webs that we are dealing with here.

With that, I look to the Minister to do all that he can in government to bring forward the legislation. I hope that it conforms to the four points—the four challenges—that my hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook), speaking from our Front Bench, mentioned. We all look forward, ultimately, to seeing an end to this appalling practice.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered leaseholders and managing agents.

5.37 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 28 February 2023

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Highly Protected Marine Areas

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): I am announcing my intention to designate the first Highly Protected Marine Areas (HPMAs) - North East of Farnes Deep, Allonby Bay and Dolphin Head. These will contribute to the Government's vision under our UK Marine Strategy for

'clean, healthy, safe, productive, and biologically diverse ocean and seas'.

They will increase the scope and protection of protected areas at sea and will allow sites to fully recover, increasing resilience to climate change. This forms part of our commitment to deliver 30by30 under the Global Biodiversity Framework.

Between 6 July and 28 September 2022 my Department led a public consultation on five candidate HPMAs. The sites included two inshore: Allonby Bay (located in the Irish Sea) and Lindisfarne (Northern North Sea). The other three were offshore: North East of Farnes Deep (Northern North Sea), Inner Silver Pit South (Southern North Sea) and Dolphin Head (Eastern Channel).

Over 900 responses to the consultation were received, and after carefully considering these and further evidence, including economic impacts, I will proceed with designating North East of Farnes Deep as set out in the consultation. For Allonby Bay and Dolphin Head, I will designate modified areas.

I will not designate Lindisfarne, owing to the impacts on the local community raised during the consultation, nor Inner Silver Pit South, owing to the high costs to fishers identified during the impact analysis.

The revised Allonby Bay HPMa boundary allows for an area of recreational angling, including access for disabled anglers, and for other activities to continue due to its importance to the community and takes account of the needs of Maryport Harbour and the Port of Silloth while still delivering important biodiversity benefits. The revised boundary for Dolphin Head is to improve compliance and enforcement. The new boundary still provides high ecological benefits, whilst straightening the western most point of the site boundary.

These HPMAs will be designated as "Marine Conservation Zones" under the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009 by 6 July 2023.

I have asked officials to explore additional sites for consideration this year.

The Government Response will be available on www.gov.uk.

[HCWS585]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

England Rare Diseases Action Plan 2023

The Minister for Social Care (Helen Whately): The Government have published England's second Rare Diseases Action Plan today, on international Rare Disease Day.

Approximately 3.5 million people in the UK are living with one of over 7,000 rare diseases, such as muscular dystrophies or Huntington's disease. People living with rare diseases often face complex journeys to diagnosis, treatment and care.

Our action plan is part of our continued commitment to improve the lives of those living with rare conditions, as outlined in the 2021 UK Rare Diseases Framework. It follows publication of England's first Rare Diseases Action Plan in February 2022, and highlights progress made in the past year, as well as setting out 13 new actions for the year ahead.

Key achievements in the last year include:

changes to the UK National Screening Committee to support robust decision making within the constraints of more limited evidence bases, to help improve how decisions are made on newborn screening for rare diseases;

extensive public engagement to support design of a whole genome sequencing research study embedded in the NHS to screen for up to 200 rare genetic conditions in newborns where early intervention could transform outcomes;

identification of over 1,000 new, complex diagnoses for people with rare diseases, via the Genomics England Clinical Research Interface, to inform the most appropriate clinical care;

expansion of innovative digital educational resources on rare diseases, which have had strong uptake by healthcare professionals;

creation and rollout of a toolkit for virtual healthcare consultations, to improve care co-ordination for patients with complex, multi-system rare diseases;

recruitment of over 2,500 new volunteers to the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) BioResource, to increase scientific understanding of rare diseases and facilitate improved diagnostics and treatments;

completion of innovative research studies, such as the MELODY Covid-19 study, to inform targeted treatment policies for the rare diseases community.

Our second action plan will continue to build on this record, adding significant new commitments against each of the framework priorities, developed in close collaboration with members of the rare disease community. These include:

addressing health inequalities for people living with rare diseases by gathering the evidence needed to include rare diseases in NHS England's Core20PLUS5 Framework, enabling Integrated Care Systems to develop targeted actions to reduce these inequalities;

changes to commissioning of services for rare diseases within NHS England, to improve co-ordination of pathways for access to specialist care, treatment, drugs, social care, mental health and special educational support for those living with rare diseases;

seeking feedback from the rare disease community on how to improve NIHR's Be Part of Research platform, to make it easier for people living with rare diseases to participate in clinical research.

These actions are supported by recently announced Government funding for ground-breaking research, including investment of nearly £790 million in 20 NIHR Biomedical Research Centres, and £12 million of funding to support the Medical Research Council (MRC)-NIHR UK Rare Disease Research Platform. This research forms the essential foundations to improve understanding, diagnoses and treatments of rare diseases, translating scientific breakthroughs into clinical advances.

Under the action plan, the millions of people with rare diseases in England will see more efficient and equitable access to care and new treatments introduced. Over the coming year, we will closely monitor the progress of these actions, seeking input from those living with rare diseases to ensure we are measuring the outcomes that matter most. Progress will be reported in 2024, as part of England's commitment to report annually over the 5-year lifetime of the UK Rare Diseases Framework.

Through this second action plan, we will continue to take steps towards achieving our overarching vision—delivering improvements in diagnosis, awareness, treatment and care, and creating lasting positive change for those living with rare diseases.

[HCWS586]

JUSTICE

Consultation on a Small Payments Scheme for the Mental Capacity Act 2005

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mike Freer): Today I am publishing the Government's response to the consultation on a small payments scheme for the Mental Capacity Act 2005.

The Mental Capacity Act (MCA) is a crucial piece of legislation that protects vulnerable individuals who may be unable to make decisions for themselves. The principles of the MCA guide us in empowering these individuals to make their own decisions when possible and supports their families and carers to make decisions in their best interest when necessary.

It is a long-held principle that an adult must have proper legal authority to access or deal with property belonging to another adult. In cases where the adult lacks mental capacity, the MCA provides the framework for them to grant legal authority by appointing a lasting power of attorney (LPA) while they still have mental capacity, or for third parties to obtain legal authority through applications to the Court of Protection (CoP).

Concerns have been raised that the existing CoP process for obtaining legal authority to access accounts on behalf of individuals who lack mental capacity creates barriers to access small value assets. This has particularly been highlighted in the case of accessing matured Child Trusts Funds, where a campaign by the families of young adults with learning disabilities has led to attention in both the Lords and Commons.

In response to these concerns, the Government decided to examine whether there was a case for an alternative process to the current CoP deputyship where access to small funds was required. We consulted on a small

payment scheme that would be run by financial services firms and permit access for six months to limited funds up to £2,500 from one account belonging to an individual who lacks mental capacity without an order from the CoP being sought. The scheme set out to meet three aims:

Scope: Scheme must be broad enough to be useful and avoid inadvertent discrimination;

Security: Assets of vulnerable individuals should not be subject to unacceptable financial risk; and

Simplicity: The scheme must be straightforward and allow quicker access to limited funds than current processes, while being easy for financial service firms to implement.

The consultation received 225 responses and provided the opportunity for key stakeholders from the financial, legal and disability sectors as well as parents and carers supporting those who lack mental capacity to share their concerns about the current system and opinions on the new proposal.

The consultation provided clear evidence of the challenges faced in the current system. Most consistently respondents complained of the lengthy and complex CoP application forms, and the time taken to complete the application. It has also become apparent through the consultation that there is a general lack of awareness of the MCA. In many cases families and carers are often caught off guard when their child turns 18 as they were not aware of the MCA and the need to obtain legal authority to manage another person's financial affairs if they lack capacity.

I want to make it simpler and quicker for the people who care for individuals who lack mental capacity to access the funds on their behalf. The evidence demonstrates that legislating for a small payments scheme would fail to address the underlying challenges preventing access to small value assets. Instead, the best approach is to focus on addressing the underlying barriers in the current system to accessing small value assets. To do this, the Government will work with the Court of Protection to improve application processing times and simplify court forms, and collaborate with OGDs, charities, and the finance sector to increase awareness of the MCA among parents and caregivers of young people without capacity as they transition to adulthood.

Importantly, this approach will also maintain protections and support for vulnerable people and their rights. The steps outlined uphold the principles of the MCA to empower individuals without mental capacity to make their own property and affairs decisions when possible and support their families and caregivers to make decisions in their best interest when necessary. This is essential for protecting vulnerable individuals from fraud, abuse, and coercion.

I hope the publication of this response will demonstrate the thorough consideration given to this issue and the impact on those individuals who lack capacity. As my predecessor, now the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work, my hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove), said when launching the consultation, these individuals must come first and should not lose the protections provided by the MCA. It is my belief that this response rightly honours that.

[HCWS588]

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

Planning System Consultations

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Michael Gove): Today I have launched two formal consultations on proposals to improve the planning system to support measures in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill.

Planning fees

Planning application fees provide essential income for local planning authorities to be able to deliver their planning service.

This consultation seeks views on proposals to increase planning fees by 35 per cent. for major applications and 25 per cent. for all other applications, including proposals for fees indexation, to support greater resourcing and financial sustainability for local planning authorities. The consultation also seeks views on how the Government can provide additional support for building capacity and capability in local planning authorities.

All applicants should be able to benefit from a high-quality and timely planning service, so the consultation also asks for views on new performance measures.

This consultation closes on 25 April 2023.

Permitted development rights

National permitted development rights play an important role in the planning system, providing flexibility and reducing bureaucracy. This consultation asks for views on a new permitted development right for temporary recreational campsites and changes to existing rights to further support film-making and local authority-led electric vehicle charge points.

In addition, and as committed to in the Government's British Energy Security Strategy, this consultation seeks views on changes to the existing rights for solar equipment. As part of this, we are also proposing a new right to allow for the installation of solar canopies in ground-level off-street car parks in non-domestic settings.

This consultation closes on 25 April 2023.

A copy of both documents will be deposited in the Library of both Houses.

[HCWS587]

ORAL ANSWERS

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**not later than
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