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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Wednesday 8 March 2023

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Mr Speaker: Before we come to Women and Equalities questions, may I say how proud I was to host an event last night marking *The House* magazine's publication of its list of 100 women in Westminster? It was an honour to celebrate so many inspiring colleagues. I wish them and everyone a happy International Women's Day.

Oral Answers to Questions

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

The Minister for Women and Equalities was asked—

Gender Pay Gap

1. **Munira Wilson** (Twickenham) (LD): What recent assessment she has made of the implications for her policies of the gender pay gap. [903984]

The Minister for Women (Maria Caulfield): Gender pay gap reporting continues to motivate employers to look at their pay data and improve workplace gender equality, and huge progress is being made. The gender pay gap has fallen by approximately a quarter in the past decade, but of course, there is more work to be done.

Munira Wilson: I thank the Minister for her response. An 18-year-old entering the workforce today will not see gender pay equality in her lifetime. With the national gender pay gap at 14% and growing, will the Minister commit this International Women's Day to ending the motherhood penalty by fixing our broken childcare system and ensuring that every family can access affordable childcare?

Maria Caulfield: Absolutely. It is this Conservative Government who, in 2017, introduced the world-leading regulations that have ensured that we are able to record the gender pay gap and the progress that we are making. We are also committed to the childcare aspect, which is difficult for many women. That is why we have announced additional funding of £160 million this year, £180 million next year, and £170 million the year after for local authorities to increase the hourly rates to pay for childcare, which is so important to women.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): Last year, the gender pay gap was 12% higher than it was in 2020, the year in which the Minister for Women and Equalities was first appointed to the Government Equalities Office. If not the Minister, can anyone on the Government Front Bench please apologise to women for that increase this International Women's Day?

Maria Caulfield: I thank the shadow Minister for that question. It is disappointing that she cannot welcome the progress that has been made, and not just in terms of the gender pay gap: we are supporting pay transparency, which is equally important in making sure women are paid the same as men. We are launching a science, technology, engineering and maths returners pilot to enable 75,000 people to return to the STEM sector, mainly women. On carers' leave, flexible working and shared parental leave, and through supporting the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) with her private Member's Bill on harassment in the workplace, there is huge progress on supporting women in work.

Anneliese Dodds: No apology, then, for that increase in the gender pay gap over recent years, and no real action, it seems. Other figures from the Office for National Statistics show that the gender pay gap for women in their 50s and 60s is nearly four times higher than it is for those in their 30s. Some 185,000 women aged between 50 and 64 have also left the workforce since 2020, at a cost of £7 billion to our economy. Will the Minister back Labour's proposal for larger companies to publish menopause action plans to support women to stay in work, boost productivity and grow our economy, or will that action to support working women again just be dismissed as left-wing?

Maria Caulfield: I am pleased that the Labour party is getting with the programme—that it can actually define what a woman is, for a start. We will not take any lectures from the Labour party; perhaps it needs to get its own house in order before lecturing the rest of the country, because according to *The Daily Telegraph* in January, the Labour party paid its black workers 9% less than its white workers. It absolutely needs to get its own house in order.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow SNP spokesperson.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): As I highlighted to the Leader of the House last week, the gender pay gap between women and men currently sits at nearly 15%. We know that women are not a homogenous group, so that gap will vary further based on intersecting characteristics, including ethnicity and disability status. Will the Minister, in line with the theme for this International Women's Day, embrace equity by mandating gender pay gap reporting and action plans for all employers, as well as introducing ethnicity and disability pay gap reporting requirements?

Maria Caulfield: As I set out, this Government in 2017 set out world-leading regulations requiring larger employers to publish their average salaries, but that does not stop other employers from doing the same. We would have to pass new regulations to reduce that threshold and change the Equality Act 2010, but we are seeing all employers wanting to reduce the gender pay gap, and we are leading the way in government, with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the Department for Work and Pensions having eliminated that gap in their Departments.

Making Misogyny a Hate Crime: Potential Merits

2. **Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): What recent assessment the Government have made of the potential merits of making misogyny a hate crime. [903985]

Mr Speaker: Come on, Minister.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Miss Sarah Dines): I am going to have to be quicker, or I will never get on the “Women in Westminster: the 100” list.

The Law Commission recommended against adding sex and gender to the hate crime laws. It found that the addition of those characteristics might make the prosecution of crimes that disproportionately affect women and girls more difficult. The Government share the Law Commission’s concern. Parliament repeatedly voted against making misogyny a hate crime last year, and there are no plans to change.

Wera Hobhouse: I recognise the arguments that have been made. Most violence against women originates in misogyny. Therefore, making misogyny a hate crime would send such a powerful signal to all offenders that all their offences will be taken with the utmost seriousness and investigated properly. Victims of Wayne Couzens have argued that, if only their reports of his indecent exposure had been taken seriously, Sarah Everard might still be alive today. Is it not time that we made misogyny a hate crime?

Miss Dines: I beg to disagree. It may send a signal, but it is more of a virtue signal than a real signal. We have more police officers than ever, and we are determined to stamp out violence against women and girls.

Health Disparities

3. **Sir James Duddridge** (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): What recent progress the Government have made on tackling health disparities. [903986]

The Minister for Women (Maria Caulfield): Health disparities exist across a wide variety of conditions, from cancer to mental health, and contribute to the unacceptable variation in health outcomes. The major conditions strategy that we are launching will therefore apply a geographical lens to end the disparities in health outcomes across England.

Sir James Duddridge: I thank the Minister for that reply, but what does she make of the interesting comments by Sir Chris Whitty about health inequalities in coastal areas, such as Southend, and what are the Government proposing to do about those inequalities?

Maria Caulfield: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that there are disparities. There is an eight-year difference in life expectancy between a woman born in Blackpool and a woman born in Woking, and we want to end that. That is why our major conditions strategy is in parallel with the work that NHS England is doing on its Core20PLUS5, where we are targeting the 20% most deprived populations and the five key health conditions that are making those disparities apparent today.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): The average life expectancy of a woman with a learning disability is around 18 years shorter than women in the general population, so on this International Women’s Day, what can the Minister say to women with learning disabilities about the disparity in their life expectancy in Britain?

Maria Caulfield: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point and that is exactly why mental health is part of the major conditions strategy. People with mental health and learning disabilities do suffer from poorer physical health, and that is why it is crucial that we do not see—[*Interruption.*] If he listened to me, he would have heard that I said “learning disabilities”. It is crucial that we do not see people with a learning disability in isolation, and that we look after their physical health, as well as the conditions they suffer from.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): Pregnant women who live in the poorest areas of England are twice as likely to die than those living in the most affluent areas. Shockingly, black women are four times more likely to die during childbirth. This Government have had 13 years, but have failed to tackle maternal health inequalities. What action is the Minister taking to address these appalling disparities?

Maria Caulfield: This is why we have set up the maternity disparities taskforce. We are working with the chief midwife to drive down those disparities, and we are working with NHS England. Maternity is one of those Core20PLUS5 elements, because we recognise that there is huge disparity across the country, which we want to eliminate.

Energy Bills: Impact on Disabled People

4. **Helen Morgan** (North Shropshire) (LD): Whether she has had recent discussions with her Cabinet colleagues on the impact of energy bills on disabled people. [903988]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Amanda Solloway): The Department is talking to a range of stakeholders to assess evidence and options for a more targeted approach to consumer protection from April 2024.

Helen Morgan: More than 200,000 disabled households, including people in my constituency, lost out on the £150 warm home discount scheme due to a change in who the Government deem entitled to claim. Disabled people often require additional energy to run specialist equipment and to keep their homes warmer. Given that there is no appeals process, will the Minister agree to review that problem in the system and work with hon. Members to address it next year?

Amanda Solloway: The Government have been committed to supporting disabled people—a whole range of people—in the cost of living crisis. As I have mentioned, we will be meeting and discussing it.

Transphobia and Hate Crimes against Trans People

5. **Mr Ben Bradshaw** (Exeter) (Lab): What steps she is taking with the Secretary of State for the Home Department to tackle transphobia and hate crimes against trans people. [903989]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Miss Sarah Dines): The Government take all forms of hate crime seriously. We expect the police to fully investigate all those sorts of hateful attacks to make sure that the cowards who commit

them feel the full force of the law. We are committed to reducing all crime, including hate crime, which is why we are recruiting 20,000 additional police officers.

Mr Bradshaw: The Minister will know that trans people are already the group most likely to be the victims of violent crime, and there was a massive 56% increase in hate crime against trans people last year. That is against what I conceive to be a background of semi-official transphobia in England, which is similar to the moral panic that led to section 28 in the 1980s. What is her view of the comments of her party's deputy chairman, the hon. Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson), who called on the Conservative party to campaign on "a mix of culture wars and trans debate"?

Miss Dines: With the greatest respect, I do not accept the way that the narrative has been framed about the deputy chairman of the Conservative party. We have to look at all those issues, but I welcome the increase in the reporting of the sort of offences that the right hon. Member mentions, because it is only when people come forward that we can do something about it. The increase to 56% from 43% is a good thing, because it means that people have more confidence in the police. There is more to do, but I certainly do not accept that the Government are against assisting in that area, as has been said. We are putting huge amounts of effort and education into it, from which we will reap the benefits in years to come.

Gender Recognition Certificate: Application Process

6. **Andrew Lewer** (Northampton South) (Con): What progress her Department has made on amending the application process for a gender recognition certificate. [903990]

The Minister for Equalities (Stuart Andrew): The Government have taken steps to modernise the application process for obtaining a gender recognition certificate and to make applications more affordable. GRC applicants are now required to pay £5 and the newly developed digital application process for GRCs launched on 29 June.

Andrew Lewer: Does the Minister agree that it is important to have a consistent approach to the recognition of overseas countries' GRC schemes and that, because of the complex interaction with the Equality Act 2010, it is right to recognise the schemes of only those countries that have equivalent approaches?

Stuart Andrew: A consistent approach to GRCs is fundamental to the effective functioning of legislation in this area. The GB-wide Equality Act was carefully drafted in the light of, and to reflect, the specific limits of the UK-wide Gender Recognition Act 2004. It is important, for the effective functioning of the Equality Act, that the recognition of international GRCs is in line with the basic principles of the GRA.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his response. Many people in Northern Ireland, and the United Kingdom as a whole, have concerns about gender recognition certificates. Has he had an opportunity to talk to some of those organisations to get their opinion, so that we can draw up a policy that is recognised by everyone?

Stuart Andrew: I recognise that this is an area of considerable concern for some, but it is important that the debate is calm and measured, and absolutely respects the individuals involved. I have many meetings with people from around the country on these specific issues, and we take careful consideration of all the points that are made to ensure that everybody feels confident that the law is in the right place.

Entrepreneur Support Programme: Educational Opportunities

7. **Edward Timpson** (Eddisbury) (Con): If she will make an assessment of the potential impact on educational opportunities of the entrepreneur support programme set out in "Inclusive Britain: government response to the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities", published in March 2022. [903991]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake): The Department for Business and Trade is keen to support entrepreneurs from all communities, as evidenced by a disproportionately high proportion of start-up loans accessed by ethnic minority-led businesses. The Government have supported actions aimed at improving opportunities for ethnic minority entrepreneurs, as set out in the "Inclusive Britain" report, and we will be reporting back to Parliament shortly.

Edward Timpson: Decision making, leadership, commitment, confidence, resilience, teamwork and self-esteem are all skills and attributes essential to entrepreneurialism. It is also the case that these can be fostered by high-quality physical education in schools, which is why today's announcement of £600 million over two years to support primary school PE and sport is so welcome. Sport England reported in December:

"Children and young people with Black, Asian and Other ethnicities are the least likely to be active."

So will my hon. Friend use his good offices to upgrade from Government aspiration to Government policy the Association for Physical Education's recommendation to make PE a core subject in schools to help tackle this unacceptable disparity?

Kevin Hollinrake: Hear, hear. As someone who benefited from playing football, rugby and cricket at my state school, I am delighted at the announcement that my hon. and learned Friend refers to. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education has today announced a package of activity to boost equal opportunities in school sport, both inside and outside the classroom.

Violence against Women and Girls

8. **Ian Levy** (Blyth Valley) (Con): What recent steps she has taken with Cabinet colleagues to help end violence against women and girls. [903992]

14. **Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): What recent steps she has taken with Cabinet colleagues to help end violence against women and girls. [903998]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Miss Sarah Dines): Tackling violence against women and girls is a Government priority, and something I regularly discuss with my colleagues. We have added violence against women and girls to the

strategic policing requirement, meaning it is set out as a national threat for police forces to respond to alongside issues such as terrorism. We have launched the £36 million domestic abuse perpetrator intervention fund to improve the safety and feeling of safety of victims and their children, and to reduce the risk posed by perpetrators.

Ian Levy: It is a sad fact that walking home at night is for too many women and girls a time when they feel exposed to danger, and this is unacceptable. Sadly, for some when they get home, home is not a place of refuge; it a place of danger. During the periods of national lockdown in the pandemic, this became a reality for more women and girls, with the police and domestic abuse support services reporting an increase in cases of victims experiencing abuse in their own homes. Will my hon. Friend advise me what progress has been made in supporting the frontline services?

Miss Dines: I am pleased to be able to say that the Northumbria police and crime commissioner has received £3.7 million from across the safer streets fund rounds to date, and the £750,000 through the current round 4 is for a range of interventions on transport and therapy. Also, we have training for the NHS to make sure we have an all-systems process to improve this; we have better training for those who work in healthcare and in education in a whole-system approach. This Government are committed to assisting.

Sir Edward Leigh: As the father of three young women, like any parent I worry about their safety. Society seems to have become harder, and old-fashioned values of respect towards women seem to be vanishing in many parts of our society, even in the police. What practical efforts can the Government make to make young women feel safe in the streets, particularly in areas of our great cities?

Miss Dines: I know that the Prime Minister has daughters and shares my right hon. Friend's concerns. I can say that the Lincolnshire police and crime commissioner has received £1.3 million from across the safer streets fund rounds so far, and the almost £400,000 in the current round 4 is for extra CCTV and police training to respond to VAWG. This is part of a wider picture and we are advancing. I am very proud of what the Government are doing.

Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Lab): An Afghan woman is smuggled into the UK on a small boat because she cannot access the resettlement scheme. Once here, she is trafficked into prostitution and abused by a grooming gang. Under the Government's new Bill, she would be unable to access modern slavery support, and she would be returned to an unsafe country. Does the Minister agree that we must make sure that all vulnerable women are safe from such crimes?

Miss Dines: There is a lot of work going on. We have been engaging with stakeholder groups to see what we can do to make sure that every woman is safe. I have spoken to several groups about this issue, which is being considered. Let no one be mistaken: this Government are extremely strong on making sure that vulnerable women, wherever they come from, are safe.

Samantha Dixon (City of Chester) (Lab): Sadly, catcalling and other gender-based micro-aggressions are still commonplace in schools. The Chester Sexual Abuse Support Service, which works closely with schools across my constituency, tells me there is still a lack of awareness, education and prevention regarding these issues. What is being done to resource schools to raise awareness and help young people to challenge behaviours that lead to abuse?

Miss Dines: A wide range of work and training is going on within schools to ensure that young people understand more clearly what is and what is not acceptable. On more national interventions, we have the Ask for ANI scheme in pharmacies and the Enough social media campaign, which has really cut through—the responses we have had to that campaign have been unprecedented. This Government are committed to, and making good progress in, assisting young people to understand what is and is not acceptable.

Topical Questions

T1. [903977] **Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Minister for Women (Maria Caulfield): I wish everyone a happy International Women's Day, when we celebrate 51% of the population. I am proud of this Government's record on supporting women, whether that is young girls playing more sport in school or the first ever women's health strategy, which this year will see the rolling out of the prepayment certificate for hormone replacement therapy, pregnancy loss certificates this summer, and the levelling up of IVF access. Today I am proud to announce £25 million to roll out women's health hubs across England—the one-stop shop for all women's health needs that will drastically improve women's experience of healthcare in England.

Chris Stephens: The Minister will be aware—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. People cannot walk in front of a Member when he is asking his question.

Chris Stephens: The Minister will be aware of a legal agreement under the Equalities Act between McDonald's and the Equality and Human Rights Commission over the handling of complaints of sexual harassment. Does the Minister believe that that is solely an issue of a toxic culture at McDonald's, and will she look at whether women working on zero-hours contracts across the economy are at increased risk of experiencing sexual harassment because of depending on male managers for future shifts?

Maria Caulfield: We take sexual harassment in the workplace very seriously—*[Interruption.]* Oh, to be shouted down for the entrance of a man.

Mr Speaker: Order. Minister, nobody was shouted down. It happens every time, and when the Prime Minister comes it will happen again. Don't worry—come on.

Maria Caulfield: I will try again, Mr Speaker. Once again, the Government are keen to tackle sexual harassment in the workplace. That is why we are supporting the private Member's Bill promoted by the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse), the Worker Protection (Amendment of Equality Act 2010) Bill, because it is such a serious issue.

T2. [903979] **Simon Jupp** (East Devon) (Con): I am proudly backing a campaign to improve services for menopause sufferers in the county of Devon. In society and at work, stigma remains a barrier to many people getting the support they require. What steps are the Government taking to prevent menopause discrimination in the workplace?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mims Davies): We are working with employers and employees on that crucial matter, to ensure that there is no stigma in the workplace for those experiencing the impact of the menopause. To that end, on Monday I was delighted to announce the appointment of Helen Tomlinson as the Department for Work and Pensions menopause employment champion. She will have a key role in driving awareness and promoting the benefits to both business and the economy of a fully inclusive workplace.

T3. [903980] **Mick Whitley** (Birkenhead) (Lab): Disabled people are more than twice as likely to experience domestic abuse and sexual violence as non-disabled people. The national disability strategy set out a roadmap to improve the protection and support available to disabled people in their homes, but last year that was found to be unlawful by the High Court for not having given the disabled community an adequate opportunity to shape the strategy. Will the Minister confirm that tackling the scourge of violence against disabled people will be a central priority of the new disability action plan, and will she guarantee that that new plan will be shaped by disabled people?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Miss Sarah Dines): Violence against disabled people, in their home or anywhere, is just as important an issue as violence against anybody else, and we are putting unprecedented moneys towards stopping that sort of violence. It is all about education. The National Police Chiefs' Council and the College of Policing are working hard on that, and we are making progress.

T5. [903982] **Sir James Duddridge** (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): Young men often struggle with their mental health, and particularly with suicidal thoughts that can hit like a heart attack. What more can the Government do—indeed, what more can each individual Member of the House do—to help those young men?

Maria Caulfield: Absolutely. That is why we are setting out the suicide prevention strategy and looking at high-risk groups such as men. The Home Office is also working to set up helplines for men. Some £200,000 is going into those helplines, and so far they have supported 10,000 men who needed support.

T4. [903981] **Stephen Morgan** (Portsmouth South) (Lab): New businesses are almost three times as likely to be started by men as by women. Does the Minister agree with Labour's plan to work with the British Business Bank to support female founders to achieve their ambitions?

Maria Caulfield: The Labour party is once again late to the party, because the Conservative Government are already delivering on this. We have set up the high-growth enterprise taskforce to get more women into setting up high-growth businesses and to end the disparity in venture capital whereby, for every pound that is given, 89p currently goes to men's businesses and only a penny to women's.

Mr Speaker: Before we come to Prime Minister's questions, I would like to point out that live subtitles and a British Sign Language interpretation of proceedings are available to watch on parliamentlive.tv.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked— Engagements

Q1. [903999] **Richard Burgon** (Leeds East) (Lab): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 8 March.

The Prime Minister (Rishi Sunak): Today is International Women's Day. At home, we are taking huge strides to deliver equal opportunities for women, such as mandatory pay gap reporting and the landmark Domestic Abuse Act 2021; and internationally, we have today launched a new women and girls strategy, which puts them at the heart of everything we do.

This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Richard Burgon: Over 100 days ago, the Prime Minister promised to publish his tax returns. He still hasn't. People want transparency in our politics, especially because the Prime Minister is the richest Prime Minister in history and because of the concerns there have been. So why on earth has the Prime Minister not published his tax returns yet, when will he do so, and when he does so, will he include his US tax returns?

The Prime Minister: As I previously confirmed, I will publish my tax returns, and that will be done very shortly.

Q4. [904002] **Anthony Mangnall** (Totnes) (Con): On International Women's Day, may I congratulate the Prime Minister on all the work that has been done on the preventing sexual violence in conflict initiative and on ensuring that the UK continues to show its global leadership?

There are 250,000 people in this country living on park home sites. They are treated as second-class citizens by councils to which they pay council tax, they are treated poorly by managers who own the sites, and they are at a disadvantage when we roll out our incredibly generous energy schemes. Will the Prime Minister ensure that we can give them more support and help, and reform the Mobile Homes Act 2013?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right that there is still more work to do to tackle problems with the sector. We are making progress in implementing changes. Park home owners' rights are now codified in writing with the site owner, and should those obligations not be met, residents can take site owners to a tribunal. Local authorities also now have powers to take enforcement action, and we will continue to support them to improve protection for park home residents everywhere.

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): Today, on International Women's Day, we celebrate the successes of women in our society. It is a crying shame that, as we do so, we face legislation that drives a coach and horses through our world-leading modern slavery framework, which protects women from exploitation. In the last decade, this Government have introduced five plans to tackle illegal immigration—five utter failures. The problem just gets worse with every new gimmick. The Home Secretary says the public are

“sick of tough talk and inadequate action.”

Does the Prime Minister agree with her assessment of this Government's record?

The Prime Minister: What the right hon. and learned Gentleman fails to recognise is that there is a global migration problem. We are not alone in facing these challenges. It is precisely because, across Europe, the numbers are escalating to the extent they are that we have brought forward new plans, and because we are determined to ensure that this remains a compassionate and generous country and that that is done fairly and legally. That is why we will break the criminal gangs. We have announced new agreements with Albania and France, tougher immigration enforcement and now new legislation that makes it clear that if you come here illegally, you will be detained and swiftly removed. But what we have not heard is the right hon. and learned Gentleman's plan. We know what it is: it is open-door immigration and unlimited asylum. While he may be on the side of the people smugglers, we are on the side of the British people.

Keir Starmer: If the Prime Minister was serious about stopping the boats, he would steal our plan on stopping the boats, smash the gangs, sort out the returns and clean up the utter mess. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I am going to hear this, and nobody is going to—*[Interruption.]* I wouldn't if I were you. I think we have heard enough. I want to hear the questions and the answers. They will not be interrupted.

Keir Starmer: Nobody on the Labour Benches wants open borders. Those on the Conservative Benches have lost control of the borders. The Prime Minister promised the country that the Bill will stop all small boat crossings, no ifs, no buts. It sounds like more talk, so in the interests of adequate action, when will he achieve that?

The Prime Minister: We will be implementing the plan as soon as we can pass it through Parliament, so I look forward to the right hon. and learned Gentleman's support. The reality is that he has been on the wrong side—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Stafford, if you don't want to hear the Prime Minister you can go and have a good cup of tea, nice and strong I suspect, but I will hear him.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. and learned Gentleman has been on the wrong side of this issue his entire career. He described all immigration law as “racist”, he said it was a mistake to control immigration and he has never, ever voted for tougher asylum laws. It is clear that while he is in hock to the open border activists, we are on the side of the British people.

Keir Starmer: When I was in charge of prosecutions, I extradited countless rapists and the conviction rate for people smuggling was twice what it is today. I voted against the Prime Minister's legislation last time because I said it would not work. Since it became law, the numbers have gone up: he has proved me right. He should be apologising, not gloating. The Prime Minister says the Government will detain people who are not eligible to claim asylum here and then return them. Well, they already tried that under the last legislation. Last year, 18,000 people were deemed ineligible to apply for asylum—that is the easy bit, the talk—but as for the action, Prime Minister, how many of them have actually been returned?

The Prime Minister: As a result of the plans we have brought forward, we have almost doubled the number of people returned this year. The right hon. and learned Gentleman talked about laws—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I think the Front Benchers need to be a little quieter. I want to hear and I do not need you joining in. Our constituents want to hear Prime Minister's questions, both the questions and the answers. Show our constituents the respect they are due. Come on, Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. and learned Gentleman asked about our laws. Actually, when I was in Dover yesterday talking to our law enforcement officials, what did they tell me? That precisely because of the law the Conservative Government passed last year, they have now been able to arrest more than double the number of people they did before: 397 in the last six months. But stopping the boats is not just my priority; it is the people's priority. His position is clear: he wanted to, in his words, scrap the Rwanda deal, he voted against measures to deport foreign criminals, and he even argued against deportation flights. We know why, because on this matter—he talked about his legal background—he is just another lefty lawyer standing in our way. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. We will continue. When you keep shouting, it prolongs things. Some of you are trying to catch my eye. When you are disappointed, I do not want any complaints. Let us get through these questions, so we can get some Back Benchers in.

Keir Starmer: All that nonsense because the Prime Minister does not want to answer the question. He knows what the answer is. The number is 21. I thought he was a man of detail. The number is 21—21—people out of the 18,000. What happens to the rest? They sit in hotels and dig for months on end at the taxpayer's expense. Last year he promised to end the hotel farce—that

is the talk—but because of his mess there are thousands of people who cannot claim asylum and cannot be returned, so where does he actually think they are going to end up?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. and learned Gentleman talks about the pressure on our asylum system, but we have a clear plan to stop people coming here in the first place. Labour Members have absolutely no plan on this issue because they simply do not want to tackle the problem. We introduced tougher sentences for people smugglers—they opposed it. We signed a deal with Rwanda—they opposed it. We are deporting foreign offenders as we speak—they oppose it. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) should save that good voice for the rugby match. She might be able to join Mr Stafford for that strong cup of tea.

The Prime Minister: In fact, the right hon. and learned Gentleman opposed every single step of what we have done to try to stop the problem. We know his only contribution to this debate—in his own words:

“We will defend free movement.”

That is the Labour party for you.

Keir Starmer: The Prime Minister stood there last year saying exactly the same thing. We said that it would not work; the Government passed the law and the numbers went up. Absolutely deluded. He cannot say where they will return people, because they spent £140 million on Rwanda and it does not work. They cannot say how they will return people because the Bill does not come with a single new return agreement. They cannot say when they will fix the mess because it is more talk, more gimmicks and more promises to be broken. A few months ago, I put to the Prime Minister that of the people who arrived on small boats, only 4% had been processed. He stood there and said that that was unacceptable. What is the number now?

The Prime Minister: As a result of what we have done, there are now 6,000 fewer people in the asylum case load backlog. We are hiring more caseworkers and we are increasing their productivity. Again, the right hon. and learned Gentleman is mistaken when it comes to returns, because we have returns agreements with India, Pakistan, Serbia, Nigeria and—crucially—now with Albania, where we are returning hundreds of people. Our position is clear: if you arrive here illegally you will not be able to claim asylum here, you will not be able to access the modern slavery system and you will not be able to make spurious human rights claims. That is the right thing to do. The right hon. and learned Gentleman is going on and on about process and hiding behind it because he does not want to confront the substance. We are the party of fairness. He represents the party of free movement.

Keir Starmer: I thought that the Prime Minister was supposed to be a man of detail, but he has gone to all those lengths to avoid the detail. He knows the answer to the question—less than 1% of those who arrived by boat have been processed. *[Interruption.]* He shakes his head, but that is the Government’s own statistic. On his watch, processing of those boats cases has gone from

“unacceptable”, in his words, to almost non-existent. Does that not tell you everything you need to know? After 13 years, small boat crossings are higher than ever; claims are unprocessed; the taxpayer is paying for hotel rooms. Criminal gangs are running, laughing all the way, to the bank. The asylum system has been utterly broken on his watch.

This is the Government’s fifth Prime Minister, their sixth immigration plan and their seventh Home Secretary. After all this time, all they offer is the same old gimmicks and empty promises. I do not agree with the Home Secretary on very much, but when she says that the Tories are “all talk and no action,” she is spot on, is she not?

The Prime Minister: Illegal immigration enforcement—up. The amount of people processing claims—up. The backlog is down. The number of returns agreements is up. Hundreds of people have been returned to Albania, and now we have new laws to detain and deter illegal migrants. It is clear what we stand for. We are doing what is right: we are acting with compassion, we are acting with fairness and we are acting to respect the laws and borders of our country. We are delivering on what we said. It is crystal clear from listening to this that it will be the Conservatives, and only the Conservatives, who stop the boats.

Q6. [904004] **Miriam Cates** (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Con): Graphic lessons on oral sex, how to choke your partner safely and 72 genders—this is what passes for relationships and sex education in British schools. Across the country, children are being subjected to lessons that are age-inappropriate, extreme, sexualising and inaccurate, often using resources from unregulated organisations that are actively campaigning to undermine parents. This is not a victory for equality; it is a catastrophe for childhood. Will my right hon. Friend honour his commitment to end inappropriate sex education by commissioning an independent inquiry into the nature and extent of this safeguarding scandal?

The Prime Minister: I share my hon. Friend’s concerns and thank her for her work in this area. That is why I have asked the Department for Education to ensure that schools are not teaching inappropriate or contested content in relationships, sex and health education. Our priority should always be the safety and wellbeing of children. Schools should also make curriculum content and materials available to parents. As a result of all this, we are bringing forward a review of RSHE statutory guidance and will start our consultation as soon as possible.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP leader.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): On International Women’s Day, can I ask the Prime Minister to reconfirm that under his proposed new asylum laws, a woman who is sex-trafficked to the UK on a small boat by a criminal gang will not be afforded protection under our modern slavery laws?

The Prime Minister: It is precisely because we want to target our compassion and our resources at the world’s most vulnerable people that we must get a grip on this system and break—

Hon. Members: Answer the question!

Mr Speaker: Order. Can I say to SNP Members that it is quite right that questions are asked, but I also want to hear the answers? Shouting from up there is not helping anybody.

The Prime Minister: As I was saying, it is precisely because we want to target our resources and our compassion at the world's most vulnerable people that we need to get a grip on this system, make sure that we have control over our borders and make sure that our system and resources are not overwhelmed, so that we can help the people most in need. There is nothing fair and there is nothing compassionate about sustaining a system in which, as we saw recently, people are dying on these crossings. That is not right, and our plans will stop that from happening. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr McDonald, I do not need to hear you chuntering all the way through. You could be joining the others for a cup of tea.

Stephen Flynn: I will take that as a yes from the Prime Minister that women who are victims of sex trafficking will not be protected under our modern slavery laws. What a complete and utter disgrace. But while it may shock, it should not necessarily surprise, because this is the Tory Government who in recent months have spoken of "invasions". Just yesterday, this Tory Government said that 100 million people could be coming to these shores. This morning, this Tory Government said that the number could in fact be billions. That is complete and utter nonsense. May I ask the Prime Minister: from whom are his Government taking inspiration, Nigel Farage or Enoch Powell?

The Prime Minister: What a load of nonsense. In fact, the figure of 100 million does not come from the Government; it comes from the United Nations, and it illustrates the scale of the global migration crisis with which the world is grappling. That is why it is right that we take action: because if we do not, the numbers will continue to grow. They have more than quadrupled in just two years. It is a sign of what is to come, and our system will continue to be overwhelmed. If that happens, we will not be able to help the people who are most in need of our support, our generosity and our compassion. This has always been the way of this country. Once we get a grip on this system, that is who we can extend our support to, and that is why it is the right legislation.

Q9. [904007] Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): Last year, the UK economy grew at 4.1%, the fastest rate in the G7. At the same time, greenhouse gas emissions fell by 3.4%, which is more than in comparable countries. To maintain this momentum ahead of the net zero strategy refresh, will the Prime Minister encourage my right hon. Friend the Chancellor to use his Budget statement next week to stimulate investment in renewable energy projects by renewable energy companies, both offshore and onshore, to improve our energy security, reduce reliance on more expensive fossil fuels and ultimately reduce bills for households?

The Prime Minister: I am proud of our commitment to scaling up renewable energy sources. Renewables make up nearly 40% of our electricity supply, which represents a fourfold increase since 2011. My right hon.

Friend will know that I cannot and will not pre-empt Budget decisions, but he is a powerful champion for the environment in this House, and I have no doubt that he will make his views known to the Chancellor.

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Following the tributes relating to International Women's Day, I want to pay a special tribute to the women in the House, past and present, who have helped to shape the future of our country.

When Jean rang 999, she was told that she would have to wait at least eight hours for an ambulance, so she got into her car and drove herself to Eastbourne District General Hospital. She paid for parking and made it to the entrance to A&E, where she collapsed. Jean died an hour later. No one should lose their mother or their grandmother like that. Will the Prime Minister apologise to Jean's family, and to all those who have lost loved ones owing to the Government's appalling ambulance delays?

The Prime Minister: Of course my thoughts and condolences go to Jean's family. It is absolutely right that we continue to make progress on improving performance in urgent emergency care. We outlined plans to do that just the other month, and I am pleased to say that we have been seeing a marked improvement over the last few weeks in comparison with the peak pressures that we saw over the winter, owing to covid and flu, both in waiting times in A&E and in ambulance performance times. Because of the investments that we are making in more ambulances, more doctors and nurses, and more discharges, I am confident that we will continue to make progress towards securing the care that we all expect and need to see.

Q12. [904010] Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con): Since its release earlier this year, the heartwarming and inspiring story of Dave Fishwick's journey to set up a community bank has quickly risen to become one of Netflix's top films. Last week in the Chamber, I called for more initiatives such as the "Bank of Dave" to support local communities across the UK. Does the Prime Minister agree that financial inclusion is an essential part of levelling-up opportunities in our communities, and will he meet Dave and me to discuss how we can replicate his success story in other areas such as Stoke-on-Trent?

The Prime Minister: Community focus banks and non-bank lenders such as Burnley Savings and Loans have a vital role to play in ensuring that everyone has access to affordable credit. That is why we have made it quicker and easier for new banks to enter the market. Since the new bank start-up unit was created a few years ago, 30 new banks have been authorised. I will ensure that my hon. Friend has a meeting with the Exchequer Secretary to discuss this issue further.

Q2. [904000] Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): BBC Radio 4's "You and Yours" has exposed queue-jumping online touts who have been buying up Eurovision tickets and putting them up for sale for thousands of pounds on dodgy sites such as Viagogo. In this year when we are hosting Eurovision on behalf of war-ravaged Ukraine, this latest example of the rampant rip-off culture in Tory Britain in particularly

despicable. Why have the Prime Minister's Government not done more to support genuine fans over the merchants, the spivs and the ticket touts?

The Prime Minister: We have introduced measures to combat ticket-touting, but I shall be happy to listen to the documentary that the hon. Gentleman has mentioned to ensure that we are doing everything we can do, and I will talk to the Home Secretary about it. More generally, it is a source of enormous pride for us to host Eurovision. I know that everyone is looking forward to it. We should ensure that access to it is as broad as possible, and we will do all that we can to make certain that that happens.

Q14. [904012] **Mr David Davis** (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): In the aftermath of 9/11, the British Government signed an extradition treaty with the United States with the intention of covering terrorism and other violent crime. Since it came into force in 2003, the US has extradited 83 people to the UK, while we have sent 225 to America. Three quarters of those extraditions have been for non-violent and largely white-collar alleged crimes.

There is a fundamental unfairness at the heart of our extradition treaty, as was shown when Anne Sacoolas refused to come here to face trial for the killing of Harry Dunn. That unfairness is compounded by an American system that coerces British citizens and gives them unfair trials. In the last two decades, the American policy has been rather like an international commercial policy. Correcting that is important, so will the Prime Minister look at the treaty with a view to correcting this parody of justice?

The Prime Minister: Obviously it is in our national interest to have effective extradition relationships. Under the treaty we have with the US, we have secured the extradition and subsequent conviction of terrorists, murderers, rapists and child sex offenders. I am happy to meet my right hon. Friend to discuss this issue further. As he knows, the US has refused, I think, one UK extradition request and the UK has refused 27, but I know that he has concerns and I would be happy to meet him to discuss this matter further.

Q3. [904001] **Kenny MacAskill** (East Lothian) (Alba): There is a stark correlation between areas off the gas grid and those with the highest rates of fuel poverty. It is worse in Scotland, ironically in those areas closest to the national gas reserves in the North sea, but also in urban deprived areas where multi-storey flats are deprived of the ability to have natural gas. Being off the gas grid means that people are dependent on unregulated fuels such as heating oil, the price of which has risen faster than electricity and gas, or on old, inefficient and costly all-electric systems. Will the Prime Minister end this by ensuring that all fuels are regulated and that those all-electric households are able to get the alternative fuels payment?

The Prime Minister: As someone who represents a rural constituency with many people off the gas grid, I appreciate the concern that the hon. Gentleman raises. That is why this has always been uppermost in the Government's mind as we have designed and implemented our support for people with energy bills, notably by

basing it on electricity meters rather than gas, but also by putting in place the alternative fuels support payment of £200. We are making sure that that gets to everyone who needs it.

Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con): The adjustments to the dental contract last November were a welcome step, but there is more work to do. Will the Prime Minister therefore keep this area under the closest review to ensure that constituents such as mine in South Norfolk and those of other hon. Members get the best possible dental care?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an excellent point. I can tell him that we are continuing to invest in NHS dentistry, with £3 billion a year, and we have also enabled practices to do 10% more activity on top of their contracts and removed the barriers so that hygienists and other therapists can continue to work to their full skillset. The number of NHS dentists has increased by about 500 over the last year and we will continue to work with the sector to see what more we can do.

Q5. [904003] **Rosie Duffield** (Canterbury) (Lab): As today is International Women's Day, does the Prime Minister agree that voters in the run-up to May's local elections have every right to ask candidates who are standing for a position of responsibility in local government questions relating to women's rights? Does he believe that as representatives of their political parties, all candidates must answer those questions honestly, politely and with respect while standing on a voter's doorstep?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady makes an excellent point and I wholeheartedly agree with her. These are important questions, and voters deserve to have clear and straightforward answers to them. I hope that she can continue to put her campaign forward. She will have my full support, and I hope that in the local elections we can debate these issues in the way that they should be debated.

Chris Clarkson (Heywood and Middleton) (Con): Last weekend, I had the pleasure of being auctioned off for the Conservative Women's Organisation. On this International Women's Day, will my right hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to the excellent work that the CWO does to get more Conservative women into politics, and to all the remarkable women who support us in the work that we do, especially—because she is in the Gallery—my mum?

The Prime Minister: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his successful auction. I assume that it was not his mother who bid for him successfully. I pay tribute to her and to the Conservative Women's Organisation for the fantastic work that it does. We need more women standing in local and national politics, and everyone who is working to bring that about deserves our praise and thanks. Long may that continue.

Q7. [904005] **Richard Thomson** (Gordon) (SNP): On this International Women's Day, research published by the pensions company Scottish Widows has shown that a woman retiring today would have to work to the age of 81 to achieve pension fund parity with her male

counterparts, and it is every bit as worrying that a woman in the workplace today aged 25 can still expect to retire with a pension fund £100,000 less, on average, than that of her male counterparts. With all the fiscal and social policy levers at his disposal, can the Prime Minister tell us how he is going to set a course to shut that gap, over what remains of his premiership?

The Prime Minister: The Government take the gender pensions gap incredibly seriously. We have delivered groundbreaking pension reforms and major progress. Automatic enrolment has helped millions more women to save into a pension, and pension participation among eligible women in the private sector was 87% in the last available year, up from just 40% a few years ago. We remain committed to the measures in the 2017 review and will continue to give this issue all the attention it deserves until we close the gap.

Lia Nici (Great Grimsby) (Con): Grimsby Town football club have reached the quarter finals of the FA cup. The last time the team achieved this was in 1939, which by coincidence was the previous time the town had a Conservative MP. Grimsby beat the Prime Minister's team, Southampton, to get to this next stage, but will he join me in congratulating the team and wishing them the best of luck when they play against Brighton & Hove Albion?

The Prime Minister: Although it pains me, I congratulate my hon. Friend and Grimsby Town on their victory over Southampton. I now have a new team to support in the cup, and my hon. Friend will have my full support. I wish Grimsby well in their next match, and I look forward to cheering with my hon. Friend and all her colleagues.

Q8. [904006] **Steve McCabe** (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I have heard the Prime Minister talk fondly of helping out in his mum's community pharmacy. How would he feel if 600 pharmacies close this year because of a vicious NHS contract that takes no account of rising costs and is forcing many into bankruptcy?

The Prime Minister: I praise the work of our community pharmacies, which are fantastic at delivering primary care on the frontline. As I have said previously, the Government are exploring ways in which we can support them to do even more, because improving access to pharmacies is something that people would welcome, and it would help people to get the care they need faster and more efficiently. We will continue to look at all the proposals we have received.

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): For more than two years, an illegal waste site has been operating in the village of Borstal. Tipper lorries with covered numberplates thunder to the site at all hours of the day and night, blighting the lives of residents nearby and creating untold environmental damage. I thank the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs team for their engagement with the Environment Agency so far, but no action has been taken. Does my right hon. Friend agree that enough is enough, and that swift, multi-agency action should be taken to stop and shut down such illegal and criminal activities?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for raising this issue. The Government are committed to tackling waste crime, and the joint unit for waste crime brings agencies together in the way she describes. I am aware that she has met the local Environment Agency director about this particular issue, but I will ensure that she gets a meeting with the relevant Minister to discuss it further.

Q10. [904008] **Matt Rodda** (Reading East) (Lab): My constituent Olly Stephens was just 13 years old when he was stabbed and brutally murdered in a local park just yards from his home. The two boys who attacked him had shared dozens of pictures of knives online before the attack. Can the Prime Minister explain to me why the Government have removed measures to tackle this sort of dreadful online content from the Online Safety Bill?

The Prime Minister: I am very sorry to hear about the case that the hon. Gentleman raises. My thoughts are with Olly's family.

The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that we should do everything we can to tackle the scourge of knife crime. That is why, for instance, this Government brought forward new powers to improve the police's use of stop and search, which has made a major difference. Violent crime is now down considerably over the past few years. The Online Safety Bill goes further than any other country has gone to make sure we protect children online. I am happy to look at the specific issue he mentions, but the Bill has been praised by the Children's Commissioner and others as a groundbreaking law that will do wonders to improve children's safety.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs will be visiting Shrewsbury at the end of this month, at my invitation, when she will hear of the tremendous progress made to date by the River Severn Partnership and the Environment Agency in trying to find a holistic solution to managing Britain's longest river, the River Severn. We are now experiencing flooding in Shrewsbury on an annual basis, with tremendous economic damage as a result. Will the Prime Minister take an interest, please, and secure additional funding for the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, so that we can finally tame these rivers and protect our communities from annual flooding?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has raised this issue before, and he is right to do so. The Government have doubled our investment in flood defences over this Parliament, to £5.2 billion. I know that the DEFRA Secretary will talk to him and his communities on her visit, and I look forward to hearing back from her after that.

Q11. [904009] **Gerald Jones** (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): Between 1997 and 2010, Labour Governments across the UK lifted 800,000 children out of poverty. Since 2010, the Conservatives have driven half a million children into poverty, with child poverty next year predicted to reach levels not seen since the 1990s. There is not enough parliamentary time this year for the Prime Minister to say sorry to each child damaged

by the Conservatives' policies, but will he start today by saying sorry to all the children he failed during that time?

The Prime Minister: The exact stats are that, since 2010, 1.2 million fewer people are in poverty, because of the actions that this Conservative Government have been putting in place, such as raising the national living wage. The best way to ensure that children, especially, do not grow up in poverty, is to ensure that they do not grow up in workless households. As a result of the actions of this Government in getting people into work, there are now several thousand fewer workless households than there were in 2010.

Mrs Natalie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): It was a great pleasure to welcome the Prime Minister to Dover to talk about the work he is undertaking on the pull factors in tackling illegal immigration. The Prime Minister has a meeting with President Macron this week, so may I ask him to see what more can be done to deal with the push factors associated with illegal migration and small boats—pushing those boats across French beaches and pushing those boats from French beaches into the French sea?

The Prime Minister: As I have said before, no single lever will solve this problem, which is why it is right that we work on all the different things that will make a difference, including close co-operation with the French. That is why I was pleased at the end of last year that the Home Secretary and I announced the largest ever small boats deal with France, with a 40% increase in patrols and greater co-operation. We look forward to strengthening that co-operation and furthering that discussion this Friday.

Q13. [904011] **Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab):** Let us be absolutely clear in this Chamber: under this Government's new dystopian, far-right-appeasing, anti-refugee Bill, those who are trafficked to the UK would still face deportation. Can the Prime Minister therefore clear up whether Sir Mo Farah, who last year bravely revealed that he was trafficked to the UK as a child, would have been removed under this Bill?

The Prime Minister: It is precisely because we want to help the world's most vulnerable people that we must stop our system being exploited and overwhelmed by

illegal migrants who are being trafficked here by criminal gangs. There is nothing compassionate or fair about supporting that system continuing, which is why our new laws are the right way to deal with this. I hope that the hon. Gentleman can see that and support them.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): This morning, on International Women's Day, I joined some of the amazing young women at Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Primary School in Leigh-on-Sea to take part in the Football Association's Let Girls Play football campaign. Does my right hon. Friend agree that sport, and football in particular, is a brilliant way to empower young women? Will he visit Southend and celebrate some of our aspiring Lionesses?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point, and I wholeheartedly agree with her. I hope that I will be able to come to visit her. She is right about the power of sport to both engage young women and inspire others. I am looking forward to seeing the Lionesses later today, and the Government are pleased to announce today more funding and more support for sport in schools, which I hope she will warmly welcome.

Mr Speaker: For the final question, I call Tahir Ali.

Q15. [904013] **Tahir Ali (Birmingham, Hall Green) (Lab):** On International Women's Day, it is vital that we talk about women in Indian-occupied Kashmir being subjected to rape, domestic abuse, kidnapping, forced marriage and torture by Prime Minister Modi's extremist BJP-led Government. Does the Prime Minister agree that the BJP Government have exploited women through gender-based violence? Does he agree that the UK Government should be standing in solidarity with Kashmiri women?

The Prime Minister: This Government have a proud record of standing up for women and girls across the world. We have led the way in preventing sexual violence in conflict, and are taking a lead on ensuring that tens of millions of girls in some of the poorest parts of the world receive the high-quality education that they deserve. Just today, we have announced a new women and girls strategy from the Foreign Office and backed that up with £200 million more to support women's health around the world. That continues our leadership on this issue, which will remain the case.

BILL PRESENTED**DATA PROTECTION AND DIGITAL INFORMATION
(No. 2) BILL**

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary Michelle Donelan, supported by Secretary Suella Braverman, Secretary Steve Barclay, Secretary Kemi Badenoch, George Freeman, Julia Lopez, Paul Scully and Alex Burghart, presented a Bill to make provision for the regulation of the processing of information relating to identified or identifiable living individuals; to make provision about services consisting of the use of information to ascertain and verify facts about individuals; to make provision about access to customer data and business data; to make provision about privacy and electronic communications; to make provision about services for the provision of electronic signatures, electronic seals and other trust services; to make provision about the disclosure of information to improve public service delivery; to make provision for the implementation of agreements on sharing information for law enforcement purposes; to make provision about the keeping and maintenance of registers of births and deaths; to make provision about information standards for health and social care; to establish the Information Commission; to make provision about oversight of biometric data; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 265) with explanatory notes (Bill 265-EN).

Estimates Day

[3RD ALLOTTED DAY]

SUPPLEMENTARY ESTIMATE 2022–23**DEPARTMENT FOR LEVELLING UP,
HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES****Adult Social Care**

[Relevant documents: Second report of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee, Long-term funding of adult social care, HC 19; first joint report of the Health and Social Care Committee and the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee of Session 2017–2019, Long-term funding of adult social care, HC 768; correspondence from the Chair of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee to the Secretary of State, on the Government's response to the Committee's report on the Long-term funding of adult social care, reported to the House on 20 February 2023; and correspondence from the Minister for Local Government and Building Safety, on the Government response to the Committee's report on long-term funding of adult social care, reported to the House on 7 March 2023.]

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2023, for expenditure by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities:

- (1) the resources authorised for current purposes be reduced by £2,074,000 as set out in HC 1133,
- (2) the resources authorised for capital purposes be reduced by £2,428,760,000 as so set out, and
- (3) the sum authorised for issue out of the Consolidated Fund be reduced by £4,454,598,000.—(*Lee Rowley.*)

12.42 pm

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I thank everyone concerned for the opportunity to lead this debate on behalf of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee. Adult social care is an important issue, which the Committee has come back to on several occasions.

Last year, we produced another report on long-term funding for adult social care. We were happy to receive letters, in the last couple of days, from the Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, the hon. Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley), and the Minister for Health and Secondary Care, the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince), both saying why they have not yet responded to the report that was produced around nine months ago.

As you know, Mr Speaker, the advice is that Government should respond to Select Committee reports within eight weeks, so eight months seems rather a long time. I know that there have been quite a few changes of Minister during that period, so perhaps that explains some of the delay. If this was just a one-off, it would probably be excusable, but the Select Committee rarely gets a response within months, let alone weeks, of a report being produced, which is a little frustrating when we have put so much effort into them. We have not even had a proper response to the joint report that we produced with the Health and Social Care Committee back in June 2018—almost five years ago, which must

get near a record for non-responses to Select Committee reports. The Health and Social Care Committee has also done its own reports into these matters, as have many reputable organisations, such as The King's Fund.

Given the nature of the debate, I will concentrate on the impact on local government funding. Although social care, as a responsibility, lies with the Department of Health and Social Care, it is ultimately delivered through funding from local councils. I want to concentrate on the challenge that that poses for councils. This is not a new matter and is not without a lot of commitments. Only last year, the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss) said that she would spend £13 billion raised by the levy on social care. Well, the levy seems to have disappeared into other uses, as has the £13 billion.

The right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) said:

"I am announcing now—on the steps of Downing Street—that we will fix the crisis in social care once and for all".

Not to be outdone, the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) said that her Ministers

"will work to improve social care and will bring forward proposals for consultation."—[*Official Report*, 21 June 2017; Vol. 626, c. 35.]

Let us go back a bit further. David Cameron said:

"A commission will be appointed to consider a sustainable long-term structure for the operation of social care."—[*Official Report*, 25 May 2010; Vol. 510, c. 31.]

I will not just be party political in this, because Gordon Brown said:

"Alan Johnson and I will...bring...new plans to help people to stay longer in their own homes and provide greater protection against the costs of care."

The one thing that Prime Ministers have in common over the years is that they all promise to deal with the problems and funding of social care. The other thing that they have in common is that none of them has actually done that, and that is something of concern and it is why we still have the problems today.

Let me put this in the context of local government funding. Local government has had the biggest cuts of any part of the public sector since 2010. The National Audit Office and the Library have produced some interesting figures, which are known to be authoritative. They have said that the cut in core spending power for councils in the decade after 2010 has been 26%. By comparison, the increase in funding for the Department of Health and Social Care has been 14%. So that is 26% down for local government and 14% up for the Department of Health and Social Care. I am not begrudging the extra spending on health, but, clearly, councils also do important work and that is not really reflected in the figures.

The reason for that cut in spending power is that the revenue support grant has fallen by 37% over that similar period. A 25% increase in council tax has helped cover some of that fall. Council tax spending as a percentage of total local government spend—the percentage funded by council tax—has gone up from 41% of local government spend to 60%. In other words, council tax has been going up as the Government grant has fallen, but the totality of spending has fallen as well.

Councils' spending on social care—social care as a whole, including children's care—has risen by 8.9% in real terms, but non-care spending by authorities has

fallen by 32%. That is the knock-on effect—we must keep reminding ourselves of the consequences of this. Social care spending has now roughly risen from 50% of council spending to 60% over the period. Those are very dramatic changes in how councils spend their money.

Let us look at services such as planning. I know that they are important for the future of our country, for future growth and for regeneration. Spending by councils on planning has fallen by about 50%. That is a staggering fall. There have been similar falls in regeneration and economic development, which will be important for the levelling up agenda.

Let us look now at libraries, buses and street cleaning, which are important services that everyone tends to use in some way. They have all fallen by between 30% and 50%. The real challenge for local democracy—the Minister on the Front Bench has responsibility for local government—is that people are now finding that their council tax is going up by amounts that I have just described, but, if they or their immediate relatives do not use social care, they are seeing all the services that they receive fall. That is a fundamental challenge for local democracy—people pay more and get less. That is not defensible in the medium term, but it has been going on for 10 years now, and something has to give.

We might think, "Well, it's alright as long as social care is sorted out," but it is not, is it? Let us just look at the particular problems with social care and social care funding. Before the autumn statement last year, the Local Government Association said that it thought that about £7 billion was the shortfall currently. I appreciate that the Minister will no doubt advise us of all the goodies that were delivered in the settlement for the next financial year, and, clearly, there were some helpful increases of money, but not the £7 billion that local councils were looking for. The problem is that that settlement contains some of the elements of the problems that we have been experiencing for a decade or longer now. First, so much of the funding councils get is short-term. Yes, the better care grants and the social care grants are welcome, but much of it is on a one-off basis. Much of last time's settlement was on a one-off basis, with the extra money coming in those forms of grants, together with the increases in council tax I mentioned previously.

We know there are two fundamental problems with increases in council tax: first, they raise far more money in the most affluent communities than in the poorest communities, and secondly, they are regressive—not my word, but the Secretary of State's. I know the Minister has been charged with finding a solution to that problem. Good luck to him—we look forward to his report in due course, and we had an interesting dialogue with him in the Select Committee the other week. We are asking more from people on low incomes with proportionately lower house values, and giving less to the poorest communities through the increases. That is not the best way to fund social care in the longer term.

We know that, although funding has been going up, demand is rising. There are more unhealthy people in our communities, as we all know; we can see the figures for ourselves. Often forgotten, however, is the rising demand from people with disabilities. People with a whole variety of disabilities, both learning and physical, are living longer. Where they might have died in their 30s, they are now very often living into their 50s, to the

[Mr Clive Betts]

point where parents who once looked after them can no longer help or support them. Those parents are worried sick about what will happen to their children when they no longer have that parental support available. That demand must also be met and recognised.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend reflect on the fact that, when local authority spending on social care is squeezed and the demand goes up, as he describes so well, the work of caring is then passed on to unpaid carers, such as the parents of the people with disabilities he talks about? Last week, the King's Fund reported that the number of unpaid carers receiving direct support from local authorities fell by 7% from 2020 to 2021. Does he agree that unpaid carers are being failed by this squeeze and the inadequate local authority funding, and that the Government need to do more to improve that and ensure that carers are properly supported?

Mr Betts: That is a great point from my hon. Friend. We recognise that that care is generally provided with a lot of love and commitment from people who do it, but very often they will reach breaking point without the additional support from local authorities, such as respite care. Families say to me, "If only I could just have a week where I could go away and relax a bit, knowing the person I am caring for is being looked after, that would make an enormous difference." Sometimes that does not exist anymore, so that is an important point.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is giving a very clear explanation of local government funding, and I would expect nothing less from the Chair of the Select Committee. However, there is another issue he has not yet covered in his speech, and I am not sure whether he plans to: does he agree that another problem is the other source of income for local government, non-domestic or business rates? I well remember a certain hon. Lady from the Opposition saying in the Select Committee that we are going to get to a position where the non-domestic rates are paying for social care. Is that the right way to utilise business rates?

Mr Betts: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point, and he has been through some of those discussions on the Select Committee—I think the County Councils Network also made that point strongly to us—so he is absolutely right. I was not going to go too much into the long-term reforms of local government funding, but as a Committee we have said that there is a real challenge with the reforms of both council tax funding and business rates, and we have produced reports on that. There is not a clear linkage between how much money a council might get in from business or non-domestic rates and how much demand for social care is going up. Demand for social care is going up that much faster and the tax base needs to be adapted to recognise that, so his point is an important one.

To some extent, that demand is being met by tightening the rules on exemptions. More and more people who would have got social care in the past do not get it now. Age UK says it is 1.5 million—an estimate, but probably not an unreasonable one. There is also less prevention

work going on, which means that people who have small needs to help them live in their homes do not get those needs addressed until they become serious needs. Then they end up in hospital, which is much more expensive and a much worse outcome for the people concerned. It results in more pressure on the NHS, more cost and a less good service.

On the other hand, there is the pay and conditions for care staff. People doing the same job in care get less money than people in the NHS. That is true of nurses, for example, where we can make direct comparisons. We know that up to half of care staff tend to leave within a year, and many are on zero-hours contracts. There have been repeated requests for a long-term workforce plan. There has rightly been a request for a long-term plan for the health workforce, but we need one for the social care workforce as well. I think that the Chancellor, the right hon. Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt), when he chaired the Health and Social Care Committee, argued that case very strongly, and quite rightly.

There is a question of pay: these are skilled people with a real commitment that should be recognised, and not at a minimum pay level. There should be a system with proper career progression and training, so that people can realise the benefits of their skills and commitments. There is evidence that the care market is broken, that many care providers have gone out of business or struggled over the years and that the level of fees in some areas probably does not reflect their costs.

Then, of course, we have the issue of people having to give up their homes to pay for their care costs. It is a complete lottery. If in the end someone finishes the last years of their life with dementia, much of the value of their home will go to pay for their care. If they finish their life by having a heart attack and dying, they do not pay anything towards their care. That is an unfair system and it needs to be addressed. The Dilnot reforms have been around for some time. They have been nearly started and then not started, and nearly started again and not started; I will refer in a couple of minutes to how we might take things forward.

How might we change things to improve them, then? This debate is not just about making complaints; it is about providing solutions. I accept that, and that is what the Select Committee is trying to do. One suggested solution is, "Well, just amalgamate it—let's have one big service. Put it all in the NHS and it'll all be all right." I think most would say that the NHS has enough challenges at present without taking on another great challenge on top. What we do not need is another mass reorganisation affecting both health and social care, the cost of which would probably be a lot more than the cost of doing things any other way.

We should also remember that most people receiving care receive it not in a hospital or even in a care home, but in their own homes. The link that councils can make between their home service, providing adaptations and the like, and care, is key in that regard. The other thing I would say is that we cannot carry on relying on short-term fixes, with one-off grants here, one-off grants there, and a council tax system that is regressive and not fit for purpose, let alone for long-term funding of social care—or, as the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) said a few minutes ago, business rates, which bear little relation to demand for social care either.

I go back to the 2018 joint report with the Health and Social Care Committee, in which we said two things. We did a lot of work with the focus group on this question and spent a lot of time on weekends away in a hotel in Birmingham. What people said was, “If we knew the money was going to social care, we would happily pay more.” That is what happens in Germany and Japan, two countries that we looked at. We said, “Let’s have a social care premium.” Immediately, it might be said that that is not dissimilar to the Government’s proposed increase in national insurance rates. The difference was that, at the time, we said that we had to target any payments. There will be different ways of doing this, I accept, but there has to be a way of raising extra money for social care that neither comes from the current local government system, nor takes care out of local government.

We said that there should be a social care premium as a percentage of income, but that we would raise the bottom level so that the poorest people would not pay. We would increase the top level in the way that national insurance does not, so that people on the highest incomes would continue to pay, and we would include unearned income and higher-level private pensions, but we would also exclude the under-40s, as they do in Japan. We felt that people under 40 were probably getting the worst of the deal after the financial crash in terms of the impact on their finances. That is how we thought we could raise the funds, and it was agreed by the 22 members of the two Select Committees as a way forward.

What is sometimes missed, and what we also suggested, is that we have to deal with the issue of people’s homes being sold. I have to say to the Government that their arrangements to try to implement Dilnot are complicated and unfair. People may not pay until their assets reach a minimum level, but—and I have never heard a Minister address this point—the Government cap the amount that people pay in such a way that people with lower value houses pay a bigger percentage of their homes than people with the highest value houses.

Someone who has a home worth half a million pounds pays a much smaller percentage than someone who has a home worth £100,000. That is not fair, so our Select Committee said that a percentage should just be taken from everyone’s estate. Then, the people with the most would pay the most, and the measure would not be confined to people who need care. That removes the unfairness of people with dementia paying all or most of the value of their home while those who do not have dementia paying nothing. With a small amount of inheritance tax, or another way of assessing people’s estates, we could raise a lot of money and deal absolutely with the problem of people having to give up most of their home to pay for their care costs. That is certainly worth a look.

We need to find a long-term solution to the problem. It is not going to go away, is it? The number of elderly people will continue to grow; the number of people with learning disabilities will continue, quite rightly, to require more from our services. Councils said that the funding gap was £7 billion last year, but they have also said—the Health and Social Care Committee has addressed this, and other important think-tanks have confirmed it—that if we are to deal with the combination of problems, including the immediate funding gap, the need to address eligibility criteria and bring more people back into the social care system, the challenge to local government

finance, and the need for a long-term workforce plan, the gap is probably about £14 billion. That is a big sum of money, and we cannot find it in the existing local government finance system, which cannot cope as it is.

If we carry on as we are, and demand keeps increasing with no improvements to eligibility or workforce pay, there will be a consistent further increase in the pressures on other local government services. There will be bigger cuts to libraries, buses, planning, street cleaning and so on. The public, in the end, will simply not stand for that. I say to the Minister: please, let us just have a bit of long-term thinking and recognise that this is a serious problem that will not go away. Local government funding, as it exists at present, cannot take the strain any longer. We need an alternative source of revenue, we need to keep social care linked in to the rest of local government services, and we need, of course, to develop better contacts with the health service. Money to deal with the problem of people sat in hospital beds when they need to be in social care is welcome, but all that is short-term thinking.

I say to the Minister—and, to be non-partisan, to the Labour Front Benchers—where is our plan for long-term care? Where is our recognition of the funding needs? How will we bring about change? Could we, as the Joint Committee said, just possibly get a bit of cross-party thinking on this for the future? Whatever solution we come up with, we need one that will work for the long term, not just for half a Parliament or for one Parliament.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call Damian Green.

1.3 pm

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): May I start by saying how delightful it is to see you back in your proper place, Madam Deputy Speaker? You are very welcome back.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) not only on instigating the debate but on much of what he said. He said that he wished to speak in a non-partisan way, and he approaches the subject as the Chair of the Select Committee, while I approach it as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on adult social care. I found myself nodding in agreement with significant amounts of what he said, particularly the point about the need for long-term thinking and for a quite radical change in the way that we fund adult social care.

That is not just agreed across the House now, but has been for some decades. The hon. Gentleman went as far back as Gordon Brown. I can go back further: I have identified Tony Blair talking to the Labour conference in the 1990s, saying that social care was one of the big issues that he wanted to address in government. Here we are, a quarter of a century later, and we have got through it with a series of short-term efforts and sticking plasters. Long-term plans have been produced and promised but none of them has ever been put into policy. Throughout that quarter of a century of debate, the one thing that has been agreed is that the social care sector needs long-term funding.

The current Prime Minister and Chancellor have understood the importance of a long-term strategy and funding base for the sustainability of adult social care. Indeed, as the hon. Member for Sheffield South East said, the Chancellor was previously—by happy chance—

[*Damian Green*]

Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee, and that Committee produced a number of reports setting out the need for an additional £7 billion a year for social care. I note that the hon. Gentleman has just doubled that to £14 billion.

I am sure that the figure will rise, not fall; we have only to look at the demographics of the over-65s. Regardless of the rising number of working-age people who require social care of one form or another, if the same sort of percentage of over-65s end up requiring care, the bill will go up by something like 80% over the next 15 years. It is certainly true that demands on the social care budget will rise rather than fall in the coming years.

Mr Betts: Figures are bandied around, but I think that the figure is somewhere between £7 billion and £14 billion. It depends—the right hon. Gentleman is addressing this point properly—on whether we include the rise in demand, the need to have a real review of the workforce and pay, and the eligibility criteria. That is the way in which costs have been dampened in the past. We really need to revisit that whole issue.

Damian Green: I agree; indeed, I will mention workforce later.

The Government have, of course, responded to this issue in successive years, and have found extra central Government funds to pay local government, so we have proceeded from year to year, and although the system has been fragile, it has continued to operate. Of course, the background conditions are getting increasingly difficult. Inflation has an impact on social care providers. A cost of living survey done by social care provider MHA found that 94% of its community schemes had heard members or residents express concerns about the rising costs of living, and 49% of respondents said that the increased costs of transport specifically were a significant issue among their members. There is a danger that rising energy costs will significantly reduce the number of available services and have an immediate impact on discharge from the NHS into the community.

The Association of Directors of Adult Social Services has reported that nearly half of all directors of social care services are not sure that unpaid carers will be able to cope financially with the cost of living crisis, which could lead to further increased demand on paid-for social care services.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does he agree that we still grossly undervalue carers?

Damian Green: My only caveat is that my right hon. Friend says “we”. In the community, we do not.

Sir Greg Knight: As a country.

Damian Green: Publicly, as a country, we may well do so. They are a hidden army of people acting well, purely out of generous motives and the desire to help loved ones, which is natural. They do not get enough reward and praise from the general public, even though many of those people are the best members of the general public.

There are other specific measures that the Government could take. I would hope that following April, adult social care providers could be defined as a vulnerable sector as part of the energy bill relief scheme; I think that would be of significant help. The County Councils Network has estimated that with inflation, it could cost councils £3.7 billion extra to keep social care services running. If that figure is anything like accurate, the quality of care will decrease if those providers are not defined as a vulnerable sector.

I will now move on to the central point of the debate, which is funding. The hon. Member for Sheffield South East has very eloquently made the case for what we all know to be true: adult social care is a huge strain. The way in which we currently fund it is something that local councils find unsustainable, and therefore, the system is now kept going through repeated one-off injections of central Government cash. That in itself is not sustainable as a system. Some years ago, I suggested an alternative way of getting the extra money we all need into the system. I will return to that proposal now, because if we step back, the problem is that social care—especially for the elderly, perhaps—is too opaque for those trying to understand it, with no apparent logic as to which conditions receive free NHS treatment and which do not. Moving directly on to the financial point, it is also unfair not to reward a lifetime of prudence. Those who have saved feel that their savings will simply disappear, while those who have not saved receive the same level of care.

There is also the fact—which is not often discussed—that funding social care out of council tax means that local authorities are reluctant to allow too many care homes, or indeed retirement housing, to be built, because they do not want an increasingly elderly population. The ageing population means that something like 50% of some councils’ spending already goes on social care. As the hon. Member for Sheffield South East said, that figure is projected to rise to 60%, and given the demographic trends that I have already mentioned, my fear is that some higher-tier authorities that are funding social care will end up as basically social care providers with a few libraries and a bit of money to spend on potholes, and not much else. A lot of essential council services will be swallowed up by the need for social care, as well as the fact that the problems in social care put extra pressure on the NHS.

We need a radical change to the system in order to meet five objectives. The first is to provide enough money to cope with the increasingly ageing population. The second is fairness across generations, so that today’s working-age taxpayers are not asked to pay for both their own care in the future and the care of the generation above them today. The third is fairness among individuals, ensuring that no one has to sell their own home—has to lose all their assets to pay for care—and ending the dementia lottery that the hon. Member for Sheffield South East mentioned, where one condition is treated on the NHS and another is not. The fourth is increasing the supply of care beds and retirement housing. My fifth point is perhaps slightly ambitious: in an ideal world, we should secure cross-party consensus, with a lot of consultation before we move to a new system, but with the people moving to that system having confidence that Governments of any stripe will keep it going.

The model I take, because we can see it more or less working, is the pension system. The basic state pension has been increased significantly in recent years, taking many pensioners out of poverty, but at the same time, most people save additionally through their working years to provide comfort and security in old age. Auto-enrolment in pensions has been a great cross-party success story, encouraging millions more people to save towards their own security in old age; for an individual who starts saving in their early 20s, the benefits will not come for decades, but they will be huge when they arrive.

Similarly, just as the basic state pension has been improved in recent years, I think we should offer a universal care entitlement, offering a better level of care—both homecare and residential care. For those who need residential care, that would cover the core residential costs. The needs would be assessed locally, but the money would come from central Government, which would take away the pressure on local councils. The state element of that funding should come centrally, rather than locally. Will that involve extra money? Of course it will, but given the annual injections of extra money that the Government put into the system, they have already implicitly admitted that it needs much extra money, so I think this is a necessary increase in public spending. I accept all the pressures and controversies that it will cause, but it seems unavoidable to me.

On top of that, we need to find an acceptable way to allow those with the capacity to improve their own provision to do so. I suggest we should create what I call the care supplement: a new form of insurance designed specifically to fund more expensive care costs in old age, just like the private pension system that tops up the state pensions of millions of people. It would allow people to buy insurance at the level they can afford in order to provide peace of mind. I do not think that the care supplement should be compulsory, as indeed auto-enrolment for pensions is not compulsory, so we would not get into the slightly sterile debate about death taxes and dementia taxes, phrases that both of the main parties have thrown at each other over the years.

People could save for that insurance over many years through their working life, or they could make a one-off payment—possibly using something like equity release from a part of their house value—at a suitable time in their life. I will pause on that point, because too much of the social care debate has devolved into questions about home ownership and whether a person has to sell their home. Under a mass insurance system, nobody would have to lose all of their assets or sell their home; a sliver of the money that is now in free equity in housing owned by the over-65s would cope with this challenge. There is £1.7 trillion in free equity in housing owned by the over-65s, and if a very small percentage of that money were applied to insurance for social care, it would mean that people had peace of mind in old age.

I have been told by successive Ministers that that system would be too complicated, and that we cannot set up an insurance system. All I say in response is this: of course, setting up a new system is complicated and difficult, but we know that the current system is not working. If we carry on doing the same thing, the system will continue to be frail and rickety for years—possibly generations—to come, which is not acceptable. We have to do something radically different. If somebody

can come up with a better way of getting some of that wealth to pay for social care, fine, but we have to try something radical.

Funding is one key issue, but since the debate is about adult social care, I will identify four areas in which we need new thinking if we are going to fix social care. The first is the workforce, which has already been mentioned. It needs to be bigger—bigger by more than 100,000—and to achieve that, it needs to be better paid and have a higher status. I would like nurses working in the care system to be on the same Agenda for Change pay scales as those in the NHS, otherwise they will keep moving from the care system to the NHS.

The second area is the voice of care within the new integrated care boards. That change represents a chance to improve the integration of the health and care systems without creating another massive bureaucracy, but I slightly fear that the ICB system is settling down with the voice of care providers not being loud enough at the table. Local authorities are clearly a key player in the system, but so are other providers, and their voice needs to be heard.

My third point is about the use of technology, not only for sharing information between different parts of the system, but for giving those in receipt of care more control over their daily life. We are not exploiting the range of available technology anything like enough to do that and, if we get it right, the prize is that more people will be able to stay in their own home for longer. That is better for them, most importantly, but it is also better for the taxpayer, so it ought to be a high priority. It is particularly important for people living with dementia.

The fourth area is an extension of that notion of people staying in their own homes for longer through the provision of housing. As it happens, in one of the Minister's previous incarnations, I spoke to him about this issue. We are failing to build anything like enough supported housing for older people, particularly in retirement villages. Taken together, the last two measures I mentioned—technology and the provision of suitable housing—would mean that many people were able to stay in their own home for longer. As I say, that is a double win: it is better for the taxpayer, but most importantly, it is better for people as well. Most people want to live in their own home for as long as they can.

My original idea for a universal care entitlement accompanied by a care supplement would take the burden of social care funding away from local authorities, which is good, and, more importantly, offer certainty and security for the increasing numbers who will need social care in old age. No one would have to sell their house and see their inheritance disappear, everyone would have the chance of receiving better care and fewer people would be left unnecessarily in hospital beds as they wait for social care to be available. I am conscious that none of this is easy and that it will take political courage and possibly political consensus to achieve, but it is absolutely necessary if we are to provide peace of mind and security to frail, elderly people who richly deserve it. I commend these ideas to the Minister.

1.21 pm

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): It is lovely to see you back in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thank the hon. Member for Sheffield South East

[Helen Morgan]

(Mr Betts) and the right hon. Member for Ashford (Damian Green) for their excellent speeches. I draw the House's attention to the fact that I am a vice-president of the Local Government Association.

When the Government announced their local government funding settlement for the upcoming year and the additional £2.3 billion in grant funding at the autumn statement designated for social care, I welcomed that additional funding, despite concerns that much of the rest of the money will come from increased council tax. We are passing the buck from Government to local councils and, ultimately, as the hon. Member for Sheffield South East outlined eloquently, to local taxpayers who may not immediately see the benefit of the tax they are paying.

That funding will plug in the short term the gap in budgets caused by inflationary pressure, but we need to be mindful that 542,000 people are already waiting for care package assessments or direct payments and there are thousands of vacancies in England, according to the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services. The County Councils Network warns that councils and care providers are facing a perfect storm, as I am sure we are all aware, of rising demand, fewer care home beds, chronic staff shortages and acute inflationary pressures.

Shropshire is certainly no exception to that scenario. My meetings with local care providers have consistently shown that the sector is becoming fundamentally unstable, with some providers left facing a choice between losing money, or handing their contracts back to the council and restricting themselves to private work. We should acknowledge that social care is becoming a two-tier sector, where people who can afford a large amount of care in their home every day receive a very good service from skilled and caring workers who come and attend them, but those who are left with only a short visit in their own home see a much worse situation. I have seen that first-hand on an ambulance shift. It is heartbreaking to see people whose carers have popped in on a rushed schedule. They clearly care and have written everything down in the book—in one case, they had called the ambulance—but they do not have time to ensure that those individuals are living in the dignity they deserve. We need to ensure that that variation and those dual standards are addressed in the solutions we propose.

We have also seen that a shortage of care options is a factor in the acute emergency department and ambulance response crisis that Shropshire has faced, because people who are unable to be discharged home are restricting the patient flow through hospitals and ultimately stopping people coming in through the front door.

Today, I would like to raise in particular the challenges faced in the long-term learning disability and autism sector. In this sector, where people with learning disabilities need long-term care, the providers often do not have private clients from whom they can cross-subsidise their council-funded packages. My attention was drawn to that just before Christmas when I was alerted to the fact that three individuals in my constituency, who have lived in a care home together and been cared for by the same care home manager for more than 20 years, faced being split up and rehomed just three weeks before Christmas. Worse than that, because their levels of need were high and the care in North Shropshire met this need, they had come from across the United Kingdom and were

funded by different councils. If their care home closes because of cost pressure, they will most likely be split from each other. As I am sure we can all imagine, the impact on those individuals would be extremely severe. I was grateful in this case that their provider was able to reassess their situation and keep them together in the same location, but the funding in this sector is so precarious that there is no guarantee that will be maintained.

As I understand it, the fair cost of care exercise excluded many social care services for people with learning disabilities, autism or severe mental health problems. In learning disability and autism services, a recent survey showed that 71% of providers have handed back a contract, declined to deliver a service or considered doing so in the past 12 months. Some 83% are subsidising services as charitable organisations that should be paid for in full by the state. We can all recognise that is fundamentally unsustainable, and I urge the Minister to consider some of the excellent suggestions from colleagues to stabilise this growing sector caring for our most vulnerable people.

Part of the cause of the instability across the whole sector is the fact that rising minimum wage levels have not been matched by funding from central Government to local councils, and therefore from those councils on to the providers. The national living wage increased by 6.6% from 1 April 2022, and it will go up by a further 9.7% from 1 April 2023. Clearly, that is necessary to deal with the cost of living crisis, and I am not here to begrudge care workers that increase. The staff in the sector are providing caring, highly skilled support, and they deserve to be recognised with a fair pay packet for the work they do.

In rural parts of Britain, such as North Shropshire, home care and community-based services are also seeing pressure from high fuel costs, and the council funding they receive does not take into account either the additional fuel they use travelling around such a large area, or the additional dead time there is between visits to people in rural places. In October 2022, Shropshire Partners in Care, an organisation of care providers in Shropshire, conducted a survey of its members, in which only 18% of respondents said that they felt the fees provided by the council covered their costs on a weekly basis. More than half confirmed that they have reduced the number of council-funded packages or places they are willing to accept.

When I meet care providers in my constituency and carers at work when I am on the doorstep, I am struck by their passion for providing high-quality care for their clients, but I have also been struck by the distress that the cost and recruitment pressures are placing on providers, because they are affecting the quality of service they deliver. The problem is nationwide, too. A Liberal Democrat councillor and friend in Cambridgeshire told me they are seeing an urgent crisis in adult social care there, too. They are facing an estimated 40% projected rise in funding for the elderly, but they have not got the Government funding to match, so they are looking at a £23 million funding gap going forward. They have nursing homes with 50% vacancy rates at peak points during the winter.

I urge the Minister to commit to looking at the long-term settlement for councils, because these costs, as colleagues have already described in great detail, will only increase. We need to ensure that we are fully funding the cost increases for care providers, so that

people can receive the care they need and deserve, whether in a care home or, ideally, in their own home. The settlement also needs to take rurality into account and reflect the additional costs incurred when carers are travelling such long distances between homes. It is critical that councils have the flexibility to spend the funding they have been allocated in the most appropriate way for their own area and the requirements of their local demographic.

The Minister will be aware that the Liberal Democrats have called for a fully funded carers minimum wage set at least £2 above the national average, and paid for by a tax on online gambling platforms, to address the recruitment and retention challenges that are knocking into other areas of social and NHS care. Our increased wage would be centrally funded and it would ease the pressures on councils to find savings from elsewhere to meet their social care needs. The Care Quality Commission's 2022 state of care report stated that

"our health and care system is in gridlock and this is clearly having a huge negative impact on people's experiences of care."

It went on to say:

"At the heart of these problems are staff shortages and struggles to recruit and retain staff right across health and care."

I urge the Minister to consider the points that we have raised, to consider the crucial nature of ensuring that care workers are paid fairly so that they can be recruited and retained, and to consider that whatever the plan is going forwards, it needs to ensure that councils have certainty about their future funding. I urge him to take note of the pressures and to work with his Treasury colleagues to address some of the huge challenges that we have outlined today.

1.30 pm

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): It is a pleasure to see you back in the Chair on International Women's Day, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is also a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan), whose constituency reflects mine in many ways. I will bring some colour from a constituency perspective to many of the issues and challenges that she highlighted around providing social care.

Devon is a prism of the future, because it has an elderly population that is only getting older. If anyone wants to see what the rest of the country will look like in 20 or 30 years, they should come to Devon. Similarly, if any of the great ideas coming out of this debate can be trialled or tested, I recommend Devon to the Minister as a great place to come. We are already on the journey of our county council frantically trying to balance its budget. Some 25% of the budget is spent on adult social care, and that amount has increased by 23%, adjusting for inflation, in the last decade alone.

As the hon. Member for North Shropshire mentioned, rurality is a huge factor. North Devon is remote, rural and coastal, so the distances involved in providing adult social care are monumental. The dramatic rise in energy costs has had a huge impact on social care providers' ability to deliver the same service, and the increase in the council's budget, unfortunately, does not fully reflect that.

Rurality also has an impact on the manner in which care is delivered in those communities, because of the distance that individual teams have to travel between

daily stop-offs. That is overlaid with the pressures being placed on the hospital, which mean that some carers are having to make multiple visits a day—perhaps three—to one family, where they might previously have made one or two. That is escalating into a snowball effect of costs rising far higher than is reflected by the council.

I am now being contacted by providers of social care who are concerned about what is happening and their ability to continue to provide the care. One innovative care provider pays its care workers on a shift basis to reflect the distances travelled and the amount of time that care workers are not working, as opposed to paying them on a contact time payment methodology. Given the likely decrease in the next budget, however, it is unlikely to be able to continue that, even though offering that great package is how it has been able to train up and retain its fabulous staff team. If someone has to drive between appointments, why should they not be paid for the driving time, if it is the only way to get there?

We need to redesign the scheme for remote rural locations. As the Minister knows from his previous roles, we have a particular housing pressure in North Devon, so a different way of looking at it would be to remunerate a social care worker with accommodation as part of their package. That would enable them to serve that remote rural community without having to spend hours in the car driving between remote rural communities. The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities might not be the right Department to suggest that to, but we cannot keep on pretending that the system is working. We need to find other ways and different solutions, particularly when rurality is being overlaid on the other pressures. At the moment, clients are being transferred away from better-qualified, better-quality care providers because the council budgets will not stretch, which is not right for the individuals involved. It feels fundamentally wrong that that is happening on my doorstep.

In North Devon, we are home to a fabulous hospital, which is the smallest and most rural in mainland Britain. It is not right that there is regularly a queue of ambulances outside it because we cannot discharge out of the back end due to a lack of social care. I have social care providers telling me that they have capacity but the council will not pay their rates to provide it.

As part of this process, I hope that somebody will look at the fair cost of care exercise in Devon, because there is some concern that the data that has been submitted is perhaps not being accepted as the true price of delivering that care. We need to acknowledge the prices involved, because these are humans who we need to look after and care for in our communities. There is also a concern that the cost pressures faced by the council are driving growth in the number of unregulated personal assistants and private carers.

Mr Betts: The hon. Lady is talking about the fair cost of care. I declare an interest as a vice-president of the Local Government Association, where there is a real concern that the money that the Government made available was not based on the detailed assessment that councils had done about the difference between what people pay for their care privately and what councils are paying. If councils suddenly ended up with that extra cost, the Local Government Association's view is that

[Mr Betts]

the amount would be much more than the amount that the Government were putting to one side in their initial reform proposals.

Selaine Saxby: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention; much more work needs to be done in this space.

We need to look for longer-term funding solutions. That is true for social care, but also for potholes, which I will mention while I have the opportunity, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Damian Green) did. Part of the reason why some funding settlements do not add up is that when we provide a short-term funding solution, we cannot plan for the long term. I estimate that we are paying twice as much per pothole repair as a result of short-term settlements that stop councils from being able to plan effectively for their workforce, the work and the use of materials. I hope that there will be an opportunity to address some of those problems, because the pressure on budgets is having an impact on all council services, not to mention the individuals and the fantastic care staff involved.

1.36 pm

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): I was not going to speak, but I have been drawn by some of the speeches that I have heard to add some comments, particularly on autistic people and people with learning disabilities and their care. One of the worst aspects of the chronic underfunding of adult social care is that it has led to a reliance on inappropriate in-patient care for autistic people and people with learning disabilities, 2,000 of whom are in that situation. The Government seem chronically unable to get that number down; there have been all kinds of targets to reduce it, but it has not happened.

That care is often expensive and far from home. The hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan) told us about people in a care home far from their homes, but when the care is in in-patient units, it is often unsuitable. We know from scandals at units such as the Edenfield Centre, most recently, and Winterbourne View—there have been 10 years of scandals in those in-patient units—that they are frequently found to use restraint and seclusion as a punishment.

There have been inquiries and reports into the level of social care funding, such as that chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), who made an excellent speech. The Health and Social Care Committee, of which I was a member, also looked into the issue and made recommendations. The squeeze on local authority funding means that local authorities feel that they have to put the bill on to the NHS—it becomes easier for a local authority to let the NHS pick up the bill for an autistic person or a person with learning disabilities.

Those placements can cost hundreds of thousands of pounds a year—up to £1 million. In one case that we have spent a lot of time talking about in the House, the NHS was funding a placement that cost £1 million a year. Clearly that makes no sense, because the money could go into housing or care for that person, but there does not seem to be any way to passport the money

from the NHS, which is shelling it out every year, to the local authorities that would need it if they were to house and provide care for those people.

However, we had a solution years ago. When people were moved from long-term mental health institutions into the community, a dowry went with them from the NHS to the local authority. When I was the vice-chair of social services as a councillor, if we picked up somebody who had been in a long-term mental health institution to move them to the local authority, they came with a dowry that might be as much as £1 million. If a local authority were to buy a property or pay for care for a number of years, that system would work.

I urge the Minister to look at the recommendations made by the Health and Social Care Committee when we looked at this, but also to take account of what the hon. Member for North Shropshire said about how we cannot leave this in an unsatisfactory and precarious situation. It is good that some solution was found in the case she mentioned, but too often people end up in in-patient care and then will be there for the rest of their lives. There are people in these institutions who have been there 10, 20, 25 or 30 years, and it is tragic, because once someone has spent that long in an institution, it is very difficult to find a way back to the community. I wanted to mention that because it has been raised in the debate.

I want to mention one other thing. The right hon. Member for Ashford (Damian Green) and the hon. Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) talked about support and recognition for carers, and they are right to do so. We should all think about how we support unpaid carers. However, I want to say that I think the thing that is missing is that we do not have a proper national carers strategy. The last national carers strategy we had in this country was under the last Labour Government, and it came out in 2008. That would solve the problem, which my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East talked about, of there being no respite care breaks for carers. That national carers strategy had a commitment of £255 million specifically to support carers, including £150 million for respite care breaks. We now find that there is no money we can identify or point to that is specifically for respite care breaks. Given the squeeze on local authority funding, it just does not happen.

What this Government have had is a carers action plan, which is a weak document. The last one, which covered 2018 to 2020, had no funding commitments and was very short of ambition. I know that carers organisations very much campaign for us to go back to having a national carers strategy, which in the case of the Labour Government had the commitment of the Prime Minister and each of the Secretaries of State responsible for services used by carers. I think the key thing, as we have heard in this debate—I really stress this point—is that we have to go back to having some money that is kept separately for respite care breaks for carers, otherwise they will be pushed and pushed, and they will not get the support they need.

I just wanted to speak on those two points, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I join everyone else in saying what a pleasure it is to see you back in your place.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Thank you. I call the shadow Minister.

1.43 pm

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and may I also welcome you back? It is great to see you in the Chair.

Today we have been allotted time to speak about something the Government seem to do anything possible to avoid, and that is social care. It got barely a look-in in the autumn statement, and there is not much hope for next week's Budget either. Every generation in this country is being failed by irresponsible, careless Conservative leadership—or, rather, a lack of leadership. Young people are having opportunities snatched from them by this Government. Working people are underpaid and cannot afford to buy their own home or pay the rent. Our older generation, who have toiled for decades, paid their taxes and contributed to our economy, are now being left in the lurch by the state when they need it the most. These are people such as the wonderful WASPI women whom I met outside Parliament today—women such as Josie from Great Yarmouth, Yvonne and Jane, who all told me to tell younger generations of women, “Look after yourself and plan for later life, because the likes of this Government won't be there when you need them most.”

Our ageing population do not just deserve good social care; they should be entitled to it. It is their right, and in a country with the sixth largest GDP in the world, it is frankly mortifying that they are not afforded it. The social care sector is a problem the Tory Government have not just neglected, but actually made worse in their 13 years of power. There are currently record high levels of staff vacancies in adult social care—a staggering 165,000 vacancies. The existing workforce are burnt out, underpaid and overworked trying to cover the staff shortages. When I worked as a care worker, going into people's homes to provide some of the most sensitive of support in sometimes less than 20 minutes, I knew the system was broken. Being pressured by managers to prioritise private patients over those who had support from the state, regardless of their need, was the wrong way of doing things then and it is the wrong way of doing things now.

It is worth noting that this debate is taking place on International Women's Day. Later, we will hear a debate on childcare funding. While it might be a coincidence that these two debates are being held on this day, it is extremely meaningful. Some 80% of the care workforce are female, and that accounts just for the official staff. Under this Conservative Government, 2.3 million more people have given up some or all of their working hours to care for family members, because they cannot access professional support. That point was made eloquently by my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley). The majority of those unpaid carers will be women, once again taking a hit to their careers, their finances and often their own health to provide care when the state has simply stepped back.

It does not have to be this way. As many as one in three hospital beds are currently occupied by patients who are ready for discharge, but who have nowhere to go. I am sure the Minister and his colleagues know as well as we do that these are not hospital beds going spare. Then there are the waiting lists. Many of us here will have a parent, a grandparent or a loved one in need of adult social care, or care for a younger person with

disabilities. I wonder how many of us could say they have received the care they needed in a timeframe they are satisfied with.

Recent figures show a shameful trend of delays and let-downs in the social care sector. More than half a million people are waiting for an assessment, a review, the start of a service or a direct payment—half a million people. When will this backlog be dealt with and what are those people having to do in the meantime? I can take a guess at what some of them are having to do. As much as local councils, charities and places of worship try to plug the gaps left by this Government with food banks and warm banks, many pensioners are left shivering in homes, avoiding too much usage of their lights or televisions even, and watching their bills escalate. They are going to the shops to find no eggs and no tomatoes, and still coming back out of pocket. They are doing all this while dealing with their untreated health issues, and they are waiting up to 24 hours for ambulances to arrive in desperate situations.

Those people are wondering when exactly it was that this Government turned their back on them. Perhaps it was in 2022, when the Chancellor made it clear that social care was not a priority, allocating just £2.6 billion in new funds. Maybe it was in 2019, when a Tory party actually quite different from this one—we have gone through quite a few different leaders and Prime Ministers—promised that

“nobody needing care should be forced to sell their home to pay for it”,

while, on their watch, 28,000 people have exhausted their life savings to pay for care. That point was made by the right hon. Member for Ashford (Damian Green). But no, I think the betrayal of our older generation goes much further back than that.

In 2012, the current Chancellor was Health Secretary. He promised a cap on care costs, acknowledging the financial weight crippling individuals and families. The cap was legislated for in 2014, delayed until 2020 and then postponed indefinitely. After 10 years of being strung along, the hundreds of thousands of people needing adult social care were told in the autumn statement that any reforms of social care charges would have to wait until at least 2025. This is a heartbreaking and intensely frustrating situation for people waiting for answers and for security for the future. People are dying while waiting for state social care—150,000 over the last five years to be exact. I repeat: 150,000 people have died waiting for the care they never received. Will the Minister tell us how our constituents can really trust the Government to solve this crisis?

When he was Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee, the Chancellor stated that an annual sum of £7 billion was needed to plug the gaps in social care. One year later, and now in the position of power to allocate the very funding that he demanded for the sector, he pledged £7.5 billion over two years and, as we have established, only a quarter of that is new funding.

As the deliverers of state social care, local government leaders are well placed to judge what is needed. The Local Government Association has calculated that £13 billion is required to address the severity of the pressures facing the social care service. It states:

“An investment of this scale is needed to support our national infrastructure, our economy and our prosperity.”

[Sarah Owen]

Does the Minister believe that the Tory-led LGA is wrong about that? The LGA has also been critical of the Government's model that continues to rely on council tax revenue to pay for social care. Council tax brings in vastly different amounts in different areas, depending on the demographic of residents.

In some areas, particularly rural communities, funds coming in from council tax are heavily outweighed by the demand for social care. As the hon. Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) eloquently put it, there are many different barriers to accessing social care—and good care—within rural communities, and that is just one of them. The hon. Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder) also made it clear that that is an issue. In a debate in January, he argued against the funding model, with one third of his constituents aged over 65, compared with a national average of 19%, which presents a huge need for care. He stated that Dorset Council's spending on adult social care had risen by 15%, but that that was not touching the surface of the problem, and 83% of the council's income was reliant on council tax.

The problem lies with central Government and the lack of a sustainable funding model. Fortunately, one party has a plan for social care, and we will not be postponing it for years or decades when we are in power. A Labour Government will implement a 10-year plan for investment and reform in social care. We will increase access and prioritise prevention and early intervention with home care. We will present a new deal for care workers that delivers fair pay, training and working conditions to recruit staff and—most importantly—retain them. We will ensure that unpaid family carers are no longer overlooked or taken for granted. If the Minister can present anything to rival that, I would genuinely love to hear it. As a former care worker, and someone whose grandparents have wonderful carers, I would love to say that we could put politics aside and come to a solution for the good of our country, but I also question the likelihood of that, given the 13 years of failure that we have seen from this Government.

I have mentioned some shocking figures, but I want to make it clear that social care is not about numbers—it is about people. It is about people in desperate need of care, who are often towards the end of life. It is about young disabled people, and families when they are at their most vulnerable. It is about the people providing that care through long hours, hard graft and low pay. Our nation's older generation depends on them, and so will we when our time comes. I hope for everyone's sake that they will still be there, and that this Government will not be.

1.53 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Lee Rowley): I add my voice to all those who have welcomed you back to the Chair in recent days, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I thank right hon. and hon. Members who have spoken in this debate. It has been a good debate that has highlighted some of the challenges, and demonstrated some of the opportunities in this area. I am particularly grateful to my near neighbour and Chair of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee, the hon.

Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts). We do not agree on everything, but he had a long and illustrious history in local government before he joined this place, and since then he has taken a significant interest in this subject. I am grateful to him for introducing the debate in such an even-handed manner.

As all those who have spoken today have indicated, this is an important area of policy for a variety of reasons. That is why there is such close working between the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and the Department of Health and Social Care, given the importance of the issue, the need to get it right, and the need to continue to make progress on some of the challenges that have been highlighted. We have also worked closely to ensure some of the achievements that have come forward in recent years. As hon. Members will know, policy is largely within the Department of Health and Social Care and the funding process, via the local government finance settlement, is within the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.

I will try to answer the questions as best I can on all the elements that have been raised today. Colleagues raised a substantial number of points that fall into three broad buckets: first, where we are; secondly, where we are going; and thirdly, what we do about the long term. I will take those three points in turn.

First, there is no disagreement across the House that there are challenges, and that there have been difficulties on both a macro level and across government and society as a whole. There are also challenges within adult social care. More broadly, over the past 20 years, under Governments of all parties, we have seen changing demographics. It is great that more people are living longer, but that creates challenges for whoever is on the Treasury Bench to ensure that the Government support people to the extent that they can. There is often greater acuity with individuals in the system, and more have multiple conditions. More broadly, in recent years and despite valiant attempts by the hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) to gloss over them, we have received the challenges of inflation, of external events and of covid, all of which have created issues across the Government. A mature debate will recognise and acknowledge those challenges, and seek to build on them and resolve them over time.

The hon. Member for Sheffield South East is correct to say that funding has been much questioned over the past 13 years, and we will all have different views on that. The issue has been much discussed since 2010, just as the reasons behind decisions that were taken between 2010 and now have been much discussed. I will not detain the House by repeating those reasons, other than to say that we know them, and that they are at least anchored in a set of decisions that were taken before 2010. It is also important to acknowledge—I hope hon. Members will do this—that significant additional funding has gone in and is going in over the remainder of the spending review period, with £2 billion of additional grants in 2023-24, and nearly £1.5 billion of additional funding in 2024-25. Money is not everything, but ultimately there is a recognition in all parts of the House that there are challenges with adult social care, and more money has gone in.

The hon. Gentleman also talked about the way we fund. Although I accept challenges from right hon. and hon. Members about the right balance, I hope we can

agree within our discourse that it is reasonable and proportionate for us to have both funding provided centrally and an element of local funding, not least so that there is linkage between how organisations and local councils decide to spend that money in the locality and how they raise it. As I say, I accept that there are different views about what the proportions should be, but I hope that future discussion of this issue acknowledges the reality and appropriateness of that balance.

Although I am trying not to be too political, it is important to note that some of the challenges have been in place over recent years because there has been a challenge with Government funding over the course of 13 years. We have been trying to keep taxes down for people when we are able to do so. It is important to note that council tax more than doubled under the last Labour Government, and we have spent a significant amount of time and effort in the local government system since 2010 making sure that increases are as low as they can be.

Barbara Keeley: The Minister is talking about the balance between funding being found locally and funding from central Government grant. The issue I have outlined is that it would be unreasonable for a local authority to have to find something like £1 million extra. I have talked about placements for people with learning disabilities or autistic people that can cost up to that. That cost is being borne by the NHS, yet it could be much lower if the person had suitable housing found for them in the community. It is not reasonable to expect a local authority suddenly to find a large amount of money if a case comes up. Together with colleagues from the Department of Health and Social Care, will the Minister look at the idea of a dowry that I put forward, so that people do not have to spend 10, 20 or 30 years in horrible NHS institutions that are often far from home and unsuitable? This is just a logistical problem about where the money is, and it seems that of all the problems we could solve, this is one we should be doing something about.

Lee Rowley: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her intervention. I will come to her points in a moment.

I acknowledge the point that my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) made about rurality, which is one reason why it is important that there is a balanced understanding that some funding is raised locally. Different parts of the country will have different requirements, pressures and challenges, which, in many parts of the country, will include rurality. I accept that that creates an issue in certain places. From a local government perspective, rather than an adult social care perspective, we have tried to acknowledge that, at least in part, in the local government finance settlement through the rural services delivery grant. I am always happy to look at that and to talk to my colleagues in more detail, as we prepare for funding settlements in future years.

Selaine Saxby: Does my hon. Friend acknowledge that in massive counties such as Devon, outside the urban south, the very rural hinterland causes variance from the average, and that top-tier authorities should have much more leverage to offer settlements with a far greater differential between rural and urban areas?

Lee Rowley: I certainly acknowledge that there are differences in individual circumstances between rural areas, urban areas, and suburban and near-rural areas, one of which I have the privilege to represent in Derbyshire. The finance settlement seeks to acknowledge that to some extent. As I will come to in a moment, we are also introducing Oflog—the office for local government—which will seek to understand how councils spend the money they receive or raise, so that we can understand the differences that occur around the country and also how people choose to make decisions arising from those differences.

Let me come to the second point, which is where we are going.

Mr Betts *rose*—

Lee Rowley: If I may make a little more progress, I will happily give way to the hon. Gentleman.

I recognise the points that have been made about reform. I note that the hon. Gentleman, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Damian Green) and others highlighted the importance of looking at how we can continue to improve adult social care in the round and over time, and I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend for his work in the all-party parliamentary group on adult social care in that regard. I also note the broader questions of what we do over the long term, over many years and decades, and some of the issues that the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) highlighted, and also the intervention from my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight) about the importance of carers, which I absolutely acknowledge. I will certainly pass back to my colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care all the policy points, which absolutely have been heard today.

Both my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashford and the hon. Member for Sheffield South East highlighted alternatives, and mentioned Japan and supplements. Decisions about how best to fund the system are long-standing and challenging, and there are always alternatives; I hope it will be recognised that the Government have tried to resolve some of the issues through changes and proposed reforms over the last couple of years, even if they are later than originally intended. There is acute difficulty and challenge in reforming this area, and successive Governments of different colours have been unable to do what many people would like to happen, yet we are determined as a Government to get it right. I hope we have demonstrated progress—both in the short term through further amounts of funding, and through the reforms we proposed a couple of years ago—and we will continue to try to do that.

Mr Betts: I thank the Minister for giving way; his further comments were quite helpful because they lead on to the intervention I was going to make, which comes back to local funding for social care. The joint report by the two Select Committees in 2018 said:

“There should be a continuation for the foreseeable future of the existing local government revenue streams.”

That was accepted, but we went on to say, very clearly, that a new source of funding is needed for social care to recognise the gaps that exist. Does the Minister accept in principle that the Government must come up with a new, discrete source of funding for social care? The

[Mr Betts]

Government sort of got there two years ago, then backed off. Are they going to come back to that at some point?

Lee Rowley: As I think the hon. Gentleman is aware, substantial additional funding has gone into the system. I am always happy to discuss the best way that that should be structured—obviously that is a multi-departmental discussion—but I hope there is an acknowledgement that additional funding has gone into the system and continues to go in. The additional information given in our announcements about the remainder of the spending review, over the coming financial year and the year after, demonstrates our commitment to do that. We hope that will have a positive impact on the challenges that have been articulated.

Finally, I want to talk about the long term, which hon. Members from across the House raised in their speeches. We acknowledge that there is a desire, and it is important to try to plan for the long term. We will bring forward a plan for adult social care reform in the spring. I hope that will answer some of the questions that hon. and right hon. Members have raised and assuage some of their concerns locally. To answer the challenge from the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan) about a long-term settlement for councils, while some of the long-term nature of that is debatable, I hope that the broader policy statement, which the Government announced several weeks ago with the local government finance settlement, demonstrates our intent to move forward with a longer-term understanding of what councils can expect to receive from Government, where we are able to do that. As I have highlighted, in the long term we are also seeking to introduce new elements to government, such as the office for local government, which hopefully will provide information not just about what is happening, but information that explains in more detail how local government is spending that money.

Helen Morgan *rose*—

Lee Rowley: I have detained the House, but I will be happy to give way briefly.

Helen Morgan: I am grateful to the Minister. The point about long-term funding is so important. Until a couple of weeks ago, care providers in Shropshire did not know by how much their rates would increase in the new financial year, and they were considering handing their contracts back. It would have cost the council a fortune just to find someone who was willing to fulfil some of those care packages. Councils need long-term funding for their own financial stability and to find care packages at an achievable cost.

Lee Rowley: I am happy to confirm that the Government are trying, where we are able, to offer greater visibility of what is coming and greater long-term understanding. We will continue to try to do that across the local government finance settlement, and I hope this policy statement is an indication of that.

Sarah Owen: I appreciate the Minister's generosity in giving way, and I completely agree on the kind of long-term futures that we talking about for local

government, yet we are 23 days away from local authorities setting their budgets and they have still had no indication about their public health grants. If we are going to treat local authorities with respect on healthcare, surely they should be given that well in advance.

Lee Rowley: I know that my colleagues across Government will be working hard to get the final elements of the settlement out as soon as possible, but I hope the hon. Lady will acknowledge that, on the basis of my conversations with local government over the past few weeks, there is a recognition that the settlement has provided a good level of funds, that it will be moving in a positive direction and that it provides the stability and greater certainty that local government has requested and that we have responded to as a Government.

To conclude, I again thank the hon. Member for Sheffield South East for instigating and opening this debate. I also thank everybody outside this place who supports adult social care. It is an extraordinarily important part of local government and the state's activities in general. As has been outlined in this debate, we need to support the most vulnerable and those in need, irrespective of age or condition. Through the changes that are coming in the new financial year, we are trying to provide additional funds, support and taxpayer subsidy to do that, and to ensure that local government can continue to build and improve for the long term in such an important policy area.

2.9 pm

Mr Betts: Madam Deputy Speaker, you came into the Chair as I was halfway through, so let me, too, welcome you back.

This has been a good debate. Whether it has taken us forward, only time will tell. The challenges are there and hon. Members, certainly the co-chair of the all-party group on adult social care, the right hon. Member for Ashford (Damian Green), expressed it. We spoke in very similar terms on very similar issues. The concerns are there. As was said in the debate, it is about individuals: individuals getting care that is often not to the standard they need; individuals not getting care at all because the eligibility criteria have changed; people sitting in hospital beds for days on end because the care is not available to them. In the end, this is a very human issue we are dealing with. We are dealing with a workforce under enormous strain and pressure, not properly paid and sometimes not properly trained, with far too much expected of them. Councils are struggling to do their best to represent their local community. Councils across the board of all political persuasions are having to make impossible choices to deal with social care and the people who need it, as against having to sweep the streets and run bus services that are vital to their communities. This is an issue that needs to be addressed.

I come back to what I said in my last intervention on the Minister. We cannot carry on believing that the existing local government finance system, with occasional top-ups from Government on an ad hoc basis every year or so, will sustain adult social care for the longer term or even the medium term. We must reach some sort of agreement on a way forward that brings an additional funding stream into local government to take the strain off the rest of local government finances,

put social care on a proper footing, increase the eligibility criteria, get a long-term plan for the workforce, and ensure, ultimately, that the people who need social care get it and get it to a proper and decent standard.

Question deferred (Standing Order No. 54).

DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION

Childcare and Early Years

[Relevant documents: Fourth report of the Work and Pensions Committee, Universal Credit and childcare costs, HC 127; first report of the Petitions Committee of Session 2021–22, Impact of Covid-19 on new parents: one year on, HC 479, and the Government response, HC 1132; first report of the Petitions Committee of Session 2019–21, The impact of Covid-19 on maternity and parental leave, HC 526, and the Government response, HC 770; oral evidence taken before the Education Committee on 31 January and 21 February 2023, on Support for Childcare and the Early Years, HC 969; correspondence from the Work and Pensions Committee to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, on Universal Credit and childcare costs Report, reported to the House on 22 February 2023; e-petition 624461, Fund 30 hours free childcare from age 1 for families where both parents work; e-petition 586700, Commission an independent review of childcare funding and affordability; e-petition 615623, Do not reduce staff-child ratios in early years childcare; e-petition 628412, Increase funding for early years settings; e-petition 580137, Offer 15hrs free childcare for multiples under 3 years.]

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2023, for expenditure by the Department for Education:

(1) further resources, not exceeding £3,096,686,000, be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 1133,

(2) the resources authorised for capital purposes be reduced by £1,580,042,000 as so set out, and

(3) a further sum, not exceeding £145,625,000, be granted to His Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.—(*Claire Coutinho.*)

2.12 pm

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con): It is great to see you back in your place, Madam Deputy Speaker. Both you and the late Baroness Boothroyd have demonstrated amply, on International Women's Day, that a woman's place is in the Chamber and preferably in the Chair of the Chamber.

I am very grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for approving this very important and timely debate, and to all colleagues across all parties and across the House who supported my bid for it. I would also like to pass on my thanks to the Liaison Committee, under whose auspices these estimates day debates take place. I pay tribute to the work that the Petitions Committee has done in this area. I have come hot foot to this Chamber from a meeting of the Petitions Committee, as has my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) and the all-party parliamentary group for childcare and early education which he chairs.

The departmental estimates briefing from the House of Commons Library shows education as the second-biggest winner after health in absolute terms when it comes to changes in day-to-day spending—the so-called resource departmental expenditure limits line in estimates—and a minor loser on capital DEL. The welcome increase in the former, however, is dominated by the impact of the revaluation of the student loan book.

As a former schools Minister, I cannot begrudge the fact that the largest proportion of the £3.9 billion increase in the education resource budget is going to

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schools, and I am in no doubt that the extra funding of £2 billion in each year of the next two years announced in the spending review is needed in the schools system. Nor do I in any way regret that the second-biggest winner in the education space is high needs. As we heard on Monday, the Government have overseen a 50% increase in spending on high needs since the 2019 election, which I very much welcome and support.

However, I am concerned. As the House has heard many times, early intervention is money well spent and the case for early intervention, early identification of need and early education is stronger than ever. In that context, it is deeply concerning that the only line in the departmental estimates that is clearly focused on childcare or the early years is a £52 million increase in resource DEL. That increase in spending on the early years is tiny in comparison to the overall increase in the Department's budget, a rate of increase across the piece of just 1.4% when compared to the same line in the 2022-23 main estimate. That breaks down into an increase in early years funding for schools of £35 million, a rate of increase of just 1% and an increase of £17 million for early years funding through the families budget, a slightly more reassuring 14% annual increase.

Such numbers without context might sound very significant, but the context, as we are often reminded by the Front Bench, is that the Government spent nearly £20 billion on childcare and the early years over the last five years, and are currently spending around £5 billion a year across the various different Government Departments that support it. I do not claim to be an accountant. I do not claim to be the greatest living authority on the departmental estimates process and—pace the Prime Minister—I did not complete an A-level in mathematics, but I do know that an increase of £52 million on a budget of billions is not a big deal. In fact, the House of Commons Library's very helpful briefing for this debate confirms that the Department for Education's resource DEL for early years is being increased by just 1.4% from £3,781 million to £3,833 million. At a time when inflation is running at around 10%—even if we hit the Prime Minister's laudable ambition of halving it we will be running above 5%—that does not feel like anything close to a real-terms increase.

In evidence to the Education Committee, the Institute for Fiscal Studies highlighted the problem. It submitted written evidence in November 2022, headed:

"Funding for the early years is likely to fall by 8% up to 2024 as a result of faster-than-expected cost rises".

It set out that

"The early years sector in England received a significant uplift to its budget at the last Spending Review in 2021...but higher-than-expected inflation means even that increase will not compensate for rising costs. We estimate that childcare providers' costs are likely to rise by 9% in total between this year (2022-23) and 2024-25. Judged against these rising costs, total funding for the free entitlement will be 8% lower in real terms in 2024-25 than it is this year."

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): I welcome my hon. Friend's speech and I welcome his Select Committee conducting an inquiry into childcare and early education. We can talk about entitlement as much as we like, but if the settings are not there, we have a problem. The private voluntary independent sector is losing numbers.

I have seen two closed in my constituency in the past six months. This is a problem. We have a supply side problem. Does he agree that achieving parity on business rates between the PVI sector and the maintained sector where an early years setting is in a school would help significantly with its in-year budget problem?

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend demonstrates his considerable knowledge and expertise in this space, and his all-party parliamentary group has gathered evidence from across the sector. I will come back to that point, because it is one of the many things we could be doing to help.

In fairness to Ministers in the Department, I know very well that they have been doing hand-to-hand combat with the Treasury year in, year out for more investment in every phase of education. In recent years, those battles have borne fruit, particularly for schools and for the high needs pupils in them. I also recall starting this year at the launch of the IFS's very interesting report into education spending, which confirmed that over the last decade the early years has been the fastest growing area of Government spending in education and, unlike in the schools space where current increases in funding are making up for previous years of real-terms cuts, the early years budget has grown faster than any other phase of education in real terms under the Conservative Government.

By contrast, and before we hear too many speeches on Labour's proposals for an all-singing, all-dancing £20 billion childcare offer, we should remember that it left a system with a single 15-hour offer and Department for Education spending on childcare and the early years at roughly a third of what it is today. That is the backdrop to the disappointing departmental estimate that underpins the debate.

The House will be aware, and as my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester mentioned, that I started my term as chair of the Education Committee with a call for an inquiry into childcare and the early years. I am very grateful to all the people, across parties, who elected me to that position and to all the members of the Committee who unanimously accepted that call. The inquiry is now well under way. We have heard loud and clear from the nurseries, childminders and the wider early years sector about the challenges they currently face—challenges my hon. Friend alluded to—the pressures they are feeling, and, as the IFS confirmed, the very real inflationary pressures being felt by the sector. We have heard time and again the case for more investment in this crucial sector. Although it is too early for me to pre-empt the findings or recommendations of our inquiry, I believe passionately that there is a strong case for more Government investment in this space.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making an interesting speech, and I commend him on his focus on the importance of early years education. Sarah Ronan of the Women's Budget Group has said:

"Years of chronic underfunding have led to extortionate fees for parents, providers closing down and early years workers leaving the sector because of poor pay."

The Government are providing insufficient funding to cover the existing 15 to 30 hours, as has been mentioned. The Women's Budget Group is calling on the Government

to address that by increasing investment in childcare by £1.75 billion. Obviously, it is about not only the welfare of children but enabling women to be in the workplace, because without affordable childcare, women cannot be in the workplace. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is really important that the Government listen to groups such as the Women's Budget Group, which has a lot of expertise in this area, and consider this issue further?

Mr Walker: I want the Government to listen to many groups across the whole sector and see the case for investment. I will come later to the different elements of the case for investment, to which the hon. Lady rightly refers.

Childcare affordability is a crucial part of the argument. To date, our inquiry has heard about a perfect storm facing the nurseries and childminding sector, of parents struggling to pay the costs required to make the so-called “free hours” work, of rising employment costs and greater than ever competition for staff, and a high burden of bureaucracy. For the vast majority of providers run by the independent and voluntary sector, there is also the challenge of business rates, as my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester mentioned, which are increasing at an alarming rate, and of having to pay VAT on their investments when neither of those costs is felt by their direct competitors in school-based provision.

The National Day Nurseries Association has published figures that suggest that despite the very welcome increase in funded hours for parents, the Department—perhaps more accurately the Treasury—has knowingly underfunded the free hours so that there is a clear and increasing burden on parents and on settings themselves to cross-subsidise the two-year-old and 15 and 30 hours offers. The Sutton Trust has pointed out that 75% of childcare providers said that funding provided per hour for the 30 hours entitlement did not meet their costs, forcing them to apply charges to better-off families, including extras such as nappies, sunscreen and lunch. They say that that undermines the intention of the 30-hour policy as a free entitlement.

We have heard concerns from parents that the myriad different offers and support systems across early years are confusing, and from providers that the use of “free hours” terminology causes conflict with their customers. The reality is that these are subsidised hours, for which the state bears only a share of the cost burden. We have heard concerning statistics about the underspend in both the Department for Work and Pensions and the Treasury schemes to support childcare, because the need for up-front payments out of net income deter both parents on universal credit and those who should be benefiting from tax-free childcare from using the Government schemes. That is both part of the problem and, in my view, part of the solution. There is money that the Treasury has already approved to support childcare in the early years that is not getting spent. That money needs to be put to work to support the very real needs of parents and children.

That brings me to the fundamental point about the case for investment. The Prime Minister rightly said that education is the closest thing to a magic bullet that we have. Investing in education is a good thing and something that I have dedicated most of my time on the Back Benches to supporting. Early intervention usually pays dividends, and that is especially true of education.

Many Members across the House, mostly notably my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom), have repeatedly made the case for investment in the first 1,000 days of children's lives. They have pointed to the strong scientific evidence that investment in this period has more impact on the way minds develop than any other.

The Nuffield Foundation has said that there is a strong case for additional investment in the early years, as a “foundational stage” of early development. It states:

“Given that lifelong inequalities have their roots in early childhood, this would be investment in social and individual well-being in the long term.”

An interesting research summary of “The Lifecycle Benefits of an Influential Early Childhood Program” by the Heckman Equation, states:

“Every dollar spent on high-quality, birth-to-five programs for disadvantaged children delivers a 13% per annum return on investment.”

Others have pointed to the huge productivity gains to be made from providing childcare that supports parents, particularly mothers, to continue in or return to work.

On International Women's Day we should recognise the substantial benefits of closing the gender pay gap and allowing more women to realise their full potential, focusing not only on participation levels but on the quality of participation in the workforce. According to a PwC report published in March 2021 on women in work:

“There are large economic benefits to increasing the number of women in work.”

It estimated that the UK could gain £48 billion per annum from

“increasing female labour force participation rates to match those of the South West – consistent top regional performer for female participation in the UK index.”

A report by CBI Economics and the Recruitment & Employment Confederation from July 2022 entitled “Overcoming shortages - How to create a sustainable labour market” stated that if unaddressed, labour and skills shortages could see the economy lose £30 billion to £39 billion annually. Gingerbread has said:

“Successive research that we have undertaken pinpoints the cost of childcare as the biggest barrier to single parents in finding and staying in work as well as in progressing in their careers.”

Sometimes, including in the evidence provided to our inquiry, it has been suggested that there is some conflict between the two objectives. In reality, investment in the early years and in childcare should be a win-win. It should be good for the children, who are better stimulated, supported and prepared for education, and better for parents, who know that they can engage in work with confidence, knowing that their children are getting that stimulation in a safe setting that meets their needs. A recent report by the Centre for Progressive Policy think-tank has suggested that the economy stands to gain a staggering £38 billion, or 1% of GDP, if a fully effective childcare system could support more women to continue in careers and reap the benefits of returning to work. Others, such as Onward, have pointed to the clear desire of parents to have access to affordable and flexible childcare, and the benefits of both parents being able to deploy help from the Government effectively.

[Mr Robin Walker]

As Schools Minister, I often heard concerns from primary schools about the challenges of children arriving in schools less school-ready than they had been previously, and the greater range of measures and extra support needed to prepare them for life at school. Having children stimulated by excellent early years provision would address that challenge far more effectively and in a more timely manner than interventions or catch-up funding spent in the school years. In the noble quest of ensuring that more children leave primary school able to read, write and do maths, investment in the early years when they learn basic communication—their letters and numbers—should be a no-brainer.

Laura Barbour of the Sutton Trust told the Select Committee:

“In primary schools, 93% said that they recognised that time spent in an early years setting prior to attending primary school made a significant difference when they arrived in school, particularly for children from more disadvantaged families.”

Steve Brine: My hon. Friend is making such an important point, which is one of the reasons why the all-party group that I lead is called “on childcare and early education.” It is important that we flatten the distinction in taxation terms between early years settings and early years carried out in school. The people who run those settings—I declare an interest because my wife works in one—are early years educators. All too often society does not see them as that. I know that the Minister does, as have all previous Ministers, but all too often the discourse is about just childcare. It is not—it is early education.

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I am glad that he has declared his family connection in that respect. We should all value the contribution of the early years and the people who work in what we might describe as childcare but is early education, early stimulation and support of children. The steps that the Princess of Wales has taken to draw attention to the importance of the sector are very welcome.

Dame Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con): I have to pick up the term “early educator” because the reality is that most children start nursery when they are about six months to eight months old. It is simply wrong to call it early education—what those tiny babies need is a loving, nurturing environment. To call it early education is just the wrong terminology and sends the wrong message. What they need is love and attention. For babies who come from chaotic homes, very often that is their route to secure secondary attachment to somebody. I find that term very misleading, and I wish that we would not always use it.

Mr Walker: I recognise my right hon. Friend’s point. That is part of the dilemma of covering this as an issue from nought to five. The earliest years are not necessarily about education—certainly not in any formal sense—but about stimulation and support. My argument is that the changes that the right support and the right stimulation unlock in young brains and the progress that it allows children to make pay enormous dividends in the education system further down the road.

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): I absolutely love this important debate. What the country and the sector want is parental choice. Many parents are telling me that they do not have enough options because settings have closed or are too expensive. As my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom) says, very young children are often better placed with their mother or father or with a childminder, nanny or au pair. There should be a range of options, but in recent years the options have steadily declined. Parental choice, underpinned by quality, is exactly what we should be hoping to achieve.

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend has been a great champion for parental choice; I know that she has worked with Onward and others to make the case for it. That is a really important part of the argument, and I look forward to engaging with it as the Education Committee inquiry progresses.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that a beneficial but often overlooked by-product is that people can become better parents as a result of meeting other parents? Being a young parent can be a very scary experience, especially without having had younger siblings. Beyond the benefits for children, it can be very beneficial for parents to share experiences and have conversations with other parents and with the people who run facilities.

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend, on whose Select Committee—the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee—I am happy to serve, is absolutely right. I have learned a huge amount as a result of having children in childcare and early years settings and talking to the brilliant people who look after them. It is absolutely true that the people who work in this space provide that support. I also think that the Government’s family hubs intervention will be very welcome, particularly if there is outreach and support in the community.

When we take into account the stimulation for young minds, the benefits for parents and the impact on schools, the case for investment in early years becomes a win-win-win—and that is not all. We all know about the rising tide of demand for specialist and high needs support; the Minister was very frank about it in her statement on Monday. We all know that the early identification of need is vital to children’s life chances. Picking up challenges such as autism, speech and language difficulties and hearing or visual impairments early in a child’s life enormously increases their chances of managing their condition, getting the right specialist support in place and being able to engage with mainstream education.

If the Treasury ever wants to reduce the high needs deficits that beset our local authority budgets and simultaneously unleash the potential of more young people with special needs, it needs to understand that investment in early years and in the professions that can support, identify and meet needs in the early years is a must. Investment in the early years and childcare should therefore be a win to the power of four. There can be few sectors of the economy in which there is such obvious and compelling payback.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): My hon. Friend is quite right to use the word “investment” in this context. Has he ever come across the Tangelo Park project in the United States, which has fascinated

me for many years? A local philanthropist took over a neighbourhood in Florida that was plagued by crime and low achievement—what one would refer to as a rough neighbourhood. He made two offers to the population: he said that he would pay for universal, high-quality pre-school childcare and that anybody who got into college would get it free. Obviously people normally have to pay for college there, so that created an incentive. The project has been going for 20 years and has completely transformed the neighbourhood, which has become prosperous, crime-free and a lovely place to live. If we are interested in regeneration and levelling up across everything we do, investment is about not just the individual child and their family, but the area in which they live and their community's sense of aspiration and purpose.

Mr Walker: My right hon. Friend makes an excellent point. We had a very interesting debate on the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill about childcare as an infrastructural issue, which I think reflected those benefits. I agree that we need social entrepreneurs to invest and play a role in this space. The private, voluntary and independent sector, which currently dominates provision, is so vital. It is important for us to work with the sector and support it rather than placing it under the pressures that unfortunately we are seeing today.

This is a debate about departmental estimates, but I am first to recognise that not all spending on childcare and early years comes or needs to come from the Department for Education's budget. Within that budget, however, we have seen welcome commitments to review and increase the local spending on funded hours. I am proud of this Government's record of delivering both the targeted two-year-old offer for disadvantaged children and the 30 free hours for some working parents.

Evidence given to the Education Committee makes it all too clear, however, that those welcome steps are coming under real pressure from rising costs. Helen Donohoe of PACEY, the Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years, told us:

"The number of childminders has halved in 20 years. We project that by 2035 we will have only about 1,000 childminders left in the country. That is from 60,000 20 years ago".

Dr Grenier, a nursery school headteacher, told us that "roughly 10% of nursery schools have closed in the last 10 years and more are due to close soon."

Kara Jewell, a nursery director, told us:

"In 2003 when I registered as a childminder our funding rate was £3.02 per hour. It is now set to go to £4.69, so our funding rate has gone up 55.3% in 20 years while the minimum wage has risen by 131.56%."

Emma Gardner, who is quality manager for early years and childcare at Spring by Action for Children, told us:

"I certainly think that funded places in settings that take funded children will reduce dramatically because it is just not sustainable."

Much of the potential for real investment in this space comes through the Treasury's so-called tax-free childcare offer and the Department for Work and Pensions' substantial contribution through universal credit. However, our Committee has heard that neither is working as effectively as it should, and that both need reform to meet the needs of parents today. The Early Years Alliance has suggested to our Committee that the tax-free childcare policy should be stopped and that the theoretical billions

set aside for it should be invested in meeting the full costs of the so-called free hours. We have heard from others that the money could be better invested in extending the scope of the subsidised offers from three and four-year-olds down to one and two-year-olds.

Against that, it is worth bearing in mind that the tax-free childcare offer is currently the only part of the system that offers parents any support for children under two or over four, so cutting it off completely would come at the expense of many who use it. I also think that it is worth exploring the true potential of actual tax-free childcare. We could make it much more attractive for parents by allowing childcare costs to be claimed against taxation for the household, as many European countries do, rather than offering a 20% subsidy on cash placed in an account from post-tax income.

There are other ways for the Treasury to help the sector that I believe are worthy of immediate consideration. It could remove business rates from the PVI sector, which provides approximately 80% of childcare in this country. It could remove the unfair burden of VAT, which holds back investment. I know that such moves would come at a cost and that the Chancellor has a hugely difficult challenge in balancing the books after all the challenges of the pandemic, but I plead that he consider the huge benefit of supporting investment in this space and the enormous upsides of better stimulated children and of more parents returning to work.

If such reforms prove a bridge too far, I hope that the Chancellor will look urgently at the massive increases in rates facing many in the sector. The NDNA told our Committee:

"Business rate property revaluation from April 2023 has seen providers report bill increases of 40-50%".

I received clear evidence of that last week from a passionate early years advocate in my constituency who has been made an MBE for her services to the sector. She is despairing at the proposed increase of 35% in the rates for her outstanding-rated Worcester provision, which is compounded by the fact that the local funding rate has increased by just 1% for two-year-olds and 5% for three and four-year-olds while the national living wage on which many of her staff are working has increased by 9.2%.

I will conclude my speech not by pre-empting the findings of our Committee's inquiry further than I have done already, but by quoting directly from my constituent. In a recent letter to me, Alice Bennett MBE—the founder of the Worcester Early Years Centre and the recipient of an honour in recognition of her outstanding work in the early years sector—wrote:

"I appeal to you and your Government once again for urgent reform in this nation's early years sector. We are facing the most challenging time in decades with settings closing and talented staff leaving in droves... We all know that 90% of a child's brain development happens before the age of 5. The research and evidence for this is utterly convincing."

She described investing in the sector as

"morally and ethically the right way forward, thereby ensuring that every child can realise their rights and entitlements to develop their full potential and to thrive and enjoy a meaningful existence in this world. Our sector is indeed very dedicated and hardworking but we cannot continue to work for peanuts and be subject to such punitive taxation. Our lifetime legacies of outstanding and irreplaceable nurseries will be forced to close without some form of sensible revision and financial interaction."

There is a real case for responding to that call for help.

[Mr Robin Walker]

On International Women's Day, we should celebrate the enormous contribution to this sector of female entrepreneurs—people who have invested a lifetime of learning and labour in supporting children's development.

I believe that we have a Prime Minister and a Chancellor who recognise the case for education and early intervention, and I know that we have a Children's Minister who is passionate about the value of childcare and early education. I am hopeful that next time we debate the departmental estimates, they will have enabled the Department of Education to deliver a sustained uplift in investment in early years, and to build on the Government's overall record in this regard.

2.40 pm

Taiwo Owatemi (Coventry North West) (Lab): Happy International Women's Day, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is great to see you back in the Chair.

Last week I visited Georgie Porgies Pre-School in Holbrooks, in my constituency. It provides outstanding care and early years education for more than 60 children at the most important stage of their lives, but because of the Government's failures, it will soon have to close its doors for good unless something is done. With a gas and electricity bill totalling £1,000—an increase of 100% on last year's—George Porgies, along with pre-schools and nurseries across the country, is coming to the awful realisation that it will not be able to fulfil its mission: to give children the best possible start in life.

Katie, the owner of Georgie Porgies, pays herself a salary that is below the minimum wage simply to keep her business afloat—a business that provides employment for nine people and vital education for tens of children—but despite this selfless sacrifice, she and her business face financial ruin. To put it simply, the Government are levying a tax on generosity and kindness. Katie faces financial hardship because she cares and is passionate about what she does. She loves her community, and wants to give children the best possible chance in life. If she took the very reasonable decision to step away and find another job, she would no doubt find herself in a much more secure position, but she and thousands like her are not driven by money. They want to make a difference, and because of that, the Government continue to punish people like her.

Let me make it clear to Conservative Members that Katie does not need any business advice on how to make her money stretch or improve efficiencies. What she and everyone in the sector need more than anything is deep-rooted, fundamental change to a broken system. That is the only thing that will keep childcare businesses in every corner of the UK afloat. Childcare costs in the UK are the third most expensive in the world, after those in New Zealand and Switzerland, and still the Government are doing nothing about it. We need to move away from the current model and rethink the system.

The Government talk about wanting growth, but while the cost of childcare continues to be a serious financial burden both for families and for those who provide it, the social infrastructure that allows us to contribute economically is rapidly coming apart at the seams. I speak to many families on the doorstep every week, and the No. 1 issue that comes up—apart from the cost of living crisis—is childcare. Thousands of

women in my constituency are facing the impossible choice between staying at home to look after their children and going back to work, which means that many of them are sacrificing hard-won careers.

Let me end by asking the Minister to listen to Katie's words of desperation:

"Help me keep a business I absolutely love. Help me keep nine people in employment. Help me keep over 60 children in a nursery that is full of love, care, and happiness."

I do hope that the Minister will have an adequate response for Katie.

2.43 pm

Dame Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con): May I say what a huge pleasure it is to see you back in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker—and what better day to be discussing this topic than International Women's Day? I wish all the women—and men—in the Chamber a happy International Women's Day. Is it not wonderful that there are so many of us now? It is indeed wonderful to see so many women in politics, making a contribution and debating these issues. On behalf of all of us, I want to encourage every young woman, of whatever party, who has political interests and ambitions to get stuck in. We will help you. Come and join us; you will be most welcome.

Let me begin by paying tribute to my hon. Friend the Minister, who has been such an advocate for what, as I think everyone in the House knows, I am so passionate about: giving every baby the best start in life. The lovely thing about that is that I am, so far, not alone. Every Member I talk to, in every party, is incredibly supportive, because we all know from bitter experience of constituency cases, from what we have read, and from what we have learned as politicians and in our own lives, how critical it is for every single baby to have a chance of the best start in life.

Let me give the House some statistics. We know from a study conducted by the Early Intervention Foundation in 2016 that the cost to our economy of late intervention is about £17 billion a year. Almost a third of that is the cost of looked-after children. The children who have some of the worst outcomes in the country are those who are removed from their families and taken into care, and it is shocking that so much money is spent on achieving such poor outcomes. Huge parts of that £17 billion are spent on dealing with domestic violence, and young people who are not in employment, training or education and whose life chances have been hampered by their not being given the best start.

My hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker) has already mentioned the work of Professor James Heckman in analysing the rates of return on human capital investment. It says very clearly, "If you do not care about human happiness, just look at the money—follow the money!" A pound, or a dollar in the professor's case, invested during the antenatal period will pay exponentially more, in terms of the return, to the human potential of the child—and will lower the later cost to society—than a pound, or a dollar, spent further down the line, when that child is already in the realms of youth crime or perhaps mental illness. Financially, prevention is not much kinder but so much cheaper than cure. Across our United Kingdom, and indeed across the world, there is a growing wealth of evidence for that.

I pay tribute to the Princess of Wales for her amazing work through the Royal Foundation Centre for Early Childhood, observing the struggles of parents and the number of parents who do not feel confident about knowing what their baby needs. I have talked to consultant paediatricians as part of my work as the Government's early years healthy development adviser, and one of them said to me, "I am supposedly an expert in this field, but when my wife and I had our baby, we were like, 'Aargh! What do we do with this?'" That is the challenge. It is not about the nanny state, or about interfering; this can happen to any us. I had three babies, and by the third time I thought I had it sussed, but my 19-year-old still gives me hell!

When you first have a child, you do think, "What am I supposed to do with this?" You take that beautiful, squeaky new baby home, and once you have got over the stitches and the other horrific unspeakable things that befall women in these circumstances, you find yourself trying to focus on the fact that you have had no sleep, which is an effective torture, is it not, Madam Deputy Speaker? We all know what it is like if we have had no sleep, and your baby, like my first, does not sleep for more than two hours at a time. In the one antenatal class that I just vaguely recalled, I was asked, "What is your 24-hour clock like now?" We all said things like, "Between 11 pm and about 7 am, I am fast asleep." Then we were asked, "What do you think it will be like once you have had the baby?" We all said, "Well, I don't really know, actually."

It is so difficult, having a baby. You can be as rich as Croesus, you can be happily married, you can have all the support and the nannies in the world, you can have maternity nurses, and it is still difficult. Actually, I pay tribute to the Netherlands, where 95% of babies are born at home and you get a free maternity nurse, on the state. I would do that trade any day of the week—hands up those who would not! To have someone who will take the baby off you so that you can get a few hours' sleep—that is extraordinary. However, I hope I am not freaking out anyone who is thinking of having a baby: it is the most glorious thing we ever do, and I welcome the fact that so many of our colleagues in the House have young children. I was proud as Leader of the Commons to introduce proxy voting for baby leave, because, oh my goodness, we cannot just sit at home and watch everyone voting and hope that our slip is going to be adhered to. We need to continue our lives.

So, for many women, and men, this is the most difficult thing they ever do, but what is so appalling is that we are really not allowed to say that. When I had my first child I was working at Barclays and I had just been appointed senior executive—one of only eight women; it was an absolute badge of honour—and they said, "We will do this appointment if you will come back after 10 weeks." I know that seems extraordinary. They could not legally do that now, but in those days they could. And I said yes, which was really stupid. In hindsight, why on earth did I say yes? Anyway, there ensued two miscarriages, postnatal depression and awful trauma, and I left. It was not a happy experience. I say that because we are never allowed to say when things are difficult and we are really struggling, but we really want to keep our career. We do want to have it all, and that is understandable, but at the moment we really cannot.

We absolutely have to focus on the incredible investment in the early years. Again, I pay tribute to the Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho); to the Prime Minister who, as Chancellor, funded this incredible project; and to the Chancellor, who as a Back Bencher and Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee was absolutely supportive of the best start for life. I also pay tribute to Opposition colleagues. One of my earliest friends in this place was the wonderful Lord Frank Field—if I may use his name since he is no longer an MP—and the even more wonderful, if that is possible, Dame Tessa Jowell, both of whom have been such advocates for giving every baby the best start in life.

What the Government are seeking to do is to provide support. My hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), who is no longer in his place, talked about the importance of early years settings to build families' capacity to be parents. In those settings, parents can chat to others and ask, "What size nappies are you using? Have you weaned yet? What are you feeding your baby?" We do not get a manual, do we? We should, but we do not. Another thing we do not get, which we should, is an on/off button. Don't you agree, Madam Deputy Speaker? I am sure Matthew would agree. When Madam Deputy Speaker's son used to sit in his sitting room opposite mine and play my music in my flat from his Bluetooth, I wanted an on/off button then. He was a bit older.

That is one of the challenges that we have as parents: there is no manual. So how do we get that information? We have the Government's programme of rolling out family hubs across England. I wish we could roll them out across the UK, and we will be working with our colleagues in the devolved Administrations to make that the case. In Scotland, they have got parenting mental health absolutely sorted but they do not have family hubs. Talking to some colleagues who are Scottish parliamentarians, I know that they would be keen to follow what we are doing here. I think we can learn from each other all around the world. In Chile they have the most wonderful support for new mums that we do not currently have here, but we are starting to roll out the family hubs across England.

Most importantly, we are rolling out the best start for life, which involves six universal services. People who go to a family hub will be able to get antenatal midwifery checks, to chat to a health visitor, to seek support for their mental health issues or those of their partner or any member of their family, or for their relationship with their baby. They will also be able to get breastfeeding support. This is another ridiculous thing: we are all expected to know how to do that, aren't we? How on earth do you breastfeed a baby? Who knows? Hands up, any of the men? No. We do not get a manual for that either, and actually women need a lot of support. You would not give your five-year-old a two-wheel bicycle and say, "Right, off you go, darling." You hold the back of the seat until they have got the hang of pedalling. Our breastfeeding rates are among the worst in western Europe and that is because no one gets any help—

Steve Brine: On that point, will my right hon. Friend take an unlikely intervention?

Dame Andrea Leadsom: My colleague is going to tell us how to breastfeed, ladies!

Steve Brine: I have never name-checked them in this House, but Auntie Jane and Auntie Jenni ran the BABIES breastfeeding support group at Lanterns nursery, which still exists in Winchester, and I remember going to them one morning after we had had a dreadful night with our first, Emily—who is 15 now and still a challenge—and we were just desperate. The only thing that got us through to daylight was knowing that we were seeing Auntie Jane and Auntie Jenni in the morning. I remember taking my wife and Emily down to see them, and they provided amazing support, as do support groups all over this country. So, Auntie Jane and Auntie Jenni, thank you.

Dame Andrea Leadsom: That is lovely, and I pay tribute to the thousands of volunteers who provide breastfeeding support. My hon. Friend highlights perfectly one of the great challenges of becoming a new parent. When we are really struggling, there is a high correlation with mental health issues. When there is not enough support for women who want to breastfeed their babies but find they cannot do so, they suffer from feelings of guilt and feeling that they have failed and they are not good enough, and that lends itself to the problems of postnatal depression that are only too prevalent right across England.

So, to recap: midwifery, health visiting, mental health support, breastfeeding support, safeguarding support and disability support will be universally available in family hubs to help every family to give their baby the best start in life. Not only that, there will be universal-plus support for the most tricky and challenging issues such as the prospect of domestic violence. We know that up to 30% of domestic violence starts in pregnancy because of the partner's feeling, "This person is going to love the baby more than they love me." All these challenges that are brought out by pregnancy are quite desperate to be solved. We know that if we can get the hang of giving every baby the best start for life, that will transform our society.

I mentioned that the cost to our economy of late intervention is about £17 billion a year. The Maternal Mental Health Alliance's study has shown a cost of around £8 billion a year for every new cohort of births as a direct result of the cost of poor maternal mental health in the perinatal period. The all-party parliamentary group on conception to age two—the 1,001 critical days—has demonstrated that school readiness results in a reduction in later problems such as the propensity of children to get into gangs, to have poor mental health and to fail to learn and do well at school. The 1970 cohort study showed, significantly later on, that only 18% of children in the bottom 25% academically at age five get one or more A-levels, compared with 60% of those in the top 25% at age five. What happens to a child in their earliest years follows them throughout their life, and the more we can do in that earliest period, the better, so the Government are totally on the right lines.

Kit Malthouse: I applaud my right hon. Friend's work on the early years and, as she knows, I share her enthusiasm. We are talking today about the estimates for the Department for Education. What role does she think public health has to play in educating parents, particularly about our shared passion for attachment theory? We have been successful over the last few decades in educating parents about not smoking or drinking

during pregnancy, about not smoking in the car with their children and about how to give them nutritious food. Much of that has been a huge success, but we have never really had a public health campaign based on the fundamental building block of emotional maturity in children, which comes from strong early attachments. When I was in the DFE, we were considering the idea of a big public health campaign to illustrate the importance of attachment, not just to women but to men as well. An attachment to a father is just as important as an attachment to a mother.

Dame Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend is absolutely spot on.

That gives me the chance to mention the London School of Economics report in 2019, which illustrates the cost of insecure attachment. The cost is 50% higher if an infant is not securely attached to their mum than it is for a securely attached child, at around £4,000. If that baby is not securely attached to their dad, the cost can be four times higher than that, which obviously illustrates the importance of dads. My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise not only the importance of secure attachment but, very specifically, the importance of dads. The provision of holistic support on fathering is crucial.

My best start for life project is commissioning different bits of training, nationally and free to all early years practitioners, including on reflective parenting, so that everyone working with families, whether as a volunteer or as a professional, understands how reflective parenting can contribute to secure attachment. There is also video interaction guidance that demonstrates to families the good and the not so good, in a way that has been clearly evaluated. A lot of work is being done in the best start for life project to skill up everyone who is volunteering or working in the early years sector and to roll out support for families.

If a family are expecting a baby, they go to their family hub. If they want a book, they go to the library. If they want a bottle of milk, they go to the supermarket. We want family hubs to be a household name where people go if they have a child, and particularly if they have a baby. They should go whether they are rich or not so rich, whether they are young or old, and whether they have other caring responsibilities or not. We know that learning from each other in a supportive environment can be transformative.

I finish on childcare because, although my role as early years healthy development adviser is about nurturing support in the early years, most babies find themselves in a childcare setting when they are still very young—six months to a year old. The 1,001 critical days, the period from conception to the age of two, are a continuum, and it is when the vast majority of the lifelong blocks for emotional and physical health are laid.

Babies may spend a lot of that time in a nursery setting, and it seems to me that there are two issues. The first is quality, and it must be about parental choice. We need good-quality nurseries, but we also need choice for parents. If they want their mum to look after their baby, and if their mum is able, we should be willing to say, "Thank you very much, granny. You will get some sort of payment." The payment should not be as if they are a trained nanny or nursery worker, but there should be some form of carer's allowance or attendance allowance for grandparents who go part time to care for their grandchildren.

Secondly, we have already heard that childminding has fallen off a cliff because the regulatory burden, which predates this Conservative Government, has been so great that it has taken a lot of people out of childminding. If I had a six-month-old, I would much rather they were in a home environment than a nursery environment or baby setting.

We need to go with the grain of what works for families, so we need to have choices, with quality nurseries, many more childminders and support for relatives, just as we have for people who look after their elderly husband or wife who has disabilities. People who go part time to look after their granddaughter, grandson, niece or nephew get nothing. It is a straight choice, and it has a significant financial cost. I urge the Minister to consider that.

The final thing is flexibility for parents. Families know best what works for them, and people tend not to have just one child. Child No. 1 can be very difficult, but when a family is faced with paying 50 quid a day for a tip-top nursery because they want to go back to work nine-to-five—they also need to get to work and get back to pick up their child—the nursery costs are huge. For an awful lot of women, having a second child means it simply is not worth going back to work.

We should allow parents to have their own childcare budget that they decide how to use. I wanted my first child to come out of childcare when my second child was born because I wanted them to be together. If a mother is home on maternity leave, why not have the two children together? It should be a choice for families, but if the first child is three years old, families do not want to lose their free hours of childcare, even if it would suit them to have both children at home. I urge the Government to consider giving parents that choice. Childcare is difficult enough without there being hurdles that make it unaffordable and inflexible for far too many families.

I am delighted with the Government's work on rolling out the family hubs and best start for life, but childcare is part of it and we need to give families more choice.

3.5 pm

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): It is a pleasure to see you back in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker.

It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom), but it was slightly less of a pleasure when she reminded me of the pain of childbirth and all those sleepless nights. My children are now four and eight. She said she was freaking out potential mothers, but she was freaking me out, too, by making me relive some of that trauma. I thank her for that.

I also thank the right hon. Lady for her bravery in speaking out about her experiences at Barclays. Thankfully, most employers have moved on, and many employers now see it as a competitive advantage to keep working mothers and fathers in their workforce, but there is still far too much discrimination and pressure, so I thank her for sharing her story.

I thank the hon. Member for Worcester (Mr Walker) for securing this important debate. He and a number of Conservative Members have been pretty consistent on this issue, and it is important that we have men as allies in this debate. We heard from the right hon. Member for

South Northamptonshire about various women, including herself—I also think about Jo Swinson when she was in government—who led the way on many of these issues. It is great that women did that, but men need to champion it too. As we heard, men's role as fathers is just as important as women's role as mothers. I am heartened to see men making that case.

I have said it before and I will say it again, but I am standing here today only because I have a husband who took the hit to his career when we had our children. I had a senior role in business before I became an MP, and I could not have become an MP, with a one-year-old and a five-year-old, without him being at home doing a lot of the childcare, the washing and all the domestic duties. I thank the men, and I ask them to continue championing this cause alongside us.

This is an estimates day debate, so we are here to discuss Government spending on childcare and early years. To be honest, it is incredibly difficult to disagree with anything the hon. Member for Worcester said. We are on the same page, and at times it felt as if he was reading parts of my speech, so I apologise for the repetition.

I hope that Treasury Ministers and officials, as well as the Minister for children, are listening carefully, because Members on both sides of the House are making the same point. The view of the Liberal Democrats is that the Government are not spending enough on childcare and early years, plain and simple. They are not spending enough to give all children, particularly those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds, the high-quality early years education they deserve.

The Government are also not spending enough to make childcare genuinely affordable when parents decide the time is right to go back to work. The point has been made about the importance of choice. As I have demonstrated with my own example, every family are unique and need to have a range of options to suit their personal circumstances. The current system does not make that possible.

The Government are not spending enough to ensure that providers are able to stay in business, so that parents can find a place for their child. We see the impact on children, parents and providers, and I have some statistics to back up that point. Before the pandemic, children in reception on free school meals were, on average, 4.6 months behind their peers, and that gap has widened since 2016. As has already been said, early years is where investment can make the biggest difference to children's life chances.

We know that a typical couple in the UK have to spend, on average, about 29% of their wage on childcare, which compares with 19% in the US, 15% in Canada and less than 10% in France, Germany, Sweden and Japan, according to the OECD. A year ago, a survey by Pregnant Then Screwed and Mumsnet found that for most parents of young children, childcare now costs the same as or more than their rent or mortgage payments. The right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire talked about £50 a day for a tip-top nursery, but I can tell her that in south-west London people are looking at £100 a day, if not more, for a tip-top nursery. Frankly, this is unaffordable and people are spending more on childcare than on their rent or mortgage payments. Some people's mortgages increased as a result of the mini-Budget we had back in November, but I am not sure that was the solution the Government were looking for to address the disparity.

[Munira Wilson]

The other issue we face relates to childcare providers, as more than 10,000 of them closed last year, with a net reduction overall of 4,000. I wish to pay tribute to June O'Sullivan, from the London Early Years Foundation, who has been doing a lot of work on this issue. A lot of providers have gone under in more disadvantaged areas. As a result of the LEYF's social enterprise model, it is able to invest in provision and settings in more disadvantaged areas—doing so, in essence, by subsidising from where it runs nurseries in more affluent areas, including my own. I visited one of its nurseries in Teddington, which is run for employees of the National Physical Laboratory in my constituency, to hear about how the LEYF is cross-subsidising to enable all parents, whatever their background, to access good, high-quality childcare.

On International Women's Day, it is worth emphasising that the lack of affordable childcare hits women the hardest, as we have heard. The proportion of mothers in full-time work drops dramatically when their child turns one, falling from 49% to 31%, and it does not recover until their youngest is 14. On average, women's earnings take a 40% hit when they have their first child and never recover, whereas men's earnings take barely a hit at all—I will not tell my husband that! According to the Department for Education's own survey, 53% of non-working mothers with children under five would prefer to go to work if they could find convenient, flexible, reliable, affordable, good-quality childcare.

I want to say a couple of words about single parents, because they are often overlooked in this debate and I have heard from single parents in my constituency. One of them said to me, "Look, staying at home is not even an option for me. I've got to go out to work. The costs are crippling." I heard from another constituent who is on a very good salary and does not live an extravagant lifestyle. She is a single mother of twin two-year-olds, so she has two children whose childcare she has to pay for. She is on a good salary and lives in a two-bedroom home, but after all her living costs, before childcare, she has only £250 a month left to spare. So her childcare costs of more than £2,000 a month are having to come out of her savings. She appreciates that many other people are in a far worse position; at least she has some savings to pay for it, so that she can continue to work. However, until such time as her children go to school, she will be coughing up a further £75,000 in childcare costs—it is just astonishing. This issue is having an impact on people right across the income scale, because the current system is in a mess and is inadequate.

As we heard eloquently from the hon. Member for Worcester, the Government are massively underfunding the free hours entitlement. As he said, it is not free; it is subsidised. My son came out of childcare just last August or September, so I can tell the House that I was massively topping up the free hours I was getting. All sorts of jiggery-pokery with the invoices was done, because childminders and nurseries are told not to show that they are charging for those free hours, because they are not technically meant to, but everybody knows it goes on. Again, it is okay for me to have to pay for that, but, unfortunately, many people from much more disadvantaged backgrounds cannot pay for that top-up in care. The Department's own data show that the

average rate paid in respect of three and four-year-olds in 2020-21 was £4.89 per hour, which was less than two thirds of the Government's own estimate that that provision cost on average £7.49 per hour. As has been said, in London the cost is even higher.

We have heard already that the take-up of the Government's tax-free childcare offer is just 40%, and more than 750,000 eligible families across the UK did not benefit from it in 2021-22. So we definitely need—

Mr Robin Walker: At the risk of encouraging the hon. Lady to further think we agree on everything, may I ask whether she thinks it extraordinary that, even out of that relatively low take-up, about half the people opening an account for tax-free childcare are then not using it? That shows the huge challenge of the clunkiness of the current system.

Munira Wilson: I could not agree more with the hon. Gentleman on that. Embarrassingly, I have to confess that even I did not understand or appreciate what was available to me—I was not that well educated on that. When I got elected to this place in 2019, I could no longer get childcare vouchers from my former employer, which is what I had before, and so for many months I did not benefit at all from the tax-free allowance. I then realised that I could open up this account. I did not know that for my eldest child, who is now at school, I could use it to pay for wraparound care; I thought it only applied until my children started school. I confess that I did not know this, so I am sure that many parents out there just do not know what is on offer to them. We need a much better public information campaign about what is on offer. The other point to make on how the system is not working is that the maximum childcare support in universal credit has been frozen since 2016, which means that it covers fewer and fewer hours for those low-income families.

The hon. Gentleman delicately pointed out that early years provision has been somewhat overlooked by the Treasury in some of the recent funding settlements for the Department for Education. Let me put it slightly more starkly: based on what was announced in the autumn statement in 2022, setting the core schools funding aside, the rest of the Department's day-to-day spending, which includes the early years, is set to be cut by £500 million, or 2.3%, in real terms over the next two years. If that means a cut for early years provision, as logic would dictate it does, that would be disastrous and short-sighted. I hope that the Minister will specifically address that point about the budget for early years provision in the next few years.

The Liberal Democrats have set out a clear plan for childcare that is flexible, affordable and fair. We believe the Government should expand the offer of free, high-quality childcare for all children aged two to four, not just in term time, but year round. Crucially, the Government should also raise the rates paid to providers to match the actual costs they face. The Government also need to plug that gap between the end of parental leave and the start of free childcare, which leaves many parents without the choice or control to which we have alluded.

As others have said, investing in our children's early education is one of the best investments a society can make, and we need to see it as exactly that—it is an investment. Childcare is an essential part of our economic

infrastructure. For many parents, it is as important and crucial for getting to work as railways and road. Employers, finally, are seeing that and making the case, and I congratulate the CBI and other employers' organisations that are making that case. I hope that if the Treasury will not listen to me, it will listen to Conservative Members, to those employers' organisations and, crucially, to parents in all our constituencies, across the country. It is time the Government started treating childcare and early years as crucial infrastructure and investment in our children, and funding it properly. I really hope that next week we hear something substantive from the Chancellor on this issue.

3.18 pm

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): It is an honour to be able to address this Chamber on International Women's Day. It is a great opportunity for all of us to reflect on the successes of the past 100 years in removing barriers that women have faced, addressing inequality and removing discrimination. But it is also a time to reflect on what more needs to be done and so it is a logical day on which to be discussing childcare provision. International Women's Day is always an opportunity to reflect on the plight of women in many countries around the world who do not enjoy the fair treatment and equality that we have secured in this country and across much of the west. In particular, we should keep in mind the women in Iran and Afghanistan, as in both countries women are treated as second-class citizens and subject to brutality and human rights abuses.

The subject of today's debate is undoubtedly relevant to International Women's Day because, whether we like it or not, women still bear more of the responsibility for childcare than men. It is traditional to start a speech by declaring an interest; I should start by declaring that I do not have a personal interest in this issue, because I am not a mother and do not have childcare responsibilities. However, I agree with every word that has been said today about the importance of getting this right. It is important for our economy, for tackling social problems, and for so many other reasons.

Like everyone else, I would make the case that investment in childcare and early years education is an incredibly good way to tackle issues such as educational underachievement, worklessness, family breakdown, crime, antisocial behaviour, drug abuse, substance abuse and mental health problems. So much of our constituency casework can be traced back to difficulties in the early years.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom) and my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker) have so articulately highlighted, the first months and years of a child's life can really set their destiny. I think we all have an obligation to ensure that, as a society, we are doing everything that we can to make those first months and years the right environment for children, with the appropriate emotional support and education.

I pay tribute to all childcare providers and early years educators; they are doing a phenomenal job. I completely agree with the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) that the covid pandemic really demonstrated what a crucial role they play in our infrastructure. If there is no childcare, then nothing works, so it is important that we highlight how crucial childcare and early years are to keeping this country going.

I very much agree with the Prime Minister in his analysis of education as

"the closest thing we have to a silver bullet".

Well, I think early years education is the most extreme example of that, because, if we give people the right early years environment and the best early years teaching and support, we can make that an engine of social mobility and give them a chance to succeed, and to realise their dreams and opportunities and make successes of their lives.

I want to put on record my thanks to the Prime Minister for resolving a huge concern around maintained nursery schools. If you do not have one in your constituency, Mr Deputy Speaker, you probably will not know about this, but when the funding formula changed a few years ago, maintained nursery schools lost out, and many were essentially threatened with closure.

The Ministers at the time came forward with some limited supplementary funding, but, for some reason, not all nursery schools got that. The ones in my constituency did not get any supplementary funding, and, for the past five or six years, have really struggled to keep going. That is despite those schools providing a phenomenally good early years offer—really, a brilliant education, particularly for children with special educational needs and disabilities.

After a long campaign and many conversations with the Prime Minister in his former role as Chancellor, the Department for Education and the Treasury found an extra £10 million, added that to the £52 million of supplementary funding and reallocated it. The Barnet Early Years Alliance, the maintained nursery school in my constituency, got that funding for the first time, so did not have to close its doors. I am tremendously grateful for the half a million of funding that it is now receiving so that it can continue its inspirational work. I would also highlight the contribution to that successful campaign by the late, great Jack Dromey, who cared about it passionately.

That is a brilliant success story, and, as others have said—for example, my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester—there is much to be proud of in the Government's record on early years education, and there has been a significant increase in funding, but there are still some serious problems to be addressed.

We have heard that the current entitlements are greater than they ever have been, with the 15 hours for disadvantaged two-year-olds, the extended 30-hour offer for working parents, tax-free childcare, and, of course, help via the universal credit covering 85% of childcare costs in relevant cases, but there is no doubt that the cost of childcare in this country is high compared with many other places. That must be keeping women out of the workplace. It is certainly shortening the hours that they feel willing to do. For that reason, it is almost undoubtedly contributing to skills shortages in the national health service.

I also share the concerns expressed about the complexity of the entitlements and the fact that many people simply do not understand how they work and, as a result, may not end up claiming them. Of course, it is also a worry that many childcare and early years settings struggle to provide the entitlements with the funding they receive. I also want to emphasise the importance of investing in our early years educators to ensure that we

[Theresa Villiers]

have the workforce with the skills needed to do this crucial job to the best of their abilities and in a high-quality way.

The OECD has concluded that UK parents face high childcare costs compared with other countries. The IFS has reached the same conclusion. The CBI, in its Budget submission, highlights that the cost of childcare is worsening the cost of living situation and “dampening economic outlook”. As we have heard, a survey for Mumsnet and Pregnant Then Screwed found that many parents of young children are spending as much, or more, on childcare than on their rent or mortgage.

I feel strongly that addressing the affordability of childcare would have a positive effect on the labour market shortages that we face, and it would help us to address our problem with low productivity. I hope that the Chancellor has been listening to this afternoon’s excellent debate. When he kindly met MPs to discuss his forthcoming Budget, almost all of us in the group I took part in raised this issue of childcare affordability. We need to do more on this, and I hope that we will see that reflected in the Budget.

Of course, we also need to ensure that we have the necessary childcare providers, and I understand the concerns about the closure of some settings. Government figures indicate that the number of places has remained broadly constant since 2015, but we must ensure that settings are properly funded to deliver the entitlements that they asked to provide. We need to look at ratios and consider whether more regulatory flexibility can help with the affordability conundrum.

Lastly, in this debate we must not forget out-of-hours care and activities. Wraparound care to help working parents is crucial. It is part of the childcare and education support that we need to provide as a country. It does not necessarily get the same amount of attention, but for many parents it is crucial to enabling them to work and earn the money they need to support their families.

Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for calling me to speak in what has been an excellent debate. We are as one across the Chamber in emphasising how important it is that we grow our economy so that we have more to invest in our childcare and early years education systems.

3.28 pm

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): It is an honour to be speaking in this debate on International Women’s Day. I cannot think of a place I would rather be, and I cannot think of an issue I would rather be speaking on. I thank the hon. Member for Worcester (Mr Walker) for calling for this debate and for his earlier speech. Like other Members, I agreed with much of it. I am glad that the Education Committee is holding an inquiry into early years, and I look forward to the results.

As a mother of four, I know at first hand the stress and anxiety that children’s early years cause parents—as well as all the joy that comes with those years. That stress is mostly caused by the cost of childcare. As has been mentioned by many Members in this debate, flexibility of options for childcare and early years education is vital. During the years of caring for young children, I was helped in being able to go to work, or to stay at home, by childminders, my sister-in-law, state-maintained

nurseries, an au pair at different times, staying at home sometimes, going part-time, being a member of a job share at other times and then being full-time. There were different options that I needed throughout that time. On this International Women’s Day, I wish to thank the early years educators, the childminders, those who work in our children’s centres and family hubs, the au pairs, the nannies, the grandparents, the relatives and the mothers who enable us to live our best lives.

The reality is that soaring childcare costs are compounding the cost of living crisis, which is putting increased pressure on families and pricing others out of parenting—literally stopping many couples from becoming parents. This affects women the most. Women are paying the price of the failure of our current system in reduced earnings, in cutting back on careers, and, in the long term, in their pensions.

Last Saturday, when I was out knocking on doors in my constituency, I met a man who said to me, “I am glad you are here,”—that is always a very reassuring thing to hear. “I have just heard that I am about to become a dad,” he said. “Congratulations,” I replied. “That is fantastic news.” But he went on to say, “Unfortunately, that means that I will have to move out of Putney.” That really broke my heart. He was so concerned about childcare costs which, combined with the very high house prices and housing costs in south-west London, would force him to move out of our community. He was also really worried about ever having another child. These costs are really affecting people’s choices.

One constituent wrote to me a couple of weeks ago. She said:

“My child attends a nursery in Wandsworth on a full-time basis. This is the cheapest nursery that we could find within a 30-minute walk of our home. My husband and I are ambitious and we consider ourselves to have good jobs and earn good salaries. We would love to grow our family. However, due to the cost of childcare, and despite being careful with our money over the years and earning above-average salaries, we literally can’t afford it.”

She went on to outline why:

“Five days a week of childcare costs us £2,174 per month. This is the cheapest nursery that we could find within a 30-minute walk of our house. This comes to more than £26,000 per year, which we pay from our after-tax salaries. This works out to about the same amount as our mortgage. We do not have parents or family who live nearby and can offer us help with childcare, meaning that we are left with the following options. Number one, I quit my job and look after both kids at home. That would be very bad for my career, our finances, and my mental well-being. Number two, we move to another country. Number three, we do not have a second child.”

How has it come to this? No mother, no parent, should have to face such a heart-breaking and disempowering set of choices, but when we look back at the Conservative Government’s record, it is easy to see how that has happened. Missing from this debate so far have been the areas that could have made things so different. Different choices over the past 13 years could have made all the difference. Spending on early education and childcare is less than 0.1% of GDP, which is the second lowest investment in OECD countries. More than 5,000 childcare providers closed between August 2021 and 2022—something that many Members said would happen at the beginning of covid if urgent steps were not taken on funding for those childcare providers. The cost of a full-time nursery place for a child under

two has risen by about £1,500 over the past five years. Knowingly underfunding the 15 and 30 hours childcare entitlements by more than £2 an hour has forced providers to cross-subsidise, leading to astronomical costs being passed on to parents.

The cost of after-school clubs has risen by £800 a year since 2010, with parents in England paying out an average cost of £2,537 for after-school clubs last year, which is an eye-watering amount, or choosing not to provide extra support for their children in the form of music education, sports and all of those other additional, but essential, parts of a child's education. More than half of parents who use either formal or informal childcare are saying that they have had to reduce the number of hours they work due to childcare costs or availability: 76% of mothers who pay for childcare say that it no longer makes financial sense for them to work—just like my constituents—and one in four parents who use formal childcare say that the cost is now more than three quarters of their take-home pay. An estimated 1.7 million were women prevented from taking on more hours of paid work due to childcare issues, resulting in up to £28.2 billion of economic output being lost every year. The Government have now announced that they have dropped their plans to expand childcare support. I hope to hear the opposite from the Minister when she rises to answer this debate.

As the Women's Budget Group has said, the early education and childcare system in England is not working for children, for parents, for childcare workers, for childcare educators or for the wider economy. It is letting down children at a crucial stage of their development, and it is letting down women and parents. The absence of flexible, affordable and quality early education and childcare is a huge barrier to positive child outcomes, to tackling inequality, to increasing women's employment and to social mobility. The lack of access to high-quality early years education can leave disadvantaged children behind before they have even started school, and require expensive interventions in the future. Every contributor to this debate has underlined how investment in early years and childcare provides very high value for money. It is essential for economic growth and for tackling the unemployment and underemployment issues that face our country at the moment.

Research from the Women's Budget Group has found that around two-fifths of the total attainment gap between 16-year-olds from the most deprived fifth of families and those from the least deprived fifth of families is already present at the age of five. It is essential that we invest in our early years for the long-term, so that there are opportunities for our young people to thrive.

Cuts in childcare and early years funding for children centres in Wandsworth, compounded by the impact of covid, have had a real impact on children starting school. I have heard that from all of the headteachers of primary schools in my area. I thought that the impact of covid would be felt most by those in, say, year six of primary school going on to secondary school, but schools are reporting that the impact is being felt in nursery school and year one. What has been hit has been the readiness for school. Children are starting school with a significant communication delay and behavioural issues. That is also being felt throughout the school as well. Even more early years support is needed to catch up from covid. We need a modern childcare system from the end of parental leave to the end of primary school.

Other countries have been able to tackle these problems, supporting parents to work and children to thrive, and showing us that it does not need to be this way here. Labour is doing its homework, looking across the world, from Estonia to Australia to Ireland, so that we can learn from the best, building a system that works for families, not constrained by the Conservatives' so-called free hours approach. We are the party that revolutionised early years with Sure Start centres. I spent many years working in a community centre overlooking a closed Sure Start centre, and it broke my heart every day. I am glad to see family hopes returning, but I am heartbroken about the 13 missing years in which we could have been building on Labour's excellent legacy of Sure Start centres, which really were proven to work.

As the first step along the road back to good early years support and childcare support across the years of primary school, Labour will deliver breakfast clubs in every primary school in England, as well as plans to allow councils to open more maintained nurseries. I am glad that state-maintained nurseries have already been raised in this debate; I have an excellent one in my borough of Wandsworth—Eastwood Nursery School—and I have campaigned with others, including the late and much-missed Jack Dromey, for our state-maintained nurseries.

In 2010, there were 428 state-maintained nurseries, and really we should have been increasing that number, but now there are only 389 left in the UK. They are a real jewel in our early years provision, providing not only excellent standards of early years education and special educational needs provision, but training for all other nurseries in the area. However, the headteacher at Eastwood Nursery School has said:

"The quality of what we can offer is in real jeopardy if our funding is reduced. We are fearful that the much-needed service we provide to the children of a very deprived community is at great risk if we do not have the secure funding to continue our work."

That multi-year funding is essential for those state-maintained nurseries. She also said:

"Nurseries will simply not be able to continue at the current rates. Closures of early-years settings across the country will deepen both financial and educational inequalities, while slowing the recovery from the pandemic."

I hope to hear from the Minister what specific additional support will be given to state maintained nurseries.

I will end by echoing the Early Years Alliance in its summary of the current situation of childcare and early years:

"The sector has reached breaking point. It is vital, therefore the government commits to adequate long-term funding for the early years in this month's Spring Budget. Anything less will not only seal the fate of the sector, but will also make it even more challenging for families to access the high-quality and affordable care and education they need."

3.41 pm

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson); having heard about her experience with four children, I take my hat off to her. I did do a little bit of preparation for this speech today as I was haring down the road, late for my daughter's nursery. In proper slummy mummy style, I saw it was snowing and raining, so I wrapped her in a carrier bag, gave her a broken umbrella and started running—and we were still late. At one point I looked at

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her and thought, “God, you’ve got gunk in your eyes, they’re going to turn me away at the door and I’ve got a Select Committee,” but it turned out to be porridge from her sister—God knows how it got in her eye.

I tell that story to make people laugh, but also because the chaos of little children and children as they are getting into school is real life. It is reality and, no matter where we come from, what our education is or what our job is, it is really hard graft. Many families are pulling in grandparents, brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, using child nurseries, childminders, nannies and au pairs—it is a real patchwork. We should be open to many different options to support families in all their weird and wonderful different set-ups.

Everyone knows I am a proper pest on childcare. I started campaigning on this issue way before I had my own children, because I saw clearly that it was very serious. It is not just a women’s issue, much as I would love to be able to say it is on International Women’s Day; it is an economic issue, a health issue and a mental health issue. It affects businesses, particularly the ability to recruit, because while we have a high participation of females in the workforce in this country, they are not working at full tilt in many respects—many because of childcare and many because of the cost of childcare.

One little thing that is not talked about very often is that the transition to parenthood for couples—married, not married or whatever—is one of the hardest times of anybody’s life. If there are additional childcare stresses, chaos, nonsense and costs, we could see parents breaking up because of all that pressure, and we know the impact of family breakdowns on society, on the country and particularly on children. That needs to change, and it is really important that we are focusing on it.

I am a huge fan of my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker)—I hang on his coat-tails and on his every word on this subject. I am grateful that his Select Committee is producing a report, because I think the Walker reforms, as they come forward, will be quite pivotal in what the Government may do.

On a political point, I get a bit fed up with the Opposition talking about under-investment and saying that everything is absolutely dire. Let us look at the Labour party’s record in government—I know that that was a long time ago, but it is not our fault that it has not won any elections—when investment in childcare and early years was about a third of what it is now. We are spending £5 billion to £6 billion of taxpayers’ money on childcare support. I am one of the biggest champions for change, but it is wrong to say that this Conservative Government have not invested in childcare; it is right to say that we should use that money a little differently and consider the schemes.

We have eight schemes at the moment. We know that they have various degrees of success and that there are bureaucratic nightmares in some respects, so there are definitely changes to be made, but I want to get to the point where we have more parental choice, absolute stellar quality across the sector, and a sector that is loved and respected for its experts. Regardless of how they work in the early years workforce, they are experts and we charge them with looking after the most precious things in our lives, so I want the childcare and early years sectors to be loved and put on a pedestal, exactly

as we do with teachers. At the moment, that is not the case, and that is part and parcel of why attention and funding do not go to that area.

I have not just been carping and sniping from the sidelines. I have put some effort in and worked with those at the fantastic think-tank Onward, who are the most brilliant super-brains. We came up with the “First Steps: Fixing Childcare” report. I will run through its six headline recommendations.

We want to get to a point where we are empowering parents through a new system of childcare credits. That deals very much with choice and ensuring that any state support can be used in a more bespoke way. At the moment, some state subsidies cannot be used for a childminder who is not Ofsted-registered, for example. That is wrong. We need to ensure that if parents are comfortable with quality and safety, and safety standards are met, they can use state support in any way that they want.

We would like to investigate the front-loading of child benefit. Our understanding is that the first 1,001 days are the most important in a child’s life, and all the evidence is there—it is 40 years old—so let us look at some different models. They might not work, but I think that it is important that we model that because there may be some unintended consequences. Disadvantaged families have told me that they would be worried about that change. We would have to model that, but I think it is worth having a think through whether child benefit could be changed.

I would like to see a reform of parental leave by abolishing separate maternity and parental leave in favour of a single parental leave scheme. Parents would have a shared entitlement of about 12 months. Again, we can look at the research and consider the unintended consequences, but that is something that we could get to.

We could expand family hubs. As we heard, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom) has done an amazing amount of work on that. Family hubs are not just like Sure Start centres. They deal with the period before birth, when women are pregnant, all the way through to late teens and into adulthood, and beyond for children with special educational needs and disabilities. My nephew has Down’s syndrome, and he will have support until he is 25. The family hub will be the perfect place. That is quite different from the previous offer from previous Governments.

I have great fondness for the Sure Start centres, but I think that it is absolutely wrong to say that every single one of them was performing brilliantly. Having spoken to people in Sure Start centres and thought about this as a councillor, I know that a lot of the centres were not doing outreach, so the same parents came around and around from the very early years. Let us be honest about and learn from the challenges, and make changes so that family hubs work well. Someone told me recently that there were more Sure Start centres than McDonald’s in the country. I have not checked that, but there are a lot of centres, and we should be able to champion them and keep them there if that is what the local area wants, but we should also consider family hubs.

I want to see some prioritisation of childminders and childminding agencies—I could talk about this for a very long time. At the moment, we have lost about 50% of our childminders through a lot of heavy-handed

regulation, not necessarily from our Government but over a long period. They are often women who have a lot to add to the workforce as well as providing childminding services. We should be able to stimulate the childminder market, particularly through childminding agencies. As other hon. Members have mentioned, there is an inequity in the fact that private childcare settings have to pay business rates, but state settings do not. That inequity needs to be ironed out and, ideally, knocked out.

Again, I think we should look at the training and education of the early years workforce, because they are absolutely wonderful people. As a lawyer, I had to do continuing professional development. We want to make sure that that is baked into the system, and that the early years workforce are respected for that CPD if they are doing it.

Mr Robin Walker: I realise that I have banged on a lot in this debate, but on my hon. Friend's point about training and CPD, one of the really good things we were able to do during my time at the DFE was invest in national professional qualifications for the teaching workforce. There are NPQs for the early years workforce, but the challenge is that those qualifications are focused on those parts of the workforce who work in schools. Would it not be great if, as part of the investment in this area, the Government were able to widen the reach of those NPQs to people who work in the private and voluntary sector within the early years workforce?

Siobhan Baillie: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. We need to be able to focus on training and look at all the options, because the workforce are really keen on CPD. It is often quite a vocational profession: people grow up wanting to be childminders, often because they love kids. I mean, I come to this place for a rest—I could not do it. I have massive respect for that workforce, because I could not do what they do. Those people are in the job for a really good reason, but they often fall out of it because the pay is really low and there is not that ongoing professionalisation and earning of qualifications, or the building up of skills.

I am grateful to the DWP Select Committee, particularly the right hon. Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms), because we have carried out a full investigation of the childcare element of universal credit. That has been really helpful, because we have discovered through evidence that the up-front payments are causing huge problems for parents on universal credit. Basically, what is happening is that every new term, parents are begging and borrowing to pay for that term's childcare, and then they get 85% of that money back through universal credit. That is a really good offer, but families are getting into debt to make those up-front payments—not just once, but every single term—and then the money comes back through universal credit in dribs and drabs. It does not come back with a label saying, "This is for you to repay your childcare bill."

That approach is causing real trouble, and as we have heard from other hon. Members, the cap has not been uprated. It is a really good offer from the Government and the DWP under universal credit, but only 13% of families are taking it up because it is a complete mess. I appreciate that it is not the responsibility of the Minister's Department, but the fact that universal credit childcare claimants are not using this system, or they are using it and the money is paid all over the place, is having an

impact on the childcare sector, which is directly under the Minister's control. Again, I am really grateful to the whole of the DWP Committee for looking at that issue.

As we can see, this is not all about money: some of it is about regulation, safety and quality. Parental choice is high up there, but there are things we can do that are—to use an awful phrase—low-hanging fruit. I urge the Government to get things done. I have been putting a lot of pressure on the DFE, the DWP, No. 10 and the Treasury, particularly ahead of next week's fiscal event, and I am also grateful to all the national newspapers that keep covering this area; *The Sun*, in particular, is very interested in the universal credit childcare issue. The support that it as well as the whole childcare sector in my constituency of Stroud has provided has been incredible. As all Opposition Members know—as the whole House knows—this issue is coming up on doorsteps. It is something that needs to be addressed, so the fact that we are looking very closely at funding is important.

I have had to be really hard-headed about this issue, trying to find solutions. I would absolutely love to do what some parties are doing: go around saying that we can provide universally free childcare from nine months to 11 years. I would love to be able to make that offer and say that that is going to happen very quickly, because parents are obviously very desperate at the moment to see change, but I do not think that would be the right thing to do. The hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) and I had an exchange on this topic before, when I asked how much that policy is likely to cost. I know that the Labour party has not costed it yet, because it is working on other policies.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Member for giving way, because she mentioned the exchange we had recently in Westminster Hall. Can I be clear that it is not currently a Labour party costed pledge to provide universal childcare in that way? We believe there is a need for radical reform of the system, and we are working towards those proposals, and we will put forward our fully costed proposals to the country in due course.

Siobhan Baillie: I am grateful for that clarification, because the perception is, in all the trails and all the newspaper articles—a lot of people just see headlines and social media clips, or people standing up doing very short things—that universal free childcare is coming from the other side.

Helen Hayes: I would be grateful if the hon. Member could help not to reinforce inaccurate perceptions in everything she says in this House and, indeed, in Westminster Hall.

Siobhan Baillie: I would absolutely love to sit down with the hon. Member on the Front Bench and go through some of the newspaper articles I have seen coming from the Opposition, because ultimately, we have to be careful with parents. I do not want parents to be thinking, "Very soon, I will get free childcare, so I am not going to go back to work at the moment. I am going to wait for these big bang changes", because ultimately it is very unlikely that universally free childcare from nine months to 11, or whatever is being trailed, will be fundamentally affordable to this country. It would not

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be sustainable and it would be incredibly difficult for the childcare sector to manage, particularly at the moment. I know I am possibly going to make myself unpopular in some quarters, and I am perhaps not giving parents exactly what they want, but it is important that at this stage—for the next week, I hope that this is what the Chancellor and the Treasury are talking about—we are making sure that we are funding and underpinning the childcare sector.

I give credit to the Women's Budget Group—I think a number of Opposition Members have mentioned this—which has created a coalition of early education and childcare. The coalition has more than 30 bodies, including the Federation of Small Businesses, the CBI, Oxfam, Save the Children, Citizens Advice, the Early Years Alliance, the Fatherhood Institute and the Fawcett Society—loads of people that we have great respect for. The coalition's ask is twofold at this stage. The first is for an increase to the baseline hourly rate of funding to reflect the true cost of provision. That is the much-feted free hours. They are not free—the taxpayer pays—and the childcare sector is clear that those hours have been underfunded. The Minister and I have had many conversations about this. I would like to see those hours brought up to scratch to ensure we have a motoring childcare sector alongside the stimulation of other things, such as childminders. The second thing that this learned coalition is asking for is reform of the universal credit childcare support to help parents return to work, which I have already mentioned.

The final point I would like to make—I realise I have been going on, but I am so passionate about this, and I am grateful for everyone's involvement—is that I have met two childminder agencies called Koru Kids and Tiney. They are desperate to provide more childminders and people who can support families. Koru Kids told me that it puts adverts out for childminders and things called “home child carers”, who are effectively part-time nannies who can go into someone's house. People can take their kids to childminders, but these people can go into people's houses so that people can work shifts. They can do wraparound care and be flexible. It put out an advert to see how many people would like to apply and it got 75,000 applicants, the majority of whom were women. When it went through the analysis, a huge section were over-50s women or women who were not applying for other jobs. We are thinking about the economically inactive—the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and the Chancellor of the Exchequer are looking at that—and this is a workforce we could stimulate to get people into jobs, playing a massively important part in our economy. These people have been overlooked.

My final point is on ratios. I am calling for the Government not to make changes to childcare ratios at this stage. It is important that they are investigated. It was never going to be suggested that there would be a change to safety. The Government are looking at the Scottish model, and I do not think anyone is suggesting there are unsafe settings up there. The research I have done with Onward demonstrates to me that the sector is not in a position to take a change to ratios. The sector is also telling us that it would not pass any changes on. As far as I can see, there is no evidence that changing the

ratios would change the cost for parents, which is obviously a big focus. We have to be honest about that. If we changed the ratios, the political noise would also be so great that all the other good things that I hope we are going to do would be drowned out.

I thank everybody who is involved. I have had an exchange with the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood, but I hope she knows how much we can all do in this area. It is important to be honest and realistic with parents, the sector and the country.

4 pm

Jon Trickett (Hemsworth) (Lab): It has been an interesting debate. We have heard a lot about the experience of mothers in the House. On International Women's Day, it is right to celebrate the contribution and role of mothers and women generally.

We have heard some personal and interesting birthing stories. I have three children and eight grandchildren; the oldest grandchildren are probably ready to have children themselves, but I hope they will not just yet. With our first child, I vividly recall—I guess we all do—the 6 o'clock news was on and my wife said, “I need to get to the hospital. The child's on its way faster than we thought.” When I got to the hospital, they said, “Well, thank you very much. You can go home now and we'll see you tomorrow,” which is how fathers were treated at the time. By 8 o'clock, when I was back at our house, my daughter had been born, so it was not a good experience for me as a father.

With all my children and grandchildren, I was struck by the pace at which I could see the human brain of that infant or young person developing. We now know quite a lot about that from science, as other hon. Members have mentioned. In the early years of a human being's life, the brain will create 1 million new neural connections every second—let us think about that. That is extraordinary. By the time we are about five years old, there are about 1,000 billion neural connections in the human brain, which is staggering. Those figures show how important the early years are for our intellectual, social and physical development.

In this interesting debate, there has been consensus among hon. Members on both sides of the House about the emphasis that should be put on the early years for the reasons that I have just given. It is self-evident, but science is also telling us a lot about the way in which our brains develop as human beings, although there is more to do.

I will break that consensus, however, because it has been fascinating to hear Government Members say, “We need more money,” but not to face the truth, which is that the austerity programme of Conservative Governments has had a dreadful impact on early years provision. Some 1,300 Sure Start centres have closed since 2010. The hon. Member for Stroud (Siobhan Baillie) said that a lot of them are still open, but 85% of them have been closed on the watch of Conservative Governments. On top of that, 4,500 facilities for young children and the early years closed in a single year, which is staggering.

It is clear and widely accepted that the funding per child is £2 an hour less than is needed. The IFS—hardly a Labour party think-tank—has said that the Government are simply failing to provide the funds required for proper childcare in the early years. It estimates that the

total funding for the free entitlement will be 8% lower in real terms in 2024-25. Those cuts are having an impact on human lives throughout the country today, especially in areas such as mine that suffer from major deprivation, as I will illustrate. It is hard to think about the Government's fiscal strategy, particularly as it impacts on the early years, and not come to the conclusion that what they have done has been tantamount to a form of institutionalised child neglect. It is impossible to avoid that conclusion, and I say that having thought carefully before using those words.

In my constituency, child poverty has risen by 50% since 2015. There are 4,272 children in poverty. It is a very poor area. In the real world that we live in—let us be honest across this House—childcare is now an essential if we are going to meet the needs of the contemporary world, the world of work, and the world of women and parents more generally. Members have talked about the role of mothers and fathers, grandparents, and so on and so forth, and they obviously play a key role—the most important role in the development of a child—but childcare is now a social and economic necessity, and from the figures I have just given about the changes in the architecture of a young person's brain, it is clearly essential that work is done on this.

Let me give Members one more figure about my own constituency. I have given the figures on the level of poverty, but when we look at the level of early years attainment in my constituency, we are in the lowest 20% of all constituencies in the country. That feeds right through the whole of life and through the structure, social structures and stratification of constituencies such as mine. It is the same for educational attainment when it comes, for example, to national vocational qualification level 4 in my constituency. The fact is that we are in the lowest 20% for early years and, given what I have just said, Members would expect that to feed through to attainment. For NVQ level 4, which is first-year degree level, we are at 22% in my constituency. The average for the country is twice as high at 40%.

Members can therefore see what happens to social mobility, because the ability of a child to take advantage of all that society is meant to offer them depends on poorer people in deprived communities being able to rise up the so-called social ladder. I have some reservations about that expression, but let us use it for the moment. Of the 533 seats in England, my constituency is the 529th least mobile. Therefore, urgent social action needs to take place to provide social mobility to the children being born today in local hospitals in such areas up and down the country. Doing so absolutely depends on us getting this issue of early years childcare and education—I insist on using that word—correct, and we have not got it correct.

Let me turn to the experience of Emma Percy, a constituent of mine who eight years ago asked me to open a centre she called Little Gruffalos. I will spell that for the *Hansard* writers in a minute or two. This is an amazing initiative taken by local people, and she understood exactly that she was directing her work at the most disadvantaged children from year 2 up in one of the communities that I represent, and trying to give them a better start. She does see it as the provision of education, as well as of care and love, and all the other things we want our young children to have.

But here is the problem: almost every single family who use that centre are already in receipt of all the assistance they can get. We heard my hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) mention cross-subsidy. What happens is that wealthier parents, who are not in receipt of some of the assistance that the state offers, are charged more, which then cross-subsidises the children who come from deprived homes, because of the failure of the funding formula to provide properly for children coming from needy families. However, there is nobody in this institution in Hemsworth, Little Gruffalos, who is not in receipt of benefits, and there is therefore no possibility of cross-subsidy. As a consequence, it is on the edge of closing.

I opened Little Gruffalos eight years ago, and I was proud to do so. It is a great institution, and the people working there care, and obviously the mothers and fathers do, too. It is on the brink of closure, due to escalating food prices, heating costs, building costs and all the other things, as well as the cost of paying the staff, to the extent that it is now unable to pay some of the staff. Emma Percy told my office that she has not been able to take an income, but she is so committed that she is trying to continue to provide care. It is totally unacceptable that Government Members simply—I don't want to say this, but I will—whinge on about the need for more early years childcare, but do not will the means, which would be to provide proper finance and to abandon the whole process of austerity that has had such an impact on so many children across our country and in the area that I am proud to represent.

We claim to be a society that is based on the ability of every person to fulfil their capacity. We have seen how important development is in the early years—I have described it; scientists are still working on it, but we already know quite a lot. The country has to get a grip on early years, and that means putting money in. The hon. Member for Stroud is of course right to say that we might look again at how we spend that money, but to imagine that the aggregate sum of money that the Government are providing is satisfactory—those who want to make that argument are living in a fool's paradise. We need to do something very radical indeed.

Why should it be that a child born in a hospital in my constituency today, in one of the poorer communities, will probably die younger than people elsewhere in the country from more prosperous areas, and that during their time they will have less of a chance to achieve their full capacity in life? It is simply immoral, it is wrong, and the Government need to get a grip on it in the Budget next week.

4.11 pm

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): This has been a rich debate, and while I agree with much that has been said, it is important to focus on some things relating to the distribution of funding within the estimates that have not been covered in great detail.

As a father of two very young children and someone who spent a long time as a councillor responsible for education and children's services in a London local authority, and having been present at the inception of the Sure Start programme through to its delivery, with the expectations that were imposed on us as a local authority, and even at the origins of the dedicated

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schools grants, I find it interesting that many of the trends that people are debating today have been present for a long time in our debates about the way we run our early years.

Over that period, there has been a great deal of progress. The Blair Labour Government were particularly focused on getting more women into work, and that was the focus of what they drove local authorities to do. It is good that over time we have had a switch to a broader appreciation of the benefits to the child and the baby that derive from high-quality early education and care provided in formal and Ofsted-regulated settings. In turn, that has led to greater research and evidence of outcomes. We have been able to focus that investment in a way that is not only more supportive of bringing parents into work, important as that is for a child's outcomes, but that focuses on the things that help a child to prepare for their journey through school, to the extent that some research can clearly pinpoint from a child's attainment at the earliest foundation stage, how they will do when they come to key stage 5.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech, and I agree with him entirely about the progress that has been made in this area by successive Governments. Indeed, I have outstanding examples of early care in my constituency, such as ABC Rainbow Nursery, Home From Home Nursery, and Small Friends Day Nursery, to name but a few. Now the evidence is clear—we heard evidence today from the Nobel laureate James Heckman—that every pound invested in early years education delivers a return on that investment of £13 in better grades, better jobs and better mental health. Does my hon. Friend agree that, when we have such an obvious, clear open goal and an opportunity to invest in this country's future, it is a little concerning to see in today's estimates that early years funding will increase by only £52 million, which is only 1.4%, and that only £35 million is going into early years schools, which is just 1%? If we are looking at this with a view to investing in our country's future, we would want that 1.4% to go up as soon as possible, and we hope the Chancellor will be listening to these submissions.

David Simmonds: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct to highlight the point about return on investment. As a Conservative politician, I always welcome it when I hear Ministers thinking not just about how much a particular course of action will cost the taxpayer, but about what the return is. As we know, one challenge in education—we see it throughout the departmental estimates and in local authority spending returns—is that how we count something is enormously significant in interpreting what it means. We have seen record spending in schools; we have also seen record numbers of children in schools. There are those who say that the issue is per capita spending; others will say that in aggregate the schools budget is larger than it has ever been. Of course, both arguments can be true at the same time. I am sure my hon. Friend the Minister will address the point about return on investment in her response, in the context of the overall school budget and the spend per child.

Let me turn to the method of distribution and how significant it is for the outcomes we want to see. The Department for Education sets out what its spending

expectations are in its estimate and then allocates budgets to local authorities. The cash arrives somewhat later in the year, following counts of the number of children in a given area, which usually take place around autumn. Each local authority is then required, through its school forum, to hold a consultation with all those who have a stake in the distribution of that funding at a local level. The early years block forms part of a decision-making process where it is not just early years practitioners who are sat at the table, but the headteachers of big secondary schools, whose budgets tend to dominate the discussion, alongside headteachers of primary schools and representatives of the special educational needs system. That funding, which is ring-fenced within the local authority, is paid in due course to the providers, based on the returns of how many children are there.

It is interesting to note from the Department's published figures that, in the most recent year for which numbers were available, there was a £55 million underspend nationally in the early years block. The money we allocate to early years is therefore effectively going unspent and being held within the dedicated schools grant at the local level. That might be partly to do with the fact that, because of parental concerns following the covid pandemic, a number of children who would have been expected to be in nursery had not yet started. That would account for it; and yet we see a consistent pattern, certainly since the creation of the dedicated schools grant, of high pressure on special educational needs and disability in particular, pretty much consistent spend of the schools block, exactly as we would expect, and the development of underspends in early years.

When we look at the research into the impact of how we spend that funding, it is worth looking at the flexibilities that we can create in the DSG element of early years funding, not least because, as a number of Members have alluded to, we have lost a significant number of childminders from the early years market, and there are new types of providers that are interested in entering the market, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Siobhan Baillie) described. I would argue that the fact that a local authority can only pay that money at a given rate, to a given provider and through a strictly determined DFE process means that it is not available to support the development of, for example, new entrants to the market and new types of providers that might like to set up. While we would clearly wish those new providers to fall within Ofsted's remit, in order to guarantee quality, there is an opportunity to use those existing resources more flexibly, perhaps to develop the market a little further.

At the same time, it is welcome that it is not just DFE funding that finds its way to those providers. There is also the voucher scheme and tax-free childcare, on which I declare an interest as I am personally a beneficiary. Although the use of National Savings and Investments as the payment provider means it seems to take quite a lot longer for the many transfers to take place than would be the case with most other financial institutions, it works very effectively as a substantial subsidy towards the cost of childcare.

For children with special educational needs, there are additional forms of funding. There is the early years pupil premium. To the point my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) made so powerfully, in my time as a cabinet member for

education, I saw the benefits to a whole variety of different outcomes from maintained nursery schools. The fact that there is within the DFE system the supplementary funding for maintained nursery schools is most welcome. In children's centres and early years settings, it can be transformational for a child who may have quite profound disabilities to be able to access good-quality early education at the same time as other children. The disability access fund helps support children to access those settings, with additional money to provide equipment. I saw in my own children's nursery settings medical equipment and additional technical equipment brought in to ensure that that child could have an equal place alongside their peers at the start of their life. That is incredibly important. I absolutely commend the Government for progressing that and ensuring it is seen by parents as a way of getting their child an equal start in life with their peers.

I want to turn to a point, raised previously by my hon. Friend the Minister and a number of other colleagues, relating to an area where we have an opportunity to develop the early years market: schools as providers of early years services. A very large proportion of primary schools have school nurseries that take children earlier than the statutory school age. However, the vast majority of those schools will only offer parents a very limited number of hours, typically from 8.30 am to 11.30 am, and then maybe from midday to 3 pm or 3.30 pm. For most working parents, that will never be sufficient to make it a viable option. In practice, it means that they have to find all their childcare in the private sector, even though there is a state-funded school with top-quality facilities that their child is quite likely to start when they reach statutory school age, which is very close to their home. In practice, it is only parents who are not working, or children who are in a situation where perhaps a family member or a childminder can look after them full time, who are able to access those services.

I urge the Government to think about a more directional approach with schools. In school settings where a breakfast club and an afterschool club are already provided on site for children of statutory school age—so the school is open, staffed and operating during those periods—it is not acceptable to say that its early years facilities are only available for such limited periods. The taxpayer is putting the money in to ensure that these are good-quality settings with fully trained staff. We need to get those schools to the point where they are playing a much more significant part in the provision of early education and childcare. That would help to improve supply, potentially raise quality and reduce the cost to parents.

We are focusing on childcare and early years, but we must not forget that many parents will go through a significant period of their lives with one child who is pre-statutory school age and another child who is of statutory school age. In larger families, there might be quite a number of children. Constituents have told me about the challenges in managing a situation where there is a four-year-old through to a 15-year-old: everything from finding a family car with enough child-safe car seats to transport them around the place, through to trying to manage a normal working life. Schools already provide some of that patchwork, so expanding their offer, in particular ensuring that childcare around school-age children is of a high standard, high quality and as affordable as possible, needs to be a priority.

The Department has not always had the rosiest view of the capacity of local authorities, but it is my experience that the good ones, of which there are examples in every part of the country, have shown that when they have the flexibility they are very good at innovating and finding new ways of delivering these kinds of services. Where there is a new provider with a new model in the local area, they can use the resources available to them flexibly to enable that to go to scale and serve a much larger population of parents.

I would like to spend a moment on how we spend the money in this budget. Lots of Members have given good examples of the transformational effect of particular services. It remains an issue for us as a country—and for the international community—that the impact of interventions in early childhood and childhood more generally are not well-researched. Therefore, the decision making around that is not always very well-evidenced.

My experience of Sure Start is that when the programme was first implemented, it was very focused on capital expenditure on buildings. In the local authority, the direction to me was that my priority was to get the buildings constructed and opened by the deadlines—that was what mattered more than anything else. At the same time, some of the research that emerged as those programmes were evaluated showed that the evidence was mixed. A lot of the evaluations were carried out on the basis of whether parents felt that they had enjoyed their involvement with the children's centre and whether they felt that it had been useful, rather than looking at the long-term metrics. Long-term metrics on obesity, for example, showed that they had had a positive impact. Other metrics showed that they had not. We cannot assume that because something was popular and well-liked, it was also effective at giving children the transformational opportunity intended.

In my experience, because Government deadlines for their opening had to be met, buildings were often provided on existing local authority-owned land adjacent to schools. The primary focus of the centres therefore became the school readiness of children who were going to attend a particular school, rather than the broader service of the community and the most vulnerable, which was the intention.

Helen Hayes *indicated dissent.*

David Simmonds: The hon. Member shakes her head; I appreciate that the Labour party and the previous Labour Government were enormously attached to that, but it is right that it has been subject to scrutiny. For something intended to be a flagship, it was clear that the Sure Start programme did not reach the parts that other programmes could not reach, which was the crucial and core purpose for which it was set up. That is backed up by research from the United States.

The right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom) referred to the Early Intervention Foundation. I urge the Government to make the best possible use of the now merged What Works centres, whose chief executive, Dr Jo Casebourne, was previously chief executive of the Early Intervention Foundation. The use of randomised controlled trials was strongly advocated at the outset of Sure Start, and was resisted by the then Government. There was a lot of debate about why that was, and certainly an active suspicion among researchers that the Government did not want

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any of that research to come back and point out that some interventions were not very effective and not a good use of taxpayer money.

An emerging substantial evidence base demonstrates that although some of the things that we spent money on in Sure Start did not achieve any useful purpose for the children who were supposed to be the beneficiaries, other programmes were effective. Commissioners, whether in the Department or in the local authority, need that information so that, given a choice to spend a given amount of taxpayer money, they can spend it on what will make the biggest possible difference in the life of a child. Evidence week is coming up in Parliament soon, and I hope that the Department and Ministers will have the opportunity to celebrate the use of evidence in the distribution of the funding that we are debating.

Let me give a good example. Several hon. Members have mentioned ratios, which Governments in the past have addressed. There is an enormous amount of guidance for local authorities and providers about how things are to be done, and it is a dull but worthwhile exercise to read the Department's guidance on calculating ratios. It makes it very clear that, depending on how we choose to calculate them, we can produce very different figures suggesting very different things about the ratio of children to staff at a given site.

A setting can arrive at a number by dividing the total number of staff, or the full-time equivalent, by the number of children on the roll. Ofsted would probably encourage it to think instead about how many appropriately qualified adults per child are in the room—a different figure. Both approaches are fine within the DFE guidance, however, so those who believe that changing the ratios can completely transform the early years landscape and resource spread are perhaps barking up the wrong tree. It may well be that adjusting the guidance would help to address the issue.

Kit Malthouse: To a certain extent I think my hon. Friend is right about ratios, but does he accept that they inject into the system an element of inflexibility and certainly an element of nervousness? As I understand it, most providers under-pitch on ratios for fear of accidentally being caught on the far side through illness, absence or whatever. The delineated hard lines may be subject to interpretation, but they nevertheless produce a rigidity that is not helpful for providers.

David Simmonds: My right hon. Friend is right to highlight that there will always be a degree of risk aversion. Frankly, as someone who entrusts his young children into the care of a nursery, I am quite keen for it to be reasonably risk-averse in its calculations. However, my right hon. Friend's point demonstrates that in debates such as these we need to scrutinise not only the estimates setting out the financial headlines, but the real-world as well as the theoretical impact of the underlying calculations. This is a debate not just about the headlines, such as teaching unions arguing for more resources in one respect while the Government argue for different resources, but about the way in which we count these things, which can have an enormous impact on whether we achieve the policies that we set out.

I commend the Government for the estimates. Estimates debates are always interesting and worth while, because they teach us a great deal about the mechanics of what is going on. The UK has a relatively high spend on education and is a good payer of teachers in comparison with most other European countries—I say that as a former chair of the European Federation of Education Employers as well as the teachers' employment body for the UK. This will always be a subject of ongoing debate, but it certainly seems to me that in agreeing today's estimates we are making a clear statement of our commitment to provide strong baseline funding for our education system, particularly the childcare and early years element.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): We now come to the wind-ups.

4.33 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Worcester (Mr Walker) for securing this important debate. I am grateful to every hon. Member who has spoken.

It is timely that this debate is being held on International Women's Day—a day to celebrate the progress that has been made towards women's equality, celebrate all those before us who have fought for it, and reflect on the work still to be done. This International Women's Day, we read new data from the British Chambers of Commerce showing that two thirds of women with childcare responsibilities believe that they are being held back at work as a result of soaring costs, while the gender pay gap is getting worse. That is the reality after 13 years of Conservative Government, and it should give cause for sober reflection on the Government Benches.

The Department for Education has a vital role to play in supporting children in their early years through childcare and children's social care and in supporting children with special educational needs and disabilities. As we have heard from many hon. Members this afternoon, however, all those services are stretched to breaking point, and the Government's model of funding is contributing to that.

We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi) about the appalling situation facing Georgie Porgies Pre-School, a nursery in her constituency. Like so many nurseries across the country, it is struggling to make ends meet and is at risk of closure.

The stories that we heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom) about the experience of parents in the earliest years after the birth of a baby certainly chimed with me. I will never forget the image of my husband on the day we returned home from hospital with our first baby, standing in the living room with the baby in one hand and a book about babies in the other, and struggling to work out exactly what we had embarked on in life. I thank my right hon. Friend for those somewhat stressful and traumatic memories. She also described the costs of failing to provide early help and support for the most vulnerable children and their families, and paid tribute to my constituency predecessor, Baroness Jowell. I join her in that tribute, and in remembering Tessa on International Women's Day.

My hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) supplied compelling evidence of the cost of living pressures on families resulting from the cost of childcare, and explained very clearly that the current situation is, whether we like it or not in this place, a consequence of political choices that have been made. My hon. Friend the Member for Hemsworth (Jon Trickett) highlighted the devastating impact of child poverty, increasing under this Government, on the most vulnerable children and their families.

The Government provide a subsidy for early years education and childcare, but the funding model is far too complex for parents, and it does not work for early years providers such as nurseries and childminders either. Families with children under 12 can gain access to support for childcare costs via tax-free childcare or universal credit, but both have very low levels of availability and take-up, and the two systems do not relate to each other. That creates particular problems for working parents on low incomes who want to increase their hours of work. Parents taking on too many additional hours run the risk of losing eligibility for the childcare costs component of universal credit, and having to apply to an entirely separate Government Department, His Majesty's Revenue and Customs, for tax-free childcare.

The Work and Pensions Committee recently published a report on universal credit and childcare costs. It drew attention to the very low level of awareness of the universal credit childcare element, which is taken up by just 13% of potentially eligible parents, and also highlighted a number of other barriers to access to childcare for parents on low incomes, including the very high costs of childcare even after subsidy, the lack of flexibility for parents with non-standard or fluctuating hours, and the requirement for up-front payment for childcare, sometimes up to a term ahead.

In addition to universal credit and tax-free childcare, the Government operate a system of so-called free hours for two-year-olds, and also for three and four-year-olds. The two-year-olds' free hours are focused on the families with the very lowest incomes, while the free hours for three and four-year-olds are available only to working families. There is a risk that some families accessing 15 hours a week of childcare for their two-year-old free of charge will find themselves without a place when the child reaches the age of three if they are not in work, which will make it even harder for them to find and sustain employment. It is an enormous problem that universal credit requires parents to arrange and pay for their childcare themselves and then reclaim reimbursement. In most cases, nurseries and childminders ask for fees in advance, and that can present a significant outlay for parents on very low incomes. Fluctuating hours at work, or fluctuating hours of childcare used, can then result in overpayments being recouped in arrears. This is an extremely difficult system for parents to manage, and it should therefore be no surprise that take-up is so low.

The Work and Pensions Committee emphasised the vital role that childcare plays in enabling parents to work, and the transformative impact that high-quality early years education can have on the lives of children and their families. The Committee concluded that the cost of childcare should never be a barrier to work, but we know that that is exactly what is currently happening. For the first time in decades, women are leaving the

workplace or reducing their hours because they cannot afford the costs of childcare. More than 50% of parents responding to a survey by Pregnant Then Screwed said that they had been forced to reduce their hours at work owing to childcare costs. This particularly affects women, with Office for National Statistics data suggesting that almost three in 10 currently economically inactive women have left work to care for family, including children, compared with just 6% of men. Grandparents too are leaving employment to look after their grandchildren so that their adult sons and daughters can go to work. In a recent survey, one in four grandparents reported retiring early and others across the country are reducing their hours at work.

I referred to the free hours for two-year-olds and three and four-year-olds as "so-called free hours", because of course they are not free for nurseries and childminders to deliver. The Government pay nurseries and childminders considerably less than it costs them to deliver those hours. As of 2021, the DFE paid just £4.89 per hour per child to providers, despite its own estimates suggesting that each place would cost £7.49 per hour to provide. That is a shortfall of £2.60 per child per hour, a gap that will only have grown as inflation has hit nurseries and other providers. The Government's funding model does not work for nurseries and childminders, who are closing their doors in their droves. According to the National Day Nurseries Association, 5,400 nurseries, childminders and other providers closed in the year to August 2022, and this is set to rise even further as support for energy bills is withdrawn at the end of this month.

The Government have effectively set up a cross-subsidy model for childcare, with the unsubsidised places for under-two-year-olds being used to cover the unfunded costs of providing free hours to two-year-olds and over. The consequence is eye-wateringly high costs for parents of the youngest children. Last week, I met a constituent who was about to return to employment after maternity leave for her second child. She told me that the cost of childcare for her three-year-old and her one-year-old will be £2,700 a month. There are very few jobs that pay so well that employees have such a large amount of extra disposable income each month just waiting to be spent on childcare. It is no wonder that more and more women are concluding that they simply cannot afford to work under this Conservative Government. And of course the costs of childcare do not end when children start school, yet the Government provide next to no support to parents who need wraparound childcare at the start and end of the school day.

There is broad consensus on the issue of childcare and the need for reform. The CBI, the British Chambers of Commerce, the TUC, parents and providers all agree that childcare in the UK is broken, and we cannot wait any longer to reform it. Families cannot wait, and our economy cannot wait. Labour understands the urgency, which is why we have announced that a Labour Government would introduce fully funded breakfast clubs for all primary age children as the first step on the road to a childcare system fit for the 21st century that works for families, providers and our economy, and a childcare system that needs to work from the end of parental leave until the end of primary school.

When it comes to the most vulnerable children, this Government's funding model does not work either. Labour established a network of Sure Start centres

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across the country, bringing together support for families with very young children and helping to build communities. The current Government decimated the funding for Sure Start, and since 2010, 1,300 centres have closed completely. Family hubs are a pale imitation in only a fraction of local authority areas, bringing services together under a brand but doing nothing to drive improvements in capacity or in quality. Support for children with special educational needs and disabilities is similarly stretched to breaking point. The Government's announcement this week will do nothing to end the battle for support that so many parents have to endure, with even the patchy measures that have been announced not due to be implemented for at least two years. Our children deserve the best that we can offer, not this mess of piecemeal, incoherent funding, and not services that are being stretched to the limit. Labour put children first when we were last in government, and we will do so again.

4.44 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Claire Coutinho): It is brilliant to be here on International Women's Day, and it was wonderful to see Madam Deputy Speaker back in the Chair, as she did much to ensure it is always debated in the Chamber.

This has been a great debate. I always like coming to childcare debates, as the quality of Members' contributions is always extremely high. I start by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker) for securing this debate and for giving a typically thoughtful speech. He is right about the importance of early years, about which he cares deeply. He talked about the amount that childcare entitlements have increased under successive Conservative Governments, and he gave a balanced speech on the challenges we face, the dividends from getting this right and the power of early identification, about which I am passionate. I commend his ongoing work as Chair of the Education Committee, and I look forward to his report.

I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom) for her focus and leadership on early years and best start for life. I remember working with her on the £500 million support package in 2019. Before this job, when I was writing a report on supporting parents, she was one of the most helpful, impressive and insightful people I spoke to. I am glad the House got to hear some of her insights today, as graphic as they might have been. There is more, if people would like to discuss it further.

My right hon. Friend is a brilliant champion for this area, particularly in her tremendous work on family hubs. I remember working on family hubs more than 10 years ago, when I was at the Centre for Social Justice, and she brought them to life. I am pleased that they will be in half of local authorities, providing excellent support on, for example, breastfeeding. When I talk to those in places such as A Better Start Southend, they tell me that the effect of breastfeeding support can be transformational in the number of people it can help. It is incredibly effective.

My right hon. Friend mentioned the importance of dads, and she also mentioned the importance of childminders and one-to-one care. My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Siobhan Baillie) is also passionate

about childminders. I have been to see an Ofsted inspection, and I can talk about the great outcomes that childminders achieve and the wonderful work they do.

The hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) talked about a variety of things, including funding for single parents. I was pleased to table a private Member's Bill on child maintenance, which my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud has brilliantly taken through the House. This is really important for single parents.

There is more we can do on the complexity of tax-free childcare, and we had an increase in tax-free childcare referrals following our campaign last year on childcare choices. The increases in recent times have been quite large, with a 116% increase in referrals, but there is more to be done.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) ably raised the plight of children who face troubling challenges in their early years. We spend £10.8 billion on children's services, and we have set out some transformational work, particularly on early help. I met Ruby, a social worker in Leeds, who is supporting a young lady through her pregnancy as she prepares for birth, and she told me how important that support will be to a successful start. My right hon. Friend has been a longstanding campaigner for maintained nursery schools, and we are investing £10 million in 2023-24. I pay huge tribute to her work in that area.

The hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) misrepresented the OECD statistics, but she talked about the importance of getting speech and language right in early years, and I absolutely agree. We are making sure that we have enough special educational needs co-ordinators in early years, and we are looking at particular pathways, on which we are working with the NHS, as part of our change programme for the special educational needs package for early language and support. We are also setting out best practice guidance on early language and support, which is crucial.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud has been a complete champ on childcare, families and relationships, not least by producing two children in her time in Parliament, which is mind-boggling. She is brilliant in her thoughtful campaigning on childminders, childminder agencies—she mentioned how good they are—training and apprenticeships, and so much else. She might like to know that I am meeting Koru Kids on Monday.

The hon. Member for Hemsworth (Jon Trickett) is the only man from any Opposition party to speak in this debate, for which I commend him. He might want to champion that childcare is not a women's issue.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds) mentioned the dedicated schools grant—I have looked into that, and I would be delighted to speak to him further—the disability access fund and the differences between local authorities. We know that, for example, some can take four to six weeks to get through their checks of a childminder whereas others can take six months; there are a variety out there, but some are doing really well and we need to look at how we spread that best practice.

I want to take this opportunity to put on record my thanks to all those who are working in education settings, providing ongoing support for children, young people and all learners. Some 96% of our providers on the

early years register are good or outstanding, which I believe is up from 74% in 2012. I am grateful today for the opportunity to discuss early years and childcare. Let me set out the overall funding picture, an issue that has been raised multiple times today because of the nature of the debate. For 2022-23, the Department for Education's resource budget is about £77 billion. The change since the beginning of the financial year relates primarily to accounting movements in the fair value of the student loan book, itself driven by changes in macroeconomic factors.

The evidence on early years and childcare has been mentioned today, and it is clear: high-quality early education supports children's development and prepares younger children for school. Access to high-quality childcare helps children to learn in their earliest years and supports a functioning economy by enabling parents to work. Our 15 hours' free early education entitlement for all three and four-year-olds has been supporting children's development and helping prepare them for school. We remain committed to the continuation of this universal offer of 15 hours' free early education, helping more than 1 million children this year to get on in school.

We are also committed to making childcare more affordable and accessible for working parents, with the 30 hours' free childcare entitlement. It is one of our key areas of Government support for families, helping to save those eligible about £6,000 a year. Nearly 350,000 children were registered for a place in January 2022, and our 2021 childcare and early years parents survey found that almost three quarters of parents reported having more money to spend since they started using the 30 hours, and almost two in five thought that without the entitlement they would be working fewer hours.

Government support for childcare is not just limited to three and four-year-olds. In 2013, we introduced 15 hours' free childcare for disadvantaged two-year-olds; in January 2022, 72% of eligible two-year-olds were registered for a free early education place, and more than 1.2 million children have benefited since its introduction. Following a consultation, we extended eligibility for this entitlement to children in no recourse to public fund households in September 2022, enabling even more children to benefit.

This Government have invested heavily in the early years, giving our children the best start in life. Some £3.5 billion has been spent in each of the past three years on our early education entitlements alone for two to four-year-old children. I know the sector is facing economic challenges, similar to those being faced across the country. We have already announced additional funding of £160 million in 2022-23, £180 million in 2023-24 and £170 million in 2024-25, compared with the figure for the 2021-22 financial year, for local authorities to increase the hourly rates they pay to childcare providers. In December, we announced that for 2023-24 we will invest an additional £20 million in early years entitlements funding, on top of that additional £180 million I have just mentioned. Taken together, this will help to support early years providers. In addition, we have been supporting them on energy bills and with a £180 million package of support on educational recovery, covering off some of that SEND work that I just talked about.

We have also been rolling out family hubs, with a £300 million package. We have a £200 million programme, the holiday activities fund, which is absolutely brilliant and really targets disadvantaged children. When we carried out the first survey of the cohort coming through, we found that about 70% of children said that they had not been on anything like that before. We have £28 million of support for early language in particular, and £560 million is going on youth services. We have the start for life programme, as well as the early language speech pathways with the NHS that I mentioned and all the work we are doing on that.

I am happy to assure the House that improving the cost, choice and availability of childcare for working parents and making sure that providers are well supported are enormously important to me, and we will not ignore the cost pressures faced by the sector in the cost of living crisis. We will continue to explore all options.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): For the final word, I call Mr Robin Walker.

4.53 pm

Mr Robin Walker: I thank the Minister for that response and for setting out some of the areas in this space beyond the departmental estimates in which the Government are investing. I think we have had great consensus across the House on the need for and the benefit of more investment in early years and childcare. There is recognition of some of the steps that the Government have already taken, and recognition also of the enormous opportunities if we can go further.

I do not have time to pay tribute to everyone who has spoken, but the hon. Member for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi) spoke about a business owner working for less than minimum wage. Sadly, that is not a unique circumstance for us to come across.

The hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) was kind enough to refer to me as an ally. I assure her that I will not always be one in debate, but she has contributed powerfully to this debate. I thank her for her support, and that of many of her colleagues, on this issue.

The hon. Member for Hemsworth (Jon Trickett) quoted the same thing as me from the IFS about the current cost pressures facing the sector and the fact that it is not seeing real-terms increases. However, he neglected to quote the figure pointing out the real-terms increases in early years funding over the last decade, and that the actual funding is roughly treble the level that it was when Labour left office.

Jon Trickett *rose*—

Mr Walker: And, no, I am not going to give way to him on that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds) made a fantastic speech, bringing the expertise of his immense experience in local government to this Chamber.

The Minister has heard from across the House on this issue. I hope that she will carry that message to the Treasury, and that we will see progress on this area in short order.

Question deferred (Standing Order No. 54).

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

Resolved,

That Mrs Sharon Hodgson be appointed to the House of Commons Commission in place of Mr Nicholas Brown in pursuance of the House of Commons (Administration) Act 1978, as amended.—(*Jacob Young.*)

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMISSION

Resolved,

That Mrs Sharon Hodgson be appointed and that Mr Nicholas Brown be discharged as a member of the Public Accounts Commission under section 2(2)(c) of the National Audit Act 1983.—(*Jacob Young.*)

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I will now suspend the sitting until 7 pm, when we will take all the remaining business, including the petitions. The bells will ring a couple of minutes before the sitting resumes.

4.56 pm

Sitting suspended.

7 pm

The Deputy Speaker put the deferred Questions (Standing Order No. 54).

SUPPLEMENTARY ESTIMATE 2022-23

DEPARTMENT FOR LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

Resolved,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2023, for expenditure by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities:

- (1) the resources authorised for current purposes be reduced by £2,074,000 as set out in HC 1133,
- (2) the resources authorised for capital purposes be reduced by £2,428,760,000 as so set out, and
- (3) the sum authorised for issue out of the Consolidated Fund be reduced by £4,454,598,000.

DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION

Resolved,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2023, for expenditure by the Department for Education:

- (1) further resources, not exceeding £3,096,686,000, be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 1133,
- (2) the resources authorised for capital purposes be reduced by £1,580,042,000 as so set out, and
- (3) a further sum, not exceeding £145,625,000, be granted to His Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.

The Deputy Speaker then put the Question on the outstanding Estimates (Standing Order No. 55).

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): With the leave of the House, I will put the Questions on motions 2 to 7 together.

ESTIMATES 2023-24 (NAVY) VOTE A

Resolved,

That, during the year ending with 31 March 2024, a number not exceeding 39,550 all ranks be maintained for Naval and Marine Service and that numbers in the Reserve Naval and Marines Forces be authorised for the purposes of Parts 1, 3, 4, and 5 of the Reserve Forces Act 1996 up to the maximum numbers set out in Votes A 2023–24, HC 1036.

ESTIMATES 2023-24 (ARMY) VOTE A

Resolved,

That, during the year ending with 31 March 2024, a number not exceeding 102,250 all ranks be maintained for Army Service and that numbers in the Reserve Land Forces be authorised for the purposes of Parts 1, 3, 4 and 5 of the Reserve Forces Act 1996 up to the maximum numbers set out in Votes A 2023–24, HC 1036.

ESTIMATES 2023-24 (AIR) VOTE A

Resolved,

That, during the year ending with 31 March 2024, a number not exceeding 36,500 all ranks be maintained for Air Force Service and that numbers in the Reserve Air Forces be authorised for the purposes of Parts 1, 3, 4 and 5 of the Reserve Forces Act 1996 up to the maximum numbers set out in Votes A 2023–24, HC 1036.

ESTIMATES, EXCESSES 2021-22

[*Relevant document: Thirty-ninth report of the Committee of Public Accounts, Excess Votes 2021–22, HC 1132.*]

Resolved,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2022, resources, not exceeding £2,457,088,000, be authorised to make good excesses for use for current purposes as set out in the Statement of Excesses 2021–22, HC 1135.

SUPPLEMENTARY ESTIMATES 2022-23

Resolved,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2023:

- (1) further resources, not exceeding £7,756,204,000, be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 1105, HC 1112, HC 1133 and HC 1145,
- (2) the resources authorised for capital purposes be reduced by £8,829,421,000 as so set out, and
- (3) the sums authorised for issue out of the Consolidated Fund be reduced by £20,188,514,000.

ESTIMATES, VOTE ON ACCOUNT 2023-24

Resolved,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2024:

- (1) resources, not exceeding £370,588,547,000 be authorised, on account, for use for current purposes as set out in HC 1090, HC 1106, HC 1111, HC 1134, HC 1146, HC 1167 and HC 1172,
- (2) resources, not exceeding £93,152,800,000, be authorised, on account, for use for capital purposes as so set out, and
- (3) a sum, not exceeding £374,553,971,000, be granted to His Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund, on account, and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.—(*Fay Jones.*)

Ordered, That a Bill be brought in upon the foregoing Resolutions relating to Supplementary Estimates 2022-23, Excesses 2021-22 and Vote on Account 2023-24;

That the Chairman of Ways and Means, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, John Glen, Victoria Atkins, Andrew Griffith and James Cartlidge, bring in the Bill.

SUPPLY AND APPROPRIATION (ANTICIPATION AND ADJUSTMENTS) BILL

Presentation and First Reading

Victoria Atkins accordingly presented a Bill to authorise the use of resources for the years ending with 31 March 2022, 31 March 2023 and 31 March 2024; to authorise the issue of sums out of the Consolidated Fund for

those years; and to appropriate the supply authorised by this Act for the years ending with 31 March 2022 and 31 March 2023.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 266) with explanatory notes (Bill 266-EN).

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I apologise for not having given you prior notice of this, but I was calculating up the numbers in the motions we have just passed. The House has approved expenditure of around £882,593,848,000, and we did it in slightly less than a minute. We are in the remarkable position where we can debate estimates on estimates days, which has not always been the case in the past in this place, but I wonder whether anyone else has recently expressed to you the possible inadequacy of the scrutiny of Government expenditure, and the allocation and approval of such expenditure, through the estimates process.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point of order. I am not sure whether he spoke in the earlier debates today—

Patrick Grady indicated dissent.

Madam Deputy Speaker: There was an opportunity to speak—[*Interruption.*] Excuse me—I can handle this, thank you. There was an opportunity to speak earlier had the hon. Gentleman wished to do so. However, he has put his point on the record, and perhaps in future he might like to speak in the debates themselves. I recommend it—it was a very interesting debate.

PETITIONS

Ultra Low Emission Zone

7.3 pm

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): This is a petition to stop the Mayor of London's expansion of the ultra low emission zone. Together with an online version, it has 2,724 signatures, and another 50,000 have signed the Conservatives' London-wide ULEZ petition, showing how strongly people want to stop Labour's new tax on driving in the suburbs. At a time of rising prices, many businesses and households will struggle to afford £12.50 a day or the cost of a new vehicle. The petitioners therefore

"request that the House of Commons urge the Government to press the Mayor of London to drop his proposals to extend the Ultra Low Emission Zone to cover Barnet and Greater London, as well as his plans for pay-per-mile road charging."

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the constituency of Chipping Barnet,

Declares that, in the light of the significant increase to the cost of living, it would be wholly wrong for new charges on driving to be introduced by the Mayor of London; further that new charges would add to already strained household budgets; and further that petitioners strongly

oppose the Mayor of London's proposal to extend the Ultra Low Emission Zone to cover Barnet and the whole of Greater London, as well as his plans for pay-per-mile road charging.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to press the Mayor of London to drop his proposals to extend the Ultra Low Emission Zone to cover Barnet and Greater London, as well as his plans for pay-per-mile road charging.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002807]

Planning permission for telecommunication telegraph pole installation

7.4 pm

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I rise to present a petition signed by residents of Hull North regarding the installation of telecommunication telegraph polls. Many of my constituents in Hull North, and indeed residents across the country, have found telegraph poles erected close to their homes, outside their front gates or in the middle of the pavement, without their permission or any advance notice. With no requirement for local consultation, there is no opportunity for residents to have their say. This petition reflects the strength of feeling of many residents, both in Hull North and across the country. The situation needs to be challenged. The petitioners therefore

"request that the House of Commons urge the Government to make statutory requirements for designated communications network operators to apply for permission to the LPA on any proposed installation of telegraph poles and for the LPA to consult with affected residents before issuing any permissions.

And the petitioners remain, etc."

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Notes that telegraph poles being erected by designated communications network operators for the expansion of Fibre to the Premises (FTTP) broadband do not need planning permission under the Electronic Communications Code (Conditions and Restrictions) 2003 and The Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) (England) Order 2015; further that the only requirement on the operator is 28 days' notice to the Local Planning Authority (LPA); further that there is no requirement to consider alternatives such as under-street cabling; further that the LPA can only make suggestions on siting which the telecoms company is under no obligation to follow; further that there is no requirement to inform residents of the installation and so no opportunity for them to inform the process; and further that the first knowledge residents will have of a telegraph pole being installed is when it appears in their street or outside their residence.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to make statutory requirements for designated communications network operators to apply for permission to the LPA on any proposed installation of telegraph poles and for the LPA to consult with affected residents before issuing any permissions.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002811]

Global Fund: Supplementary Funding

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Fay Jones.)

7.6 pm

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to have secured the Adjournment debate this evening on supplementary funding of the Global Fund, a subject that I am passionate about, and one that I know the Minister responding is, too. I want to start by paying tribute to the organisations that work tirelessly and diligently on these matters, including Malaria No More and STOPAIDS, which have advocated throughout the replenishment period for the UK to meet the Global Fund's funding target.

I would like to begin by describing the work of the Global Fund and highlighting its impact in saving lives across the countries that it operates in. In 2002, the Global Fund was created to fight what were then the deadliest pandemics confronting humanity: HIV and AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria—diseases that are all treatable and preventable; diseases of poverty and inequality; diseases which at that point seemed truly unbeatable. Bringing together civic society organisations, the private sector, Governments and local communities, the Global Fund has proven that, with collaboration and the correct investment, action can be taken to improve lives.

The results have been stark. In the 20 years following the initiation of the fund, 50 million lives have been saved. The number of deaths caused each year by AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria has decreased by 70%, 21% and 26% respectively since 2002. Yet those numbers alone paint only a partial picture, because the fund helps to better the livelihoods of families and communities around the world. Every dollar invested for the Global Fund's seventh replenishment will yield an astonishing \$31 in health gains and economic returns.

The Global Fund targets countries in the greatest need. Countries in Africa receive about three quarters of the Global Fund investments, and Commonwealth countries receive about half. The Global Fund promotes gender equality, strengthens health systems and allows children to gain an education. It is perhaps the most successful initiative the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office supports, and it demonstrates to the international community our efforts to end AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria epidemics in line with UN sustainable development goal 3.3. Its success was highlighted by the Independent Commission for Aid Impact, which praised the fund for its low operating expenditure, saying that it represents the best "value for money" of any UK development assistance initiative. Indeed, the Minister himself said that the Global Fund is "brilliantly effective." In his time as a Back Bencher, the Minister urged the Government to ensure that we are as generous as possible on the replenishment of the fund and he is now in the perfect position to ensure that the Government are as generous as possible. He knows the Global Fund can only be as effective as it is if it is properly funded.

I want to highlight one example of the programme in action. I would like to speak about Krystal. Krystal is a field entomologist in Uganda. Her story is particularly relevant on International Women's Day, as malaria has a disproportionate impact on women and young children, and in particular on pregnant women. She collects mosquito samples, which are then studied to develop genetic

technology that can interrupt malaria transmission. Krystal's fight against malaria is not just professional, it is personal. She remembers the horrors of having malaria as a child, her little brother convulsing with the disease, and her mother struggling to afford the treatment for her children. When Krystal and her two brothers were growing up, their mother worked to support the family. When one of her children got malaria, she was left with the impossible decision of whether to stay home to care for her sick child, or go to work to earn the money to look after her family and pay for treatment. Krystal says that the Global Fund's arrival in Uganda was a game changer. She said:

"I remember what it was like when the Global Fund came to Uganda. They brought free malaria treatment to hospitals, free mosquito nets that protected children and their families, and funded village health teams."

In Uganda, deaths from malaria fell by almost two thirds between 2002 and 2020, while the percentage of people using long-lasting insecticidal nets almost doubled over the same period. In 2020, almost every person in Uganda with suspected malaria received a test. That accomplishment was only possible with the intervention of the Global Fund and Krystal's story is one example of the outstanding work the Global Fund carries out. There are many more.

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): I would like to share another example. I was recently in Kenya on a delegation with STOPAIDS. At the Ngong Sub-County Hospital just outside Nairobi, I met Abigail, a two-year-old child. Her mother was HIV-positive and had been supported through a programme funded by the Global Fund which provides what are called Mentor Mothers. That meant her mum got peer support for two years—not only for the period of her pregnancy, but until Abigail was two—to make sure she was taking her antiretroviral tablets and her daughter was taking the prophylactic treatment that was needed because her mum was breastfeeding. Now, as a two-year-old, Abigail is HIV-free, despite being born to a mother who was HIV-positive and who had not been complying with treatment earlier on. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government can put a cost on these sorts of interventions, but they cannot necessarily put a value on them? They are hugely important.

Dan Carden: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend. I am glad she had the opportunity to get that on the record.

Let me turn to the UK's most recent funding contribution. At the seventh replenishment in 2022, the UK Government pledged £1 billion to the Global Fund—a significant 30% cut to the UK's 2019 pledge of £1.4 billion. The US, Japan, Canada, Germany, the European Commission and several other contributors met the Global Fund's request for a 30% increase from 2019. France increased its contribution by 23% and Italy by 15%. However, the UK—alone—went in the opposite direction. The UK was the only G7 member to cut funding in 2022. Mike Podmore, the director of STOPAIDS, said that it was a "disastrous decision" that risks the lives of 1.5 million people and

"over 34.5 million new transmissions across the three diseases, setting back years of progress".

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing the debate. Is not the point precisely that the kind of interventions that the

Global Fund make are preventive spends? If those lives are not saved or if people continue to contract those diseases and there is not further research into them, in the longer term it will cost more to deal with the consequences of not reducing the infection rate. It is a false economy. The Government talk about making their diminishing aid budget work smarter and harder. Surely, that kind of preventive spend is a smart and hard way of working?

Dan Carden: Absolutely, I agree. We know what is needed. Analysis has calculated that \$18 billion is required to get the world back on track towards ending HIV, tuberculosis and malaria, to build resilience and sustainable health systems and to strengthen pandemic preparedness. The Global Fund is more than \$2 billion short of reaching that \$18 billion target. At the sixth replenishment, the UK was the second biggest donor. Now, the UK's reduction in funding is the biggest contribution to the shortfall.

Now is possibly the worst time to be cutting funding following the coronavirus pandemic, which had a drastic impact on the ability to test for infectious diseases. In 2020, for the first time in the Global Fund's history, we witnessed declines in key outcomes across all three diseases. Decreases in testing led to increases in infections, undoing years of progress. That is exactly what the statistics tell us: HIV testing fell by 22% and prevention services by 11%. In 2020, TB deaths increased, fuelled by a surge in the number of undiagnosed and untreated cases. The number of people tested for drug-resistant TB dropped 19%, and the number of people treated for TB fell by more than 1 million. Malaria testing fell by 4%. Now is not the time to reduce our commitments to the developing world; it is the time to redouble our efforts.

Charlotte Nichols: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Dan Carden: I am not sure how much time I have, so I will carry on to get through what I want to say.

As co-founder of the Global Fund with permanent representation on the board, the UK is uniquely placed to direct policy and act as a leader in the field. We should do everything we can to strengthen that position, not undermine it. I ask the Minister, who is a champion of the Global Fund, to continue to be both vocal and resolute in his calls to his Cabinet colleagues.

Let me turn to the reasons that the UK decreased its contribution to the fund at the most recent replenishment. We were made aware in the autumn statement that the Chancellor had decided that the aid budget would not be restored to 0.7% of gross national income until "the fiscal situation allows". The Government have been unclear on when the international aid budget will be increased again, if at all. The Home Office is now appropriating funds to host refugees, and only 0.3% of GNI is being spent on official development assistance—a smaller percentage than before 1997. That means less funding for the UK's long-standing international aid commitments such as the Global Fund.

No other G7 country used the economic impact of the covid-19 pandemic to reduce its contribution to the Global Fund, but that is exactly the action that the UK Government have taken. Will the Minister share with the House what discussions he has had with Treasury

colleagues about the urgent need to return the aid budget to 0.7%? What conversations has he had with FCDO, Treasury and Home Office colleagues about increasing the transparency of the aid budget spending that is allocated domestically? I have written to the Treasury on that point, but I hope his discussions have been more productive than mine.

The development budget—the pot of money we put aside to help the world's poorest people—is being squeezed from every angle. Not only was it slashed by almost a third, but other Departments are now able to use the fund to cover shortfalls. The Minister should consider whether it is accurate to say that we are spending even 0.5% on international aid, when such a huge proportion of the pot is being spent domestically rather than on helping people facing enormous hardship across the world. I hope that ahead of next week's Budget he has been lobbying hard for more money. The bottom line is that the UK was the only major donor that failed to deliver the same level of funding as in the previous replenishment, let alone the increase that was requested.

As we have seen in recent years, marginalised communities will suffer the most as a result of UK ODA cuts. These decisions have a drastic impact on infections and deaths from HIV, TB and malaria. We must explore what our country can do to ensure that our international obligations are met. Although of course those obligations involve replenishing the Global Fund, I remind the House that they must extend further.

If we are to ensure that the poorest countries have the resources to fund healthcare fully for their populations, we need to end the crippling debt crisis faced by more than 50 countries worldwide. As agencies such as the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development are warning, debt levels for low-income countries are at their highest for 20 years. Countries are being forced to choose between spending on debt servicing and spending on healthcare. The focus of this debate is the Global Fund, but let us not forget that there are actions that the UK Government can and must take to tackle the growing debt crisis. If we want to increase financing for healthcare in the poorest countries, action on debt is essential.

Let me return to the Global Fund. In the current resource-limited setting, it is vital that the UK ensures value for money and capitalises on the match-funding arrangements with the US for the seventh replenishment, under which the US will provide a 50% match for every additional £1 that the UK contributes. Supplementary funding to the Global Fund has the potential to unlock significant matched funding from the US and drive the delivery of the UK's international development strategy, so the Government should be exploring the allocation of additional funding to the Global Fund in the upcoming Budget and beyond. I urge the Minister to listen to this call.

Finally, it is International Women's Day. It is important to recognise that women and girls continue to be disproportionately affected by ill health as a result of AIDS, TB and malaria. AIDS-related conditions are the leading cause of death for women of reproductive age globally, and approximately one third of all pregnant women in sub-Saharan Africa suffer from malaria. Thanks to the Global Fund's investments, more than 85% of pregnant women living with HIV now have access to medicine.

7.23 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Mr Andrew Mitchell): I congratulate the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) on securing this debate. It is a pleasure to respond on behalf of the Government. Let me say at the outset how much we appreciate the work of the Global Fund's executive director Peter Sands and his team, whom I saw recently in Geneva. He, along with others, has significantly reformed the Global Fund, with which I was involved 10 years ago. It is now going from strength to strength. As the hon. Gentleman said, this spending is among the very best of the development expenditure that the British taxpayer generously provides.

Given the impacts of the pandemic and Russia's barbaric attack on Ukraine, the UK's aid budget currently sits at about 0.55% of gross national income. That equated to more than £11 billion in 2021, and we are proud to remain one of the world's biggest aid donors. Over the past 18 months, the UK has acted decisively and compassionately to help the people of Ukraine and Afghanistan to escape oppression and conflict and to find refuge in the UK. We report all aid spending in line with the OECD rules, which allow funds to be spent on food and shelter for asylum seekers and refugees during their first year in the UK. That point was raised by the hon. Gentleman.

This support has put significant pressure on the aid budget, which is why the Treasury has agreed to provide an additional £2.5 billion of official development assistance over two years. Even with that extra money, we are having to make difficult decisions to manage our aid spending this year and next. Our decisions and approach to spending are guided by the international development strategy. That means focusing our work on the priorities set out in the strategy, including women and girls and global health, both of which the hon. Gentleman cited with approval. We will do this in a way that maximises the positive impact we can have, and our ability to respond to crises.

Organisations such as the Global Fund remain essential partners for the achievement of our goals. The UK joined with others to create the Global Fund because we refused to accept the loss of millions of lives every year to AIDS, TB and malaria—diseases that are both preventable and treatable. The fund's achievements are nothing short of extraordinary. Over the last 20 years, it has saved 50 million lives, cut the death rate from those three diseases by more than half, invested billions in healthcare systems, and played a crucial role in the protection of key populations and women and girls—a point made by the hon. Gentleman towards the end of his speech.

The UK is an important partner in the Global Fund's success. We are its third largest donor. We have contributed more than £4.5 billion to the fund to date, and we continue to back its vital, life-saving work. In November, I announced our significant contribution of £1,000 million to the fund's seventh replenishment. This will support critical programmes through to 2025, helping us to get back on track to end AIDS, TB and malaria. The UK's pledge will help to save an estimated 1.2 million lives, while preventing 28 million new cases and infections. Not only will that funding help the diagnosis, treatment and prevention of those three diseases, but it will boost work to tackle the stigma and discrimination that are driving the epidemics, reaching 3 million people in key

populations through prevention programmes. It will help community workers to find those at greatest risk, and it will be used to invest in innovative research and development work. That includes tackling the growing resistance to drugs and insecticides that threatens the fight against malaria.

We have invested about £400 million in product development partnerships, harnessing the best of British scientific excellence to fight diseases of poverty, and our £500 million investment in Unitaids supported innovations that cut the cost of the best paediatric HIV medicines by 75%. As I made clear in the international development strategy, we will continue to push for multilateral reform, including greater collaboration between health agencies at global, country and local level. The UK remains a determined leader, not only through our financing but through our valuable country partnerships, our expertise and our power to convene others. We are pleased that the Global Fund and Unitaids have been building on their partnership.

The Global Fund is key to our strategy to end the preventable deaths of mothers, babies and children. The majority of its investment is in Africa, where a child dies every minute of malaria and where one in three pregnant women risks catching malaria, putting them and their baby at risk. It also invests in strong and inclusive health systems. One third of the UK's contribution to the Global Fund will help to support and strengthen formal and community health systems, improving data tracking, getting medical supplies to clinics in remote areas and helping community health workers to meet the needs of their local communities.

Building on the experience of the fight against covid-19, the Global Fund supports work to prepare for and respond to pandemics. For example, it invests in building laboratory networks that were the bedrock of the covid-19 testing programmes. The fund raised \$5 billion in two years to fight covid, leading work in lower-income countries on diagnosis and treatment. But this is about more than money to fight diseases; it is about addressing wider global challenges, from conflict to climate change.

Dan Carden: The Minister and I agree that the Global Fund is a very good thing. We have had two years of progress, increased testing and reduction in diseases, and in the end we are hopeful of eradicating those diseases for good. Will the Minister continue to watch that progress? At the minute, statistics suggest that we are sliding backwards—something we cannot afford to do. If that is what the evidence suggests this year and next year, will he push for more funding? Will he also touch on the point about the United States' match funding, which makes this such a good investment for the FCDO?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to point out the huge benefits of the generous offer from the United States, which, along with Britain, has been one of the two core countries for the Global Fund. On his request that I keep this spending and the results under review, he may rest assured that I certainly will.

The Global Fund has kept health services going in conflict zones from Afghanistan to Ukraine. It has provided \$25 million in emergency funding to Ukraine, which has been used to deploy doctors and mobile clinics. It has supported healthcare for those suffering from climate-related disasters in Pakistan and Somalia.

Addressing gender and human rights barriers is an integral part of the Global Fund's strategy for the next five years, ensuring that life-changing services are available for all, regardless of gender, age, sexual orientation or income. Some 60% of the Global Fund's investments go towards protecting women and girls. The UK continues to champion those values in all our work. As the hon. Gentleman indicated, today we celebrate International Women's Day, and this morning we published our strategy, which puts women and girls at the heart of pretty much everything the Foreign Office does. We will stand up for them at every opportunity, work with our partners who do the same and counter any rollback in women's rights and freedoms around the world.

Charlotte Nichols: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Mitchell: I am very sorry, but I am about to run out of time.

We are increasing our ambition, because threats to gender equality are mounting and because women and girls continue to be at particular risk from diseases such as HIV and malaria. Over the next year, global leaders will come together for UN high-level meetings on universal health coverage, tuberculosis, and pandemic preparedness and response. The Global Fund is an important partner to the UK in helping to advance those priorities.

To conclude, we have no doubt of the huge importance and value of the work of the Global Fund. We will fulfil our sixth replenishment pledge. This is an outstandingly successful partnership, which is why the Foreign Secretary, the Chancellor and I very carefully considered our £1,000 million pledge to the seventh replenishment, for all the reasons that the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton has set out so eloquently.

We balance the needs of the fight against AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria against the many other demands on the aid budget, guided by the priorities of

the international development strategy. We can all be proud of our commitment and the difference this pledge will make to millions of people around the world, helping to end those three diseases that shatter lives and to build a better, safer world for all.

The hon. Gentleman asked me about the discussions on transparency with the Home Office. A new cross-Whitehall committee, co-chaired by myself and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, will bear down on the quality of ODA spent throughout the Whitehall system. He asked about discussions with the Treasury on these matters and on ODA generally. I assure him that, short of camping under the Chancellor of the Exchequer's bed, I could not lobby more than I am.

Finally, I shall give way to the hon. Lady, because there is one minute left.

Charlotte Nichols: The Minister has outlined brilliantly all the great things the Global Fund does, but as we have cut our replenishment funding, has the Department made an assessment of what that loss will mean, in terms of the inability to meet some of this need?

Mr Mitchell: We look incredibly carefully at the results our taxpayers are buying with their contribution. The contribution we have made of £1,000 million is a significant one, given the constrained circumstances that we and others around the world find ourselves in. We have made a contribution at that level for precisely the reasons set out by the hon. Lady and the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton, in what I think you will agree, Madam Deputy Speaker, has been a most interesting and illuminative debate.

Question put and agreed to.

7.36 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 8 March 2023

[PHILIP DAVIES *in the Chair*]

Financial Security and Reducing Inequality in the Caribbean: Government Role

9.30 am

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered financial security and inequality in the Caribbean.

It is an honour to conduct the debate with you in the Chair, Mr Davies. Before embarking on such debates, it is customary for Members to declare any interests that might influence them in the debate at hand. Heritage is rarely one of them, but I would, for the purposes of this debate, like to declare that I am a son of both Britain and the Caribbean island of Grenada, and therefore have a vested interest in these matters.

What are these matters? I would contend that we cannot debate our Government's role in promoting financial security and reducing inequality in the Caribbean without discussing the elephant in the room—namely, the preceding 400 years of exploitative colonial history and the urgent need for some form of reparatory justice.

I am not the first person to raise the issue. Indeed, I would not be here discussing it today without the understanding and analysis of Caribbean giants such as Frantz Fanon, who wrote "The Wretched of the Earth"; Eric Williams, who produced the seminal work "Capitalism and Slavery"; Walter Rodney, who wrote "How Europe Underdeveloped Africa"; and Sir Hilary Beckles, who wrote "How Britain Underdeveloped the Caribbean".

While those people, in their own way, gave us the theoretical and academic arguments for the case for reparations for colonialism and slavery, I want to thank another group for the compassion and leadership they have shown on the issue—namely, the Trevelyan family, some of whom I believe are here today in the Gallery, fresh from their visit to Grenada, where, as the descendants of slave owners, they did what no British Government have ever done. They apologised for their ancestors' part in the exploitation of the 1,000 slaves they owned on six plantations. They acknowledged the financial and cultural advantage that had generated for them, and urged the British Government, as I do today, to enter meaningful negotiations with the Governments of the Caribbean in order to make appropriate reparations.

The Trevelyan family did not leave it there. They set up an educational fund worth £100,000, and in so doing opened the door of the debate just a little wider. Thank you very much for all that you have done.

The issue of reparations could simply be dismissed as the obsession of a small group of so-called woke extremists. We have seen in this country a political backlash, often from Members on the Conservative Benches, against any notion that we should reassess our history as regards colonialism and slavery, and the impact they have had, and continue to have, on the lives of millions across the globe and here in the United Kingdom.

Whether it is the pulling down of slaver statues or campaigning against the National Trust's efforts to educate the public about the link between slavery and the financing behind many of our stately homes, this is a live issue that evokes great passion and sometimes anger. That is entirely understandable, because when anyone questions the very story we tell ourselves and the world around us about who we are and what we represent, that is challenging—triggering, even. People who have been in a relationship will know this.

Relationships can be difficult because our partners often challenge those notions of who we think we are: "What do you mean I snore? What do you mean I'm tight fisted? How dare you say I leave the toilet seat up?" Learning things about ourselves and others can either end in denial, argument and divorce, or result in growth and development. That is what those calling for dialogue on this issue are striving for. The Commonwealth is a relationship between Britain and her former colonies, which, like a partner who has endured 400 years of the most hideous abuse, seek not charity but restitution.

Nadia Whittome (Nottingham East) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this important debate. He is making an impassioned speech. Does he agree that the case for former colonial powers paying reparations to the descendants of enslaved people is particularly strong, given that the UK Government were making payments to compensate the descendants of enslavers—families and organisations—as recently as 2015? Reparations are the right and fair thing to do not only because of the legacy of slavery and because the wealth that countries such as ours extracted underdeveloped those societies, but because of our role in the climate crisis, which threatens the very future of the Caribbean.

Clive Lewis: I thank my hon. Friend for her points, which I will come to in my speech. One key thing she pulled out is that successive Governments have made many arguments about why this should not happen, but they should be making the argument about why it should. I want to pick up on one thing she said that I will not have time to cover in my speech. One argument that Governments have often made over the past 20 or 30 years, in the post-colonial period, for why we should not pay reparations for the slave trade and colonialism is that it was legal at the time. Not only do this Government make that argument, but our Labour Government made it in the noughties. We have to remember that throughout history, including in the 20th century, countries treated people brutally and exterminated them ostensibly under their own laws, so we cannot allow that argument to be made against reparations.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): I speak as the chairman of the all-party group on St Kitts and Nevis. All Members will be incentivised and motivated to ensure that there is the greatest flow of capital to our allies in the Caribbean, but does the hon. Gentleman not think that giving the Caribbean states tariff-free access to the United Kingdom, the world's fifth-largest economy, is more important than reparations? That would contrast with the protectionist racket they have experienced from the European Union, which, inherently, tried to restrict the flow of goods from the Caribbean to the EU.

Clive Lewis: The hon. Gentleman will not find me defending the EU on the matter of the Caribbean. Later, I will explain why, like the United Kingdom, the EU also owes a debt to the Caribbean.

When we look at how the Caribbean has been systematically underdeveloped, it makes no sense to say, “Let’s not worry too much about the past. You can now take advantage of tariff-free access to UK markets.” If those countries do not have an economy to take advantage of that tariff-free access, what is the point? We first have to build up the economies in the Caribbean and structurally invest in those countries’ people and infrastructure to enable them to make use of that tariff-free access.

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an extremely powerful speech. We often hear the argument, “Let’s forget what happened.” Reparations are about making amends for centuries of violence and discrimination against those countries. It is interesting that people say, “Let’s forget what happened,” when those countries are still in debt, their jewels and artefacts are in museums in this country and we refuse to give them back. A lot of reparation is needed, whether it be economic reparations or an acknowledgement of what happened. Does my hon. Friend agree that any arguments against that are not only a betrayal, but collusion in what happened many centuries ago?

Clive Lewis: I thank my hon. Friend for her wonderful intervention—it is almost as though she is reading ahead in my speech, and I will come to some of those points. I would go further: this country will be unable to move on as a cohesive whole until these issues are resolved. I think that everyone in this room would want to see that happen as this country goes forward, post Brexit, into the big, wide world yonder.

I was in the middle of my discussion about the Commonwealth being a relationship—a relationship between Britain and her former colonies, which, like a partner that has endured 400 years of the most hideous abuse, seek not charity but restitution. The alternative is divorce, in the form of growing republican sentiment across the Caribbean. Abusive partners who cannot say sorry cannot change, can never grow and can never develop. Who in their right mind would want to stay in an abusive relationship like that?

But do not take my word for it. King Charles III, through his goddaughter Fiona Compton, has shown an intimate understanding of the necessity for this national conversation—knowing, as he does, that he could well be the last king of anything resembling an international Commonwealth. As such, the monarch has shifted positions. He believes, we are told, that British history “should not be hidden”, and that, in the same way that we are taught about the holocaust,

“we should be open to speaking about Britain’s involvement in the slave trade”.

For it seems that this country still finds it easier to remember the transgressions of other nations than it does its own.

Let me turn to the issue of those transgressions. What happened such that Britain, or any other European colonial power, should be expected to apologise and pay reparations? As any student of history would attest, history is littered with ancient atrocities and what would

now be called crimes against humanity that elicit no such reactions or demands. Why is what took place in the Caribbean so different?

Sir Hilary Beckles, a historian and vice-chancellor of the University of the West Indies, nails a key part of the explanation in his book “How Britain Underdeveloped the Caribbean”. He states:

“The modern Caribbean economy was invented, structured and managed by European states for one purpose: to achieve maximum wealth extraction to fuel and sustain their national financial, commercial and industrial transformation. Therefore, for each European state, the Caribbean economy was primarily an external economic engine propelling and promoting national economic growth.

No other large and lucrative colonized economy in the five-hundred-year history of Western economic development has ever been created for such a singular purpose. No such economy has ever been as intensively exploited as that of the Caribbean by imperial entrepreneurs and nation states.”

It continues that European countries, Britain chief among them,

“called into being a new, immoral entrepreneurial order that defined the Caribbean...economy as a frontier beyond the accountability of civilization, where crimes against humanity became a cultural norm”,

with the ability

“to accumulate wealth without cultural or ethical constraints.”

That involved

“the institutionalization of piracy and plunder, genocide and slavery, violent hostility and hatred, and notions of black subhumanity. These were the driving forces in Europe’s wealth extraction as it rose to economic dominance”—

a dominance that, we know, it still enjoys to this day.

Sir Hilary goes on to describe slavery as “systematic genocide”, because although around 3.5 million Africans were brought to the Caribbean in those 400 years, only 600,000 were in the region by the time of emancipation, which is unsurprising, given that the average useful lifespan of a West Indian slave was five to 10 years. That went on for 400 years, so extreme was their treatment. British history books might tell us that the first African slaves landed in the British empire in 1624, but when we listen to that, the reality is that black people, Africans, did not land in the British empire; the British empire landed on them. That is what happened in 1624 and continued to happen for 400 years, to this very day.

This is not just about Africans. Indians were also forcibly indentured in the Caribbean by the British. Let us not forget the 3 million indigenous peoples estimated to have inhabited the Caribbean in 1700. I have some Carib Indian in me, which I can trace back through my great-grandmother. Those people were deliberately wiped out by those European forces, so now only 30,000 survive.

As the fabulous research of University College London shows, even the abolition of slavery in the 1830s saw no justice, because it was the slavers, not the slaves, who received the vast sums of compensation—billions in today’s money—that taxpayers in the UK, including the Caribbeans who came here in the post-war period to rebuild this country, after it had fought a war ostensibly against racism and fascism, finished paying off in 2015, so vast was the debt. Let us think about that: the people who had been brutalised and exploited for 400 years came back to the mother country, after it had fought a

war against racism, to rebuild this country, leaving theirs in poverty, and paid taxes to pay their former slave masters.

This does not end there. Some of those same people, decades later, having worked for this country, were deported as illegal immigrants in the Windrush scandal. You could not make this up. If it was written in a book, some would say it is fiction. It gets worse, because the Windrush compensation scheme was made so difficult to apply for that fewer than one in four people eligible for compensation have received it. That is not a scandal; it goes beyond scandal.

Daniel Kawczynski: The hon. Gentleman is making an impassioned speech. He is talking about immigration and the rights of people. As the first Polish-born British Member of Parliament, who came to this country from Poland, I say to him that one reason I campaigned for Brexit was that I felt the current immigration policy was racist. We gave automatic access to fellow white Europeans to the exclusion of Commonwealth citizens.

I want everybody to be treated in the same way when they are at our border, irrespective of their colour, religion or where they are from. It should be based on their skillset. The Labour party and the SNP—[*Interruption.*] I hear chuntering from the SNP—campaigned for a system that would have allowed that ongoing racism to take place: automatic access for Europeans to the exclusion of Commonwealth citizens.

Clive Lewis: I thank the hon. Gentleman for those points. We can have both a fair immigration system in this country, which we do not have at the moment, and justice for the Caribbean. The two are not controversial or incompatible.

The money paid to the slave owners in the 1830s poured into the British economy, paying for Victorian infrastructure and modernisation. That includes the embankment over there, across from where we sit; the first underground, the Metropolitan line; and new modern insurance companies, with the capital to go global. That was all generated by the investment that came from the compensation given to slave owners.

That compensation in part funded what would eventually become the insurance giant Aviva, based in my Norwich South constituency and formerly known as Norwich Union. It financed vast cultural and learning investment in universities, the creative arts and science. It financed a modern 19th-century military industrial machine, one finally able to colonise Africa and vast swathes of Asia in that fast phase of 19th century colonialism, finishing what had been started in the centuries before.

For former slaves in the Caribbean, there was no such economic renaissance. The century after emancipation was one of racist brutality, the suppression of basic human and labour rights, bloodshed and massacre. Even in the 1930s, people in Jamaica, Trinidad, Barbados, St Lucia, St Vincent and St Kitts witnessed violent suppression and death at the hands of British colonial police forces for seeking basic labour rights in the colonial sugar factories, mines and fields that they still toiled in, for poverty wages—and all the time, the profits rolled out of the Caribbean, not into it.

Already I can hear the howls of those opposed to the reparations and the apology that no British Government have ever given: “Move on! Get over it! Don’t linger in

the past; look to the future!” But there is no future worth looking forward to in the Caribbean until we confront the past. If people go to the Caribbean, what they will see is the past alive and well today. There is poverty, racism still, inequality, and debt. But do not confuse an honest appraisal of the situation across much of today’s Caribbean for victimhood, because although the peoples of the Caribbean have been wronged, they are a proud and capable people, whose 400-year baptism of fire has made them strong and resilient, with great potential—potential that now needs to be realised.

Let us take, for example, the University of the West Indies. Despite the past, it ranks among the top 1.5% of universities globally. That is evidence of how far ahead the Caribbean could have been had three quarters of the population not been unable to read or write just 60 years ago. That was the condition they were left in when they were given independence—illiteracy rates of 60% or 70%. So when, as happened this week, the Prime Minister of Grenada, Dickon Mitchell, invites British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, another son of empire, to discuss reparations, he does so with full understanding of that potential.

It is potential that CARICOM—the Caribbean Community—and its 10-point plan for reparatory justice also recognises. Its reparations commission is working with initiatives such as Repair, set up by the entrepreneur Denis O’Brien. Their joint mission is for an EU and UK 25-year, multibillion-pound programme of reparation and repair and investment in the Caribbean, involving education, physical infrastructure, and science and technology, replicating the EU’s structural investment funding, which transformed the poorest countries and regions of the EU, including Ireland and Poland. The same can be done for the Caribbean. It can be given the tools to prosper, to make the jump to clean energy technologies, and to adapt to the climate crisis, by which it will be disproportionately affected. There have been centuries of carbon-intensive manufacturing, which the bodies of its people financed, but it receives no share of the bounty. The irony of the climate crisis is never lost on me—or on millions of other people around the planet.

I am sure that the Minister will tell us today of the largesse of Britain and its generous overseas development packages. Let us unpack that. Forget for now that this Government oversaw a 21% drop in aid spending since 2020, as a result of their decision to cut aid budgets from 0.7 of GDP to 0.5% of GDP. I have the Library figures for the British Government’s overseas aid to Caribbean countries in millions of pounds, not adjusted for inflation, over a series of years. For Grenada, the figures are 0.0, 0.0, 0.0, 0.0, 0.0, 0.0, 0.0, 0.1, 0.2. This is the reality of overseas aid for the Caribbean. Let us go down the table. For St Lucia, the figures are 0.0, 0.0, 0.2, 0.2, 0.1. The 0.2 is a fraction of a million—hundreds of thousands of pounds. St Vincent and the Grenadines: 0.0, 0.0, 0.0, 0.0, 0.0, 0.0, 0.1. We get the picture.

Dawn Butler: My hon. Friend is making such a powerful speech. Does he agree that development aid is often given to developing countries through a middleman, and not directly to the countries, or to small businesses in those countries that do valuable work? It is often difficult to find out who the middlemen are, but we know how they worked during covid.

Clive Lewis: We do. They certainly took their cut, and they continue to. We want something completely different. We want to give the victims of slavery and colonialism the tools and ability to help themselves. They do not want a handout; they want a hand up, and they want to be able to build for themselves. There must be a reckoning with the primary reason why empire was created: to materially enrich some people at the expense of others. Its afterlife is not an issue of identity politics, but a key contributor to global inequality and its corrosive impact on democracy.

I will conclude on a personal note. The BBC's Laura Trevelyan, who made such a moving BBC documentary on her journey of discovery about her ancestors' part in this story, shared with me the comments of a Caribbean woman who worked in the NHS. After watching the programme, the woman told her how the lack of justice, combined with the Windrush scandal, meant that for the first time in her life, she felt she did not belong in this country, despite being born here and working here all her life. Many other black people in this country will be able to relate to that; I can relate to it.

We as a country and as a Parliament have to remember that until we acknowledge the past, play our part in resolving matters, and help to build a better future, we will never be able to heal and move forward, and a significant number of people will never truly feel a part of this country. That cannot be allowed to happen. We should live up to our words; we often talk in this place about collectively wanting to take our country forward into a bright future. The issue of reparatory justice must be confronted now. If this Government do not do it, the next Government, whoever they may be, will find the arguments growing stronger by the year, by the day, by the week.

9.58 am

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): Thank you for calling me to speak in this debate, Mr Davies. I start by paying tribute to the hon. Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) for securing this debate. I want to offer him some form of cross-party collaboration focusing on the Caribbean.

This country—I speak as an immigrant myself—has benefited enormously from the British-Caribbean diaspora, not just in London but across the whole of the United Kingdom. That community has some of the greatest skillsets imaginable; we want to harness the skills in the diaspora to help us build a bridge between London and the Caribbean, post Brexit. The paucity of Members attending this debate is rather regrettable, bearing in mind how important the Caribbean is to the United Kingdom and to our relations with that western sphere of the world.

I chair two all-party country groups: the APPG on Poland, not surprisingly, which is the third-largest in the House of Commons. We now have 97 parliamentarians in that APPG. We make regular visits to Warsaw with Members of Parliament who have never visited Poland. I also chair the all-party parliamentary group for St Kitts and Nevis, which we set up last year. One reason why I set it up is that I am particularly interested in evaluating how, post Brexit, the United Kingdom will strengthen links with the Commonwealth.

You and I entered the House in the same year, Mr Davies, in 2005. We were both Brexiteers. One of the reasons why I campaigned so assiduously for Brexit is that I recognise the extraordinary power of the Commonwealth—a global network of 54 nations around the world, representing a third of the world's population. In our obsession with the European Union over the last 50 years—this tiny, almost inconsequential continent, whose population as a percentage of the global population, and whose GDP as a percentage of global GDP, is shrinking every day—we attached ourselves to a shrinking market, and allowed protectionist barriers to be imposed between us and the Commonwealth. That is probably one of this country's greatest acts of self-harm in our lifetime.

What I want from this Government, post Brexit, in a country freed of the European Union's artificial constraints, is for us to turn the Commonwealth into something meaningful and economically viable. The hon. Member for Norwich South said that King Charles may be the last titular head of the Commonwealth. I do not believe that. I believe that Prince William will continue in that role, as will his children, but only if we demonstrate to these 54 nations that we want to give them the maximum tariff-free access to our markets and build up those economic partnerships. Politicians are transient figures, here today, gone tomorrow. It is businesses and economic joint ventures that solidify and strengthen links between countries.

This year, we enter the CPTPP—the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership. It is a partnership with the world's largest trading bloc in the far east. We should also focus on the Caribbean, and on making sure that we challenge our American allies' position as the major investor and exporter to the Caribbean. As you will know if you have visited the Caribbean, Mr Davies, the vast majority of products there, whether it be a car, or a pencil in a school, come from the United States of America. In this modern era of transportation, with high-velocity cargo ships crossing the Atlantic, we can compete against the United States of America. That is the best way to strengthen our relationship with the Caribbean.

When we set up the APPG for St Kitts and Nevis, would you believe, Mr Davies, that it was the first time that such an APPG had been set up in this Parliament since 1983, when St Kitts and Nevis achieved independence? I find that staggering. St Kitts and Nevis may have a small population, but let us not forget that it has one vote at the United Nations. There are only 195 votes in total—there are 195 countries in the world. St Kitts and Nevis has one of those precious votes. We ought to do everything possible to demonstrate to our partners in St Kitts and Nevis that we do not take their votes at the UN for granted, and we are doing everything possible to show them a genuine partnership.

I am very honoured to be hosting His Excellency Dr Kevin Isaac, the high commissioner to St Kitts and Nevis, today in the House of Commons. He has been the high commissioner for St Kitts and Nevis to the Court of St James's since 2011. When I spoke to him this morning—I do not want to embarrass him—he said he could not remember reference being made to St Kitts and Nevis in the British Parliament in the last few years. He could not tell me the last time he heard such a reference. Between us, we need to make as many

references to St Kitts and Nevis as possible. His Excellency Kevin Isaac was awarded diplomat of the year from North America and the Caribbean in 2015 and 2022. That is an award adjudicated by other diplomats and senior political figures. He has won it twice. If someone wanted to understand about international diplomacy, they should go and talk to him.

In my discussions with His Excellency Kevin Isaac, we have talked about an important project in his country: the construction of a major bridge from the island of St Kitts to the island of Nevis. I will talk to bridge builders in my constituency of Shrewsbury; we have a famous bridge builder in Leebotwood, Shropshire, and I will write to them about this opportunity. It is essential that the Minister is cognisant of this huge infrastructure project that St Kitts and Nevis is investigating. Can the Minister give me an update on what his Department is doing in conjunction with the Department for International Trade to ensure that there is a British proposal on the table to build that highly strategic and important bridge?

The Government of St Kitts and Nevis are building a climate-smart modern hospital and a senior high school. They are also seeking support for extending their international airport. There should be British construction proposals for all those projects. I am keen to hear from the Minister what we are doing to ensure that we bid for those important projects. Speaking as one of the Prime Minister's trade envoys, it is important that we use UK Export Finance to help British companies bid for those projects. UK Export Finance has billions of pounds at its disposal, with which it can give companies soft loans and credits to help them compete against Chinese construction companies.

I have a great concern about the way that the Chinese are taking over the whole of the Caribbean, in terms of infrastructure projects and commercial opportunities. It is not just Africa where the Chinese are stealing a march on the United Kingdom; it is also in the Caribbean. If we look at the figures for investment in the Caribbean nations, we will see that we have fallen behind the communist dictatorship of the People's Republic of China in this critical part of the world—a part of the world that has such historical links to the United Kingdom, and that is so close to our major ally, the United States of America. Somehow, this Government are allowing the Chinese to steal a march on us in the Caribbean. You couldn't make it up, Mr Davies.

Before I conclude my speech, I will make one strong appeal. We need a trade envoy for the Caribbean. I know that the Minister is from the Foreign Office, but I would like him to take that message to No. 10 Downing Street and to the Department for International Trade. As one of the Prime Minister's trade envoys, I have dozens of meetings every month in the House of Commons. The trade envoy is like a telephone switchboard operator, putting British commercial entities in touch with opportunities from the jurisdiction that they represent. Here in the House of Commons, we take advantage of the prestigious building that we work in to bring together people from the UK with people from the country to which we are trade envoy. We ensure that Britain is doing everything possible to take advantage of the opportunities. We need an envoy for the Caribbean. We had one in the past. A trade envoy acts as a totem pole; they encourage, facilitate, represent, and lobby on behalf

of British business. They work with not only the Department for International Trade, but, most importantly, UK Export Finance.

Lastly, let me refer to compensation. I could see how emotional and passionate the hon. Gentleman was, and I am not going to demur from anything he said as it would be inappropriate for me to do, even though he and I might not entirely agree on the matter. However, I would say to him that I have campaigned for many years for compensation for Poland from Germany, because 98% of the city of my birth, Warsaw, was destroyed in 1944. The Germans still refuse to pay that compensation, so I entirely understand his motives and strength of feeling. I respect that and his right to raise the issue, but I say to him again—gently, delicately and irrespective of the differences we have—that I hope we can agree to work together to slash those tariffs and restrictions, which have existed for decades with respect to Caribbean countries and their commercial entities.

We have been part of the European Union. As I said, I go around universities in this country and try to explain to young people that we gave automatic access to Poles—fellow white European Poles—but that somebody from the Caribbean would have to go through a different channel and jump over higher hurdles to get into this country. That is pure, unadulterated racism. It is staggering that for so many years we accepted a system—I look to the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), who actively campaigned to remain in the European Union—that tolerates such extraordinarily profound discrimination between European citizens—fellow white Caucasian citizens—and Caribbean citizens. That is an absolute outrage.

I want every single individual at the border crossing to be assessed on their skillsets, their ability to learn English and their ability to convince a British entity to hire them. Those are the attributes that should be tested, not which part of the world the individual is from.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Norwich South on securing the debate. I hope that he and I can stay in touch and work together to facilitate and send a strong signal to Caribbean nations that we value their partnership and their friendship, and that we are determined to create the strongest possible economic links between us.

10.12 am

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) on securing the debate. I also congratulate him on bringing some important and challenging issues to the House during what has turned out to be an extremely lively debate, involving brief but passionate and important contributions from the hon. Members for Nottingham East (Nadia Whittome) and for Brent Central (Dawn Butler), and indeed the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski).

I echo the welcome from the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham for the high commissioner from St Kitts and Nevis. I quickly checked *Hansard* when the hon. Gentleman was speaking: since 2005, there have been 16 on-the-record references to St Kitts and Nevis—I suspect that by the end of the debate he will have gone a long way to doubling that. The name “Nevis” is derived from the Spanish for Our Lady of the Snows, which is appropriate considering the weather we are experiencing today.

[Patrick Grady]

I cannot speak to lived experience of the kind described by the hon. Members for Norwich South and for Shrewsbury and Atcham, but it is my privilege as Member of Parliament for a Glasgow constituency to represent an incredibly lively and diverse community, particularly those constituents with Afro-Caribbean heritage. That community itself is extremely diverse, and it draws on the heritage and experience of many different cultures. As we have heard, the Caribbean is not a homogenous entity, place or territory; it is culturally, politically and economically diverse. The region encompasses some of the most and least privileged communities in the world.

In choosing the title for the debate, the hon. Member for Norwich South was right to draw attention to the inequalities across the region and the challenges they bring. Take the disparities between Haiti and the Dominican Republic, for example. They are two countries on the same island—not a concept we are unfamiliar with in the United Kingdom—but a person born in Haiti is two and a half times more likely to die as a baby, has a much shorter life expectancy, and will grow up to be almost 10 times poorer than a counterpart on the other side of the island.

The hon. Gentleman is also right that the Caribbean's social, political and economic landscape cannot and must not be understood outside the region's colonial past, the effects of which live on to this day. It has been irrevocably shaped by the history of western imperialism, the slave trade and the colonial—and perhaps ongoing—extraction of natural resources.

The juxtaposition of extreme wealth and poverty across the region speaks to wider global challenges that emerge when excessive concentrations of wealth come at the expense of sustainable public services and transparency. Transparency International said:

“far from being victimless crimes, corruption and tax evasion deprive citizens around the world of much-needed public services while at the same time undermining institutions and democracy. Developing countries alone lose an estimated US\$1 trillion each year to illicit financial flows.”

The UK Government know that only too well because several of their overseas territories in the region effectively operate as tax havens. The Cayman Islands alone are home to 85% of the world's hedge funds and an estimated 100,000 registered companies, and report banking assets in excess of \$500 billion.

The UK Government have to step up and play their part in tackling the illicit finance in their overseas territories. They could establish an illicit finance commissioner to monitor the presence of assets in overseas territories and Crown dependencies. They could ensure that their refresh of the integrated review has a dedicated focus on countering illicit finance flows and addressing corruption. They could establish a transparent and accurate ultimate beneficial owner register, enhance verification of that register, initiate investigations into known weaknesses, and accelerate timelines for entries linked to British overseas territories.

The Government also have to step up and do more to address challenges at the other end of the spectrum, as the hon. Gentleman said, including high poverty levels, instability and the legacy of slavery and colonialism. I talked about the extremes of inequality and instability that Haiti has experienced in recent years, through a

combination of natural and man-made disasters that have made it the poorest country in the western hemisphere. The UK could take simple steps such as uplifting its emergency aid provision, working with the non-governmental organisations that are still present in the country, liaising with the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights when he makes an official visit, and exploring what the UK embassy in Port-au-Prince can do to formally document and escalate human rights abuses witnessed by British diplomats on the ground.

As the hon. Gentleman said, climate change is another major driver of inequality and instability. Again, people in the Caribbean are particularly at risk. Of the 511 natural disasters worldwide since 1950 that have hit small states, 324 have been in the Caribbean, killing more than a quarter of a million people and affecting more than 24 million through injury and the loss of homes and livelihoods. It is expected that by 2050, 1 billion people in low-lying coastal areas will face escalating climate risks that undermine adaptation efforts. Of the Caribbean's 40 million inhabitants, 28 million live on the coast.

In addressing financial security and reducing inequality, the UK Government ought to address some of those points. They could learn from the Scottish Government's commitment to a comprehensive sustainable loss and damage package to help developing countries tackle climate change. They could pledge to target the most climate-vulnerable countries first, which would include nations in the Caribbean. Of course, they will find it difficult to do that precisely because of the aid cuts that the hon. Gentleman spoke about.

Of course, the majority of the hon. Gentleman's speech focused on the legacy of colonialism. He spoke incredibly powerfully about that, and he is right to put challenging questions to the UK Government and all of us in positions of responsibility.

Daniel Kawczynski: Does the hon. Gentleman, on behalf of the SNP, agree that irrespective of what the aid budget is today, a greater percentage of it ought to be going to Caribbean nations?

Patrick Grady: The distribution of aid should be determined on a needs basis, and it would be easier if there was more of the pot to go around. As I understand it, under the OECD and official development assistance rules, there are issues with how much of their budget the UK Government can give to countries that are essentially their own territories and have that counted as aid. However, they should be providing support of the kind that has been discussed, to enable those countries to raise themselves and their people to the standard of living that the rest of us take for granted. That is why I spoke earlier about addressing the impact of tax evasion and financial corruption. Huge amounts of money are flowing through some of these countries, but not everybody living in them is feeling the benefit. Perhaps if there was more transparency and fair taxation, some of those issues would be addressed.

I turn back to the question of colonial legacies. In recent years, many Governments and authorities across the United Kingdom, the US, Europe and other countries with historical involvement in the slave trade and colonialism have been asked, or are asking themselves, searching questions about how that legacy can be recognised and understood, and how amendments and apologies can

best be made. The hon. Member for Norwich South was right to acknowledge the ambitious and pioneering actions of the Trevelyan family, who I know are paying close attention to today's debate. I think we can all recognise that, in many cases, there is still quite a distance to go before justice is fully served, but there are exemplars and initiatives that point in the right direction.

In recent years, the city councils of both Glasgow and Edinburgh have examined their historical involvement in the transatlantic slave trade, and have adopted motions of regret and apology for that. The review for City of Edinburgh Council was chaired by Sir Geoff Palmer, who was Scotland's first black professor, and Glasgow's report was conducted by Dr Stephen Mullen of the University of Glasgow and championed by Councillor Graham Campbell, Glasgow's first councillor of Afro-Caribbean descent, who has been a real driving force in taking this issue forward.

When the report into Glasgow's connections was published, the leader of Glasgow City Council, Susan Aitken, said that

"the tentacles of the slave economy reached far into Glasgow and helped build and shape this city. It also talks about the legacy of enslavement in the form of institutionalised racism in today's Glasgow.

And this must be publicly acknowledged. We need to be honest about Glasgow's history, our involvement in the slave economy, the attempt at creating a Scottish empire and our deep role in the British Empire. There are people who live every day with the legacy of their ancestors having been enslaved. We need to step up and apologise, to express contrition and sorrow for our part in the moral atrocity of slavery."

As I said, the basis of that report came as a result of work by Dr Stephen Mullen of the University of Glasgow, who audited the city's connections to the transatlantic slave trade. The university, which I am proud to represent in this House, has taken its own steps and committed to pay £20 million over the next 20 years in reparations, in recognition of its role in the slave trade. That money will be used to support a centre for development research at the University of the West Indies, which the hon. Member for Norwich South spoke about so highly.

There are therefore calls for the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government to act at a national level in this regard. Of course, there is a time of change upon the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government, so perhaps some of the concerns should be drawn to the attention of those aspiring to be our next First Minister. But we are here today to hold the UK Government to account, so I hope the Minister will look at the steps being taken by local authorities, universities and other institutions across the UK, and consider how the Government can recognise and respond to the legacy of slavery and colonialism, in which their predecessors were complicit.

It is clear from the debate that people in the Caribbean, like people anywhere on this planet, deserve to live lives of dignity and respect, and enjoy basic financial security and freedom from stark inequalities. There have been significant suggestions today as to how the UK Government can work to achieve that, and I hope the Minister will respond appropriately.

10.24 am

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your direction this morning, Mr Davies.

I am very grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) for securing today's rather timely debate, and for his powerful and impassioned speech. It gave us all a lot to think about. I knew that my hon. Friend had mixed heritage; I was not aware that he was part-Grenadian. We do not have a big Grenadian diaspora in Leeds, but we do have a large diaspora from St Kitts and Nevis, which I will elaborate on a little more shortly.

Our country has a long-standing and historic relationship with the Caribbean. Our friendship with our Caribbean partners and allies is rightly based on mutual respect, trust and shared values, which is especially true for those nations that are members of the Commonwealth. It is really important that we continue to nurture these relationships as Caribbean countries attempt to tackle the existential threats posed by climate change and widespread inequality, and it is vital that the UK plays its part through the United Nations and other international bodies to help ensure that people in the Caribbean can live prosperous lives, free from the threats of violence and poverty.

Of course, one of those bodies is the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, and it is vital that Caribbean countries are able to engage with and work within the OECD to secure additional support for food security programmes, debt relief and other initiatives that seek to improve the lives of people living in the region.

As we know, much of the financial uncertainty in the Caribbean stems from the unfiltered flow of so-called "dirty" money into Caribbean countries' financial systems, whether in the form of tax evasion, fraud or other financial misdemeanours, all of which undermine the economic stability of too many countries in the region. This has led to states such as Anguilla, the Bahamas, the Turks and Caicos Islands, and Trinidad and Tobago being severely limited following their inclusion on the European Union's tax blacklist. I would be interested to hear from the Minister today how the UK is working with these countries to ensure that they are not centres for tax avoidance and other financial crimes, and how his Department is working with our European friends and allies on tackling fraud of this nature.

I turn now, as the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) did in his speech, to the crisis engulfing Haiti. As one of the poorest countries in the world and the poorest in the western world, as the hon. Member said, Haiti already faces a barrage of socioeconomic problems, alongside the threat posed by climate change. Labour supports the Haitian people in trying to restore political legitimacy to their country and in trying to bring the dreadful wave of gang violence and kidnappings to an end. There are over 200 gangs operating as the de facto authorities in Haiti, which is having a severe impact on the lives of all the Haitian people, as well as destroying their already significantly limited economic prospects.

As His Majesty's official Opposition, we are willing to work with the Government to help to resolve these issues, which, at their heart, stem from vast inequality and financial insecurity. Alongside this, Haiti is currently facing a cholera outbreak, with the World Bank saying that this has led to high levels of infant and maternal mortality, with prevention measures stagnating or declining, especially for the poorest households. This outbreak

[*Fabian Hamilton*]

has already claimed hundreds, if not thousands, of lives. Haiti is another country in the Caribbean that is having to suffer as a result of its tattered economy and political instability.

It is therefore vital that the United Kingdom supports free and fair elections in Haiti, so that its economy can begin to recover. Can the Minister say what plans he has to enhance the UK's support to tackle criminal activities on Haiti through our contributions to the UN's integrated office on the island? Working with our international partners and allies is the only way that this appalling situation will be resolved, particularly following the Haitian Government's request for support from the international community, which must be considered properly at the UN Security Council. I hope that the Minister agrees and I would be very interested to hear his response to the Haitian Government's request today.

We welcome the fact that the UK Government have joined our allies in the United States and Canada in imposing sanctions on the Haitian gang leader Jimmy Chérizier, after he was found to have committed acts that constituted serious human rights abuses. I think the Minister would agree that more must done, and quickly, to challenge those who threaten the peace and economic security of Haiti.

The situation in Haiti is extremely serious, and any further destabilisation would be catastrophic. Ninety-six per cent. of Haiti's population is vulnerable to further earthquakes. As we have seen in Turkey and Syria recently, as well as in Haiti in the past, the financial implications for countries impacted by those natural disasters are horrific.

The hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) mentioned the rise of the Chinese Government in the Caribbean region. With a more aggressive Chinese Government, tackling financial security and chronic inequality in the Caribbean takes on a new geopolitical significance, as the hon. Gentleman pointed out, for both us and our closest ally, the United States. As it is in many regions across the world, China is looking to expand its political influence in the Caribbean, owing to the extremely advantageous location of the islands.

For example, China has already offered Jamaica loans and expertise to build miles of new highways, and it has donated security equipment to military and police forces across the region. Those initiatives are clearly an attempt by China to gain influence and expand its footprint in the Caribbean through Government grants and loans, investments by Chinese companies, and diplomatic, cultural and security efforts. As the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham pointed out, China has done just that in Africa.

That Caribbean financial markets are generally small and there is a lack of raw materials in the region shows that China is keen to secure geographical strategic advantages, which could pose a direct threat to democracy and freedom in the Caribbean. Alongside the obvious moral reason, that is yet another reason why we must play our part on the international stage to secure a safer future for all the peoples of the Caribbean.

I am proud to represent Leeds North East, a constituency that prides itself on its rich diversity. We have a large Caribbean diaspora, and many of the families came to

this country to contribute to the economy and to our local culture. As I mentioned earlier, that includes the large community of people of St Kitts and Nevis heritage—indeed, it is the largest diaspora outside the islands themselves.

Many years ago—before 1997, when I was elected as the Member of Parliament for Leeds North East—I was privileged to attend a meeting in the Leeds West Indian Centre. I was the only white person, and the only person not of St Kitts and Nevis heritage. The occasion was to hear a speech by the then Leader of the Opposition on the islands, Dr Denzil Douglas. If a politician could be combined with a hellfire preacher, that was embodied by Dr Douglas. He was absolutely brilliant and captured the attention of the 200 or so people there. He also wished me well as the Labour candidate for Leeds—we actually have eight MPs in Leeds, but he thought I was the candidate for Leeds. We kept in touch over the years. When he became Prime Minister, he made another visit to the United Kingdom, and he came to Leeds to meet the diaspora. Indeed, his sister was one of my constituents.

I feel a strong connection to St Kitts and Nevis—not least through my connection to the high commissioner, Dr Kevin Isaac, who is in the Public Gallery, but also through one of my closest friends, Arthur France MBE. Arthur France is of St Kitts and Nevis heritage, and he is proud of the islands he came from. He was the founder of the oldest West Indian carnival in the United Kingdom, the Leeds West Indian carnival. It is one year older than the Notting Hill carnival, and celebrated its 50th anniversary a few years ago.

More importantly, Arthur was very active on the 200th anniversary of the abolition of slavery in the United Kingdom earlier this century. He led the way, with people descended from all over the Caribbean but based in Leeds, to make sure that those in Leeds who were not from the Caribbean understood the important effect of slavery on those islands, and how they were trying to overcome the terrible catastrophe that had happened to the people of his heritage and background.

When I am out and about in the constituency, I am sometimes reminded that my constituency is made up of people of different heritage. We have a large Caribbean diaspora—I mentioned St Kitts and Nevis, and I should also mention the Jamaican and Barbadian peoples who make up the diaspora in my constituency—and we also have a big Jewish community. When I go to the West Indian centre, people say, "But you do not understand, Mr Hamilton, what it is like to be the child of an immigrant." I say, "Well, I do, because my father was an immigrant." They say, "But you are not black." But that does not matter. As the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham pointed out, a person does not have to have different colour skin to be the child of an immigrant and to understand the trials and tribulations of being an immigrant to this country—especially when one's first language, as in my father's case, is not English. Indeed, today, I am going to the United Nations in Vienna, and I will do some further work to study my father's background; he was born in Vienna, and his parents married there in 1921. That should be very interesting.

One of my closest friends, who is sadly no longer with us, was a man called Norris Pyke. Norris was from Nevis. He was terribly proud of the fact that he met my

mother, who visited Leeds some years before her death, and I introduced the two. They could not have been from more different backgrounds and could not have been more different from each other, but they got on very well. Norris died of cancer about 15 years ago. His life's ambition was to see a bridge built between St Kitts and Nevis. He never achieved it, but he never stopped talking about it. I will never forget Norris Pyke, whom I want to commemorate today, and the contribution that he made to the people of those islands.

We share a long history of friendship with Caribbean countries, particularly those in the Commonwealth. It would be morally, politically and economically wrong to abandon them as they face truly difficult economic circumstances and rising inequality.

10.36 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (David Rutley): As always, it is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Davies. I congratulate the hon. Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) on securing this important debate. It has been good to hear the views of colleagues, and to recognise those who have joined us today in the audience, notably His Excellency the high commissioner for St Kitts and Nevis—the island that I think has had more mentions than any other—and the Trevelyan family. I feel at a bit of a disadvantage, because I have not been to that country and I do not have any diaspora in my Macclesfield constituency.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) for his contribution, which was, as always, very considered, and I will come to some of the points that he made. He described Denzil Douglas in quite a—

Cherilyn Mackrory (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): Colourful.

David Rutley: Yes, a colourful way. Denzil Douglas would be very proud of the way that the hon. Member for Norwich South conducted himself. I think it was in the same tradition. We recognise that.

We want to work with the Caribbean to solve shared problems, from climate change to gender inequality. We share important values, which is why, in partnership, we are taking steps to promote democracy, peace, prosperity and opportunity. Of course, many of our friends in the Caribbean region are part of the unique Commonwealth family of nations. Members have rightly highlighted the threat of climate change to the region. As small island developing states, the countries of the Caribbean are particularly vulnerable to natural disasters and economic shocks.

These are challenges that we must help to address, particularly in the aftermath of the pandemic and Russia's illegal war in Ukraine. The war may feel quite distant from the region, but it has big implications for the cost of energy, fuel and, for some in the area, fertiliser. As stewards of the ocean, Caribbean countries have a vital role to play in tackling climate change and protecting biodiversity, and I welcome the historic achievement at the United Nations at the weekend of a new treaty to protect marine biodiversity—a huge step forward that was acknowledged around the world.

The UK's vision for small island developing states, or SIDS, is set out in our international development strategy. We want to help them build economic and climate resilience by 2030, by supporting them to adapt to climate change, improving access to finance and preventing biodiversity loss. I will spend more time on access to finance later. Of course, that requires other countries and international organisations to share our vision. The fourth international conference on SIDS next year will be a key moment for the global community to come together and commit to action.

We continue to pursue an overseas development aid programme in the Caribbean region, focusing on strengthening disaster and climate resilience in eligible countries. We had a long debate on overseas development aid in this room a couple of weeks ago. Around £35 million a year is devoted to building climate-resilient infrastructure, to help countries withstand natural disasters and recover faster from catastrophes such as hurricanes. We are also supporting better access to employment for vulnerable groups, and fostering small and medium-sized enterprises.

The UK is also supporting climate action and disaster response by strengthening the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency and social protection systems. Through the UN's EnGenDER project, we are working to address gender inequality in climate change and disaster response work. We also support the Climate Resilience Execution Agency for Dominica, whose goal is for Dominica to become the world's first climate-resilient nation. Meanwhile, eligible Caribbean countries can also access two dedicated programme funds for SIDS, totalling £76 million, to help them benefit from international finance and realise the potential of marine economies.

The hon. Member for Leeds North East highlighted the situation in Haiti, which is a source of real concern to us both. There are implications not just for the people of Haiti, but for the region as a whole and beyond, because of the potential impacts of irregular migration and the violent activity that could flow should the situation deteriorate even further. We are actively engaged with the UN Security Council on that issue. We encourage international partners to work together to assist in Haitian-led efforts to tackle underlying causes of gang violence. We have seen positive progress on the ground, with economic and political accords, which are unusual on that island. The UK is funding multilateral partners, contributing more than £20 million each year to development in Haiti, including programmes to improve the resilience of infrastructure to natural disaster.

I want to come on to the importance of development finance on a global scale. We are working with partners towards reform of the international financial institutions to make more capital available, including to Caribbean countries. That is pivotal to the Caribbean and a subject I have discussed with many interlocutors. I am determined that we make progress across all SIDS, but particularly, given the role that I hold, in the Caribbean. As set out in the Glasgow climate pact, vulnerability criteria should be considered by multilateral organisations, including the World Bank, in their financing and allocation decisions.

We welcome innovation and reform in that regard. The new drive launched by Barbadian Prime Minister Mia Mottley, the very important Bridgetown initiative, aims to do just that. We are working closely with her and getting behind the drive to reform international financial institutions. We are demonstrating leadership

[David Rutley]

in financial innovation, such as climate resilient debt clauses, which will allow Caribbean countries to suspend repayments to UK Export Finance in the wake of a climate disaster such as a hurricane. We are shaping initiatives to expand the amount of development and climate finance available from multilateral development banks by hundreds of billions of dollars.

Those are very significant opportunities, which I am sure people recognise across the House. We are also working to get more subsidy for climate for middle-income countries and SIDS. We are engaging actively with the development of the new loss and damage fund agreed at COP27, which was raised by the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady). That is absolutely important. We are part of a 24-member transitional committee; the first meeting is happening at the end of March. We will work closely on that vital area.

We are also keen to help drive economic growth through trade and investment. We recognise China's interest in the Caribbean and we are working closely to focus on trade and investment opportunities. Others have talked about illicit finance. Work is ongoing with our overseas territories, and the Government and the Treasury are providing support in the form of technical expertise to tackle those challenges.

I am delighted that my predecessor as Minister for the Caribbean, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), launched British International Investment's first Caribbean investment when he visited Jamaica last autumn. That will build a new wave of investment in clean, green infrastructure, bolster businesses, create jobs and boost trade. We are also working with our Caribbean partners to ensure that the terms of our economic partnership agreement are fully implemented to boost trade.

My hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) mentioned the importance of duty-free trade. Our economic and partnership agreement with the Caribbean Forum countries provides duty-free and quota-free access to UK markets for all goods. We are working with the Governments in the region to ensure that the agreement is fully implemented. We can talk more about that separately.

The hon. Member for Norwich South made a really important point about the legacy of slavery. I would like to say some important words on that subject, which means a lot to many people in this room. I have listened with care to the points that have been made today. Slavery is abhorrent. We acknowledge the role of British authorities in enabling the slave trade for many years before being the first global force to drive the end of the slave trade in the British empire. We deeply regret this appalling atrocity and how it harmed so many people. We acknowledge that the wounds and feeling on this issue run very deep.

We believe that the most effective way for the UK to respond to the cruelty of the past is to ensure that current and future generations do not forget what happened, that we address racism, and that we continue to work together to tackle today's challenges, such as climate change, through the initiatives that I have set out. Those need to be hard-hitting initiatives that will make a difference in people's lives and help Caribbean nations move forward.

We have had a series of positive engagements with our friends across the Caribbean over the last year. I mentioned my predecessor's visit to Jamaica. In November, I was privileged to visit the Dominican Republic, the largest economy in the region, for a packed agenda of high-level meetings on trade, environment, security and many other issues. My colleague the Minister for Overseas Territories, Lord Goldsmith, was in Guyana last week. All these activities are designed to help build relationships and to move the agenda that I have talked about forward.

I plan to make a further visit to the region before the end of the month, and numerous senior leaders from Caribbean countries have visited the UK recently, including Prime Minister Skerrit of Dominica, who I was honoured to meet two weeks ago. We look forward to hosting Foreign Ministers of the Commonwealth member countries next week, and to the UK-Caribbean forum and the UK-Jamaica strategic dialogue in May.

The UK will continue to work with our partners in the Caribbean to empower people, protect the environment, address climate change and boost prosperity. We will also use our voice on the international stage to advocate for issues that are important to Caribbean countries. That is how, together, we will make progress on challenges and make the most of the valuable opportunities that our deep and long-standing friendships in the region have to offer.

10.49 am

Clive Lewis: I thank everyone who has taken part in the debate. I wish there were more here. There aren't, but perhaps in the future there will be, because this issue is not going to go anywhere. I will play my part in ensuring that St Kitts and Nevis is mentioned a number of times in *Hansard*, but it would be remiss of me not to say: Grenada, Grenada, Grenada, Grenada, Grenada, Grenada! My father, probably watching this in Gouyave at some point, would never forgive me if I did not mention his island in this debate.

This is part of the complexity of the issue—that a descendant of former slaves, a part of that injustice, can find themselves centuries later in the British Parliament making the case for reparations. That is the complexity of the issue; this injustice has been done, and yet it is this country that has given me the opportunity to stand here today to make this argument. We all acknowledge that the issue is complex, but life is complex, history is complex, and it is our job as politicians to be able to navigate that.

I thank the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) for turning up—I am looking at some empty Benches on both sides of the Chamber. He spoke, as have others today, about China. People in the Caribbean are well aware that China has its own motivations—not all of them honourable—for wanting to invest in the Caribbean, but it is investing and it does not have the colonial hang-ups and history that that money from the United Kingdom, which is not coming in, would have. It does not have that complex history, so we can understand why people in the Caribbean accept Chinese investment.

I welcome the hon. Member's comments on accepting the comparison between German-Polish reparations and British-Caribbean ones; it was an important and gracious point to make, and I thank him for it. I disagree with him, though, on the matter of racist immigration

policies and the EU's part in that. Of course the EU has racist immigration policies. "Fortress Europe" is a term that I am well aware of when it comes to immigration into the EU, but we have to remember that the campaign for Brexit was a complex campaign with many different actors and motivations. However, it would be remiss of us not to acknowledge that a key part of the Brexiteers' campaign was one based on a fear of all immigration—east European, European, and from across the globe. It would be wrong not to acknowledge that.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) mentioned, as have others, Haiti and the severe situation that it finds itself in. As I was listening to him, I could not help but think of CLR James and "The Black Jacobins", and Toussaint Louverture, the black Spartacus, because Haiti, of all Caribbean countries, has paid a heavy price for the defiance it showed at the turn of the 19th century when it freed itself from slavery. It has suffered for centuries the wrath of western countries—the United States and Europe—because it freed itself from slavery. I think it is fair to say that Haiti is still, to this day, paying a price for that resistance.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North also spoke about the sorrow that his country and party feel about slavery. We have heard sorrow expressed by Labour and Conservative Governments and now the SNP, but I am afraid that sorrow is not enough. There is a question for the SNP as we move into the future: if it one day extracts itself from what it might call English imperialism—I know some do—what will the SNP's position be on reparations, and all the economic benefits and advantages that that country now enjoys, in part because of what happened in the Caribbean? The Campbells and many other surnames testify to the Scottish slave owners and the benefits that came back to Scotland. It will be interesting to see where the SNP goes on that in the future. I will monitor that closely, and I think there are questions for them to answer.

It is always a pleasure to listen to my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) speak; he is so eloquent, kind and compassionate. I particularly appreciated the connection between what it is to be a Jewish immigrant and what it is to be a black immigrant. While there are differences, there are lots of similarities in the experience. I also acknowledge that it is way above his paygrade to be able to make any substantial position changes from where the last Labour Government were on this issue.

I understand that for my party this is a difficult issue, especially in the so-called red wall seats, where we feel such issues could alienate potential Labour voters. It is for the Labour party to make the argument and the case

as to why this is the right thing to do. I think that people will listen, because there is a connection. At the end of British colonialism, the deindustrialisation that occurred in many of the former glorious cities of Leeds, Bradford and Manchester damaged those communities. That was an integral part of decolonisation. The pivot of British capitalism away from manufacturing, leaving so many of those people and communities bankrupt and broken, is something we are still paying for today. That is why we have the levelling-up agenda. British capitalism pivoted to financialisation, and those communities paid a price for that. We can never forget that that is connected to colonisation, slavery and our history.

There is a message here for an incoming Labour Government—we do not know if that will happen, but I am confident and hopeful that it will. I would tell my Front-Bench team that this issue will not go away. It will be there, and it will land on the desk of my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), who I hope will be the first Caribbean Foreign Secretary. It will be on his shoulders to say yes or no on this matter; and many people will be waiting with bated breath in anticipation of his decision, and the decision of a potential future Labour Government. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North East will pass that on to the Labour Front Bench.

Turning to the Government, again, there is the question of paygrades. I did not really expect the Minister to be able to come here, issue a formal apology and then set out in detail the reparations that will be coming to the Caribbean. What I have done today is put down a marker. However, I will comment on some of the things the Minister talked about that got my goat a little bit. He talked about capital investment finance and new finance deals; those are about sucking yet more money out of the Caribbean, because although there is investment, a return is taken out. The whole issue of reparations is about not taking any more. After 400 years, we have taken enough from the Caribbean. Now it is time to put back into the Caribbean, not to continue the financialisation and extraction processes.

Today we kept hearing about the bridge between St Kitts and Nevis. Bridge building is what reparatory justice is also about; it is about building a bridge between the past and the present, between injustice and justice, and between Britain and the Caribbean—a bridge to a more prosperous future for all.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered financial security and inequality in the Caribbean.

Genomics and National Security

Philip Davies (in the Chair): I will call Mr Alistair Campbell to move the motion. I will then call the Minister, who has just arrived, to respond. As an experienced Member of the House, the right hon. Gentleman will be well aware that there will not be an opportunity for him to wind up, as it is a 30-minute debate. I call Mr Alistair Campbell to move the motion—sorry, I mean Mr Alistair Carmichael.

11 am

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered genomics and national security.

Alistair Campbell, of course, might be somebody who will wind up at some point. Notwithstanding that minor quibble, it is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Davies, and to bring what might be seen by some as a slightly niche subject to the House. I am pleased to see the Minister in his place.

It is worth stating at the outset why I have initiated the debate and what I hope to achieve with it. Let me first accentuate the positives. Genomics is a great British success story and the opportunities for further advancement in the future are phenomenal. In 2003, two years ahead of schedule, the Human Genome Project successfully sequenced the human genome. Since then, genomic research has transformed healthcare. Numerous genomic applications, including non-invasive prenatal genetic testing, DNA-based forensics, genetic disease diagnostics and covid-19 surveillance are now commonplace. Indeed, covid exposed the importance of genomics in monitoring new variants and enabling targeted interventions at a community level. The industry is already worth billions and it will only grow.

But we all know that where there are opportunities, there are also risks—and that is where I want to take the Minister's attention today. I have been a Minister; he has been a Minister. We all understand that although government can do many great things, it is often clunky and finds difficulties responding when science and technology bring change at a quite bewildering pace, which is exactly what is happening here.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for securing this debate; he is right to underline the issue of risk. Not so long ago I read an article that highlighted the previous existing ties between UK universities and Chinese state-linked companies, about which the US National Security Commission on Artificial Intelligence had issued a warning. It referred to a

“global collection mechanism for Chinese government genetic databases.”

Does the right hon. Member agree that although it is important to encourage the use of genomics for early intervention and prevention, the national security of information gathered is also of utmost—and perhaps even greater—importance?

Mr Carmichael: Absolutely, and the question of the work in our universities and other research institutions is one to which I will turn in some detail later. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving me the opportunity to highlight its importance in this debate.

Consider, though, what happened in recent years in relation to data protection. Regulation of data use was essentially analogue in a world that had gone digital, and it was therefore possible for a company such as Cambridge Analytica to take advantage of poor regulation and to build a business model that was all about the manipulation of opinion.

Genomics is a subject that is often poorly understood outside its own walls. A few years ago, we would have said exactly the same thing about data protection and mass data capture; we simply did not understand the significance of data capture through social media. Well, we understand that better now, and as a consequence we are having to scramble to catch up. If the Minister wants a bit of entertaining bedtime reading in this subject, I recommend Chris Wylie's book—forgive the vulgarity, but this is the title—“Mindf*ck”. It is about the creation of the Cambridge Analytica model, which used data captured from social media. If we do not learn the lessons of data capture and data protection, we risk the same things happening in genomics and national security.

As a country, we need to ensure that we have a suitable regulatory environment that will protect the gains we have made in the genomics space. That regulation has to protect individual data privacy rights and our national security and economic interests. I believe that our regime falls short in the latter aspect, and it must be made fit for purpose.

We know the positive applications of genomics, and in the coming decade genomics research could lead to breakthrough therapies for hundreds of genetic diseases. It could also create a truly personalised approach to healthcare and enable us to predict the risk of disease at a population level. However, there are also enormously dangerous applications of the technology. Genomic research could be, and in some cases already is being, deployed to widen global health inequalities, curtail human rights, and threaten global peace and stability. There is a spectrum of threat involved, which can range from population engineering to improve “population quality” to genetic extinction technologies in bioweapons.

Genomics is the next frontier in surveillance for repressive regimes such as China, and in 2022, the Citizen Lab found that since 2016 the Chinese Government had been conducting mass DNA campaigns in Tibet and in Xinjiang, as well as a police-led national programme of male DNA collection, to intensify state repression and control.

How are we in the UK mitigating those threats? From Watson and Crick to John Sulston's vision to map the human genome, applying technology developed by Fred Sanger, the UK has long led the world in this vital research. Still today, our world-leading universities and thriving genomics ecosystem, combined with our continued role in the western alliance, mean that the UK can lead the way in ensuring that genomics is used for the right reasons and in the right way. However, that will continue only if the right decisions are taken now.

More than half our research is a product of international partnerships, and those partnerships need to be based on shared values over the protection of human rights and on reciprocity. The Centre for the Protection of National Infrastructure already does important work to protect the integrity of international research collaboration, but we must be more proactive. Our institutions need to

get the most out of international scientific collaboration while protecting intellectual property, sensitive research, personal information and, ultimately, our national defence.

Already, it is evidenced that questionable actors are finding a way into the space left by poor regulation, and we risk finding ourselves a few years down the line in the situation we were in some years ago when we had to remove Huawei from the roll-out of the 5G network. Had we acted earlier on Huawei, we would not have had to engineer it out later.

In the field of genomics, more attention needs to be paid to the work of the Chinese gene giant, the BGI Group. BGI is one of a large number of Chinese state-linked companies that have been implicated in the repression of Uyghurs and the forced collection of genetic data. It has a lengthy history of collaboration with the People's Liberation Army, and is just one example of a company that should not be operating without constraint within our institutions.

The UK relies on the general data protection regulation to regulate the work of groups such as BGI and hopes that genomics firms such as BGI will follow GDPR, rather than the Chinese national security law, but I genuinely question just how likely that is. As the Minister will know, article 7 of the national security law states that

“organisations and citizens shall support, assist, and cooperate with national intelligence efforts”.

That is a law to which BGI is subject. The BGI Group does not submit itself to independent data security or cyber-security audits, and essentially, we are prepared to take BGI on trust. To me, that feels a little naive.

The US National Security Commission on Artificial Intelligence noted:

“BGI may be serving...as a global collection mechanism for Chinese government genetic databases”.

It also said that BGI

“poses similar threats in the biotechnology sector as Huawei does in the communications sector.”

In 2020, the US Department of Commerce added Xinjiang Silk Road BGI and Beijing Liuhe BGI—two BGI subsidiaries—to an export blacklist for

“conducting genetic analyses used to further the repression of Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities”.

If that is the conclusion of some of our most trusted allies' agencies, why is the United Kingdom so determined to take a different approach? I fear it may be that we are already further down the road of reliance on companies such as BGI than many in the Government are prepared to acknowledge and admit.

On a point made by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), a recent *Times* investigation found that no fewer than 42 universities in the United Kingdom that have links with Chinese institutions connected to the repression of the Uyghurs, espionage, nuclear weapons research or hacking. Many of them have had links with Chinese universities carrying out military work. Twenty-one universities, including Cambridge, Sheffield, Leeds and Queen Mary University of London, are partnered with what is termed “very high-risk Chinese institutions”.

The reach of BGI into key areas of healthcare and scientific research should be of particular concern. Let me contrast the view of the National Counterintelligence and Security Centre in the USA with the answer given

recently to a written parliamentary question asked by the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West), in which Ministers stated that

“the genomics industry is not designated as critical national infrastructure in the UK”.

The truth of the matter is that genomics is playing a role not just in the advancement of science but in economic competition between the UK and our allies on the one hand and competitor states on the other. It is a new front in the defence of the realm.

As far as I am able to tell, there have been no cross-departmental discussions at Cabinet level about the involvement of China and its state-linked companies in the UK genomics and bionomics sector. That has got to change. We need much more proactive work, both within the Government and among the Government, industry and academia. We need to identify potential issues and put in place structures that will protect data privacy and ensure the proper use of genomic research.

If companies such as BGI are not prepared to submit to meaningful compliance audits, we have to stop treating them as if they are trusted partners. At the risk of stating the totally blindingly obvious, once data is shared, we cannot get it back. Although I welcome the Government's moves last year, including the Trusted Research campaign, led by the CPNI, and the launch of the research collaboration advice team in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, those bodies need to be properly resourced and given proactive mandates to advise and support universities and others engaged in research in this area.

How do we start to turn this situation round within the limits of what is currently available to us? Other things can probably be done with the legislation that is currently going through the House, but what can we do with what is currently available? I suggest to the Minister that the most important step we can take is to bring the genomics industry within the definition of critical national infrastructure. That is defined as:

“Those critical elements of infrastructure (assets, facilities, systems, networks, or processes, and the essential workers who operate and facilitate them), the loss or compromise of which could result in (a) major detrimental impact and the availability, integrity, or delivery of essential services, including those services where integrity, if compromised, could result in significant loss of life or casualties—taking into account significant economic or social impacts; and/or (b) significant impact on national security, national defence, or the functioning of the state.”

It defies belief that genomics is not already included in that definition, and that the Government have apparently not even considered putting it in.

We need to start to scrutinise the work of Chinese genomics firms that are involved in the UK's health and research sector in the same way that we currently scrutinise firms in areas such as defence technology, telecoms and CCTV surveillance. There must be no trade-off between research success and the promotion of our democratic values and adherence to standards of human rights. Just as the UK Government eventually opted not to allow Huawei access to our 5G critical infrastructure, they must now consider the threats to our national security of allowing BGI and other companies linked to competitor or hostile Governments to access our genomic data.

This is not the sexiest subject that we are going to find, and I suspect that it will not be raised on many doorsteps yet, but consider how the previous exercise in

[Mr Carmichael]

relation to data capture worked out, whereby people understood too late what they had been part of, and the concerns that that raised. This is an opportunity for the Government, just for once, to get ahead of the curve. I would like to hear from the Minister that he understands that and that work is going on within the Government to do exactly that.

11.15 am

The Minister of State, Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (George Freeman): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I thank the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) for bringing this important issue to the House. He and I both know how important the subject is and that the Chamber is not full because of the business going on elsewhere. I reassure him that we take this issue very seriously. Some of things that we are doing are not in the public domain, for obvious reasons, but I will answer his questions. I agree with just about everything that he said, so we are very much on the same page.

Let me start, as the right hon. Gentleman did, by reminding listeners and viewers of what a success story British genomics has been, going right back to Watson and Crick's famous pint in the Eagle in Cambridge—and, in this International Women's Week and week of women's science, let us not forget the third discoverer of DNA, the great Mary Black at King's College London,¹ who often gets left out of the story—through the work that Fred Sanger and his team did at the University of Cambridge on the structure of DNA and how it works, and right up to our leadership in genetic research and medicine in the UK.

It is worth saying that that leadership is not just in human genomics but in animal and plant genomics. I was recently up in Scotland visiting the Roslin Institute and the James Hutton Institute. Across the UK, we have such an understanding of not only genomics across humans, animals and plants, and their diseases, but the application of those genomics to help to develop drought-resistant crops for Africa and disease-resistant crops that do not need to be sprayed with highly carbon-intensive pesticides. The underpinning technology is fundamental to net zero and global sustainability, to allowing agriculture in sub-Saharan Africa and to improving nutrition and health around the world. The front end now is cancer and rare disease, but the revolution in technology will drive sustainability and prosperity around the world over the coming decades.

I am delighted to respond to this debate, not least because, when I was the Minister for Life Science in the coalition Government, I had the great privilege of setting up Genomics England, which was our first big move to capture our leadership in this global race. I remind the House that we set up Genomics England very carefully as a reference library, not a lending library. Some 100,000 NHS volunteers and patients offered to be sequenced—it was not just the snip, which is the bit of DNA segment that we know is implicated in disease, but the whole of their genome. We could then look at whole-genome analysis at scale and link it to someone's phenotype, life cycle and hospital records, and start to shine a light on the real insights into the mechanisms of disease. We might discover that men over the age of 55 with red hair, a beard and early-onset diabetes are more

likely to respond to a particular drug than others. The work transforms not only the business of drug discovery but diagnosis, and it accelerates access for patients to treatments.

We originally focused GEL—Genomics England—on cancer and rare disease, which is where the appliance of genomics is most urgent and transformational, but we were clear that it was never going to be a lending library, so nobody would ever have access to an individual patient genome or an individual patient record. Researchers could interact with the database for the basis of research, but they would never be able to take out of the library any of the core data. I pay tribute to all the people at GEL, because in the 10 years since it was launched there have not been huge debates in Parliament or any scandals. People have not been marching up and down. In fact, thousands of NHS patients have happily enrolled and, through Biobank, we have taken the number of NHS volunteers to half a million. I pay tribute to the team behind that work. It is possible to build these datasets. We were absolutely clear that it was embedded in the values of the NHS: one for all, all for one, and shared data for national as well as personal good.

Alongside GEL, there is the UK Biobank, the National Institute for Health and Care Research BioResource, and now Our Future Health, which is looking at longitudinal datasets. We have not just done the deep science; we are building an ecosystem of genomically informed medical research and medicine in the NHS. I was particularly proud that we launched the NHS genomic medicine service. It is about not just science but research to drive better medicine in the NHS. In the NHS around the country, genomic medicine clinics are now accelerating access for researchers and patients.

The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland is right, as was the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), that we are in a global race in so many of these technologies, and particularly in genomics. In my recent speeches, I have set out what we mean by being a science superpower. It is not just a glib phrase. I define it not just as, first, world-class science—and with two of the world's top three universities, we are a world-class research centre. To be a science superpower we need, secondly, to go out and solve some of the problems in the world, not just study them; thirdly, to recognise that science is conducted in international, global career paths and put the UK at the hub of those networks; fourthly, to insist on attracting much more industrial research and development, to help to drive this country out of post-pandemic recession and get long-term investment; and fifthly, and crucially, to insist on and stand up for the values on which science is conducted: free speech, critical thinking, respect for intellectual property and respect for law, in a collaborative setting. That is true on our own campuses—we will never be a science superpower if we have a cancel culture calling out and preventing free speech—and is equally true internationally. We will not be a superpower unless we take a stand against other countries that aggressively use science and steal intellectual property.

I have put the research security agenda right at the heart of our definition. Here in the UK, in 2020 we set out the Genome UK 10-year genetic healthcare strategy, with £175 million for life-saving programmes around cancer and rare diseases. We have set out the UK biological security strategy, recognising exactly the points

1.[Official Report, 9 March 2023, Vol. 729, c. 1MC.]

made by the right hon. Gentleman about biosecurity in an interconnected world. In the pandemic, we saw the cost of disease to the global economy, as well as to our own, and we glimpsed the value of health and strong health resilience. That is biosecurity in terms of human health, but we are also in a world in which more and more food products and animal products are transported, and where climate change is driving new patterns of migration in insects and animals. There is a growing threat of infectious disease—pathogen biosecurity—which is one of the issues that our new economic security cabinet has looked at. We have now refreshed our biological security strategy.

Research security is at the heart of our international collaborations. Last year, I signed an agreement with Sweden, and there is a similar one with Thailand. In my work internationally, at the G7 Science Ministers summit in Japan this year and at the G20, we have led in putting research security on the table internationally as a key issue that we must all work on.

Mr Carmichael: I want to bring the Minister on to the point about BGI. I think we are aggressively agreeing with each other here, essentially because we are talking on parallel lines. Will he address the point about BGI and similar companies, and their need to comply or else be treated differently?

George Freeman: Absolutely; it is as if the right hon. Gentleman has read my notes.

Here in the UK, we are toughening up our regime. The National Institute for Health and Care Research has a set of very clear principles, as does UK Research and Innovation. We have set up the research collaboration advice team—RCAT—which is a new system to help all our researchers across the UK ecosystem with advice and support. We insist that they exercise due diligence if they sign a collaboration with, say, the “South China Sea research collaboration company”. We do not expect all our researchers to be policemen and women, but we do expect them—and they are now required—to show due diligence before they sign some lucrative research agreement.

We have set up RCAT as a specialist advisory group in the Cabinet Office, connected to our intelligence agencies, so that it can check quickly whether a partner is benign, hostile or dangerous.¹ That system has been working well since we set it up a year ago. The team is in the Cabinet Office, 350 queries have been handled, and we are getting international visits from people who congratulate us on getting it right, although a lot more remains to be done.

I reassure the right hon. Gentleman that we have an economic security cabinet, which I joined three weeks ago. It looks much more strategically and in granular detail across exposure to hostile actors in the UK economy. That includes everything from genomics to the biosecurity piece that I have discussed, along with semiconductors, space and cyber-security—the whole piece. We are now in a global race not just with our benign competitors but with hostile actors who wish to use science and technology to hold us back and undermine us, or to steal our science and technology for their own use.

BGI is clearly one of those danger points in the ecosystem. I share with the House the fact that, in 2014, I was wheeled out to give a speech on the occasion of the visit of President Xi to the Guildhall. When President Xi and then Prime Minister Cameron were wheeled in, I was speaking to around 1,000 Chinese delegates about Genomics England. I had been prepared to pay tribute to the work of BGI when my officials pointed out that at that point Genomics England was suffering several hack attacks from BGI each week.¹ That was a wake-up call for all of us.

We are well aware that we have to manage such risks properly. On that point, I commissioned and have literally just received from UKRI a detailed assessment of all the China research and innovation links across our system—we did the same last year for Russia. I have passed that through to my right hon. Friend the Minister for Security. He and I, and our officials, will go through it shortly in detail, looking in particular at some of the actors such as BGI that we know to be aggressive in their international acquisition of intellectual property.

I reassure the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland that we have put research security at the heart of discussions at the G7 and G20. If we are to harness science and technology for global good and to deliver that extraordinary opportunity of helping to feed, fuel and heal emerging populations safely, international collaboration will be required. However, we have to ensure that we defend not only the values of good and open science but our own economic security, and that we get the balance right. We do not want to conduct research only with our strong, strategic, military partners, but we want to defend our values.

The right hon. Gentleman made an interesting point about critical national infrastructure that I will pick up in the economic security cabinet. It is a point that I have made in connection with another bit of our science infrastructure. We all recognise that the threats now mean that we need to think about the value of other infrastructure. I will come back to him on that.

The right hon. Gentleman made an important broader point about how the Government handle data. It is fair to say that the pandemic revealed the best and the worst, in a way. The NHS put together the world's biggest clinical trial—not just bigger than the next one but bigger than the next 10, and faster than any of them—which was an incredible operation, embedded in the values of the NHS, and it worked brilliantly. Equally, the clunkiness of some testing data feedback from different towns and regions held back some decisions. I think the role of data will be rightly highlighted in the covid review.

I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for bringing this subject to the House. I will come back to him on the CPNI point. I look forward to pursuing the subject with him in future.

Question put and agreed to.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended.

1. [Official Report, 14 March 2023, Vol. 729, c. 5MC.]

1. [Official Report, 9 March 2023, Vol. 729, c. 2MC.]

Future of the UK Constitution and Devolution

[YVONNE FOVARGUE *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the future of the UK constitution and devolution.

It is a pleasure to open this debate in Westminster Hall. Members may or may not know this, but the Minister is a keen historian—he was in gainful employment before he came into politics. The great thing about this debate being in Westminster Hall is that this is the site of the 1265 Parliament, where Simon de Montfort made his name. I do not want to give a history lesson, least of all to the Minister, who knows the history much better than I do, but that Parliament was noted because it was about the relationship between the localities and the centre, and the powers of the Crown, Parliament and the magnates—barons and others—not just taxation. Although money and tax matter hugely—indeed, they are largely the story of how Parliament developed—other things matter, too, for the health of this United Kingdom. I refer, in particular, to the relationship between local areas and regions and the centre, and I want to address that this afternoon.

The millions of people watching this debate may think to themselves, “What is the point of debating something like the constitution and devolution?” These things change quite slowly, so why should we give up our time to think about and debate them? There are two big reasons why this debate matters, particularly now. First, it will surprise nobody in this Chamber or the House that our Union and our constitutional arrangements, including the relationships among and within the four nations of the United Kingdom, have been under strain in recent years, and that has had all sorts of political consequences. It is important that we find better ways of working together as four nations and within our nations. That is the first reason: it is important for the health of our country in its most fundamental sense that we debate this issue and come to a broad agreement.

The second reason is the economy, on which we have numerous debates; we have interminable discussions about inequality, levelling up and regional disparities. Although Members on both sides of the House, quite responsibly, sometimes have competing visions about how best to address those problems, we all share an understanding that we need to address them. Governance—how this country is run and works—is as central to the economic future of this country as decisions about tax, regulation and public spending.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for making such a powerful opening speech. I have just come from a meeting with Cheshire and Warrington business leaders, and they echoed exactly what he says. Their frustration is that they have made a plea for a devolution deal for Cheshire and Warrington but have not yet had a reply from Ministers. We agree, and there is an appetite out there.

Bim Afolami: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention, which is well timed, because I am about to come to his very point—not so much about the tardy response from Ministers, but about the necessary engagement on devolution deals and other such mechanisms between localities and the centre.

It is fundamentally important that we regularise the local government and devolution structures across England, in particular. I will come to the other nations, but let me first focus on England, which was the topic of the intervention. In a county such as Hertfordshire, there are district councils and a county council. In central Bedfordshire, a neighbouring county, there is a unitary system. In the Tees Valley, there is a mayoralty, but the powers are different in that mayoralty from the west midlands, and the powers are different again in London. I have probably missed out other forms of local government as well.

When we speak to people who are trying to navigate their way through our local government structures, they will often say—they definitely this say to me—that it takes them forever to figure out who is responsible for what. I have not even mentioned such things as local enterprise partnerships or the chambers of commerce, which overlap all those structures—let alone NHS trusts, integrated care boards and the other things that cut across the structures.

I mention that because it is critical, both for the health of our democracy and how our country runs and for economic growth—holding in mind those two things—to regularise local government structures, so that we do not need to worry about whether there is a devolution deal in this area or whether the right Minister or MP is lobbying in the most effective way. Everybody will have a clear sense, broadly speaking, of whether they are in one of three areas: in a county, where we should have unitaries; in a smaller urban area, where there should be a mayoralty with certain powers; or in a large urban area, such as Manchester or London, where the mayoralty should perhaps have greater powers. We need to regularise the structures so that we can finally move to a system in which people understand what the powers are and who is responsible for what. That responsibility is critical for democratic health and for economic investment and growth.

I was recently in Germany. When I speak to German businesses and say, “How does it work with investment?”, whether into Germany or into the UK, they often say that, if they are investing in most countries in Europe, they will go to the local mayoralty, for cities, or to the region, but in England—I say that precisely—they often do not know where to go. For example, in my county, if someone were to invest in life sciences in Stevenage, which is a hugely growing area and doing very well, they might go to Stevenage Borough Council, but the council would say that they also need to speak to the county council about different things and North Herts Council about certain other things. That inhibits our economic growth, and that is just one example.

Regularising and standardising the relationships is important, but this is not just about that. Let us assume that we had managed to do that, and we had a more standardised local government structure, such that people started to understand who is responsible for what. It is important that local leaders—we often talk about the importance of local leaders—have a more direct relationship

with Westminster as well. It should not just be that someone elects a Member of Parliament and, indeed, a Government in the general election, and they elect their local leader in a local election, yet the relationships between the local leader and the centre are not formalised. We should move to a system in which local leaders have, in a more standardised fashion, formal mechanisms to engage with central Government and Parliament. We could use the House of Lords, perhaps with positions in an ex officio capacity, though that may not be necessary. However, the broader principle is to have a more formalised way in which leaders from Cheshire, for example, have a relationship with Westminster and Whitehall that enables them to lobby and make their voices heard, and enables MPs to feed into that process effectively, so that we get much better governance. I am talking not just about Cheshire, as such a system might benefit Hertfordshire, for example.

Regularising these things would not cost much money, if any at all. This is not about paying extra and it would not change a huge amount. However, it would make sure that the voices of local people and local leaders are heard here in Parliament.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I am not exactly sure what the hon. Gentleman is proposing that regularisation should look like. In Scotland, we have a system of unitary authorities—32 local councils—that meet together in the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, which is the forum where negotiations with the Government happen. Local leaders are all members of and involved in COSLA, and they have a relationship with the Government through that system. Is he suggesting something similar, with a kind of unitary authority structure?

Bim Afolami: As with the intervention from the hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury), the hon. Lady's intervention provides me with a perfect segue to talk about Scotland and, indeed, Wales and Northern Ireland. We live in one United Kingdom—I appreciate that we have opposition from the hon. Lady on that particular question—and it is important that local people in all parts of the United Kingdom have broadly similar relationships with the centre, with Westminster and Whitehall, regardless of whether there is a devolved Assembly or devolved Parliament. By achieving that, we will help to knit our country closer together and, again, build the understanding and awareness of responsibilities with the population, business and economic actors in this country and outside it.

The next part of my remarks relates to the second Chamber, the House of Lords. People have been talking about Lords reform for more than 100 years and I am pretty sure that in another 100 years, people will still be talking about Lords reform, although I do not intend to be here then—[*Interruption.*] You never know.

Personally, I am not a proponent of an elected second Chamber, but I strongly understand and recognise the concerns of those who feel that it needs an elected element. It is clear to me that there is a way to help to sort out some of the glaring inconsistencies and problems with the House of Lords. We are all familiar with those issues, whether we are talking about a sense that it is too big, concern about certain people who have been nominated to it, the fact that there is no retirement age, or various other things that a lot of people have problems with, in

my view very reasonably. We can try to kill two birds with one stone by engaging local leaders in the broader governance of the country and by using the second Chamber partly to help that process to happen.

By doing that, we would help the voices of local people to be heard, because they would not just elect a local leader to deal with their local issues, and that was that. That local leader would then have a national voice that would help the governance of the wider country. Presumably, we are all here to help to improve the governance of our country. Where there are local leaders who have something to add and to offer, that should be shared and voiced, which could benefit everybody. In my view, we should use the House of Lords to do that.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): I hope that we can all agree that the bishops and hereditary peers have no place in a House of Lords. For the moment in the House of Lords, representation is disproportionately by peers from London and the south-east. Will my hon. Friend outline what could be done to improve representation from other parts of England and the United Kingdom?

Bim Afolami: This is how that could work. First, alongside what I was saying about local leaders, a standardised system of local government—whether people live in unitary authorities or a mayoralty, and whether they live in England, Scotland or Northern Ireland—would by necessity spread representation all over the United Kingdom. That is how we build in a lot of regional balance. Secondly, we could change the system by ensuring that, in the weight of the total number, there was always at least a significant minority—if not at least 50%—represented in that sort of way, rather than this being just about appointments. Ultimately, lifetime appointments cannot be made on a regional basis; even if we tried to, people are free to move around. However, if by necessity, in an ex officio capacity, the Mayor of Newcastle had a right while they were Mayor to speak in the second Chamber, it would have that regional balance.

This matters because not only would it improve democratic accountability and increase economic growth, as well as helping investors understand who to go to, but it would help to spread good practice and ideas. Constitutions matter because of what they practically do to the governance of the country. We currently have ad hoc relationships that depend on the political colour of the Government and, for example, of mayoralities, and whether particular individuals are perceived to be effective. To some degree, that is always the case. However, where we find good practice happening, we need to highlight it and have a vehicle for it to be aired in a public forum. Parliament, if nothing else, is a vehicle for the public airing of issues and debate. Linking local governance with the review of the second Chamber in that way would be effective.

I will add a bit more detail about why, economically, it makes a big difference if we get more standardised control of how our local government works, and how it links in with central Government. I like data—it is important. If we look at the data for most of the 20th century, inequality in GDP terms between the regions of the United Kingdom was quite low by European standards. However, by 2010, we had started to perform quite badly in comparison with our European partners,

[*Bim Afolami*]

and we have continued to perform badly in that vein. I happen to think that that is more about the strength of London than it is about the weakness of certain parts of the country, but we can have a debate about that.

The consequence of that high degree of regional inequality has been twofold. First, it has caused political problems. In certain parts of the country, people feel left behind and that, economically, they have not been given a fair shake. There are calls to reform the Green Book and the Treasury. There are all sorts of political shenanigans and things that Opposition Members will appreciate, as we do on this side of the House. Secondly, that regional inequality has contributed significantly to our national productivity problem, which is well documented. It is out of the scope of this debate to go into that in detail, but if there are big portions of the country performing economically poorly—even if London and the south-east are doing well—the country's economy overall is not going to improve as much as it needs to.

How does effective devolution help the national productivity problem? Some people might argue that it is about tax, education or skills policy passed in Westminster. Effective devolution, standardised and regularised in the way that I am describing, will help. There are two broad reasons economists give for productivity and regional inequality. The first is poor transport infrastructure in huge swathes of our country. The second is poor policy on innovation clusters, particularly in areas of high skill and around universities. Compared with the UK, other countries are just doing better in those two areas, although the economic debate is broad. If we had more effective power for local leaders, more of a voice to spread good practice, a clearer understanding of who was responsible for what and when, and a more effective fiscal package for each of those local areas, I submit that we would perform better in both those areas.

It is impossible for any centre of government in Whitehall and Westminster to focus appropriately on every single need of every single part of the country, because we make broader national and international policy. We cannot deal effectively with everywhere; that is the role of local leaders. Helping them do that better, whether that means transport infrastructure, skills or innovation clusters around top universities and areas of learning, is what we need to do, and to do that effectively we need to talk about money. It is easy for me to talk about powers and how things should be better and more effective. We have to talk about not just the money available for local authorities and leaders to spend, but what they are accountable for raising. I will be candid with the House. One of the difficulties politically that I and many party colleagues have felt at times is that certain local leaders seek to blame Westminster for all that goes wrong, yet take the credit for everything that goes right. I know it will be a shock that any politician would think of doing something like that.

In this country, we are incredibly centralised fiscally. About 12% of taxes are spent and raised locally, the lowest proportion in the G7 by some stretch. The next is Italy at about 17%, then Germany at about 30%, Canada at about 50% and the United States at somewhere between 40% and 50%, depending on how it is calculated. We are an outlier. I do not want to stray beyond the subject of the debate into Treasury policy, as we have

the Budget for that—I know the Minister will be itching to weigh in on the Treasury, and will hold himself back—but when we think about raising more revenue, we should do that as closely as possible to people in the places where that money is spent.

We should politically enable local areas to raise more money, because people would know what they were responsible for and how they were responsible for it in a more standardised way. By raising more money locally, they would be responsible and accountable for it, and there would be a higher degree of trust that the money would be spent well. If that money is not spent well, local people will vote for somebody else. That is how democracy works.

I finish by saying that yes, we need the powers to be regularised. Yes, local leaders across the whole United Kingdom need to be linked in much more closely with Westminster. I have not touched on the powers of the devolved Parliaments, because I am not convinced that a huge shift in power required at devolved level is necessary. When we think of England, we should ensure that what we do mirrors existing models. The hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) described how local government in Scotland interacts with Holyrood. That is the sort of model we could bring in more broadly, on a UK-wide basis, but the money really matters.

Enabling local areas and local leaders to raise and spend more of their own money, whether through property taxes, local income tax or a reformed version of business rates, rather than always relying on Westminster to raise all the money and dole it out, would be an effective way to build our democratic Union, as well as helping our understanding of how we are governed and our economy.

Yvonne Fovargue (in the Chair): I shall move to wind-ups from the Opposition spokespeople at about 3.30 pm.

2.55 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to see you in the Chair this afternoon, Ms Fovargue. I thank the hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) for his detailed introduction, much of which I agree with.

Like many hon. Members, I am a passionate advocate for devolution, because I am also a passionate advocate for democracy. When I see surveys that tell us that more than 50% of adults believe it does not matter who they vote for as nothing will ever change, and over 60% of people believe that Britain has a ruling class that will always rule the country, no matter what, then the message to me is very clear: something needs to change.

Democracy is fragile and cannot be taken for granted. We can protect our democracy by ensuring decision making is brought closer to people, so they have greater confidence in the decisions that are being taken on their behalf. We can do better than making areas jump through multiple hoops, at the cost of great time and expense, to take part in a competitive bidding process that is often neither fair nor transparent, the terms of which are often ultimately dictated by the centre. Genuine devolution is about empowering local communities to choose their priorities.

Speaking as a former council leader, and sitting next to another former council leader, my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Samantha Dixon), it

seems there is a certain level of distrust and snobbishness about the ability of our local leaders to be granted additional levels of power and resources. As we know, the biggest prizes on offer always seem to come with the precondition of an elected Mayor. I believe our local councils have proved themselves more than capable of working together, particularly through the pandemic, when there were multiple examples of cross-border working on a subregional basis.

My constituency of Ellesmere Port and Neston is governed by Cheshire West and Chester Council, which along with Cheshire East Council and Warrington Borough Council forms part of the Cheshire and Warrington Local Enterprise Partnership. It is not a metropolitan area or a city region. It does not have a single urban centre, but is made up of several large towns, one city and a considerable number of smaller towns and villages. It does not really have an established identity. It is not a defined place, as such, and it is made up of separate areas of economic activity.

In my part of the world, we look towards north Wales and Merseyside as much as we look across Cheshire. That is significant because although a case can be made for a single figurehead for a city or city region, it should be recognised that non-metropolitan areas have significantly different sets of circumstances. Be in no doubt, I warmly welcome the opportunities any devolution deal will bring to my area, but I am not convinced we need a Mayor to deliver that.

I genuinely hope there is a real opportunity to improve our area and that that is not lost because of Government intransigence over the governance arrangements. If it is the Government's position that there has to be a Mayor, then the biggest opportunities for devolution are denied to us. I do not believe that we should forgive such a petulant and inflexible approach; I suspect the public we represent will not forgive such an approach either.

Genuine devolution is not about telling areas what governance they must have, creating extra layers of bureaucracy or dictation from the centre. As we know, in this country power and wealth flow towards London and the south-east, then upwards into Westminster. Any power and resources that are given away usually go on Westminster's terms, with Westminster's priorities at the forefront. I believe that is the wrong approach. For too long people have felt left behind and held back by a system that does not work for them.

People already feel they do not have the power to take important decisions about the things in their lives that are most important to them, whether it is a local hospital that should stay open, where a new school might go or even how often the buses run. To empower local areas, we need a different, long-term approach that actually attempts to tackle the underlying issues and to really empower local communities by giving them the responsibility, power and resources to shape their own futures by—dare I say it—allowing them to take back control.

My plea to the Minister is to meet us and give us the keys to unlock the potential for our area. I have been in this place for nearly eight years, and throughout that time we have heard many times how the Government are prepared to allow greater devolution in Cheshire, but we always get left behind. We are seeking devolved powers, particularly in transport—on buses, for example. As we know, we are currently at the mercy of bus

companies pulling out services at a moment's notice. We also want to improve economic regeneration and get more housing in the right areas to meet the local housing need.

There is a well-developed plan, which has been on the shelf for many years now, and we just want the opportunity to deliver it. Leave preconditions about mayors who do not have local support at the door and, instead, talk to us about what more we can do to improve the lives of the people we represent. Do not dictate to us; liberate us. That is what genuine devolution is all about.

3.1 pm

Robin Millar (Aberconwy) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Fovargue. In the next six or seven minutes, I hope to set out a contra-view of the Union. I compliment my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) on bringing forward the debate. Colleagues will know that this is a subject close to my heart to which I have given considerable thought; they may think differently at the end of my speech, but I hope they will find it interesting none the less.

Let us take the old joke of a visitor coming to a rural area and asking for directions. The farmer, or whoever it is leaning on the gate, says, "Well, if I were you I would not start from here." Sometimes, when we approach a subject such as this, there is that sense of that if we disregard where we are at and start from some idealistic blank page, or some other framework that does not exist in reality—if we believe hard enough and screw our eyes up tight enough—we can imagine that it is that way and start from there and a bright new dawn awaits us. I just do not think that is where we are at.

I am afraid that when I hear words such as "regularising", I immediately think of words such as "cookie cutter", "wait your turn" and "stand in place", because that big stamp that is coming along will get you as well and turn you into something—into a moveable piece that fits with the rest of the puzzle created somewhere else. I find instinctively that that does not fit with me. Members will not hear a defence of the status quo from me. This is not an exercise in party political point scoring—which Members have avoided so far, and I commend them for that—but about exploring what the Union means, what its future holds and what role devolution might have to play in that.

I hold an organic view of a Union that has started and developed inevitably from things such as our location in the world; the temperate climate we enjoy, our maritime nature and identity have all contributed to the nation that we are. We cannot and should not ignore that, and we would not wish to. The system of law we have is, again, an important part of our identity. Identity—there we are. How has our reputation, for good or ill, developed around the world? The values we hold, the Judeo-Christian principles that have been at the heart of so much of who we are as a nation—these things have shaped us. Inevitably, that has dictated and shaped the relationships we have formed around the globe.

When Bill Gates came here a couple of years ago, I had the opportunity to ask him why he came to the UK Government. He said, very simply, "Because of your network of relationships around the globe." He recognised that history and the depth of contact and relationships we have across the globe and the influence that came with them. From that, then, comes the economy. We are

[Robin Millar]

the fifth or perhaps the sixth-largest economy in the world, and part of that is because of that network of relationships. Part of that, too, is driven by the internal relationships we have forged and the transport links, which have already been mentioned, across all parts of our United Kingdom.

We then need to think about the future. In understanding ourselves as a Union, what are we moving towards? That is an absolutely salient and current question. I again commend my hon. Friend for bringing forward exactly the question that we face now: what are we, now we are post-Brexit Britain? If we are no longer on a trajectory into a federalist, liberal, social democracy within the EU, where are we heading? Some would say we are going back to the days of empire and colonial oppression—that kind of thing. I do not think it is, but what are we heading to? That is the Union I think of, and it is absolutely correct to think about what the future holds.

Time does not allow me to develop my points in the way I would wish, but I want to make a couple of key points. I contrast the covenant that holds us together with the contract that is presented in the form of devolution. The covenants that hold us together are those relationships built on shared dreams, shared ventures, shared losses and shared institutions that we have built on the values we hold together. All those things speak to me of covenants, and a vested interest in what every other part of the Union is thinking, feeling, experiencing and hoping.

I contrast that with what we did by devolution. Let me be clear that I fully support the democratic establishment of devolved Assemblies and Parliaments across the UK—there is no disagreement from me on what has been established democratically. The biggest damage that has been done to our Union was not in the creation of those institutions, but in convincing us that the relationship is now not covenantal but contractual—that it is a transactional relationship that says, “You now do these bits. You now make the decisions on these policy areas, and we will give you some money for it.”

Trying to turn that covenant into a contract and a series of transactions does not work, just as it would not for my own marriage: “Right, Robin, on a Monday, you do the bins, and on a Wednesday, I will wash the dishes.” It is the same for our Union. Phrases like “regularising” and the focus on a technocratic design chill me a bit, because they do not capture the essence of who I think we are.

When we start to look at how the contract operates on points such as accountability, we start to find flaws. I support subsidiarity—decisions should be made as close to the local point of impact as possible—but we must not imagine that what we have done is perfect or should be replicable. There are deep problems, which I do not have time to develop today.

Let me finish with one analogy. We are all familiar with new housing estates. Very often, there is a green space in the middle of them. When the houses go up, and the green space is marked out, brown lines cutting across that green space, faint at first, start to appear very quickly. There is actually a phrase for them—they are called desire lines. Those desire lines do not reflect the footpaths that are in place.

I am sure hon. Members know what I am talking about. Residents have decided that the shortest way from A to B is to walk across the green. That is absolutely a metaphor for what we need to learn and how we need to think about the mistakes we have made and the lessons we need to learn about our institutions and how we think about our Union. There is a temptation to say, “We can create a beautiful place. We can put down straight lines, and maybe even curved lines, that reflect what people want,” but we would soon find that people’s actual desires—their organic response to their environment; the thrust of where their ambitions, hopes, dreams, relationships and ties take them—cuts across that place, and creates desire lines, not always where we designed for them.

I urge caution in imagining that technocratic cleverness could take us to a better Union. I urge the proper consideration of the organic model we have, which has grown the covenant that holds us together, and of the bright future ahead.

Yvonne Fovargue (in the Chair): I remind hon. Members that they should bob if they wish to be called in the debate. I call Samantha Dixon.

3.9 pm

Samantha Dixon (City of Chester) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Fovargue. I congratulate the hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) on securing this debate on an issue that is really important to the local authorities, businesses and constituents in my area. I am pleased that this is not just a debate on devolution to the nations, but on devolution within England as well.

The question of devolution to Cheshire and Warrington is something I had been working on for a long time before I was elected as a Member of Parliament. It is a journey that started when I was the leader of Cheshire West and Chester Council, and one that I am determined to continue now as Chester’s representative in Parliament.

Cheshire and Warrington has so much potential and so much to offer, and a devolution deal would give our region even more opportunity to fulfil that. Cheshire and Warrington has an important role to play in partnership with mayoral combined authorities in Greater Manchester and the Liverpool city region, and as a gateway to north Wales and the north-west of England. We have built a successful, inclusive economy, embarked on a net zero agenda and developed public service transformation projects. The three local authorities—Cheshire West and Chester Council, Cheshire East Council and Warrington Borough Council—have worked closely as a sub-region over many years, alongside partners in policing, fire, health and the local enterprise partnership.

Compared with the complex governance outlined by the hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden, the current system of collaboration between the three leaders of our three councils provides a strong, simple model that reflects our geography, our history and the identity of our different places. There is no need for local government reorganisation—we did that 15 years ago, and my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) has the scars to show for it. With so much local talent and potential, it makes sense for powers to be devolved and decisions to be made closer to home by local people who understand what our region needs and what it can offer.

A devolved Cheshire and Warrington could further progress its work on transforming our transport networks, backing our towns and rural communities, creating green jobs and achieving net zero—the list goes on, and the potential is endless. Locally, there is a real drive to see Cheshire and Warrington as one place with one voice. That is based on the county's shared culture and history, but it also respects distinct local identities. Too often, it feels like Cheshire is left behind; too often, my constituents express concerns that Cheshire and Warrington risks missing out on the funding and freedoms enjoyed by our neighbours in the cities.

I point out to the Minister not only that a devolution deal for Cheshire and Warrington is beneficial for our region, but that the region's strong economic base—in particular the Cheshire science corridor and net zero ambition—can help to meet the Government's levelling-up goals. There is no point in pitting region against region for funding. The only true way to resolve this issue is through devolution. I have one simple question for the Minister: what plans does his Department have to consider a devolution deal for Cheshire and Warrington, and will the Department meet representatives from across the area to discuss that further?

3.12 pm

James Grundy (Leigh) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Fovargue. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) for securing the debate. However, it is unusual that on this occasion, like my hon. Friend the Member for Aberconwy (Robin Millar), I have some doubts about the vision for regularisation, uniformity and conformity presented by my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden. My view is that devolution, as the hon. Members for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) and for City of Chester (Samantha Dixon) have said, is not a one-size-fits-all process.

As Opposition Members have rightly said, a mayoralty is a deeply unsuitable model for some non-city areas. Indeed, there are even some people in cities who feel that the mayoral model is not appropriate—certainly not the Osbornian model. I have spoken to people across the north-west, and the view not just in Cheshire but in Lancashire is that a combined authority model, or something similar—like the Greater Manchester Combined Authority before the mayoralty was created—is a much more collegiate and sensible model. I was speaking to colleagues in Lancashire, who said that a mayoralty would not work. One person representing the interests of everywhere from Silverdale to Skelmersdale could not do a good job. There is considerable diversity in the area, and it is a considerable geographic area; putting all that into the hands of one person is the wrong model. My understanding is that Conservative colleagues in Cheshire feel, similarly, that a mayoral model would not be—

Bim Afolami: I am listening to my hon. Friend's speech with interest. He has thought a lot about these matters. If we are considering organic change and development in a small c conservative way, as well as a big C Conservative way, I suggest working with the grain of what has already happened in the west midlands and Greater Manchester, which both have Mayors. Is he suggesting that we go back on what we have already done in certain areas, such as the mayoralty in Greater Manchester? That is perfectly reasonable and fine, but a

more small c conservative way of thinking would be to say, "We have already established a mayoralty in certain places. Let's work with that and then try to smooth out the huge distinctions between areas", rather than saying, "Let's revert to a period of time before there was a mayoralty".

James Grundy: I am not arguing at this stage for the abolition of the mayoralty, although I know that some do. Some feel it has not worked in the way it should. In Greater Manchester—this is the view of Greater Manchester Conservative colleagues—the mayoral model is distinct from the one in London because it has no Assembly to hold the Mayor to account, so there is no scrutiny, accountability or responsibility. Equally, I welcome the fact that there are slightly different models around the country, because different models take account of the different needs of different areas. That is a benefit of the system and not necessarily a downside, whether it means different mayoralties having different powers, some areas not having a mayor, some using the combined authority model or similar, or collaboration between existing local authorities.

Where everyone agrees that certain powers should be devolved further, that absolutely should happen, but where there is discord and dissent or where people feel it is not appropriate, it should not happen. Where there is cross-party support, which there probably is on what they are trying to do in Cheshire, clearly that model should be adopted. I agree with Opposition Members that a mayor would not be appropriate for Cheshire, given that it does not have a major metropolitan centre.

On the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden made—you will, no doubt, be amused by this, Ms Fovargue—the creation of large unitary authorities can sometimes be controversial. There was great distress in 1973 when my own seat of Leigh was merged with the neighbouring rival town of Wigan, which my hon. Friend may have heard me speak about on a previous occasion when he served in a previous role. At the time there was a great phrase illustrating the problem with devolution if done the wrong way. In 1973 the campaign against the creation of huge metropolitan authorities saw the process as one that took power away from local communities and gave it to a larger, more remote one, and its slogan was, "Don't vote for Mr R. E. Mote". That did cause problems for Conservative candidate Roger Moate during the following election. But that is how people sometimes feel—that power is being taken further away.

To finish, because I realise we are pressed for time and others may wish to speak, devolution down to regions does not always work. I will give my hon. Friend a good example of this. On transport, he is 100% right in principle. In the mid-1960s, one of the predecessor local authorities to Wigan—Golborne Urban District Council—wrote to the Government on the desperate need for a bypass for the town of Leigh and the villages of Lowton and Golborne, which were mining communities at that time. About 60 years on, we are still waiting for that bypass to be finished, because the problem is that it would run all the way from Bolton down through Leigh and then down to Warrington.

In 1984, when I was a small boy, the middle bit of that bypass was finished—the bit that runs from virtually the border with Bolton down to the border with Warrington—but neither end has been finished. That is because it

[James Grundy]

runs across three different local authorities and two counties—Cheshire and Greater Manchester. The question whether Greater Manchester is a county is a point of debate for many. Certainly, people in Saddleworth would get angry if someone said they were not in Yorkshire. Devolving powers down to the mayor would not work because we would still have to deal with the problem of Cheshire—

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Alex Burghart): The problem?

James Grundy: That is perhaps a blunt way of describing it.

In some cases, it would be better if these powers and the fragmented responsibility for delivering local infrastructure were taken up to the departmental level, as we do with national schemes, and other powers were devolved down.

By and large, this has been a non-partisan debate, and I fundamentally welcome that. We must listen to what local representatives say about the model of devolution and the suite of powers they want, and not be too prescriptive about the model and powers. Standardisation is the wrong way, although I understand what my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden was trying to argue. If we listen to local representatives, we will get the best version of devolution with proper scrutiny and accountability, and a system that actually works and that local people believe in. The worst thing we could do is impose a uniform model of devolution on everyone whether they want it or not. The Government would lose the good will of a goodly number of Back Benchers if they tried to do that, and would face considerable opposition from the other side of the House.

I am a great champion of localism; it must be the founding principle of devolution. As I said, one size does not fit all.

3.21 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a real pleasure to speak in this timely debate, and I thank the hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) for securing it. It is even more pertinent to us in Northern Ireland. Its title is “Future of the UK Constitution and Devolution”—how important that is for us. I am mindful that we are in the middle of a proposal from the Prime Minister, and I do not intend to develop that debate, but I will talk about what is important to me.

This Union is of the utmost importance to me. The flag of our four nations means so much to me personally and the people I represent. Whenever I go into Central Lobby, I never fail to look at the four nations together as one. I say respectfully to the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) that I believe we are stronger together.

The Union is also important to me because members of my family and many other families made the ultimate sacrifice and gave their lives in service to the flag and the Union it represents. I am sure there is not one person in this Chamber who does not understand what I am saying and why the Union is important to us. My cousin, Kenneth Smyth, a sergeant in the Ulster Defence

Regiment, was murdered by the IRA on 10 December 1971—by those who could not abide his service to the Union under the Union flag.

I have said previously that the red-line debate on Northern Ireland is not about a line in pen over pride; it is about a line in the blood of people we have loved and miss to this very day. That is why the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland means so much to so many of us who are honoured to take our seats in this, the mother of Parliaments. I do so with pride. It is a privilege and an honour to be here serving the people of Strangford in Northern Ireland, and I never take that lightly. It is our responsibility to do all we can to tell others without that experience why we cling to our position in the great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Devolution is essential. People with local knowledge, accountable to local people, are vital. That is why I support devolution, and why it is important that we have it in place. I know that some will say, “Then get back to it,” but that is the crux of the DUP’s issue. The last thing we wanted was to walk away from Stormont. We believe in it, as imperfect as it is. We lived for years under an absent, faceless civil service, which led decision making. It was not good, and we recognise the dangers of that.

However, when faced with the insidious protocol and the burden it placed on local businesses, as well as the devastation it caused to our constitutional position, we had to take that decision. The future of Northern Ireland within this Union is worth every sacrifice that we have given, and every sacrifice that we ask for. That is why our Members of the Legislative Assembly took that decision overwhelmingly, knowing that their pay would be cut and that they would have difficulty making ends meet in their families. The Union of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland means as much to them as it does to me.

That is why we were thankful for the PM’s intervention and negotiations, but we have to seek a legal opinion and I understand that will be back within two weeks. We have to understand what the intricacies of this agreement and the Windsor framework mean. We do not want the Windsor framework to become the Windsor knot for those of us who are of a Unionist persuasion, so we need to know the full detail and to have a full understanding. Ultimately, we seek the opinion of the people of Northern Ireland, whom we represent, in relation to this deal.

Time stops for no man—no woman, either. I understand that I am not a young man, and I suspect that I have a few more years on the clock than nearly everyone in this Chamber. That is just the way things are. I still feel young, by the way. My thoughts have turned to the legacy that I will leave my children and my grandchildren, and my constituency of Strangford. I hope to leave a legacy as someone who stood over the decisions taken as being in the best interests of Northern Ireland in this great nation. I do not say that lightly—it means as much to me as I believe it means to many others in this Chamber.

For me, devolution is the way forward, but that cannot be in place without the Unionist people having a seat at this table. We have been put out in the cold for sticking to our principles. I remind everyone, gently but sincerely, of two prominent architects of the agreement and the peace settlement in Northern Ireland: Tony Blair and Bertie Ahern. Both of those gentlemen are of

prominence in the Republic of Ireland and, of course, as former Prime Ministers. Both have said that no agreement can go forward without full consideration being given to it by those of a Unionist persuasion; in other words, an agreement can never be an agreement without our input. We are a sturdy people and we will remain so until the resolution is one that will leave a stable Northern Ireland in the Union for my six grandchildren and for every grandchild across the whole nation.

I will be urging my party's MLAs to nominate a Speaker, as soon as I can face the Unionist people with the knowledge that devolution and democracy are not being circumnavigated. We need to ensure that we can celebrate the Good Friday agreement, and not simply because the President of the United States of America is declaring that we must do so. I am always reminded of a comment he made when he was first elected. I watched it on TV. He was going to a state celebration and someone asked him a question, and he said that no Orangeman was welcome there. Well, as an Orangeman since 1981, I have great pride in my organisation, and I take a real exception to the President's comments. If I do meet him, I will remind him that he is shaking the hand of an Orangeman, just to remind him of that particular occasion when he said that and tried to denigrate us as Orangemen. We will make the decisions for ourselves without any undue pressure from others, because that is what a sovereign nation does, and I believe that we have just about maintained sovereignty on the mainland, if not in Northern Ireland post Brexit.

If this framework is the way forward, it will still be the way forward once we have had time to study and to consult. For the EU and its bureaucracy to try to dictate the timeline of our consultation and study is something that cannot stand up to the true meaning of democracy. I strongly believe in the importance of democracy.

I finish with these comments: the Union means the world to me, and I would give everything in the world to protect it for my grandchildren, who deserve to grow, to live, to work and to love in a thriving Northern Ireland. I ask everyone in this room, from all parties, who believes in the UK constitution and devolution to not just listen to my words but take in their meaning, to understand my approach and to stand with me—and the Ulstermen and Ulsterwomen—and for the Union of Great Britain and Northern Ireland when the time comes.

3.29 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I am glad to speak in this debate on International Women's Day. Unfortunately, we are significantly outnumbered, but it is nice to have a woman in the Chair and to hear a colleague—only one, sadly—speak with a huge amount of knowledge and experience that she brings to her role.

I thank the hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) for securing the debate, which he opened with a short history lesson. I give him credit: it was very interesting. This is also the building in which William Wallace was tried; if we are talking about the history of the constitution and devolution, this building plays an important role in that part of Scotland and England's history.

This has been quite a disparate debate with a lot of different takes on what is an incredibly broad subject; I understand why everybody has come to it with slightly

different views and from slightly different positions. I will talk a bit about what a number of people around the room have said, and then about my views and my take on the debate title we were given.

First, on the way that local authorities work, we have 32 unitary authorities in Scotland. My constituency is Aberdeen North, which is wholly within the Aberdeen City Council area. The Aberdeenshire Council headquarters are also in my constituency, because Aberdeenshire surrounds the city, so I have the honour of having two local authority headquarters in my patch, which I am not sure that many MPs are able to say—certainly not in Scotland. The 32 local authorities work through COSLA in their relationship with the Government.

The hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden in particular, but also several others, spoke about financial matters. In recent years we have instituted participatory budgeting for local authorities. One per cent. of local authorities' budgets has to be spent through a participatory budgeting route, which means that people in local communities decide where to spend that money—regeneration money, in a lot of cases—to best improve their communities. It does work, because the people choose their priorities. The priorities do not come from the centre; they are chosen by the people. Suggestions are put forward and costed up, and then decisions are taken by people who have the ability to vote if they live in certain areas of our city. I am speaking specifically about Aberdeen, but we do it across Scotland. The process works, it makes a difference and it is helpful for returning power to local communities.

We have done an awful lot to improve community empowerment in recent years with things such as community asset transfers, whereby buildings that are no longer being used by the city council, for example, are transferred over to community groups for very little money, giving those groups the opportunity to run them and to have a place. Community asset transfers do not just involve buildings; in some cases, tracts of land have been transferred. They have been incredibly successful.

One thing that could be done to improve local leadership is paying councillors reasonable salaries, as we have done in Scotland. I confess that although I have tried, I do not understand the local government systems in England. They seem to be different in all different parts of England and I am utterly baffled by the whole thing. In Scotland, councillors are paid a salary that, while not enough to live on—it is supposed to be two thirds of a full-time wage, although I do not know any councillor who only works two thirds of the time—is an actual salary.

James Grundy: Let me try to help the hon. Lady. There are often different wage structures in England because the different tiers of authorities have different responsibilities, whereas with the unitaries in Scotland the responsibilities are obviously uniform across that system. For example, county councils deal with roads and potholes, while district authorities tend to deal with lower-tier things, which sounds hilarious compared to potholes. I hope the hon. Lady understands that although the wage structure varies greatly, that is the reason why.

Kirsty Blackman: I am sure the hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct on that, but the thing is that if we are not paying councillors a reasonable amount of money, we are not going to get the high-calibre local leaders

[Kirsty Blackman]

that we need, or even just people who are able to dedicate the time that is necessary to do the role for the money they are given. That is one thing that I suggest could be improved.

The hon. Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) made a suggestion about the House of Lords. Abolishing the House of Lords would be a better way forward than giving it more power. Labour first stood on a platform to abolish the House of Lords in 1910. Despite some moves towards having fewer hereditary peers, we have not yet got to the position of having none. If we are going to give any more power to the unelected House of Lords, we need to have a serious look at the way its Members are selected, particularly given recent events.

The constitutional settlement is broken, and the situation is getting worse. We are supposed to have parliamentary sovereignty and a situation where Parliament can and does make decisions. I disagree with the hon. Member for Aberconwy (Robin Millar), who suggested that we need to look at what we have and fix it, rather than starting with something new. With the constitutional settlement and the way this place works, I think we are beyond tweaking and fixing.

The whole idea proposed about Brexit was that it was about returning power—people said, “We want Brexit because we want power to be returned”—but over the years this Conservative Government have repeatedly moved power away from Parliament to the Executive. That continues to happen. We will see it next week, when I imagine the Chancellor will present the Budget without an amendment of the law resolution. That seems like a small thing, but it makes a significant difference to parliamentary power and sovereignty. It is a change in the way that our constitution works that has just been slipped through. A former Chancellor wrote to the Procedure Committee to say, “This is just a tweak—it is just a small change.” It is not; it massively dilutes MPs’ power to amend the Budget.

In Scotland, we have an agreed devolution settlement. The problem we have is that the Westminster Government, in their post-Brexit antics, have done what they can to return power from the Scottish Parliament in Holyrood to this place, most recently with the section 35 order. Absolutely, that is in the Scotland Act 1998, but it is supposed to be used only in extremis, when there is a massive negative impact on the rest of the UK. There is no good argument that Ministers can make that that is the case now. The only way we will solve the problem and get a collegiate relationship between the Scottish Government and the UK Westminster Government is if Scotland is an independent country and we are able to have this conversation on our terms—on the terms that the people of Scotland want us to have it. In Scotland, it is not Parliament that is sovereign; it is the people of Scotland, and we intend that the people will be able to have their say and choose the way forward.

3.38 pm

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Fovargue. I congratulate the hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) on securing this important debate. I believe

that our constitution, and in particular the devolution ideas in it, holds the key to many of the challenges that we face as a country. With the right approach to these issues, we can unlock the enormous potential of all our nations and regions and embark on a period of national renewal.

With characteristic courage, the hon. Gentleman set out a full new constitutional settlement. I thought that was a good place to start the debate. I agree with the need for greater coherence. Like the hon. Members for Aberconwy (Robin Millar) and for Leigh (James Grundy), I would probably stop short on standardisation, but the clarity that the hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden gave on that helped too.

This is an interesting issue, because I think we meet in the middle on a lot of these things. There are disagreements on the Government Benches and there are disagreements within the Labour party, whether on Lords reform, electoral reform or devolution. That we have disagreements within our parties is a good thing, and pretending we do not is a bad thing. That disagreement makes these debates very interesting.

I agreed with an awful lot of what the hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden said, particularly the twin points that our constitution and the Union more generally are under strain, and that the constitution and devolution are at the root of tackling our economic challenges as well. Those points were very good.

The Cheshire caucus was well represented in the debate. In his intervention, my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) talked about getting a deal for Cheshire and for Warrington, and my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) talked about the multiple hoops and hurdles that it feels like his local community has to clear just to take some degree of control over what happens to them.

I was particularly taken by what my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Samantha Dixon) said about the way in which local people there had got themselves organised. A lot of the complications and hurdles that the hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden talked about do not apply to them because they are organised. I have an awful lot of confidence in our local leaders—I love local government and am a localist at heart—so my commitment to the people of Cheshire is that we believe they should have access to the maximum powers. I will set out how we will go further than the powers set out in the Levelling-Up White Paper. That should not be contingent on a governance model; it is for local people to decide, not for me. I strongly believe that.

That takes me to the points that the hon. Member for Leigh made. I think the different models of local government are a strength, because I want them to reflect local realities, whether that is geographic realities, cultural things or whatever else. The thing for me is that local authorities should all have access to the same powers; as to how they organise themselves, that should be a local decision.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) made important points about the Union. This is fundamentally a question of our Union. He used the word “legacy”; the thing that weighs on me is that every generation and every Parliament that is elected are, for

that period of time, the custodians of our constitution, democracy and Union. That is quite a heavy weight to be bear. We all have a responsibility to say at the end of our time here, whether short or long, that we safeguarded and protected those things and bequeathed them to the next generation in a strong and healthy way. That is much of our challenge.

The hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden said that we are too centralised, and I wholly agree. We hold communities back because we have a system that hoards power in this place. It is a system that thinks that, whether we are discussing what is best for skills, transport, planning or job support, we know better than the people who actually live in our communities. I fundamentally disagree with that view. It has created an unbalanced economy that makes too little use of the talents of too few people in too few places, with the rest of us—my community included—being written off as not being able to contribute. That is why there is so much appetite for a new approach. So much of our political debate over the last decade has been underpinned by people's yearning to have more control over their lives and over the country; the clamour for a fairer future, with new opportunities for the next generation; and the desire to build back for our communities, supported by strong local economies and underpinned by decent public services.

The country knows that it is time for a change. We have seen the devolution of power to England's regions in recent years, but it is not sufficient. There are too many deals, the ambition is too modest, and too many places have been shut out. It should be a point of great anger for many of us—especially those who are locked out of the current settlement, as many colleagues are—that at some point Ministers looked at leaders in parts of the country, whether the West Midlands, Teesside or Greater Manchester, and thought they were good enough to have certain powers, and looked at the rest of us and thought we were not. That is fundamentally wrong.

By dint of our common personhood, we should have access to the same opportunities. That is why the Leader of the Opposition asked Gordon Brown, the former Prime Minister, to produce a report on the future of the UK. We are currently consulting on it, but it contains really great proposals that, at their heart, would represent the biggest ever transfer of power from Westminster to the British people.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): From a Welsh perspective, the Gordon Brown report was extremely unambitious. I encourage the shadow Minister to realise that there is a huge opportunity for Labour, as it goes into the general election, to deal with many of these issues, especially by empowering the Welsh Government with the necessary fiscal levers they need to deal with the Welsh economy. I encourage the Labour Front Bench team to be as ambitious as possible going into the next election.

Alex Norris: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that intervention, which I will take as a contribution to our consultation. That point has been well made by our Welsh colleagues, so it has been heard.

In January, the Leader of the Opposition set out the type of thing that we are talking about today when he spoke about our “take back control” Bill, which is about new powers for our communities over skills, the Department for Work and Pensions, transport, planning

and culture, all to help to drive growth by developing hundreds of clusters of economic activity. It would be a fundamental shift in power and something to be really excited about—I know I certainly am.

Power is one half of the arrangement, but the other half is, of course, finance. We have to change what the Conservative Mayor of the West Midlands called the “broken begging bowl culture”. Local Government Association research shows that over the four years to 2019 there were 448 separate funding pots from which councils were invited to bid. Much of that was for fairly basic services, such as cleaning up chewing gum or having more public toilets.

We need to get away from that competitive bidding process in which the Government pick winners and losers, and someone always loses. In fact, the winners are also losers, because the money they get back is less than they have had cut from their budgets. We need to end the beauty parades as soon as possible. The Government must address the point that they do not want to address in respect of round 2 of the levelling-up fund: many communities up and down the country put hearts and souls into good bids, only to find out later that they could never win. Communities being held in such contempt has to change.

I will use my remaining time to talk about our Union, because a debate about the constitution and devolution is a conversation about union. I am a unionist in many senses of the word: a trade unionist all my adult life and a UK Unionist for as long as I can remember. I believe strongly in the power of the collective and co-operation. I value others' contributions and they value mine, and together we are better than the sum of our parts. Unionist is what someone is; unionism is what they think and do every day. We work that muscle to build that.

It is clear that the next Government will have a huge job in restoring our Union. I am sad to say, because it is a loss to us all, but the Government have been the best friend to nationalism that those who wish to leave our Union could ever have. We need to restore our settlement to a union of equals, restating that self-government and shared government are hugely beneficial to all the nations of the UK. The Brown commission spoke persuasively on that.

We need to restate that we believe in local decision making not just when the decision is one that we want made, and that differences strengthen rather than weaken us. We should also restate that there is huge economic potential across all our nations and regions, but there is not the same degree of opportunity. I believe we have reached a positive consensus on devolution, at least in England, although we have to do much more in Scotland and Wales, as colleagues have said.

The challenge is to get that power and those resources out of this place and to those communities, setting them free. That is how we will improve communities, restore the public's faith in democracy and get economic growth that benefits everyone. That is a really big prize that is incumbent on us to deliver.

3.47 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Alex Burghart): It is a pleasure to respond to this wide-ranging debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) on securing it.

[Alex Burghart]

He was kind enough to say at the outset that I used to be a history teacher; I could not help remembering marking bright undergraduates' essays. I would sometimes write, "This is a very good essay, but I can't help but think you might have got the title wrong." We have four overlapping debates. One is on history, which I shall indulge in; one is on the nature of English devolution; one is on UK devolution; and another is on the structures of the constitution. Those things obviously interlink.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) was right to mention where we were, in Westminster Hall. Central Lobby is the embodiment of our four nations and the four physical parts of our constitution: the Lords, the Commons, the ancient Westminster Hall and the Committee Rooms all coming together, along with England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

The hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) mentioned that William Wallace was tried in Westminster Hall. She did not mention that it was also where James VI was greeted when he came to be both King of England and King of Scotland. The evolution of those two ancient kingdoms tells us a lot about where the debates on localism come from, because they are very old indeed. In several cases, the shires of England are older than England itself; indeed, Kent probably dates to the pre-Roman period.

When we hear debates about whether Wigan should be allowed to switch over, I am reminded of the passionate arguments against Humberside. I also thought my hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (James Grundy) was very brave—in this company—to refer to the problem of Cheshire, because we have heard powerful advocacy on behalf of the people of Cheshire for the sort of local representation they would like.

It was from the shires of England that Parliament was formed in the 13th century. In the pre-conquest period, the leaders of the shires were represented in the Witan. These are very old structures and identities, and that history still infuses the debates we have today about where boundaries should lie and about where power should derive from. Obviously, the answer is in the interaction between the centre and the locality and in the adequate balance of the two.

On English devolution, I respect the remarks from the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) about these issues crossing party lines, and that has contributed to the open and good-natured debate we have had. The reason this issue cuts across party lines is that it is not easy, and there is variation in how people see things in different parts of the country, based on their geography, history and recent experiences.

Pity me somewhat, for I am merely a Parliamentary Secretary in the Cabinet Office, not a Minister in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, but I have heard the representations made by Members from Cheshire, and I will be certain to put them to colleagues in DLUHC. I am sure they will thoughtfully consider what has been said and the request for a meeting.

The Government have been a powerful advocate for devolution, and we have practised what we preach. I have seen the results in my time in Government. I was lucky enough to be the Minister for Apprenticeships in

my last job but one. In Teesside, I saw the new Tory Mayor working with central Government and with local communities and business to create staggering new opportunities. It was the first time that I had seen all these things come together. The Government created the freeport—a place where there could be opportunity. The Mayor got in touch with BP, and said, "Here is a place we can do business. Come and put your hydrogen plant here." BP went to the local colleges and said, "We want the people who are coming through your colleges to get the jobs in our plant." Opportunities were created for local people by negotiation between central and local government, and that, I strongly believe, is levelling up.

In answer to the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden made on standardisation versus variation, and to the fears my hon. Friend the Member for Aberconwy (Robin Millar) expressed about a cookie-cutter approach, we have cookie cutters of several different shapes. We think those are the best way of delivering effective devolution, with the opportunity for there to be combined county authorities or individual unitary authorities, based on the needs and experience of local communities.

Let me turn to devolution across the UK. The hon. Member for Aberdeen North—I have debated this point with her before—said that the use of section 35 should only be exceptional. Well, it has been used only once. There is no greater illustration of how it is used only in exceptional circumstances than the fact that, in national devolution's 25-year history, it has been used only once, and even then only in very particular circumstances and on sound legal advice to maintain the balance of laws across the United Kingdom. I hope the hon. Member will see—although I know she will not—that that shows that the mechanisms of devolution are, to a certain extent, working and being respected.

I acknowledge what my hon. Friend the Member for Aberconwy and the hon. Member for Strangford said about the need for there to be respect between nations. That is absolutely right. We are all in this together. In respecting those relationships, we must also understand that this building is one of the places in which the nations come together and that there remains a role for the UK Parliament in the structures of the United Kingdom.

That whistlestop tour does not necessarily answer every individual question, but I am happy to come back to any hon. Member who feels I have not covered their points.

Robin Millar: The debate has been commendable for the tone in which it has been conducted on both sides of the Chamber. However, I must observe that, when the Labour Government introduced the devolved Assembly, it had an unintended consequence. The anecdote at the time was that doing that would deal with nationalism but, with great respect, we have a strong nationalist presence in this House under this Administration. Has the Minister given thought to the factor of unintended consequences?

To cite one example, tax-raising powers have been devolved, but in the case of Wales they have not been taken up. I use that example as a further illustration of the unevenness and the natural response—the phrase I used was "desire lines". Will the Minister comment on that in the minute he has left?

Alex Burghart: Few people have thought about this issue more than my hon. Friend. He is certainly right to say that the Labour party was wrong in its assessment that devolution would kill nationalism, although these were cross-cutting issues even at the time. I remember Charles Clarke arguing openly that the Government were mistaken and that the nationalists would be empowered. That goes to show that parties can hold different views.

I disagree with the hon. Member for Nottingham North on one thing. I think that the constitution of the United Kingdom remains incredibly strong. Indeed, it seems capable of coping with everything we throw at it. One of its great strengths over the centuries has been its ability to adapt, evolve and grow, and when it comes to the agenda this Government are pursuing on devolution in England, it is doing just that.

3.58 pm

Bim Afolami: I thank the Minister, Opposition Members and Government Members for an interesting and thoughtful debate. The nub of the debate around English devolution is this: in 1265, and for centuries subsequently, two MPs were sent to Westminster from among the leading citizens of the town, and two knights came to Westminster from the counties. We heard from the Minister the respect in which the shires have historically been held. It is not standardisation to say that we can have that sort of respect for the relationship between all local areas and the centre. I would urge everybody to bear that in mind.

If we are serious about more power going to local people, that is going to mean more money. If we are serious about there being more money, we are going to have to clarify the responsibilities between local authorities and the Treasury.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation: Sanctions and Tariffs

4 pm

Yvonne Fovargue (in the Chair): I will call Siobhain McDonagh to move the motion and then the Minister to respond. There will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up, as is the convention for 30-minute debates.

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered sanctions and tariffs on Belarus and Russia.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Fovargue. Sanctions and the war in Ukraine have been given a great deal of attention, and rightly so. It is fitting that just downstairs in Westminster Hall, Volodymyr Zelensky, the President of Ukraine, was able to address parliamentarians from both sides of the House. Members of all parties have been united in their response to the illegal invasion of Ukraine, and I hope we can continue that cross-party consensus today.

I want to make it clear that I have not held this debate to undermine the Government's policies on sanctions and tariffs against Russia and Belarus. I am on board with the policy. I agree that we must isolate both Belarus's and Russia's economies and target the key industries that support President Putin's illegal war in Ukraine.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for securing the debate, and I concur with her comments. Does she agree that, although we have huge compassion for the Russian and Belarusian people, who are paying the price for their dictators' decisions, we must increase the pace of our sanctions on these nations and ensure that the price for those decisions is paid where it hurts—in the pockets of the oligarchs?

Siobhain McDonagh: I agree with the hon. Member. The sanctions regime is integral to Britain's role in supporting Ukraine and holding Putin's regime accountable for the acts of violence that it continues to perpetrate against civilians across Ukraine.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): I am grateful to be able to add my voice, and that of my party, to the hon. Lady's comments. Our concern is that the sanctions regime is not being extended far enough and specifically to countries in the developing world that are being seduced by Russia to trade with it.

Siobhain McDonagh: I agree with the hon. Member entirely.

This winter, the people of Ukraine carried on through the difficult war that they face, and we need to back their bravery by being brave and bold with sanctions and tariffs. However, the joint sentiments are worthless if things do not happen in practice, and sadly this is the case for a business group in my constituency. I recently met SGG Manufacturing Ltd, JDUK Ltd and Alunet Systems Ltd—a small group of wholly UK-owned businesses that I am glad to see represented here today. They are based in a number of MPs' constituencies—particularly that of the hon. Member for Dewsbury

[*Siobhain McDonagh*]

(Mark Eastwood), who apologises that he is unable to attend, but he is absolutely on board with the case that I am about to raise.

Prior to the war, the businesses were, in part, the sole and exclusive distributors of a Belarusian manufacturer. They imported and distributed aluminium extrusions and products from Belarus. For example, they supplied components for roller garage doors—not the most glamorous of products, I agree, but over 10 years these British businesses had grown their revenue to £30 million per annum. Over 10 years, they had managed to supply 30% to 50% of roller garage doors in the UK using their components.

Then, the war in Ukraine happened. In response, the businesses did the right thing. They decided to abandon their exclusive contract with the Belarusian manufacturer and sourced their components from elsewhere in Europe—a decision that was expensive, risky and lengthy but nevertheless the right thing to do. The Government then introduced additional tariffs of 35% on Belarusian and Russian goods, which made it clear that the decision by those businesses was not just the moral thing to do but the right thing to do from a business perspective—that is, if the sanctions and tariffs were implemented effectively. Unfortunately, they were not.

The original Belarusian supplier is now managing to circumvent the sanctions and is continuing to import banned products. It is also able to pay the relatively low additional tariff of 35% with ease, so it can operate very competitively in the market. The British group, based in my constituency, has played by the rules and has had to find a more expensive manufacturer elsewhere in Europe.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate. I am the co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Magnitsky sanctions, and we recently looked carefully at the implementation—the reality, as opposed to the Government’s rhetoric. We are discovering that there are big holes in what is actually happening, with far too little consideration given to the detailed implementation. We also sanction far fewer people who are guilty of transgressing our rules than the US does. The hon. Lady is on the right track, and I congratulate her on that, but perhaps she would like to press the Government further to increase the number of people and businesses they sanction and to make sure they do it properly.

Siobhain McDonagh: I thank the right hon. Gentleman and congratulate him on all the work he does on not only Russia but China. We often work together. This debate is not about the grand scope of the sanctions, but about the nuts, bolts and garage doors of how they are working on the ground for British businesses and Belarusian businesses.

The Belarusian company appears to be stealing the British company’s customer base by avoiding the sanctions, absorbing the additional tariff and undercutting the British company by supplying at a lower rate. Most people would call that dumping, and it has led to a loss of roughly £10 million in revenue for this British company based in my constituency.

As has been said many times in the Commons, Russia and Belarus are trying to get round sanctions on an industrial scale, and this seems to be a case in point. I have detailed evidence of how the Belarusian company is evading sanctions, and I would like to state it for *Hansard* so that it is in the public domain. I also note that, although the Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation at His Majesty’s Revenue and Customs is responsible for enforcing specific cases, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office is responsible for drawing up the sanctions and tariffs legislation.

As I tried to explain to the Minister informally last night, the way the company is avoiding sanctions is unbelievable: it is starting some of its goods in Russia. There is a list of sanctioned products codes for Russia and one for Belarus, and in some instances, the two lists do not match. As a result, a product could be sanctioned in Belarus but not sanctioned if it comes from Russia. That is exactly what is happening. The tariffs apply to all iron and steel commodity codes starting 72 and 73 in Belarus, but they apply to only specific iron and steel products that begin with commodity codes 72 and 73 in Russia. That means that some of the goods that the Belarusian company supplies are sanctioned if they are imported from Belarus but not if they are imported from Russia.

The Belarusian company supposedly managed to move an entire factory’s worth to Russia so that it can still import the goods sanctioned from Belarus into the UK tariff free, all the while undercutting a British business. I have been able to get hold of an email from the Belarusian company to one of those customers to prove that. It stated:

“We would like to clarify the situation with regard to the current import of sectional doors and operators to the UK.”

The company says:

“Since the UK Government has introduced economic trade and transport sanctions on Belarus,”

it has

“imported garage doors from our Russian factory”.

It states that

“shipments fully comply with import restrictions by the Government of the United Kingdom in the last months.”

There we have it. Because of the way our sanctions list has been drawn up, Belarusian companies are avoiding sanctions. They are manufacturing and shipping products that were originally from Belarus, and are now supposedly from Russia, to avoid the sanctions. I am glad that the Foreign Office Minister is present today, and I hope that the sanctions list is updated, because it is costing a business in my constituency millions of pounds.

In other cases, this Belarusian company is assigning its products a new, intentionally incorrect but unsanctioned commodity code, enabling it to import to the UK sanction-free. I got hold of an email from this company to one of its customers to prove that. The measures are quite technical, so I hope hon. Members will forgive me if I go through them in a little detail. The company stated:

“We are looking for a way to supply you with roll tubes which are currently banned from entering the EU due to their commodity code 7308905900, and it seems like we have found an option. We can bundle the roll tubes with other items. This will have a different name and a commodity code which can be imported to the EU and the UK.”

The company can change the commodity code to one that is allowed to enter the UK from Belarus, and it can evade sanctions altogether. The most egregious part is that the Belarusian company is now approaching the former customers of the British business in my constituency and offering to supply them directly, profiting and expanding its business because of the war in Ukraine. It is just unbelievable. If that is happening in one company, surely it is happening in a number of businesses right across the UK.

It is important that President Zelensky comes to Parliament to speak, that our Opposition and Government leaders visit Kyiv and that we all get together to stress how strong our sanctions and tariffs need to be. However, it makes a difference only if the detail is correct. The sanctions are effective only if the product lists are drawn up effectively and we are able to target Belarusian and Russian businesses. Tariffs are effective only if they are high enough to make goods originating from a country uncompetitive. In the recent co-ordinated package of sanctions by the US, EU and UK, only the US increased tariffs on metals by up to 200%.

As we know, Putin and his cronies will be seeking every single loophole, omission and error to try to circumvent the sanctions. It is quite clear that Russia and Belarus are actively trying to get round sanctions and absorb tariffs on an industrial scale. Currently, companies are claiming that their goods originate in Russia to avoid sanctions. That is absurd. I hope that the Minister can provide more information about that and explain how we will close the loopholes that Russia and Belarus are using.

We can have the toughest regime on paper, but if Russia and Belarus are finding ways round it in practice and costing UK businesses, we have not done the right thing. I ask the Minister to address the detail and the consequences for British business. If he is in a position to do so, I would welcome it if he gave a few minutes after the debate to the businesses that are here today.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab) *rose—*

Yvonne Fovargue (in the Chair): Order. If the hon. Member wishes to speak, did he obtain the permission of the Member in charge and the Minister prior to the debate?

Siobhain McDonagh: I am happy for anyone to contribute to the debate.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (David Rutley) *indicated assent.*

4.15 pm

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Fovargue. I thank the Minister and my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) for allowing me to speak briefly. I thank my hon. Friend for her excellent work on this matter. Who would have thought that such a humble thing as a garage door could have been the subject of such appalling abuse of the system? I ask the Minister to look into that.

I want to set out my support for this action and point out the considerable support for Ukraine in my constituency of Reading East. Many local people, including those in our significant local Ukrainian community, who I actively

support, are concerned about sanctions. Sanctions need to be part of a wider package of action against the Putin regime in Russia; that should include the UK continuing to work with NATO, continued UK Government support for the Ukrainian Government through military and other means, and a package of measures for the future, such as a plan for the longer term and action against war criminals.

4.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (David Rutley): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Fovargue. I congratulate the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) on securing this important debate and on her commitment in broadly backing His Majesty's Government's approach to sanctions. It is always a great pleasure to work with her because she makes doing business very simple, which is much appreciated, even though the issues we are talking about are complex.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan), the Minister for the Indo-Pacific, whose responsibilities include sanctions, would have been delighted to take part in the debate. She is travelling on ministerial duties, however, so it is my pleasure to respond to the important issues that have been raised on behalf of the Government.

Mr Jonathan Lord (Woking) (Con): I think there is unanimity across the Chamber in support of what we have heard from the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh). Would a good start be to make sure, as a matter of some urgency and importance, that those product lists are the same for Belarus and Russia? That would surely undermine a lot of the shenanigans we have heard about this afternoon.

David Rutley: I thank my hon. Friend for his contribution and I recognise the point he has made. As I will discuss at greater length later in my speech, the sanction lists are reviewed regularly. I understand his point about comparing the lists side by side. Clearly, there are differences in the approach we take to both those countries, but I understand the points that he makes.

In the face of President Putin's illegal and barbaric war, Britain is doing everything possible to support Ukraine and to make Russia pay the price. I will begin by outlining the extensive sanctions we have already imposed on Russia and Belarus, before turning to more detailed points set out by the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden—the nuts and bolts, as she called them in her very well crafted speech.

We have co-ordinated with our international allies to respond to this unprovoked and barbaric invasion, and together we have unleashed the most severe package of sanctions ever imposed on a major economy. I know it is supported by many people and encouraged by many colleagues in this room. The UK alone has sanctioned over 1,500 individuals and entities since the start of the invasion.

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) on securing the debate and thank the Minister for allowing me to intervene, especially as I was late to the debate. The US

[Ms Marie Rimmer]

Secretary of State recently announced further sanctions to tackle the sanctions evasion network, notably against Igor Zimenkov, who was cleverly in possession of a Cypriot golden passport and therefore sanctions could not be placed upon him. Does the Minister agree that our own Government need to take further action on individuals and countries that are helping Russia to bypass sanctions, which is exactly what Igor Zimenkov did?

David Rutley: I thank the hon. Member for that contribution, and I recognise that it is sometimes difficult to arrive bang on time for the start of a debate. I am not familiar with that particular case. Where people seek to circumvent our sanctions regime, we will review that in two ways: first, by continually reviewing and updating our sanctions lists; and, secondly, through HMRC's serious enforcement action, which I will come to in a minute.

The latest package of internationally co-ordinated sanctions and trade measures announced on 24 February includes export bans on every item that Russia has been found to be using on the battlefield to date. These are important sanctions. Our sanctions toolkit extends far beyond the designations of individuals or entities.

In the year since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the UK has introduced an array of measures targeting the trade, finance, military and industrial sectors. These measures target industries that support the war and prohibit all new investments in Russia via third countries. They are constraining Putin's ability to maintain the occupation of Ukraine, and they are weakening and isolating the Russian economy.

Our trade measures alone reduced Russian goods imports to the UK by 99% between September and November last year, compared with the same period in 2021. UK goods exports to Russia fell by nearly 80% over the same period. More than £20 billion of UK-Russia trade in goods is now under full or partial sanction. By anybody's metrics, these are substantive measures. But Putin has not acted alone. Lukashenko's regime in Belarus has actively supported Russia's illegal and unprovoked actions. That is why UK sanctions also apply to Belarusian individuals, entities and organisations who have aided and abetted this reckless aggression.

In July 2022, we introduced legislation imposing further sanctions on Belarus in response to its support for Russia's war. These sanctions included giving the UK the power to detain and de-register Belarusian aircraft, and measures prohibiting Belarusian ships from entering UK ports. We also expanded existing financial sanctions measures, banning more Belarusian companies from issuing debt and securities in London or obtaining loans from UK banks, among other measures. The legislation introduced trade measures against Belarus, including bans on the export of critical industry goods and technologies, as well as luxury goods, and a ban on the import of iron and steel.

Since before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Lukashenko's regime in Belarus has shown continued disregard for international law and has committed ongoing violations of the fundamental freedoms and human rights of the Belarusian people. The regime initiated a brutal crackdown in 2020, which continues today, in response to protests which followed the flawed 2020 elections.

The UK previously introduced sanctions against Belarusian individuals, entities and organisations who have supported and facilitated the Lukashenko regime's human rights violations. These sanctions signal our discontent and are intended to coerce the Belarusian regime to change their behaviour. In total, with the addition of our designations since Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine, the UK has targeted more than 120 Belarusian individuals and entities.

Tariff measures are adding further weight to our response, tightening the screws on Putin and his supporters. Between March last year and January this year, we introduced four batches of 35% tariff increases on a wide range of goods from Russia and Belarus worth over £2.4 billion, from vodka and caviar to certain metals, chemicals and plastics. Tariff increases on Belarus have been made in line with the evolving sanctions positions as part of our co-ordinated response.

Hywel Williams: Before the Minister moves on, is he in a position to comment on how Russia is evading some of the sanctions broadly imposed by the west by trading with countries that are developing or emerging markets? Russia is evading our sanctions, however well we impose them.

David Rutley: I will come on to what we are doing to tackle circumvention in a little more detail. The Russians are doing everything they can to try to avoid these sanctions, because they are biting on their economy. We continually need to refresh our sanctions approach to respond to that, and we are.

The hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden will be aware that a letter to the Foreign Secretary in January was passed to HMRC, as the lead enforcement authority for trade sanctions, for further review. As I am sure she will understand, HMRC cannot and does not comment on specific cases. However, I can assure her that the Government and HMRC take this and all reported alleged sanctions violations very seriously indeed.

I will take this opportunity to acknowledge the important role that businesses can and do play in providing us with information and intelligence about suspected sanctions breaches, such as by self-reporting. That is an important part of our sanctions enforcement architecture, and it is vital to help to inform the action that is taken.

The hon. Lady asked about steel and aluminium products. That issue relates to differences in the scope of the UK's Russia and Belarus sanctions regimes, as has been highlighted by a number of colleagues. Different regimes serve different foreign policy objectives. Although there are links between Russia and Belarus sanctions, they are distinct. We keep our sanctions under review. Given Russia's ongoing and outrageous actions in Ukraine, we have continued to bring forward new measures since the invasion last year.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I understand where the Minister is now, but is not the problem that there seems to be no exchange between Departments as to exactly how this works? It seems illogical to me that different countries now sanction different groups and industries in different ways. Surely, the key here—this relates to the measure that I raised earlier—is that we now sanction far fewer individuals than the United States does. On industrial sanctions, we seem to have no common purpose. With respect to the Minister, and I am a big supporter of his,

he should surely go back to his Department and set out that it is not good enough to say there are different regimes. We know how involved Belarus is with Russia, and we know what the links are. We should treat them both exactly the same and get on with it.

David Rutley: I thank my right hon. Friend, who knows that I am also his fan, because we worked together—or, rather, I worked for him a long time ago; let us be clear about that. I respect him enormously on a range of issues.

I say gently that the UK has worked closely with our international partners to maximise the impact of our sanctions, and we have taken co-ordinated action to ratchet up economic pressure on Russia. It is not just about comparison, although I know my right hon. Friend is very hot on that issue; it is also about collective action to ensure we get maximum impact. We have demonstrated leadership in the most impactful areas. For example, we are the only international partners with designated top executives at Rosatom, the Russian state nuclear corporation—a key Ukrainian priority.

Let me come back briefly to sanctions circumvention, which is an important issue. We will continue to bear down on Russia and Belarus by implementing further sanctions and leaning in to tackle Russia's attempt to circumvent measures that are already in place, as we have done over the past year. That means coming down hard on sanctions evaders, closing loopholes and working with our international partners to undermine Russia's attempts to build global resilience to western sanctions. That includes through the G7, which reaffirmed unwavering support for Ukraine on 24 February, one year on from Russia's illegal invasion.

We are also addressing the threat of third country circumvention—that is a point that the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden made earlier—by using diplomatic channels to limit the size of the international market to which Russia can turn. The UK Government and our law enforcement agencies are using a range of tools to ensure that all forms of circumvention are identified and tackled, including by taking criminal enforcement action where appropriate.

We are taking action and having an effect, but I understand the points that have been raised. We will continually review our sanctions package and enforcement measures, and we will come down as hard as we can on those who seek to evade and avoid the sanctions regime.

Question put and agreed to.

Racial Discrimination in Schools

4.30 pm

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered racial discrimination in schools.

It is a pleasure to open today's debate with you in the Chair, Ms Fovargue. When I send my children to school every morning, I expect that they will be safe and protected. Members who have children or grandchildren, or nieces and nephews, as well as parents and carers from across my constituency of Lewisham East, or indeed across the whole country, expect the very same—for children at school to be safe and happy. In the vast majority of cases, they are safe and happy, and generally school staff across the UK do a brilliant job educating and inspiring our children. They often do so in the most difficult circumstances, and I commend them for all that they do.

That is why it was shocking and distressing to see an assault on a black female child by a group of white female children near their school in Surrey last month. Members who have seen the footage of the incident are likely to have been as traumatised as I was—it was heartbreaking to watch. That is why I co-ordinated a cross-party letter, with Members from across the House, to the Home Secretary to ask how the victim was being supported and for the incident to be fully investigated. I am pleased to see many Members who signed that letter in the Chamber today, and I am grateful to the Home Office Minister who replied to that letter.

It quickly became apparent that the issue went much further than one case alone. I received a stream of emails and phone calls from teachers, parents and the wider public, who all raised their concerns about injustice and discrimination in schools. A teacher called me and asked to remain anonymous. She spoke about racial attacks at her school: two Asian girls had their hijabs pulled off their heads, and fights had broken out in the classroom. She spoke about teachers feeling let down by the headteacher and about a generally unsafe environment. Soon after that, a further disturbing and shocking assault case was brought to my attention—a group of ethnic minority schoolchildren at a school in Kent being segregated and subsequently attacked by a group of white children. Last week, I raised that with the Education Secretary.

Growing up in south-east London—many years ago—I remember when the British National party would march near my family home. I remember feeling unsafe in my own community—feeling unsafe because of my ethnicity. Surely, years later, black, Asian and ethnic minority children should not feel unsafe in our community. The fight against racial discrimination began long before the far right marched through my childhood community, and it is still being fought today.

In 2021, *The Guardian* revealed that there were more than 60,000 racist incidents in British schools between 2016 and 2021. That is an astonishing figure, but it does not tell the full story. In 2012, the Government advised schools that they have no legal obligation to report racist incidents to their local authorities, and in 2017 the Government issued further guidance that schools have no obligation to record bullying of any form. If racist incidents, and bullying more generally, are not being tracked, how can schools, local authorities, Ofsted or the Department for Education identify a problem and then act on it? The answer is that, of course, they cannot. The data is simply not there.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for her excellent work in securing the debate and campaigning on this important issue. Does she agree that the Government can learn from some of the successes under the last Labour Government, in particular in London during the roll-out of London Challenge, and many other policies? They should revisit the guidance to which she refers, which clearly seems to be a mistake.

Janet Daby: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. There are many lessons to be learned, and the Government could take heed of them and respond. As I have mentioned, there are things on which the Government have gone backwards, rather than going forward.

This week, a new survey by a young persons movement called I Have a Voice, found that one in four students say that they have experienced racism in their place of education. That is not the only survey showing alarming figures on racial discrimination in schools. The Government need to uphold the principle that the welfare of the child is paramount. That begins by accepting that their guidance in 2012 and 2017 was wrong. Will the Minister commit to reviewing those decisions, so that data on racist incidents in schools can once again be collected and acted on?

As we have sadly seen in the last month, discriminatory incidents can sometimes be violent. In those situations, headteachers and school staff should be able to intervene confidently and safely to safeguard children. The Education and Inspections Act 2006 outlines the fact that all members of school staff have a legal power to use reasonable force. That might include standing between children during an altercation or, in the most extreme circumstances, bringing a child under control.

While school staff are permitted to use reasonable force, there is no requirement on schools to provide a policy on the use of force. Schools are left to make their own decisions on this, which I find wholly unacceptable. I recognise that the use of reasonable force may not always be appropriate, but there are occasions when it is necessary in order to safeguard children. On those occasions, headteachers and school staff must know how to use that power. Will the Minister agree to update guidance on the use of reasonable force to include a requirement for schools to have a policy on it, and for it to be part of the training which school staff receive? Members will know that the issue of racial discrimination in schools is much deeper and broader. More needs to be done in schools to reduce the fear that some children may feel about one another.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): The hon. Lady is making a very compelling case. Does she agree that it is not only safeguarding that must be considered, although there is a direct and immediate need for that, but the ongoing consequences of discrimination? How can children learn effectively if they do not feel safe in their learning environment?

Janet Daby: The hon. Member is absolutely right. That has a huge emotional impact on children when they are in situations where they are discriminated against. It goes on to affect them psychologically and emotionally, and it can affect their ability to learn. If we want children to thrive and achieve, we want them to have the best experience in school. That is why it is so important that the Government act to eradicate at all levels any inch or hint of discrimination in our schools.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): There are some things in life where we expect changes to come naturally, organically or incrementally, and there are other things for which change has to be driven, and the approach must be strategic. I suggest to the hon. Member that racial discrimination is something that falls in the latter category.

In my own constituency we do not have the same range of ethnic diversity that might be found elsewhere. However, in Kirkwall Grammar School we have a teacher, Theo Ogbhemhe, who has taken a leading role in getting a group of students together in an anti-racism group, challenging discriminatory attitudes and behaviours wherever they are found. That is only possible if the strategy is in place to empower teachers like that.

Janet Daby: I thank the right hon. Member for giving the example of some excellent work taking place in his constituency. That is a great example of a headteacher allowing that to happen and other teachers getting on board to drive it through. Strategies are really important, and the Government need to have a clear one to ensure that this type of thing happens in all schools to eliminate discrimination.

Teach First's report examining diversity in the English literature curriculum highlighted the lack of ethnic minority authors offered on the syllabus. The largest exam board, which accounts for 80% of GCSE English literature entries, features no books by black authors and only two by an ethnic minority author. That is disappointingly low. Children from diverse backgrounds need to gain a sense of pride and self-worth by identifying with people who look like them in their learning. There is a risk that if children are not exposed to diversity in the school curriculum, they miss the opportunity to find out about those who are different from and those who are similar to them, and to be enriched by that difference and similarity. Will the Minister agree to look at how the school curriculum can be updated to increase ethnic minority representation?

Hon. Members will know that the issue is not just what children are being taught; who is teaching them also has an impact on their learning. Research conducted by University College London shows a lack of teachers from ethnic minority backgrounds in our schools. Sadly, when it comes to leadership, only 4% of headteachers are non-white. It is positive for all children, no matter what their ethnic background, to experience a diverse teaching workforce. That is important for their learning and their personal development. Will the Minister outline what steps the Department for Education is taking to recruit and retain greater numbers of ethnic minority staff and to encourage the promotion of ethnic minority staff to senior leadership roles?

Mr Jonathan Lord (Woking) (Con): In my constituency of Woking, we have a very diverse community, including a very large Muslim community, and I am pleased to say that our schools and, indeed, other organisations have made great strides in recent years on these issues. The hon. Lady talks about leadership. May I point out the importance of governors—chairs of governors, and the whole governing body? Would she, like me, encourage people from all communities to come forward and serve on those bodies, because they are a backstop but can also help the headteacher to set policy and the right example?

Janet Daby: I thank the hon. Member for that significant intervention. He is absolutely right. Governing bodies are excellent in steering and in holding the headteacher and the teaching staff to account, and having a diverse governing body and governance for schools makes a significant contribution, so it is absolutely right that that happens and can be encouraged and supported. In my constituency and, indeed, the borough of Lewisham, the local council very much encourages schools and works with schools to enable that to happen. I am proud of what has been achieved in my own constituency in that respect.

Discrimination due to the colour of a child's skin has no place in any school. I believe that everyone goes to work to do an excellent job. That includes headteachers, who have one of the most significant roles to play. That means that they lead by example, but they must also recognise when they need help and where to go to get it. Will the Minister respond and say what support is available to headteachers to address all the points that I have raised?

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Yvonne Fovargue (in the Chair): I call Kirsten Oswald. I apologise: I did not see you, Mr Shannon. I call Jim Shannon.

4.42 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I am only a small person, Ms Fovargue, so when I am hidden behind other people, perhaps you would not see that I was there. Thank you for calling me.

It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I thank the hon. Member for Lewisham East (Janet Daby) for introducing the issue. I remember when she raised it in the Chamber in a question—it may even have been in a point of order. At that time, I took note of her comments. It is very clear to me that there is an issue that needs to be addressed. It is a pleasure to see the Minister in his place, because I am sure that, as he always does, he will respond in a positive fashion to explain how the Department for Education and he himself will act to address the issue.

Education is fundamental to equality of opportunity as preparation for life, as a powerful influence on access to and advancement in employment, and in giving young people the skills to resist the dangerous temptations that exist in society today. There is no hiding from or ignoring the fact that racism and cultural ignorance exist in our schools. The hon. Member for Lewisham East has outlined that very well on a number of occasions. Often, children are unaware of the meaning or full impact of their words, so it is crucial that this conversation is had and that action is taken to teach children how to do good. The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) referred to how important that was in his intervention. It shows that there are occasions when people can take measures to promote better harmony in schools.

In 2021, UK schools reported—rather shockingly—more than 60,000 racial incidents in the previous five years, with a racist incident defined as any situation perceived to be racist by the alleged victim or any other person, including unintentional racism. Racism has proven to be a big issue in schools, especially in England. Instead of co-operating more with one another, our attitudes

suggest to younger people that it is all right to behave in this way and it makes the segregation even worse, complicating the issue and making it much more difficult to control.

As you and other Members will know, Ms Fovargue, I always try to give a Northern Ireland perspective in debates. We have discrimination in schools, which tends to be more sectarian than racist. However, I have no doubt that instances of racism have happened over the years in Northern Ireland. Historically, Northern Ireland is a deeply segregated and divided area, and although we have moved mountains since the era of the troubles, young people have become accustomed to the history of our nation, whether socially—outside the education sector—or internally, in schools or other education settings. Sectarian words fly around and are often used incorrectly, especially by young people, and can often be seen as “cool”. The fact is that they are not and never will be.

The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland states that

“schools in Northern Ireland have a responsibility not to discriminate against pupils on the protected grounds of sex, sexual orientation, race or disability. The law does not apply to age, religious belief and political opinion and gender reassignment in schools.”

I struggle to understand why religious belief is not included in that law, given that it is completely embedded in Northern Irish history.

We are no stranger to talking about our past and how it has had an impact on current generations. However, I genuinely believe that more can be done in schools in Northern Ireland to tackle sectarianism and the use of verbal slurs by young children. There are ways in which schools can teach young people about all types of discrimination. My youngest staff member remembers taking a class in school called “Learning for life and work”, with a module studying citizenship. Through this module, pupils were taught about the benefits and the challenges associated with cultural identity, the causes and consequences of prejudice and discrimination in society, and the benefits and challenges of immigration for communities, society and the economy. Those are all very worthy things, which we should take onboard. Again, I ask the Minister this question: what discussion has there been with his equivalent in the Northern Ireland Assembly, perhaps to get a grasp of what is being done in Northern Ireland and what is being done here, in order to work better together?

It is really important in today's society that young children are aware of the environment around them. There are more people emigrating here, so there are more people from different cultures, with different histories, traditions and countries. We have more of that in Northern Ireland than we have ever had before. It tells me that we have to adapt. We want to welcome them; I am very much in favour of that.

It is good that young pupils can look at who they are sitting beside, or consider the background of their friends, understand the disabilities that some people may have, and have a general tolerance—how much has tolerance been mentioned?—of people who are different from them. Poor mental health and bullying can stem from racial discrimination in schools and there should certainly be more scope for teachers to be able to take appropriate action so that children understand and treat their peers with respect.

[Jim Shannon]

On love and tolerance, I am trying to remember the name of the organisation that says:

“Love for all. Hatred for none.”

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): I am delighted to hear the hon. Gentleman use that phrase and I think he will find that it is the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community that coined it. It is very apt in this debate.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady for reminding me of that, and it is an apt phrase.

I always try to treat people as I wish they would treat me—not that I am any better than anyone else, because I am not. I will just say that if we all adopted that attitude, life would be a lot better, and for our children—who will be the elders of tomorrow, and the people who will have responsibility, and take our positions whenever we pass on from this world—it is important that we get this right.

4.49 pm

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Fovargue.

I am really glad to be here in Westminster Hall today. This is a debate that people might not expect to find a Scottish Member participating in, but it is on such an important subject that I decided to come along anyway. I thought that the hon. Member for Lewisham East (Janet Daby) made a really powerful and compelling, and very clear-headed, speech to introduce the debate. That matters because it is such an important subject that it requires that kind of clear explanation about what is happening and why it matters.

Racism in society in general is obviously deeply troubling and damaging, but racism in our schools and educational settings is perhaps even worse. These are children, at formative points in their lives, in an environment where they should feel completely safe and where they should be able to relax and to learn, being put into situations that make that much harder or even impossible. The knock-on impacts throughout people's lives if they have had that very difficult experience at school, which has perhaps caused them not to fulfil the potential they have, should be clear to all of us. That is something that should occupy our minds.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) often makes salient points in debates, and he talked about the importance of welcoming people who have come here from other places. Obviously, that is not a direct read-across to racism in schools, but it is an important point to make. We should welcome diversity, difference and those who have arrived from other places. I reflect, with a degree of sadness, on some of the narrative that we hear from the Government Benches at the moment—the “stop the boats” narrative and “the hostile environment”. Such things do not happen in isolation—[*Interruption.*] I can hear the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Dr Mullan) chuntering; I do not know whether he is referring to what I am saying.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con): I am.

Kirsten Oswald: If the hon. Gentleman would have the courtesy to either intervene or to allow me to contribute so that I can hear myself over him, that would be helpful. It troubles me that that narrative is out there. It has an impact on people's behaviours and it will have an impact on what people experience in schools. The hon. Gentleman should have the good grace to at least listen to my perspective on that. I am sure that if he wants to contribute, the Chair will allow him to do so.

We have to think about the environment in which all of that is happening. From my own perspective, it is vital to me, my politics and my beliefs that Scotland is an open and welcoming country. That does not mean that we have some kind of magic wand that means that racism does not exist in Scotland. Of course, that is not the case; we have to be mindful of that and always on our guard. We must be clear that the aspirations we have and the reality we may see in front of us does not mean that racism not there.

I suspect I say that because I come from a particular place. I represent a very diverse constituency. East Renfrewshire is one of the most diverse constituencies in Scotland, and we are far the better for that. Most of the Jewish population in Scotland lives there, we have a large and growing Muslim community and we have a thriving Baha'i community. A whole range of people have made their home there and we rub along really well together. That does not happen by accident; it happens with a great deal of good will, work and joint working between communities. That is the case in our schools as well. I commend the education department in East Renfrewshire Council and the schools themselves, where my children, who are children of dual heritage, go, and I have a particular insight because of that.

The Scottish Government have published a race equality framework for Scotland, which is very important. We need to have structures that allow us to scrutinise, work to targets and examine whether we are doing what is needed to make sure all of our children have an appropriate environment in which to learn. We need to appreciate the potential range and diversity of ways in which racism can manifest itself. It can have a broad range of impacts on people. If we are not able to think about and understand that, then we are working with one hand tied behind our back.

Different groups can be affected by racism. The hon. Member for Strangford made a good point about sectarianism being an issue. Representing a seat in the west of Scotland, I know that that is true. I was also grateful to receive a briefing from the Traveller Movement. We do not speak nearly enough about the impact on Traveller and Gypsy communities of the racism that they face daily.

There are lots of things that will have an impact on how our children and our education systems deal with issues of race. In recent years, we have heard of the Black Lives Matter movement, which has shone a powerful spotlight on these issues. One would hope that it would have allowed further discussion about how we deal with race education in schools. I am pleased that it has led to that discussion in Scotland—discussion about the decolonising of the curriculum, and conversations about slavery and how different historical eras have manifested themselves. We cannot shy away from these realities, and it is important that our children learn and understand

what happened in the past. Otherwise, they are going to be much more prone to making the same mistakes in the future that their and our forebears made.

I know the huge amount of work that goes on in my local area, and a lot of it goes on unsung and unappreciated every day. It is right to put on the record a real appreciation for the teachers in my local area, and I really want to do that today. Lots of holocaust education takes place in my community, and that is really valuable. Some of it involves the Anne Frank Trust, and there is work with the Holocaust Educational Trust, Gathering the Voices, the Lessons from Auschwitz project and Vision Schools—I could go on. That work also involves listening directly to the voices of those who have been in that situation themselves—the testimony of people such as holocaust survivors Henry and the late Ingrid Wuga. All of those things really matter.

I was really glad to participate last week in the filming for a documentary by a young woman called Rachel Kinnear, a journalism student at Edinburgh Napier University, who is making a documentary about holocaust education. The fact that there are young people who are putting their minds to the issues of holocaust, race and education and how they fit together is profoundly helpful and very important, as we look forward, at a time where there are challenges in our society on how we deal with and engage with one another.

I also had a conversation this week that gave me a wee bit of food for thought on this topic, with a local school librarian named Anne De'Ath. We were discussing this debate, and she talked to me about the role of school librarians in trying to make sure that appropriate educational material is available across curricular areas. The art department could be looking at different kinds of art and culture; it could be music, it could be English, it could be history—it could be all of the things that I might not have thought of, because I might be thinking in a very linear way about how a library might support this kind of education. It is not just the personal and social education class; it is much more, and much broader.

We will never rid our schools of racism if we do not think about education in those broad terms and if we do not accept that it is a responsibility, not just of the headteacher and the teacher, but also of the librarian—I am very grateful to Anne for her time—and of the students. We heard from the hon. Member for Strangford about the students working with their teacher. I know that really good work goes on in my local area with students and teachers working together.

All of the work has to be deliberate, though. That takes me back to where I started. None of this work happens in isolation. None of it happens alone. We need to have a will and a determination to make sure that we acknowledge that racism in schools is a reality, that it does happen and that we want to deal with it and minimise it, and stamp it out wherever possible.

We have made significant progress. We have made significant progress in Scotland, and that is heartening, and I have no doubt that progress has been made in the community of the hon. Member for Lewisham East, too—but we are absolutely not there. We are at a challenging point in history and in society. If we do not accept that and take positive steps to talk about these issues, we do all of our young people a grave disservice.

4.58 pm

Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Fovargue. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East (Janet Daby) for leading this debate, following the awful recent incidents at schools in Surrey and Kent, which other Members have also raised. Our thoughts go out to the victims and their families following those dreadful incidents.

We have heard from a range of Members today, with helpful interventions and speeches, including on the importance of leadership by heads and governors, the need for a diverse workforce and the value of data in informing strategic responses. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) shared his wisdom and experience from Northern Ireland and its schools, and the importance of tackling discrimination for the benefit of community cohesion. We heard about the value of citizenship on the curriculum and how that can help young people prepare for life and the environment and culture around them.

The hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) made some hugely powerful remarks about the environment in which such incidents can happen in schools. It falls on all our shoulders to think about the language and tone of the debates in our country, to create a country of compassion and respect for all cultures.

Schools should be a place where children develop a love of learning and are prepared for life, where they make friends and learn life skills, where they feel safe, and with zero tolerance for racism. Recent figures, however, sadly indicate a rise in racism in schools across the UK. Some 7,403 students were suspended last year for incidents including racially motivated assaults, according to data from the Department for Education under a freedom of information request. The number marks a 50% increase on the previous year.

According to an October 2020 report from the YMCA, 95% of young black people report that they have heard or witnessed the use of racist language in school; 49% felt that racism was the biggest barrier to attaining success in school; 50% said that the biggest barrier was teacher perceptions of them—for example, being “too aggressive”—and 70% had felt the need to change their hair to be “more professional” at work or school. Those are shocking statistics and show that we cannot be complacent in the fight against racism in our schools.

In this debate, we should of course not forget the brilliant work that headteachers, school support staff and senior leadership teams do across our country to educate our children and get them ready for life. Also, we should not forget about the work that the vast majority of schoolteachers do to make their schools and classrooms inclusive and welcoming to all children. Despite that, however, we clearly need to do much more to address the racial inequalities in our schools.

A third of pupils in both primary and secondary are from an ethnic minority background, but according to a UCL study, 46% of schools do not have a teacher from an ethnic minority background. Nationally, retention is lower for ethnic minority teachers than for white British teachers. That includes higher turnover due to moving school or not remaining in the teaching profession. Of course, racial inequalities and discrimination go beyond schools.

Kirsten Oswald: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman has spoken about teacher representation, which I did not. Is he aware of a Women and Equalities Committee sitting on racial harassment, discrimination and higher education, in which Professor Nicola Rollock described the experience of black female professors in the UK, noting undermining, stereotyping and passive bullying as issues? Also, is he aware that data from May 2022 shows that there are only 40 black female professors in higher education? That is a shocking figure.

Stephen Morgan: I thank the hon. Member for those statistics, and I am pleased that she got them on the record. I hope that the Minister is listening and will address those points later in his contribution.

Baroness Doreen Lawrence's review identified how structural inequalities caused black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds to be discriminated against because of covid-19. She made a series of long-term recommendations to tackle the structural inequalities in several key areas, including the machinery of government, health, employment and the education system. Systemic solutions are required to fix systemic problems. That is why the next Labour Government will introduce a new race equality Act to tackle the structural racism that scars society.

In conclusion, the highest priority for the Department for Education and all schools must be to protect children's safety and wellbeing. In the Minister's response, I hope he will outline what his Department is doing to evaluate whether the current safeguards to prevent racial discrimination are robust enough; whether we should look further into school staff training on handling racism in schools; whether we are doing enough to encourage young people to speak out against racism when they see it; and whether the Government are doing enough to prevent incidents such as those we have seen recently from taking place again. I finish by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East for securing the debate. I hope that any actions taken forward from today will ensure that awful incidents such as those that prompted this debate will never take place again.

5.4 pm

The Minister for Schools (Nick Gibb): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Fovargue. I congratulate the hon. Member for Lewisham East (Janet Daby) on securing this debate on an important subject. There is of course no place in our education system for discrimination or bullying of any kind. I recognise and share the concerns raised by her and other hon. Members about racist or discriminatory behaviour in schools. I was deeply concerned to hear about the incidents at both Thomas Knyvett College and Walderslade Girls' School. I am aware that there are multiple ongoing investigations into the incidents at both schools. It would therefore not be appropriate for me to comment on those specific incidents, but I share the concerns raised right across the Chamber about them.

Schools' responsibilities relate to discrimination in a number of ways. Keeping children safe is a priority, and safeguarding is everyone's responsibility. The role of schools is critical, and all staff should have an awareness of the various safeguarding issues that children can face, including the risk of violence and discrimination. The hon. Member for Lewisham East was absolutely

right when she opened her speech by saying that when parents—including herself—send their children to school in the morning, they expect them to be safe and protected. I think everyone taking part in this debate can agree with that.

We remain committed to ensuring that teachers have the tools and support to carry out their responsibilities. In September last year, we updated the statutory guidance, "Keeping children safe in education," which supports schools and colleges to meet their duties in relation to equality, harassment and victimisation. The role of schools is not just reactive. State-funded schools, as public authorities, must comply with the public sector equality duty, which means that they must have due regard to the need to eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation; to advance equality of opportunity; and to foster good relations between people who share protected characteristics and those who do not, including between people from different ethnic backgrounds. The Department has published guidance to support schools to comply with those duties under the Equality Act 2010.

The hon. Member also raised the issue of reasonable force. A new programme of work to minimise the use of restraint and reasonable force in all schools has started, and will include updating guidance with a focus on prevention and de-escalation, and making it a legal duty to record and report incidents of restraint to parents. That work began with extensive consultation, research and a call for evidence on the use of reasonable force and restrictive practices, which was launched in February and will be open for 12 weeks, closing on 11 May.

The hon. Member raised the issue of black writers in the curriculum. Schools, of course, make their own decisions, choosing texts within the set requirements. There is guidance for teachers on how to make their choices of texts, with literacy organisations and reading charities offering suggestions, book lists, guidance, research and support. She also asked about the teaching workforce, and what more can be done to ensure that teachers reflect the make-up of British society. The Government share her ambition, and we are making progress on teacher recruitment. Of postgraduate trainees who declared their ethnic group, 78% were white, 12% were Asian, 5% were black, 4% were mixed ethnicity and 2% responded "other". Those are broadly similar proportions to 2021-22 and 2020-21.

Our recruitment campaigns are targeted at audiences of students, recent graduates and potential career changers regardless of their identity or background, and last year "Apply for teacher training"—our new application service for initial teacher training in England—was rolled out nationally. The service has been designed to be as user-friendly as possible, and has been extensively tested with a diverse range of potential applicants to ensure that it helps to remove barriers to great teachers from all backgrounds applying for initial teacher training.

A vital part of meeting these duties is creating a safe, calm and supportive environment for all pupils. Headteachers play an important role in preventing bullying, harassment and discrimination in their schools, and they should ensure that they consider the needs of all pupils and staff when developing the school's approach to its behaviour policy, which all schools are required to have in place.

Successful schools recognise that they need to work continually to maintain high standards of behaviour. That can be achieved only by all members of the school community working together to reflect the school's values and creating a culture in which bullying, physical threats or abuse and intimidation, including racial discrimination, are not tolerated.

The hon. Member for Lewisham East asked about support for teachers and headteachers. Our recently updated "Behaviour in schools" guidance advises schools on creating environments where pupils and staff can work in safety and are respected. The guidance is clear that as part of a school's behaviour policy, it should have clear measures to prevent all forms of bullying, including prejudice-based bullying. When an incident does occur, schools should take swift and decisive action to resolve it.

Schools should explicitly teach pupils about which behaviours are permitted and which are not, and when any incidents of bullying, discrimination or use of derogatory language occur, staff should respond promptly, predictably and confidently. Pupils need to understand that there are consequences for their behaviour, and that will often involve the use of reasonable and proportionate sanctions. Schools should also make it clear to pupils that good behaviour does not end at the school gates, and underscore the importance of kindness and respect towards others outside of school. The school behaviour policy should set out how the school will respond to any misbehaviour outside school premises.

The hon. Member asked about schools recording incidents of a racist nature. Racism of any kind is completely unacceptable and is abhorrent in any school setting—indeed, in any setting. We do not mandate that schools record or publish racist incidents; they are best placed to monitor and tackle racist incidents. They are required to have a behaviour policy, as I said, which outlines measures to prevent racist and other forms of bullying, and they are held to account by Ofsted. They are also required to take steps to advance equality of opportunity, foster good relations and eliminate racial harassment. We provide support to schools to do that. There is no legal obligation on schools to record and report incidents of bullying, and there never has been.

Bullying can just as easily occur online as it does face to face, but evidence suggests that most online bullying of children and young people is linked to face-to-face bullying. Schools can also help to prevent online bullying by educating their pupils about acceptable ways to behave online. The relationships, sex and health education curriculum guides teachers by supporting them to ensure that children learn about the risks of the internet, including cyber-bullying and online grooming. As part of an anti-bullying grant funded programme, the Anti-Bullying Alliance delivers a key stage 3 and 4 online toolkit called "Stop, Speak, Support", which was produced with support from the Royal Foundation's cyber-bullying taskforce to further help teachers. The Diana Award also has hundreds of free resources in its resource centre, including on online safety.

Through the health education curriculum, all pupils will be taught about online safety and harms. That includes being taught what positive, healthy and respectful online relationships look like, the effects of their online actions on others and knowing how to recognise and

display respectful behaviour online. When bullying outside schools is reported to teachers, it should be investigated and acted on. If the bullying develops into criminal activity, schools must take immediate action and report it to the police.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister for his helpful responses to the inquiries from the hon. Member for Lewisham East and others. I am mindful—and we are all aware—of cases where online bullying has unfortunately led to some young people either injuring themselves or committing suicide, because the pressure from their peers was so great. What are the Minister's ideas on how he and schools can respond to that in a positive and helpful way, so that it is dealt with at an early stage before it becomes something with which the young person feels they can no longer cope?

Nick Gibb: It is beyond tragic when we read of children taking their own lives because of how miserable they are due to online, or any form of, bullying. That is why the relationships, sex and health education guidance in the curriculum is designed in part to ensure that children learn how to behave online and in day-to-day life, and to understand about kindness and the consequences of their actions on others. That is why it is such an important part of the curriculum: to prevent precisely that kind of behaviour leading to those tragic outcomes.

Learning about respectful relationships is key to tackling discrimination in schools. All children in England will learn about respectful relationships in person and online as part of the mandatory relationships, sex and health education. The curriculum has a strong focus on equality, respect and the harmful impact of stereotyping, as well as the importance of valuing difference. Citizenship education enables pupils to explore a range of important and complex concepts, such as racial justice and the need for mutual respect and understanding. Addressing these topics in school will help all pupils to lead happy and fulfilled lives that will benefit them throughout adulthood.

To help schools to prevent and, where necessary, address discriminatory behaviour, the Department continues to publish information, guidance and support for teachers and school leaders on how to challenge radical views, including racist views, on the Educate Against Hate website. One of those resources is the respectful school communities toolkit, which is a self-review and signposting tool to support schools to develop a whole-school approach that promotes respect and discipline. That can help to combat bullying, harassment and prejudice of any kind, including hate-based bullying. The Educate Against Hate website hosts information for parents and carers through the parents' hub.

In conclusion, I reiterate our commitment to supporting schools in their work to educate young people about prejudice of all forms and to protect young people from discrimination. Most schools maintain a high standard of behaviour, where pupils are educated in a calm, safe and supportive environment, but we know that managing these issues can be challenging and that some schools need to do more. All pupils in our schools deserve to grow up free from discrimination and hate in a culture of respect and kindness, and it continues to be our priority to ensure that that happens.

5.17 pm

Janet Daby: I thank all hon. Members who have contributed through interventions and speeches in this significant debate. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) spoke about children sometimes not being fully aware of the words they say. That is, indeed, why they are at school in the first place—to learn, to be educated, to know about difference, and so on. Education rightly takes place at school, and also in the wider community. Obviously, the family also has an impact. He spoke about the need for harmony in schools—I absolutely agree with that—and the need for love and tolerance. We all need much more of that in our society.

The hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) spoke with such passion and a deep sense of what needs to be done and changed in this area. I could disagree with nothing in what she said. Learning about the past to improve our future is key. Children and young people need to be able to learn in a relaxing environment that is conducive to learning, and facilitating that environment is key. There was some tension in this Chamber regarding some of the narrative about other people who arrive on our shores and the need to ensure that that negative narrative does not persist, because that could go on to have an effect on children and young children and cause more tensions in our society that could lead to discrimination. I absolutely agree with that.

I know from this debate and conversations we have had elsewhere that the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan), is deeply concerned about this issue. I thank the Minister for acknowledging all the concerns and issues that I raised and for addressing them so carefully. I acknowledge the prevention and de-escalation work that is taking place and the review. That is key, and I look forward to those outcomes and the training for teachers and staff, if this goes ahead.

I impress on the Minister the need to look again at data collection, which I believe needs to take place in schools, and I am sure many Members agree. If data is being collected on what schools are doing on racial discrimination, bullying and even cyber-bullying, that can be tracked and monitored and can lead to improvements. I agree with the general sense of the debate that children need to learn in an environment where there is respect, where they are free from abuse or bullying, and where all teachers and school staff are working towards young people's best interests.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered racial discrimination in schools.

5.21 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 8 March 2023

DEFENCE

Future Nuclear Deterrent Annual Update 2022

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace):

On 18 May 2011, the then Secretary of State for Defence, the right hon. Member for North Somerset (Dr. Liam Fox) made an oral statement to the House (*Official Report column 351*) announcing the approval of the Initial Gate investment stage for the procurement of the successor to the Vanguard-class ballistic missile submarines. He also placed in the Library of the House a report “The United Kingdom’s Future Nuclear Deterrent: The Submarine Initial Gate Parliamentary Report”.

As confirmed in the 2021 Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy, this Government have committed to publishing an annual report on the programme. I am today publishing the eleventh report, “The United Kingdom’s Future Nuclear Deterrent: 2022 Update to Parliament”.

A copy has been placed in the Library of the House. Attachments can be viewed online at:

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2023-03-08/HCWS616>

[HCWS616]

EDUCATION

School Sports Access and Funding

The Minister for Schools (Nick Gibb): The Government have announced additional funding to support schools in providing high quality PE and sport to pupils and action to ensure that girls and boys have equal access to sport in school. Schools are being asked to ensure that girls are offered the same opportunities as boys during PE and extracurricular activities. Where schools are able to evidence and demonstrate their delivery against the Government ambitions of parity between the sexes in school sport, this will be acknowledged through the School Games Mark, an assurance scheme that recognises a school’s commitment to the development of competition across their school and into the community.

The Government are encouraging schools to offer a minimum of two hours’ curriculum PE time so that pupils can experience the benefits of regular exercise—from becoming healthier both mentally and physically to better academic achievement and improved attainment. With the support of the Football Association and other sporting organisations, the Government will identify schools that offer a minimum of two hours PE and equal access for girls to sport during curriculum time and additional extracurricular activities and will share good practice. This will help all schools to improve their provision despite wider pressures.

The Primary PE and Sport Premium will continue for academic years 2023-24 and 2024-25 with a total of over £600 million of funding across the two years, with funding provided by the Department for Education and the Department for Health and Social Care. The Primary PE and Sport Premium is provided to all primary schools in England, with an average of £18,000 per school. Schools must use the funding to make additional and sustainable improvements to the quality of PE and sport they provide, with eligible spending including teacher training, providing a wider range of sports to pupils and top-up swimming lessons. Schools will receive updated guidance this summer setting out how schools should be using the funding to the best advantage of their pupils. A new digital tool will also be introduced for schools to report on spending of their allocation of the PE and Sport Premium.

An additional £11 million per year to fund School Games Organisers is being made available for a further two academic years until 2025, provided by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the Department of Health and Social Care. This national network of 450 School Games Organisers works directly with their local schools to co-ordinate inclusive sport competitions across 40 different sports and activities.

The Department for Education is funding up to £57 million to deliver phase three of the Opening School Facilities programme which allows schools to open their sport facilities outside of the core school day, at weekends and during holidays. The programme is being delivered by consortium partners Active Partnerships, ukactive, Youth Sport Trust and StreetGames. Up to 1,350 schools across England will be targeted where the funding will have the most positive impact in their communities including for girls, disadvantaged children, those with special educational needs and disabilities and other groups who have lower participation levels in sport.

The Government’s announcement made on 8 March will be followed later in the spring by publication of the Government’s new sport strategy and an update to the School Sport and Activity Action Plan.

[HCWS615]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

International Women and Girls Strategy 2023-2030

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (James Cleverly): The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) is today publishing a new international women and girls strategy 2023-2030.

Launching on International Women’s Day, the new strategy aims to tackle increasing threats to gender equality from climate change, humanitarian crises, conflicts such as the war in Ukraine, and recent attempts to roll back women’s rights, including in countries such as Iran and Afghanistan.

The strategy will set out how the UK will work to tackle global gender inequality at every opportunity, including combating attempts to roll back women’s rights, and work with partners around the world to do the same.

The strategy commits the FCDO to involving its entire network of high commissions and embassies around the world to deliver the strategy. This will include UK heads of mission developing plans and commitments specific to their host country and raising the most pressing issues with their host Governments. The UK will also develop an ambitious new research offer to help the UK and its partners make investment decisions.

The FCDO is also increasing support for women's rights organisations and movements, recognising their critical role in advancing gender equality and protecting rights, and amplifying grassroots women's and girls' voices.

In addition, the strategy commits the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to at least 80% of its bilateral aid programmes having a focus on gender equality by 2030.

The strategy will be guided by five principles:

We will stand up and speak out for women's and girls' rights and freedoms on the global stage and in our bilateral relationships.

We will embolden and amplify the work and voices of diverse grassroots women's organisations and movements, championing their role as critical agents for change.

We will target investment towards the key life stages for women and girls to maximise our effectiveness and secure lifelong and intergenerational impact.

We will act for and with women and girls impacted by crises and shocks, including conflict, global health, climate change, violence, food insecurity and malnutrition, and the resulting humanitarian crises.

We will strengthen systems—political, economic and social—that play a critical role in protecting and empowering women and girls, embracing innovative financing models and technology use to secure long-term development.

FCDO will remain focused on the three thematic priorities of educating girls, empowering women and girls, championing their health and rights and ending gender-based violence. These are considered areas where challenges are the most acute, potential gains are greatest and where the UK is best placed to add value and catalyse progress.

The strategy sets out new headline goals on how the FCDO will lead this work, including by:

driving the conversation, through a major UK global campaign; leading by example, by ensuring women and girls are at the centre of FCDO's operations and investments;

leading through knowledge, by driving forward new expertise, evidence and research;

A copy of the strategy has been placed in the Libraries of both Houses and is available on www.gov.uk.

[HCWS614]

Sanctions Designations

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): On the 8 March, to mark International Women's Day, the UK announced a package of sanctions demonstrating the UK's resolve to take action against those that seek to suppress women or use sexual violence as a weapon of war. These five sanctions over four countries follow previous designations announced on 9 December 2022. Travel bans and/or asset freezes have been imposed on designated individuals and entities.

The package includes further sanctions on the Iranian regime, including two designations relating to the forceful

imposition of "morality" rules against women. We will continue to hold this regime to account, ensuring there are no hiding places for those who violate women's fundamental human rights.

Today's sanctions include designations that target abhorrent crimes of sexual and gender-based violence using Central African Republic (CAR), Syria, and South Sudan sanctions regimes. This sends a strong signal about respect for human rights, accountability, and the UK's preparedness to take action.

The specific designations are:

CAR

Mahamat Salleh Adoum Kette—Leader of the Front Populaire pour la Renaissance de la Centrafrique (FPRC).

South Sudan

Major General James Nando—Commander of the South Sudan People's Defence Forces (SSPDF) in Tambura County, Western Equatoria State, South Sudan.

Iran

The Headquarters of Enjoining Right and Forbidding Evil—An Iranian Government institution, responsible for determining and enforcing mandatory dress codes for women, including the use of unreasonable force against individuals they deem to be non-compliant.

Seyyed Mohammed Saleh Hashemi Golpayegani—Head of the Headquarters of Enjoining Right and Forbidding Evil.

Syria

Amjad Youssef—A member of one of the Syrian regime's security and intelligence forces known as the "221 Region Branch".

[HCWS618]

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

Supporting Families Annual Report 2023 – Celebrating 10 Years of Delivery

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Felicity Buchan): As is required by section 3(6) of the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016, today I have published the 2022-23 annual report of the Supporting Families programme. The report sets out how the programme has been helping our most disadvantaged families who face multiple and complex problems. We are laying the report today and will deposit a copy in the House of Commons Library.

Supporting Families—previously the Troubled Families programme—helps join up local services to help families combat problems such as domestic abuse, unemployment, truancy and poor mental and physical health, with funding allocated based on deprivation and population figures. It has been at the heart of the Government's work to strengthen families and improve their futures for 10 years. This phase of the programme has seen an increase of £200 million in additional investment to expand the programme. This is around a 40% cash terms uplift in funding by 2024-25, taking total planned investment between 2022-23 and 2024-25 to £695 million.

This is the Supporting Families programme's 10th anniversary. The programme has directly helped vulnerable families across England. Importantly, the programme has shown what is possible when we step in early to help families and prevent problems from escalating. The programme's evaluation showed it reduced

the proportion of children on the programme going into care by a third, the proportion of adults going to prison by a quarter and juvenile convictions by 15%.

“Ten years of Supporting Families: Supporting Families programme Annual Report 2022-23” is the seventh annual report for the Supporting Families programme. This document provides an update on the programme’s performance figures and policy developments.

Between April 2022 and January 2023, we have achieved positive outcomes with 50,860 families. The programme is making progress on its aim of helping up to 300,000 families between 2022-23 and 2024-25. This year’s outcomes take the total number of families helped since 2015 to almost 535,000. The programme continues to work across a range of outcomes and supports many different priorities across Government. In October 2022, local authorities implemented the updated outcomes framework, which has brought in new outcomes including early years development and secure housing.

As well as setting out the previous number of families that have been supported at both national and local level over the last year, the report sets out how the programme has continued to drive improvement of local services for families. For example, the programme has updated the Early Help System Guide self-assessment tool and continues to identify and disseminate good practice.

I look forward to working alongside local authorities, their partners and other stakeholders as the programme continues to build on the success of the previous 10 years and to seeing at first hand the continued impact it has on the lives of our most vulnerable families.

[HCWS613]

SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY

Data Protection and Digital Information (No. 2) Bill

The Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Michelle Donelan): Today, the Government are introducing the Data Protection and Digital Information (No. 2) Bill in the House of Commons. This Bill supercedes the original Data Protection and Digital Information Bill that was introduced in July 2022. This new Bill is being introduced following a detailed codesign process with industry, business, privacy and consumer groups to determine how we could improve the Bill further.

The Department for Science, Innovation and Technology has a clear mission—to ensure we are the most innovative economy in the world and that we cement ourselves as a science and technology superpower.

Better data access and use is at the heart of our mission to grow the economy, to improve the lives of everyone in the UK, and to achieve the Prime Minister’s five key priorities. Data is fundamental to economic growth, scientific research, innovation, and increasing productivity.

The Data Protection and Digital Information (No. 2) Bill seizes our post-Brexit opportunity to create a new UK data rights regime tailor-made for our needs. The Bill reduces burdens on businesses—especially SMEs—and researchers, and crucially, boosts the economy by a staggering £4.7 billion over the next decade.

Businesses have told us how important the responsible use of data is for their growth. They will have the opportunity to protect personal data in the most proportionate and appropriate way, making them more efficient; and organisations will be freed from unnecessary paperwork. No longer will British businesses be held back by a one-size-fits-all approach to data. For example, our work to amend record-keeping requirements will provide greater clarity for businesses and community groups.

We have also been repeatedly told that uncertainty within the current data protection framework is also limiting the work of scientific researchers as they are unclear on the rules around processing personal data. By providing clarity, we will continue to foster the UK’s reputation as the most attractive home for world-class research and development. We are also encouraging more research activity in the UK by incorporating research in a commercial setting into the definition of scientific research.

This Bill takes tangible steps to harness the benefits of secure data use for everyone through innovation and technology. Trusted and secure digital verification services will enable smoother and cheaper transactions. “Smart data” schemes across the economy will ensure everyone benefits from lower prices and trusted, innovative services such as open banking. Better use of personal data in delivery of health and adult social care, security, and other government services will increase efficiency and service quality.

This Bill will also improve trust and confidence in the use of personal data in the public interest. It improves the efficiency of data protection for law enforcement and national security partners encouraging better use of personal data where appropriate to help protect the public. It provides agencies with clarity on their obligations, boosting the confidence of the public on how their data is being used.

It builds on the high standards we already have for personal data use, strengthening and modernising the regulator—the Information Commissioner’s Office—by making sure it has the capabilities and powers to tackle organisations that breach data rules, giving it the freedom to better allocate its resources.

It also maintains our internationally recognised data protection principles so that businesses can trade freely with global partners—some 81% of services trade is enabled by data sharing between the UK and other countries. We will strike new agreements that allow for the free and safe exchange of data across borders and continue to engage with the EU and its institutions, with a view to ensuring our existing data adequacy decisions remain in place. The UK is firmly committed to maintaining high data protection standards—now and in the future. Protecting the privacy of individuals will continue to be a national priority.

It is only right that we ensure the Bill works for as many people and businesses as possible.

That is why the original Bill was paused in September 2022, so Ministers could further consider the legislation and undergo an intensive co-design process with business leaders and industry experts. As part of this process, we met with a wide range of stakeholders to hear their views on the Bill and incorporate new and innovative ideas into its provisions. We have made several changes through this engagement, which will:

reduce compliance costs in the sector and reduce the amount of paperwork that organisations need to complete to demonstrate compliance;

reduce burdens by enabling businesses to continue to use their existing cross-border transfer mechanisms if they are already compliant;

give organisations greater confidence about the circumstances in which they can progress personal data without consent;

increase public and business confidence in AI technologies.

Our new UK data rights regime will drive innovation, growth and productivity. It will maintain the high data protection standards our citizens expect while ensuring our businesses, researchers and public services are not held back by disproportionate burdens. It will be more

agile and able to respond to the rapidly transforming digital landscape. It will transform the ICO to ensure it is ready to tackle new challenges and protect citizens from the most serious harms, while supporting innovative use of data. It will allow the UK to strike new data bridges with like-minded countries across the world.

And we will be in an even stronger position to do this, having brought these crucial and connected responsibilities together in one Department, with one, expert voice. We will continue to lead the debate globally and maximise the UK's position as a global powerhouse of science and technology.

[HCWS617]

ORAL ANSWERS

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**not later than
Wednesday 15 March 2023**

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