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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 18 May 2023

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

BUSINESS AND TRADE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Small Businesses: Growth

1. **Samantha Dixon** (City of Chester) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help support the growth of small businesses. [904985]

7. **Stephen Morgan** (Portsmouth South) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help support the growth of small businesses. [904993]

15. **Robbie Moore** (Keighley) (Con): What steps she is taking to help support the growth of small and medium-sized businesses. [905002]

17. **Simon Fell** (Barrow and Furness) (Con): What steps she is taking to help support the growth of small and medium-sized businesses. [905004]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake): The Government are providing better support in a number of ways, including through our network of 38 growth hubs across England, our Help To Grow management scheme and mentorships. We are improving access to finance, not least through our start-up loans and recovery loan scheme. We are removing barriers to trade for our SMEs. Those that are seeking to grow through exports can now access support through our UK Export Academy and UK Export Finance.

Samantha Dixon: Small and medium-sized businesses are the beating heart of Chester and our country's economy, yet their costs have become crippling, with extortionate energy bills, staff shortages and businesses forced to shut their doors for good. Reports show that a record number of people are off work due to health reasons, notably an increase in mental health issues. What is the Government's plan to put that right and help businesses in Chester and up and down the country?

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Lady raises an important point. The first thing we will do for any business is to ensure that the economy is growing, as it is. We are seeing much higher rates of growth than anticipated by

many, and we are cutting the costs of doing business by halving inflation, which again is incredibly important for business. In the short term, we are providing support with £13.6 billion of business rate discounts. We put £23 billion into energy discount schemes, too. We also have a big programme, across government, to try to get 9 million people who are economically inactive back to work.

Stephen Morgan: Portsmouth's fantastic small and family-run businesses tell me that after the Tories crashed the economy, they are struggling with rising business rates, supply chain issues and soaring energy costs. Why does the Minister not just adopt Labour's plan to scrap business rates and replace them with a system fit for the 21st century?

Kevin Hollinrake: We would all like to reform business rates. When people in my constituency hear about Labour's plans to scrap business rates, the question I always get is, "Where is the money coming from?" Business rates raise £22 billion in England alone. I have heard Labour's plans to scrap business rates. Which taxes will be increased to make up that shortfall? That is the question. We are reforming business rates to ensure that small businesses pay less, and providing short-term discounts. Labour cannot simply wipe away £22 billion without telling us where the money is coming from.

Robbie Moore: I recently had the pleasure of hosting a business roundtable in my constituency for small and medium-sized businesses, many of whom are proud of the products and services they want to export. Will my hon. Friend outline what additional steps the Government are taking to support small and medium-sized businesses in my constituency and across the UK that are looking to export their world-leading products to the global market?

Kevin Hollinrake: My hon. Friend is a great champion for his businesses across Keighley, and I thank him for the work he does. He will know that through our export strategy, "Made in the UK, Sold to the World", we provide extensive support and advice to SMEs, whether they are considering exporting, learning about how to go about it, or expanding into new markets. UK Export Finance focuses on supporting SMEs so that they can secure export opportunities.

Simon Fell: Barrow-in-Furness is, I hope, about to enter a 25-to-30 year jobs boom thanks to the Government's steadfast support for Dreadnought, AUKUS and the renewable energy projects up and down our coast. However, that causes issues for our local SMEs, which are struggling to retain and recruit, not least because of the geographical isolation of Barrow-in-Furness. May I invite my hon. Friend the Minister to cross the Pennines to speak to the SME cluster that I chair over there and hear some of their concerns? Does the Department have some specialist support to help those businesses leaning into this new economic challenge?

Kevin Hollinrake: I would be happy to cross the Pennines; I have been known to. It would be my pleasure to do that. What businesses want more than anything is to make sure that we have a growing economy, which we have, and that we are controlling costs by halving

inflation. The next thing that businesses want is access to labour and skills. I attended the British Chambers of Commerce's global event yesterday at the QEII Centre, and it was one of the key asks. We are doing many things on making the workplace more attractive: flexible working and, for example, carer's leave. We have a programme across government to try to get those 9 million people who are currently economically inactive back to work. That can solve many of the problems, along with reform of childcare and other things. I am happy to come and listen to my hon. Friend's businesses and find out the particular challenges they are facing.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Twenty billion pounds! That is the amount of money currently held up in late payments—more than the entire science budget. It should be flowing to small businesses, allowing them to innovate, develop new products, create new jobs, drive our local economies or simply stay afloat. Instead, every day thousands of our great British small and medium-sized enterprises are wasting precious time and money chasing late payments, at an estimated cost of £684 million a year. For the sake of British business, will this Government take a leaf out of Labour's policy book and properly legislate to tackle late payments to small businesses?

Kevin Hollinrake: Well, £90 billion is the amount of Labour's uncoded spending plans, but let us talk about the £20 billion for now. The hon. Member is absolutely right to raise the issue of late payments. I attended a roundtable yesterday as part of our payment and cash flow review consultation, which is hugely important. We have significant engagement with businesses across the piece. We are determined and ambitious to reform the rules on late payments to ensure that businesses get paid on time. We have made significant progress in recent years in our international performance, so we are not an outlier. Nevertheless, we can and shall do more. The results of the consultation will be made available shortly.

NDAs: Sexual Assault, Harassment and Misconduct

2. **Layla Moran** (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): If she will make an assessment of the implications for her policies of trends in the level of use of non-disclosure agreements by businesses in cases relating to sexual assault, harassment and misconduct. [904987]

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kemi Badenoch): Non-disclosure agreements can be used legitimately by employers—for example, to protect commercially sensitive information. The Government understand concerns about the use of NDAs to silence victims of sexual misconduct. We have legislated to prevent higher education providers using NDAs in cases of sexual abuse, harassment or misconduct and other forms of bullying or harassment.

Layla Moran: Imagine, Mr Speaker, that you are a victim of bullying, misconduct or sexual harassment at work, and your employer pushes you to sign a gagging clause preventing you from publicly disclosing what happened to you; this sits over you in perpetuity, reminding you of the trauma you experienced. The campaign group Can't Buy My Silence will soon be launching a

business pledge to commit to ending this practice in businesses for good. Will the Secretary of State consider meeting me to discuss this forthcoming pledge, and does she back a ban on the use of NDAs in these specific cases?

Kemi Badenoch: I am aware that the hon. Member had a private Member's Bill on this very issue. The Government are supportive of preventing harassment in the workplace, and we supported the Worker Protection (Amendment of Equality Act 2010) Bill. We believe that NDAs have a place, but she has raised specific circumstances where they are inappropriate, so I am happy to discuss with her what we can do to stop this problem from continuing.

Digital Markets: Competition

3. **Nadhim Zahawi** (Stratford-on-Avon) (Con): What assessment her Department has made of the potential impact of the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Bill on levels of competition between businesses in digital markets. [904988]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake): The Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Bill will establish a new pro-competition regime for digital markets. This will boost competition between businesses in digital markets, driving productivity, growth and innovation.

Nadhim Zahawi: The Competition and Markets Authority's recent ruling blocking the acquisition of Activision Blizzard has made us an outlier. Its intervention in the nascent, innovative cloud gaming market was based on potential rather than real market power. You will know, Mr Speaker, that regulators have as much of a lever on growth in the economy as the Government. As we are doing in financial services, all regulators should have a remit for growth, and maybe—just maybe—we can call them “regulators for growth”.

Kevin Hollinrake: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his question. He may have noticed that we recently launched a paper, “Smarter Regulation to Grow the Economy”, so we absolutely agree with that point. Some of the measures it proposes are about ensuring that Ministers, officials and others look at alternatives to regulation, rather than jumping straight to regulation, and have an earlier impact assessment of what regulation would mean for businesses' costs, rather than just looking at other factors. I absolutely agree with him that the best regulator is competition—the No. 1 thing we want to drive forward—which is also the best thing for growth. I am keen to talk to him about this matter in further detail after these questions.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): A huge element of growth in the digital market is the crypto industry. The European Parliament has just signed off the Markets in Cryptoassets Regulation. That ambitious and forward-thinking law gives the European Union the first rules to govern the crypto industry. When will this Government do the same?

Kevin Hollinrake: We are looking at the crypto sector carefully, and there was a report yesterday from the Treasury Committee on that matter. The crypto sector

is moving at pace, and it is important that regulation keeps up with that. We have regulated already on some of the promotions around cryptocurrency, and it is something we will keep under scrutiny. I am sure my Treasury colleagues will be doing that even more than I shall.

Steel Industry

4. **Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): What steps she is taking to support the steel sector. [904989]

8. **Holly Mumby-Croft** (Scunthorpe) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to support the steel industry. [904994]

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kemi Badenoch): We are actively engaging with the steel industry to secure a positive and sustainable future. Alongside that, my Department announced the British Industry Supercharger in February—a decisive and necessary intervention that will help to reduce energy costs for energy intensive industries such as steel.

Jessica Morden: As the Minister knows, the key issues facing the steel industry are energy prices—we are still paying much more than our European competitors—and decarbonisation. There are 23 clean steel projects in Europe, but none here. In reply the Secretary of State will quote support that is historic, too little, or too late. Labour Members have a plan for steel, where is the Government's?

Kemi Badenoch: I visited the Port Talbot steelworks, and no one there is talking about Labour's plan; they are talking about what the Government have been doing, and they have been grateful for the support we have provided. It is misleading to call that "historic" when we have been showing continued support for the steel sector. The Government continue to provide that significant financial support, and the steel industry has been able to bid into Government funds worth more than £1 billion to support energy efficiency and decarbonisation.

Holly Mumby-Croft: I thank the Secretary of State for her visit to Scunthorpe steelworks. She knows well the challenges that the steel industry is facing. While the British Industry Supercharger was a welcome announcement that I hope will go a long way to putting us on a fairer footing, I am concerned that some of that support might not be fully in place until 2025. Given current concerns, can she do anything to speed that up?

Kemi Badenoch: I thank my hon. Friend for her question and for accompanying me on my visit to British Steel last week. We are moving quickly to deliver the supercharger policy. It will reduce energy costs to energy intensive industries, including steel, by around £20 per megawatt hour. She mentioned speed, and we will consult on the capacity market exemption shortly. We intend to bring forward secondary legislation on all three measures around renewable energy obligations and capacity market costs. I will do everything I can to ensure that businesses get the support they need as quickly as they can.

CPTPP: Impact on UK Businesses

5. **Marco Longhi** (Dudley North) (Con): What assessment her Department has made of the potential impact of the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership on UK businesses. [904990]

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kemi Badenoch): We have secured a deal that offers brilliant new opportunities for British businesses by getting an agreement in principle to the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership. Our exporters will have greater opportunities to sell their excellent products to some of the world's biggest markets in the Americas and Asia-Pacific, with the bloc set to account for 15% of global GDP once the UK joins. It will be easier and less expensive to trade physical products between our countries, and more than 99% of current UK goods exports to CPTPP will be eligible for tariff-free trade.

Marco Longhi: I congratulate the Secretary of State on the CPTPP agreement, which, among other things, will be a wonderful vehicle to foster better relationships within the Indo-Pacific, as well as being a key region for UK trade. Another key area for trade for the United Kingdom is Latin America, and as the Prime Minister's trade envoy to Brazil, and having lived and worked there for five years, I have seen first hand the wonderful opportunities available there. Will the Secretary of State update the House on what her Department is doing to build on that trading relationship with Brazil?

Kemi Badenoch: I thank my hon. Friend for his outstanding commitment to improving our trade relationship with Brazil in his work as trade envoy, and I wish him well on his upcoming trip to the country. Our bilateral trade with Brazil increased to £7.7 billion in the 12 months ending December 2022, and the signing of the UK-Brazil double taxation agreement in November represents a significant step in enhancing trade across all sectors. There is much we can do with Brazil—I intend to visit the country, hopefully later this year—especially around critical minerals. I look forward to working with the Brazilian Government in due course.

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): As the UK crafts deeper and more comprehensive trade relations across Latin America, it is important to capture not just economic benefits but cultural benefits. In fact, student and language exchanges are a vital precursor to trade as they enable young people in both the UK and Latin America to have the mobility and skills to create those relationships and build businesses. Today, a major barrier preventing UK university students from studying in Latin America is the lack of mutual recognition agreements on qualifications. What assessment has the Secretary of State made of the merits of integrating mutual recognition of higher education qualifications into trade negotiations?

Kemi Badenoch: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question, for the work that he does as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Mexico and for his interest in the region. We do look at mutual recognition for qualifications in trade deals, but most of the time they tend to be in separate agreements. Because of the

nature of how free trade agreements are structured, we try to ensure that they are focused specifically on trade. We have an upcoming upgrade to our trade deal with Mexico, as we do with several other countries. If he has specific areas that he would like us to highlight, now is the time to tell us which qualifications in particular we should focus on.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): While Labour Members recognise the diplomatic and security benefits of closer ties with the Indo-Pacific, Ministers' negotiating skills are clearly not improved if Britain's joining the CPTPP will lift economic growth here by only 0.08%. Will the Secretary of State tell the House why, in the accession talks, she was not able to resist giving some overseas corporate giants the right to access secret courts that could override the will of the British people, bypass Parliament and cost British taxpayers significant sums of money?

Kemi Badenoch: I believe that the hon. Gentleman is referring to investor dispute settlement mechanisms. We have used them in this country for many years, and that has protected British companies. He is wrong about the CPTPP not bringing much economic growth to the country—it will bring billions. We have repeatedly explained that the statistic he quoted is being misused. It does not take into account the growth of the bloc or the future GDP growth of those countries. We should be congratulating all our officials for the hard work they did in negotiating the agreements rather than criticising them.

Critical Minerals

6. **Andrew Selous** (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to support the critical minerals industry. [904992]

The Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade (Ms Nusrat Ghani): As part of the UK's strategy to secure a resilient supply of critical minerals, we are accelerating domestic capabilities along the whole critical minerals value chain, from mining to manufacturing. Our support for businesses such as Cornish Lithium and Green Lithium shows our support for these industries. Just in March, we published a refreshed delivery approach to the critical minerals strategy, including the establishment of a new industry taskforce on critical minerals that will investigate the critical mineral dependencies and vulnerabilities faced by UK industry and help it to mitigate risks.

Andrew Selous: I thank the Minister for that answer. She will know well that demand for graphite, lithium and cobalt is expected to quadruple by the 2040s. With supply currently dominated by China, what can the Government do to extract rapidly the deposits identified in all four nations of the United Kingdom so that we can gain a climate action dividend and level up the United Kingdom?

Ms Ghani: My hon. Friend is right. One reason why I came back into government was to ensure that we were not reliant on one country, China. We need more lithium, cobalt and graphite, as does everybody else, to make

batteries for electric cars, and we need silicon and tin for electronics. We welcome the Critical Minerals Intelligence Centre's report, "Potential for Critical Raw Material Prospectivity in the UK", which we commissioned. We are working with the British Geological Survey on next steps. Through the strategy, we are funding projects such as Cornish Lithium and Green Lithium, which build innovative, resilient value chains here in the UK.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Many are clamouring for the rights for deep-sea mining to extract critical minerals, but we know little about the seabed and the knock-on effects there could be on the environment and ecology of the deep sea and the wider oceans. Will the Minister continue to support a moratorium on deep-sea mining through the International Seabed Authority until we have a better understanding of those environmental impacts?

Ms Ghani: There is no deep-sea mining currently happening in areas beyond national jurisdictions. The UK has committed not to sponsor or support the issue of any exploitation licences for deep-sea mining projects unless and until there is significant scientific evidence about the potential impact on deep-sea ecosystems.

Business Regulators: Accountability

9. **James Wild** (North West Norfolk) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to improve the accountability of business regulators. [904995]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his fine work as part of the Regulatory Reform Group, which has just published a report. Last week the Government published "Smarter Regulation to Grow the Economy", setting out our vision for the UK's regulation and how we can harness the opportunities that Brexit presents to re-think how and when we regulate. As part of that, we set out our agenda to ensure that regulators help drive economic growth.

James Wild: I thank the Minister for his answer and for the reforms published last week. He kindly mentioned the Regulatory Reform Group and our report last week. Will he carefully consider our recommendations in the report on the Government better holding regulators to account, and look at the proposal for an accountability framework that looks at key metrics, including competition, to judge their performance?

Kevin Hollinrake: I read that with interest, and I spoke to my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) yesterday about the matter. It is important that all regulators with responsibility for regulating and promoting growth continue to be held to account for delivering on those objectives. His proposed joint committee of Members of both Houses is for the House authorities to consider, but I note that in a regulatory system that already has a number of accountability mechanisms, adding another layer could risk more uncertainty rather than clarity.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Leaving the cost of formula up to the market has resulted in soaring prices, as Sky News has revealed this week.

Parents are stealing formula from shops, relying on baby banks and formula foraging on Facebook, while profits and marketing spends of the companies have soared. Will the Minister instruct the Competition and Markets Authority to investigate the sector to protect our younger citizens?

Kevin Hollinrake: The CMA is an independent body that decides where it should intervene. We keep these matters under very close scrutiny. Competition is the best regulator. We have a very competitive market for the supermarkets. There are 14 supermarkets, all regulated by the Groceries Code Adjudicator. It is important that competition is allowed to play its role in driving down prices, but we will keep an eye on that.

Safeguarding Democracy, Rights and the Environment

10. **Geraint Davies** (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): If she will make an assessment of the implications for her policies of the report by the Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development of the Council of Europe entitled “Safeguarding democracy, rights and the environment in international trade”. [904996]

The Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade (Ms Nusrat Ghani): It is clear that we live in dangerous times. Autocracies are behaving in a way that many of us have not seen in our lifetimes. The UK stands at a crossroads of this geopolitical stand-off between international rules-based systems as we know them and the system that autocratic leaders would like them to become. Trade and investment are at the very heart of that crossroads. The UK has long supported the promotion of our values globally, which will continue as an independent trading nation. By growing our trading relationships, the UK can increase its influence, which helps us to open conversations bilaterally with partners on a range of issues.

Geraint Davies: The Minister knows that I am trade rapporteur to the Council of Europe. My report, which has been agreed by 46 member states, calls for due diligence on the border to protect supply chains from human rights abuse and deforestation, and more clout for the environment vis-à-vis the interests of energy companies, in particular in dispute mechanisms. Will she meet me about taking forward those proposals so that trade agreements green rather than blacken our planet and uphold rather than diminish our fundamental rights?

Ms Ghani: I have read the hon. Member’s report, because he sent it to me. I have lost many hours of my life, but I have read it and I enjoyed it. It would be remiss of me not to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell), the Conservative leader of the UK parliamentary delegation to the Council of Europe, for all his work. There is lots of really good stuff. [Interruption.] He leads the delegation, but the hon. Member wrote the report, which I have read. There are some good points, especially on China’s emissions, which are greater than USA and the EU combined.

The UK works with allies and partners through multilateral systems to promote our values globally. Multilateral forums include the UN, the World Trade Organisation, the Organisation for Security and

Co-operation in Europe and the Council of Europe. I will sit down and work through the hon. Member’s report with him.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies) on his work on this report, which includes calling out the energy charter treaty used by fossil fuel companies to sue Governments for introducing climate policies. It is now nearly a year since the Minister’s colleague, the right hon. Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Greg Hands), said:

“The UK cannot support an outdated treaty which holds back investment in clean energy and puts British taxpayers at increased risk from costly legal challenges”.

Can the Minister tell us when the Government will follow the example of other major European countries and commit to withdrawing from the energy charter treaty?

Ms Ghani: The energy charter treaty, which is under review, falls under the responsibilities of the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, which has been formed from half of my previous Department. In their negotiations to modernise the ECT, the former Departments for International Trade and for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy worked in close collaboration and DIT led on the investment provisions, so there is no doubt that the hon. Lady’s question would be better focused at the other Department.

Chinese-owned Businesses: Contracts

11. **Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): Whether her Department has provided recent guidance to companies negotiating contracts with Chinese-owned businesses. [904998]

The Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade (Nigel Huddleston): Our bilateral trade with China was worth £111 billion last year. The Department provides expert guidance to help UK companies succeed in China, ranging from specialised support through the export support service to practical assistance from our extensive overseas network. We will continue to support engagement, while ensuring our national security and values are protected.

Tim Loughton: This House has voted to recognise the genocide by China. This House has passed legislation to limit companies doing business in Xinjiang and to restrict Chinese companies getting involved in sensitive UK infrastructure projects, including Hikvision, which has over a million security cameras in this country and just reported an increase in sales in this country of more 50%. What message does it send when a UK trade Minister, from the Minister’s team, goes to Beijing, feting Chinese Ministers for Chinese investment in the UK, as if the golden age of UK-China relations was still a thing?

Nigel Huddleston: My hon. Friend raises many important points, but the key thing is that the relationship with China has been laid out recently in the integrated review, the integrated review refresh and in the Foreign Secretary’s speech, and we have made it very clear that we need to balance our trading interests with our national security interests, for the very reasons that my hon. Friend outlines.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): What are the Government doing to ensure that the genomics data of British businesses held by British genomics companies that then trade or do deals with Chinese companies, such as BGI Genomics, is protected? Is it not somewhat naive, given the terms of the national security law, to think that GDPR alone is sufficient protection?

Nigel Huddleston: Through a variety of mechanisms and across multiple Departments, the Government give advice to companies investing overseas. In terms of dynamics the other way around, the Investment Security Unit carefully analyses investment in the UK, particularly relating to acquisitions in 17 sensitive areas. We are very careful at analysing and we will continue to keep a close eye on those two-way relationships.

Goods Exports: UK and G7

12. **Dave Doogan** (Angus) (SNP): What recent comparative assessment her Department has made of trends in goods exports from (a) the UK and (b) other G7 countries. [904999]

The Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The UK's total exports have now recovered to pre-pandemic levels, measured against 2018. In 2022, UK exports were £815 billion, up by 21% in current prices compared with 2018, and up by 0.5% once adjusted for inflation. The latest data shows Scotland is the third highest exporting nation or region in both goods and services. In 2022 Scottish exports of goods totalled £35.7 billion, up by 23.5% in current prices from the previous year.

Dave Doogan: I know just what a favourable position Scotland is in, in terms of its trade exports. We do very well, even though we are held back by the constraints of this Union. The Office for National Statistics figures show that UK exports are lagging behind other G7 countries. Before the Minister tells us that this is because of the war in Ukraine and covid, let me point out that all our G7 partners have faced those headwinds as well, but only the United Kingdom, sadly including Scotland, faces the English Brexit chaos that is damaging our trade. What discussions has she had to apologise to the Scottish Government and to Scottish businesses for the drag she places on Scottish trade?

Ms Ghani: The hon. Gentleman started so positively. If he is against Brexit, then he is against every trade deal, and he is against the most integrated single market in the world, which is Scotland and England. All he wants to do is to split, split, split. I have already told him the good news that the total amount of exports in pounds is up. There is also fantastic news about whisky—surely that can raise a smile from the hon. Gentleman—and about services: in 2022, UK services were up by 24% in current prices, and by 4% when the figure was adjusted for inflation. I know it is difficult for the hon. Gentleman to accept good news from the Government Benches, but it is good for his constituents, so he should welcome it.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I am afraid the independent Office for Budget Responsibility does not share the Minister's optimism about exports. The

analysis that accompanied the spring Budget forecast that the UK would face a 6.6% fall in exports this year. That is equivalent to a fall of over £51 billion, and would represent an average hit of over £186,000 to the more than 273,000 UK exporters. It will have a devastating impact, and is it any wonder that the UK is predicted to have the worst growth in the G7? Surely, if Ministers recognised the scale of these projected losses, they would be taking urgent steps to support our exporters now.

Ms Ghani: There will always be data, forecasts, and the evaluation and re-evaluation of those data and forecasts. It is important for the House to know about all the good news that was missing from the right hon. Gentleman's question. According to a PwC report, the UK will continue to be the fastest growing G7 economy until 2050. That is indeed good news. [Interruption.] It is a forecast. The right hon. Gentleman himself mentioned an OBR forecast.

Exports are up, including business services exports, and we are on track to reach our target of £1 trillion by 2030—and before the right hon. Gentleman jumps to his feet, let me add that 2030 is several years away, and I look forward to being on the Government Benches on this side of the House telling him, on that side of the House, how close we are to that target.

Food Prices

13. **Tommy Sheppard** (Edinburgh East) (SNP): What recent assessment she has made of the impact of her trade policies on food prices. [905000]

21. **Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): What recent assessment she has made of the impact of her trade policies on food prices. [905008]

The Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade (Nigel Huddleston): Our free trade programme helps to remove market access barriers for importers and exporters, making the UK more competitive and contributing to a greater choice of goods. The UK's trade policy works to increase access to good-quality, good-value food from around the world, while the liberalisation of tariffs can help to lower food prices.

Tommy Sheppard: UK food price inflation is already significantly higher than that in France, Germany and Italy. This week William Bain, the head of trade at the British Chambers of Commerce, said there was a strong prospect that new Brexit regulations coming into force later this year would drive prices even higher. Is it not time that this Government apologised for their ideological obsession with Brexit, which is forcing ordinary-working class families into poverty?

Nigel Huddleston: The hon. Gentleman is being somewhat selective. The figures from the Office for National Statistics showed that food price inflation in the UK was 19.2%—and the EU average is 19.2%. As for apologising, I will not apologise for the fact that when we left the EU, we got rid of hundreds of useless tariffs that were doing nothing other than pushing up prices for British consumers. We liberalised tariffs on environmental goods, and we liberalised tariffs on goods that we generally do not produce in the

UK, thus massively reducing the total number of tariffs faced by British consumers. That is a good thing, throughout the UK.

Patricia Gibson: Recent figures from the Trussell Trust show that food bank use across the UK by people in need of a three-day emergency food supply soared to a record 3 million in 2022-23. Does the Minister accept that food bank use, which has more than doubled in a decade, has a direct correlation with the disastrous Brexit—according to the London School of Economics—causing food prices to soar, and does he agree that more must be done to tackle a disgraceful situation in which too many of my constituents struggle to put food on the table?

Nigel Huddleston: All of us, on both sides of the House, are concerned about the struggles faced by our constituents, which is precisely why the Government have supported families through the challenges of the cost of living to the tune of £94 billion—£3,300 per household. As for the specific connection with trade, I refer the hon. Lady to the answer that I gave a moment ago: since we left the European Union, 47% of tariff lines in our tariff schedule have fallen to zero. The figure is 27% in the EU. British consumers are better off because of our tariff policy.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): If we take the Minister at his word that tariffs are coming down, that does not seem to be making much difference to the prices that people are paying at the supermarkets. Governments across Europe are taking action to tackle soaring food prices caused by what is termed greedflation. For example, in Ireland, supermarkets have been given a six-week ultimatum to bring down food prices; in France, the Government have agreed with retailers to keep the price of essential foodstuffs to the bare minimum; and Italy has set up a commission to monitor unusual movements in prices. Do Ministers accept that action to protect consumers from corporate greed is necessary and urgent?

Nigel Huddleston: As I said in answer to a previous question, food inflation is very similar in the UK and Europe, because we are all facing very similar challenges, including, of course, inflation through energy prices. That is precisely why we provided support to consumers to the tune of about half their energy costs this winter. Of course, we also provided support to businesses, which otherwise would have passed on higher costs to consumers; about a third of business energy prices have been covered by Government support. We are doing a lot, and the Prime Minister highlighted the challenges with a summit on food this very week.

Richard Thomson: I accept that we might be facing similar problems to mainland Europe, but we are certainly not getting the same degree of action from the Government to tackle prices in supermarkets. Does the Minister accept that by voting against my party's motion on Tuesday calling on them to put pressure on supermarkets to pass on falling food prices to consumers, the UK Government sent an extremely clear signal to families in Scotland that they are not on their side?

Nigel Huddleston: Again, I and my colleagues continually engage with industry about how it can help support consumers, because both the Government and businesses

have a responsibility to help consumers in these challenging times. That is precisely why we had the summit this week, which I am sure the hon. Member is well aware of.

Trade Deals: Environmental Standards

14. **Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD):** What steps her Department is taking to uphold environmental standards in trade deals. [905001]

The Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade (Nigel Huddleston): We are committed to upholding the UK's high environmental standards in our trade deals. In our Australia and New Zealand trade deals, for example, we included commitments to preserve our right to regulate, protect the environment, and affirm international environment and climate commitments. We work across Government on environmental matters and utilise international fora to promote our environmental aims.

Wera Hobhouse: Trade deals can protect or destroy our natural environment. What the Minister has just said seems to contradict this, but our assessment is that the Government consistently fail to guarantee existing environmental standards in trade deals. For example, they have removed European palm oil tariffs to join the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership. The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds said that that could devastate forests, destroy orangutan habitats and fuel climate change. Can he explain why the Government are happy to ignore the environment, and will the Government establish core environmental standards for any new trade deals?

Nigel Huddleston: I am disappointed to hear that from the hon. Lady, because we generally agree on a lot of things. We have no intention of weakening environmental standards through trade agreements; in fact, they are often an opportunity to enhance standards through co-operation. CPTPP prohibits parties from waiving, derogating from or failing to enforce environmental laws in order to encourage trade or investment. I am afraid the reality is the exact opposite of what she says.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): One opportunity from our joining the trans-Pacific partnership is that it gives the UK a say in different chapters of the partnership, including that on the environment, and the ability to work with Malaysia to ensure the sustainability of its palm oil exports, in exactly the same way that we helped Indonesia shape its regulations and processes for exporting timber. Does the Minister agree that the key to all this is engagement? In that context, does he share my strong enthusiasm for a separate free trade agreement with Indonesia, so that we can work together for the huge benefit of both countries?

Nigel Huddleston: I thank my hon. Friend for the amount of work that he does as a trade envoy. We both met our Indonesian friends this week, and the Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade, my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani) will be visiting Indonesia shortly, so we are certainly building those relationships. We are always keen to look at future opportunities for trade agreements and, outside trade agreements, at enhancing the relationship through a

variety of fora, for the very reasons that my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) explains. We look forward to continued engagement with Indonesia.

Employment Bill

16. **Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Whether it remains her Department's policy to bring forward an employment Bill. [905003]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake): The best thing we can do to help people with employment is to have a strong economy with low unemployment, and I am pleased to say that we have both. Although there is no employment Bill, the Government are supporting six private Members' Bills to deliver on our manifesto commitments: helping new parents and unpaid carers, giving employees easier access to flexible working and giving workers the right to request a more predictable working pattern. The Employment (Allocation of Tips) Act 2023 has also now completed its journey.

Rachael Maskell: According to Stop Hurt at Work, 27% of employees experience bullying or harassment at work. There is no legal definition of workplace bullying and no simple path to restitution. Although we have been promised employment legislation by this Government since 2017, and in the light of Matthew Taylor's "Good work" report, we have not seen an employment Bill in this Parliament to protect workers at work. Can we expand employment rights in legislation to ensure that there is a clear path to restitution for people experiencing bullying at work?

Kevin Hollinrake: I point out that the unemployment rate in York is at a record low of 1.4%, which is below the national average, as I am sure the hon. Lady would welcome.

Since the good work plan was published, the Government have taken forward a wide range of commitments, including giving all workers the right to receive a statement of their rights on day one and the right to request a more predictable working pattern. I am very happy to meet the hon. Lady following these questions to discuss the points she raises.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Ministers have promised an employment Bill more than 20 times, but they have consistently failed to deliver. It seems that not a week goes by without a company in the gig economy announcing that it is stripping back workers' rights and protections, presumably because they are confident that this Government will not legislate to introduce protections in the gig economy. Will the Minister come clean on the Government's plans? If they are not going to bring in any protections for gig economy workers, will he now apologise to them for another failed promise?

Kevin Hollinrake: Paying the national living wage is the law, and failing to pay workers the correct wage can result in significant fines, public naming and, for the most serious offences, criminal prosecution. The national living wage applies to all those who are classified as

employees or limb (b) workers. If an individual feels that their employment status has been misclassified, they have the right to go to an employment tribunal.

Topical Questions

T1. [905009] **Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kemi Badenoch): As Secretary of State for Business and Trade, my priority is to support UK companies to thrive at home and abroad, which is why this week I launched negotiations for an enhanced UK-Swiss free trade agreement alongside my counterpart, Federal Councillor Guy Parmelin. Trade between us is worth almost £53 billion and, as two service economies, a modernised agreement presents huge opportunities for the UK and Switzerland. I met representatives from SIX Swiss Exchange, the backbone of Swiss financial services, and several innovative start-ups at the fintech accelerator Tenity.

Peter Aldous: Fish and chip shops have been part of the fabric of British life for generations and should be the cornerstone of a revived domestic fishing industry. However, shops in the Lowestoft and Waveney area continue to face an ongoing triple whammy of high energy costs, high fish prices and the high cost of cooking oil. Will my right hon. Friend work proactively with the sector to agree a strategy that ensures the survival and subsequent flourishing of fish and chip shops?

Kemi Badenoch: My hon. Friend is a doughty champion for his local fish and chip shops. We recognise the importance of fish and chip shops to local communities and the challenges they face. We have introduced a range of support measures to address the specific issues he raises, including changes to business rates that, across the country, are worth a total of £13.6 billion in lower bills. We are also supporting non-domestic energy customers through the energy bill relief scheme, and we recently introduced the energy bills discount scheme, which runs until March 2024. We will keep working closely with the sector as part of the Hospitality Sector Council to improve the resilience of businesses, including the fish and chip shops in Lowestoft.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): It has now been 100 days since we first welcomed the right hon. Lady to her new post. In that time, we have seen steel production fall to record lows; the automotive sector has issued warning cry after warning cry that Government policy risks shipping jobs overseas; and the US has seen incredible sums invested under the Inflation Reduction Act and the EU has put forward its own significant response. Meanwhile, the UK remains trapped in the Conservatives' low growth, high tax loop, with the lowest business investment in the G7. This morning, three of her predecessors, each from a different political party, have said that the Government need an explicit industrial strategy. Does the current Business Secretary agree with them?

Kemi Badenoch: I thank the shadow Minister for highlighting that we have had 100 days as the Department for Business and Trade, during which we have been able

to launch the biggest free trade agreement that the UK has seen since we left the EU and since the trade and co-operation agreement. He also mentions a lot of systemic issues, which have been faced globally. He rightly talks about the US IRA and the EU green deal industrial plan, but it is good for me to mention that we are doing a lot in this space. For example, the issue that the automotive industries are talking about relates to rules of origin. This is something that the EU is also worried out, because the costs of the components have risen. This is not to do with Brexit; it is to do with supply chain issues following the pandemic and the war between Russia and Ukraine. I have had meetings with my EU trade counterpart; we are discussing these things and looking at how we can review them, especially as the TCA will be coming into review soon.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): What would have been the answer to Question 19? How many businesses were supported by grant funding in North Northamptonshire during the pandemic?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake): Off the top of my head, I can say that during the pandemic the Government delivered an unprecedented package of support for businesses. In total, more than £22.6 billion was provided to businesses via local authorities. In Kettering, more than 5,000 covid-19 business grants were issued, amounting to £24 million. North Northamptonshire Council delivered £29.9 million to local businesses through the covid-19 business grant scheme.

T2. [905010] **Marion Fellows** (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): Dr Nikhil Datta from Warwick Economics noted that the £5.84 billion that UK consumers had paid in increased food prices by 2021 as a result of Brexit hit the poorest households hardest, as they spend a larger proportion of their income on food. Does the Secretary of State, the Minister or the UK Government accept that the most vulnerable households are paying the highest price for Brexit, especially in this ongoing food price inflation crisis?

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Lady raises an important point. As she knows, one of the Government's commitments is to halve inflation, which will also have an impact on food prices. We absolutely need to do that, particularly for those low-income households. That is why we directed support mostly at low-income households, with more than £2,000 a household this year and £900 in additional support for low-income households this year. This is a twin-track approach, tackling inflation and lowering food prices, and also providing direct support.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): Some 70% of our economy is services, so what is the Department doing to reduce barriers in that area and supercharge our global trade in services?

The Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade (Nigel Huddleston): My hon. Friend raises an important point: more than 70% of our economy is services. Therefore, it is absolutely right that the Department for Business and Trade has a laser focus on services as well as goods, particularly in relation to international deals. Historically, some of those trade agreements have

not covered services particularly well. The Secretary of State mentioned the Swiss agreement, which was silent on services. So my hon. Friend is absolutely right about this, and we have a hitlist of barriers we are working on. They relate to both goods and services, which are hugely important right across the country, including in his constituency.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): May I draw the Minister's attention to a Which? investigation into the lack of consistency in unit pricing by supermarkets? That makes it difficult for consumers to work out the real price of goods and, crucially, to choose between them. The Competition and Markets Authority is looking at this issue, but will the Government talk to the supermarkets too?

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Lady raises an important point. Which? does fantastic work. The CMA acts independently, without ministerial influence, and it is right that it does. However, I am sure it is keeping a close eye on that matter. As I said in a previous answer, the best way we can regulate prices in the UK is through strong competition. We have a very strong, competitive market in the supermarkets, with 14 chains in this country, and that is the best way to hold down prices. However, she raises an important point and I am sure the CMA will have listened to it.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): UK Export Finance plays a vital role in supporting export opportunities, but a company in my constituency is having difficulties landing support to secure a contract based in one of our Trans-Pacific Partnership area countries. Will my right hon. Friend meet me to discuss this and how we can support that business?

Kemi Badenoch: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that. I will see whether I can get a meeting with him, but, if not, I will make sure that one of my officials is able to look into this issue specifically for him.

T6. [905015] **Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): I am sure that you, Mr Speaker, and everyone here will wish the Red Lion in Ealing well under its new management. It even does food for non-drinkers such as me. Can Ministers work with Ofgem to find a sustainable solution to energy bills, and with the Home Office to redefine chefs as a shortage occupation, to stop the Red Lion being one of the record number of pubs going to the wall?

Kemi Badenoch: I thank the hon. Lady for raising that issue. As I said earlier in reply to a question about energy support for small businesses, we do know that businesses are facing high energy costs. The Government are currently paying about half of everyone's energy bills. I talked about the energy bill relief scheme and the energy bills discount scheme. We are doing everything we can to support businesses in the hospitality sector, but if there is something that is specific outside that, I ask her to please write to us and we will see whether there is any further support that can be offered.

T7. [905016] **Richard Foord** (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): According to the website for the Department for Business and Trade, the Department is supposed to "shape our rules to ensure businesses thrive".

Edenvale Turf is a successful small and medium-sized enterprise in my part of Devon and it employs more than 20 people. Older Edenvale workers have grandfather rights as supervisors, but they have been told that they will no longer be eligible to act as turf-cutting supervisors without taking a National Vocational Qualification. Will the Minister meet me to discuss how the Government might prevent scores of older, experienced people from leaving the workforce by getting out of the way and ensuring that businesses thrive?

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Gentleman raises a very important point. Clearly, our regulation must work in favour of employment and helping people to get work and stay in work. I am very happy to meet him, possibly with one of my colleagues from the Department for Work and Pensions, to look at this matter.

Stephen Kinnoch (Aberavon) (Lab): I am honoured to chair the all-party group on steel, and, as such, I have invited the Secretary of State to meet us, as all four of her predecessors have agreed to do. I am very disappointed that she has declined to do so. I urge her to reconsider that position.

The US is investing \$282 billion in green manufacturing. The Spanish and German Governments are each investing £1 billion in the decarbonisation of their steel industries. Labour would match that opportunity with a £3 billion clean steel fund, but the Government's response to date has been woefully inadequate. When will the Secretary of State bring forward a steel transition strategy that matches up with what our competitors are doing and that matches the ambition of our professional and dedicated steelworkers?

Kemi Badenoch: I have not declined to meet the all-party group on steel; I just said that it was subject to diary requirements. Where I have been is in the hon. Gentleman's constituency, visiting the steelworks. I did notify him before we went there, but he showed absolutely no interest in accompanying me to visit the steelworks in his constituency. We are spending quite a lot of money on supporting the steel industry. We look at what has happened at Teesside and how we have regenerated the former steelworks. Those on his side of the House, however, have spent most of their time smearing the Mayor of Teesside and making it very difficult for the businesses there to continue to make the investment they need in order to help turn the sector around.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): Marshalls Bakery, a small business in my constituency, has just closed its doors after 43 years of trading. The owners told me that they were unable to withstand the combined pressures of covid, rising wheat and container charges and high energy costs. They feel let down and are angry at the lack of Government support for businesses such as theirs. Can the Minister tell me what further steps he is taking to ensure that other small businesses can survive in this challenging climate to provide the certainty from Government that they so desperately need?

Kevin Hollinrake: I am sorry to hear about the demise of that business in the hon. Lady's constituency. Clearly, it has been a very tough time for businesses in recent years, with the covid crisis followed by the cost of living crisis. I am very happy to meet her to discuss what

support we provide, which is to the tune of hundreds of billions of pounds. I am informed that there has been £1 billion of support to businesses over recent years. The schemes running at the moment include: the rates discount at £13.6 billion; and £23 billion has been put into helping businesses with energy costs. I am very happy to meet her to discuss that further.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): UK semiconductor businesses have been crying out for the semiconductor strategy. I have asked a number of questions about this, and two weeks ago the Minister for Science, Research and Innovation told me it would be published in "a matter of days". The Secretary of State loves a doughty champion; can she be a doughty champion for the semiconductor industry and speak to colleagues in the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology to get the strategy published?

The Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I do not need any excuse to chase up the Department on the semiconductor strategy, and I will do so. As the hon. Lady knows, it does not sit within our remit, but with DSIT. In this Department, we are making sure that the critical minerals needed to put semiconductors together are in the supply chain and that we can get hold of them, but I am more than happy to chase up that strategy.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Large global car makers have warned that the UK's transition to electric vehicles will be impeded if the UK Government and the EU do not delay the stricter rules of origin, which could add tariffs on car exports. Will Ministers negotiate on the issue to safeguard the UK's automotive industry?

Kemi Badenoch: The answer is yes; we are actively working on the issue, and we are not the only country impacted by it. Just yesterday, officials from Germany were talking about how they needed to look into it. It is due to the rising cost of components, which we will look at as part of our trade and co-operation agreement, but it is something that both sides are interested in resolving, so I assure the hon. Lady that we are actively working on it.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Businesses and organisations in my constituency, and no doubt beyond, have ended up marooned on exceptionally high energy tariffs because they were forced to sign contracts at the height of the crisis. What conversations have Ministers had with Ofgem and with the energy companies to see what can be done to support those businesses, as those tariffs will be a drag on their future growth and development, and in some cases threaten their very survival?

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Lady makes an important point. Alongside the Minister for Energy Security and Net Zero, I met energy suppliers and Ofgem recently to discuss the matter. The problem is principally that energy prices have fallen, so businesses entering into new contracts today are getting more competitive rates, but the ones who entered contracts between July and December last year are facing difficulties. The energy

suppliers have promised to help, but if the hon. Lady wants to talk to me about any particular instances, I am happy to help.

Stephen Kinnock: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Following the exchange I just had with the Secretary of State, I want to underline the point that her office has declined and said that she would not be interested in meeting the all-party parliamentary group for steel and metal related industries. While she did come to visit the Port Talbot steelworks in my constituency, which of course I welcome, I was not invited to join her on that visit, whereas I understand the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Holly Mumby-Croft) was invited to join her on the visit to the Scunthorpe steelworks. I just want to set the record straight on those points.

Mr Speaker: Does the Secretary of State want to come back on that?

Kemi Badenoch *indicated dissent.*

Mr Speaker: First of all, that is a point of correction rather than a point of order, but if somebody has made a mistake in the information given to the House, it must be corrected. I will leave that to whoever is right or wrong, and I am not going to make a judgment.

Kemi Badenoch: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I will write to the hon. Gentleman. I do not believe that what he has said is the case, but I will check the records and make sure that he gets a response to the correction he has made.

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Secretary of State. Please check, but please also correct the matter in writing for the record of the House—if that was the case, may I add?

Business of the House

10.33 am

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): May I ask the Leader of the House for the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Penny Mordaunt): The business for the week commencing 22 May will include:

MONDAY 22 MAY—Committee of the whole House and remaining stages of the Non-Domestic Rating Bill, followed by consideration of Lords amendments to the Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Bill.

TUESDAY 23 MAY—Opposition day (16th allotted day). Debate in the name of the official Opposition, subject to be announced.

WEDNESDAY 24 MAY—Consideration of Lords amendments to the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill.

THURSDAY 25 MAY—Debate on a motion on recognition of the Ukrainian Holodomor, followed by a general debate on tackling Islamophobia. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

The House will rise for the Whitsun recess at the conclusion of business on Thursday 25 May and return on Monday 5 June.

Thangam Debbonaire: I thank the Leader of the House for the forthcoming business. May I say how refreshing it is to see a Tory Cabinet Minister speaking at the actual Dispatch Box, rather than at the National Conservatism conference podium?

I assume that the Prime Minister signed off on the announcement by the Leader of the House today, but it would not surprise me if he had not, as we have Cabinet Ministers jockeying for position and coming up with whole new agendas—left, right and, well, even further to the right. Civil war season in the Tory party comes around faster every year, but every time it is working people who suffer. Ministers pass the buck, blame anyone but themselves and act as commentators, as if they have no power. That is reflected in the business.

Perhaps we could find time for a debate on ministerial responsibility; perhaps the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities could lead it. At that conference, he admitted that

“there simply aren’t enough homes. It is increasingly difficult to get on the property ladder.”

I presume he realises that he is the Housing Secretary. Why has he not done anything about it? He is only making the situation worse by prioritising his Back Benchers over Britain’s young people. Is it not time that he came here and answered questions from MPs?

After calling for it last week, I was glad that the Renters (Reform) Bill was announced this week. Can the Leader of the House tell Bristol’s renters when that Bill will receive its Second Reading? I did not notice it in the business. Labour wants to see a four-month notice period, a national register of landlords, and a host of new rights for tenants, including the right to make alterations to their homes, to request speedy repairs and to have pets.

Many Bristolians also want to buy their first home—that is true of people up and down the country—but we need more affordable green homes. If the Government do not have any ideas of their own, perhaps they could introduce a Bill that includes Labour’s plans to fix the housing crisis. We would take on planning reform, bring back local housing targets and remove the veto used by big landowners to stop shovels hitting the ground. We would also prioritise first-time buyers. Where is the Government’s plan for aspiring homeowners? Can the Housing Secretary come and tell us what it is?

Can the Leader of the House clarify whether Tory Ministers are taking full responsibility for their own conduct? Yesterday, the Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Dehenna Davison) wrote to my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald)—I have notified them both of my intention to mention them—saying that the Government found no signs of corruption or illegality in the redevelopment of a massive site in the north-east. She did not declare in that letter, however, that she had received thousands of pounds in a donation from a local businessman who has a holding in Teesworks Ltd, the company redeveloping the site. I must stress that she has registered that donation in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests, but the ministerial code states that

“Ministers must ensure that no conflict arises, or could reasonably be perceived to arise, between their public duties and their private interests”.

so can the Leader of the House clarify whether any rules have been broken? If so, what steps will be taken?

To continue the theme of failing to take responsibility, I see that the Home Secretary also enjoyed a day out at the circus. Contradicting her own Prime Minister, she said that she would cut immigration. I wonder whether she realises that she is actually the Home Secretary. Shortly after, the Prime Minister hit back with an announcement of visas for 10,000 more seasonal workers. Who are we to believe? Who holds the authority: the Home Secretary or the Prime Minister? What is the Government’s policy? We need clarity. Instead of answering questions from friends at the Conservatives’ conspiracy comic con—I love a bit of alliteration on a Thursday—perhaps the Home Secretary could get on with her job, come to this House and answer questions from MPs.

Why is the Prime Minister not taking responsibility for the behaviour of his Cabinet colleagues? Is he really so weak that he will let them get away with openly undermining his authority like that? Will the Leader of the House at least try to fill some of the massive leadership black hole that is lingering over the Conservative party right now? Perhaps she will follow the example of an important figure in England’s other great civil war. In Parliament 375 years ago today, Thomas Fairfax, an English politician and parliamentary commander-in-chief—yes, he too had a sword—spoke of the need to suppress the insurrectionists. I am not asking for that, but perhaps the Leader of the House is today prepared to stop her Cabinet colleagues squabbling among themselves and get them to take responsibility and actually start governing.

Finally, I do not normally do weeks or days, but this week is Dementia Action Week. I recently attended the funeral of a family member who lost their life to dementia, and so many colleagues and people up and down the

country will have had that experience. Some 40% of people currently with dementia are not diagnosed. I am asking the Leader of the House, as a special personal request and on behalf of everybody who has met people who have dementia, to ask for a progress report from her colleagues on dementia diagnosis, as 91% of people who have one say that it is better to know.

Penny Mordaunt: I will take the hon. Lady's last point first. These awareness weeks afford us an opportunity to put a spotlight on what is happening on care, research, support and the progress made. There is some good news, in that our fantastic scientists have made real breakthroughs in recent years, but of course raising awareness and getting an early diagnosis can make a huge difference to the quality of people's lives. I shall certainly ensure that the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care has heard that point and updates the House in one form or another.

This week, we have commemorated the 80th anniversary of the Dambusters raid. We all know in this place that Wing Commander Gibson led that mission, and he later died after completing 170 war operations, aged just 26. What Members and the public may not know is that he was also the prospective parliamentary candidate for Macclesfield. At his death, Churchill wrote:

"I had hoped that he would come into Parliament and make his way there after the stress of the war was over, but he never spared himself nor would allow others to spare him. We have lost in this officer one of the most splendid of all our fighting men. His name will not be forgotten; it will for ever be enshrined in the most wonderful records of our country."

We should never forget what a privilege it is to serve in this House, nor the price others paid so that we could.

On the very serious point that the hon. Lady raised about the Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Dehenna Davison), this is recent news, but I know that the Department has issued a statement saying that all the reporting that should have been done had been done, and there was not a conflict of interest; it was something that happened before the election. I think she has honoured all her obligations in that respect.

With regard to the Teesside issue, it is a concern for all people, and even the Mayor last night was asking for more scrutiny to demonstrate that all that should have been done had been done. It is important that we focus on the facts. I understand the need and wish to make political capital out of this situation, but it is also about ensuring business confidence in a part of the world that we are keen to level up.

The hon. Lady talks about different policies and division in the Conservative party, which is high praise indeed from a party so qualified in the art, although—credit where credit is due—I think some unity has broken out in the Labour party. The shadow Deputy Prime Minister, the shadow Levelling Up Secretary, the shadow Health Secretary, the shadow Justice Secretary, the shadow Defence Secretary, the shadow Business Secretary, the shadow Northern Ireland Secretary, the shadow Minister for Women and Equalities, the shadow Environment Minister and the shadow Secretary of State for Scotland are all united against the Labour leader's latest policy U-turn. They are all what he would describe as "blockers" to development. To give them some comfort, most of

his policies and pledges have been ditched within a few months, so my advice to them is to hang tight and that is bound to happen.

The hon. Lady is right: people want to own their own homes. It is important to their financial resilience and it provides them and their family with certainty about their future. While I recognise that there is more to do, I am very happy to contrast our record with Labour's on building homes. Some 2.2 million additional homes have been delivered since 2010. House building starts have increased by over 108% since Labour was in power. There are 15% fewer dwellings failing to meet the decent homes standard. Housing supply was up 10% on last year and last year saw a 20-year high in people taking their first steps on the property ladder. Through Help to Buy, we have assisted 837,000 households to own their own home.

The hon. Lady talks about ministerial responsibility and the focus we have had this week on conservative philosophy. To me, being a Conservative has always meant taking responsibility for yourself and others. The facts of life are conservative, and ours is a party that values the individual and their potential. We are the party that puts people first, and we are the party of the first-person plural, "we"—not us or they, but we. We widen opportunity, responsibility and pride in our nation, and the stake people have in it. It is the Labour party, her party, that narrows and diminishes.

Further business will be announced in the usual way.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): Can we have a debate on the widespread need to reduce speed limits on rural roads for safety reasons, and to reduce the protracted procedures that can apply when trying to achieve that, even on one individual road? This is an issue of great concern to my local councillors Patrick Redstone and Liz Wardlaw, who are working hard on the issue, as is the Cheshire police and crime commissioner, John Dwyer.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that important question, and for the work that she is doing with her councillors and the police and crime commissioner on that important matter. She will know that the next relevant questions will be on 8 June and I suggest she raises the matter with the Secretary of State.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the SNP spokesperson.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): This week, Britain has been treated to not one, but two, Conservative conferences: the far-right Conservative Democratic Organisation and the extreme far-right National Conservatism conferences. I was rather surprised that the Leader of the House was not there after her recent starring role; nevertheless, the Home Secretary, the Levelling Up Secretary, and lots of up-and-coming Tory Back Benchers all made eye-catching contributions, along with some other rather extraordinary speeches. The holocaust was dismissed as Nazis mucking things up, and we were told that only married straight couples could safely bring up children, that pagans and narcissists are harming western civilisation, and that woke teachers are ruining children's education—it should make for an interesting Tory manifesto. Many of my constituents are extremely concerned by these latest developments. Can we have a debate to examine the extremist language and attitudes that we have witnessed at those conferences,

[Deidre Brock]

and can the Leader of the House tell us whether they further signal her Government's alarming slide into the grip of the far right, or will she reject these ideas out of hand like all decent people?

At Prime Minister's questions last week, the Prime Minister said that the Scottish Government should ditch plans to introduce highly protected marine areas, apparently unaware that the Scottish Government are only at the very start of a consultation process, with many hundreds of responses to go through yet, and that our First Minister and Ministers have said that no community will have an HPMA forced upon it. I do not know why some of the Prime Minister's Tory MSPs could not have told him that, although judging from recent behaviour in the Scottish Parliament, perhaps some struggle to use the internet.

However, rather embarrassingly, I see that the PM himself, when touting for Tory membership votes last year, signed a pledge from the Conservative Friends of the Ocean group supporting the creation of HPMA's, and his Government recently announced that three HPMA's will be created in England. What is going on here? I know that the Conservatives are desperate to win back the Scottish coastal communities after their Brexit catastrophe, but those communities will see through this hypocrisy, and my jaw nearly hit the floor when I saw that the lead patron of that same Conservative Friends of the Ocean group was the Leader of the House herself. Perhaps a debate sorting out exactly where the UK Government are on this important issue would be helpful, and can the Leader of the House clarify how she is dealing with the PM's flip-flopping on HPMA's? Will she be resigning from Government to honour her role as patron, or resigning as patron to uphold Government policy?

Penny Mordaunt: First, the hon. Lady asks me about the National Conservatism conference. That is not a conference that has been organised by Government or the Conservative party, and is therefore not within my remit or responsibilities to respond to. I am taking this as a positive, as she is running out of complaints to raise about my Government.

She raises the matter of HPMA's. I am very proud of my Government's record, both on improving water quality and boosting the economic resilience of coastal communities and the many things that we have done around the world to protect our valuable oceans, including the Blue Charter and others. I am proud to be patron of that Conservative group that looks after our oceans and the industries they support.

I gently say to the hon. Lady that I hope we all share those aims in this place, but how we go about doing things is also rather important. The complaints that not just Conservative MPs and MSPs have about how the Scottish Government have been going about this, and the concerns that have been raised by many coastal communities, are because the Scottish Government do not consult and do not listen to those communities. It is the same story with their disastrous bottle deposit return scheme, which will impact negatively on recycling rates and cause massive problems for businesses.

I was surprised this week that the hon. Lady decided to have an Opposition day debate on the cost of living, given that the SNP is hiking taxes, spending like there is

no tomorrow and failing to deliver on decent public services. We have heard this week that it will now cost more to finish those ferries that are so massively overdue than to do a complete new build. We know that Scottish Ministers appreciate the difficulty for and impact on their constituents and the travelling public, because in order for them to visit the island of Rùm, they had to hire their own boat; they were not able to use the ferry services.

I wonder whether the hon. Lady and her colleagues have read any of Audit Scotland's reports or acted on any of its recommendations. They have no concept of the catalogue we now have of arrests and raids and multiple police investigations into the mismanagement of their party finances, and of how negatively that has reflected on Scottish politics. We also have the poor stewardship of public funds and an increasing question about the ongoing saga of the Scottish National Investment Bank. We are wondering not just how much longer those CalMac ferries will be in the dock, but how many SNP figures will be as well.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): The European Scrutiny Committee, with three formal invitations, has been trying to secure the appearance of the Secretary of State for Business and Trade before our Committee on the issue of retained EU law for almost three months. That is not to mention last week's urgent question and my business question last week to my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House.

Over the past few days, I have been trying to secure the attendance of the Secretary of State through No. 10 and otherwise. My Committee understood that she might appear before us today. Despite everything, that has not transpired, and we have received no response from her or her staff. It is not possible to believe that she does not know that we have been making these representations through No. 10. She must clearly know that, given the timing of procedures, the need for her appearance by today was critical. It is now too late, given the proceedings in the Lords. We have heard nothing from her or her team. The Bill has now completed Report in the House of Lords. The failure to appear before our Committee is a grave discourtesy to the Committee and to this House in obstructing our work and the work of the House. Does my right hon. Friend know why the Secretary of State has been so clearly obstructive to my Committee on a matter of such vital national interest?

Penny Mordaunt: First, I thank my hon. Friend for the work that he and his Committee have done on this incredibly important issue. He has expressed concerns about the schedule of EU retained law to be revoked, the Government's policy on that and Brexit opportunities, and the opportunity that his Committee and other Members of this House will have to scrutinise. I go through those concerns, because I emphasise to him that this Government take those concerns extremely seriously. My understanding, and I checked this morning, is that the Secretary of State has agreed to appear before his Committee. After this session, I will make sure that he is updated on that, but that is my understanding as of a few moments ago.

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

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for the business statement and for announcing the Backbench Business debates for next Thursday. The Backbench Business Committee already has a very busy schedule for Chamber debates for June, but we do rely on a steady flow of applications for debates in the Chamber and in Westminster Hall. As I have mentioned, we are already quite busy for June, but upcoming commemorative dates in July that Members may wish to consider applying for debates on to recognise them include, among other things, the International Day of Co-operatives, World Youth Skills Day, Nelson Mandela Day and, of course, International Moon Day. We are looking forward to an application for a debate on International Moon Day and I am sure that will be forthcoming.

Will the Leader of the House join me in wishing success to Gateshead football club, my home town team, who are playing in the final of the FA trophy at Wembley on Sunday, where I will be in attendance?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for again giving an advertisement for the work of his Committee. I think I heard him say International Moon Day. I do hope it is in relation to the astronomical interpretation of that word, otherwise it is going to be an extremely interesting debate.

Theo Clarke (Stafford) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for her recent visit with me in Stafford to see for herself the Beaconside campus and the Home Office's proposed site for a new asylum seeker site in my constituency. I explained to her my very strong objections to that proposal, and shared those of the huge number of constituents who have written to me to complain about it. Can she provide time for a debate on asylum seeker policy and its impact on the west midlands?

Penny Mordaunt: I was pleased to respond to my hon. Friend's invitation for me to visit her constituency, and in particular to see that site. I know she has been speaking to many people in Government to emphasise her concerns and represent the views of her many constituents who are worried about this. She will know that this is one reason why we are bringing forward new legislation to relieve the unsustainable pressure on our asylum system and accommodation services, which are costing this country £3 billion a year. She will note the remarks of the Prime Minister, at the Council of Europe the other day, in calling for other countries to recognise how we need to work together to make sure that the finite resource we have to support people in desperate need is directed to those people who need that care most.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): Women's organisations have warned that the cost of living crisis is having a devastating impact on women, putting them at greater risk of violence and abuse. On my visits to refugees, I have heard stories of women who are considering returning to their abuser because they are living in poverty and the rising cost of living means they cannot see a way out of their situation. Can we please have a debate on mitigating the cost of living crisis for domestic abuse services and victims?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Lady raises an important point. She will know that the next Home Office questions will be next week, and she can raise that matter then.

This is a concern to Government, and it is why we have brought forward new measures to ensure that financial support is in place for anyone fleeing those situations.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): Would my right hon. Friend be able to provide time for a debate on the efficiency of some Government Departments in responding to correspondence? I refer particularly to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, to which I wrote on behalf of a constituent on 18 December, the five-month anniversary of which occurs today. I reminded it on 13 February and 10 March and I actually took to the airwaves on a certain television programme to remind it on 13 April, and still no answer is forthcoming. May we cover in this debate whether Departments that are incompetent at replying to correspondence are competent at bringing forward legislation?

Penny Mordaunt: I am very sorry to hear about that situation. My right hon. Friend is also a Privy Counsellor and it is a courtesy to Privy Counsellors that Secretaries of State should respond to their correspondence. Of course, every Department must be responding to correspondence from Members of this House in a timely way. I would be happy to take up this particular instance and I am sorry that he has had this shoddy treatment.

Mr Speaker: Can I just say to the Leader of the House that it might be worth while if we were to have a meeting with the Chief Whip? It is becoming more and more apparent that Members—Back Benchers in particular—cannot represent their constituents when Departments do not answer their correspondence in good time. I would say that it is now becoming the way forward not to answer Members. That is not acceptable, we need to get it resolved and I am sure that we can both do that together to represent Back Benchers in the way they should be and, more importantly, their constituents.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): One hundred and thirty years ago, Ivor Novello was born in Cowbridge Road East in my Cardiff West constituency. Today, we celebrate the Ivor Novello awards that bear his name, with the wonderful, brilliant song writing and composing community that we have in the UK. May we have a debate about the contribution that is made, both culturally and economically, by our brilliant song writers and composers in the UK, and explore Government policy and the implications of artificial intelligence and so on for the future of our brilliant song writing and composing community?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising awareness of that important anniversary, and for affording us an opportunity to reflect on the recent triumph of the city of Liverpool, which has such an incredible musical heritage, in hosting Eurovision. Music has a huge legacy and tradition in this country, and it is also important to our economy. If he were to apply for a debate, I am sure that it would be well attended.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware that Vahid Beheshti was carrying out his hunger strike on the opposite side of the road from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office for more than 70 days before being taken to

[*Bob Blackman*]

hospital. The good news is that he is likely to be allowed to leave hospital today. The bad news is that there are continued threats to his peace camp. May we have a statement from the Foreign Secretary about measures that the Government will take to combat the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the nefarious activities that it has launched in the UK, and about the literal epidemic of executions taking place in Iran right now, involving innocent people whose only crime has been to demonstrate against the current Administration?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that important point, and I am glad that Vahid Beheshti is recovering and regaining his strength. His protest was not just about what was happening in Iran, important though that is; it was also about the increasing intimidation of and threats to murder individuals who are in the UK. That should concern us. Such threats have been made against Vahid Beheshti and others supporting his protest, and the message we should all send from this place, today and every day, is that our eyes are on those people. We will ensure that they have the right to protest and get across their point of view about what is happening in Iran.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Last night the Environment Secretary chose to say on ITV that there is “misinformation” about sewage being dumped into our rivers, rather than acknowledging the problem. That is really insulting. People have been made sick after swimming in raw sewage. It is a serious and disgusting stain on our country, yet the Environment Secretary blames “misinformation” for the scandal. May we have a debate in Government time, led by the Environment Secretary, on the alleged misinformation of sewage reporting, including why thousands of sewage monitors are broken?

Penny Mordaunt: When we came into office, just 6% of storm overflows were monitored. That figure is now 100%. But I know that there are issues, which are different in different areas, with the monitoring systems.¹ The hon. Lady will have heard today’s announcement from Water UK about the £10 billion that is being invested by 2030 to stop storm overflows, and it also announced some additional measures to improve monitoring. This is an ongoing situation, and we have a clear, funded plan to end storm overflows. That is incredibly important to our coastal communities, and we need to stick to those facts.

Holly Mumby-Croft (Scunthorpe) (Con): I recently raised concerns about National Grid connection times, as I know have other colleagues. I am concerned that long waiting times may be hampering business and industry, our attractiveness as a place to do businesses, and our environmental credentials. I recently spoke to the British Metals Recycling Association, which raised those concerns on behalf of its members, who potentially face waiting times of years to be connected to the grid. Will the Leader of the House support a debate in Government time so that we can talk about how to prioritise some of those key installations, and do our bit to support business?

Penny Mordaunt: That is an excellent topic for a debate, and my hon. Friend will know how to apply for one. The next Energy Security and Net Zero questions are on 23 May. She will know that we are working with

Ofgem and the network companies to reform the connection process and bring forward connection dates, and we will set out further action in a connections action plan this summer.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I am amazed that we are not having a statement from the Environment Secretary today, given the announcement from the water companies. They issued an apology for their appalling performance, discharging sewage into our rivers and coastal areas, but alongside that apology they announced that water bill payers will have to fork out £10 billion to put all of that right. Imagine if a garbage disposal company decided that it was cheap and quick to dump rubbish in our town centres, disrupting all of those businesses, or if local authorities chose to dump it in swimming pools because that was cheap for them, disrupting people who want to take their families swimming? That is exactly what the water companies have been doing. They have been wrecking tourism in coastal areas and seaside towns, and stopping people from swimming in our rivers—that is totally intolerable. And now they are telling us that, to put all of it right, they will charge us £10 billion. When will we get a statement on that?

Penny Mordaunt: I shall ensure that the Secretary of State has heard the hon. Gentleman’s request for a statement, but I do not think that what he says is quite correct. The only way to end storm overflows and sewage going into our rivers and around our coast is to invest in and upgrade infrastructure. Work has started now. We have legislated so that every water company needs to have a plan in place and to meet those targets. It is a shared cost, but I will give him some hope. We know from where work has already been done—in London, for example, with Thames Water—that the cost to the bill payer has not been great. We have got to make this investment, which will be shared between bill payers—all of us—and those companies. It needs to be done.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): I was delighted to welcome Molton Monthly, the south-west enterprise champions, to this week’s Countryside Alliance rural oscar here in Westminster, celebrating some of the best rural businesses, presented by the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. In the same week, we have seen the Farm to Fork Summit, with additional support for our fabulous farmers. While warmly welcoming all the work that DEFRA does to support rural communities, does my right hon. Friend agree that rurality should be considered in decisions across Departments such as on decarbonising transport, energy efficiency and equity of health and education outcomes, as work to design such policies in SW1 may need adapting to be effective in our rural communities? Might we secure a debate in Government time to see how practically we can implement a more rural focus?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend and congratulate everyone who took part in the Countryside Alliance rural oscar. I thank them for coming to Westminster. She will know we take this matter seriously. DEFRA has launched the £110 million rural England prosperity fund, and we also have Project Gigabit funding and our multimillion-pound rural mobility fund. Those things are in place precisely because of the issues that she raised.

1. [Official Report, 24 May 2023, Vol. 733, c. 4MC.]

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Can we have a debate about the switchover from copper cables to fibre for our phone networks? Concerns have been raised about vulnerable citizens—particularly the elderly and the disabled—and what might happen were there to be an outage in the fibre network. We now hear that a survey from Citizens Advice says that up to 1 million people have cancelled their broadband subscription because of the cost of living. We need to know the implications of that in terms of the fibre network, so could we have that debate, which would give Members the chance to thrash out the issues and get some concrete answers from the Government?

Penny Mordaunt: I am sure that the issue that the hon. Lady raises is a concern to many Members in this House. I have written to several Departments on this matter. If she were to apply for a debate, I am sure it would be extremely well attended. Such issues are very timely, so I will ensure that the Secretary of State has heard what she has said.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): The very encouraging Government White Paper on gambling tackles the destructive impact, especially of online gambling, without damaging legitimate betting, racing or the lottery fund. But just as we consider banning gambling advertising from football, so the industry now turns its focus towards rugby. Although I do not believe that Premiership rugby union clubs wish to accept gambling advertising, they may be tempted to do so in a tough financial situation. Does my right hon. Friend agree that there is an opportunity for the Government to influence Premiership Rugby Ltd to reduce the cap on players, and perhaps extend the repayment of Government loans during the pandemic? Does she agree that this is a great opportunity to have a debate on the future of rugby, so that we can proactively tackle these problems before gambling shifts from football to rugby?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend not just for his question, but for proposing a solution for the Department for Culture, Media and Sport so that those clubs do not have to rely on income from particular sources. Given that the relevant questions are not until 15 June, I will ensure that the Secretary of State has heard his question and his suggestion.

Andrew Western (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): There have been shocking revelations this week of desperate parents forced to steal in order to feed their infant children. When challenged, the Prime Minister replied that the Healthy Start allowance was the mechanism to support such families, yet it has been frozen in each of the last two years, despite huge food price inflation. When I asked the Leader of the House about this issue three months ago, she told me to raise it with relevant Ministers. I have done so, to no avail, so I have secured a Westminster Hall debate on this issue on Tuesday. Given the seriousness of this matter, could she advise me on what other mechanisms are available to Members who want to ensure that no parent has to make such a decision again?

Penny Mordaunt: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing his Westminster Hall debate—he has successfully advertised it today and I hope it will be well attended. He will know that, in addition to the

Government's £94 billion support package to assist with the cost of living, we give funding to be distributed nationally as well as ensuring that local authorities have enough flexibility to be able to target households in greater need or that have fallen through the cracks, through the household support fund and others. This is a serious and important matter to us. I will see what is said in his Westminster Hall debate, and I thank him for securing it.

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware of the ongoing situation on the provision of mental health services via Tees, Esk and Wear Valley NHS Foundation Trust, with a rapid review underway into its services. In recent weeks and months we have seen continuing coverage of yet more alarming news about TEWV in *The Northern Echo*. As we await the publication of the rapid review, can my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the performance of TEWV and a potential public inquiry into the trust?

Penny Mordaunt: I am extremely sorry to hear about the ongoing situation and the difficulties for my hon. Friend's constituents. He knows that I am unable to comment on current legal proceedings before his local magistrates court, but I congratulate him on his diligent campaigning on these matters and on ensuring that his constituents will get the services that they are entitled to and deserve. I will ensure that the Secretary of State has heard his concerns again today.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): Why is it that Westminster is always the last to the table to accept state responsibility for the most vulnerable members of society? Between 1949 and 1976, an estimated quarter of a million children across these islands were taken from their mothers and fathers and forcibly adopted. I stand here as possibly one of those children. Despite the Scottish and Welsh Governments issuing a formal apology, the UK Government stopped short and said:

“We are sorry on behalf of society for what happened.”

Adoption is a formal state practice; it is the state that is responsible for setting standards and protecting people. Forced adoption is not simply a historical injustice, but an ongoing injustice. Can we have a statement in which the UK Government will finally issue a formal apology to those mothers, fathers and children who continue to be affected by what was an abhorrent practice?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this important matter. We are grateful to him for sharing his personal experience, which helps us to understand the impact on individuals and others who are affected. I will make sure that Cabinet Office colleagues have heard his concerns today. It will be a matter for several Departments, so I will ask the Cabinet Office to get in touch with his office.

Jane Stevenson (Wolverhampton North East) (Con): Many of my constituents have written to me saying that they are extremely upset about the state of Heath Town swimming baths, in my constituency. Heath Town swimming baths is a grade II listed art deco building of which many people in Wolverhampton are extremely proud. It has been closed for nearly 20 years and the council has allowed it to get into an absolute state of dereliction. There was a fire there last year. Residents living near the

[Jane Stevenson]

baths have suffered antisocial behaviour and various problems with drug taking and disruption. Can we have a debate about the responsibility of councils towards heritage buildings under their stewardship? It is extremely important to lots of Wulfrunians that we preserve this valuable asset for our city.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important matter. I fully appreciate the ambitions her constituents will have for this important facility, both as somewhere that teaches life skills and keeps people fit and healthy, and as a building that provides a sense of place to the community and is part of a treasured heritage. Where local authorities drop the ball, this Government have done a considerable amount to facilitate community asset transfers. My local lido has been the beneficiary of that and is currently being refurbished through the levelling-up fund. I would be happy to ensure the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has heard my hon. Friend's concerns, so that we can see what we can do to assist her and her community in protecting this important and much-loved asset.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House as her words last week seem to have done the trick. The director general of the BBC has agreed to meet a cross-party group of MPs to talk about the vandalism to BBC local radio. At the same time, published figures show that BBC Radio Humberside's audience is going up in reach and hours listened, which is positive. Can we have a debate about the Government's decision this week to scrap regional levelling-up officials and whether that shows that they have given up on their flagship policy of levelling up?

Penny Mordaunt: First, may I say "Hooray!?" I thank the right hon. Lady for raising the matter and all Members of the House who put their shoulder behind her to secure that meeting. I hope it goes well. As I said last week, BBC local radio is not only a vital lifeline for people to get information and keep in touch with what is going on in their communities, but also important for democracy and the business of this place. I will ensure that the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has heard her concerns, but I assure her that we are very much committed to the levelling-up agenda and making good progress against it.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Hemel Hempstead and Berkhamsted are fewer than 15 miles from Leighton Buzzard, Dunstable and Houghton Regis, and yet petrol has regularly been 10p a litre cheaper in Hemel Hempstead and Berkhamsted than in my constituency, quite often at the same supermarket. The tanker is literally going up the road and charging 10p a litre more to my constituents. The Competition and Markets Authority is independent—I understand that—but it should be accountable to this House. It is simply not acceptable to have that level of profiteering from my constituents, who are struggling with their bills at the moment. What are the Government going to do about that?

Penny Mordaunt: This has been an issue for some time. As my hon. Friend will know, Fair Fuel UK has been monitoring the disparities, and the Competition

and Markets Authority has suggested that something additional is going on, over and above the lag between wholesale purchase and the price at the pump. The issue is important to many people, and *The Sun* has been campaigning on it as well. The message from all Members to the CMA should be that it pulls its finger out and gets to the bottom of this so that we ensure our constituents and businesses are dealt with fairly. Such a huge additional cost is not helping the cost of living. Fuel at the pump is a vital commodity, and people should not be paying pay more for it than they have to.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): I know very well that the Leader of the House values Portsmouth lifeboat station every bit as much as my constituents value those at Montrose and Arbroath. The Royal National Lifeboat Institution is an august organisation which holds a special place in the heart of communities throughout these islands, especially coastal communities, so it is deeply unfortunate that in Arbroath, in my constituency, it has chosen to downgrade the Mersey-class all-weather lifeboat to an Atlantic 85 rigid inflatable boat rather than a Shannon-class all-weather lifeboat. This goes against the will of the community, it goes against the will of the local crew, it follows a fairly scant—I was going to say "consultation", but this was more of a monologue—and it goes against three coastal reviews which found that the Shannon-class lifeboat would have the best life-saving effect in Arbroath. May we have a debate about the nature of the RNLI—not just about the outstanding work that it does, but about the need for partnership working?

Penny Mordaunt: Members in all parts of the House would want to express support and admiration for the incredible work done by the crews of the RNLI. I greatly value the Portsmouth team, who save lives and prevent all kinds of terrible things from happening, and I know that the downgrading of the hon. Gentleman's local lifeboat will be of concern to the crews and also to many in the community. The RNLI is an independent organisation which relies on public donations, and I hope that in raising local concern about this matter, we will also encourage people to donate to it.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Ind): My constituency has benefited from more than £300 million of additional investment during the current Parliament, including more than £100 million in levelling up moneys. Our final ask in Blackpool is a £30 million package for the redevelopment of the Bond Street area, which is one of the most deprived parts of the country. Will my right hon. Friend consider holding a debate on the impact of the Government's levelling-up agenda and the positive benefits that it is bringing to communities such as mine?

Penny Mordaunt: I congratulate my hon. Friend on the funding that he has already managed to secure, and wish him luck in securing the further amount that he wants for the area that he mentioned. We have been investing in communities that have been neglected for a long time. These schemes are not just about the infrastructure, the new buildings and the look and feel of a place, but about bringing people together to have an input in the design and help to shape their communities. This is incredibly important work, and I am sure that if my hon. Friend applied for a debate, it would be well attended.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): The UK life sciences sector excelled during the covid crisis, and we applauded it for that, but since then the picture has been less rosy. The number of clinical trials being undertaken has fallen back badly, and we have fallen down the international league table. The Government are aware of this; they have appointed Lord O'Shaughnessy to conduct a review, and his findings are expected soon. Will the Leader of the House ensure that a statement is made at that time, so that there can be a proper interrogation about his conclusions?

Penny Mordaunt: As the hon. Gentleman will know, this important matter is a priority for the Government. Our future national prosperity depends on it, and we also want to ensure that the people of this country benefit from the life sciences sector and innovations can be taken up quickly. I shall certainly ensure that my noble Friend Lord O'Shaughnessy has heard the hon. Gentleman's request.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Erewash proudly boasts some of the finest indoor and outdoor bowls facilities in the country, including those at Stanton Clubhouse bowls club and Victoria Park bowls club, both of which will mark their centenary next year. Will my right hon. Friend provide Government time for a debate to discuss the physical and mental health benefits of this popular but often overlooked sport for people of all ages?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising the matter, and I am glad to hear that those facilities are being put to good use in her constituency. We encourage all forms of physical activity through funding that we provide to Sport England. The Bowls Development Alliance, a partner of Sport England, receives just shy of £2 million to support a wide range of provision across the country. My hon. Friend will know how to apply for a debate, and I encourage her to do so.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for her help with the redundancy modification order. Although I trust her, I also submitted a written question to ask the relevant Secretary of State for his timeline for completing it. I received a response remarkably quickly—in about two weeks—and it said:

“Announcements will be set out in the usual way.”

I have been chasing the matter for eight years, and it was a problem before then. How much longer does the Leader of the House think my constituent will have to wait to get her organisation added to the list?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for her kind remarks. I will take the matter up with the Department again and chase an answer for her, and perhaps suggest that the Minister meets her.

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): Back in May 2019, Joanne and Andrew Doody lost their much-loved son Peter, who died suddenly from epilepsy aged 21, having been diagnosed at the age of 17. Joanne and Andrew went on to form the Peter Doody Foundation, which has three aims: to raise awareness of epilepsy, to provide much-needed support for young adults with epilepsy,

and to reduce the stigma associated with epilepsy. Will the Leader of the House join me in supporting Joanne and Andrew in their endeavours through the Peter Doody Foundation, and provide Government time for a debate on this incredibly important issue?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for his question, which is timely as next week is National Epilepsy Week, when I know many Members will want to shine a spotlight on the work going on in their constituencies. I know that all Members will also want to send our thanks to Joanne and Andrew for doing something so positive to help others out of the immense tragedy that they have suffered.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Tamil Remembrance Day is marked every year on this day, to remember the thousands of predominantly Tamil victims of human rights abuses in Sri Lanka. Fourteen years on from the end of the conflict, there is still no international mechanism for holding the perpetrators of war crimes on the island of Sri Lanka, such as extrajudicial killings, torture and rape, to account. Will the Leader of the House be good enough to ask the Foreign Secretary why Britain still will not use Magnitsky sanctions against some of the worst perpetrators, or even consider a referral to the International Criminal Court?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising the matter and advertising the important moment when we can consider and remember all those victims of human rights abuses. He will know that the next Foreign Office questions are on 13 June. That is probably the best way to get an answer from the Secretary of State, but given that it is a little way off, I shall also make sure that the Secretary of State has heard the hon. Gentleman's remarks.

Laura Farris (Newbury) (Con): I have been struck by the number of pubs and restaurants in my constituency, including the John O' Gaunt in Hungerford and 137 Eat Drink Distil in Newbury, that have been in touch with me about the severe labour shortages that they are experiencing. May I invite my right hon. Friend to consider a debate in Government time to discuss the acute pressure on hospitality businesses across my constituency and, I think, more widely, and whether hospitality staff could be added to the Home Office's shortage occupations list?

Penny Mordaunt: Such matters are for the Home Secretary, and the next Home Office questions are on 22 May. My hon. Friend will know that labour market participation has become a major challenge. Unemployment is at a near 50-year low, and since the covid-19 pandemic there has been a significant increase in the number of people neither in nor looking for work, resulting in near record levels of labour market tightness. I will make sure that both the Cabinet Office and the Home Secretary have heard her concerns.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The International Development Committee recently released a report recommending that Parliament introduces legislation to ensure that private lenders play their part in cancelling debt when lower-income countries are in crisis. The report describes the current debt distress of

[Patricia Gibson]

developing countries as “bleak” and “catastrophic”. The economic crisis and high interest rates mean that a staggering 54 countries now face a debt crisis, with speculators able to make more than 200% profit on debts. Will the Leader of the House make a statement setting out her support for the International Development Committee’s recommendations to help support the poorest countries on earth?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the International Development Committee for producing this report. The nation has a huge amount to offer on this agenda. A great number of the most innovative finance solutions that are helping people around the world have come from the City of London. Such organisations work very closely with the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and other Departments to spot opportunities and to make sure that everyone who can help in a given situation is doing so. I will make sure the FCDO has heard the hon. Lady’s comments, and she will know that the next questions to the Foreign Secretary are on 13 June.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): The Leader of the House will be aware that the Department for Transport has confirmed that the Ukrainians who have come here from the conflict need to apply for a new driving licence after 12 months of residency, and they need to complete a practical driving test to confirm that new licence. There are huge backlogs in the testing system, and two of my constituents are concerned that they can no longer use their Ukrainian licence, cannot get a test and risk losing their jobs. Their employers have been on to me, begging for Ministers to intervene to ensure that these people, who have faced so much, can get their licences quickly and keep their jobs. Could the Leader of the House raise with Transport Ministers the urgent need to resolve the huge backlog in practical tests to ensure that these people, who have faced so much and who have come here at our invitation, get the support they need to keep their job?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman asks a very important and sensible question. The Homes for Ukraine scheme has been a huge success, but clearly, a year on, there will be new issues and new things that those being hosted here will need. We want people to be able to go about their life and take care of their family, and being able to drive is clearly a major part of that. This is an important matter, and I will make sure the Secretary of State for Transport has heard about this issue. I will also make sure that the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has heard it, as the scheme comes under his responsibilities.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): First Steps Nutrition Trust research has found that the cost of first infant formulas has increased by between 17% and 45% in the past two years. Sky News has reported this week on parents stealing, going to food banks, formula foraging on Facebook and watering down formula, which has a dangerous impact on infant health and development. Can we have an urgent statement from the Department of Health and Social Care, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs or the Prime Minister, given his food summit earlier this week, on the

need to cap the cost of infant formula, which remains an essential item for many families? Letting the market set the cost is a big part of this crisis.

Penny Mordaunt: We are supporting families through the current cost of living pressures, and supporting families with young children is a priority for this Government. The hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western) has advertised his Westminster Hall debate on this matter, to which a Minister will respond. I will also make sure the Minister has heard the hon. Lady’s comments.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): There was a disturbing report earlier this week from the BBC about a reporter who had accessed three private clinics for an attention deficit hyperactivity disorder assessment. They had told him that he had ADHD, but when he went for an NHS assessment he was told that he did not. That raises huge questions about the regulation of these private clinics, but a wider issue is involved: people cannot get access to the NHS for assessments in the first place. I have heard of stories of people waiting up to five years to receive an assessment, and in my area the NHS is refusing to accept new referrals. May we therefore have a statement from the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care about what they are going to do to tackle this growing problem?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this important matter. He will know that the next questions are not until 6 June, so I shall make sure that the Secretary of State has heard his remarks. It is incredibly important that people have access to a diagnosis and access in regard to education, so that what they need, be it care or additional support, can be put in place. We take these things extremely seriously and I shall ensure that the Secretary of State has heard the hon. Gentleman’s concerns.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Following on from the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan), I was contacted by a constituent who states:

“I have recently connected to the internet under the Home essential broadband, with BT. I was supposed to be connected on the 4th May, today is the 11th. I have had 2 engineer visits and today I was told I couldn’t get connected unless I upgraded my package by £10 per month, on top of the £15 already agreed”.

The position on the issue of social tariffs has been supported by Ofcom, whose figures have revealed that just 5% of eligible households had taken them up as of the last period. My constituent, who has argued their point, is now connected to the internet, but does the Leader of House agree that it is time we had a statement from the relevant Minister to hold these companies to account and to force them to keep up their end of the broadband bargain?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that important point, and I am sorry that his constituents have had that experience. He has just missed Business and Trade questions, so I will make sure that the Secretary of State has heard his concerns. He is right: it takes a number of players to ensure that we are able to get people the connectivity and broadband speeds that they need, and we expect the private sector to play its part too.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): May we have a statement on oral health for children? Last year, there were 26,741 extractions for decay of children's teeth, involving children who were three and a half times more likely to be from deprived communities. This cost the NHS £50.9 million. Clearly, the situation is completely unacceptable; we know children cannot access NHS dentistry. Now that the responsibility has moved to integrated care boards, can we ensure that they prioritise oral health for children and have an NHS dental service for children up and running within the year?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for raising that important matter. Not only are regular exams crucial for ensuring good oral health; they can also detect other health conditions that need to be dealt with early. This problem has been exacerbated by the pandemic, with children and vulnerable and looked-after children in particular not getting check-ups. She will know that this issue has been a priority for the Minister responsible. In addition, the Health Secretary has created a mechanism so that we can see and compare what care boards are doing. That is an incredibly valuable tool. I have been talking to him about how Members in this place can access that data on a real-time basis and I will make sure that he has heard the hon. Lady's comments today.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): The discussion in this place and in public about the controversial proposals for highly protected marine areas has rightly focused so far on the potential impact on fishing and coastal communities, in Scotland, in particular. I was reminded by the Scottish Government's policy paper that:

"It is intended that no new renewable energy projects will be allowed in an area designated as a HPMA. This includes exploratory activity or construction of new infrastructure."

May we have a statement on whether the UK Government are aware of the potential implications in this reserved area and whether any discussions are ongoing with the Scottish Government about it?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Lady is right that there are concerns about the scheme. Understandably, we tend to focus on the impact on coastal communities and they have been very vocal in their concerns. However, there are other implications, which is why we need to ensure that, when such schemes are proposed, there is proper consultation and engagement with all communities

and all parties. Clearly, we would hope that there are ambitions for energy generation; that is certainly what the Scottish Government say. These are matters for them, but I know that the hon. Lady and my Conservative colleagues will do everything they can to make sure that all voices are heard and that this scheme makes sense.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): Later this week, we will see the publication of the latest version of the rich list in *The Sunday Times*. It will show that the rich are getting richer and that the country's wealth is being concentrated in ever fewer hands. In response, a group called Patriotic Millionaires has been formed, which is campaigning for higher taxes on themselves. Given that millionaires themselves are asking for it, can we have a debate in Government time on the introduction of a supplementary wealth tax, which will allow those who are blessed with extreme good fortune to be able to make a greater contribution to the public good?

Penny Mordaunt: That is a very interesting suggestion. I gently point out to the hon. Gentleman that the actions of the Scottish Government have been not to raise taxes on those who have the most. Furthermore, low and middle-income earners in Scotland are facing the highest tax burden of anyone else in the UK.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): My constituent recently got in touch after her father was in an accident on a short bike ride and suffered a fractured skull. She told me that he always wears a helmet, but on this occasion, he unfortunately was not doing so. I will be supporting the ten-minute rule Bill of the hon. Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) on 7 June, but will the Leader of the House join me in wishing my constituent a speedy recovery and schedule a debate in Government time on the merits of making bike helmets a legal requirement for cyclists?

Penny Mordaunt: I am sure that all Members of this House would want to send our best wishes to the hon. Lady's constituent for a full and speedy recovery. I am very sorry to hear that that has happened to them. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) on his ten-minute rule Bill and also thank the hon. Lady for raising awareness of the importance of wearing helmets.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): That finishes business questions. I thank the Leader of the House for responding to questions for more than an hour.

Points of Order

11.42 am

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Next week, the BBC's economics correspondent will publish a book and release whistleblower testimony, telephone recordings, emails and documentary data on a number of serious miscarriages of justice in the LIBOR scandal that emerged in 2012. It will show that British and US authorities covered up state involvement in LIBOR rigging, and the scapegoating of 37 low and middle-ranking bankers, some of whom spent years in jail.

In this evidence, there is a prima facie case to believe that state agencies coerced individuals into perjury that led to false evictions. I will write to the Metropolitan police asking them to investigate any potential perjury, but, more importantly in this context, I am also greatly concerned that the Treasury Committee may have been misled by state agencies about the knowledge and involvement of the state in setting false rates.

This is a big and complex issue with hundreds of pages of evidence. I have written to the Chair of the Treasury Committee suggesting that the Committee might want to look into the issue. Can you confirm that that is the appropriate mechanism to deal with this serious matter, Mr Deputy Speaker?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his point of order and advance notice of it. It is a very serious issue that he has raised. He has put his point on the record and shown that he is experienced enough to take appropriate steps even without any advice from the Chair.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker, I know that as a Parliament we are keen for members of the public to come to this place and see us at work. However, yesterday the Home Affairs Committee was interrupted by protesters and the session had to be suspended while the protesters were removed from the Committee Room. I just wondered whether, through you, Mr Deputy Speaker, I as the Chair of the Committee and the Members could thank the Clerks, the security staff and the police, who acted very quickly to ensure that the Committee was able to resume its very important work of scrutinising the policing of protests without much delay? I just wanted to put that on the record.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I thank the right hon. Lady for her point of order and for giving notice of it. I join her in thanking all the staff involved for their swift action yesterday, which enabled that important Committee sitting to continue after the disruption.

The Leader of the House of Commons (Penny Mordaunt): Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker, I would like to thank the right hon. Lady for raising the

matter and inform the House that the protest that was going on outside this building and outside a major hospital yesterday, preventing traffic from moving freely, was resolved within 15 minutes by the Metropolitan Police.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I thank the Leader of the House for that point of order further to the previous one. We too thank all the authorities for enabling people to get on with their normal daily lives and indeed with the process of democracy that people have elected us to come here for.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker, on the Order Paper today is the matter of the Holocaust Memorial Bill Second Reading. Indeed, I understand that the Joint Committee on Examination of Bills is considering today whether this is a hybrid Bill. I declare my interest as co-chair of the all-party Parliamentary group on holocaust memorial, but could you use your good offices, Mr Deputy Speaker, to inform us how the result of that Committee will be communicated to this House so that we can get on with this very important project? The project is welcomed across the House, apart from a small numbers of Members of both Houses, but the key point is that we need to know what is going to happen, because the current projections are that it will take a very long time indeed.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order and advise him to go to the Table Office and put the question to the Clerks, because I think they will have a better idea of the timetabling of any announcements that will be made either today or later on.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker, I apologise for not giving you prior notice, but I have only just received the email that I wish to raise. The email is from UK Visas and Immigration on a constituent's case. My constituent claimed asylum in December 2020 and the email I have received from them today says that,

"your client may expect to receive their asylum decision by 31 December 2023".

That is quite a long time to wait in limbo for a decision, as I am sure most hon. Members would agree. Have you received any notification from Home Office Ministers about any statements to the House with an update on the asylum backlog, which is having a serious impact on the lives and wellbeing of so many of my constituents?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Lady for her point of order. This is a very serious issue, and people being left in limbo is clearly not acceptable. I have not received any notice that there will be any statements today, but should that alter, people will be informed in the usual way. Those on the Treasury Bench will have heard the point she has made and will make sure it is passed on to the Home Office.

Backbench Business

Public Access to Nature

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I remind the House that the judgment in relation to *Darwall and Darwall v. Dartmoor National Park Authority*, the Dartmoor wild camping case, has been appealed and the case is therefore sub judice. Members must avoid making reference to that case in this and any other debates.

11.48 am

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I beg to move,

That this House has considered public access to nature.

It is a pleasure to open this debate on increasing public access to nature and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for supporting it. In an age where we are increasingly isolated from the natural world, and in a country that ranks lowest in Europe for nature connectedness, improving access to green space could not be more important. Yet that very framing somehow suggests that we are separate from the world around us and that nature is simply something to be visited on occasion. In reality, nothing could be further from the truth. Others have pointed out that it has been around 7 million years since our ancestors started evolving into the modern humans we are today. During that process of evolution, we have spent more than 99.9% of our time living in a natural environment. Our bodies are adapted to nature.

In debating the urgent need to improve access to nature and to reforge our connection with this precious earth, it is also important to reframe that relationship so that we no longer see nature as something other, but something of which we are a part and which is also part of us.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Wildlife and Countryside Link has made a number of recommendations for improving public access to nature, including the expansion of the right to roam and investment in widely publicising the countryside code. Does the hon. Member agree that by realising those recommendations in tandem, the Government can aid more people to enjoy the UK's natural spaces responsibly?

Caroline Lucas: The hon. Member will not be surprised to know that I agree entirely with her points. Indeed, I will come to them a little later.

In my introductory remarks to the debate, I will set out the many benefits of increasing access to nature, identify where the Government could amend and update existing legislation to achieve that, and, indeed, make the case for a new comprehensive right of responsible access in England. Before I do so, I pay tribute to the many organisations and individuals who have done so much to promote that idea, and I single out Marion Shoard in particular, who I believe is watching us from the Gallery today. Marion has done more than perhaps any other individual to push land on to the agenda in Britain, and to advance cogently and fearlessly the case for a right to roam.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): I am extremely grateful to the hon. Lady for initiating the debate and for allowing me to intervene. I wonder if her

interest in nature extends to water and blue spaces. On the rare occasions when parliamentary duties and childcare allow, I seek joy from canoeing, but there is an unfettered right of access to only 7% of appropriate inland waterways in the UK. Voluntary access arrangements are clearly not working in any significant way. Does she agree that, at a minimum, the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 needs to be extended to cover water as well as land?

Caroline Lucas: I agree entirely with the hon. Member. It is slightly unfortunate that the phrase “right to roam” does not automatically include the right to access water, but that is exactly what is understood by it. I will in a moment pay tribute to canoeists for their work in setting up a voluntary code of conduct on how they treat the water to which they have access. They need a lot more access, however, and that is certainly part of the proposals that I will set out.

On the benefits of access to nature, we have long known that being in the outdoors is good for our soul, but the evidence increasingly demonstrates that it is vital for our health as well. First, for our physical health, beyond the obvious health benefits of walking or running, the very act of being in green space has been found to lower blood pressure, reduce the risk of diabetes and heart disease, and boost our immune systems.

Margaret Ferrier: I thank the hon. Lady for giving way once again. It is understood that exercising in the fresh air can also ease mental health issues such as anxiety. Polling by the Mental Health Foundation highlights that 70% of adults find that being in nature improves their mood. Clearly, those benefits cannot be overlooked. Does she agree that widening public access to nature could be instrumental in responding to the country's mental health crisis?

Caroline Lucas: Indeed, the hon. Member anticipates my very next point. She is exactly right: the benefits of being in nature are not limited to our physical health; they very much affect our mental health as well, easing anxiety and increasing positive emotions. Spending time in nature has been proven fundamental to good mental health. Indeed, the growth in green social prescribing shows that that is increasingly being recognised more widely.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): Does the hon. Lady agree that part of the problem with health and income inequalities is that access to nature is not equally distributed in this country? Some of the wealthiest constituencies have far greater access to nature than some of the poorest. That goes along with the historic theft of land by the very wealthiest—facilitated by this place—who stole it from the poorest communities. That has never been properly readdressed.

Caroline Lucas: I agree very much with that point. Inequalities go right through from start to finish in terms of access to the countryside, and I will say more about that, but he also rightly points to the fact that this is nothing new; this is part of a history of land grabbing that has been going on from the enclosures onwards, if not before that. It is something that we need to address if we are serious about wealth inequalities in this country as well as health inequalities, because unless we address the issue of the distribution of land, we are not going to solve that problem.

[Caroline Lucas]

There is economic sense in increasing access to nature, too. Figures suggest that the NHS could save around £3 billion in treatment costs every year if everyone had access to good-quality green space. Despite the importance of access to nature to the nation's health, and that significance only being underlined throughout the covid pandemic and subsequent lockdowns, there is no national strategy for ensuring that everyone can enjoy access to nature. My first question to the Minister is whether she will look to rectify that and to direct and co-ordinate policy action and resources across Government.

As the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) set out, we know that access to nature remains incredibly unequal, and covid underlined that. Black people and people of colour, as well as poorer households, are far less likely to live close to green space. Friends of the Earth research suggests that 40% of people from ethnic minority backgrounds live in the most green space-deprived areas, compared with just 14% of white people.

While I welcome the Government's goal outlined in their environmental improvement plan to enhance engagement with the natural environment and the commitment that everyone should live within a 15-minute walk of a green or blue space, the Minister will know that, as it stands, that commitment is not legally binding. It urgently needs to be accompanied by ambitious legislation, together with funding for local authorities to help achieve it.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this important debate, of which I am a co-sponsor. Does she agree that, along with access to nature, we need restoration of nature? Local authorities can lead the way, but they need the money, and it is so important that our urban communities in particular can benefit from local authorities restoring nature where they can.

Caroline Lucas: I thank the hon. Member for her intervention and very much agree with the point she makes. Local authorities have a vital role to play, and yet their budgets have been slashed over the past 13 years.

To return to the issue of how the lack of access has played out in different constituencies, new research by the Wildlife and Countryside Link shows that in more than one in 10 neighbourhoods, between 90% and 100% of the population currently have no access to nature within a 15-minute walk. The Right to Roam campaign recently calculated that 92 constituencies in England currently have no right to roam at all, with many more than that having very little access.

The Minister might be aware that when the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill was going through the Commons, I tabled an amendment on Report that would have created a right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment and required public authorities to increase equitable access to nature. That call is backed by the public, with 80% of people wanting to see a legal right to local nature. With that Bill now going through the Lords, I urge the Minister and the Government to pick up my amendment and show the level of ambition that is needed.

I know that Ministers are, rightly, extremely proud of the English coastal path and the establishment of the coast-to-coast national trail. I welcome these efforts,

which undoubtedly improve ease of access, but I am concerned that they do not begin to address the scale of the challenge at hand—not least because, for example, much of the English coastal path, which involves essentially a pretty thin strip of land along the coast, was already accessible through existing rights of way. The coast-to-coast route has long been an unofficial long-distance path linking east and west coasts across northern England. Last year it was designated as an official national trail, but as a result, it needs to be better signposted, better maintained and better publicised.

The bottom line is that much more needs to be done to improve public access to nature. As such, I urge the Government to look closely at other proposals, such as giving national park authorities a range of new purposes, including one to improve people's connection to nature, which would also implement a key proposal from the Glover review of protected landscapes. Will the Minister look again at embedding public access into the new environmental land management schemes, which would help farmers to create more opportunities for people to enjoy the outdoors? Will the Government remove the new 2031 deadline for recording historic rights of way? The reimposition of that artificial deadline risks losing thousands of footpaths.

Will the Government urgently conduct a mapping review of existing open access land? Ministers have tabled a further amendment to the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill to defer that review until the end of 2030, which is more than 25 years after the first maps were produced, despite a legal requirement that they be updated every 10 years. Will the Minister bring forward new funding for local authorities to maintain public rights of way? Finally, will the Government support local councils and national park authorities to improve access to the countryside for everyone, including those with disabilities and those who do not own or have access to a car? For both those groups of people, much of the countryside remains out of reach—a situation that has undoubtedly been exacerbated by cuts to local bus services.

Having said that, I am just going to give a quick shout-out to the Brighton & Hove bus company and its “Breeze up to the Downs” service—I am sure the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown will agree. That service is supported by the council, the National Trust and the South Downs National Park Authority. Those kinds of models, which enable people to get into the countryside affordably and easily if they do not have a car, need to be supported. I will also use this opportunity to congratulate the former Green administration in Brighton and Hove, which blazed a trail with its transformative city downland estate plan. That plan contains commitments to consider proposals to designate every site under the council's management as statutory open access land.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: The hon. Lady raises an important point about the ability for councils to use their own estate. Is she looking forward to the exciting plans that we might have in Lewes, as I am?

Caroline Lucas: I am indeed looking forward to exciting plans in Lewes, and I pay tribute to local councillors there.

However, we must go further to truly transform our relationship with nature, with access to wilder spaces where we can marvel at the wonders around us and be

fully immersed in the natural world. Those who organised the mass trespass of Kinder Scout in 1932, which so many of us have taken so much inspiration from, knew the value of access to our dramatic Peak district, and their actions united the campaign for access to the countryside.

At the start of this millennium, the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 finally gave us a right to roam in certain areas, over mountain, moor, heath and down, designating them as open access land. However, that designation still covers only 8% of land in England, and much of it is remote. Too often, tracts of legally accessible open country land lack any legal means for the public to cross other land to access them, rendering them effectively off limits. Just 3% of rivers in England and Wales are accessible, and even that is only provided by voluntary agreements with landowners and can therefore be taken away.

That is why last year, I tabled a Bill that would have extended the right to roam to woods, rivers, green-belt land and more grassland. In doing so, it would have provided access to nature on people's doorsteps, as those landscapes are found in almost every community, and it would have extended access to approximately 30% of English land. Since I drafted that Bill, the momentum behind the campaign for access to nature has only grown, and I believe now is the time to be even bolder and more ambitious. It is time for a reset of our very relationship with the natural world around us, one that re-establishes the intimacy and connection that is essential if we are to restore the state of our—quite often literally—scorched earth.

I believe it is time to expand our minds and our horizons and look north of the border to Scotland, where the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 enshrined the right of access to most land and water, providing that the right is exercised responsibly. Of course, there will be some sensible exclusions such as fields where crops are growing, seasonal restrictions for sensitive nature sites, school playing fields and even gardens. However, that is essentially a much more expansive approach. It designates a universal right to roam with exclusions carved out, rather than the opposite approach that is taken in England, which is based on a universal exclusion with access only to some very specific landscapes. The Scottish approach is far simpler, meaning that we are no longer reliant on confusing and often outdated land designations that no longer reflect the nature of our countryside, and it is more equal, meaning that everyone has shared access to this island that is our home.

Margaret Ferrier: The Government made a number of welcome commitments in their environmental improvement plan, but legislative change is needed to deliver on those commitments. Does the hon. Member agree that the Government now need to advance policy that successfully expands public access to nature?

Caroline Lucas: I hope that everything I have said so far demonstrates that I entirely agree with the point that the hon. Lady makes.

I believe it is time to consider a comprehensive right of responsible access in England. With two decades of lived experience, Scotland provides an important model for us to learn from and emulate south of the border. It is important to note that Scotland is not alone in its approach; in countries such as Norway, Sweden and

Estonia, the right to roam has long existed as a common right and a defining concept of nationhood that has only recently been codified into law. In America and Australia, there is free access to all navigable rivers. Why should we in England be denied that right to enjoy, know and protect our shared world?

In recent months, the Opposition have announced that they would pass a right to roam Act in government, and I welcome that, but when the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) speaks, I would be interested to know what exactly their version of a right to roam Act would entail. Would it be a fully expanded right to roam, or a partial one based on specific designations? I am arguing for a new approach: an extension of the right to roam in the context of a wider recentring of our relationship with nature—moving to a relationship built on community, care and reciprocity, with a deep love and understanding of the world around us, rather than one defined by extraction and exploitation. Re-establishing our connection with nature is essential if we are to effectively address the terrifying biodiversity crisis that sees a million species on the brink of extinction.

The Minister will no doubt be aware that target 12 of the global biodiversity framework agreed in Montreal in December was to:

“Significantly increase the area and quality and connectivity of, access to, and benefits from green and blue spaces”.

The public can be partners in that endeavour and become guardians of the natural world, but only if they and we are given the opportunity to better know, love and protect it. That so many are not able to delight in the blackthorn bursting into blossom in the spring, the sight of fledglings making their first leaps to freedom, or the sound of grasshoppers singing in the heat of summer is a personal tragedy, but it is also profoundly concerning for the future of the species with which we are blessed to share this one planet. In the words of one scientist, Robert Michael Pyle,

“What is the extinction of the condor to a child who has never known the wren?”

While greater access to the countryside obviously cannot solve the ecological crisis, I genuinely believe that it is nevertheless a precondition to our ability to try. I know some Members will be concerned about the impact of a renewed right to roam, and in particular the irresponsible behaviour of a few. Let us be clear that those are the actions of a very small minority among a nation of nature lovers. The response to David Attenborough's “Wild Isles” demonstrates how fiercely the public love nature and want it to be not just conserved, but restored. I welcome initiatives such as the “People's Plan for Nature”, which sets out the public's vision for the future of nature and the actions we all need to take to renew it.

Secondly and crucially, the right to access has to be balanced with responsibilities. No one is suggesting that a right to roam should be absolute. It has to be balanced against other rights, such as the rights of wildlife to be protected and the rights of landowners to gain a living from their land. However, arbitrarily applying rights to some classes of land but not to others is no way of securing that proper balance, and that is why it has to go hand in hand with a renewed outdoor access code that clearly sets out the responsibilities of the public and landowners.

[Caroline Lucas]

The Scottish outdoor access code has been instrumental in successfully establishing a right to responsible access. It makes it clear that visitors must respect the interests of others, care for the environment and take responsibility for their own actions, and it enjoys widespread public awareness. That simply is not the case with the countryside code in England. The work that has gone into updating it has sadly not been matched by work to promote it. Wider education has a vital role, whether that is public information campaigns or making sure we are teaching the countryside code in every single school so that children grow up with a much clearer understanding of their responsibilities in our countryside. In that respect, I am encouraged and inspired by examples such as the new paddlers' code, produced by British Canoeing, which sets out guidance for canoeists, kayakers and paddlers on how to enjoy our waterways responsibly.

Let me be very clear that there will be some times and some areas where a right to roam is simply not appropriate, whether that is to protect sensitive sites and rare and endangered species such as the wood calamint or the ghost orchid, or to avoid disturbing ground-nesting birds such as nightjars and woodlarks. Our remaining biodiversity is immensely precious, and we must be vigilant in protecting it. I also want to acknowledge that there are particular concerns about dogs, especially for wildlife. Even if they are on a lead, their presence can not only cause birds stress, but disrupt their behaviours and even cause them to leave their nest. We therefore do need a proper debate about whether a right to roam should be extended to dogs, and I will look at this very closely when I present a revised Bill in future.

As I draw my comments to a close, I want to challenge the idea that it is somehow the public who are a threat to nature and that that is why they have to be kept away from it. The UK did not become one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world, where 15% of species are at risk of extinction, because some people are dropping litter. To borrow some words from author and campaigner Nick Hayes:

"It's not the wild swimmer who poisons our rivers, nor the rambler who burns the moorland. When they took away our right to access the land, they took away our ability to protect it."

No, we know it is the greedy water companies that relentlessly pump sewage into the rivers and seas while handing billions to their shareholders, or it is the landowners who burn our precious peatlands, a vital carbon source, for blood sport and profit. Frankly, it is also this Government, who have failed to give enough support to farmers to transition to agroecological farming when nature restoration and food production can go hand in hand.

In closing, I pay tribute to the work that has been done by campaigners from right across the access movement. Fifteen years ago, Marion Shoard wrote of her concerns about new barriers to the countryside—not just the landowners' fences, but the new shutters that she argued have closed people's minds against the very idea of being able to roam freely in the countryside. Today, thankfully, that is changing. There is now a vibrant and growing movement, with those such as the Right to Roam campaign, spearheaded by Guy Shrubsole and Nick Hayes, asserting their rights—our rights—to the land. My hope is that we can work together for our health and wellbeing, for our happiness and fulfilment,

and of course for the love of life on Earth, because nature needs us to know it, love it, restore it and defend it, and, frankly, we need nature if we are to learn to be fully human.

12.12 pm

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), and I congratulate her on securing this very important debate. I want to focus most of my remarks on the importance of access to nature for children and for education. The hon. Lady and I have worked together on campaigns on these issues. However, I also want to touch on some local matters relating to developments in Worcestershire and Herefordshire to do with how we ensure that the children in all our schools benefit from the fantastic countryside and the fantastic nature around us, and how we protect those special places.

Last Saturday, I was on a sponsored walk for my local hospice up in the beautiful Malvern hills. It is a historical place for conservation, and the work of the Malvern Hills Conservators to protect the landscape of the area goes back over a century. We can see three counties from up there, including that of my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham). We cannot quite see Gloucester, but we can certainly see Gloucestershire, as well as Herefordshire and Worcestershire. It is an incredibly valuable landscape, and it was great to see, as we went on with our miles of walking, that scouts and guides were up on the hills and enjoying them as well. I pay tribute to all the voluntary organisations that provide access to nature for children of school age, including of course the Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme, and the very important work that they do in getting kids out into the natural environment.

It was very interesting during my time as schools Minister to visit schools in the inner cities of London and Birmingham that were doing really important work, recognising the benefits of nature for the mental health of pupils, in trying to connect their pupils with nature. I remember one visit to a school in a very built-up area of Lambeth, where the teachers had determined to use the resources they had available to develop a garden, create a natural environment and have a pond in the small urban space they had, so that children could engage with nature. They talked about the mental health benefits of that. When we face such a huge mental health challenge in our schools and in our education system, I think we should see access to nature and engagement with nature as one of the solutions. It is certainly not the case that only schools in the countryside can deliver that—schools in urban environments can deliver that, too—but it needs to be something that we consider as part of our curriculum.

Wera Hobhouse: The hon. Member makes a great case for young people needing to have access to nature, but because there is so little directly accessible in their local area, they often have to travel a very long way. Does it not make sense to open up more nature, so that people do not have to travel, but have it on their doorstep?

Mr Walker: I absolutely recognise that, which is why it is important that councils work together with voluntary groups to make sure that we signpost those green spaces. In my own constituency, which is an urban constituency—

Worcester is surrounded by beautiful countryside, I accept—we have seen a fantastic local project by the Worcester Environmental Group and the council to develop the Wild about Worcester Way, a walking route around the city. It connects green spaces in the city and accessible areas such as the Worcester Woods country park, Nunnery wood and Perry wood, where Cromwell allegedly met the devil, to our primary schools, so that there are walking routes for children to enjoy. In areas where they might not enjoy great parks and facilities, to link schools, through active travel, to such places is important.

We also need to look at routes through the countryside. I do not represent many farmers and I am not going to get into the detail of the debate about the right to roam, but I do think we should be exploring more greenways—more long-distance travel routes from area to area. I am interested in proposals for a Hereford to Worcester greenway to enable both active travel and engagement with nature for people. For that to work, there needs to be join-up between different Departments—the Department for Transport, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities—to make sure we have an approach that can support these things with proper funding.

I touched on this earlier, but there is also the importance of having nature as part of the curriculum. I have spoken before about the amazing work being done by the Rivers multi-academy trust in my constituency, which is promoting a curriculum based on the sustainable development goals. Right at the heart of that curriculum is engaging children with nature and making sure that they understand their responsibilities to nature. I was interested in what the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion said about the balance of rights and responsibilities when it comes to access. It is absolutely key that children have the opportunity to learn those responsibilities at an early stage in their education, and they are not going to do that unless we connect them with nature and give them those opportunities to be outside and to be engaged with nature.

Caroline Lucas: As someone who spent the first 18 years of their life in Great Malvern and spent a lot of time on the Malvern hills, I appreciate the hon. Member's words about that. I have been enjoying his speech very much, but is he going to come on to the natural history GCSE? We have worked together with the wonderful Mary Colwell to try to make sure there is a natural history GCSE in the curriculum, which would absolutely give young people that empirical exposure to the nature around them.

Mr Walker: The hon. Lady is absolutely right and pre-empts my very next point. I did have very interesting meetings with the hon. Lady, Mary Colwell and Tim Oates discussing the case for a natural history GCSE. I have to be honest and say that I was initially sceptical. Going into those meetings, I had extensive briefing from officials as to all the questions to ask and all the reasons why we might not approve a natural history GCSE, and I felt that the campaigners, collectively, were able to answer those questions in an incisive way. That demonstrated the academic benefits of restoring subjects such as botany to the curriculum, and the opportunity to engage students at a crucial time and to make sure that we fill the gap between the primary

science curriculum, which includes good elements of nature, and the A-level in environmental studies, which the Government have put forward. The conversations I have had in schools since taking the decision that we should go ahead and develop that, show there is enormous appetite for it. I will be writing to the Minister for Schools to urge him to come forward with the detail needed to ensure that the natural history GCSE can be delivered at the earliest possible opportunity. It is important that we move forward with that. I know that many groups, including The Wildlife Trusts, are interested in contributing to the work on that. I think it is possible to deliver an academically rigorous, challenging and interesting natural history GCSE, which will also widen opportunities for students in our schools to undertake field work.

It is so important to have a natural history GCSE. People say, "Well field work is covered in biology and geography", but not every student takes those subjects. Many students will opt out of geography before they choose their GCSE courses, and many will take combined sciences and might not have the opportunity to take part in field trips. A natural history GCSE will give students another opportunity to engage in field trips and outdoor activity, and to develop some of the skills that we as a country will need if we are to meet our long-term ambition of leaving nature in a better state than we found it.

We have recently seen in Worcester the establishment of the Office for Environmental Protection. It has been interesting talking to it about the job and skills opportunities there are for people who can understand and monitor levels of nature, biodiversity and environmental issues. Some hard skills are required for that, such as data science and scientific knowledge, so we must ensure that we take advantage of those opportunities. We must look at careers guidance in schools and prepare children for a greener, more environmentally aware future, in which increasing the quality of our natural environment and biodiversity is a key goal shared by all parties across the House. That is also a good reason for stepping forward with access to nature for schoolchildren in general, and with the natural history GCSE in particular.

A couple of things have improved in recent months and years, one of which is the conversation around environmental land management schemes. I have met my local wildlife trust regularly, and our discussions have led me to think that the Department is now in a much better place on ELMs than it perhaps has been sometimes in the past. Some of the concerns that the trust raised strenuously regarding the direction of travel about a year ago seem to have been met, so I am grateful to Ministers for their ongoing engagement with The Wildlife Trusts on that.

A number of constituents have written to me recently about the so-called Save the Shire campaign and the interesting challenge of saving literary landscapes. When that first came in, I imagined that it might refer to the view from the Malvern Hills, which I have always understood was very much the inspiration for Tolkien's Shire. It turns out, however, that it is to do with another part of Worcestershire, which the Tolkien family had connections with, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean). It is an example of some of the tensions between access to nature and other environmental issues, because it is a campaign against the development of a solar farm. People are saying that they do not want the development of the solar farm because it will change the nature of

[Mr Robin Walker]

the countryside and change access. that is a challenge. I will not wade into the planning area. Of course it is important that we protect our rural landscapes, and it is also important that we develop renewable technologies and renewables, but access must be a key part of that and one concern is that, if we have large renewable installations on land, they will restrict access. We should ensure that we enable access, both for nature and creatures, but also for people, to those sites and that we do not allow rights of way, which are important, to be shut off.

We need to continue to work on this area. Some of the figures on the health benefits have been cited. I suspect those understate the reality. The £2 billion figure I have seen in a Natural England report about health benefits largely focuses on physical health. As a country we face such huge challenges with mental health, particularly among our young people. Engaging people with nature and ensuring that they have that opportunity to reflect and engage with nature—as the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion ably pointed out, that has very much been part of our natural development as human beings over the millennia, let alone the centuries—will be better for people’s mental health and in the long run it can save the health system a fortune.

12.24 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) on securing this important debate and the Backbench Business Committee on granting it. Research in 14 different European countries has shown that the UK’s record is woeful, with biodiversity, wellbeing and natural connection the worst among those countries. Among the G7, we come bottom and across our world we are in the lowest 10% of countries. So today’s debate should kickstart the Government’s thoughts, as well as drive forward the Opposition’s ambitions to establish a plan for nature. I welcome that the Government this year published the environmental improvement plan, but its 10 goals lack ambition and teeth, and the rigour we need to ensure that the commitments in that project are delivered in a timely way.

Wera Hobhouse: In the south-west, only 5% of land is accessible to the public. A lot of green-belt land is privately owned and therefore not accessible to them. Does the hon. Lady agree that part of the plan should be to open up green-belt land to the right to roam?

Rachael Maskell: I absolutely agree. The historic injustice in who owns our land across our country has to be addressed. We have much work to do on that. The environmental improvement plan does not address those issues, which must be addressed, so that everybody can have access to our natural environment.

The plan also lacks ambition when it comes to addressing inequality. The word “inequality” is not sewn through the plan and it must be. Inequality is why we are standing here today, whether that involves the historic injustice of who owns the land in Britain, or the diversity of our communities, where access is far more restricted for those from the most deprived communities—something I recognise within my constituency. Just 8% of England is covered by the right to roam, and 3% of our rivers and 15% of our woods.

We are indebted to Chris Smith, and the work he did in bringing in the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 to open up access to mountains, moors, heaths, downlands and common land. However, even after those efforts, most of our country locks us out. We need a fresh start and I believe my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) will have that ambition when a Labour Government come in. Even in York, with our incredible bioeconomy, pathways are still closed to the public as developers buy up land and lock them out. We need to address that injustice too.

I personally have known the enrichment that access to nature gives. It is my place to go for restoration. It is a privilege to walk many national trails, over hills and mountains, to be lost in complete wilderness when finding myself, and to cycle the breadth of the country. Even in my constituency, each day, I seek to have a brisk walk to enjoy the rivers and strays, and the environment that comes into the heart of York. I always say that the most important skills I ever learnt were to ride a bike and use a map and compass, yet many of our young people today have no access to either. It is so important that young people learn those vital skills as part of their formal education process. Many youth organisations such as the Brownies, Guides, Scouts and Cubs teach those skills, but every child should have that enrichment.

I will never forget talking to a teacher at Carr Junior School in Acomb in my constituency, who talked about how the children in her school had never seen crashing waves at the seaside and never felt the “sand between their toes”. We have incredible assets across our country, but our children cannot necessarily access them unless their schools have proper funding to afford those trips, or unless we have a strategy that really focuses on young people getting that love of nature.

Mr Walker: I agree with the hon. Lady’s point. One visit that I did during my time as Schools Minister was to a primary school in Hastings and Rye, which was all of a mile and a half from the sea—admittedly up quite a high cliff—and I was struck by the headteacher saying that probably two thirds of the children there had never been to the seaside. That is an extraordinary example of how, even with very small distances, communities sometimes get locked in and do not have that opportunity to go and enjoy the natural resources right on their doorstep. It is crucial that schools are resourced but also challenged to provide that engagement with those natural resources, which might be close by but are still considered inaccessible.

Rachael Maskell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point and could not agree more. It often comes down to funding in schools and being able to afford those opportunities for young people to experience the natural environment. That should not be the case, because we know how that further bakes in inequality. Of course, at a time when children really need to access nature, they are denied it. We have such incredible assets all around us, so we need to provide that opportunity to young people.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Will she join me in congratulating Second West Kirby Sea Scouts on the work they do to take children out on the water and give them the experience of enjoying water sports? I met them recently at a May Day fair, where they said they

were sure that they would have about 15 children sign up to go kayaking and so forth, but they were looking for volunteers. Does she agree that the work of volunteers is invaluable in that regard?

Rachael Maskell: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. As a former Beaver Scout leader and someone who is much involved in the scouting movement, I know the value that scouting and guiding bring to many of my constituents. Of course, we need scout and guide leaders—that is always the issue. Volunteers gain so many skills as well, so I urge people to come forward and enjoy that too.

We often talk about these things in this place, but if we do not see that opportunity hardwired into legislation and Government strategy, it often becomes talk and not action. For example, I spent six months on the Bill Committee for the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill, bringing forward amendments that aimed to provide greater access to nature, whether by developing one of the missions to focus on nature or by bringing forward opportunity for access to nature and protection of nature, which is vital at this time.

In that Bill Committee I made arguments about how we use our brownfield sites. I would like the Minister to respond on this. In debates in this place, we often hear that we must drive development on brownfield sites. However, I have witnessed in York how a brownfield former rubbish dump has been turned into St Nicks nature reserve, providing real access to nature in an urban environment. When we are developing brownfield sites, we need to think about opportunities to create wildernesses and parks. We even need to be thinking about exchange with green-belt land so that we do not push everything into the urban centres, denying access to nature to people living in urban environments while there is so much for everybody else. We could look at that policy to ensure that we get a fairer share. With that legislation, we talk about using little pockets of land for development, but those are often where people in those communities have the opportunity to enjoy nature. We should look at protecting those areas for community interest purposes.

I thank those who have campaigned long and hard to provide access, right back to the Kinder Scout movement and to this very day. In York, I see the work that York Cycle Campaign and Walk York are doing to open up access. It is not always just about getting there. That is a major issue, and for that I thank the dales and moors buses who take people out, including facilitating day walks for people from the urban environment, giving them an opportunity to experience the natural environment while ensuring that there are things to do.

That is where i-Travel York comes in. It has created interactive maps so that as people go on cycle routes and walks, they can know what places to go, what they are looking for and what kind of nature to spot. That is why we must ensure that we facilitate the travel. I welcome reducing the cost of buses that go out into the environment, but there is too little infrastructure. We need to address that. People also need to know what to do when they get out into the natural environment and how to enjoy and get the most out of it.

We recognise how during lockdown so many people were trapped in flats and urban environments. Getting that reconnection is really important. Social prescribers are doing fantastic work by opening up opportunities, but we must ensure that they are properly funded and

that that programme can be built up even more. We know that when people access nature, their physical and mental health improves. We have heard how about £2.1 billion could be saved, but I agree with the hon. Member for Worcester (Mr Walker) that it could be far more. There is talk of £7.4 billion to the wider economy, and of course there is the difference that could make to people in our communities. The mortality gap in my constituency—just in York—is 10 years, so we know that inequality is clearly embedded in people's ability to walk and enjoy the natural environment; that must be closed.

We need that programme of nature recovery to be integrated with human recovery. I think hard about what happened after the pandemic in many schools and getting that focus on children's wellbeing. Some independent schools put farming and engagement in the natural world on their curriculum. However, in many state schools it was a case of young people having to work harder at the core subjects, which the Government identified, in order to catch up—as opposed to being able to catch up with themselves. In fact, that caused greater harm to those individuals rather than the replenishment that nature could bring.

We also need to look at where people can stay when they are out in the community. We have heard much about the opportunity to visit places, but I would argue that people should have the right to wild camp and stay in locations. There is nothing like waking up to the dawn chorus or seeing a spectacular sunset in a wild area and getting that connection with nature. The opportunity to wild camp is therefore really important. Of course, we must preserve that land and take care of it while there. In just a week's time, I will be packing up my tent and walking the hills with my father, who is now well into his 80s. We are both really excited about spending time together, recharging and climbing those hills once again. It is such a privilege, and I want everyone to enjoy that.

I want to raise with the Minister the decline in youth hostels across the country. I am a life member of the Youth Hostels Association. Rural hostels have been in decline and disappearing, and it is really important that we deal with that so that all ages can engage. In fact, the Government could do so much more to ensure that people have those stopping points. Certainly, for those walking a national trail without the infrastructure there, trying to find somewhere to stay can be a nightmare. I think about the Pennine way—I think it is 276 miles—where several of the youth hostels on the route have now disappeared, which makes it a difficult journey. It is really worth looking at where people can stay, whether camping or indeed in a youth hostel, so that everyone can access nature and enjoy those rural retreats.

In this debate we have talked about such joy, such opportunity and the amazing landscapes we have. Before I close, I want to touch on one more issue: bringing nature into the urban space. In York I want to see a city farm. I have long talked about the therapeutic benefits that could bring. We know from research that when animals are brought into care homes, it has helped residents and older people re-engage, re-live memories and feel connected. I want young people to be able to learn the basics of animal welfare, and for people with mental health challenges, and indeed all of us, to enjoy the opportunities and enrichment that a city farm can

[*Rachael Maskell*]

bring. We need those facilities in our urban environments to draw out the interest of young people to help them find themselves and to connect.

We need to see so much more ambition. We have a Labour Government coming, and I am excited about that because we can create wonderful connection and restore our rhythm of life.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I must say that, although I have no policy views, I am delighted to represent the Ribble Valley during this debate, and I cannot wait to get back there this afternoon.

12.40 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): This is a rare debate, is it not, Mr Deputy Speaker? It is becoming an ode to nature; a long series of prose poems of colleagues' enjoyment of nature and what it brings to us and our constituents.

I very much enjoyed listening to the hon. Member for York Central (*Rachael Maskell*) describe her upcoming walk with her father, now in his 80s, and the joy that will bring them both. My father is now 94. Sadly, his walking days are very much behind him, but they are strong in his memory. He can still vividly describe landscape, nature and birds from throughout his long life. I am sure that is true for everyone here and across the country. I welcome this debate, opened in style by the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (*Caroline Lucas*), with strong support for things that she and so many of us believe in.

My starting observation would be that my sense of nature and public access to it is slightly less central and less driven by Government fiat; it is more about the joys of volunteers, charities and individuals incrementally improving the landscape around us, to hand it on to our children and grandchildren in slightly better shape than we inherited it. It is more a conservative vision of what human involvement with nature is all about. That is what I want to touch on today.

In many ways, one would expect the representative of the city of Gloucester to talk about access to the great nature all around our city. We are so close to the Cotswolds escarpment, Crickley hill, and all of the lands that Laurie Lee and Ivor Gurney described so beautifully. Whether up in the hills or looking the other way to the Forest of Dean, May hill and even to the Malvern hills—which we can see clearly from quite a lot of Gloucester, and where I vividly remember as a small boy tobogganing from school through the snow—we are part of a wider landscape around us. That includes the River Wye, which, despite everything that one might read, is still a wonderful place to go swimming, whether from Lydbrook or Symonds Yat. It has some of the most spectacular country for walking, swimming and canoeing, arguably. That is a free advert for my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (*Mr Harper*).

It is about recognition that in each part of the country that we represent, we have very special nature all around us. As a couple of Members have already said, that came to the fore during the pandemic, when at one stage we were able to go five or six miles for our daily exercise. Five or six miles from Gloucester leads to spectacular places, including Haresfield Beacon, close to where *Beatrix Potter* used to draw. Aren't we lucky?

I want to focus on what is happening within my own urban environment in Gloucester. There are lessons and opportunities for the whole country from what is happening in the small city, which the Minister knows so well—she was there not long ago. We could not find a better champion for nature and everything that it can bring to us than the Minister and her colleagues in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

What is Gloucester all about? It is 5.5 square miles of urban environment, which happens to include the Robinswood hill, and water in the shape of both the River Severn and the Sharpness to Gloucester canal, as well as other things that I will come to. It has many parks, most of them enhanced considerably over the past dozen years, often with playgrounds—the city council has doubled the number playgrounds in Gloucester over the past 12 years. Playgrounds are often the entry point for small children to first visit and be around nature with their parents and grandparents.

In the same sense, we are lucky to have the headquarters of Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust on Robinswood, which has understood that amazing asset and now taken over its management from the city council. That is a really good example, if the House will tolerate this, of what some people would call privatisation but I would call simply a more imaginative management of important resources, better done by a specialist charity. In the same way, the Canal and River Trust has done such a good job of looking after our major canals all around the country, although there are one or two things about that I will come to. It was handed over from British Waterways by a very good Minister in DEFRA at that time, *Richard Benyon*, who is now in the other place and still doing great work on the environment for his country. We are lucky, geographically, to have those amazing assets. We are also lucky to have good partnerships that make the most of them.

Thematically, I am looking at ways in which we can preserve, enhance and create. Preservation almost speaks for itself, but preserving and enhancing together is a theme that every wildlife trust in the country should—and no doubt is—looking at. The Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust, under the leadership of its recently moved on chief executive *Roger Matlock*, who is now taking over the Council for the Protection of Rural England, led some important steps forward to use Robinswood as a place for education and enjoyment. Sustainable wooden playgrounds and enhanced car parks have been used as a way of bringing families in from all backgrounds.

Colleagues have made points about people from ethnic minority communities who live further from nature than others. That is true in some parts of the country, no doubt, but in a city our size of only 5.5 square miles, where we have a primary school that has more than 50 nationalities, we are all very close to the extraordinary combination of the canal, the hill, the river and the lakes. The question is, does everyone have equal inspiration and drive to go and find, use and draw pleasure from those great natural assets? That is where schools play a major part.

I want to highlight *Meadowside* and *Clearwater* in *Quedgeley*, which has its own town council in the city of Gloucester. Those two primary schools—both rather different, one very new—have embraced the opportunities that using the green spaces and exploring outside can offer children. They are joined by many schools in Gloucester—*Abbeymead Primary School* was the first to take up my offer for every child in our city to plant a

tree at the new Hempsted woods on our recycling centre, where we hope to plant 100,000 trees. Almost 8,000 have been planted so far by five schools. We have a long way to go, but the opportunity is huge and some schools are seizing it fast, particularly the local Hempsted primary.

Creation is important, too, and it can be done in lots of different ways. After the terrible floods of 2007, which hit Gloucester, Tewkesbury, Worcestershire and all around the River Severn, the Environment Agency, encouraged by the Government, created a new balancing pond that will become a diversion for the Sud Brook, rather than it flooding the suburbs of Elmbridge and Longlevens, in particular. That balancing pond serves the functional task of protecting humans, but it has also become an incredibly attractive area for birds, ducks and marine life. It now provides a wonderful leisure opportunity for people to walk and picnic with their families and dogs, with some areas protected so that dogs cannot disrupt nesting birds, ducks, moorhens and coots. That is a creative way in which a government agency has prevented the flooding that had badly impacted thousands of people's lives, as flooding does, and provided a huge new natural resource that everybody can enjoy.

On a more micro level, in Barton and Tredworth ward, which has the least green space and the most ethnic diversity, last year we were able to open a new community garden—the Sudbrook Community Garden—which I have wanted to do for a long time. With the help of several partners, including businesses, the city council and a housing association, we were able to deliver. I know on the Minister's next visit to Gloucester this little pocket park will inspire her, as it excites me and provides wonderful opportunities for people living nearby. It includes a little brook beside it.

Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a wonderful speech. Last week, I had the pleasure of a walk around Poulshot, in my constituency, with Dave Yearsley and Tim Lewis from the Wiltshire Ramblers. They showed me a series of brilliant interventions to make the countryside accessible, most of which had been done by volunteers. Does my hon. Friend agree that if we empowered local councils, particularly parish councils, and encouraged landowners to do their duty to keep paths open and properly accessible, we could bring in a huge number of volunteers who would also step up and we could open up all those wonderful lanes and paths to a far greater part of the population?

Richard Graham: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, as he so often is on issues to do with communities, volunteering and the big society, which many of us were inspired by when first we came to this House. That is true in practical ways, as well, because the joy of charities being involved is that they have access to funding and foundations that city or parish councils do not necessarily have. When there are partnerships between private landowners, communities, such as the ones he described, and charities, all sorts of good things can happen.

A good example of that is the Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust's Severn treescapes project, a 60-mile walk along the edge of the River Severn that crosses five, if not six, constituencies. It provides a walk along the riverbanks from which people will derive huge pleasure—it is a massive opportunity. The project has been supported by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural

Affairs, which funded the trees, but it is also a collaborative, community effort. If we can get one plus one plus one to equal about five and a half, that is definitely the way forward. I am sure we will hear more about that from the Minister in due course.

Let me continue on my brief tour around scenic Gloucester, Mr Deputy Speaker, which I hope will inspire you and others to visit this most spectacular small city. I pay tribute to the Gloucester Urban Greening Project, a collaboration between the county council, a couple of borough councils, the University of Gloucestershire and the Environment Agency. The project has delivered some remarkable and tangible incremental improvements.

For example, in no particular order, in Quedgeley, in the south-west of my constituency, the Quedgeley orchard now has an area left as meadow, with paths cut through it. This is an increasingly fashionable thing for people to do in their gardens, as well as in bigger spaces. Many councils are adopting the No Mow May approach, not in order to save money on mowing, of which some accuse them, but in order to allow for greater biodiversity. Wild flowers can be seen on the edges of roads such as Eastern Avenue and the entrance to Westgate, and there is much greater enjoyment of those areas by humans as well as by bees, damselflies, dragonflies and others. The fruit trees in Quedgeley are available for anyone to harvest and eat, which is always attractive.

We have the Friends of Saintbridge Pond, whose founder and former chairman, Ken, has sadly just died. He leaves the great legacy of a wonderful wildlife space that is rather hidden from many people's knowledge, but which is right in the middle of Gloucester. It benefits from grants provided by the county council.

I touched on the Sud Brook, where it comes through Barton and Tredworth, but in Barnwood and Abbeydale the re-naturalisation of the Sud Brook has created more wild flower meadows and wetland features, and we have greater numbers of moorhens and coots, as well as bees and dragonflies. In Barnwood Park, the wetland areas beside the balancing pond are much more biodiverse than they were a decade ago, as is the balancing pond at Appleton Way.

The land around the Clock Tower, on which there was a mental health institution years ago, has been spectacularly reinvented as a centre for native tree planting and wild flower meadows, providing great enjoyment for residents.

At the King George V playing fields, which has been a large sports area for almost 100 years, we have added a huge amount of tree planting around the edges. The spoil removed for the swales will be used to create butterfly banks, which will provide habitat for other pollinators. That is good news for primary schools on the edge of the King George V playing fields.

At Matson and Robinswood, towards the great hill, we have done a huge amount. When I say "we", I mean everybody collectively. Nobody should try to take individual ownership, because we must encourage everybody to create and to take individual and collective community ownership to make these projects sustainable and successful for more generations. Matson Park has improved, as has Haycroft Drive. We can see similar trends across the constituency of allowing more wild flowers and meadows, with paths through them. That greatly increases the amount of insects and birds that we can all see on our walks or cycle rides around the city.

[Richard Graham]

Part of the success of an active wildlife trust is stimulating friends of parks organisations, whether that is the Friends of Gloucester Park, the Friends of Tuffley Park or others. There are more such groups and the Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust co-ordinates them. There are sessions where they can share best practice, look at how best to access new seeds, talk about tips on planting, and look at the management of friends' groups, so that the finances are in good order and the governance is safe and accountable. All those things add to a greater sense of ownership. It is less about, "Why hasn't the council done this, that or the other?" and more about, "What can we do, as friends of the park close to where we live, to help improve the state of the park, to litter-pick it ourselves and to take much more ownership and joy in what is being done?"

That can include restorative justice. Some 18 months ago, I planted 20 cherry trees—the sakura tree—donated by Japan in Gloucester Park. Just as they came into blossom, in spring last year, sadly all 20 of them were cut down by an individual. That was captured on CCTV and we know who the individual is. I am going to ask him to come and plant another 20 trees, which have again generously been donated by Japan. We will do that this autumn. I hope that the individual involved will come and take ownership and want to protect these trees, rather than to attack them, forever after.

I could talk about lots more, but I want to touch on two things, because not everything is rosy. Opportunities also have challenges. What is great about having water can mean floods or drought. We have work still to do on Alney Island with the Environment Agency, particularly to try to protect the Showmen's Guild community who have lived there for a very long time and who travel around the country for many of their fairs. We need to do a bit more to protect them. I will be seeing the Environment Agency soon to discuss progress.

Likewise, we have had problems with our canal because of the severe drought in the River Severn. Water lifted and taken into the canal had a heavy amount of silt. Dredging has gone on for longer this year and been less satisfactory than it should have been, which has led to difficulties for narrowboats coming to moor in the basins of the canal in Gloucester, and to some friction from businesses that feel they have lost out as a result. I have had encouraging meetings with the chief executive and others in the Canal & River Trust, and I believe that all the problems should be resolved by 6 June and that lessons have been learnt. However, there is clearly a need for large stakeholder groups to meet regularly and share problems, communicate what is being done and check that everyone is happy, knows what events are coming up and will support them. That is one of the lessons that we have learnt and will act on.

Sometimes, of course, human needs will clash with the needs of nature. There is what I consider to be a sensible plan to develop a sports hub and some playing pitches in the large open field at Blackbridge, in Podsmead. That will be good for children living in the area—they will no longer have to travel several miles for their sports, which will also reduce carbon emissions and improve air quality—but it will slightly reduce the space available for dog walking and so on. We have to manage

the different interests in a way that means the green spaces are still there, but human needs are taken into account as well.

I know that the Government will play their part in all this, working with charities and statutory agencies such as the Environment Agency to ensure that those of us who treasure what nature offers in our constituencies—paddleboarding, walking or cycling in Gloucestershire, which I spend so much of my time doing—have opportunities to pass on to our children and grandchildren, providing the best public access to nature that we possibly can.

1.1 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) on securing such an important debate.

One of life's great pleasures is to be able to enjoy the natural world, but for many it is a pleasure denied. Goal 10 of the Government's recently published environmental improvement plan is

"Enhanced beauty, heritage, and engagement with the natural environment".

The Government say they will ensure that the "natural environment...can be enjoyed, used by and cared for by everyone."

However, there is a great deal of work to do in that regard. For example, the Government must address the fact that in recent years numerous studies have found that there is unequal access to green spaces across the UK, and that people from less affluent areas and those in ethnic minorities are less likely to enjoy easy access to local green space.

In 2020, 57% of British adults who responded to a survey carried out for The Ramblers said that they lived within a five minutes' stroll of a local park, field or canal path, but just 39% of people from ethnic minority backgrounds said that they enjoyed the same proximity to green space. Fewer than 50% of those with household incomes of less than £15,000 a year lived close to a green space, but 63% of those with annual household incomes of more than £35,000 could find a green space within five minutes' walk from their homes. I should be grateful to hear from the Minister what recent assessment the Government have made of the inequality of access to green spaces, and what specific steps they are taking to increase engagement with the natural world among disadvantaged socioeconomic groups and people from ethnic minority backgrounds.

It is beyond dispute that access to nature is immensely important to our health and wellbeing. The mental health charity Mind has said that spending time in green space or making nature a part of everyday life by, for instance, growing food or flowers, exercising outdoors or being around animals can benefit both mental and physical wellbeing. In his 2010 Review "Fair Society, Healthy Lives", Michael Marmot observed:

"Well designed and maintained green spaces can encourage social interaction, exercise, play, and contact with nature. Well designed, car free and pleasant streets encourage feelings of well-being, chance interactions and active travel; good quality and good access to public spaces contributes to pride in the community, integration and social cohesion."

Spending time outdoors was one of the key factors enabling people to deal with the stress of the covid-19 pandemic; there were countless reports of the importance of that. Nearly half the respondents to a survey by the

Mental Health Foundation—about 45%—said that throughout the pandemic, visiting green spaces such as parks helped them to cope.

People in my constituency can enjoy beautiful parks, farmland and beaches. Off the coast of West Kirby are the picturesque Hilbre Islands, which sit in the Dee estuary site of special scientific interest, an area of international importance for migrating birds and a favourite place for seal-spotting. The estuary has been at risk of industrialisation through underground coal gasification. I led a campaign against that, and on previous occasions I have raised in the House the importance of protecting the Dee estuary. I should be grateful for a commitment from the Minister that there will be no underground coal gasification in the Dee. Remarkably, the Government have not categorically ruled it out; they have only said that they are not minded to support the technology, so the threat remains. I therefore hope that the Minister is able to give a cast-iron assurance today.

Across the estuary are the scenic Welsh hills, and if weather conditions allow, one can see as far as Anglesey and even Snowdonia, one of the UK's 15 national parks. Of course, the national parks are a proud Labour achievement, as they were created by Clement Attlee's Government through the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949. We are also indebted to Beatrix Potter, who bought up great swathes of Cumbria for all of us to enjoy, and was closely involved in the early days of the National Trust. In Wirral West, Caldly Hill, Thurston Common, Irby Hill and Harrock Wood are all owned and cared for by the National Trust, which does an extremely important job in maintaining the sites so that they can be enjoyed by local people and visitors alike.

My constituency is fortunate to have much-loved areas of green belt, but they are under threat of development by Leverhulme Estates. Residents are campaigning passionately against that development, and I fully support them. The threat to the green belt is a threat to the very character of Wirral West. People care deeply about the natural world, and it is vital for us to ensure that it is accessible and unspoilt. It is important to create opportunities for children and young people to enjoy the natural world as well, and the growth of the Forest School movement is an indication of the growing awareness among parents and educationists of the value of access to that natural world. Ganneys Meadow Nursery School and Family Centre on the Woodchurch estate in my constituency does excellent work in this regard, supporting children's play and exploration and giving them hands-on experience in a natural setting. Children, parents and staff enjoy flower planting and an area that includes an orchard, willow dens and paths that encourage the children to explore the natural environment.

Access to nature is something that has been fought for, and it is vital for us to recognise the importance of protecting and enhancing the right to roam. The Kinder Scout mass trespass in 1932 was aimed to highlight the fact that walkers were denied access to areas of open country. It is generally agreed that hundreds of people took part, and those of us who enjoy the great outdoors today are hugely indebted to them for their actions. Remarkably, some of those trespassers were arrested, and some were given prison sentences, but it was the actions of those who trespassed on that day that led to positive change, and we need to see more change. The Government should introduce legislation to extend the right to roam, and to improve promotion of the countryside code.

It is no surprise that artistic expressions of the natural world are a major part of our cultural heritage. Its beauty has inspired numerous writers and artists, including poets such as Wordsworth and Keats and painters such as Turner and Constable. Their popularity is due not just to their genius, but to the beauty of the natural world that they evoke. It is extremely important for people of all ages and backgrounds to be able to access nature and enjoy the many benefits that it brings. We all have a responsibility to address inequality in access to nature and to care for the natural environment, and I urge Government to address that as a matter of urgency.

1.7 pm

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I am going to look at access to nature in relation to protection of the natural world—and, indeed, access to it—through the prism of my constituency, which means that I will be very parochial, but I am also going to pitch a series of arguments to the Minister, as I have done in addressing previous Ministers. I thank the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) for securing the debate; it is also nice to see the Minister here, and it is great to see a fellow co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Ukraine, the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) on the Opposition Front Bench.

First, I will explain why I believe that the Isle of Wight, for the purposes of the natural world and human access to it, should be seen as a single whole rather than, as is currently the case, a patchwork of designations with some undesignated land. Secondly, I will make the case for a specific island designation. There is no national park on the Island, but I should like to see an island park, which would be slightly different. That could possibly be introduced on other islands as well, such as Anglesey and the Scottish islands. I may have misunderstood, but I thought that there was to be primary legislation following the Glover review. We were looking at the idea of city parks, and I should like that to be extended to the idea of an island park. Thirdly, in support of those two points, I shall explain why the remarkable depth and diversity of animal life, marine and landscape habitat and geology on the Isle of Wight, which is unique in the United Kingdom, should be much more valued by policymakers in London. First, however, I will make my argument in a little more detail.

The Island is said to represent England in miniature. The east resembles Sussex and Kent, with its thick hedges and coppices; the stone walls around the Undercliff on the south side of the Isle of Wight resemble Cornwall, as do the sandy little coves; in the south-west, where I live, the windswept chalk downs somewhat resemble parts of Dorset; and the creeks of Yarmouth, Newtown and Wootton on the north of the island resemble those in Devon. Importantly, being an island, we have not had the invasion of non-native species such as deer, grey squirrels and escaped mink from mink farms—we are free of those.

The Island has a series of internationally and nationally important nature conservation sites, which I will list. We have special areas of marine conservation; as part of an island designation, we would include marinescape as well landscape. We have the Newtown national nature reserve. We have a remarkable 41 SSSIs and 395 local wildlife sites. We have two of the south-east of England's four heritage coasts, and just over half of the Island is an area of outstanding natural beauty. It should be

[Bob Seely]

much more. Someone turned up in 1963 from the Ministry, spent half a day on the Island, threw a few splotches of AONB on the map and left; it was not a well-conducted exercise.

We are again applying for dark skies status for the south-west of the Island. I got back from London last Friday morning at 2 am—I got the midnight ferry down. Even with a partial moon, the intensity of the night sky in the south-west, where I live, is breathtaking. Having dark skies and being able to see the night sky—sadly, in our light-polluted civilisation, fewer and fewer people are able to—is humbling and uplifting at the same time.

Let me put all those explanations and categorisations into terms that geographers might recognise—again, I apologise for listing, but I am using the geographical terms from Natural England and other organisations. Our landscape and seascape include: broad-leaf mixed and yew woodland; maritime cliff and slope; lowland calcareous grassland; coastal and floodplain grazing marsh; lowland meadows; reedbeds; lowland dry acidic grassland; fens; lowland heathland; the chalk downs that provide the spine of the Island, from Bembridge on one side to the Needles all the way over in the west; saline lagoons; mudflats; coastal sand dunes, and coastal vegetated shingle.

I will mention specifically our chines, which are mostly unique to us, although I believe there are a few in west Dorset too. Those are spectacular steep-sided gorges where rivers and streams flow down to the sea and, over thousands of years, have carved their way through soft sandstone. Shanklin chine, celebrated by Keats, is one of the more famous, but there are chines all over the Island, including near me on the south side.

What does all this mean? With our English landscape in miniature, our range of different habitats and our role as an island, we are pretty unique geologically and geographically—I will say a little more about that in a second. We are also home to many different species, some of which are unique to the Isle of Wight. Importantly, we have species on the Island, some of them flourishing, that are near-extinct in other parts of the United Kingdom. Those include red squirrels, dormice and water voles, because we do not have grey squirrels or lots of escaped mink. I thank the Isle of Wight Red Squirrel Trust for its great work looking after injured red squirrels, which we sadly see occasionally on the roads.

We have some of the UK's rarest bats. I think 17 or 18 species have been identified on the Isle of Wight, including the greater horseshoe bat, which those who know their bats—I do not, but I read the work and talk to people who do—tell me is very rare nowadays. We also have the Bechstein's bat and the grey long-eared bat. I thank the Isle of Wight Natural History and Archaeological Society for the information.

Our specialised flora includes early gentian, which is found in Wiltshire, Dorset and the Isle of Wight; field cow-wheat, which is present in only a few locations in the country; and wood calamint, which we have in a single dry chalk valley on the Island. For insects, the Island is the sole British location of the Glanville fritillary butterfly and the reddish buff moth. About a decade ago, we rediscovered the bee hawk-moth in part of the Island. I am sorry to list stuff, but I want to get it on the record, because it is important to the arguments that I am going to make.

For birds, the Solent as a whole, including our marshes, is a Ramsar designated site—a wetland of international importance. Brading marshes and the Newtown and Western Yar marshes and estuaries are internationally important for migrating and wading birds, and for the insects and plants that exist in that saline estuary—I think that is the geographers' term—habitat. The sea eagle—the second largest in the world—was reintroduced in England on the Isle of Wight, and there is now a nesting pair, I think at Brading marshes. Buzzards, which were once rare, are now relatively plentiful, especially in the middle of the Island.

The areas surrounding the Island are protected by marine conservation zones, special protection areas and special areas of conservation. There are two species of seahorse that can be seen—sadly, often to a lesser extent nowadays—around the British coast. Those are the spiny seahorse and the short-snouted seahorse—a bit of an alliterative struggle, that one. Both exist in and around the shores of the Isle of Wight. We have other rare or semi-rare marine species, including native oyster, peacock's tail and stalked jellyfish. There is a plan to reintroduce the white-clawed crayfish, the English crayfish having died out in many parts of the UK because of the bigger American crayfish, which we find in Pret A Manger sandwiches and so on. I thank the Wildheart Animal Sanctuary for that potential work.

The purpose of my listing those species is to show the Minister the variety of the wildlife that exists on the Island but is relatively rare in other parts of the United Kingdom. There is a little bit more of the list and then I shall come to my points.

We have seagrass meadows in Osborne bay, Yarmouth and Bouldnor. Seagrass is very important for carbon capture, which is why a project is taking seeds from those coastal waters around the Isle of Wight and replanting them in the Beaulieu river in the Solent. The relative strength of our natural world—I accept that it is relative—is being or will be used for the benefit of the wider UK, as is exemplified by what is happening with the crayfish, the seabeds and the sea eagle.

All that—thank you for bearing with me, Mr Deputy Speaker—means that the variety, diversity and depth of our habitats, natural flora, and common, rare and unique insects, marine life and animal life are pretty much unique in the United Kingdom.

Let me say a word on geology, too. We have one of the most complex geologies pretty much anywhere in the world, but certainly in Britain. The Undercliff, a breathtakingly beautiful area along the southern tip of the Island, is the most geologically unstable inhabited part of Europe. Sadly, our roads occasionally slip alarmingly towards the sea. The last time that happened, eight years ago, about 75 metres of A road parted company with the rest of the road during a particularly bad storm. Sadly, that road has not yet been repaired.

Along the south-west of the Island, we have a near-complete exposure of Cretaceous coast—of orange Wealden rock. If one looks at the Isle of Wight, one sees white rock and orange rock. They are from roughly the same period, about 120 million years ago. The Wealden rock produces dinosaur fossils in relative abundance, which is why the Isle of Wight is Europe's No. 1 site for the discovery of fossilised bones of dinosaurs. Indeed, we have dinosaur footprint casts near where I live in Brook bay. I hope that I can say without sounding like a

member of the Flintstones that we actually have a family dinosaur. Fossilised bones of an iguanodon were found on my great-great-great-grandad's farm in about 1870, so there is actually an Iguanodon seelyi. There is some discussion among palaeontologists about whether it is a true species or a subspecies. I will let others argue that point.

The point is that our wildlife is pretty unique and there is not such concentration of different landscapes in any other part of the United Kingdom. That is not to question the beauty of the moors, the lake district, bits of Yorkshire or Dorset, but there is not the concentration of almost every type of habitat in the UK in one place, apart from on the Isle of Wight. There is not the concentration of wildlife—common, rare on the mainland, or unique to the Island—anywhere else, and, frankly, there is not the geology.

Our access to nature is relatively good; we have 500 miles of footpaths. That is probably largely because we avoided enclosures back in the 18th century—we were quite slow to take up those things—so we kept our medieval rights of way, which existed for hundreds of years before that, into the modern era. We also have about 2,000 hectares of open access land, and we have a coastal path, which in most places goes along the coast. We have some 2 million visitors a year.

Frankly, back in the 1940s and '50s, the case for making the Isle of Wight Britain's first national park was overwhelming. J. B. Priestley, one of the great authors of the 20th century, argued as much. Unfortunately, it did not happen. I am not arguing for a national park, but I am arguing for a specific island designation because of the uniqueness of our geology and so on.

The Isle of Wight should have a unique role. Indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker) talked about Save the Shire and how people have written in celebration of the landscape. For its size, nowhere compares to the Isle of Wight on that score. Lord Tennyson used the landscape and the seascape in many different ways, and he used the Solent in "Crossing the Bar", a breathtakingly beautiful poem about crossing from the mainland to the Island, and metaphorically from life to death—it was one of the last poems he wrote.

John Keats's most famous poem "Endymion" was probably written about Shanklin Chine:

"A thing of beauty is a joy forever".

Like many others, he was bowled over by the Island's natural beauty. Turner sketched and painted on the Island, and the 19th-century Freshwater and Bonchurch sets were hugely influential on the Island's artistic heritage. Some of the finest collections of pastoral poetry, in which we have tended to specialise, were written in the 19th and 20th centuries, including some breathtakingly beautiful poetry. The daughter of William Makepeace Thackeray asked on a visit to the Island in 1853,

"Is there no one who is commonplace here? Is everybody either a poet, or a genius, or a painter"?

Considering that she was talking about previous constituents, I would undoubtedly say yes, but it shows that our countryside, our seascape and our landscape are widely celebrated.

I now come to my political argument. Thank you for bearing with me, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am constructing an argument, but there is a reasonable amount of detail that I want to get on the record.

The Isle of Wight has a single designation under the UNESCO biosphere, but that has no standing in UK law. How about thinking of ways that it could? I thank Joel Bateman of the Isle of Wight AONB for his great work leading that campaign. In UK designations, more than half our land is an AONB, which I believe is wrongly parcelled into different areas. If we are to treat one bit of countryside as a unified entity, surely it should be an island, and therefore it should surely be the Isle of Wight. I have driven through the Cotswolds AONB and it is very beautiful—do not get me wrong—but it has flat, boring bits. Different lumps of the Cotswolds were not parcelled out. The Cotswolds were taken as a single entity, so why is a much smaller part of the world, the Isle of Wight, not being treated as a single entity? It is effectively a patchwork because someone turned up on the ferry in 1963 at midday and left at 6 o'clock, having pottered around the Island in an Austin 7 and made a few notes. Not only did we not get a national park, but we did not even get a unified area of outstanding natural beauty.

Our protected landscape, although fragmented, is incredibly special. Our finite landscape is in danger of being damaged. Natural England has said:

"Urban development is spreading, with waste disposal sites, extensive holiday and industrial developments and caravan parks blurring the edge of settlements."

The extent to which rural landscapes on the Island have been disturbed by urban development increased by 27% between 1960 and 2007. Some of our rivers have been badly damaged—we now know of the dirty rivers scandal—and Southern Water is thankfully now using the Isle of Wight as an example of best practice in how to clean up rivers. I hope the rest of Britain will catch up with the Island's natural regeneration in the years to come. In this area, we are leading the way.

An all-island designation could encompass both maritime and landscape. Why not have both in a single entity? A single protected landscape status for the Island would fit with its single unitary authority and its biosphere status. Frankly, it would also help our branding. The Island is special in many ways, but we are not one of the richest parts of Britain, and we are certainly not one of the richest parts of the south-east. Environmental and ecological tourism would be a significant benefit. The Island's 2 million visitors already contribute about £560 million to our economy.

If I had a choice, I would choose controlled development that both looks after the Island's housing needs and protects our landscape, without appealing to a mainland market, because the landscape is important in its own right and it is important for our tourism economy, rather than the endless urban sprawl. Large-scale development is completely unsuited to the Island.

An island park designation would see the Island as a single ecological and environmental entity. Access to nature would be provided wherever necessary, respecting the law, but it would primarily function for the benefit of the nature recovery plan. I thought the Glover review would result in primary legislation.

I assure you that I will be winding up in the next two or three minutes, Mr Deputy Speaker. I normally make concise speeches, so I feel a bit guilty whenever I go for more than 15 minutes.

An island park would effectively function like an AONB. It would rule out large-scale development, so we would no longer build for a mainland market, but we

[Bob Seely]

would, importantly, look after the Island's housing needs, which we have not done for 50 years. We would probably have more affordable housing, more social housing and more housing association housing. That would be our priority to get our youngsters on to the market. If people want to retire to the Isle of Wight, that is great, but the back pages of the *Isle of Wight County Press* list 500 homes for sale at any one time. If we are building, we should build for Islanders—mainly the young, but occasionally the old when they need to downsize. I would seek a ban on largescale housing development in favour of smaller developments in existing communities, using the few brownfield sites and perhaps mildly increasing the density of our towns.

I am frustrated that, whenever I talk to the Government or Natural England, they say they are looking at extending the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge AONB and the Yorkshire Wolds AONB, as justified as that would be, and potentially creating two new AONBs. We will have to wait 10 years for a review of our AONB. Why? The next time we have a landscape protection Bill for, say, city parks, why do we not consider special island designations for the Isle of Wight, Anglesey, the Isle of Arran and the Outer Hebrides?

The former Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), committed to 30 by 30 and to an additional 4,000 sq km, which is welcome, and I assume the current Prime Minister would do the same. In the Isle of Wight, the Government have a natural partner that wants to work with them. The council has committed to an all-island designation, and so have I, because we want to be an example of best practice for how human beings can live in harmony with the natural world and for how we can get the nature recovery we need, because it is obvious that we are becoming less biodiverse. If we can do that on the Island, with its multiple types of species and multiple habitats, we could learn how to do it elsewhere. This is a no-brainer, as the Americans would say, and I would welcome it if the Government wanted to work with me on this.

To recap, the Island should for the natural world, and the human enjoyment of it, be seen as a single whole. There is a very strong case for introducing an island designation in our landscape protection, and I believe it should be introduced first in the Isle of Wight because of the uniqueness of our environment, the uniqueness of our habitats, the uniqueness of our wildlife and the uniqueness of our geology. I look forward to talking further about this with the Government.

1.28 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) for securing this debate on an important yet under-discussed subject.

The United Kingdom is

“one of the world's most nature-depleted countries”.

Those are not my words but the words of Lord Goldsmith, a Government Minister. Research by the Natural History Museum has revealed that the UK ranks at the bottom of the G7 in biodiversity preservation. In fact, we find ourselves languishing in the bottom 10% of all countries. There will be people in this place today who have repeatedly heard that statistic from me and others so,

although I apologise for sounding like a broken record, I want the House to consider how serious the situation is for our beloved natural environment.

For nature to recover and thrive in the UK, we need to manage our land and ecosystems in a way that restores biodiversity and leaves room for nature, part of which involves having a stronger connection to nature. Research shows that people with a strong connection to nature are more likely to behave positively towards the environment. Establishing a long-lasting connection between people and nature would play a crucial role in ensuring the conservation of precious wildlife, habitats and species in the future. It is quite simple: the more people engage with nature, the more likely they are to protect it.

The green space we currently have access to provides significant benefits, especially for our physical and mental health and well-being. Research suggests that access to nature saves the NHS approximately £110 million a year in fewer GP visits. That fact was starkly reinforced during the pandemic, when many people gained a greater appreciation of nature, green spaces and local parks.

My hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) was spot on when she talked about the environmental improvement plan, the need for more ambition and the lack of discussion of equality within the EIP. She was also right to acknowledge Chris Smith's important role in opening up access to nature, which we need to expand, delivering much more of it. My hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) rightly linked access and health, reminding us of the Marmot review and of those great and brave pioneers who climbed Kinder Scout. I climbed there myself just after the pandemic restrictions were lifted.

However, accessible nature is distributed unfairly across England. In 2020, Friends of the Earth's “green space gap” report highlighted that 40% of people from ethnic minority backgrounds live in the most green space-deprived areas, compared with 14% of white people. We heard a great tour of constituencies and their surrounding areas from Conservative Members, including the hon. Members for Worcester (Mr Walker), for Gloucester (Richard Graham) and, perhaps most expansively, for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely). He knows that I lived on the Isle of Wight for a year. I particularly recall the dark skies there and the ability to see the beautiful starscape. Again, the Glover review recommended giving young people access to those dark skies. He made some excellent points that I am sure we will discuss in future.

The Government commissioned the Glover review to assess the 70-year-old protections that led to the creation of England's national parks and AONBs. The review was clear in calling for a stronger focus on natural recovery and improving the state of the national parks in the UK. It also called for greater access to our countryside, citing the barriers to access for children, minority ethnic groups and those living in the most deprived areas of England. It was a comprehensive and important review.

National parks were created in part to provide a healing space, both mentally and physically, for the many who had given so much to protect our country during the second world war. They were meant for everybody. The Glover review recognised that, stating that

“it feels wrong that many parts of our most beautiful places are off-limits to horse riders, water users, cavers, wild campers and so on. We hope that”—

the Government—

“will look seriously at whether the levels of open access we have in our most special places are adequate.”

It is perhaps unsurprising that the Government failed to address the adequacy of open access rights in their lacklustre response to the Glover review when their interests so closely align with those seeking to prevent it. The Minister will no doubt extol the virtues of the EIP, which promises to ensure that everyone lives within a 15-minute walk of blue or green space, but there has been no detail on how that will be achieved. I hope that she will give us some of that detail today. Currently, nearly 2.8 million people in the UK live more than 10 minutes’ walk from green space. So where is the road map to achieve that goal? Where is the road map to achieve 15-minute access?

We need a robust strategy that goes beyond the Conservative’s ambition for ambition’s sake. That is why Labour will take tangible action to ensure every Briton is able to access the nature our country has to offer. We will introduce a right to roam Act, a new law allowing national parks to adopt the right to wild camp, as well as expanding public access to woodlands and waterways. As has been said by the shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon), Labour will give the

“right to experience, the right to enjoy and the right to explore” our countryside, as opposed to the current right to roam, which gives people only the right to pass through.

Labour will improve the quality of our national parks and expand the area of national parks, AONBs and SSSIs that the public can experience, enjoy and explore. A Labour Government will also ensure that there are sufficient responsibilities and protections to manage and conserve our natural environment for all.

Caroline Lucas: It is interesting to hear the plans from the Labour party, which I welcome, but could the hon. Member answer a question about the kind of right to roam Labour is supporting: is it the universal right, based on the Scottish model, or is it a more specialised one, based on exclusions?

Alex Sobel: The hon. Lady is prejudging the conclusion of my speech, but perhaps I will get to that now and put her out of her misery. Like in Scotland, Labour’s approach will be that our right to roam will offer access to high-quality green and blue spaces for the rest of Britain. We will replace the default of exclusion with a default of access and ensure the restoration and protection of our natural environment. I hope that that answers her question.

Caroline Lucas *indicated assent.*

Alex Sobel: The hon. Lady seems to indicate that it does, so I will try to find the space further back in the speech and not repeat that point.

Currently, only 3% of our rivers are accessible to the public, although perhaps that is not such a bad thing for swimmers, given the state of our waterways under the current Government. Labour will end 90% of sewage discharges by 2030 and introduce strict penalties for water bosses who fail to comply. Only the Labour party will ensure access to clean rivers, lakes and seas, so that those swimmers and other water users can enjoy them. Of course, it is important that any expansion of access encourages responsible behaviour, with measures to protect our most vulnerable habitats and species from harm.

By incorporating responsible practices into our access rights, we can ensure the wellbeing of our environment for generations to come. That is a far cry from the attitude of the Government, who currently spend less than £2,000 per year on promoting the countryside code.

In conclusion, Labour will create a future where nature thrives, people have a deeper connection to the environment and everyone has equal access to the benefits of green spaces.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call the Minister.

1.35 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Trudy Harrison): Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. I think you are a very lucky fella, because so often you are in the Chair for these fantastic debates and today’s has been no exception. It feels like Parliament’s own version of “Wild Isles” or perhaps “Wish you were here...?” Where shall we go? I know that for you the answer will be Ribble Valley. I was preparing for this debate with my Parliamentary Private Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder), who was so disappointed not to be able to contribute because his constituency equally has many wonderful attributes in nature that people can enjoy. But of course there is a serious point here and there is a significant challenge. I welcome the successful debate we have had and the contributions on constituencies across the country. I echo the thanks of the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) to the folks involved with the “People’s Plan for Nature”. I have been working on that with non-governmental organisations and others in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

Many Members have contributed and I wish to run through some of their comments. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker) for his work when he was Schools Minister in the Department for Education to make sure that that GCSE will come in in 2025. I will join him to ensure that the current Education Minister absolutely makes that happen and that DEFRA can be part of it as well. While he was walking the Malvern hills last Saturday, I was walking the Eskdale fells. I also enjoy hiking, biking and kayaking, which we have heard about today. In fact I was awoken on the wonderful Fisherground campsite in Eskdale not rudely, but wonderfully, by the dawn chorus. I would recommend the outdoors and enjoying nature to anybody.

My hon. Friend mentioned the importance of schools. So many of us visit schools in our constituencies to learn about forest schools and eco schools. When I was chair of governors at Captain Shaw’s C of E School, we ensured that the children got out into nature as much as possible. I pay tribute to Bikeability. He referred to the need for children to be able to access active travel—it has been a theme throughout today’s debate—and Bikeability does a tremendous job.

My hon. Friend also referred to the Rivers multi-academy trust. Today in Grizedale there is an event celebrating women in forestry. It is important that we have these schools providing the education so we can continue the legacy in eco-tourism and ecosystems services.

Margaret Greenwood: The Minister is making a strong case for encouraging people to access nature. As I mentioned in my speech, in Wirral West, we have Hilbre Island in

[Margaret Greenwood]

the Dee estuary. It is incredibly important for international bird life and very much enjoyed by people who live in the area and people who visit the area. It has been at risk of underground coal gasification. I am seeking a commitment from Government that they will rule out underground coal gasification. Can she give me an answer today, or write to me with such a commitment, having consulted with colleagues?

Trudy Harrison: The hon. Lady is right that I would need to consult with colleagues on that point. I am happy to do so and write to her.

I also wish to raise the important role played by Active Travel England—it is headquartered in the constituency of the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell), which is a very good thing—ensuring that we have access to nature. My hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) mentioned my visit to his constituency. It was wonderful to hear his effective promotion of Gloucester. Surely he could send an invoice to VisitEngland for that. We learned about the wonderful nature in his beautiful area and the many reasons to visit it. He also talked about the benefits that children enjoy in schools such as Clearwater Academy, Meadowside and the many others that he mentioned.

I completely agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Danny Kruger) about the benefit of community involvement and pay tribute to the enormous amount of charities, not-for-profit organisations and trusts across this country that are helping us to protect, preserve and ensure that we have access to nature. But the Isle of Wight is perhaps the winner here today for the promotion of nature. I know that the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) hosts red squirrels. I also share his appreciation of dark skies. I have Wild Ennerdale in my patch, which is a dark sky site.

Caroline Lucas: I am not quite sure how long the Minister is going to speak, but I am anxious that she will come to answer the questions. I counted eight or nine of them in my opening statement and, although I appreciate her eulogy of everyone else's speeches, I just hope that she is leaving herself enough time to answer those eight or nine questions.

Trudy Harrison: Of course, Mr Deputy Speaker. I was just going to reflect on the variety of references that we have had—from Beatrix Potter and Fred Flintstone at Yabba Dabba Do Town to the introduction of paleontology.

Let me set the record straight on publicly accessible land across England. It is not quite accurate to say that it is just 8%. Although I enjoy a hike and getting out on my bike, I also recognise that it is simply not safe to consider the fell tops and mountains to be truly accessible. So I wish to draw the House's attention to the physically demanding, courageous and relentless work of our mountain rescue and inshore rescue teams and many other volunteers who give up their time—often, their weekends and family time—sometimes at risk to themselves, to rescue others.

On that theme, may I take the opportunity to restate the countryside code, which has been mentioned many times? It is especially important right now, during the lambing season. In brief, it says: keep dogs under control and in sight at all times; take litter home; leave gates as

you find them—if they are open, leave them open, and if they are shut, leave them shut; and, most important, leave no trace.

Members have raised the importance of accessing nature, so I will set out how we can access nature at the moment and how we will improve that. Our public woodlands and forests are mostly open to people, too. Forestry England has 258,000 hectares. There are national parks, as we have heard, including England's largest, the Lake district, where I live, at 912 square miles. But we do not just want to improve access to nature.

There are 1,800 miles of existing national trails in England and, increasingly, we are committed to making these trails as accessible as we can. It is not just about the square miles; it is about the linear miles too. When complete, at 2,700 miles, the new King Charles III England coast path will be England's longest national trail and the longest continuous coastal path in the world. The Coast to Coast national trail will add another 197 miles of national trail. When both the King Charles III England coast path and the Coast to Coast national trail are complete, the total length of national trails in England will be 4,952 miles. There are also 43,910 miles of inland waterways in England and Wales. The national cycle network spans 12,000 miles of signed routes for walking, wheeling and cycling and includes more than 5,000 miles of traffic-free paths.

I think that I have well and truly set out that there is far more than 8% of the countryside and indeed urban areas for people to enjoy. That is important because we know the links between greener living and higher life satisfaction, including improved mental health. I am delighted that there have been 7,000 referrals through green social prescribing and we look to do even more of that.

As has been mentioned many times, we published our environmental improvement plan on 31 January with its 10 goals—I recommend it to all Members. In that plan, we have announced our intention to work across Government to ensure that everyone lives within a 15-minute walk of a blue or green space. This recognises the fact that 68% of trips to green space are made within two miles of home, so it is crucial that nature is close to where people live. We will be working with Natural England to achieve this. We have already put in place our green infrastructure framework, which is being used to identify those areas where Government funding should be prioritised, especially where we have higher levels of deprivation.

We are also taking steps to increase the number of routes to and through nature. For example, last week the Bridlington to Filey stretch of the King Charles III England coastal path was opened, connecting thousands of people to the Yorkshire coast.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I really could go on and on about the existing access to nature, but I know that it is important to talk about what we are doing in the future. We have our Farming in Protected Landscapes scheme, which is increasing access to national parks and areas of outstanding natural beauty. It has been incredibly successful, and we will be extending it through to 2025. There has been much reference to the environmental land management scheme, which is enabling farmers to make their land more accessible to people too.

Our local nature recovery strategies will be across all 48 upper tiers of local authorities in England, and will involve working with farmers, private landowners, trusts

and local authorities to make sure that we are increasing access to nature. I also wish to mention what we are doing with trees. Our target to increase tree canopy cover to 16.5% by 2050 means that we need to plant about 400 million trees. That will also bring people closer to nature.

In conclusion, connecting people with nature is at the heart of our environmental improvement plan. We are beginning to tackle the inequalities that have been referenced in the debate today and we are doing that particularly in urban areas where there are levels of deprivation, but there is much, much more to do.

Rachael Maskell *rose*—

Trudy Harrison: I am sorry that I cannot give way, because I must conclude.

I thank Members for their contributions today. I very much hope that I can continue to look forward to their support as we drive forward to ensure that nature is protected, most importantly, more abundant and truly there for everyone.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): The final two minutes go to the mover of this debate, Caroline Lucas.

1.47 pm

Caroline Lucas: I hope the Minister will allow me to re-present in a letter the questions that I asked her in my speech, because she has not answered a single one of them, which is somewhat disappointing. I will just correct her: when we are talking about open access land under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, 8% of English land is accessible, as I said.

I am grateful to all Members for taking part in this debate. It has been inspiring to hear people's very real love of the environments close to them, from Worcestershire to the Isle of Wight, from York to Gloucester.

This debate is not just an opportunity to share paeans to nature, important though that is; it is a deeply important debate about the lack of equitable access to nature and about the state of nature in our country. The UK is one of the most nature depleted countries in the world. We are in the bottom 10% of countries globally for protecting nature. A total of 15% of our species are threatened with extinction, so I am afraid that some of the complacency that I have heard from the Minister is extremely misplaced.

People will not protect what they do not love, they will not love what they do not know, and they will not know what they do not have access to—touching it, smelling it, feeling it and really being intimate with it. That is what we are talking about here. It is not just about more footpaths, important though they are, or more trails; it is about an immersion in wild nature.

Yet people cannot do any of that right now because they are confronted by fences, barbed wire and notices that say “Trespassers will be prosecuted.” Half of England is owned by just 1% of the population; 24 dukes alone own almost 1 million acres of our land and the rest of us are shut out of it. Until we change that, we will not be able to ensure that the nature that we are blessed with can thrive into the future.

I hope the Minister, as well as answering my questions, will meet me so that we can discuss how we can genuinely move forward on a comprehensive right to roam, which so many people both inside and outside this House want to see. That momentum is growing and the campaign is not going away.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered public access to nature.

Psilocybin Treatments

[*Relevant document: e-petition 621199, Reschedule psilocybin for medical research on untreatable conditions.*]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): We are now moving on to the final debate before the Adjournment, on the motion on access to—is it psilocybin? [HON. MEMBERS: “Psilocybin”]—psilocybin treatments. I have learned something today, and I will learn a lot more, I suspect.

1.49 pm

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House welcomes the development of treatment options in mental health; further notes there have been no new pharmacological treatments for depression, with the exception of Esketamine, in over 30 years; recognises that psilocybin, a naturally occurring compound, has the potential to revolutionise the treatment of many of the world’s most hard to treat psychiatric conditions such as depression, PTSD, OCD, addiction and anorexia nervosa; recognises that no review of the evidence for psilocybin’s current status under UK law has ever been conducted; regrets that psilocybin is currently more controlled than heroin under the most stringent class and schedule under UK law which is significantly stalling research; and calls on the Government to take steps to conduct an urgent review of the evidence for psilocybin’s current status as Schedule 1 under the Misuse of Drugs Regulations 2001 with a view to rescheduling, initially for research purposes only, in order to facilitate the development of new mental health treatments and enable human brain research for the benefit of researchers, patients and the life sciences sector in the UK, and to deliver His Majesty’s Government’s commitment to be world-leading in its approach, with evidence-led and data-driven interventions, and building the evidence base where necessary.

Psilocybin is a psychoactive substance found in more than 50 species of fungi, including many native varieties of mushroom that grow wild across the UK. There is a certain irony in the fact that this debate follows on from the debate on access to nature, because in many respects our debate is also about that.

Psilocybin is a naturally occurring substance and produces a window of neuroplasticity that lasts for a number of hours. When administered in a controlled environment with psychotherapeutic intent by trained professionals, psilocybin could be a powerful and effective tool to help treat society’s most complex mental health conditions, and that is what we call on the Government to make possible.

The evidential basis for psilocybin’s current status as a schedule 1 substance has never been reviewed since it was first controlled more than 50 years ago, and there is an urgent and medically justified need to reschedule psilocybin under the Misuse of Drugs Regulations 2001. It is unethical to deny that any longer. A review of the evidence of psilocybin’s harms and utility should be undertaken immediately, with a view to rescheduling it.

The use of psychedelics in medicine is not novel; they have been used throughout human history to treat the sick, from peyote ceremonies in Mexico to ayahuasca in the Amazon basin, and the San Pedro cactus in Peru. The earliest evidence of psychedelic use can be found in a cave in the Tassili-N’Ajjjer region of the Sahara desert in Algeria, with a mural depicting what is referred to as the “mushroom man” or “mushroom shaman”, a bee-headed figure with mushrooms identified as *Psilocybe mairei*, native to the region, sprouting from his body. The mural has been dated as being between 7,000 and 9,000 years old.

The Selva Pascuala mural in a cave in Spain features mushrooms that researchers believe to be *Psilocybe hispanica*, a local species of psychedelic mushroom, and is dated as being approximately 6,000 years old. We can also date back to the 13th century western scientists first discussing the use of psychedelics in healthcare in Latin America. None of this is new.

Modern psychedelic research began when Albert Hofmann first synthesized lysergic acid diethylamide, or LSD, in 1938, causing something of an explosion in interest among psychiatrists and psychologists, with studies from the period showing the safety and efficacy of psychedelics, including psilocybin, in treating a whole range of psychiatric conditions. However, all that progress was stalled by the counter-cultural movement of the 1960s, which ultimately led to the criminalisation of the drugs. Since then we have been in stasis, until in recent years something like a psychedelic renaissance has taken place among researchers.

Today, there are serious and considerable barriers to legitimate research associated with the schedule 1 regulations. While current legislation does not preclude scientific research with the drugs, it does make them significantly more difficult, time-consuming and costly to study. I will share with the House just one example of this, from Rudy, a psychology PhD student whose thesis is investigating psychopharmaceutical treatments for addiction—a noble avenue of study, as I am sure we would all agree.

Rudy was first motivated to undertake this research after reading incredible findings that psilocybin administration was associated with sustained nicotine cessation in humans, with 80% of participants abstinent after 6 months. Rudy wanted to see whether those results could be replicated to treat other addiction disorders. However, he ran into problems due to the schedule 1 status of psilocybin. He says that

“in order to undertake my research, I would have had to spend upwards of £20,000 applying for Home Office Schedule 1 licences and retrofitting my laboratory to the correct security standards. Meanwhile, I can work with heroin, cocaine, and methamphetamine with no qualms. In light of this, I had to modify my experiment to instead investigate the effects of ketamine. I find it shocking that this government is willing to throw life science research under the bus and push life scientists out of this country with an outdated and downright illegitimate understanding of the medical benefits psilocybin can provide. Please do what you can to fix this!”

That is just one example. At a recent seminar at the Royal Society of Chemistry with some of the country’s most eminent neuroscientists, psychopharmacologists and psychiatrists, I spoke to countless researchers who have run into the same issues, making their research either needlessly more expensive or so prohibitively difficult to do that it has had to be abandoned. There is a huge credibility gap between psychiatry and politics for that reason; psychiatrists cannot understand why, at a time when we claim to be listening to the experts in the field of health, and when this country is facing a mental health crisis, we in Westminster are satisfied with doing nothing on this issue.

Why do we set up expert bodies and not listen to them? It is dangerous, immoral and unethical, and it is frankly offensive to both psychiatrists and their patients that we seem to think that as politicians we know better because of some moral panic 50 years ago. Multi-criteria decision analysis shows the comparative harms of various different kinds of drugs. Psilocybin is physiologically

non-toxic and consistently found to be one of the safest controlled drugs, with the broader category of psychedelic compounds it falls into considered relatively safe physiologically and not drugs of dependence. The idea that psychedelics, including psilocybin, are dangerous is a myth, created and perpetuated to justify keeping them illegal.

Psychiatrists tell me that psychedelics are the best clinical tool and the best bit of psychiatric equipment they have, altering states of consciousness to allow for deeper processing and exploration of trauma and opening a therapeutic window where treatment can work, versus sub-optimal treatments with maintenance medications and substandard psychotherapies.

Moving on to patients, there is not a single other field where we would accept a 90% failure rate as acceptable, yet in mental health treatment that is where we are. There are a number of mental health conditions, including borderline personality disorder, that we seem to be satisfied with having no proper treatments or cures for. Psilocybin has been shown in numerous studies globally to have a profound and lasting effect over placebos for a range of different mental health conditions including treatment-resistant depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, anorexia nervosa and addiction.

I want to talk first about one of those conditions, PTSD. I have referred previously to living with PTSD, and that is where my interest in the potential promise of psilocybin as a treatment first began—so please consider this a declaration of interest, Mr Deputy Speaker. I was first diagnosed almost two years ago, after being the victim of a crime, and I cannot overstate the impact it has had on my life.

PTSD is a condition that I can expect to live alongside potentially indefinitely, and that can only ever be managed. It is a condition that has, for me, proved almost fatal. I manage it through a combination of a powerful serotonin and norepinephrine reuptake inhibitor, Venlafaxine, taken daily, benzodiazepines taken for sleep and to stave off a dissociative episode if I am triggered by something, and regular therapy, following an almost month-long period as a psychiatric inpatient, having been sectioned in 2021 for my own safety. I am not telling the House this for sympathy, but because I hope my experience can be illustrative of just how debilitating a condition such as PTSD is.

We all know that being an MP can be a difficult job at the best of times. However, I ask hon. Members to consider for a moment what it is like living with a condition such as PTSD and the myriad subtle and unsubtle ways my body lets me down: having to put my best face on and go into a meeting after a panic attack; having the energy to make it through our long working hours after a virtually sleepless night plagued by night terrors, where I try to fight my attacker off me and wake up covered in bruises; seeing someone who looks like my attacker on a tube platform and feeling a terror so acute that I want to jump in front of the oncoming train to make it stop; going for walks until I am exhausted and my feet are bleeding in order to burn through the nervous energy that fizzles up inside me; finding myself in dangerous situations and being more vulnerable as a result; hearing a car going past playing the song that was playing when my PTSD began and vomiting; dissociating and losing time; being angry, messy and erratic; crying at everything and nothing; being snappy

with my loved ones and becoming convinced that ending my own life would be a kindness to all those who have had to deal with me throughout the worst period of my PTSD, from my staff to my family. Even at its best, it is a living hell. There is nothing I would not give, nothing I would not do, to go back to who I was before my diagnosis.

My experience is not unique. This is the reality of living with a serious mental health condition. I am making it through as best I can because of the love and support of friends, colleagues and psychiatric intervention, but I know that, just as I am a million miles better than I have been, and there are many more good days than bad these days, I could easily relapse because of something I can neither plan for nor prevent.

I am hopeful that this sort of treatment may offer a light at the end of a very dark tunnel and finally give me my life back. The evidence shows that psilocybin, as with other psychedelics, can be such an effective treatment for PTSD that following a successful course of psychedelic-assisted therapy, many patients no longer even fulfil the diagnostic criteria any more—they are all but cured. But this Home Office, and its scheduling policy, which says against all the evidence that this is not allowed, is stopping that. It feels like institutional cruelty to condemn us to our misery when there are proven safe and effective treatment options if only the Government would let us access them.

Just as that is one story—my own experience—consider the millions of people in this country and around the world living with the same, with no hope that things can or will ever get better. Depression is one of the most socially, medically and economically burdensome diseases of the modern world. It is the single largest cause of global disability and the leading contributor to suicide. An average of 18 people take their own lives every day. Up to one third of people with depression do not respond to multiple courses of medication; an estimated 1.2 million adults in the UK live with treatment-resistant depression.

The direct treatment and unemployment costs to the UK associated with depression in 2020 have been estimated at £10 billion. The human and economic burden of that condition is profound, and there are clear benefits to supporting development of therapies that may be effective where all other treatments have failed. Mental health costs the UK £117.9 billion a year—around 5% of GDP—yet that is not nearly enough money to address our current crisis. Waiting lists for specialist treatment are often years long. There is both a moral and economic imperative for the Government to act.

We are being left behind as a nation. Some US states have legalised the use of psilocybin in mental health treatment. In 2018 it was granted “breakthrough therapy” status for depression by the United States Food and Drug Administration, expediting the research and approval process, with expected approval by the FDA in 2024. In Australia, from 1 July this year,

“medicines containing the psychedelic substances psilocybin and MDMA can be prescribed by specifically authorised psychiatrists for the treatment of certain mental health conditions.”

In Canada, healthcare practitioners may be able to access psilocybin for emergency treatment under a special access program when a clinical trial is not available or suitable.

[Charlotte Nichols]

We have charitable organisations in this country, such as Heroic Hearts, which take veterans abroad to be able to access treatment that they should be able to get in this country on our NHS. We have scientists, including the brilliant Dr Ben Sessa, leaving the country to pursue research and treatment abroad. That is utterly, utterly shameful. The real-world data from those countries will only make avoiding change in the UK even less justifiable.

The motion would make no difference to the laws around recreational use or supply of psilocybin or magic mushrooms. Further, there is no evidence of diversion of schedule 2 substances from clinical research. Use of psilocybin-containing mushrooms is low, and there is no evidence of users developing a dependency. As psilocybin mushrooms grow wild throughout the United Kingdom, psilocybin does not represent an opportunity for profit-motivated gangs and criminal individuals. These proposals do not risk increasing drug-related harms but will allow us to assess and access the benefits of psilocybin as a substance.

Of all of the psychedelic compounds that show promise in this area, psilocybin has the lowest risk profile across all metrics, so there is little reason not to reschedule it but plenty of reasons to make the change as soon as possible. The overwhelming scientific consensus is that psilocybin does not pose a major risk to the individual, to public health or to social order. Its schedule 1 designation is not morally, medically or economically appropriate.

We are supported in our call today not only by politicians from across the House, but by the Royal College of Psychiatrists, the Campaign Against Living Miserably, the Conservative Drug Policy Reform Group, Drug Science, Heroic Hearts, Clusterbusters and SANE, among many other organisations. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for having the political courage and will—those are, sadly, too often lacking in this place—to grant us this important debate so that we may move ahead on rescheduling psilocybin. Now it is the Government's turn to show that political courage and will.

Psilocybin's current status as a schedule 1 drug is incommensurate with the evidence of its harm and utility. I beg the Government to support our motion and finally, finally right the historic wrong of its scheduling.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I think the whole House will wish to commend the hon. Lady for her courage in bringing this matter before the House and for the way in which she has put her case this afternoon.

2.5 pm

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): I wholly concur with your words, Madam Deputy Speaker, about the speech of the hon. Member for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols). I also offer my thanks to those on the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate. They were plainly moved by the brilliant words crafted by the hon. Lady, which I was privileged to deliver to the Committee on her behalf. I also thank the 25 parliamentary colleagues from across the House who supported the application for this debate on a technical and—as we heard from your predecessor in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker—tricky-to-pronounce subject, which is of astonishing potential importance to the future of mental health treatment.

The debate helpfully falls during Mental Health Awareness Week. The Government are formally committed to evidence-based policymaking; that is stressed in the White Paper of 22 August 2022. There is an immediate need to act on all available evidence in respect of psilocybin. Having spent the last six years specialising in this country's failing approach to drugs and drugs harms, and setting up a think-tank on the subject to provide me with expert advice on the issue, I know the challenges all too well.

On 14 March 2023, the Minister with responsibility for drugs, the right hon. Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp), and I debated this very issue on the Adjournment. I purposely used that debate to raise the principal issues involved in this narrow question. I did not seek answers from the Minister on that occasion, but sought to give him a little time to look at options to resolve the question. It was already my intention to follow up with this debate to demonstrate publicly that this is not just my view but one that is widely shared, as the hon. Member for Warrington North said, including by the Royal College of Psychiatrists; mental health charities CALM and SANE; veterans' charity Heroic Hearts, of which I happen to be a trustee; cluster headache organisation Clusterbusters; Drug Science, a drug charity chaired by the former chair of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs, Professor David Nutt; and across this House.

I wanted to give the forewarned drugs Minister the opportunity, in responding to the debate, to show that His Majesty's Government understand the potential improvement to mental health treatment, and that they are straining every bureaucratic and regulatory sinew to follow up the strongly indicative research evidence to date about its potential. I put that in terms in the previous debate. I said:

"I do not want or expect an answer this evening; these matters demand careful consideration. There will shortly be an application to the Backbench Business Committee, supported by more than a score of colleagues from across the House, for time for a fuller consideration. I hope by the time that debate is secured we can enjoy the news that this Minister is taking the available opportunities of his very tough policy inheritance."—[*Official Report*, 14 March 2023; Vol. 729, c. 805.]

It is now two months since that debate and almost six years since the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs was first commissioned to look at the problem, so it is frustrating, to put it mildly, that it is the drugs Minister's colleague who has been put forward to reply to this debate. I have the highest regard for the Minister for Immigration, my right hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), and the quality of his attention to detail on issues he has been responsible for, such as planning, which is of immense importance to my constituency of Reigate, but this issue needs the policy Minister across the complexities engaged, and with the authority and confidence of his colleagues to carry them with his strategy, to enable the benefits that only bureaucratic inertia prevents.

Where is the drugs Minister? Having told him in terms of today's opportunity and the date of this debate, when I had notice of it from the Backbench Business Committee, and of my expectation that he would have spent those ensuing two months engaged with these issues and able to come to the House today, what are we to make of his absence? What has he prioritised over Parliament, with notice? Does it remain his view that

this issue is not a priority? Has he nothing new to say? Has he so little regard for the people who are raising this that he has prioritised the apparent visit scheduled for today, having initially tried to palm it off on the Minister for medicine, my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince), in the Department of Health and Social Care?

The Immigration Minister is now having to reply to this debate, and I already know the speech he is going to give on officials' advice. The irony is that it should be the Minister for medicine replying to this debate, but the Department of Health and Social Care does not own this policy—the Home Office does—and that is part of the reason our drugs policy is in such an unforgivable mess. I am not sure who should be more insulted and put out by the drugs Minister's dereliction of parliamentary duty: my right hon. Friend answering, with no new defence to offer, or myself, who tried to create this opportunity and deliver an incentive to his colleague to get the necessary focus to clear the bureaucratic hurdles to enabling this potential medicine.

What we can certainly conclude is that this Home Office, with the collective responsibility of all Government Ministers, can now be held accountable for the delay in delivering psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy and psychiatry as a new mental health treatment in the United Kingdom. Having heard the powerful opening speech from the hon. Member for Warrington North, it must be clear to any reasonable person that the duty on His Majesty's Government to act and act now has been established.

The hon. Member for Warrington North, with personal courage of the highest order, has used her own massive trauma to advance the public interest engaged. She speaks for tens of thousands suffering from apparently untreatable, life-changing mental health trauma. How can my right hon. Friend the Minister look our parliamentary colleague in the eye and read his prepared script? She also speaks for 1.2 million of our fellow citizens with depression. One hundred and twenty five people end their battle every week by killing themselves. Knowing what they know, that makes the Government guilty of joint enterprise in those decisions, because we could and should now be on a path to avert them.

The hon. Lady speaks for about 2,500 veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan who have PTSD from their service that is currently untreatable. She speaks for Scotty, the ex-paratrooper medically discharged after 15 years of service who presented himself with military dignity on my train home last week to his fellow passengers. He gave his Army number and his service record of five tours in Iraq and Afghanistan as he asked for food, not money, understanding his health condition to be untreatable. He was apparently medically discharged after 15 years' service due to an untreatable mental health condition and a borderline personality disorder. His dignity in these appalling circumstances, when simply under the care of his GP, being prescribed every kind of chemical cosh going but with no hope of cure, was humbling. It is the absence of hope that I found so distressing.

The current cost of depression alone to the United Kingdom economy is estimated to be about £110 billion a year—5% of our GDP. Even if psilocybin delivered a fraction of what is hoped, the benefits to the economy would be immense, and giving hope to those suffering without it today would be priceless. The ask is simple: that psilocybin be placed in the same schedule as heroin

and cocaine through an urgent review by the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs of the evidence of its harms. The original controls were not based on a review of the available evidence but simply on the fact that no product had yet reached market, which itself is an accident of history. No review has ever been conducted since, for over half a century. In what other area of policy would that be acceptable? Where it has been assessed—in Australia and the United States, for example—change has happened.

It is especially shocking that psilocybin has never been subject to analysis of harm and utility, when the Government admit they are aware of the many studies regarding its potential therapeutic applications. Adding insult to injury, the Government have confirmed that they have no plans to commission the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs to assess the scheduling of psilocybin because it is “not currently a priority”. The potential treatment of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of mental health patients is not a priority—really? Does the word “scandalous” do that position justice? If psilocybin treated a physical health condition such as cancer or epilepsy, Government inertia not to swiftly lift barriers to research and treatment would not be tolerated, given the level of clinical potential and safety.

Let us not forget that in the last four months alone, His Majesty's Government have commissioned the ACMD to conduct rapid reviews of the evidence of the harms of both nitrous oxide and monkey dust. In the case of nitrous oxide, it took the ACMD four weeks to reply. It took the Home Office about four hours to formally ignore that advice, but we know it is possible to commission a rapid review of harms, so why not do so for psilocybin? The Royal College of Psychiatrists and various mental health charities wrote to the drugs Minister to say:

“It is unethical to wait any longer. Psilocybin's schedule 1 designation is not morally, medically or economically appropriate.”

Now let me address the speech that we shall hear from the Immigration Minister. He will explain that research trials are possible under schedule 1. While research into schedule 1 drugs is possible, only a tiny fraction of the possible research actually takes place, almost all of which is conducted by large pharmaceutical companies trying to bring drugs to market. This red tape not only discourages competition, as only very big companies can afford to conduct the research; it also means that, as the research is unnecessarily expensive, it will be the taxpayer who ultimately picks up the bill through higher drug prices for the NHS. Moreover, leading UK academics have had to relocate to North America and Australia, where the research is easier, which is leading to a brain drain in this vital bioscience area, despite our desire to be a science superpower. Put simply, the Home Office is the enemy of the Prime Minister's aim to make Britain a centre of global bioscience.

The Immigration Minister, reading his script, will explain that barriers to research are already being investigated and that the ACMD is currently undertaking a review of the barriers to research into controlled drugs beyond cannabinoids. We are told that the drugs Minister is apparently pressing for urgency on psilocybin, but it was six years ago, in 2017, that the Government first asked the ACMD to review this. There is no current deadline for the completion of the current report. In 2017, the Government rejected the ACMD's recommendations, just as they did with nitrous oxide recently.

[Crispin Blunt]

In the meantime, since 2017, 40,000 people with depression and trauma have taken their own lives. As butchers' bills for Government inaction go, I hope that statistic alone will gain some attention. Are the Government hoping that this issue will simply go away? Let me tell them: it will not. Under the current procedures, even if the ACMD is supportive of rescheduling, the Government will still need to issue a further review to reschedule psilocybin under statute to the same schedule as heroin and cocaine, as the current review does not look at the evidence of harms for rescheduling specifically, meaning more delay, more deaths and more misery for those people suffering from depression, who will eventually get treated with pharmacology accompanying psychotherapy and psychiatry.

The Government have also taken the view that specific compounds will be rescheduled once a drug containing psilocybin reaches market authorisation. Nowhere in law, nor in the standard scheduling operating procedures for the ACMD, is that required. In truth, there are three routes to rescheduling: one is that market authorisation triggers a review of the scheduling of that product rather than the generic compound, as was the case with Sativex in 2018, but rescheduling can also take place through the ACMD self-commissioning a review of the evidence or the Home Office commissioning an ACMD review of the evidence. Waiting for a product to reach market authorisation produces a Catch-22 situation where a product cannot be researched in the first place because the barriers of schedule 1 are too high. More importantly, rescheduling only patented products could create a pharmaceutical monopoly on a compound that grows naturally in the United Kingdom, increasing waiting times for patients and costs to the NHS and, ultimately, the taxpayer.

The Home Office has the power to commission a review of the evidence, and there is precedent for commissioning such a review in cannabis-based products for medicinal use. Indeed, in 2018, the wretched situation of just two epileptic children enabled change to start the deployment of cannabis-based medicines, but the regulatory treatment of the psychedelics—psilocybin in particular—remains unaddressed. Perhaps the Minister might like to have a go at advancing an explanation of why 1.2 million people with depression can go hang, compared with the very deserving but relatively few epileptic children.

There is some good news, in that thanks to the Chancellor's Budget measures, psychedelics will benefit from the expedited approvals of medicines via the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency announced in the Budget. While welcome, that would still leave UK patients without access until approval has been achieved abroad, leaving the UK trailing behind Canada, Australia and the United States. In this scenario, the United Kingdom has become a world bioscience follower and not a leader, with the Home Office seeking to deny competitive advantage to our prestigious universities and research companies—indeed, to impose disadvantage on them.

Finally, psilocybin has been consistently found to be one of the safest controlled drugs. It is physiologically non-toxic, and there is no evidence of diversion from schedule 2 substances of whatever danger from clinical research of any kind. Use of psilocybin-containing mushrooms is low, and there is no evidence of users

developing a dependency. Psilocybin mushrooms grow wild throughout the United Kingdom, meaning that psilocybin does not represent an opportunity for profit-motivated gangs and criminal individuals. To argue that they might conceivably cause excessive damage to the population, especially when the ask is for medical use under medical supervision, is nonsense—not least when tobacco and alcohol are already legal.

If the Home Office is not prepared to act, it is surely now crucial that the ACMD demonstrates its independence and a proactive approach by prioritising the wellbeing of patients in the UK, particularly given that it is chaired by a practising psychiatrist who enjoys the support of his royal college. But today, Madam Deputy Speaker, it is perhaps time to reveal the Home Office's true regard for the advice and guidance of the regulatory body responsible for advice on drugs policy, set under statute by this House. That body reports its total expenditure in 2019-20, the last year for which figures are available, as £46,067.34. That is to guide the Government on drugs harms that cost the country an estimated £20 billion a year. It is perhaps unsurprising that proactive advice from the ACMD is somewhat rare.

Surely now the Minister, who has so kindly stood in for his colleague, is appreciating the scale of the hospital pass he has received this afternoon. Add in the modest consideration that the size of the psychedelics market is set to grow to \$10 billion by 2027, and the fact that today's proposition enjoys four to one support with the public and has the potential to revolutionise the lives of millions, and the Minister is invited to defend the Government's position, which is unethical, immoral and wholly counter to the national interest, however we express it. It will not stand the test of time—change it now.

2.25 pm

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): It is a rare privilege for me to rise in this place and follow two such magnificent speeches from Members across these Benches, and it is a fact that when we find ourselves with cross-party support on something, we tend to be able to back off and just talk sense about things, and stop trying to score political points off each other.

Then I look at the Government Front Bench, and I understand that the Minister must be asking himself the question, "Why on earth am I here today?" The Government have a history of doing this. When we bring forward debates that are clearly issues for the Home Office, particularly about drugs, they send a Health Minister. When it is clearly something about health, they send a Home Office Minister—this is not new. Sorry, Minister: you are not the first to be put in this position, but you are here today and you will answer the speeches that have been made. I am not going to rehearse everything that has already been said so eloquently today. There is no need: if you have been listening, you have heard the points. You have heard about the number of people who suffer from mental health conditions and can benefit from psilocybin, and the lack of research—I do not have to tell you it again.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. It would assist me if the hon. Member would say "he" and not "you", although we will not make a fuss about it.

Ronnie Cowan: Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker, for once again correcting me.

Since announcing that I was taking part in this debate, I have been inundated with briefings from a wide range of individuals and organisations, every one of which was welcome. Not being medically trained, it took me some time to read through and absorb what I was being told. I have my own views on the issue and the path forward, but it is always worth while listening to those who agree and disagree with me—how else can I develop a well-rounded and balanced approach?

That is why it is interesting to note that the motion we are debating states that

“no review of the evidence for psilocybin’s current status under UK law has ever been conducted”.

As has been said, it currently has schedule 1 status under the Misuse of Drugs Regulations 2001, which—in the view of the UK Government, with no review of the evidence—makes psilocybin, a drug that cannot be overdosed on and has low addictive qualities, more dangerous than heroin or cocaine. We have legislation that is based on preconceptions rather than evidence. That is nonsensical—well, I think it is, but clearly the UK Government do not. They actively support the current situation.

Psilocybin has been pushed to the back of the drugs cabinet and left there, almost—but not quite—forgotten. In the USA, especially in Oregon and Colorado, they are way ahead of us in producing medical research; I also note that Australia has taken a lead in the field. In the UK, a drug being schedule 1 does not completely prevent research, but the researchers themselves have raised the issues of increased administrative and financial costs. We should not be placing barriers in the way of research: we should be supporting and encouraging it, and using it to help us legislate properly. It is not just me saying that. This month, the Royal College of Psychiatrists wrote to the Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire, the right hon. Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp), calling for the same change as this motion. People are suffering from mental health issues that existing evidence tells us would benefit from psilocybin administered by the right people in the right way. We should be pursuing that avenue of research and developing the support and professional skills required.

Before the Minister responds, I hope that he considers that the motion is not about recreational use. It is not about dictating the uses of psilocybin, or those who would benefit. All we are asking in the motion is that the UK Government conduct an urgent review of the evidence for psilocybin’s current status as schedule 1 under the Misuse of Drugs Regulations 2001. That is it; that is what we are asking for. That would allow better opportunities for the required medical research to be completed. That research would help us to provide appropriate medical support for those suffering from a range of conditions. Why would the UK Government not want that? Why would they continue to obstruct the research? I look forward to the Minister’s response.

2.30 pm

Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con): May I add my voice to those who have paid tribute to the speech of the hon. Member for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols)? She said she was not asking for sympathy, but she has the sympathy of the House and, I am sure, of anybody who watches that speech on film, which I hope many will do. My heart goes out to her for all that she has

been through. I also hope more people see the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt), which deserves wide circulation. He is a tremendous campaigner on many issues, not all of which I join him on, but I sympathise with what he is trying to do today. I particularly acknowledge and want to add to my voice to his point about the suffering of our veterans. As a Member with a large military community, I echo that. Too many of our former servicepeople suffer appallingly from PTSD and we need to do more to help them. Psilocybin might be part of the answer.

Both the hon. Lady and my hon. Friend cited studies suggesting that the efficacy of psilocybin is similar or superior to that of pharmaceutical interventions, and selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor drugs in particular. That is significant and we need more research to test that because, if true, it is tremendously positive news. Crucially, the evidence suggests that psilocybin is not dependency-forming and not toxic. I speak as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for prescribed drug dependence. Research by colleagues supporting that APPG has laid bare the degree of dependence on prescribed drugs that exists in our country. I am talking not about illegal drugs here, but about drugs administered by doctors, generally in response to mental health conditions, and depression most of all.

A fifth of the adult population is on some sort of dependency-forming drug, such as SSRIs. Many of those are absolutely appropriately prescribed—the hon. Member for Warrington North mentioned that she takes an SSRI—but that is a very high rate. Crucially, and most worryingly, many people who are taking prescribed drugs were only prescribed them, according to the guidance that accompanies them, for a certain number of months. However, because doctors repeat prescriptions and we have such an inadequate system of withdrawal support for people in this country, they are prescribed these drugs for years and years, well beyond the healthy and safe guidance that was given. Of course, if they try to withdraw on their own without the support they need, they suffer terribly. Often they are re-prescribed the drugs because the doctor thinks they are having a relapse, when actually all they are doing is going through the agonies of withdrawal.

We need to do so much more to support people who take these prescribed drugs. There is also a huge amount—at least £500 million a year—spent on prescribed drugs for people where the prescription has gone beyond the period in the guidance. They should not be receiving these drugs, but they are doing so and it is costing the taxpayer half a billion pounds a year. We can think of the knock-on effects in terms of the health costs, and my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate mentioned huge figures there, the welfare costs and the human cost. We need to go beyond these pills. We need to get to an approach to mental health that does not only rely on what he calls the chemical cosh.

I have some concerns about psilocybin being the next big thing or the next SSRI, treated and imagined as if it will be some sort of silver bullet—another pill and another shortcut to what is a profoundly complex set of mental health circumstances, which derive in many cases from trauma and deep-rooted adverse social and emotional conditions that cannot just be wished away by the administration of a new pill.

Crispin Blunt *rose*—

Danny Kruger: I am happy to give way. I am about to repeat my own argument, but my hon. Friend will do it better than me.

Crispin Blunt: My hon. Friend was kind enough to reference the work that has already gone on. I could cheerfully read into the record the list of 15 separate studies where the evidence is gradually being developed, despite the schedule 1 status, about efficacy. That addresses his proper concern about treating this as another mythical silver bullet that solves the issue. There is only one way for us to fully establish this, but it is already evidentially established sufficiently that we should be doing everything we possibly can to enable this treatment to get under way.

Danny Kruger: I echo that point. The point I am making more generally is that I am concerned that we withdraw from a medicalised model. It is a bigger topic, but the way we approach health in general can often be over-medicalised, and that is particularly so for the mental health field. I echo my hon. Friend's point that we have sufficient evidence to justify a more official review and I support the call for that. The hon. Member for Warrington North put the point very well. What we understand to be the case with psilocybin is that it creates this therapeutic window where talking therapies can be even more effective, or can be effective, because frankly often they are not effective at the moment.

If the administration of this non-toxic, naturally occurring substance can create an opportunity where talking therapy can be effective, that should be welcomed, and there is sufficient evidence to justify us looking at that. I am open to suggestions, and I am interested to hear what the Minister says—not from his script—about what might be done. It may be that the chief medical officer is the best office to review this. We need to be careful, and I retain my note of caution about leaping for another solution that might not deliver what we hope it will, but I also share the hope and inspiration that Members have mentioned.

I recognise the point—I do not know whether the Minister will make it—that it is possible to conduct research under schedule 1. As my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate said, it is difficult and expensive. In fact, it is usually just done by pharmaceutical companies that see the opportunity for big profit from new drugs. I am concerned that we do not class this research in that guise. In fact, I hope there will not be big profits to be made from this naturally occurring substance. This is another topic, but I am concerned about the MHRA, how it is funded and how it licenses treatments. I am not entirely sure we are doing the right thing by giving it the power to rubber-stamp licences that have been given abroad. I am not sure that speeding up approvals is always right, but in this case we need to conduct the research.

I find myself in the strange position not only of agreeing with my hon. Friend—actually, I do agree with him on many important matters, just not on others—but of taking inspiration from places such as Oregon and Colorado that I regard as unhelpful places, given the other things they are up to; they are the leading jurisdictions promoting assisted suicide, of which I strongly disapprove. I notice that Australia is also in the gang, and presumably Canada, if it is not so already, will be full steam ahead for psilocybin. Liberals do not get everything wrong, I suppose is my conclusion, because these places are paving the way and in this case we should follow them.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call the SNP spokesman.

2.38 pm

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and it is good to see you in the Chair. It is a pleasure to speak in the debate today and to follow the hon. Member for Devizes (Danny Kruger) on a subject about which I have to admit I had no great prior knowledge. I had some knowledge, although not great prior knowledge, so getting my nose into briefings and articles about a most poorly understood topic, at least I think for Members in this House, and hearing the various contributions today has been most enlightening.

I will come on to those contributions in a moment, but I would like to pay tribute to my good friend, my hon. Friend the Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan), who is a co-sponsor of today's debate. He is certainly a fan of the road less travelled, and I find the tenacity and good humour with which he approaches the sometimes unfashionable subject of drug reform—not only in this Chamber, but at home in Scotland—to be a breath of fresh air. As we know, the subject can often be too dominated, especially in this place, by preening truism pedlars who do not challenge either elected Members or the general public, who expect us to be able to have debates of substance on topics that, as the hon. Member for Devizes indicated, have no easy answers, but are none the less valuable.

I thank the hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) and especially the hon. Member for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols) for showing that there is cross-party support in this House for a sensible evidence-based approach to drug law reform. To come first to the hon. Member for Warrington North, who talked about the prior debate on access to nature, we live in these islands surrounded by psilocybin. Importantly, the hon. Member brought in the lived experience of their condition and how this research, or rescheduling to schedule 2 would have a profound impact on those suffering from PTSD. I hope not only that the Minister is listening, but that all of us on the Front Benches are listening, as well as those who advise Ministers in Government in Whitehall. I am sure Government Ministers will be taking their advice and I hope they are listening to the lived experience so well and eloquently expressed by the hon. Member.

The hon. Member for Reigate exposed something that all politicians, especially those on the Front Benches, need to be very careful about, which is proposing White Papers that talk about an evidence-based policy-making approach. Well, the evidence seems to be self-evident. My good friend, my hon. Friend the Member for Inverclyde, talked about how the regulation we have is based on a preconception. I am maybe going to call it the “Mary Whitehouse approach”, because it seems to be founded on the Mary Whitehouse approach of the 1950s. I hope that those who advise Ministers—from the medical profession, but notably civil servants in Whitehall—will reflect that we now perhaps need to take our heads out of the sand.

I think it is clear from the contributions in general today that something does need to change with regard to the drug scheduling laws, particularly as they relate to psilocybin. It is a strange time for drug reform in many ways. We in this place seem a good decade, if not

even further, behind the attitudes of the wider public—and, actually, other countries—who appreciate that the days of endless and expanding prohibition must surely be behind us and that the so-called war on drugs has been in so many ways not only unwinnable, but actually detrimental to the society it seeks to protect. I think all of us on the Front Benches really need to take our heads out of the sand and look at the opportunities that debates such as this now offer us to change our own views.

My party is one that I hope will always support sensible drug policies that uphold the rule of law and make communities safer. I am afraid that I now need to perhaps challenge the Minister about the UK Government's continued reticence, for example, to even countenance an evidence-based change to drug laws, which, at least from my perspective, means letting people down. For those of us in Scotland, we have seen this in, for example, the safe consumption rooms. It is a policy with proven efficacy across the western world that enjoyed cross-party support as one possible way to reduce the terrible toll of drug deaths in many of our constituencies, yet I am afraid this was reduced to the level of party politics.

I mention the Government's attitude to opiates there deliberately, because in many ways psychedelic drugs are more restricted, as we have already heard from various Members, with opiates being licensed for medical and research use, while substances such as psilocybin remain on the schedule 1 list with no medical potential. So this makes it an issue of pretty unique importance. I can understand arguments against, for example, safe consumption rooms, even if I disagree with them, but when it comes to psychedelic compounds, I do not think anyone can have the same arguments regarding addiction and societal breakdown that we would have heard around opiates.

Members who want a crash course in opiate addiction need only pick up the *Financial Times* today to see the profound consequences of opiate addiction in the city of San Francisco in the United States. It is a harrowing article to read, and will have consequences for us all if we do not start to pick up on some of the issues highlighted by the hon. Member for Reigate about accessing new medical treatments. That is not, as the hon. Member for Devizes indicated, a silver bullet, but it is another tool in the armoury for those suffering from various conditions.

This is not just for mental health issues; there are a whole range of usages, and people are using psilocybin, or even micro-dosing with it, for many other issues. There are those who consider using it for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, which is not a mental health issue but a learning disability. There are those using it who are pre-menopausal, menopausal and post-menopausal, to deal with the menopause. We have to take this out of certain silos and see it as the broadest opportunity. As the hon. Member for Devizes said, this is not a silver bullet but another element in our armoury to deal with a whole range of medical conditions. I would like to hear what the Minister has to say, because I am not sure that that approach is yet cutting through, although I might yet get that wrong.

As we have heard from those contributing to the debate, there are certainly enough examples of the efficacy of psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy to merit further research, but the barriers put up by schedule 1 status make any investment in that research prohibitively

expensive. SNP Members believe that needs to change. We talk about the shrinking number of industries—again, the hon. Member for Reigate made a fantastic speech to challenge the Government, and they made it very clear that the UK seeks to be a global player. After financial services, the example given is the pharmaceutical industry, yet in that area of relative competitive advantage the Government seem—I might be wrong; perhaps the Minister wants to get to his feet and change that opinion—to be choosing to cede to states, notably in North America and the rest of Europe, that do not share that head-in-the-sand approach.

At a time when it is becoming somewhat fashionable for Members to talk about the mental health crisis, catching up with the lived experience of so many in communities such as mine, and those described by the hon. Member for Warrington North, where people could take advantage of advances in psychiatric pharmacology to improve their lives, those of their families, and be better able to contribute to their community, is something I would recommend to Members across the House, to Ministers, and to those who seem to be advising them to stick their heads in the sand. To overcome such problems, we must rise to the challenge and grasp the opportunity offered by psilocybin and other areas like it, and not curtail what is a reasonable scientific proposal by sticking our political heads in the sand.

Let me conclude with a final appeal to the better judgment of the Minister and those advising him. They can be safe that they would be able to proceed with a solid trifecta of public support, a solid working hypothesis about how research into psilocybin would work, and a depth of industrial and academic capacity to bring this research forward. Let us see whether the Minister has the confidence to do so.

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

2.47 pm

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols) and the hon. Members for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) and for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan) for their incredibly moving and well-informed speeches, and the Backbench Business Committee for supporting their application. I recognise the work that they have done for many years on this subject. As we know, in this place many Members take up individual causes that often do not get the numbers and publicity that they might warrant, but we are dogged in continuing to do that. I managed to avoid the comments that the Minister had about whether he was the appropriate person or not. I say simply that I am here on behalf of the Labour party. I am pleased to be here, I serve, it is beyond my paygrade as to who or why someone is here, but I am pleased to be here.

Like the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) I too needed to appraise myself of the details of this subject, and that is one advantage of being able to speak from the health team. For more than 50 years we have been investigating these drugs as potential treatments for a number of neurological and psychiatric conditions including, as we have heard, depression. There is now another wave of research into these drugs and the treatment of neuropsychiatric disorders

[Karin Smyth]

such as treatment-resistant depression, anorexia and PTSD, and we have heard about that strongly today. Our priority is to improve treatment and prevention services and, in particular, to support research.

The point has been well made that this subject falls between Departments—Health and the Home Office—as is the case on many subjects. Wherever it falls, it is all of our responsibility, because at the heart of this, as we have heard strongly, is the needs of people—our constituents—for treatment of these conditions. As the motion says, we need evidence-led and data-driven interventions. That is why the last Labour Government established the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence to balance care with value for money, to deliver for individuals and society. That involved rigorous and independent assessment of complex evidence. That is why, for the use of psilocybin and other treatments in the NHS, I strongly support an evidence-based approach and those processes.

This discussion highlights the opportunities available to us and to our constituents through a vibrant life sciences industry. Labour is committed to supporting our health sciences industry to improve the health and wealth of our country. That is why I am proud and hugely supportive of our fantastic academic and clinical colleagues in the NHS and UK higher institutions. They are doing world-leading research through the use of both experimental and gold-standard clinical trials to look at whether such treatments, among others, are helpful for those with severe and enduring mental health conditions. That includes interesting work on the use of psilocybin alongside talking therapies.

We hear much from the Government about their commitment to research and development, but it would be helpful to hear from the Minister about what pragmatic support the Government are giving to the research sector, universities and pharmaceutical companies to enable more research into this area.

It is clear that that work cannot sit in a silo. Following the Adjournment debate on this topic, which was responded to by the Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire, the right hon. Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp), I would like to know what conversations the Minister has had with counterparts in the Home Office regarding the controlled drugs licensing regime to support research and clinical trials in the UK. Additionally, will he update the House on part 2 of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs' advice, which was commissioned in December? That would be helpful. This is a cross-cutting issue, so he may have had conversations with Health colleagues on it, but I understand that it falls under his Department. Members on both sides of the House have come here today with good will to work cross-party—we have seen that in evidence this afternoon—and it is crucial that the Minister echoes that sentiment and outlines how the Departments are working collaboratively on this matter.

We cannot ignore the lack of a wider Government strategy on mental health, particularly in Mental Health Awareness Week. For far too long the Government have been dragging their heels on mental health. Last year they lauded themselves for putting together a 10-year Government mental health plan. However, like so much that comes from them at the moment, after months of consultations, pages of evidence and vital input from

the public and experts, again we have more backsliding on those commitments. The Government must stop pushing things into the long grass and get serious about mental health.

The long-awaited reform of the Mental Health Act 1983 is a much-needed step in the right direction on improving people's experiences with mental health services, but, despite the Joint Committee publishing its report on the draft Bill, there is still little progress. If we want to see patients having greater control over treatment options and accessing care tailored to their needs, the Government must get more serious about mental health services.

More than 7 million people are waiting for NHS treatment, and they are waiting longer than ever before, in pain and discomfort. The NHS went into the pandemic with record waiting lists and 100,000 vacancies, and there are more than 1.6 million people awaiting mental health treatment alone. Adults are waiting 5.4 million hours in A&E while we are experiencing a mental health crisis. We have heard about some of those crises today, and that is not the place for treatment. Without a proper plan for prevention and early intervention, and without a suitable workforce plan, patients will continue to be left behind.

Even where patients do get a referral, the appropriate course of action for their specific treatment needs is often not available. That accessibility to tailored mental health support goes to the core of why we are here. Across the NHS, there are frequently supply issues with antidepressants—medication that is already licensed—that people are dependent upon. Without secure supply chains, how can patients be secure in the knowledge that they will continue to receive their prescribed treatment? The anxiety that disruptions to treatment can cause patients cannot be ignored. That is why it is crucial that Ministers understand the importance of a variety of treatment options and of research and development. If the Minister could give an update on those supply issues and the assessment of stock availability, that will be welcomed by the people watching this debate.

The Government need to get a grip on mental health services. If they do not, we will. We will put prevention and early intervention at the forefront of our approach to mental health. We will place a mental health specialist in every school and an open access hub for young people in every community. We will double the number of district nurses qualifying every year and create additional nursing and midwifery placements in the health service. We will double the number of medical places so that we have the doctors that our NHS needs. We will guarantee mental health treatment within a month by recruiting an extra 8,500 mental health staff. We will reform the NHS to shift its focus to early diagnosis and intervention, as well as preventing ill health in the first place. Working with leading figures from research, life sciences and patient care will be a huge part of that.

Crispin Blunt *rose*—

Karin Smyth: I want to give the time for the Minister to respond.

2.55 pm

The Minister for Immigration (Robert Jenrick): In the years that I have served as a Minister, I do not think I can recall a debate in which expectations were set so low about my response before I even stood up.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt), the hon. Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan) and the hon. Member for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols) for securing the debate. I am grateful to them and to all the other Members who have contributed. This is the first debate that I have participated in on this subject, as colleagues have said. The House has raised the topic of psilocybin and other psychedelic drugs with the Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire, my right hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp). I appreciate the disappointment felt by my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate that the Minister is unable to be with us today to respond directly to his concerns, but I am afraid he was drawn away on other departmental business. I recognise that this is a topic of substantial interest to Members of the House, who, again, have made the case with passion.

Crispin Blunt: Could the Minister give a bit of detail about the duties that have taken the drugs Minister away from the House?

Robert Jenrick: I am afraid I do not know the precise departmental visit that my right hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South is on. But knowing him, if he was here, he would certainly wish to be part of this debate and to continue the conversation that he has had with hon. Friend the Member for Reigate. It is only because of other departmental business that he was not able to join us today.

I want to begin by recognising, as others have done, the personal interest that the hon. Member for Warrington North has in this topic. I concur with your comments, Madam Deputy Speaker, that the hon. Member spoke with great conviction and very deeply. I have heard her speak on other subjects that we have a shared interest in, such as the fight against antisemitism, with the same eloquence and bravery that she showed today.

It may be helpful at the outset to remind the House that medicines policy, including the availability of medicines for prescribing, is led by the Department of Health and Social Care. Medicines are licensed and regulated by the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency. However, the Home Office is responsible for controlled drugs legislation. Our controlled drugs licensing regime supports research and clinical trials in the UK. The two Departments work together on issues connected to controlled drugs in healthcare. I will endeavour to set out the Government's position this afternoon.

Controlled drugs legislation seeks to prevent criminality while permitting access for legitimate use, including for medicines development. The Misuse of Drugs Regulations 2001 enable the use of controlled drugs in healthcare. The Home Office's controlled drugs licensing regime enables the possession, supply, production, import and export of controlled drugs to support industry, pharmaceutical research and healthcare. These controls are subject to review in light of any emerging evidence and in consultation with the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs, which has been referenced many times this afternoon.

There is an established process for medicines, including those that contain controlled drugs, to be developed, evaluated in clinical trials and licensed, based on an assessment of their quality, safety and efficacy by the MHRA. The MHRA supports the safe and scientifically

sound conduct of clinical trials in this area, and provides regulatory and scientific advice to companies at all stages of developing medicines. Should a company submit an application for a marketing authorisation, otherwise known as product licence, it will ultimately be a decision for the MHRA whether to license a product based on a psychedelic drug as a therapy.

Charlotte Nichols: The Minister refers to marketing authorisation. In this case, psilocybin, as we have discussed, is something that grows in mushrooms across the UK. Is the Minister suggesting that people would be able to access psilocybin only if it were in another substance?

Robert Jenrick: I am by no means an expert in this field, but I think I am suggesting that were this to be a drug that is licensed, it would need to go through the MHRA process in the usual way.

I would like to come to a point made by the hon. Lady earlier around the costs involved in a first-time application for a controlled drug licence of the kind we have been discussing. She quoted a substantial figure, which would be concerning as it would be prohibitively costly for smaller manufacturers or researchers. The figures that I have been quoted are that first-time application for a licence costs £3,700 and a standard renewal costs £326. I will write to the hon. Lady with those figures and if she contests them in any way, then I or the Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire, my right hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp) will be happy to respond.

Ronnie Cowan: The cost is not just about the licence. Because it is a schedule 1 drug, more dangerous than heroin, the way in which it is stored in a laboratory, so that people cannot get access to it, and the set-up needed around the laboratory has caused a lot of people to say that they simply cannot afford to make such modifications to their laboratories and start the investigation in the first place.

Robert Jenrick: I see that point. In a moment, I will come on to the work that the Government are doing in that regard, and more broadly, to facilitate research and make it more accessible to a broader range of organisations.

To finish the point about the process involved, once granted a medicine licence by the MHRA, medicines can be assessed by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, which makes recommendations about routine prescribing on the NHS.

I thank the hon. Members who described the promising research emerging on the potential benefit of psilocybin. Studies in the UK include publicly funded research. For example, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence is funding King's College London to carry out a trial evaluating the feasibility, safety and efficacy of psilocybin for adults who are unresponsive to or intolerant of treatment for depression.

In January last year, King's College London published the results of a small-scale study suggesting that psilocybin can be administered safely, under certain circumstances and to healthy individuals. That is clearly encouraging. However, the researchers acknowledge that larger and longer trials, including comparison with existing treatments, would be required to determine the efficacy and safety of psilocybin for this disorder.

Crispin Blunt: I hope by now, as he has read his text, my right hon. Friend is beginning to work out that the administration of drugs policy is suboptimal, shall we say. Can he explain why esketamine is approved in Scotland, but not in England?

Robert Jenrick: I do not know the answer to that question, but I will happily ask officials who are listening to respond. It sounds like a matter for the Department of Health and Social Care rather than the Home Office, but I shall be pleased to give my hon. Friend a full reply as soon as possible.

Crispin Blunt: May I explain the issue that lies beneath this?

Robert Jenrick: If my hon. Friend already knew the answer to his question, I wonder why he asked it in the first place.

Crispin Blunt: As my right hon. Friend well knows, one does not ask questions to which one does not know the answer. That is not a very wise thing to do in politics.

A point was raised with me by the public affairs director of a subsidiary of a major pharmaceutical company about the differential between physical and mental health treatments. This illustrates the difficulty of getting mental health treatments to the necessary standard for assessment by NICE, and is a further illustration of the different priorities given to the treatment of mental and physical health conditions.

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend has made his point very powerfully. Of course the Government's ambition is to ensure that NICE, the MHRA and all our regulators work in the most research-friendly manner, and that applies to mental health treatments as much as to anything else.

If a manufacturer is successful in being granted a marketing authorisation by the MHRA for a medicine containing psilocybin, the Home Office is committed to swift action to remove psilocybin from schedule 1 and make it available for prescribing, subject to advice from the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs on the appropriate scheduling and safeguards for the medicine. The same scrutiny should be applied to all potential medicines to ensure patient safety. While it is legally possible to enable prescribing in advance of marketing authorisation, the Government currently have no plans to move to that position.

Charlotte Nichols: The Minister keeps referring to medicines containing psilocybin. He does not seem to understand that psilocybin is the medicine, in and of itself. It does not need to be added to something else to make it work. This is why we are running into the issue. The Government keep telling us about a licensing regime in which there is a requirement to add something to the compound in order to make it some sort of novel substance, rather than looking at the substance that already exists and, as we have said, has been used for thousands of years with demonstrated safety and efficacy. Will the Minister talk about psilocybin, rather than medicines containing psilocybin?

Robert Jenrick: I understand the hon. Lady's point. As I have said, the Government are funding research into psilocybin and its effect on patients with certain conditions. What we are discussing today is the Home

Office's role in ensuring that that research, as it emerges, can be considered as part of our drugs legalisation framework.

The Government have commissioned the ACMD to consider how better to enable research with respect to all schedule 1 drugs, and that includes the potential to extend schedule 2 status for research purposes to all schedule 1 drugs including psilocybin. This, I believe, is the point that my right hon. Friend the Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire made in the Adjournment debate, and he has written to the ACMD asking it to consider, in particular, the potential options available to extend schedule 2 status for research purposes to all schedule 1 drugs. He highlighted psilocybin specifically in his letter. If the hon. Member for Warrington North, my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate or, indeed, other interested Members have not seen it, I shall be happy to ensure that they receive a copy and can see the instructions that my right hon. Friend has given to the ACMD. My hon. Friend the Member for Reigate asked earlier about the likely timetable for any advice from the ACMD. I have been told that, while the ACMD is independent of Government, it is understood that its consideration is well advanced, and we should expect its advice in the near future.

The approach that we have taken in this regard should deliver much of what my hon. Friend and others are requesting. I should make a distinction: prescribing will remain unavailable outside a clinical trial. It is not for the Home Office to determine medicines policy, and I am sure that my hon. Friend and others will accept the general principle that medicines should be assessed on the basis of their safety, quality and efficacy before being made available to patients.

The two Departments continue to support the ACMD's review. The chief scientific adviser to the Home Office recently convened a discussion with her counterpart in the Department of Health and Social Care and the Government's chief medical officer on this precise subject. I understand that they had a very positive discussion and I know that they will be advocating for the best outcome for researchers and, of course, patients. When the ACMD provides its advice, the Government will consider it carefully before deciding how to proceed.

I thank Members for their contributions to the debate. I can assure my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate and others that the Government have heard what they have to say. I will ensure that my right hon. Friend the Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire is fully apprised of what was said in the debate, so that he and others can continue their conversation on this issue.

I reassure the whole House that the Government agree with the intent of much of what has been debated today, but rather than developing a bespoke approach for psilocybin alone, we consider our approach to be more ambitious. We want to tackle this issue across all categories of section 1 drugs to reduce barriers to legitimate research, rather than focusing on individual drugs. Equally, we must keep a firm focus on the need to tackle drug misuse, which causes such harm across our society. Both are vitally important aims, and we will continue working to strike the right balance in the interests of the public.

3.11 pm

Charlotte Nichols: I thank all Members who came to support the debate. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt)—he is a friend—I am

disappointed in the Government's response; yet again, we see a real lack of urgency from them on this issue. As we have heard, the ACMD review has been ongoing since 2017. In that time, at least 40,000 people have taken their own lives.

I am grateful for the fact that the Minister said he will take back the content of today's discussion to the Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire, the right hon. Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp), who should have been here today but unfortunately was not, because I am really keen that we should finally progress this issue. I thank all Members who took part in the debate to make the case clearly and cogently to the Government that we cannot accept their inertia any longer.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House welcomes the development of treatment options in mental health; further notes there have been no new pharmacological treatments for depression, with the exception of Esketamine, in over 30 years; recognises that psilocybin, a naturally occurring compound, has the potential to revolutionise the treatment of many of the world's most hard to treat psychiatric conditions such as depression, PTSD, OCD, addiction and anorexia nervosa; recognises that no review of the evidence for psilocybin's current status under UK law has ever been conducted; regrets that psilocybin is currently more controlled than heroin under the most stringent class and schedule under UK law which is significantly stalling research; and calls on the Government to take steps to conduct an urgent review of the evidence for psilocybin's current status as Schedule 1 under the Misuse of Drugs Regulations 2001 with a view to rescheduling, initially for research purposes only, in order to facilitate the development of new mental health treatments and enable human brain research for the benefit of researchers, patients and the life sciences sector in the UK, and to deliver His Majesty's Government's commitment to be world-leading in its approach, with evidence-led and data-driven interventions, and building the evidence base where necessary.

Health Services: Wantage and Didcot

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Julie Marson.*)

3.12 pm

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con): I campaign a lot in this House on behalf of young people, having had a career working with them before I got here. I campaign a lot on the environment, which is important to me and to many of my constituents. But the biggest thing I campaign on in this place is infrastructure, because we do not have the infrastructure for the number of houses and the population in the constituency.

I campaign for the reopening of Grove station, which my constituents have wanted for over 50 years. I campaign for better broadband in certain parts of the constituency. I campaign about our roads, because most visitors and most residents, like me, feel that the roads in Oxfordshire are more pothole filled than almost anywhere else we go in the country. We have two important roads in my constituency, the A420 and the A34, both of which have significant safety concerns. Indeed, the last time I had a debate of this kind, it was on the A420 and A34. But the No. 1 infrastructure issue in my constituency is access to health services—in particular, GPs and dentists.

For six weeks or so, I conducted a survey of my constituents, asking them to tell me about their experience of accessing health services. I am grateful to the nearly 3,000 people who completed the survey. More than three quarters of them said that they had found it difficult to get a GP appointment in the past 12 months, which is significantly more than the number who said they had found it difficult to get a dentist appointment, although that figure was also far too high at 44%—the issues for dentistry are slightly different. Only one in 10 people who completed the survey said that they had had no trouble accessing health services, and 5% had not tried to access health services in the past 12 months and so were not able to say whether it had been difficult. Overwhelmingly, I heard over and over again that we need more GP surgeries and more dental surgeries. People would like to see other services, such as more mental health provision and more physiotherapy provision, but GPs and dentists had by far the biggest responses.

The situation is most acute in Didcot, where I live. Huge numbers of people have come to live in Didcot in recent years. The Great Western Park estate, with 3,500 homes, was promised a GP surgery, and it is still waiting eight years later, with absolutely no progress having been made. Meanwhile, the new Valley Park development on the border of Didcot will have 4,200 homes, so it will add a lot of pressure. Those two estates alone will add about 18,000 people to the area's population, which is more than enough to fill a GP surgery, yet we continue to see no progress. After encouraging people not to use NHS services if they could avoid it during covid, we now have a backlog to address, but there was an issue long before covid, too. Infrastructure has not kept pace with population growth.

The politics is that the Liberal Democrats are running every part of local government, including both district councils in the seat I represent, and they run the county council in coalition with the Greens and Labour. Of course, the Liberal Democrats say that this is all the Government's fault, but they have been in charge of one

[David Johnston]

district council since 2019, and they have been in charge of the other in coalition with the Greens since 2019, so it is not good enough to say it is all the Government's fault. We have to get to a better system of accountability for both local council leaders and local health leaders.

It is partly about the Government training more doctors, and I very much welcome all the things the Government are continuing to do in this area. We are training 2,200 more doctors than in 2019, and last year a further 4,000-plus took up training places to become doctors. The increase in appointments is welcome, with 2 million more appointments in March 2023 than in March 2022, and there is investment to get 15 million more appointments by 2024.

The recent announcement on tackling the 8 am rush chimes with my inbox. My constituents are constantly writing to explain to me how frustrating it is to ring at 8 am, as they are advised, and not get through. The record goes to the person who told me they had called 117 times, and others have called 89 times. The numbers are huge, with people ringing over and again, getting very frustrated and eventually contacting me to say they do not know what to do. It does not matter how often they ring, because they are not able to get through.

I welcome the fact that the Government are now saying that people who ring will be referred to an appropriate service, such as 111 or a pharmacy, without needing to call back. I also welcome the increased role for pharmacists, because it is right that they ought to be able to give out the oral contraceptive pill and medicines for sore throats, earaches and such things. They are well equipped to do that and it will ease some of the pressure on the GP surgeries.

The situation we find ourselves in is not the fault of the existing GP surgeries. Indeed, I asked them to promote my survey and many of them did so, because they are feeling the pressure. Several surgeries have closed their books temporarily because they were simply unable to take on many more patients. Of course, that affects everybody's quality of life, because people who have lived in the area for a while and used to find it easy to get an appointment no longer can, and people who have moved to a new area and hope to be able to register with a doctor find that they are unable to do so. This is one of the most important services we could be providing for people.

The Minister knows that because I am the Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, I am going to swerve housing and planning policy, as I should not be talking about it in that role—I know the rules. However, we do need a couple of things, one of which is a much better accountability mechanism for local councils and local health leaders to plan for population increases and then deliver services as the population increases. The Government can and will train more doctors, but we are making promises to local people about what is going to come with increased numbers of people, and those promises never arrive. People then stop believing in the promises, and those who were not opposed to new houses, because they realise that people need somewhere to live and perhaps their children and grandchildren are struggling to get on the ladder, become resistant to more housing as they have seen so much housing arrive without the services that should go with it.

Let me move on to the other thing that is important to me. It may feel like a side issue, but it is fundamental. In my pre-politics career, I ran charities for disadvantaged young people and promoted social mobility. The medical profession is the most socially exclusive profession in the country—only 6% of doctors come from a working-class background, and someone is 24 times more likely to become a doctor if they have a parent who is a doctor—and it has been that way for some time. To an outsider, the situation seems to get worse. Recently, the British Medical Association's junior doctors passed a motion to cease apprenticeships into medicine, which are supposed to widen access to it. Almost every other profession has some form of apprenticeship to try to widen access, but the BMA's junior doctors have passed a motion saying, "We don't want them." Given the state of the profession, which in no way reflects the country's talent, for all sorts of reasons—I used to work on this, so I know that it is about access to work experience, recruitment methods and so on—that is a very retrograde step. That is certainly the case when this is the most socially exclusive profession in the country. We have a shortage of doctors in particular areas, and this is a profession where the ratio is at least 10 applicants to one medical school place. I worked with so many disadvantaged young people for whom this was their dream career—it was the most popular career at one charity I ran—so it seems mad that we are not making better use of that talent. I feel sure that it could help ease some of the pressure we are seeing, not just in my constituency, but in others.

In closing, I say to the Minister that I very much want to meet him to discuss how I can bang heads together and make progress to get things delivered. It is a shame that it is not within an MP's control to be able to deliver new GP surgeries and so on, but I want to work with him to work out how we can do that and possibly have a health hub in my constituency. This is not the first time I have talked about this matter—I have done so more than 20 times—and it will not be the last; I will do so until my constituents get the health services they deserve.

3.24 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Neil O'Brien): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (David Johnston) on securing this important debate. He mentioned in his remarks that there are limits on what he is allowed to say in this Chamber about certain aspects, particularly about how we marry up new housing with new GP surgeries, but none of us in Government are in any way strangers to his very strong views on the subject. The amount of work and campaigning that he has done on this issue is formidable, and I pay tribute to him for that.

I recognise the struggles that my hon. Friend's constituents have reported in his survey in getting an appointment with their GP or dentist. Despite the efforts of general practice teams, who are now delivering something in the order of 10% more appointments every month than they were pre-pandemic—that is the equivalent of about 20 more appointments per working day, per surgery—demand is rising. We have about 30% more people over the age of 70 than we did in 2010. Those people tend to have about five times more appointments than younger people. Therefore, because of the ageing society and the effects of the pandemic, demand is rising. That is why we have listened and why

we have taken action, including just last week publishing our primary care recovery plan to address some of these concerns.

Our plan is ambitious and it will modernise access to general practice—effectively the front door of our NHS. We want to end the 8 am rush for appointments and ensure that patients know how their requests will be handled the first time they contact their practice. To achieve that, we are investing the equivalent of £6,000 per practice to provide new technology, including modern digital phone systems so that people do not get engaged tones, and easier digital access so that many more issues can be dealt with online at a convenient time for the patient, which will free up phone lines for those who do need to call so that they always get through easily.

As my hon. Friend mentioned, we are expanding the role of community pharmacies in delivering primary care and investing up to £645 million to enable pharmacists to provide treatment for common conditions. Pharmacists will be able to supply prescription-only medicines and start courses of oral contraception for the first time. That will provide more choice for patients and be a convenient way of getting treated. It will also reduce the pressure on general practices, freeing up something in the order of 10 million appointments a year, again making it easier for my hon. Friend's constituents to get through. We have started consulting the Pharmaceutical Services Negotiating Committee, with a view to introducing the new service by the end of the year.

We are continuing to cut bureaucracy to reduce the time that GPs have to spend on work that is not work that they need to be doing. The plan frees up approximately £37,000 per practice by cutting back targets and improving communication between GPs and hospitals—something that has been raised with me many times by GPs. Of course, we still need to deliver more appointments and, to do that, we need more staff. I am pleased to say that today, we have managed to deliver, ahead of schedule, our manifesto commitment to recruit 26,000 additional staff into general practice. Those extra staff are helping to deliver the 50 million extra appointments that we promised by March 2024. It is through both the additional staff that we have invested in and the very hard work of general practice teams, to whom I pay tribute, that they are already delivering 10% more appointments compared with 2019.

The recruitment and retention of general practitioners remains a big priority for us, including the retention of our wonderful experienced general practitioners. That is why we are helping to retain senior GPs by reforming pension rules—the No. 1 thing that the profession was asking us for—and lifting about 8,900 GPs out of annual tax charges.

My hon. Friend quite rightly raised some specific concerns about the provision of adequate services to meet the needs of new housing developments—something

that is an issue in particularly desirable and fast-growing areas like that of my hon. Friend. I am very seized of this crucial issue, and we are working on it in real time.

Last week we announced that, as part of the GP plan, we would be making a series of reforms through the national planning policy framework and planning guidance changes to ensure that new housing always comes with the GP surgeries that are needed. That means changing the NPPF and planning guidance and, even before that, updating the planning obligations guidance to ensure that local planning authorities address primary care infrastructure, just as they do other infrastructure demands such as education.

On top of that, the Government will update guidance to encourage local planning authorities to engage with the local NHS—the local integrated care boards—on large sites that might create the need for extra primary care capacity. My hope is that a bigger chunk of the £7 billion a year that we are raising from housing developers will flow into new primary care facilities.

As my hon. Friend mentioned, local authorities have an unavoidable and crucial role in enforcing the delivery of the commitments that developers make and in ensuring, as they make and enforce their local plans, that what was promised is delivered. Wherever new development is planned, they must plan for the infrastructure that is needed alongside it. That is something local authorities absolutely must deliver for their constituents, and I am sorry to hear that there seems to be some trouble with that in his constituency.

My hon. Friend also mentioned challenges with dentistry; we are working on that very actively and will be publishing our plan for dentistry shortly. The reforms we made some months ago to enable dentists to do more—about 110% of their contracted work—and to split up the bands so that they are paid more fairly for the NHS work they do have been received well by the profession. About a fifth more people were seen by NHS dentists in the year to March compared with a year earlier, so we are starting to make progress, but we know there is more to do. To answer his question, I want to reassure him that we will be publishing our dentistry plan very shortly.

I thank my hon. Friend not just for his thoughtful speech today, but for all the work he has done to campaign on this issue ever since he was elected. He always makes a powerful case, both in the Chamber and behind the scenes, and he has many thoughtful ideas that are already influencing Government policy. I pay tribute to him for his work and I hope his constituents will soon see positive changes as part of our recovery plan.

Question put and agreed to.

3.32 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 18 May 2023

[SIR CHRISTOPHER CHOPE *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Plastic Pollution in the Ocean

1.30 pm

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of reducing plastic pollution in the ocean.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this important debate on plastic pollution in the ocean, ahead of the United Nations global plastics treaty second round negotiations next week. I also thank the Chamber Engagement Team and constituents who have responded to its survey on this important issue.

As an island nation here in the UK, we see first hand the effect of our plastic pollution washing up along our coastline. While plastic has been one of the world's most valuable inventions, inappropriate waste recycling has led to a global crisis where microplastics are present in our waterways and food chains. Nearly 460 megatonnes of plastic were produced in 2019. That is expected to reach 1,231 megatonnes by 2060—a 267% increase—and plastic waste is expected to see a 287% increase.

As a nation, we have reacted to our increased knowledge of the effects of plastic pollution via fantastic societal change. The use of reusable products, such as coffee cups and shopping bags, has really cut down the amount of waste washing up on our shores. The carrier bag charge, implemented in 2015, has reduced the use of single-use carrier bags in supermarkets by 95%, while the ban on straws, stirrers and cotton buds significantly reduced the number ending up in our oceans. Following the ban, the Great British Beach Clean said that cotton bud sticks had moved out of the UK's top 10 most common beach litter items. The 2018 ban on microbeads has also limited difficult-to-clear plastics in our water. The Marine Conservation Society's Beachwatch project also found 11% less litter on our beaches in 2022 compared with 2012.

There are also fantastic community efforts, such as Plastic Free North Devon, which work in the community to organise clean-ups, educate hospitality businesses on reducing plastic use and—especially important in tourist hotspots such as north Devon—offer wooden bodyboards in place of the traditional polystyrene ones. National bodies such as Keep Britain Tidy are launching projects such as their Ocean Recovery project, which is the only UK-based trawl net recycling scheme. Since being established last year, it has already recycled 100 tonnes of trawl net and rope. We are making great strides in reducing the amount of plastic we use, but we also need to make it easier to recycle the plastic—for instance, the estimated 4 billion plastic bottles that are not recycled each year.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to the hon. Lady for initiating the debate. She may be aware that the World Wildlife Fund argues that some 8 million tonnes of plastic get dumped every year. While she rightly describes the progress made in this country in particular—but also in others—does she share my view that for the future, we actually need to see discussion of how we can toughen up product standards to increase the amount of plastic that can be recycled, and give consumers more information about which plastics used in products can be recycled and which cannot?

Selaine Saxby: Yes, in many ways I agree. I will certainly come on to speak far more about the global implications of the situation. While we are doing so much on our own island, we need to do so much more. In particular, the upcoming deposit return scheme, confirmed in the environment improvement plan, will bring the UK in line with similar nations, and recycle 90% or more of relevant containers.

Alongside reducing use and recycling as much as possible, we also need to look at the hierarchy of waste and reusing plastic products where possible. I ask the Minister to look at setting a target for the reuse of packaging, alongside our work on recycling. By setting a target, we would incentivise businesses to invest in reuse schemes that reduce the amount of resources required in our packaging supply chains. A recent UN report on reducing plastic pollution found that proper reuse systems could reduce plastic pollution by 30% by 2040, compared with 20% for recycling. Investing in and facilitating a reuse system would also reduce the cost of waste management and increase jobs in the sector. Unfortunately, despite UK efforts, plastic has been entering the ocean for decades and continues to do so.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate. Microplastics continue to threaten our marine ecosystems, with research showing that fishing net pollution is deadly for sharks, seabirds and seals. Does she agree that the solution to this must be found through balancing industry productivity while increasing necessary regulation?

Selaine Saxby: Of course, it is vital that we find a balance. Fishing materials continue to be an issue, which is why I think that some of the initiatives that are already under way to help the industry to recycle more are so vital.

As I was saying, plastics have been entering the ocean for decades and continue to do so. Between modern-day plastic and legacy plastic—the oldest piece of plastic that has been found is a buoy from 1966—there are trillions of pieces of plastic floating in our oceans. They affect our entire ocean's ecosystem at every stage, from turtles getting trapped in nets to plastic breaking down into microplastics and slowly building up in our food chain.

Although we do not know as much about our seas as we should, we know that plastic has negatively affected almost 700 marine species. Microplastics also slowly sink down through our oceans to settle on the ocean floor, forming plastic deserts that kill wildlife and can stretch up to hundreds of kilometres. The largest floating patch is the great Pacific garbage patch, which contains more than 100 million kg of plastic over an area three times the size of France. It is the largest example of an

[Selaine Saxby]

ocean gyre where the currents draw flotsam to a point. As the convergence spot of the currents from the south Pacific and the Arctic, the zone is a plastic superhighway. It takes an average of only seven years for plastic floating in the ocean to reach the great Pacific garbage patch.

We know that the next generation care passionately about the planet, particularly their oceans and beaches. As a coastal MP, I know how engaged our schools are with this issue, and it often acts as an introduction to wider conservation work. Last year, I attended Greenpeace's big plastic count, which almost a quarter of a million people took part in, including more than 9,500 school students. That shows just how seriously our youngest constituents take plastic pollution. Books such as "Ruby Rockpool", which was written by the mermaid Hannah Pearl, suggest ways that youngsters can help. They bring the problems to life, but unfortunately solutions are not as simple as in Hannah's excellent book, in which the ocean is healed with a sea star's power.

Of course, no matter what we do domestically, this is ultimately a global issue requiring a global solution. The UK is responsible for almost 7 million sq km of the world's oceans, and one of our overseas territories in the south Pacific demonstrates the challenge. Henderson island in the Pitcairn Islands is both uninhabited and thousands of miles from the nearest population centre. Despite that, an estimated 40 million pieces of plastic rubbish have landed on its shores. The island is home to the endangered Henderson petrel and the flightless Henderson crane, and is an important breeding ground for many other large seabirds. As we saw in Sir David Attenborough's excellent "Blue Planet II", the impact of plastic in the ocean extends to seabirds and can lead to parents feeding their offspring plastic instead of fish.

To limit the continuing impact of plastic on our oceans and food chain, we need not only to reduce how much plastic waste irresponsibly reaches our environment, but work to remove it. Fortunately, there are innovative start-ups such as the Ocean Cleanup, which undertakes the only efforts to remove legacy plastics from our oceans. It aims to remove 90% of floating plastic from the ocean by 2040.

Margaret Ferrier: As we know, tiny microfibres are entering the sea due to us washing our clothes. The company CLEANR is now turning to 3D printing technology to create microplastic filters for washing machines. Does the hon. Member agree that we must continue to use new technologies available to develop innovative solutions to this environmental crisis?

Selaine Saxby: Indeed, I sponsored the Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa) on that topic. Although there is much work to do on microfibres, the plastics I will talk about are significantly more dramatic, in terms of their magnitude and the skills that are needed to clean them up.

To remove the waste from the gyres, the Ocean Cleanup is using a combination of computer modelling, artificial intelligence and space-borne plastic detection to identify the densest areas of plastic to optimise clean-up. It has created a trawler-type solution that pulls a semi-circular 4 metre-high net system very slowly—half walking speed—

through the garbage patch into a funnel called a retention zone, which takes the plastic on to ships to be taken back to shore. It sounds very simple, but it is in fact highly complex to work in the open seas of the Pacific and protect wildlife—it has several active systems to prevent bycatch—as it removes different types and sizes of plastic pieces. As it scales up the system, it is reducing the cost, and it aims to reach €10 per kilo of plastic waste.

As 80% of marine plastics are estimated to have come from land-based sources—the remaining 20% are from fishing and other marine sources—the Ocean Cleanup is also focused on preventing waste from reaching the ocean in the first place, predominantly from rivers. It has identified that 1% of the world's rivers are responsible for transmitting 80% of those land-based plastics to the ocean. To prevent that plastic from entering the oceans, it has developed the Interceptor system, which is currently focused on the most polluting rivers. Its Trashfence system is used in the Rio Motagua in Guatemala, which currently emits approximately 20,000 megatonnes of plastic into the Caribbean each year, or 2% of all the plastic emitted into the world's oceans annually. That is a key scheme for the Ocean Cleanup to be working on.

For the Ocean Cleanup to achieve its aims, it needs long-term, dependable funding. So far, it has raised more than \$250 million from private donations. It is asking the UK to become the first Government to support it financially. At present, it needs \$37 million to fund one of its new systems per year.

As a founding member of the High Ambition Coalition to end plastic pollution, which called for a target in the UN global plastics treaty to stop plastics entering our oceans by 2040, the UK Government are leading the way in a global effort to clean up our oceans. They could signal a greater dedication to cleaning up the great Pacific garbage patch ahead of a legal obligation. They could also help with mapping the problems around the world, such as in the Atlantic and Indian oceans, where the UK has permanent naval bases.

The UK has an excellent capability in oceanographic research, and could work with the Ocean Cleanup to help it with the vital mapping of the gyres so that we know where to find the plastic, how much is there, what it likely consists of, where it is coming from and so on. The Ocean Cleanup has proven know-how, as it was the first to fully map the great Pacific garbage patch.

Although plastics have a significant impact on our wildlife, they also affect island nations smaller than our own. The Pacific island nations are not just on the frontline of rising sea levels; they are among those most affected by the increase in plastic in our oceans. China is working hard to court them and extend its influence and power projection, but the UK still has significant interests in the region. China is one of the world's largest polluters, and the UK can strengthen its ties in the region by supporting measures to limit plastic pollution and help clean up other island nations' waters.

The UN global plastic treaty second round negotiations next week are another opportunity for the UK to push for positive changes to our environment as a global leader. At COP26, we secured the Glasgow climate pact, and at COP15 in Montreal, we pushed for global protections of biodiversity and nature. We need to add our voice to negotiations to secure limits to virgin plastic production and unnecessary plastic use. With the fifth largest marine estate in the world, and a population dedicated to

protecting our environment and wildlife, we are well placed not only to cut down on our own plastic waste but to lead global efforts in cleaning up our oceans.

We need to remove legacy plastics while they are retrievable. If we wait too long, they will break down into microplastics and we will have a far harder job of removing plastic from our environment. I hope the Government will not only continue to implement their environment improvement plan, but will lead support for projects such as the Ocean Cleanup.

1.44 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Again we are debating the huge and growing threat of plastic pollution in our oceans. According to Recycle Track Systems:

“There is an estimated 75 to 199 million tons of plastic waste currently in our oceans, with a further 33 billion pounds of plastic entering the marine environment every single year. This constant flow of plastic production is simply too much for existing waste management and recycling infrastructure.”

Plastic makes up 85% of all marine pollution, and unless we reduce the amount of plastic waste we produce, it is simply impossible to meaningfully tackle this shocking and dangerous situation.

Fishing equipment makes up a huge quantity of marine plastic waste—currently 20%—and, at current rates, will be enough to coat the entire planet in just 65 years. Plastic pollution harms animal health disproportionately and impacts on the ecosystems of developing countries. It is estimated that across the UK, 5 million tonnes of plastic are used every year, around half of which is packaging and half of which is not successfully recycled, with only around 9% of global plastics recycled each year. Plastic waste often does not decompose and can last for centuries in landfill or end up as litter in the natural environment, which in turn pollutes soils, rivers and oceans, and harms the creatures that inhabit them.

We know that the scale of this problem is huge. It is a daunting and global challenge, but we can mitigate our throwaway culture, and the best way to reduce the amount of plastic entering our oceans is to reduce plastic waste.

Margaret Ferrier: The plastic polluting our oceans can largely be attributed to single-use takeaway items. However, such products are often relied on for food hygiene purposes. Does the hon. Member agree that we must work to establish a valid alternative to single-use takeaway items that meets food hygiene standards?

Patricia Gibson: Yes. The hon. Lady tempts me, because I will say more about that in a moment.

Recycle Track Systems says:

“There are numerous initiatives to curb ocean plastic pollution at any one time, including everything from grassroots beach clean-ups to international agreements. One of the recent changes is the United Nations Environment Assembly’s agreement in March 2022 to develop a legally binding treaty to bring plastic pollution to an end. It will still be years in the making but is a considerable step forward according to many. What’s more, many organizations, such as Ocean Conservancy, are now calling for more dramatic changes to stop ocean plastic pollution, such as the reduction in production and consumption as well as outright bans on single-use plastics”—

as the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) mentioned— “Many are calling for a shift to a zero-waste circular economy as the only solution to a plastic problem that we can’t recycle away.”

The Scottish Government aim to make Scotland a zero-waste society with a circular economy. They have a target of recycling 70% of waste by 2025, exceeding even EU targets, and they are matching the EU target for plastic packaging to be economically recyclable or reusable by 2030. The Scottish Government are also a signatory to the Ellen MacArthur Foundation’s new plastics economy global commitment, which will ban specified items of single-use plastics in EU member states. They have signed up to the agreement, even though there is no compulsion for Scotland to do so, as it is no longer a member of the EU, sadly. I hope the UK Government will follow the example of Scotland and the EU in that regard.

Scotland’s deposit return scheme works on the basis of the polluter pays, a principle that incentivises recycling, reduces litter and tackles climate change by reducing the amount of plastic going to landfill or ending up in our oceans. The scheme has been delayed because the First Minister is very keen to work with business to get this right. It is in all our interests, even if it is sometimes tempting to make cheap political points about this issue. The reality is that it is a fine and noble principle, and we should all work to make sure that it can do what it says on the tin. We all need to think about how we use, reuse and dispose of our plastic, because that is the problem that oceans face today.

Selaine Saxby: Would the hon. Lady agree that, while the deposit return scheme systems that are being looked at across the UK are vital, is it not better—as we are talking about international efforts—that we all work together to ensure that the scheme runs across the whole country, rather than having different schemes in different parts of our own islands, making it more complex for everyone involved?

Patricia Gibson: I absolutely agree with the hon. Lady, but the point is that we cannot all move at the speed of the slowest caravan. We have to be bold and ambitious in what we seek our deposit returns scheme to achieve. What she proposes would be a better way forward, but the UK Government are slower and less ambitious. That is a pity, but we cannot be held back by that.

The scale of the plastic pollution in our oceans is catastrophic, and it is deeply damaging and deadly to marine life and habitats. It is difficult to know how many marine animals are killed each year due to plastic pollution. Many will go completely unrecorded. That said, some estimate that over 1 million animals, including many sea turtles, die each year due to plastic pollution in the ocean. The majority of animals that die are seabirds. Mammals are often more visible in the media and the public imagination, but they actually count for only around 100,000 deaths. That is still a huge number, but it does not tell the whole story. Those are just the marine animals that die as a result of plastic debris in the ocean. The toll would be much higher if other polluting factors, such as emissions from plastic production, were taken into account.

On a different tack, animals carry microplastics in their bodies, so when those animals are eaten those microplastics are also ingested. The process is called trophic transfer of microplastics. Since one animal eats another, microplastics can move through the food chain, ultimately reaching the human food chain. Some scientists have estimated that the average person might eat 5 grams of microplastics in a week, which is about the weight of

[*Patricia Gibson*]

a credit card. Another study breaks that down to being up to 52,000 particles annually from various food sources. According to the UN, there are over 50 trillion microplastics in the ocean, more than the number of stars in the Milky Way—that is astonishing. Due to the sheer quantity of microplastics in the ocean, it is difficult to find any marine animal without plastic particles in its gut or tissue. It is poisoning their food supply.

Whether or not microplastics impact human health is a relatively new field of study, but what we know so far is troubling, according to experts. Plastics and microplastics contain many harmful additives and tend to collect additional contaminants from their surroundings. Microplastic ingestion has been correlated with irritable bowel syndrome, while plastic-associated chemicals, such as bisphenol A, show correlations with chronic illnesses, such as cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes. We are talking about serious contamination. Action on plastic waste in our oceans requires us to reflect very carefully on the price we pay for plastic pollution—and the price our oceans pay.

Margaret Ferrier: Traces of microplastics have even been found in the placentas of pregnant women and in human blood. The risks of microplastics for human health cannot be ignored any longer. Does the hon. Member agree that we must end the plastic pollution of our water for our own health, as well as for the environment?

Patricia Gibson: It is the case that we are polluting our oceans, poisoning our marine life and, ultimately, poisoning ourselves. I do not think that is too stark a way of putting it. The hon. Lady is absolutely correct.

I am pleased we have had this debate, but the international community needs to take co-ordinated and serious action for marine and human health. I am looking forward to the Minister telling us what the UK Government will do, and what international efforts she believes can be made, led by the UK, in this regard. I thank the hon. Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) for securing the debate, because it is important that we keep a spotlight on the issue.

1.54 pm

Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) for working hard to secure this important debate. As she and others have mentioned, visible signs of plastic pollution are everywhere. In preparing for the debate, I have been struck by the staggering scale of the problem. Each year, the world produces over 350 million tonnes of plastic—a mass that outweighs all living mammals on Earth combined. Projections suggest that by 2050 there could be more plastic in our seas than fish. Over the past decade alone we have produced more plastic products than in the entire previous century. In the span of just one human lifetime we have inflicted an unimaginable level of damage to the global environment, particularly our oceans.

Is it not alarming that so much of our produce is packaged in plastic? A supermarket plastic bag serves its purpose for 30 minutes—the duration of an average commute. In a beverage, a straw is used for a mere five

minutes, and the lifetime of a plastic stirrer is all of 10 seconds. Despite their fleeting use, those items outlive us by over 400 years. Regrettably, only 9% of all plastic produced has been adequately recycled. That is due in part to degradation of the recycling process. Plastic is functionally recycled often as little as once, meaning that recycling alone will not solve the immense challenges posed by plastic pollution.

For plastic to be recycled it needs to be free from food residue. Plastic bottles need to be crushed and their caps removed. Some containers use two or more different plastics, which must be separated either manually or by specialist equipment. That complexity creates a significant bottleneck in the recycling process. Most material recovery facilities do not even have the technology to process flexible packaging, leading those items often to end up in landfill or to be incinerated. Does the Minister agree that the sheer diversity of different plastic materials remains an issue that is yet to be fully addressed, and that we should aim for a zero-waste society, prioritising reduction and reuse over downstream interventions such as recycling?

Turning to the effect of plastic pollution on our natural world, we are all too aware of the devastation that it wreaks on marine life. Turtles choke on plastic bags, mistaking them for jellyfish. Those who have seen David Attenborough's "Blue Planet" will have witnessed albatrosses feeding floating rice bags to hungry chicks, having found them in the remotest reaches of the South Atlantic. Our fishermen's livelihoods are also suffering acutely from plastic pollution. North sea fishermen on average spend two hours each week cleaning their nets of marine litter. At a time when food security is of paramount importance, we simply cannot afford to neglect the health of our seas.

It is not only our oceans that suffer. Before it reaches the sea, plastic pollution affects our own health. With the convenience of food delivery apps, ordering food directly to our home has become easier than ever before. However, when hot food is placed in those containers, chemicals from the packaging can leak into the food, and subsequently our bodies. One article that I read citing research by World Wildlife Fund International suggested—I think the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) read the same research—that we may be ingesting up to 5 grams of plastic a week. It is shocking that it is the equivalent of eating a credit card.

Bisphenol A, or BPA—a hormone disruptor used in polycarbonate plastics—can mimic the effects of oestrogen in the body and interfere with the normal functioning of hormones. In high heat, or after multiple uses, plastic can degrade, releasing BPA into our food and water supplies. Plastic bottles with that chemical in them are everywhere. They can be found in rivers, on beaches and littering our streets. Fizzy drinks alone produced 90,000 tonnes of single-use plastic in 2019. I am glad that there has been a movement towards drinking tap water in restaurants as opposed to bottled beverages. Many products packaged in unrecyclable plastic do not form part of a healthy diet, so that shift is welcome from a health perspective, but what more can we do?

Interestingly, the majority of people are aware of our plastic waste problem. However, the extent to which different individuals, communities and nations are committed to addressing the problem varies hugely.

In the UK, we are taking steps to tackle unnecessary plastic waste domestically, such as banning microbeads in rinse-off personal care products, and the forthcoming ban on plastic cutlery and plates from October is another encouraging development. It is heartening to see local government, as well as social and environmental groups, actively preventing, monitoring and collecting the plastics that cause marine pollution, yet there is much more we can do to lead the global response to this global issue.

Current commitments will result in only a 7% reduction in the annual discharge of plastic into the ocean by 2040. The increase in plastic production has not been mirrored by a corresponding increase in recycling rates. Once plastic enters the ocean, it is very difficult to retrieve. While new technologies can capture larger marine debris, small plastic items and microplastics are virtually impossible to recover, especially when they sink deep into the ocean, so prevention is the best solution. We need consistent rules for recycling. More importantly, we must shift the narrative to focus on reduction and alternative systems to traditional recycling models. Only then can we achieve meaningful change and a significant reduction in plastic pollution in our oceans.

2.1 pm

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) for securing this debate. I will spend a few moments thinking about the local, national and international aspects of plastic pollution in the oceans.

Turning first to local things, plastic pollution in my part of Devon is being dealt with by enthusiastic activists. We have a brilliant team of volunteers called Plastic Free Seaton, and while many of us were recovering from the King's coronation celebrations on 8 May, they were celebrating the national day of volunteering. When some of us were perhaps clearing up disposable plastic plates or polystyrene cups, the group, including Seaton's scouts and guides, were out there in the rain on Seaton beach doing brilliant work clearing up the waste that had been left behind.

Looking beyond Seaton, we have similar initiatives such as Plastic Free Ottery and Turn Lyme Green. Thinking about the point made about fishermen and our seas, the fishing fleet at Beer would desperately like us to deal with the issue better. I also pay tribute to Sidmouth Plastic Warriors and the excellent campaigning force that is Denise Bickley. She and others have gathered a group of 724 people in Sidmouth who regularly clean up our beaches, and they will be doing so at Sea Fest this Saturday afternoon.

As national legislators, we should be thinking global and acting local. The hon. Member for North Devon pointed out that 80% of marine plastic comes from the land, and that is not just true of desirable items—those plastic things we might want to use—but occasionally true of those things that we do not want. For example, anyone who finds a parking penalty attached to their car will see that it is wrapped in plastic.

The particular scourge that I want to discuss this afternoon is cigarette butts. Cigarette butts contain a filter that is made of a polymer called cellulose acetate, which breaks down in the sea and contributes to the microplastics that we have heard so much about. I have heard the argument that filters are there for a reason,

and we might suppose there are health benefits to the smoker. However, the science I have read suggests that one of the reasons cigarette companies use plastic filters is to keep the cigarette rigid. In economics, there is a concept called moral hazard, whereby if someone is told that there is a mitigating factor in what they are doing, they might do more of it. I think that is true of smoking through a filter. If someone thinks the filter is protecting their health, they might be inclined to smoke more cigarettes. It might, therefore, actually be worse for public health than not having a plastic filter at all.

We have heard about the damage to our marine life, and cigarette butts also play a role in that. A cigarette butt will tend to float on the surface of the sea, and sea life will mistake it for a morsel of food and ingest it. We might think that vaping is the future and somehow the solution, but even single-use vaping products have hardened plastic and disposable cartridges. On the subject of smoking and vaping, we have to think about producer responsibility, where the producer has to pay.

We have talked about the local and national contexts. The Liberal Democrats are calling for a more ambitious target: the end of non-essential single-use plastics by 2025. We would like to see the ban on stirrers and cutlery to be extended to polystyrene plates and, in the fullness of time, cups as well. We would like to see the creation of an independent advisory committee on plastics pollution to advise the Government on policy and dates for the phasing out of various types of plastic. The Liberal Democrats are calling for a more ambitious target for addressing plastic pollution than that set out in the Government's Environment Act 2021, which in many respects will not be enforced until 2037.

Above all, I would like to see an end to plastic exports. Although we can talk about what we would like to do on regulation and legislation in the UK, this is a global problem. Given that the oceans account for 70% of the surface of the planet, we need to ensure that we are not causing harm overseas as well as in our own country. I am curious to hear from the Minister whether the Government wish to introduce regulations on cigarette butts, given that I have heard from people working for a plastic-pollution-free east Devon that it is cigarette butts that are a particular scourge for our beaches in the west country.

2.8 pm

John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I congratulate the hon. Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) on securing this much-needed debate, as well as Members who have made valuable points on how the world uses plastic.

Plastic has been one of the world's most valuable inventions. It is durable and flexible and has myriad uses. It has reduced product weight, increased the life cycles of materials and massively reduced waste, all of which have huge environmental benefits. However, its very durability and strength means that we have created a monster, as others have said. Having been on nurdle hunts on beaches and shores around the Forth estuary, I have witnessed the devastation that these nurdles have caused. I remember someone saying in a debate a while ago that seabirds are now picking up these plastic nurdles and feeding them to their young, which means that they are filled up but starving to death. That is an awful image.

[John Mc Nally]

Around the world, nearly 460 megatonnes of plastic were produced in 2019, and that number is expected to grow by 267% by 2060, which is not that far away. In parallel, plastic waste is predicted to increase from 353 megatonnes in 2019 by some 287% by 2060. The predictions are that mismanaged waste will increase and the number will grow to an alarming 533% by 2060. Meanwhile, the plastic waste emitted annually to the hydrosphere is expected to increase by 2060 from 6.1 megatonnes to 11.6 megatonnes, which is about 190%. It is nearly doubling. Eventually, 22% of the plastic entering the hydrosphere enters the ocean. That number will increase to 29% by 2060. These statistics are verified by the OECD global plastics report.

Trillions of pieces of plastic drift in our oceans. They eventually sink to the bottom of the ocean, killing life and, as has been said, creating ocean “deserts”, or they gather in vast floating patches of plastic hundreds of square kilometres in size. The largest one, the great Pacific garbage patch, is estimated to cover an area equivalent to three times the size of France. That is a very scary image. The plastic is then broken down into many millions of small pieces, which float down the water column, making it more and more difficult to remove.

The plastic has four main negative effects. First, it harms marine ecosystems irrevocably. Nearly 700 marine species are negatively affected by plastic in the oceans, including 100 listed by the International Union for Conservation of Nature as endangered, such as the Hawaiian monk seal, the hawksbill sea turtle and the Galapagos petrel. Moreover, the plastic brings horrifically invasive species into the ecosystem. Secondly, as it breaks down into microplastics, it is eaten by fish and potentially ends up in our food systems, with the health implications that everybody has mentioned—I do not think this is in doubt; it is actually happening now—for humans and particularly for children and babies, given how they are fed. Thirdly, the plastic has economic implications, impacting shipping through propeller entanglement and other marine activities, especially fishing, and undermining tourist areas. Fourthly and importantly, there is a growing body of research showing that by reducing oxygen in the water and thereby the amount of life that oceans can sustain, the plastic almost certainly reduces the ability of oceans to store carbon and therefore combat climate change.

I wish to take this opportunity to compliment the Ocean Cleanup organisation, which has advised me and others on the worrying waste that we are producing. The Ocean Cleanup proposes undertaking what may be considered the largest high seas clean-up in history. Its mission is to remove 90% of floating plastic in the ocean by 2040. The whole project is based on scientific research. To efficiently address the issue, we need to understand where the plastic is, what it consists of and, crucially, where it comes from.

To reiterate what others have said, 26 academic partners on five continents are seeking to understand the ocean garbage patches, and numerous scientific institutions have produced 49 scientific publications in different peer-reviewed journals. There is great interest in this. Using computational modelling, the Ocean Cleanup crew estimates in which areas the circulating currents

are creating plastic hotspots. As has been said, artificial intelligence is used while further research is conducted in the field of spaceborne plastic detection in collaboration with the European Space Agency, ARGANS Ltd and other spatial sector organisations. It is reassuring that people are tackling this huge problem. Research shows that it takes up to seven years for plastic emitted into the oceans to make it to the GPGP. The plastic there can survive for decades; it degrades by about 1% per annum.

To clean the oceans and address legacy plastic, Governments need to focus on areas where there is most recoverable plastic, which is in the ocean gyres—the permanent current systems, which trap plastic debris. As I said, the largest and best known patch is the great Pacific garbage patch, and that is where efforts are being focused. A trawler-type solution has been crafted. It pulls a semi-circular, 4-metre-high net system slowly, as the hon. Member for North Devon said, through the garbage patch and into a funnel—the retention zone—which takes the plastic on to ships to be taken back to shore. I have watched videos of that; it is very impressive, and very dangerous.

To protect our oceans, stopping the leakage of future plastic pollution from rivers is the best form of prevention. We are talking about interceptor systems to prevent plastic from entering the seas. With a focus on the rivers that research has shown pump the most plastic into our oceans, there has been work with national, regional and, importantly, local governments to create a range of tailored interceptor systems—suited to rivers that are tidal or not, have deltas or do not, are slow-flowing or fast-flowing, deep or shallow, and so on. There are 12 interceptors now in place in different types of rivers in south-east Asia and the Caribbean, as the hon. Member mentioned.

The encouraging news, which gives us all some hope, is that the Ocean Cleanup organisation has signed a memorandum of understanding with the United Nations development programme to collaborate on eliminating plastic pollution in our oceans and rivers around the globe. The goal of that partnership is simply to reduce leakages of plastic into marine ecosystems by boosting policies and, particularly, behaviour change aimed at advancing sound plastic waste management systems and reducing overall plastic pollution, and accelerating the deployment of interception technologies in rivers to end marine plastic pollution. Let us hope that they and their partners, and all Governments, are successful in their objectives to clean up our treasured oceans and protect them for our future generations.

2.15 pm

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Christopher. I congratulate the hon. Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) on securing this hugely important debate, which is so well timed ahead of the treaty negotiations next week, and on the day that the water companies have listened to huge anger from the public and Labour MPs over sewage spills. There were 301,000 in the UK in the last year alone. English water companies have apologised and said, “More should have been done”. Many would say that that sums up the Government’s policy over the last 13 years—surely, more should have been done. However, it is heartening to see cross-party agreement

this afternoon about the need to tackle plastic pollution and the damage that it does to our oceans. I thank all the Members who have spoken today.

This afternoon, I am speaking in place of my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones), who is attending to a family commitment in Newport. Given my campaigning on plastic in wet wipes, for example, and as a WWF ocean champion MP, I am hugely grateful to have this opportunity to talk about Labour's commitment to preserving our planet and protecting our environment.

We have reached a critical point, and I am here today to impress on the Minister how serious the situation has become. The facts speak for themselves. According to the Commonwealth Clean Ocean Alliance, 12 million tonnes of plastic enter our oceans every year, where they become a hazard for marine wildlife and make their way up the food chain and on to our dinner plates. Plastic production is increasing. The carbon that that uses and the pollution that it causes is also increasing and damaging our oceans. Only Government action can counter the power of the plastics industry and do what our constituents want, which is to save and protect our oceans.

Margaret Ferrier: I welcome the calls for the UK to use its position on the world stage to deliver the UN global plastic treaty. It is imperative, however, that the treaty offers all workers across the plastics supply chain the opportunity to transition to sustainable jobs. Does the shadow Minister agree that the UN global plastic treaty must be inclusive and recognise the interests of indigenous people?

Fleur Anderson: I absolutely agree. The writing needs to be on the wall for the plastics industry. We need to say that creating more and more virgin plastic is just not acceptable, and there needs to be a transition to a future and to a green jobs revolution across the world, as we hope to have in this country.

I thank all of the ocean activists who have campaigned for our oceans, including Surfers Against Sewage, the Marine Conservation Society, WWF, Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth and WRAP, and David Attenborough and his "Blue Planet" programme, which several Members have mentioned. I also thank the Putney Tidy Towpath group and Thames21 in my constituency, who clean up our beautiful River Thames. I thank all the equivalent groups across the country who do so much work to clean up our rivers. They want to know what is happening at a Government level so that they do not have to keep coming back and picking up the plastic week after week. They are watching this debate very closely.

So many children in schools have asked me about this issue. I have been to many classrooms where there are ocean animals swinging from the roofs and pictures on the walls. We have had so many questions from children; we know that it matters to people across the country, but especially to children.

No one doubts the importance of plastic to the modern global economy, and it has transformed human life in many positive ways. However, this is the bottom line: our production and consumption habits, coupled with the current waste management systems, are totally unsustainable, and we are heading towards an irreversible environmental catastrophe if we do not take action.

If we continue on the current trajectory, the OECD estimates that global plastic production will double by 2040. In the UK alone, it is estimated that 5 million tonnes of plastic is used every year, nearly half of which is packaging. We cannot detach plastic from climate change. Plastic is highly carbon-intensive to produce. According to a study published in the journal, *Nature*, last year, plastics are responsible for 4.5% of global greenhouse gas emissions, contributing about 1.8 billion tonnes of carbon emissions annually. Tackling plastic production means saving the planet.

We also know that 100 million marine animals die each year from plastic waste alone, according to the Marine Conservation Society, ranging from birds to fish to other marine organisms. It is a disgraceful state of affairs and we must all do more, go further and try harder to preserve our planet and protect our environment.

With recycling rates where they are and with most plastics single use, it is no surprise that plastic is oozing its way into our water at an unprecedented rate, and 80% of marine pollution originates on land. We cannot rely on beach and river clean-ups to keep our beaches tidy. We need to take holistic and co-ordinated action to end plastic pollution.

As many Members have pointed out, plastic pollution is far-reaching. It is found everywhere—in all parts of the world—from fresh Antarctic snow to the deepest ocean trenches. The pollution that we see on our streets and our beaches is just the tip of the iceberg.

Plastic pollution harms human and animal health. Plastic has been found in human blood, mothers' placentas, whales' stomachs and numerous fish, sea birds and other marine animals. The World Wide Fund for Nature believes that a human could ingest about 5 grams of plastic every week, which is the equivalent of a credit card, just because of the way it moves through our food chain. We might literally be eating a credit card's worth of plastic every week.

Plastic pollution of the ocean obviously crosses borders as well, so we need to do all we can in the UK. However, without leading successful global action, we will not save the oceans. Half measures from the Government simply will not wash.

One issue that the Minister will not be surprised to hear me mention is how Government action can protect our environment through banning plastic in wet wipes. In 2019, 11 billion wet wipes were used across the United Kingdom, and 90% of them contained some form of plastic. The use of wet wipes has increased enormously since then, because of covid and additional hygiene uses.

Wet wipes with plastic in do not break down; they pollute our rivers and oceans, harm wildlife and clog up our sewers. Tesco and Boots have stopped all sales of wet wipes with plastic in them. They have led the way on that and shown what can be done. A ban, however, would create a level playing field for businesses and make action go further and faster.

The Government promised to take action to ban plastic in wet wipes in 2018. They held a consultation on that and on other single-use plastics, which closed in February last year. I welcome the announcement that, from October, there will be a ban on other single-use plastics, such as plastic plates, trays, bowls, cutlery, balloon sticks, polystyrene cups and food containers, but we now need to know the date for the ban on plastic

[*Fleur Anderson*]

in wet wipes. It could have been included in the Environment Act 2021 or in the water strategy, with an actual date, but there is still no ban. I hope to hear more from the Minister on this issue later.

The Government should go further and faster to preserve our planet and protect our environment, as a Labour Government under my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) will do. In Labour-run Wales, the Welsh Government, under First Minister Mark Drakeford, have committed to banning a range of single-use plastics. Their long-standing commitment to reduce waste and unnecessary plastic is outlined in their circular economy strategy, “Beyond Recycling”, which aims to have a zero-waste Wales by 2050.

That is important, because it is about priorities, focus and action, and I am sorry to say that priorities, focus and action have not been the order of the day with this Government in Westminster. The Conservatives have been in power for 13 long years, but have left the agencies that should tackle waste and pollution underfunded and understaffed. No wonder we have not seen the action that we need. We have seen the mess that has been caused with sewage pollution. The Environment Agency has struggled to tackle waste crime and monitor waste exports, and councils are struggling to deal with waste effectively while cutting waste collections. Government Members shamefully voted against Labour’s amendments to the Finance Act 2021 on a plastic packaging tax, which would have required the Government to pay due regard to the principles of waste hierarchy and a circular economy. The Conservatives are weak on tackling the effects and causes of all waste. Labour would take the issue seriously. Action is a no-brainer, and we have to get on with it.

I have seven questions for the Minister. First, as I am sure she is aware, in 2018, the UK launched the Commonwealth clean ocean alliance with Vanuatu, which brings together 34 Commonwealth countries in the fight to tackle plastic pollution. Can she update us on the progress that the programme has made, and what the next steps are? Secondly, will she consider bringing forward a national action plan for tackling plastic pollution to increase the focus and action on this issue?

Thirdly, will the Minister give an update on progress towards the deposit return scheme? Fourthly, she will know that plastic packaging accounts for nearly 70% of our plastic waste. When was the last time the Government sat down with manufacturers and worked on a road map for eliminating plastic packaging in food and other products, thereby driving down plastic production?

Fifthly, have there been discussions with the Secretary of State for Education regarding the role of schools in tackling plastic pollution? They have a huge role to play. Sixthly, can the Minister provide more detail on the upcoming ban on plastic in wet wipes that was announced in April, and will she meet me and my shadow Environment colleagues to discuss it? Finally, can she give an assessment of how well the Government’s environment plan is working in relation to reaching their target of eliminating all avoidable plastic waste by 2042, and whether she feels that target is ambitious enough in the light of the need to save our oceans?

Our oceans are precious. Plastic pollution is irreversible, drives biodiversity loss, and has a devastating impact on marine and human life. Without dramatically reducing plastic production and use, it will be impossible to end plastic pollution in our oceans. Banning plastic in wet wipes is widely supported by the public, MPs, retailers and producers. Last year, 250,000 people from across the UK, including more than 9,000 school students and 36 MPs, including myself, took part in the Big Plastic Count. Such actions show the public demand for action. The public are on board and so are the Opposition. We are just waiting on the Government. If they do not have the appetite for it, we will provide the plans if they step aside.

I thank the hon. Member for North Devon for bringing this critical matter to the House. I am so glad that we have had this debate, especially this week. I assure her that she has an ally in the Labour party if she wants real, ambitious and comprehensive change and protection for our natural world.

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): Minister, you have about half an hour in which to respond.

2.28 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): Thank you, Sir Christopher. You might be pleased to hear that I may not go on for half an hour, but that will give a little time for my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) to respond. I thank her for bringing this matter before the House. She is a great champion for her constituency, particularly on subjects connected with water and the coast. I do not think that anyone could ask for more on that front. She has to be praised for all the work that she has done, and particularly for bringing this subject for us to debate today.

While Members across the House have our differences, there is an awful lot of common ground. Plastic in the ocean is unacceptable, and we have to do something urgently to tackle it. To the point made by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson), we have probably all been in and out of schools. It is honestly the No. 1 subject that children want to talk about. I went into Oake, Bradford and Nynehead Primary School the other day, and it was top of the agenda. I share with the children all the things the Government are doing on the environment, on plastics and on waste and recycling. I usually leave them knowing that we are genuinely tackling a lot of these issues, which are so important not just to children but to us all.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Devon sent a letter to the Secretary of State, and I will respond. I was waiting until today, just in case any matters arose from the debate, but she will get her response very shortly. I thank her for all the work she does in North Devon. I will expand a bit on what we are doing both domestically and internationally, because they work together, as has been highlighted today.

Margaret Ferrier: Will the Minister give way?

Rebecca Pow: I will make a little progress, just to set the scene.

As Members have said, the annual plastic flow into oceans will triple between 2016 and 2040, which is a pretty shocking thing to think about. Plastic has already

had a devastating effect on the environment and it is due to get worse, which is why we have to take urgent action both domestically and internationally. Although it would be wonderful to take out all the plastic in the oceans—we have heard some really good stories about how that has been done in many places, and credit to all the organisations doing that work, many of which are voluntary—the absolute key is to tackle the problem at source and to reduce the amount of plastic going on to the market, so I will talk about that in some detail. It is what the Government's focus is all about.

Our environmental improvement plan 2023 states that we have targets for reducing all forms of marine plastic pollution where possible, and our 2018 resources and waste strategy sets out how we will do that. In our environment improvement plan, we have set a target of achieving zero avoidable plastic waste by the end of 2042. How will we do all that? There is a step-by-step process, and it will be done through a whole range of measures that focus on maximising resource efficiency; reusing, recycling and reducing the overall amount of plastic on the market; and keeping what plastic we do use—because there are no doubt some really important uses of plastic—in the circular economy for much longer. As we have heard from various colleagues, the key element of our packaging and waste regime and reforms is the extended producer responsibility scheme, which puts the onus on the manufacturer that places the packaging on the market and makes them responsible for its lifecycle and where it ends up. We also have the deposit return scheme, which has been mentioned by a number of colleagues. It is due to start in October 2025, but intensive work is being done on both schemes right now.

I welcome the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon about Scotland. We obviously welcome the involvement of the devolved Administrations, because it would all be much simpler if we had the same scheme. We are working very closely together. Scotland's scheme has been held up, but we are working to progress ours as quickly as possible. The third element is our consistent collection, so that we collect the same products from our local authorities. That will help us to get good-quality recyclates, and it will help the whole system to work effectively. We are pressing on with that and will shortly announce the results of our consultation. I will also slip in at this point that we will also announce our consultation on the ban of wet wipes shortly. I recognise that the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Putney, has done a lot of work on this issue, as have many people in this room and other colleagues across the House.

The Liberal Democrat Member, the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord), mentioned his party's policies for recycling. He seemed to be slightly behind the curve; we are already introducing all of the schemes to tackle plastic packaging and plastic waste. We are well on the case, and realise how important those schemes are.

We have done a lot already. We have significantly reduced major supermarket retailers' use of single-use carrier bags, as was outlined by my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon, by over 97%. That was enabled, or triggered, by the 5p charge. We have since introduced the 10p charge and extended it to all retailers. That is really making the extra difference we need on carrier bags.

Richard Foord: The Minister says that the Government have already taken account of the proposals I talked about on behalf of the Liberal Democrats. Does that include the points I made about cigarette butts? Will she tell us what the Government are doing to crack down on cigarette butts in the ocean?

Rebecca Pow: Yes. I have spent a lot of time working on cigarette butts as well. They are a nasty, poisonous, polluting litter item. In fact, in terms of numbers of items littered, they are the largest. A lot of work has been done on that front. We work very closely with WRAP—the Waste and Resources Action Programme—on options for tackling the littering of cigarette butts, which include making the industry more responsible for the cost of dealing with them. We are considering next steps now. The hon. Member may not be aware that, with the stick hanging over the industry, it has come up with £30 million to voluntarily deal with cigarette butt littering. We will watch closely to see how that proceeds.

In October 2020, we introduced measures to restrict the supply of plastic straws, which my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon) mentioned, as well as plastic drink stirrers and plastic-stemmed cotton buds, which we did ahead of the EU. We are building on that progress with our recently announced bans on single-use plastic plates, bowls, trays, containers, cutlery and balloon sticks from this October. My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent reminded us, quite starkly, why we need to do this—those things stay in the environment for so long; she gave the figure of 400 years. We are doing absolutely the right thing in bringing in those bans. As time progresses, we will review those bans to see whether they are effective and to make sure that we have the right processes in place—I think the shadow Minister asked about that.

The form of marine litter with the greatest known impact on marine life is abandoned, lost or discarded fishing gear, known as ghost gear. That has been estimated to cause a decline of between 5% and 30% in some fish stocks. The Administrations of the UK are committed to working together, and with industry, through the British Irish Council, to develop solutions for the collection and recycling of end-of-life fishing gear—the gear left lying about on the quayside—of which there is a large quantity. To fulfil that commitment, the UK is reviewing domestic measures for end-of-life fishing and aquaculture gear with the intention of moving the sector towards a circular economy model, finding ways to recycle that material. It is quite complicated, because the gear contains a lot of different materials. We will ensure that any new requirements do not create a competitive disadvantage for our fishing industry.

Regional sea conventions can also play a key role in co-ordinating action, sharing knowledge and monitoring the state of the ocean, and as a contracting party to OSPAR—the regional seas convention for the protection of the north-east Atlantic—the UK participates in monitoring programmes to assess regional trends in marine litter and develops and takes action in co-operation with our nearest neighbours. In 2021, OSPAR contracting parties agreed the north-east Atlantic environment strategy. The strategy has a number of objectives on tackling marine litter in the north-east Atlantic, including a strategic objective to prevent inputs of, and significantly reduce, marine litter, including microplastics in the marine

[*Rebecca Pow*]

environment. Under the strategic objective, contracting parties also agreed to publish an updated regional action plan on marine litter, which was published in 2022.

The strong programme of domestic and regional action means that the UK is well placed to be a leading voice in tackling plastic pollution on the wider international stage. The UK was proud to co-sponsor the proposal to prepare a new international, legally binding plastic pollution treaty, which was agreed in the United Nations Environment Assembly in February 2022.

Margaret Ferrier: With Malaysia's high contribution to plastic pollution, and its status as a comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-pacific partnership country, does the Minister believe that our recent accession to the bloc could be a good opportunity to drive environmental change with trading partners?

Rebecca Pow: One of our key focuses is on environmental protection. We are doing a great deal of work, as I am outlining, on the international stage to work with our partners, and influence them on things that we are doing at home—demonstrating that a lot of those things can be done nationally. The aim is to reduce, reuse, recycle, and limit the amount of plastic going on to the market in the first place.

The process for negotiating the new agreement that the UK co-sponsored is under way. The first intergovernmental negotiating committee was in November last year. The UK took an ambitious stance on that, supporting a treaty that will restrain the production and consumption of plastic, address plastic design and encourage more recycling and reuse. Those are the things we think are critical.

The UK is also a founding member of the High Ambition Coalition to end plastic pollution, which is a group of 50 countries that are calling for a target under the treaty to stop plastic from flowing into the environment by 2040. That very much reflects our approach at home. We reiterated that commitment at the recent G7 meeting in Japan, where all G7 nations committed to ending plastic pollution, with the ambition to reduce additional plastic pollution to zero by 2040. We are going to continue to push for ambition at future negotiation sessions, including the forthcoming one in Paris, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon. My officials and I will go to that, and we are hoping for real, useful progress there. Every colleague in the Chamber has mentioned the importance of international treaties and work.

We already support a range of initiatives to remove or remediate plastic in the marine environment. We support the Fishing for Litter initiative and many other local schemes. Fishing for Litter is a voluntary, unpaid litter bycatch removal scheme for commercial fishermen, run by KIMO, a network of local authorities, which provides fishing boats with bags to dispose of marine-sourced litter collected during normal fishing operations. Fishing for Litter South West England is currently funded by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs' fisheries and seafood scheme. In 2018, we also changed marine licensing measures to make it easier for divers to recover marine litter, including fishing gear. That is something they highlighted to us, and we

had to make a tweak to enable them to be able to do that and safely dispose of it when they brought the litter back on to land.

Under the OSPAR Commission's regional action plan for marine litter, the UK works with other contracting parties to implement actions. The plan includes an action to prevent, locate and handle abandoned, lost or otherwise discarded fishing gear.

I also agree with the importance of monitoring plastic pollution. The UK co-funds the Marine Conservation Society's recording of litter from sections of our coast. That helps us to monitor plastic pollution levels and trends. That data is used in combination with other monitoring data to measure the impact of our policies and inform our decisions about how to tackle marine litter. Its information was really useful in informing our work and regulation on the ban of cotton buds. We looked at the things that rocked up most frequently on beaches, which included balloon sticks and so forth.

I note the valuable work done by the Ocean Cleanup, which is an interesting initiative. I cannot say that we have a pot of money to put into that, but we are certainly grateful for the work it does and we are obviously looking very closely at what will proceed from that.

We are working closely with other countries around the world to understand how to tackle legacy plastic pollution through the treaty. As mentioned, we are working hard to prevent plastic from entering the environment in the first place by making producers responsible for their plastic.

We are also supporting a lot of other international action. In 2021, the then Prime Minister announced the new £500 million blue planet fund, which lots of colleagues are familiar with. The fund aims to protect and enhance the marine environment and reduce poverty. It includes a focus on tackling marine pollution and supporting coastal communities. That point was raised; we have to bring the communities along with us in all that.

Through the UK's blue planet fund, we are working with the Global Plastic Action Partnership to take collaborative action on tackling pollution in developing countries, including Indonesia, Ghana and Vietnam. Through that partnership, the UK is supporting the creation of national roadmaps to address plastic pollution, which outline the action, finance and innovation needed to achieve national commitments. In Indonesia, for example, the partnership is working towards a target of reducing mismanaged waste by 70% by 2025.

The blue planet fund's ocean country partnership programme is also supporting countries to tackle, reduce and mitigate marine pollution through the development of science-led policy and the strengthening of marine expertise. Everything must be science based. That is what they are working on.

The UK also appreciates the critical role that young people play in paving the way for change. Since 2019, we have supported the United Nations Environment Programme's Tide Turners plastic challenge badge. That has developed a community of over 500,000 young people doing work on plastic pollution.

The UK also contributes to PROBLUE, the World Bank's multi-donor trust, which supports the sustainable and integrated development of marine and coastal resources. A key component of that is prevention and management of marine pollution. PROBLUE projects aim to address

the threats posed by such pollution, including litter, plastics and land-based sources that are contributing to what goes into our seas. Additionally, the UK co-chairs the Commonwealth clean ocean alliance alongside Vanuatu. I think the shadow Minister mentioned that. We work very closely with them on the Commonwealth blue charter's action groups. We have delivered the Commonwealth litter programme, which is delivering scientific technical assistance across all Commonwealth countries. It is proceeding very constructively.

I have just a couple of questions left to answer. I think I have answered the question about the evaluation of the effectiveness of our bans because we have to qualitatively and quantitatively analyse the difference that our policies are making. We are committed to doing that, and we are evaluating the impact of the plastic straw ban. The timing of that evaluation is dependent on our progress in introducing our other packaging reforms, but it is currently scheduled for 2026-27.

The hon. Member for Falkirk (John Mc Nally) is a great advocate of the work on plastics and microplastics. He always talks about nurdles, and he did not fail to do so today. They are pre-production plastic pellets—the raw materials used in the production of plastic items—and they can be lost all over the place. It is shocking how much we find them on our beaches and in the sea. In 2019, the British-Irish Council recognised the need to address that source of microplastics, and it committed to learn from a trial supply chain approach that is taking place in Scotland. We are watching that carefully. The Administration supported the development of a publicly available specification developed by the British Standards Institution, which set out how businesses handling or managing the pellets can reduce pellet loss. It is the first initiative of its kind, and it was published in July 2021.

Hon. Members raised overseas exports of plastic waste. We plan to consult later this year on options to ban the export of plastic waste to countries that are not members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. The Government have committed to that, and it is being rolled out.

I hope I have demonstrated the enormous amount of work that is being done on this front, but that is not to say that there is not an enormous amount to do. There is: this is a huge problem. We are taking action domestically through the new initiatives that we are rolling out. They are a game-changer for lots of people and local authorities, so we will have to bring people with us. I think we will do so, because there is such a positive attitude towards reducing our plastic waste.

I once again thank everyone who took part in the debate. It is good to get this issue on the agenda. I particularly thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon for securing it.

2.52 pm

Selaine Saxby: Again, it has been a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I thank all hon. Members, and particularly the Minister, for participating. The Minister's extensive speech demonstrated the volume of work that the Government have undertaken and continue to undertake to clean up our vital oceans.

I particularly thank the Ocean Cleanup team—João Ribeiro-Bidaoui is in the Public Gallery. The video of the work that it is undertaking in the Pacific—I understand that the hon. Member for Falkirk (John Mc Nally) has seen it—is very compelling. I urge Members and anyone else who cares to do so to join us on 13 September in the Churchill Room. There will be a live transmission by the founder of the Ocean Cleanup, Boyan Slat, from the Pacific as he works on the ships cleaning up the ocean.

We have a real opportunity to do more on the global stage. Great Britain really could rule the waves on this one.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of reducing plastic pollution in the ocean.

2.54 pm

Sitting suspended.

National Numeracy Day

[DAME MARIA MILLER *in the Chair*]

[Relevant documents: Third Report of the Education Committee, The future of post-16 qualifications, HC 55; Oral evidence taken before the Education Committee on 7 February 2023, on Government proposals for compulsory maths to age 18, HC 1059; Correspondence from the Education Committee to the Secretary of State for Education, on the extension of maths provision up to 18, reported to the House on 28 February 2023; Correspondence from the Education Committee to Ofqual on Government proposals for compulsory maths to age 18, reported to the House on 18 April 2023.]

3 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I beg to move,
That this House has considered National Numeracy Day.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Maria. I declare an interest as a graduate in physics and maths. I have had a particular interest in this subject for a long time; indeed, I have three maths A-levels.

Yesterday was the 11th anniversary of National Numeracy Day—a day earmarked for the championing of everyday maths. We learn various different aspects of maths at school, but it is important to remember that the purpose of maths is to inspire everyone, at whatever age and from whatever gender or socioeconomic background, to possess the confidence and skills to competently understand numbers and be able to apply them in our day-to-day lives. We do not use trigonometry or Pythagoras' theorem when doing the weekly food shop, but basic numeracy crops up all the time. When writing this speech, for instance, I had to estimate how long to speak for to keep my colleagues interested and not allow them to doze off for too long.

Numeracy is the ability to apply numbers in everyday life, solve problems, make informed decisions and seize the opportunities that are presented as a result. National Numeracy is an independent charity. It was initially funded by one of the big four multinational professional services networks, namely KPMG. Since launching, it has attracted a growing number of organisations that recognise the importance of improving the nation's numeracy. Since 2012, through National Numeracy Day the charity has helped over 2.7 million people unlock new levels of potential, be that in school, work or their personal lives. One of the concerns is about the number of people who leave school without basic numeracy capabilities.

It is not until we really think about it that we realise how prominent mathematics is in our day-to-day activities. It is crucial for developing logical thinking and for reasoning strategies. I will give a few examples of where mathematics come in. Financially, it is important to have the appropriate skills to understand our payslips, calculate mortgage rates or rental payments, account for bills or any other outgoings, pay for items either through cash or card, and make sure we are not being ripped off. Practically, we use maths to negotiate journey times, plan the food shop, use cooking recipes, read the time and relate distances for travel. Recreationally, we might use the skills in music, when playing sport, to set time limits on phones or even with driving. It is prominent everywhere, and we must understand that maths is vital.

For those who significantly struggle with numeracy or who lack confidence, it is extremely difficult to get through the basic tasks we undertake daily. Research has shown that people who have low maths skills are increasingly vulnerable to debt, fraud, financial exclusion and unemployment. In 2020 it was estimated that more than two thirds of unemployed adults possessed extremely low numeracy skills. This is a consequence of not acquiring the skills in school or early life.

As a nation, we are often regarded as one of the richest and most powerful countries globally. Despite this stature, our numeracy levels are significantly below the average for developed countries, ranking just 21st in the widely-recognised Survey of Adult Skills. The consequence is a cost to the UK economy of millions of pounds—in unemployment, poor health and treatment costs—as well as a widening of the skills gap between those who are highly skilled and those who are not. To give an idea of how much it is costing, Pro Bono Economics recently commissioned data estimating that up to £25 billion is lost in earnings each year owing entirely to low numeracy skills.

Across the UK, low confidence and competence when dealing with numbers disproportionately affects disadvantaged communities, with deprivation of numeracy skills traditionally being passed on from one generation to another. It is even more important, therefore, that those people have access to easy, supportive and free recourses to help to improve such struggles, and prevent future generations from adopting those anxieties. Staggeringly, half of working-age adults in this country—more than 16 million people—have numerical skills equivalent to those of a primary-school leaver. That has led to more than half of young adults admitting that they have avoided a particular job, interview or qualification, thereby hindering their full potential, because they feared that it would involve using mathematics when they had no confidence in doing so.

There is also a distinct gender gap with regard to number confidence. Women are significantly less confident than men when self-assessing their numeracy skills—so much so that they feel twice as anxious about maths, and consequently are disproportionately affected by negative experiences with maths at school. Unless we encourage young women to take up maths and develop those skills, we will never close the gender pay gap, which we all wish to see removed.

Children are undeniably far more impressionable than adults. The very make-up of those whippersnappers' brains allows them to absorb information faster and much more efficiently. It is therefore of the utmost importance that nurseries, schools and education centres are taking the opportunity to equip our youth with the skills necessary to possess numerical competence and confidence. Teachers and learning assistants undergo vast training to get to their positions. They are advised on the syllabus and learning techniques that are required to educate, and hopefully have an in-depth knowledge of the subject. It is clearly far better to have those experts teach our children, so that the information they learn is accurate, rather than struggling to teach themselves at a much later stage, with a risk of misunderstanding and not being corrected. If a child does not have a good teacher, they often have to rely on their parents. If the parents are averse to maths, that can cause a challenging intergenerational cycle.

If children are taught how to competently negotiate bus timetables, money and other numerical skills, interfrastically it prepares them for life. It is essential that they are taught such skills as youngsters to ensure that they do not lack the understanding once they have reached adulthood, and therefore are able to gain greater independence. When stripped of such skills, people are immediately dependent on others and have to rely on the honesty of others, subjecting them, sadly, to a high possibility of being taken advantage of. In many cases, people doing a big shop do not know whether the bill they are being charged is correct, because they are unable to add up in their heads the rough cost of what they are buying as they go. Only when they get to the till do they realise. Even then, they may not pay the right amount, so there is a real challenge to everyday life.

I am very pleased that earlier this year the Prime Minister announced his ambition that all school pupils in England will have to study some form of mathematics until the age of 18. That does not mean that they will have to study in detail the sort of things that would be studied for A-levels and at degree level, but it does mean that basic mathematics will be understood by someone leaving secondary school. Some believe that that will have inconsequential results, but it will drastically increase the UK's productivity and give stronger emphasis to the huge importance of possessing competent numerical skills. It will also equip school-leavers with a quantitative and statistical intellect, which is needed for many of today's jobs and those of the future. For example, we have heard today of different companies requiring artificial intelligence and reducing the number of people involved. Well, if people have high mathematical skills, that will mean they will be able to do the higher-skilled jobs required in the future.

I am encouraged that the Government have recognised the impact of the pandemic on education and responded by establishing a national tutoring programme, investing over £1 billion to bring children's education up to speed. By 2024, over 6 million tutoring packages will have been delivered to support struggling children. That is an important provision to come out of the pandemic, because if children have not been in classrooms, it has been quite a challenge for teachers to teach them these skills, and recovering from that position is all-important.

Many people only realise when they reach adulthood the impact of their lagging numeracy. I reiterate: it is by no means too late to improve, and it should not be something to be embarrassed about, ignored or avoided at all costs—far from it. We need to normalise later learning and asking for help, because doing so will open so many doors. People who face a challenge in getting back into the employment market can acquire these skills and therefore acquire a better job with better rates of pay. More than 9 million people in the UK rate their numeracy as low and 86% say that their financial knowledge is also minimal. Surely that emphasises the need for more later learning in such matters. This is a case of getting not just schoolchildren to catch up but also adults who may have been failed in the past.

National Numeracy hosts a vast range of programmes, initiatives and campaigns to help adults to take the leap and improve their numeracy in a bite-sized and approachable way. Thousands of testimonies tell us that the programmes have boosted people's confidence and drastically reduced the anxiety that surrounds mathematics

for many people. The charity has found that the most influential way to support adults is to help them first to understand the value of numeracy in their lives, which is clearly important, and then to help them to experience quick success, which builds their belief in their ability and capability to use mathematics.

This Government, who I am proud to support, are a great champion of lifelong learning, and are investing £560 million in the Multiply programme to give thousands of adults the opportunity to gain employer-valued maths qualifications, and to improve their skills through Multiply's easy-to-use and accessible digital platform.

As I come to the end of my speech, I thank my colleagues for attending. I look forward to hearing others' remarks—if not from the Back Benches, from the various party spokesmen and indeed from the Minister for Schools, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Nick Gibb). I hope that, if nothing else, this debate can inspire a few people to make a conscious effort to improve their numeracy skills and in turn unlock an unlimited number of new opportunities.

On National Numeracy Day, we aim to break the taboo that maths is scary, not cool or impossible. Indeed, maths is the gateway to many amazing opportunities. The National Numeracy campaign, the Government, local schools and Protect Pure Maths are always available to offer help and support. The message to people out there is: be sure to get in touch; if you fear your maths skills are not up to speed, look for opportunities to improve your capability, gain confidence, gain new abilities and, if nothing else, improve your basic skills.

Finally, I thank all those at National Numeracy who made yesterday such a success and wish the charity all the best for the rest of the events it is hosting throughout May.

3.14 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): It is my pleasure, Dame Maria, to contribute to this debate. Like the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), I am a physics and a wee bit of maths graduate. A long, long time ago, I qualified as a physics and maths teacher, although I sometimes say that it is so long ago that I have forgotten half the physics I learned and Stephen Hawking proved that the other half was wrong.

As the hon. Gentleman said, we use numbers every day of our lives, very often without realising it, but a lot of people are scared of them—sometimes, too scared to even try to get over their fears. People go through their entire lives avoiding particular occasions that might show them up or make them think they look silly because their basic numeracy skills are not as good as they would like them to be. For people of my age, some of it is to do with bad experiences at school. Certainly when I went to school, teachers had a habit of humiliating any pupil who was struggling with any part of their work. Thankfully, that does not happen now.

When I go into the schools in my constituency, I am very encouraged by how supportive and patient teachers and other school staff are with pupils who, in my day, would just have been left behind. I am also amazed when I look at some of the techniques that are used now, particularly with children at a very young age, to get them speaking numbers in pretty much the same

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way as they learn to speak their native language without really understanding how the grammar works. The contribution that is being made by teachers at every stage of education in Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom is making a big difference in helping young people to learn essential skills, and there is no doubt that numeracy is one of the most essential.

Not only am I a graduate in two very numerical disciplines, but I was lucky enough to be absolutely fascinated by numbers when I was a wee boy; I could not get enough of them. That, plus the fact that I was probably one of a small minority of children at the time for whom the education system was well suited, meant that I did very well. I sailed through my maths exams at school. I used to do maths Higher papers for fun, to relax after I had spent an evening studying for my other exams.

Sometime towards the end of my first year at Glasgow University, the maths caught up with me and I clawed my way along by my fingertips for the remainder of my degree, but because I still love playing with numbers, it makes it genuinely difficult for me to get the concept that people find numbers scary. There is no doubt that an awful lot of people do. If we could get an honest assessment of 650 MPs, we would probably find that most of them, or certainly a significant number, will try to avoid doing anything with too many numbers in it, or they will get someone in their office to do the number part of a briefing or a speech they are preparing.

On National Numeracy Day, the Deputy Prime Minister did not know how many years the SNP had been in Government in the Scottish Parliament. It may simply be that he had forgotten the year we first got elected, and mistook it for the much more recent coming to power of the Conservatives, but it was an interesting—although I suppose light-hearted—way to mark such an important day.

I have heard people say that they have never tried a sudoku puzzle because they are no good at maths. A sudoku puzzle has numbers in it, but there is nothing mathematical about it. We could put in letters, shapes or wee dogs of nine different kinds, and the puzzle would be exactly the same; there is something about seeing a lot of numbers or an array of numbers that puts people off. The more we try to understand what does that to people, the quicker we can help them set aside their fears and get familiar with numbers, in the same way as when we find out what makes people scared of other languages when they get to certain age, we may be able to change the fact that the UK as a whole is shamefully bad at second, third and fourth languages. Children who are brought up bilingual become expert linguists when they are a wee bit older, so there may be something to think about there.

I mentioned sudoku puzzles, but basic skills in numeracy are not just important to be able to do puzzles—in the sudoku puzzles, they are not important at all. Numeracy is an essential skill for everyone to be able to look out for themselves. As the hon. Member for Harrow East said, it is important for understanding the strengths and weaknesses of different financing offers, such as mortgages or bank loans. We had to bring in regulations about how the annual percentage rate is calculated in order to standardise it across the whole industry and make it a

requirement to be brought to the attention of any customer before they sign on the dotted line, because the sales reps—the conmen and women—were presenting numbers in a very misleading way, knowing that a significant number of their victims, or customers, would not spot what they were up to.

Even a lot of people who think they are numerate do not understand what happens when different probabilities are combined. That can make someone who spends their time at the bookies or online gambling an easy target. A lot of people, for example, think that if they are being offered 10 lottery tickets per pound, it is better odds than one lottery ticket per pound, but if everybody gets 10 tickets and there is the same amount of prize money, their chances are exactly the same. People are encouraged to gamble more because the chances of success are made to look much better than they are.

We need people to be more numerate so that they can avoid being taken in when politicians use numbers to try to completely deceive them. There is a well-known saying: “Figures don’t lie, but liars figure.” Clearly, nobody present would ever think to do this, but every single time I go into the main Chamber I will hear a politician deliberately using numbers and statistics in such a way that will cause people to believe something that is not true. Technically that is not lying, but it is still deceitful. We could do with losing it entirely from our public life, but we could also prevent it from being successful by helping people understand what different combinations of numbers and percentages mean.

I am sad to say that the first example I can find comes from the late, much-lamented Margo MacDonald, an absolute stalwart of the SNP. The first time I was old enough to vote was in 1979, and I was swithering between the SNP and the Labour party, which is what my dad, grandad and great-grandad had always gone for. In a party political broadcast a few days before the election, Margo MacDonald was tearing into the record of the Labour Government on inflation. I think she said that over a five-year period prices had gone up by 50%, meaning that the pound in the pocket was worth only 50p compared with five years previously. But that was not true. As an 18-year-old first-year student at the University of Glasgow, I knew that, and I suspect I would have known it when I was 10 or 11. It did dent my confidence in the SNP of those days that it had been able to put that into a party political broadcast and nobody had picked up on it.

More importantly, a few years ago, we had a really serious issue with the marking and awarding of results in Scotland’s exams during lockdown. Students could not have exams, so all results had to be based on the school’s predictions and assessments of how pupils were likely to have done. That is never going to be a fail-safe system. Education Scotland wanted to have a pass rate that was about the same as usual, because universities would not have bought it if everybody had passed, so it had to come up with some way of amending the figures. That meant that it was very difficult to explain why some people had passed and some had failed.

One of the things that got me was that the teachers understandably spoke up on behalf of their pupils, saying things like, “We filled in the assessments, and our prediction was that everybody in the class would pass.” But that is not what they had done. They had considered each individual pupil in the class and said, “I think the

probability is that that child will pass.” However, if we add a lot of individual high probabilities, we can end up with a very low probability. For example—I checked this just before I started speaking—we could say that an individual pupil is 90% likely to pass an exam. However, if there is a class of seven pupils, each of whom is 90% likely to pass, the probability that all seven will pass is less than 50%. With a class of 30, it is almost certain that they would not all pass. There is no way of predicting which one will and which one will not—and that is assuming that the 90% estimate is anything other than a guess.

Numeracy is also about interpreting what numbers mean, rather than simply being able to play with them. It is about being able to spot when people are using numbers to put a precision and reliability on a piece of information that does not really deserve it. I do not like it when numbers are applied to something that should be assessed by way of a judgment. We can say that we think that someone will pass their exam or driving test, but putting a number to it makes it look like a hard, scientific fact, because that is what we usually use numbers for. We have to make sure that people are able to tell the difference between numbers that are used in the right context, correctly and accurately, and numbers that are misused, as they all too often are, in a way that is designed to con people.

I have a number of times had to look into investment-type scams that have caught out my constituents. In the information that is sent out to people in order to reel them in, at some point there is usually something that somebody with high numeracy skills would have spotted, so they would have known there was a catch to the guaranteed investment scheme, guaranteed pension scheme or whatever it is. The scams are deliberately worded in such a way as to prevent the vast majority of people from spotting where the catch is.

That leads me to the need for much better financial education. I heard today at the Public Accounts Committee that about 25% of young people leaving school think they are financially educated to the extent that they need to be to survive in today’s financial world. Everybody here knows this, but let me say for the record that 25% is not enough.

I am looking at the number on the clock that tells me how long I have been speaking, and at the faces of Members who are probably thinking that it has been more than long enough, so I will draw my remarks to a close. Numbers are important, but sometimes they do not tell the whole story. The number of Members here today is not a measure of how important our colleagues think adequate numeracy is. It really is an essential skill. I cannot speak for England, but in Scotland we have certainly made a lot of progress in improving numeracy skills, particularly of vulnerable young people and those from disadvantaged backgrounds. That said, we have to go much further.

3.25 pm

Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Dame Maria. I thank the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for opening the debate. It is a pleasure to be speaking about National Numeracy Day, even if it is a day after it. Perhaps it would be more appropriate to call it National Numeracy Day plus one.

I pay tribute to all the maths teachers, tutors and numeracy charities across the country. Maths can be a trickier subject than others for some people, but the hard work of teachers, teaching assistants, tutors, parents and volunteers goes such a long way in educating our nation’s children and improving their numeracy skills.

The hon. Gentleman made a number of helpful contributions. He is clearly very qualified to do so, given his three A-levels in maths. I note that the Minister jotted that down; perhaps he will encourage the hon. Gentleman to take up a career in maths teaching one day. I thank him again for securing this debate.

As we have heard, the importance of numeracy cannot be overstated. The skills that we learn in maths classrooms last us a lifetime, and we use them every day. As the hon. Gentleman said, whether it is dividing up a bill at a restaurant, working out which supermarket deal offers the best value or figuring out how many days it is until the weekend, we all use maths every day. However, according to the National Numeracy charity—the organisation behind National Numeracy Day, as the hon. Gentleman said—nearly half the UK’s working population have the numeracy levels expected of an 11-year-old child. Only a fifth are functionally numerate, measured as the equivalent of a GCSE grade 4 or above. As a result, the UK sits in the bottom half of the OECD numeracy skills rankings.

Although people sometimes make light of the fact that they are bad at maths, it really should not be a laughing matter. Poor numeracy skills impact people’s lives in a real way. They can impact personal finances too, and leave people more susceptible to fraud and amassing debt. Skills learned in school are later needed when it comes to valuing a mortgage deal, planning credit payments, taking out loans or saving for retirement. As the hon. Gentleman said, National Numeracy estimates that poor numeracy costs the economy up to £20 billion per year, as a widespread lack of confidence with numbers contributes to sluggish productivity.

These problems clearly require urgent attention, but they are not fixed by gimmicks, pledges or empty rhetoric. In 2011, the then Education Secretary, the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), said that he would like to see the vast majority of pupils in England study maths to the age of 18 within a decade. Of course, the Prime Minister has reheated that pledge in recent months, but he is yet to explain how he expects to deliver it given that the Government have failed to meet their maths teacher recruitment target every year for the past decade, leading to a total shortfall of more than 5,000 teachers.

Despite the Prime Minister’s words, the problem is not getting any better. Last year, more teachers left our schools than joined initial teacher training courses. Under the Conservatives, teacher vacancies have risen by 246%. The Government’s failure to recruit and retain teachers has left schools scrambling to fill roles and asking non-specialist teachers to go above and beyond. Recent Labour party analysis found that one in 10 maths lessons in the past year were taught by non-expert teachers, meaning that high standards are currently for some of our children but not all. Ministers have also quietly shelved plans for the £100 million digital aspect of Multiply. It was supposed to be launched last year and was previously described by the Department as a “critical pillar” in the plan to boost maths skills, and as

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the “centrepiece” of the Prime Minister’s push to improve adult numeracy, but according to recent reports, it has been put on hold. It remains unclear whether the £100 million earmarked for the scheme will be used for other numeracy initiatives or whether the money will go back to the Treasury.

The Government’s levelling-up White Paper set

“a new national mission to ensure that 90% of children leaving primary school in England are reaching the expected standard in reading, writing, and maths by 2030.”

But in 2022, 41% of year 6 pupils in England left primary school without meeting the expected standard. That is 50,000 more children than 2019. We are moving backwards. The figures are even worse for children on free school meals, fewer than half of whom are meeting expected standards by the end of primary school. The same is true of secondary school, where the attainment gap is now wider than at any point in the last decade.

The Government will claim that those gaps are due to the pandemic, but the gap was widening before covid and has worsened since. Last week, the Education Policy Institute reported that primary school children are still struggling to catch up on maths in the wake of covid, with children aged four to 11

“five weeks behind their expectations prior to the outbreak more than three years ago.”

We should not forget that during the pandemic, the then Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak), said that he had “maxed out” funding for children. The hugely damaging impact of the Prime Minister’s inaction on children’s learning of maths—his alleged priority—is only beginning to become clear.

In the debate, all Members have said that improving numeracy for children and adults is extremely important. The first step to addressing the problem is ensuring that children are taught the subject properly. That means being taught by experts, not overstretched teachers covering for their colleagues. That is why Labour is committed to ensuring that pupils are taught by specialist teachers in each subject, including maths. We will do this by recruiting thousands of new teachers across the country, ensuring that schools are not understaffed, that maths is not being taught by English teachers and vice versa, and that teachers are not burnt out from both doing their own job and covering someone else’s. Once in schools, we will also support teachers by entitling them to ongoing teacher training, providing them with the skills and knowledge to thrive—the skills that teachers tell us they need to develop their professional expertise in their chosen area—and ensure that every young person has a teacher with the expertise and time to teach with confidence and care.

Labour will also look at the curriculum and what young people are learning as a whole to ensure we are equipping them with the knowledge and skills they need to thrive in the world and in the workplace of the future. Under Labour, young people will learn practical life skills such as pension planning, understanding credit scores, applying for a mortgage and understanding employment and rental contracts. We want to see young people succeed academically and in life. Central to that is developing literacy and numeracy skills. We will support them to be ambitious, creative and confident young

people, who enjoy music, arts, sports and culture. We will also support them to be great communicators, collaborators and problem solvers and to be happy and successful.

Labour will deliver an excellent education for every child in every school in every part of the country. In doing so, we will drive up standards in all areas, including numeracy, and support all children to fulfil their ambitions. As we have heard, the importance of numeracy to children’s future life chances is simply too crucial to not be addressed with immediacy. I therefore hope the Minister will outline what his Department is doing to recruit its target number of maths teachers for the first time in a decade and to retain the brilliant maths teachers already in the profession, ensuring that our children are taught by subject specialists.

Can the Minister update the House on his Department’s plans for the digital platform Multiply, which was set to be launched last year? It was previously described by the Department as a crucial pillar in the plan to boost numeracy skills, but according to recent reports has been put on hold. In his response, it would be helpful if he could specifically update us on whether the £100 million earmarked for the platform will be used for other numeracy-focused projects. I look forward to the Minister’s response, and I thank all colleagues for their contributions to this important debate.

3.35 pm

The Minister for Schools (Nick Gibb): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dame Maria. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on his opening speech, celebrating National Numeracy Day, which, as everyone has pointed out, was actually yesterday. I guess someone miscalculated. My hon. Friend was worried about the length of his speech; it was absolutely the right length, and kept us all interested. None of us who were listening nodded off.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) for his excellent speech, which revealed his clear understanding of maths in general, and statistics in particular. There was a 50% probability that I was not going to like his speech, but it turned out I 100% liked it. I congratulate him on his contribution.

Maths is crucial. We use it every day, whether at work, managing households, or understanding loans and credit. Without a solid foundation in the subject, young people risk being shut out of the careers to which they aspire, and the life they want to lead. Adults with poor numeracy are more than twice as likely to be unemployed as those with competent numeracy at age 30. That is why the Prime Minister announced last month new details of how we will transform our national approach to maths. We will change the way the system works so that everyone will study some form of maths up to 18.

Quality maths education must be built on foundations laid throughout schooling, starting in primary school. The subject is an important part of a knowledge-rich curriculum, giving pupils fluency in key concepts so that they can explore more complex mathematics in secondary school and beyond. That is why we have undertaken fundamental reforms to strengthen maths teaching over the last decade.

Since 2010, the Government have made great strides in improving maths performance across all ages. The way the subject is taught has been transformed in schools, based on the best available international evidence. That includes learning from the approach used by the countries that perform the highest in maths. We reformed the national curriculum teaching methods and the use of textbooks in order to raise standards. More than half of England's primary schools have now adopted the mastery-based pedagogy from south-east Asia. Teaching for mastery has been supported by 40 beacon schools that demonstrate exemplary teaching, known as maths hubs, as well as by the National Centre for Excellence in Teaching Mathematics.

Mastery pedagogy encourages fluent recall of number facts, and promotes efficient written methods, as well as a whole-class teaching approach with the objective that no pupil is left behind. In mastery teaching, as in top-performing jurisdictions such as Singapore and Shanghai, significant time is spent developing a deep understanding before moving on to the next part of the curriculum sequence—teaching the components of calculation, step by step. That approach to teaching has shown that wide attainment in the subject is possible. In the 2019 trends in international mathematics and science study survey, year 5 pupils in England achieved their highest ever mathematics score of 556, which improved significantly on 546 in 2015.

To complement evidence-based approaches to maths teaching, the Government introduced more challenging assessments at both primary and secondary levels. That included the multiplication tables check in year 4, which was made statutory in 2021. For pupils who took the check, the mean average score was 19.8 correct answers out of 25, with 27% of pupils achieving full marks. The Government also introduced new key stage 2 maths tests, and reformed GCSEs and A-levels. Those assessments ensure that children master the basics of mathematics before tackling more demanding content, and match the standards set in the highest performing countries and jurisdictions around the world.

The improvement in maths attainment was seen in England's 2018 Programme for International Student Assessment results, which were our highest ever for 15-year-olds. PISA assesses the performance of 15-year-olds in reading, maths and science in approximately 80 countries. In terms of international league tables for maths, the UK was 28th in PISA 2009 and moved up to 18th place in PISA 2018.

Last month, the Secretary of State announced plans to expand the maths hubs programme so that more children can benefit from those proven teaching methods. By 2025, the proportion of schools supported by teaching for mastery will expand to 75% of primary schools and 65% of secondary schools. Maths hubs' intensive support will aim to reach the schools that need it most, and they will also deliver an expansion of the mastering number programme, which helps children in the first years of primary school to master the basics of arithmetic, such as number bonds and times tables. The programme will reach over 8,000 schools by 2024, and we will also expand it to years 4 and 5 in order to bolster those cohorts' fluency in times tables.

Last month's announcement also included further support for teachers of 16 to 19-year-olds who are resitting their mathematics GCSE or functional skills

qualification. We know that teaching for mastery also works for this age group, because an evaluation showed that GCSE resit students taught by teachers in the full mastery intervention made one month of additional progress in maths compared with other students. Tellingly, students from disadvantaged backgrounds made even greater progress, averaging two months' additional progress compared with other students. Since 2014, 16 to 19-year-olds without maths GCSE grade 4 or above have been required to continue studying maths, and more students than ever are now achieving that important benchmark. In 2021-22, 80.3% of 19-year-olds achieved grade 4 or equivalent in maths—the highest level on record.

Enhancing pupils' mathematics requires us to fully support those capable of the highest attainment in the subject, and since 2018 we have funded the advanced mathematics support programme to increase participation in core mathematics, AS and A-level mathematics, and further maths. My hon. Friend has A-levels in maths and further maths: I am trying to work out what the third one is, but perhaps he can tell me.

Bob Blackman: Applied mathematics.

Nick Gibb: Of course.

The advanced mathematics support programme also supports improved teaching of level 3 maths qualifications. Additional targeted support is offered in areas of low social mobility and low participation in level 3 maths, to increase opportunities for all students to study the subject beyond the age of 16. Since the programme began, it has reached 86% of state-funded schools and colleges in England, with over 3,000 participating in at least one form of its maths support.

Our reforms and interventions have shown that no pupil's maths destiny is fixed, as targeted support and proven teaching methods can dramatically improve attainment. To build on our progress, we have announced a fully funded national professional qualification for primary school maths leaders, to improve pupil outcomes still further. That will include instruction in how to train other teachers in maths mastery pedagogy, and we expect it to be available to all primary schools from February next year. We will update the targeted support fund for the 2023-24 year to provide additional funding and incentivise uptake by teachers.

A good understanding of maths has significant benefits for young people's economic prospects, as has been discussed in this short debate, and a mathematically literate population is essential for a strong economy, as I know my hon. Friend will agree. We are one of the few countries in the OECD where young people do not routinely study some form of maths until the age of 18. The Prime Minister recently confirmed his ambition for all young people to study maths until the age of 18, which will equip them with the knowledge they need to succeed, whatever their chosen career. Indeed, he announced the policy at the London Screen Academy, which is where young people over the age of 16 are taught to make movies. If we get this right, it will deliver a transformative change for our economy and society.

The maths to 18 expert advisory group has now been established to guide the next stages of our thinking. It will consider both the maths needed by the changing employment market and the most effective way that this can be taught. To support those aims, the Government

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will commission research on post-16 maths provision around the world, so that our curriculum can rival those of the best-performing countries. Additionally, the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education will work with employers to review the maths content in apprenticeships. I look forward to hearing the group's conclusions on how we can enhance young people's maths knowledge before they start work and make Britain more globally competitive.

Teachers already work tirelessly to deliver high-quality maths education. Rolling out maths to a substantially larger post-16 cohort will require a greater workforce, trained and equipped to teach young people the maths skills that they need, and we will work closely with schools and colleges to do that sustainably. We are already expanding the Taking Teaching Further programme, delivering funding for further education colleges to recruit and offer early career support to those with relevant knowledge and industry experience to retrain as FE teachers, and we will launch a financial incentive pilot this year for up to 355 teachers that will be targeted at some of the hardest to fill subjects, including maths.

We know it is not enough to bolster the abilities of the up-and-coming workforce: as has been pointed out by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East, some 8 million adults in England have maths skills below those expected of a nine-year-old. We announced the Multiply adult numeracy programme in 2021, which is the first priority of the UK shared prosperity fund, the Government's flagship fund for supporting people and places. That programme teaches adults maths that they can use in everyday life, and can support them to attain a formal qualification, such as functional skills or the GCSE. Some 81 local areas in England are receiving up to £270 million in funding up to 2024-25, and that programme has already reached over 10,000 people.

Following National Numeracy Day, I would like to restate the Government's commitment to maths as an essential pillar of children's education. It enables them to build logical thinking and intellect, while equipping them with practical competency for work and life. The Prime Minister wants to change how we value maths as a country while making a positive difference to people's lives, their career prospects and the economy, and we hope to build on the advances in school-age teaching in the past decade to ensure that every young person leaves education with the maths they need to succeed in modern life.

3.47 pm

Bob Blackman: Thank you, Dame Maria, for presiding over the debate, and I thank colleagues for their contributions. The hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter

Grant) posed a number of questions and highlighted a number of examples of the bad use of maths that, I suspect, would have had many of our colleagues scratching their heads, not quite understanding what he was alluding to. That probably demonstrates why so few of our colleagues have come to speak in today's debate.

The hon. Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan) reminded me of Douglas Adams, one of my favourite authors who is sadly deceased. Apart from writing "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy", he also wrote "The Meaning of Liff", and one of the great words I always remember from that book is "bodmin"—when a group of friends go out, the bill is presented and everyone puts in what they consider to be their share, there is always a balance left. That is a "bodmin"—the balance that someone has failed to calculate. I thank the hon. Member for his offer of taking up a mathematics tutorship, but I am looking forward to continuing to represent the good citizens of Harrow East for many years to come.

My right hon. Friend the Minister, of course, has relayed exactly what the Government are laying out on numeracy. One of the important points that the Government are taking action on is rolling out a clear programme for young people in schools and beyond, enabling them to acquire those skills. We need to combat the gender gap in maths as well, because at the moment, from bitter experience, young women tend to move away from mathematics in an unfair way. Those who do go into mathematics are highly skilled and brilliant and succeed in life, but we need to get this idea that mathematics is not cool—it is not for them—out of the system in many respects. Equally, I was glad that the Minister relayed some of the actions that the Government are taking to combat the lack of numeracy in older people. That is holding our country back, and we need to ensure that those people who possibly have a great fear of maths and do not want to share that fact get the skills they need, so that they can contribute to our society in a far better way.

Dame Maria, I thank you and others for the debate. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing us to have it, and note the fact that we have managed to continue the debate long after the main Chamber has adjourned. That just proves how important mathematics is, not only in today's society but in the future.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered National Numeracy Day.

3.50 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 18 May 2023

TREASURY

Her Late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II: Funeral and Related Events

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): The death of Her Late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II on 8 September 2022 and the period of national mourning that followed was a moment of huge national significance.

During this period, many hundreds of thousands of people came in person to pay their respects, at the Lying at Rest in Edinburgh, the Lying in State in Westminster, as well as in London and Windsor for the state funeral on 19 September. Many more people also came out to support His Majesty The King and other members of the Royal Family as they travelled around the UK during this time.

The Government's priorities were that these events ran smoothly and with the appropriate level of dignity, while at all times ensuring the safety and security of the public.

As Departments finalise their accounts ahead of publication in the coming months, the Government are now able to publish an estimate of the costs associated with delivery of these events by the main Government Departments and devolved Administrations involved, as follows.

<i>Body</i>	<i>Estimated costs incurred</i>
Department for Culture, Media and Sport	£57.420 million
Department for Transport	£2.565 million
Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office	£2.096 million
Home Office	£73.68 million
Ministry of Defence	£2.890 million
Northern Ireland Office	£2.134 million
Scottish Government	£18.756 million
Welsh Government	£2.202 million
Total	£161.743 million

All figures are the marginal costs, meaning money spent specifically on the events, as opposed to costs that would have been incurred in any case. Where necessary, additional funding was provided by the Treasury to meet these costs. This included fully refunding the Scottish Government, Welsh Government and Northern Ireland Office for their respective costs, which in turn they were able to repay to partners who also incurred costs.

[HCWS784]

Double Taxation Convention: San Marino

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Victoria Atkins): A double taxation convention with San Marino was signed in London on 17 May. The text of the convention is available on HM Revenue and Customs' pages of the gov.uk website and will be deposited in the Libraries of

both Houses. The text of the convention will be scheduled to a draft Order in Council and laid before the House of Commons in due course.

[HCWS782]

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Announcing the Public Body Review of the British Tourist Authority

The Minister for Data and Digital Infrastructure (Sir John Whittingdale): Today we are announcing that the second stage of the public bodies review into the British Tourist Authority is under way.

The public bodies review programme delivers against the commitments made in the declaration on Government reform to increase both the effectiveness of public bodies and departmental sponsorship, making Government work better in service of the public. Public body reviews will be underpinned by broad minimum requirements covering efficiency, efficacy, accountability and governance. The review will follow guidance published in April 2022 by the Cabinet Office: "Guidance on the undertaking of Reviews of Public Bodies".

The British Tourist Authority trades as both VisitEngland and VisitBritain, both of which are classed as executive non-departmental public bodies of DCMS. The British Tourist Authority was set up by the Development of Tourism Act 1969, with its main aim to support the development of Great Britain's tourism industry.

The Department agreed to commence a full-scale review into the British Tourist Authority. Emir Feisal has been appointed as the independent lead reviewer to lead the review. He will work with a review team composed of officials from the Department. The review team has drafted the terms of reference for the review in consultation with the lead reviewer, the Department and the British Tourist Authority. These set the scope of the review and, among other things, will cover how the British Tourist Authority is supporting places across every part of the UK to develop and market a high-quality tourist offering, boosting jobs, and helping to level up the economy. In conducting the review, officials will engage with a broad range of stakeholders in the tourism sector across the UK.

As set out by the Cabinet Office guidance, the review will report to the Government, and the Government will publish the conclusions of the review alongside any departmental response in due course.

[HCWS780]

EDUCATION

Children Missing Education

The Minister for Schools (Nick Gibb): The Government are committed to ensuring that all children, especially the most vulnerable in our society, are safe and have access to an excellent education.

The Department for Education has today launched a call for evidence on "Improving Support for Children Missing Education" in England, which is open until

20 July 2023. This builds on other policies to improve the lives of children, including the children's social care implementation strategy and consultation "Stable Homes, Built on Love", and plans to reform special educational needs provision via the "Special Educational Needs and Disabilities and Alternative Provision Improvement Plan".

Children missing education (CME) are children of compulsory school age who are not registered pupils at a school and are not receiving suitable education otherwise than at school. CME are at significant risk of under-achieving and becoming NEET—not in education, employment or training—later in life. More immediately, they are also at significant risk of becoming victims of harm, exploitation or radicalisation.

CME make up a very small minority of school-aged children and some will be missing education for a short period—for example, while they move between schools during the academic year. Children who miss longer periods of education present greater concerns, and it is especially important that these children can be effectively identified and supported.

The legislative framework places responsibilities for CME on parents, schools and local authorities. In 2016 the Department issued statutory "Children Missing Education" guidance that sets key principles to enable local authorities in England to carry out their legal duty to make arrangements for identifying, as far as it is possible to do so, CME. This guidance is available on gov.uk.

The "Improving Support for Children Missing Education" call for evidence seeks to strengthen the understanding of CME and the challenges that those responsible for addressing CME face. This call for evidence seeks comments, evidence and insight regarding:

- How local authorities, schools and other agencies identify and support CME;
- The challenges that the sector faces in identifying and supporting CME, and how these could be addressed; and
- How best practice in identifying and supporting CME can be promoted.

Since autumn 2022, the Department has also been gathering aggregate, termly data on CME from local authorities in England on a voluntary basis. This data is helping the Government to improve our understanding of the CME cohort and the support that local authorities may need. Headline figures from the autumn 2022 and spring 2023 collection will be published today on gov.uk. These are experimental statistics and the quality of the data returns should improve over time.

[HCWS781]

NORTHERN IRELAND

Independent Reviewer of National Security Arrangements: 2022 Report

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Chris Heaton-Harris): The role of the independent reviewer of national security arrangements in Northern Ireland is to monitor compliance with annex E of the St Andrews agreement 2006, reviewing the relationship between MI5 and PSNI in handling national security matters.

Professor Marie Breen Smyth, the independent reviewer of national security arrangements in Northern Ireland, has sent me her report for 2022. What follows is a summary

of the main findings of the report covering the period from 1 January 2022 to 31 December 2022. Professor Breen Smyth states:

"My contact with MI5 and the PSNI was largely conducted in person. I was given a clear insight of both the current direction, the prevailing budgetary conditions and the interaction between both organisations. The policy of wider collaboration and further community initiatives has continued.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, due to the restrictions introduced by the UK government, the level of activity amongst terrorist and paramilitary groups abated somewhat. With the ending of restrictions and a return to previous levels of mobility and freedom of movement, that suppressive effect has ended and these groups have returned to their previous levels of operational activity.

Although the threat assessment for Northern Ireland was lowered in 2022 from Severe to Substantial, in their Fifth Report the Independent Reporting Commission pointed out that paramilitarism remains a clear and present danger. The threat from Dissident Republican (DR) groups remains a concern for law enforcement.

The two main loyalist groups, the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) and the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) continue to operate, and sections of both groups, largely in the Belfast area, are involved in intimidation, criminality and violence.

The PSNI reported that work continued on broader communication and improving protocols between PSNI and MI5 in order to increase cooperation in releasing information whilst maintaining security protocols. Dialogue between the Human Rights Advisor to the Policing Board and MI5 has established a relationship of mutual understanding. Regular meetings and exchanges at a high level between PSNI and MI5 are noticeable and commendable."

"My conclusions in relation to Annex E of the St Andrews agreement are as follows."

To reinforce this comprehensive set of safeguards, the UK Government confirm that they accept and will ensure that effect is given to the five key principles, which the chief constable has identified as crucial to the effective operation of the arrangement:

a: All Security Service intelligence relating to terrorism in Northern Ireland will be visible to the PSNI

I am informed that the PSNI continues to have sight of all security service intelligence relating to NIRT. There is compliance.

b: PSNI will be informed of all Security Service counter terrorist activities relating to Northern Ireland

There are a number of processes in place to ensure that the PSNI is fully informed. There is compliance.

c: Security Service intelligence will be disseminated within PSNI according to the current PSNI dissemination policy, and using police procedures

This continues to be organisational practice. There is compliance.

d: The great majority of national security CHIS in Northern Ireland will continue to be run by PSNI officers under existing handling protocols

The PSNI and security service continue to work jointly on cases and arrangements for this continue to be jointly negotiated and agreed. There is compliance.

e: There will be no diminution of the PSNI's responsibility to comply with the Human Rights Act or the Policing

PSNI continues to operate within the National Security arena in strict compliance with ECHR. There is compliance.

[HCWS783]

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