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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Wednesday 7 June 2023

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

The Minister for Women and Equalities was asked—

Criminal Justice System: People with Neurodivergent Conditions

1. **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): What discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Justice on the treatment of people with neurodivergent conditions in the criminal justice system. [905232]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mike Freer): The Lord Chancellor is settling into his new role and has not yet had a chance to speak to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, but I can reassure the hon. Lady that, at director level, cross-departmental working groups have been working hard. As she will know from the Ministry of Justice action plan, which was updated in January this year, significant progress has been made on neurodiversity.

Kerry McCarthy: I thank the Minister for his response, and for telephoning me yesterday. As I said during that conversation, it is estimated that one in four prisoners have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and screening prisoners for that condition at an early stage—within a week of their entering prison, say—would not only help to prevent prison suicides, but aid rehabilitation and eventual resettlement. Will the Minister undertake to talk to his colleagues, particularly those on the Back Benches who have been working on this, about the need for such cases to be identified as early as possible?

Mike Freer: I can reassure the hon. Lady: I understand that prisoners are indeed screened in their first week, as are those on probation. However, there is more work to be done, and I am more than happy to arrange meetings with the hon. Lady and with any other colleague who wishes to pursue in more depth the work that we are doing in respect of both prisons and probation.

Sir Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con): May I commend the work that the Government are doing in pursuance of the call for evidence on neurodiversity that I initiated when I was in office? I note that 80 neurodiversity support managers have been appointed, but what more can be done to ensure that all our prisons have neurodiversity officers who can train other staff as well as screening prisoners who come into the system for a range of neurodiverse conditions?

Mike Freer: I pay tribute to the work that my right hon. and learned Friend has done in this regard. I know that he took it very seriously and was passionate about this issue. In fact, we now have 100 neurodiversity support managers rather than 80: we have made significant progress, but there are still have 22 vacancies. We have more work to do on the screening, and we have more work to do to ensure that the data collection is both consistent and robust.

Trans and Non-binary Children

2. **John Nicolson** (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): What guidance her Department plans to provide to schools on supporting trans and non-binary children. [905234]

3. **Mr Ben Bradshaw** (Exeter) (Lab): Whether it is her policy that schools should tell parents if their children are trans or non-binary. [905235]

The Minister for Schools (Nick Gibb): Our schools, colleges and teachers are committed to helping all pupils and students to thrive and achieve their potential in a safe and respectful environment. Gender can be a complex and sensitive matter for schools, which is why we are working with the Minister for Women and Equalities, my right hon. Friend the Member for Saffron Walden (Kemi Badenoch), to develop guidance for schools in relation to gender-questioning pupils. We will be finalising the draft guidance shortly, and will hold a full public consultation on it.

John Nicolson: The hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) appears to think that “drag story time” in Elgin is one of the most pressing issues facing the country today. What signal does the Minister think that sends to vulnerable and bullied trans and other LGBT children?

Nick Gibb: We know that this is, as I said, a complex and sensitive matter. Many schools already deal with issues relating to gender-questioning children as well as the other issues to which the hon. Gentleman referred, but some schools feel a need for more support to enable them to help pupils and their parents and deal with concerns that are raised, which is why we are producing the draft guidance for schools. That guidance, which we will publish soon, will be followed by a public consultation.

Mr Bradshaw: In April *The Sunday Times* reported that the Government intended to instruct schools to tell parents if students were questioning their gender identity. Given that a third of LGBT young people would not feel confident about coming out to their parents, given that a quarter of homeless young people are LGBT young people who have been chucked out of their homes by their families, and given the statement by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children that no one should ever disclose someone's gender identity or sexuality against their will, other than in exceptional circumstances involving safeguarding, does the Minister agree that to instruct schools to “out” pupils to their families would be totally outrageous?

Nick Gibb: There is a difference between advice being given to a child by a particular teacher and decisions about children in which parental involvement is paramount,

and it is crucial for schools to ensure that parents are involved in such decisions. As I have said, we will publish draft guidance shortly and there will be a full public consultation on our proposed approach.

Mr Speaker: I call the Father of the House.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): We need to trust parents, and we should tell children to trust parents. We are right not to confuse sexual orientation with gender confusion and other things. Schools really do need to say to children and to parents, “You can trust us as a school to let you know if your child is in distress.”

Nick Gibb: I agree with my hon. Friend. Parental involvement is important in all these matters, and they are sensitive matters, but there is a difference between what the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) spoke about, where a child who is confused about their sexual orientation or other personal problems has a confidential discussion with teacher, and big decisions about gender transitioning, for example, where parental involvement is important. Any decision about such matters needs to be taken with parental involvement.

Miriam Cates (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Con): Last year, a YouGov poll found that around 80% of schools now have pupils who are trans identified, and Policy Exchange recently reported that four in 10 schools are operating policies of gender self-identification. Dr Hilary Cass has said that social transition is “not a neutral act” but a psychological intervention with unknown consequences for children’s welfare. Does the Minister agree that the new guidance for schools must make it clear that teachers are not qualified to make this psychological intervention and that the only safe approach is to protect children according to their biological sex?

Nick Gibb: As my hon. Friend will know, we are now producing guidance for schools on this sensitive matter. Draft guidance will be available shortly and we will consult on it. In order to provide the clearest possible guidance, we intend to consider pieces of work such as Dr Hilary Cass’s independent review of gender identity services to children and young people, which is ongoing.

Dame Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): There is already very good guidance, written by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, and I hope that the Minister will take account of that as he develops the Government’s guidance. Does he agree that this situation has now been highly politicised by particular people, to the detriment of those children and teachers who are trying to do their best in difficult circumstances? Will he explain why on earth it has taken the Government this long to publish the guidance, essentially leaving teachers without Government guidance in this very contested area? When will he support the work that teachers do?

Nick Gibb: In drafting the guidance, we have taken into account advice from experts such as the NSPCC and Dr Hilary Cass, as I have just mentioned to my hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Miriam Cates), but we have to get this guidance right. This is a sensitive matter. The drafting is happening right now and the guidance will be published shortly in draft. There will then be a full public consultation to ensure that all views are taken into account.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): Recent research by Policy Exchange suggests that more than 60% of schools do not reliably inform parents when their children express a wish to change gender. Many parents are concerned about schools keeping them in the dark about such important changes concerning their children, so can the Minister please confirm that parents must be kept informed of such an important change in behaviour in their child?

Nick Gibb: As I have said, parental involvement is paramount in any decisions about children, and it is important that schools work to ensure that parents are consulted before any decisions are made regarding a child socially transitioning. These are issues that we are thinking about and discussing with experts as we draft the guidance, which will be published shortly and will then be available for public consultation.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): Schools, parents and pupils who need guidance on these issues are sick and tired of reading conflicting rumours about the Government’s plans in the newspapers. Will the Minister confirm that the reason for the delay is that the Minister for Women and Equalities does not agree with the Education Secretary, who does not agree with the Minister for Children, who does not agree with the Prime Minister?

Nick Gibb: No, we are working closely with my right hon. Friend the Minister for Women and Equalities. We are consulting experts on drafting comprehensive guidance on a very sensitive matter, and we need to get it right. Many schools are dealing with these issues very successfully, day in and day out, but some schools want advice. They want good-quality advice, and the guidance on that is being drafted right now. It will be published shortly and made available for public consultation.

Anneliese Dodds: We have had noises off and rumours about this in the newspapers for over a year, and still no delivery. The sad truth is that schools are being left in limbo by a Government who are, yet again, focused on internal battles. Their LGBT action plan has collapsed, they are at war on banning conversion therapy and they are now squabbling over schools guidance too. Will the Minister apologise to the LGBT+ people who have been failed by this playground politics?

Nick Gibb: There is a range of views, as we have seen in the newspapers, but the Government are united in our determination to have very high-quality guidance for schools. This guidance has been drafted and it is in a very good state. It is ready for publication, and it will be published shortly. There will then be a full public consultation to make sure that all the views expressed in the newspapers, by the hon. Lady and by right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House, can be taken into account as we finalise this important guidance for schools.

Covid-19 Government Communications: People with Disabilities

4. **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): If she will make an assessment of the adequacy of Government communications during the covid-19 pandemic for people with disabilities.

[905236]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Alex Burghart): Throughout the pandemic, the Government took their responsibilities to people with disabilities extremely seriously. We all remember the daily press conferences, which almost always had signers present, but that was just one element of a much broader communications strategy that ensured guidance and information were provided in easy-read, large text, audio and many other formats.

Liz Twist: Many people with disabilities would disagree with the Minister's assessment of the communications and feel that, throughout the pandemic, the Government often failed to provide specific communications to disabled people about their rights and access to support. What steps is he taking to ensure that public health announcements, public health information and daily briefings are accessible to and are reaching people with disabilities, particularly those with a learning disability?

Alex Burghart: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. On covid, I understand that this is something the inquiry will be considering. On her broader point, she will know that the NHS and publicly funded social care in this country have a duty, under section 250 of the Health and Social Care Act 2012, to ensure that patients and people in care receive information in formats appropriate for them. I know the NHS takes that responsibility extremely seriously.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): Research from Scope shows that, in the last four years, the cost of running a disabled household rose from £583 a month to £975 a month. The Conservative cost of living crisis has forced disabled people to choose between using life-saving equipment and food. After 13 years of this Government, there are now over 1 million disabled people living in poverty. What action has the Minister taken to support these people?

Alex Burghart: The hon. Lady will know the extraordinary lengths to which this Government have gone to support people through the cost of living crisis. Help has been extended to people of all means and abilities, including the people she is speaking about, and we will continue to do what is necessary to help them.

Major Conditions Strategy: Women

5. **Nicola Richards (West Bromwich East) (Con):** What steps the Government are taking to ensure that the major conditions strategy improves health outcomes for women. [905237]

8. **Tom Randall (Gedling) (Con):** What steps the Government are taking to ensure that the major conditions strategy improves health outcomes for women. [905241]

The Minister for Women (Maria Caulfield): This Conservative Government are the first Government to produce a women's health strategy, and in the first year we are already delivering on our eight key priorities, many of which are in the major conditions work, including dementia, which is the leading killer of women, and musculoskeletal conditions such as osteoporosis. This shows that this Government are prioritising the improvement of women's health across the board.

Nicola Richards: It is essential that the major conditions strategy helps to improve the care offered by the NHS, especially to women suffering from breast cancer. I recently visited Chai Cancer Care with my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey) to see the blueprint it has developed for how best to support those affected by cancer. Will the Minister congratulate Chai Cancer Care on its dedication to patients and families? And will she ensure that the major conditions strategy goes as far as possible to offer better, more joined-up care to women across the country?

Maria Caulfield: I thank my hon. Friend for her work in this space. She is a vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on breast cancer, and she also has first-hand experience of the impact of breast cancer. I congratulate Chai Cancer Care and all the charities supporting women who are going through breast cancer. It is important that the major conditions strategy not only looks at improving clinical outcomes, which are important, but supports the care that women receive—women often undergo multiple treatments in different clinical settings. That is also a priority in the major conditions strategy.

Tom Randall: Last week, I had a long conversation with a constituent who is caring for her husband, who has had dementia for the past decade. We all know that many people like her, mainly women, are quietly caring for loved ones who are battling diseases outlined in the major conditions strategy. Does my hon. Friend agree that the experiences of these people need to be heard? Will she encourage them to take part in the call for evidence on the strategy before it closes at the end of this month?

Maria Caulfield: My hon. Friend is right on this and I encourage everyone to go to the gov.uk website, because the consultation closes at the end of the month. I mentioned that dementia is the leading cause of death in women, but many women are also caring for loved ones who are battling the disease, not just for days or weeks, but for months and years. As I said, this is about improving not just outcomes on dementia, but access and the support we provide to those who care for those with dementia. Listening to experts and experience is a key priority.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): We all welcome the major conditions strategy, but will the Minister reassure us about something? Women experience so many conditions differently from men, particularly in relation to heart attacks, and there is a lack of awareness about these things. Will the strategy examine how awareness of these differences and of symptoms to look for can be improved?

Maria Caulfield: The hon. Lady makes an excellent point, and one of our eight priorities in the first year is improving access to information. Later this summer, the NHS website will be launching a women's information portal, which will be specifically about women's health needs. So it will provide information on some of the key conditions that women suffer from, and it will be a go-to and reliable source for women on their health needs. She does well to raise this point.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister very much for that response and for the £10 million that the Department has set aside for the breast screening programme on the UK mainland. In Northern Ireland, the number of those with breast cancer is rising, which is concerning. What steps will she take to ensure that the devolved nations are not left behind on outcomes for women?

Maria Caulfield: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. He will know that health is a devolved issue, but we are working closely with all four nations, because we want to ensure that we have joined-up working, particularly in the screening programme, where we have some catching up to do post covid.

Topical Questions

T1. [905257] **Chris Law** (Dundee West) (SNP): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Minister for Equalities (Stuart Andrew): This is the first opportunity I have had to pay tribute to our former colleague, and one of my closest friends, Karen Lumley. It was a privilege for me to call her a friend for nearly 35 years. We all remember her amazing character, infectious laugh and ever-changing coloured hair, but she was also proud to represent Redditch, she was a passionate defender of its people, she campaigned hard for the local hospital and she had public service in her core. Knowing her as I did, I can say that she was an amazing friend. It was also a great privilege to know her family, and my thoughts are with Richard, Lizzie and Chris, who are touched by the messages they have received from those in all parts of the House. God bless you, Karen. Rest in peace. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."]

It is June, it is Pride Month and it is a time for us all to celebrate the LGBT community and all it has to offer. It is also an opportunity to reflect on many of the challenges that LGBT people face, and I look forward to seeing what more can be done on those. I also look forward to visiting many organisations that support that community.

Chris Law: Members on these Benches would like to share our sympathies as well.

It is simply not good enough for the UK Government to absolve themselves of responsibility for the abhorrent practice of forced adoption, which affected hundreds of thousands of families from the 1940s to the 1970s. Rather than apologise on behalf of society, will the Minister finally find a backbone, acknowledge that the state failed to protect those affected and commit to issuing a formal apology on behalf of the UK Government, as the Scottish and Welsh Governments have already done?

Stuart Andrew: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comment at the beginning there. He raises an important point. Obviously, that issue is not within my portfolio area, but I will certainly take it up with the Minister responsible and come back to him on it, if he will allow me to do so.

T2. [905258] **Dr Luke Evans** (Bosworth) (Con): Recently, residents of Hinckley and Bosworth raised with me their experiences as disabled travellers. I know the Government are concentrating on the inclusive transport

strategy, but can they update me on what that will look like tangibly when it comes to public transport—flights, buses and so on—for the likes of my constituents?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): I thank my hon. Friend for campaigning on this issue. Having inclusive transport is important. He is right that the inclusive transport strategy is integral to our ambition to make transport fully accessible by 2030. My colleagues in the Department for Transport are committed to delivering that strategy to make real practical differences from accessible platforms through to accessible buses. We will be able to update him shortly with more progress.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): The UK Government recently published statistics showing a 35% gender pension gap in private pensions, and recent research by the TUC suggests that more than one in 10 women are in jobs where their employers did not have to enter them into a workplace pension compared with fewer than one in 20 men. According to calculations from the Prospect union, the income gap between men and women in retirement is therefore now 40.5%, which is more than twice the level of the gender pay gap. What action is the Department taking with Cabinet colleagues to close that shameful gap?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mims Davies): I do understand the hon. Lady's point. We remain committed to our ambition to remove the lower earnings limit, as we set out in 2017. That will proportionately benefit the lowest earners the most, including women working part-time.

T5. [905261] **Andrew Jones** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): Last year, women established more than 150,000 new companies in the UK, which is twice as many as four years ago and the highest ever, yet the number of women founding businesses remains well below that of men. What steps are being taken to further support female entrepreneurs?

Maria Caulfield: We are committed to supporting female entrepreneurs, particularly in the high-growth sector. That is why we have launched the women-led high-growth enterprise taskforce, which has found that venture capital is a serious barrier. Currently, for every £1 of venture capital, 89p goes to companies led by men and only a penny to women. That is why getting access to venture capital and funding opportunities is a priority for female entrepreneurs.

T3. [905259] **Marion Fellows** (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): According to research from the Resolution Foundation, the disability income gap is still at 44%, leaving disabled people hugely exposed to the rising cost of essentials in the context of the cost of living crisis. What steps is the Department taking with the Department for Work and Pensions to ensure that work coaches and disability advisers understand the barriers to employment faced by disabled people? Will the Department urge DWP colleagues to consider what additional specialist support could be offered to disabled jobseekers?

Mims Davies: Our disability employment adviser is there to understand exactly those needs and support. I point people to the benefits calculator on gov.uk, and

say that there will be further cost of living payment support. The House will be keen to know that the Minister of State for Disabled People, Health and Work will be joining the conference of states parties to the convention on the rights of persons with disabilities and focusing on how we can get more people into work and progressing and thriving.

T7. [905263] **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): What plans does my right hon. Friend have to amend the Equality Act 2010, which would give us the opportunity to remove caste as a protected characteristic?

Stuart Andrew: At the moment, the Government have no plans to amend that Act. Obviously, we keep everything under further consideration.

T4. [905260] **Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): The Chancellor's spring Budget announced measures to get the over-50s to return or stay in work, but did not announce any support for those experiencing menopause. The UK Government have rejected most of the recommendations in the report on menopause by the Women and Equalities Committee, whose Chair has said that it is a missed opportunity to protect vast numbers of women from leaving the workforce. Why have the UK Government not followed the Committee's recommendations?

Mims Davies: We have appointed a Government champion on menopause matters, Helen Tomlinson, who is doing sterling work. Our 50PLUS coaches in jobcentres are supporting women to progress, and I urge all employers to focus on supporting women, adjusting the workplace and listening to their needs so that 50-plus can be the most important, progressive and positive time of women's working lives.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): Some 78% of top UK energy companies have no women in executive director positions, and 28% have no women on the board. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we need to do far more to help women into science, technology, engineering and maths jobs?

Maria Caulfield: My hon. Friend is correct. We have made great progress in getting young girls to take STEM subjects—the numbers are up 31%—but the challenge is to get them into work. The FTSE women leaders review has set a target of 40% of FTSE 350 companies having women on their board. The STEM Returners programme is key to getting experienced women back into the workplace and on to those boards.

Mr Speaker: May I make an announcement? I want to tell the House about the success last night of the House of Commons teams in the tug-of-war. We beat the House of Lords 4-0.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [905192] **David Johnston** (Wantage) (Con): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 7 June.

The Deputy Prime Minister (Oliver Dowden): I have been asked to reply. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is in Washington at the invitation of President Biden. They will be discussing co-operation on a range of issues, including artificial intelligence and global trade, and of course continuing our leadership in galvanising international support for the people of Ukraine. This week is Carers Week, and I know colleagues across the House will wish to join me in paying tribute to the huge contribution that unpaid carers make to our society. This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

David Johnston: At the election, the Labour party committed to abolishing standard assessment tests, academy schools and Ofsted—three policies given to it by an education union that also opposed this Government's use of phonics. Yet, thanks to this Government's focus on phonics, English primary school children have just been ranked the best readers in Europe. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that is another example of how, on the Conservative side, we have policy to meet the needs of children, rather than the demands of trade unionists?

The Deputy Prime Minister: It will not surprise my hon. Friend to hear that I absolutely agree with him. Driving up literacy rates is central to our plan to grow the economy, so I am delighted at those latest figures showing that children in England are the best readers in the western world. Why is that? Because, since 2010, we have raised the number of schools rated good or outstanding by nearly 30%. The verdict is clear: only the Conservatives can be trusted with our children's future.

Mr Speaker: I call the deputy Leader of the Opposition.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): Speaking of the last election, the Tory manifesto promised to end the abuse of the judicial review. How is it going?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I welcome the much shorter question from the right hon. Lady. Let me remind her of a few facts about the covid inquiry. We set it up, we have provided it with more than 55,000 documents so far, and we have given it all the financial resources it needs so that we can learn the lessons from the pandemic. However, in Wales they also had a pandemic, and what have the Labour-run Wales authorities done there? No independent inquiry in Wales. As ever, it is one rule for Labour and another for everyone else.

Angela Rayner: The Deputy Prime Minister pretends that it is complicated, but it is simple: the Government set up the inquiry to get to the truth, then blocked that inquiry from getting the information that it asked for, and now they are taking it to court. I know that he considers himself a man of the people, so using his vast knowledge of working-class Britain, does he think that working people will thank him for spending hundreds of thousands of pounds of their money on loophole lawyers so that the Government can obstruct the covid inquiry?

The Deputy Prime Minister: We will provide the inquiry with each and every document related to covid, including all internal discussions in any form, as requested,

while, crucially, protecting what is wholly and unambiguously irrelevant. Essentially, the right hon. Lady is calling for years' worth of documents and messages between named individuals to be in scope. That could cover anything from civil servants' medical conditions to intimate details about their families.

I find it extraordinary that the right hon. Lady should lecture us on value for money for the taxpayer, when I understand that she has now purchased two pairs of noise-cancelling headphones on expenses. I will be fair to her: if I had to attend shadow Cabinet meetings, I think I would want to tune them out, too.

Mr Speaker: The Deputy Prime Minister was very good in saying that he welcomed short questions. I would also welcome shorter answers.

Angela Rayner: All we are asking for is what the covid inquiry has asked for. Across the world, covid inquiries are well under way, while this Government hide information and shell out public money on legal bills for the Uxbridge One—the former Prime Minister is now demanding another £1 million to pay for his new lawyers. I know that the Deputy Prime Minister and his former boss have fallen out, and maybe he wants to patch things up, but can he seriously say that that is a good use of taxpayers' money?

The Deputy Prime Minister: If we want to talk about relationships between different people, I do not think that we need to search the right hon. Lady's WhatsApp messages to know that there is no communication between her and the leader of her party. I will happily stand up for our record on covid. When she and her party were carping from the sidelines, calling for longer lockdowns, I was working as Culture Secretary to keep our football clubs running, protect our theatres and museums, and deliver the largest cultural recovery package in the western world. That is the difference between her and me: while she was collecting titles, I was getting on with the job.

Angela Rayner: I know that for the last couple of years the Deputy Prime Minister has been trying to prep Prime Ministers for PMQs, but these punchlines are dire—he really needs to go back to school himself. Speaking of school, thousands of children are missing from school; absence has nearly doubled since before the pandemic. The Prime Minister says that he has maxed out on his support for school pupils, but why did the Government abandon their plans for a register of missing children?

The Deputy Prime Minister: On the specifics of the right hon. Lady's question, that is not the case: we continue to keep the policy under review. I am very proud of this Government's record on funding and support for schools: £4 billion more this year, £4 billion next year, and the result of all that investment is that we have the highest standards of reading in the entire western world. What a contrast from when the Labour party was in power.¹

Angela Rayner: There we have it: thousands of children missing; policy “under review” still. Let me ask the Deputy Prime Minister about something else that has gone missing. The Public Accounts Committee this

week revealed that Government fraud has increased fourfold, with Ministers overseeing the loss of £21 billion of taxpayers' money in the last two years. Can he tell us how much of our money they expect to recover?

The Deputy Prime Minister: We are working tirelessly to recover those funds, and we have made huge progress already. The Labour party talks about good use of taxpayers' money, but what do we have from it? Plans for an unfunded, £28 billion spending spree. What would that do? Drive up borrowing and push up interest rates, adding £1,000 to everyone's mortgage. I know that the Opposition are out of touch, but even the right hon. Lady must realise that Britain cannot afford Labour.

Angela Rayner: Britain cannot afford any more of the Conservatives. The right hon. Gentleman seems to have lost count: the answer is that only a quarter of the billions of pounds of taxpayers' money lost to fraud is expected to be clawed back. If the Government cannot get that public money back, they cannot be trusted with anything else. It has become a pattern of behaviour from the Conservatives—an inquiry missing evidence, schools missing pupils, taxpayers missing money and Ministers missing in action. All the while, working people pay the price for their mistakes. This week, the Public Accounts Committee also warned that this epic fraud and waste could happen all over again because Ministers are living in denial of the facts. If the Government cannot admit the truth, how on earth can they learn the lessons?

The Deputy Prime Minister: We are actually putting more resources in throughout this year to tackle fraud and error, and we continue to make real progress with it. This is quite extraordinary from the Labour party: while we work to drive down inflation and energy bills, the right hon. Lady is receiving £10,000 from Just Stop Oil backers, adopting their policies, backing protesters, blocking new production and forcing us to import more foreign oil and gas. For once, I find myself in agreement with the GMB union, which said that that is “naive”, has a “lack of intellectual rigour” and could decimate communities. Just like Labour.

Q4. [905195] Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): The latest route update for East West Rail has recently been published and unfortunately the link to Aylesbury is still just a dotted line on the map. I have raised the need for this vital link on several occasions in the House, because it would cut congestion on our roads, stimulate the economy and reduce air pollution. Each time, I have been asked to work with stakeholders to reduce the cost, and I am pleased to say that we have managed to do that. A much cheaper proposal is now on the table, so can my right hon. Friend change that dotted line into a solid line and give my constituents the railway they want?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I know that my hon. Friend is a tireless campaigner for this project, and I can assure him that the Department for Transport is working with Network Rail and East West Rail to consider the feasibility of lower-cost railway links on the Aylesbury spur. I know that he will continue to make that case vigorously.

1. [Official Report, 10 July 2023, Vol. 736, c. 5MC.]

Mr Speaker: We come to the deputy leader of the SNP.

Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): When the Prime Minister took office, he said that he would put economic stability and confidence at the heart of the Government. Today, UK interest rates are among the highest in the G20, and mortgage rates are rising back to nearly where they were after the former Prime Minister crashed the economy. Is it not the case that the Government's biggest achievement is that they are trashing the economy just a wee bit slower than their predecessor?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I do not know whether the hon. Lady has been following the news today, but the OECD has again upgraded our growth forecasts. A month ago, the whole nation came together to celebrate a wonderful moment of pomp, pageantry and pride in our nation. How did the hon. Lady describe it? She called it "a pantomime". The real pantomime is the SNP in Scotland.

Mhairi Black: I do not know what question the Deputy Prime Minister was answering, but let me try another one. This Government plan to cut taxes for the richest and spend £6 billion imprisoning people fleeing war and persecution, and have lost £21 billion to Government fraud throughout this pandemic. Is the view from the Prime Minister's luxury helicopter so skewed that during a cost of living crisis, he thinks that is what people's priorities are?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I am going to take no lectures on profligacy from the SNP. Actually, what is it that this Government have done? We have provided record increases to the personal allowance, meaning that a person working full time on the minimum wage has seen a £1,000 reduction in their tax.

Q5. [905196] Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): Fylde has many vibrant small shops at the beating heart of the economy, but although St Annes town centre has fantastic potential, its layout, quite frankly, is becoming tired. Investment is needed to reinvigorate the town centre, better connecting it to the seafront and reinvigorating the town. What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to continue this Government's levelling-up mission to deliver for towns such as St Annes?

The Deputy Prime Minister: That is precisely why we have created the levelling-up fund. There is £3.6 billion within that in the towns fund to be invested in high streets up and down the country. We will be outlining the third round of submissions to that fund, and I am quite sure that my hon. Friend will make a very vigorous case for funding for his constituency during that round.

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Yesterday, I met Karen. Karen is a carer for her husband Alan, who has Parkinson's and Lewy body dementia. She told me how hard it is to get people with power just to listen to her. Like so many carers, Karen feels her caring work just is not valued; at times, she has wanted to give up, but knows she must carry on because of her husband. Remarkable carers such as Karen save the Government more than the entire NHS budget, so will the Government

finally recognise the value of Britain's family carers and not just pay tribute to them, but give them the financial and practical support they deserve?

The Deputy Prime Minister: Of course, I would like to join the right hon. Gentleman in paying tribute to Karen and to hard-working unpaid carers up and down the country. I know he speaks from personal experience about this issue as well. We have provided £2.3 billion of support for social care, with an additional £25 million committed to putting people at the heart of care in the "People at the Heart of Care" White Paper, and £327 million is also committed to the better care fund.

Q6. [905197] Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): Many of my constituents are deeply concerned about the proposals for the 440-acre Hinckley national rail freight interchange, and the impact that this proposed site will have on the environment and, for example, on infrastructure such as Narborough railway station. I know the Deputy Prime Minister cannot talk about an individual planning application—that decision is for central Government to make—but can he give an assurance to my South Leicestershire constituents and Blaby district councillors such as Ben Taylor, Maggie Wright, Terry Richardson, Mike Shirley and others that the voice of my constituents will be heard in that planning application?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I know from the vigorous campaigning of my hon. Friend that his constituents' voice has been, and will be, heard. As he knows, I cannot comment on individual cases. What I can say is that I have experience of this in my own constituency, and I know what a blight can be created by those rail freight projects, so I do have every sympathy for the case that my hon. Friend is making.

Q2. [905193] Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): This week, we heard plans for two universal basic income pilots in England. Similar schemes have been planned for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. With the progress of the gig economy and the acceleration of artificial intelligence, it is clear that the working environment will need to be drastically overhauled. Will this Government waken up to the reality of the situation and instruct both the Department for Work and Pensions and His Majesty's Revenue and Customs to engage with those pilots, so that we can constructively assess their pros and cons and work to safeguard a less precarious future for the next generation?

The Deputy Prime Minister: The Government and I have never been convinced by the case for a universal basic income. We are not alone in that; it is also the position of Paul Johnson at the Institute for Fiscal Studies. I think a much better solution is to create more jobs, which this Government have done, and to cut taxes on working people, which is what this Government have done. That is the route to prosperity for people up and down the country.

Q7. [905198] Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Revitalising Oldway, regenerating our town centres and helping Torbay's high-tech sector to grow will deliver levelling up for Torbay. What expectations does the Deputy

Prime Minister have of the new levelling-up partnership in focusing Government effort and resources on doing that?

The Deputy Prime Minister: As I am sure my hon. Friend knows, levelling-up partnerships are committed to work hand in hand with 20 places across England in most need of that levelling up. They are backed by £400 million of investment, and I know that he will make the case most robustly for funding for his constituency.

Q3. [905194] Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): After 13 years, the Government have repeatedly broken their promise to repair social care. Post-pandemic, I have been visiting sheltered housing schemes in Hornsey and Wood Green, and time after time, basic services, such as dentistry, podiatry and befriending, are all missing. Will the Government take urgent action and repair that mess, or will it be down to Labour again to pick up the pieces?

The Deputy Prime Minister: For the NHS as a whole, the Government have provided record additional funding. Indeed, since we came to power in 2010, funding is up £70 billion. In addition, in respect of social care, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor has provided a further £2.3 billion of support to that vital sector.

Q8. [905199] Dame Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con): I congratulate the Government on their determination to bring forward the roll-out of electronic patient records for everyone in England. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that that gives us a brilliant opportunity to roll out the digital version of the red book that is so transformational for every family in giving their baby the best start in life?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I totally agree with my right hon. Friend, and I know what a tireless campaigner she has been on this issue, both in and out of government. I am happy to confirm that the so-called digital red book will be rolled out, and we expect it to be delivered over the course of the next two years.

Q12. [905203] Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): The Deputy Prime Minister likes to call himself Mr Normal—he went to a normal school, and he understands normal people. We know that normal people are struggling in this Tory cost of living crisis, including nurses, for example, who he said had unreasonable wage demands. This is the same person who, on top of this £154,000 salary, charged two businesses more than £13,000 for just 20 hours' work. That is £670 an hour. Does Mr Normal really think he is worth 65 times a band 2 nurse?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I am not quite sure what the question was aiming at, but I can say to the hon. Gentleman that this Government have provided more than £3,000 of support to help people with the cost of living. Why have we been able to do that? It is thanks to the strength of our economy and the strength of our Union. What is happening in Scotland? The SNP Government are putting taxes up on ordinary, hard-working people.

Q9. [905200] Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con): We are all concerned about the 81,000 children who are not on the school register, but are under the term “home-educated”. No one—neither local authorities, nor schools—can honestly answer the question of how many children are not in school. Therefore, how can we know that every child is safe and suitably educated? These children are out of sight and out of mind. The Secretary of State for Education has said that this is one of her priorities, as has the Education Committee. Can I ask my right hon. Friend to expedite my ten-minute rule Bill to place a duty on local authorities to maintain a register of children who are not in school, so that we can ensure that every child is visible, safe, suitably educated and receiving the support to enable them to thrive?

The Deputy Prime Minister: We want to ensure that all children are safe and have access to an excellent education. Of course, local authorities must seek to identify children missing in their area and ensure that they are safe. The Department for Education continues to undertake work to support swifter identification and greater support of children missing in education.

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): In spite of Government spin to the contrary, the backlog of undetermined initial asylum claims has risen even since December from 160,000 to 170,000-plus. Caseworker numbers are down, and returns are still down. So will the Deputy Prime Minister agree to meet me to hear my constituents' concerns about the Home Secretary's plans to commandeer yet another hotel, the Stradey Park in the village of Furnace, and explain what more he will do to speed up clearing the backlog so as to return people to safe countries, settle genuine refugees and avoid the need to use the Stradey Park hotel?

The Deputy Prime Minister: This Government will take whatever action is necessary both to clear the backlog and to stop the boats. Actually, as the hon. Member may have heard from my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, small boat arrivals to the UK are down 20% this year, our French deal has prevented 33,000 illegal crossings this year, Albanian arrivals are down 90%, we have removed 1,800 Albanians, we have increased the number of illegal working raids and the legacy asylum backlog is now down 20%.¹

Q10. [905201] Damien Moore (Southport) (Con): Semina Halliwell, a 12-year-old girl from my constituency, suffered an horrific ordeal, and she tragically then went on to take her own life. She was let down by the system. This week is the two-year anniversary of her death. Labour-controlled Sefton Council still has an inadequate rating from Ofsted for children's social care. So will my right hon. Friend meet me to discuss what further measures can be taken to better protect children in Southport and the wider council area?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I congratulate my hon. Friend on raising what I am sure Members on both sides of this House will agree is a heartbreaking case, and I know that all our thoughts will be with Semina's family and her friends. All children of course have the right to be safe and protected. I understand that the Department for Education will shortly begin consulting

1. [Official Report, 10 July 2023, Vol. 736, c. 6MC.]

on strengthening statutory guidance to ensure that health agencies, police forces and councils work together more collaboratively and end decisions that prevent putting children's needs at the heart of their work. Of course, I am very happy to meet my hon. Friend and for Health Department Ministers to meet him also.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Huntington's disease eventually robs sufferers of their ability to walk, talk, eat, care for themselves and make decisions. It changes the person they were, and it has a 50% chance of being inherited by their children. Will the Government back the Huntington's disease community's call for better access to mental health services, a care co-ordinator in every area and specific National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidance so that everyone affected by this devastating condition can get the help they need?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I completely agree with the right hon. Gentleman about the devastating impact of this terrible disease. We have significantly increased investment in mental health. I am, of course, happy to arrange for Department of Health Ministers to meet him to discuss this further.

Q11. [905202] **Simon Baynes** (Clwyd South) (Con): Wales is the land of song, and there is no better example of this than Johns' Boys Male Chorus from Rhos in Clwyd South, who have performed magnificently in the recent series of "Britain's Got Talent", moving Bruno Tonioli and the other judges to tears. Would the Deputy Prime Minister join me in congratulating the choir, and also the many other community choirs in Clwyd South and across the UK who bring such pleasure to the singers and audiences alike?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I would actually argue that choral music is possibly one of our greatest contributions to global culture. I really do join my hon. Friend in congratulating Johns' Boys Male Chorus on their fantastic achievement in reaching the semi-final of "Britain's Got Talent", and I am sure that they will continue to entertain and engage communities for many years to come.

Paula Barker (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab): The Government post of anti-corruption champion has been vacant for over a year. Does the Deputy Prime Minister think that the vacancy increases or decreases the risk of corruption in Government?

The Deputy Prime Minister: In my Department, the Cabinet Office, I am working very closely with my right hon. Friend the Paymaster General. We are taking extensive steps to ensure that we crack down on fraud and waste and that procurement is transparent. Of course, we will be filling that vacancy very shortly.

Q13. [905204] **Gareth Bacon** (Orpington) (Con): The Government do not have any money of their own—every penny that they spend is taxpayers' money, including money spent supporting the economy during the pandemic. In that light, does my right hon. Friend agree that it would be disgraceful for a political party to accept huge donations from a company that was simultaneously claiming hundreds of thousands of pounds of public support during furlough?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. The furlough scheme helped to protect about 14.6 million jobs during that terrible covid crisis. But what do we discover? Labour is taking £1.5 million from Just Stop Oil backers and adopting their policy to block new oil and gas. It is job-destroying recklessness, and unfortunately it is hard-working people who will be left paying the price.

Ashley Dalton (West Lancashire) (Lab): In West Lancashire, my constituents are concerned about their children's education and specifically the ongoing long-term impact of covid-19 restrictions on their educational development. A Public Accounts Committee report out today finds that the Department for Education is failing to take fast and effective recovery action to close the attainment gap in schools, and the Department has admitted that it will take a decade—10 years—just to get the education attainment gap back to pre-pandemic levels. So when will the Government stop blaming everyone else and take responsibility for failing a generation of lost learners?

The Deputy Prime Minister: Actually, before covid struck, the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers had narrowed in both primary and secondary schools under the Government. Since covid struck, we have provided almost £5 billion for education recovery. If the hon. Lady is that concerned about children's education, she should be calling on the education unions to call off their damaging strikes.

Q14. [905205] **Alexander Stafford** (Rother Valley) (Con): Maltby Town Council and Maltby Main FC, who play at the Maltby Miners recreation ground, are fighting to ensure that the ground is financially sustainable and can stay open, but the Coal Industry Social Welfare Organisation, which runs the ground and has a history of selling off unprofitable areas to developers, will not allow a full bar to be opened, which would provide much-needed capital and has the support of the council's residents. Spaces like recreation grounds are important parts of our mining heritage. Can my right hon. Friend step in to help Maltby Main get the bar that it needs and to help secure the ground's financial future so that it does not face the same grim fate as the Dinnington Miners Welfare recreation ground?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I offer my strongest support to my hon. Friend's campaign; he is absolutely right to raise it. I question the extent of my powers to intervene on a bar closure in his constituency, but I will certainly examine what we can do further.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): The East West Rail announcement proposes a six-track route that will impact at least 66 properties in Bedford, including the demolition of 37 homes. Will the Deputy Prime Minister tell me why residents' concerns have been ignored? Will he give me a commitment today that, if the majority of residents are against the plan in the statutory consultation, his Government will not approve the proposal?

The Deputy Prime Minister: Of course, we will engage with local communities, but I find it rather odd that the Labour party has been saying for the past few months that it wants to build more housing and more

infrastructure and, as soon as there is a proposal to do so, which will enormously enrich the area, it is being opposed.

Q15. [905206] **Sir Robert Neill** (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): The Deputy Prime Minister will know that the calling of an early election in Spain has caused some concern about delay to achieving a treaty between the United Kingdom and the European Union in relation to Gibraltar. Will he confirm that it remains the policy of His Majesty's Government to prioritise achieving such a treaty once the election's outcome is known, and that the Government will do all that is necessary to secure that treaty for the benefit of Gibraltar and its Spanish neighbours, and give all the necessary support to Gibraltar and its British people for their future security and prosperity?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I assure my hon. Friend that the United Kingdom and His Majesty's Government remain steadfast in their support for Gibraltar. We are

working side by side with the Government of Gibraltar and we remain committed to concluding that UK-EU treaty as soon as possible.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): Today, the OECD said that the UK is on course to have a higher rate of inflation than almost all other G20 countries. It is families in Putney and up and down the country who will be suffering because of that. Will the Deputy Prime Minister finally commit to introducing a proper windfall tax on the enormous profits of the oil and gas giants and take pressure off struggling households?

The Deputy Prime Minister: We actually introduced a bigger windfall tax than the Labour party was proposing. Thanks to that 75% windfall tax, last winter, we paid half of people's energy bills. The hon. Lady talked about the OECD. What she failed to mention is that the OECD today gave the highest upgrade of growth to the United Kingdom compared with any other country.

BILL PRESENTED**FOOD POVERTY STRATEGY BILL**

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Chris Stephens presented a Bill to require the Secretary of State to publish a strategy for ending the need for food banks by 2030; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time Friday 24 November, and to be printed (Bill 320).

Road Safety (Cycle Helmets)

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

12.36 pm

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require a person riding a bicycle on the public highway to wear a safety helmet; and for connected purposes.

Back in November 2015, my then 15-year-old constituent, Oliver Dibsedale, was cycling along Hillmorton High Street in Rugby when his foot slipped off the pedal and he fell. He hit his head on the kerb and was left with a serious brain injury. He spent four weeks in critical care and a further 15 weeks at Birmingham Children's Hospital and the Central England Rehabilitation Unit in Leamington Spa.

Oliver had hoped to be in the Public Gallery here today, but because of the severity of his disability he would have needed two support staff to accompany him from Rugby and had to meet the significant cost of their travel expenses. Oliver was told by his doctor, Dr Badwan, that, had he been wearing a helmet, he may still have sustained an injury, but it would have been far less severe. When I met Oliver, he told me that he usually wore a helmet when cycling and that he bitterly regrets his decision on that occasion to ride without one. He spoke to me in a very moving way about the impact his injury has had on his family and the guilt he feels for the amount of time they have had to spend caring for him. He very much wants to help other families to avoid this fate. The Bill will achieve that aim.

The mandatory wearing of cycle helmets has been considered in Parliament. My hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) introduced the Bicycles (Children's Safety Helmets) Bill as long ago as 2007. A broader debate took place on the topic of cycling safety in Westminster Hall on 21 November 2012, when nine Members took part. At a personal level, on a recent family holiday, we rented bikes. When the person serving us offered me a helmet, I initially declined. He then looked me in the eye and asked, "Just how many brains do you have, sir?" I took the hint and I took the helmet, but there is not always someone on hand to offer such advice and ensure a helmet is worn. And as anybody who has children will know, children do not always take that advice. Oliver makes the point that it will be far easier for parents to insist that their children wear a helmet if it becomes a legal requirement.

When Oliver first contacted me nearly two years ago, he asked whether the Government would consider making cycle helmets a legal requirement. He explained his circumstances: six years after his accident, he remains in a wheelchair and is likely to do so for the rest of his life; he has lost the use of his left arm; and he has missed so much that his peers have experienced. He finds it extremely frustrating whenever he sees cyclists on the road without helmets because, from his personal experience, he knows all too well the risk they are taking.

After my meeting with Oliver, I wrote on his behalf to the Department for Transport and received an explanation of the work undertaken as part of the cycling and walking investment strategy of 2017 and the subsequent consultation in 2018. The focus of this work has rightly been to increase levels of cycling and walking and to

[Mark Pawsey]

make the UK's roads safer for vulnerable users, including cyclists. Following that work, the Department's clear advice to all cyclists, as set out in rule 59 of the highway code, is that cyclists should wear helmets, but the Government do not intend to legislate. I shared the Government's response with Oliver at my advice surgery. He continues to contest it and makes a compelling case from his own experience for helmets to be mandatory.

To take his case further, I arranged for Oliver to meet my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison), then Minister for Transport. Oliver was very pleased to have the opportunity to make his case here in Westminster to the Minister and I thank my hon. Friend for accommodating us. We had an excellent discussion but, to Oliver's disappointment, the Government's position remains unchanged—that the wearing of helmets should be a matter of choice, not compulsory.

Oliver continues to disagree and draws attention to a number of counts. He points out that it is illegal to drive a car without a seatbelt and that it is compulsory to wear a helmet on a motorcycle. To this, those who oppose mandatory wearing of cycle helmets respond that, unlike travelling by car and motorbike, there is a health benefit from using a bicycle, there should not be any discouragement of cycling and some people might be put off cycling, thereby reducing the wider health and environmental benefits. Oliver replies to this that, if people want to exercise, there are many ways of doing so that present less risk; he points out that people can walk, run, take up a sport or go to the gym.

A further line of argument cited by opponents to mandatory wearing of cycle helmets is that legislation would be difficult to enforce. While it would certainly create an additional burden on the police, it does not

strike me as particularly difficult to enforce compared with other offences: it is easier to spot a cyclist without a helmet than to spot a driver using a mobile phone, or a car passenger without a seatbelt. No one here suggests that wearing seatbelts should be a matter of individual choice on the basis of difficulties in enforcing the current legislation.

In support of mandatory wearing of helmets, a 2016 review and analysis of previous research, undertaken by Jake Olivier and Prudence Creighton, drew on data from 64,000 injured cyclists. They found very large protective effects from helmets, estimating 85% and 88% reductions in head and brain injury respectively for helmeted cyclists relative to unhelmeted. The House of Commons Library notes that pedal cyclists are 23 times more likely to be a casualty and more likely to die on the road than a motorist. If mandatory safety measures are acceptable for car drivers, they should also be acceptable for cyclists.

Cyclists are the most vulnerable road users. Given all the data about how much safer cyclists are when they wear a helmet and the strong arguments from Oliver—a person who acknowledges that his life has been transformed by the simple failure to put on his helmet that fateful day in 2015—this Bill to mandate the wearing of helmets by cyclists is intended to ensure that far fewer cyclists have to suffer the experience that Oliver went through and has to live with every day of his life. I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Mark Pawsey, Judith Cummins, Dan Carden, Mr Peter Bone and Dr Luke Evans present the Bill.

Mark Pawsey accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 24 November, and to be printed (Bill 321).

Opposition Day

[17TH ALLOTTED DAY]

Mental Health Treatment and Support

Mr Speaker: I inform the House that I have selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

12.46 pm

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

That this House notes with concern the scale of the mental health crisis facing the country with patients suffering with mental health issues waiting more than 5.4 million hours in accident and emergency last year; further notes with concern the mental health crisis facing young people with nearly 400,000 children currently waiting for treatment; recognises the health inequalities within the use of the Mental Health Act 1983; and calls on the Government to adopt Labour's plan to recruit thousands of mental health staff to expand access to treatment, to provide access to specialist mental health support in every school, to establish open access mental health hubs for children and young people and to bring in the first ever long-term, whole-Government plan to improve outcomes for people with mental health needs.

After 13 years in office, this Government have delivered the worst mental health crisis in our history. We are becoming a brittle, anxious, fractious society, the very bonds of which are frayed and torn. The causes of mental ill health are complex: poverty, homelessness, neglect, loneliness, debt, bereavement, domestic violence and child and adult trauma. Our understanding of mental health is developing all the time. We have moved on in the years since I trained as a doctor. We can now see how interlinked and enmeshed the range of factors is: warm and safe homes, fulfilling work, strong relationships, safe streets, opportunities to learn, fresh air and green spaces are policies for good mental health.

Nye Bevan talked about the serenity in knowing that medical care is free at the point of need. After 13 years of Conservatives, we are far from serene. For many of the families I meet, the future is filled with dark clouds, fear of displacement and debt, and a sense that society is going to hell in a handcart—a Britain where nothing works, where everything is broken and where everything costs more than six months ago. Zero-hours contracts, boarded up high streets, rapacious landlords, rising lawlessness and antisocial behaviour and the long-term effects of covid—no wonder we are in the grip of a mental health crisis.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I am very pleased with the way my hon. Friend has started her speech, because she is absolutely right. Alongside the additional healthcare staff needed and the many measures that my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (West Streeting) and I have been spelling out for the health service, the society that has been created over the past 13 years of austerity has had massive impact on the mental health crisis. I am glad that my hon. Friend has focused on that. It will be the job of the entire future Labour Government to support her and her colleagues to reduce the mental health crisis.

Dr Allin-Khan: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention; he is right. I will talk about the need for mental health not to exist in a silo later in my remarks. Frankly, it is the problem of every single Government Department.

One in four people experiences a problem with their mental health each year in England. One in six people experiences a mental health condition, such as anxiety or depression, each week. Three in four people with mental ill health in England receive little or no treatment for their condition. And people with the most severe mental illnesses die up to 20 years sooner than the general population. I ask the House to reflect on that for a moment. Tragically, in 2021, over 5,000 suicides were registered, up by 300 on the previous year. The Government should wear these statistics like a badge of shame.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Reclaim): The shadow Minister makes an accurate assessment of the size of the mental health crisis facing our nation, but her words would have more resonance if she and her party had not voted in lockstep with the Government for the disastrous lockdowns that damaged mental health, especially that of our young people. Will she apologise?

Dr Allin-Khan: I will take no lectures from the hon. Member, because he proudly sat as a Member of a Government who oversaw hundreds of thousands of unnecessary deaths. Families are still feeling the ongoing mental effects of losing loved ones because of the mishandling of the pandemic by his then Government.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), the Leader of the Opposition, launched Labour's mission for health in May. He said:

“Suicide is the biggest killer of young lives in this country, the biggest killer. That statistic should haunt us, and the rate is going up. Our mission—must be and will be—to get it down.”

He is right. Across the House, we are increasingly hearing brave, moving and revealing testimonies about our own experiences and struggles. It is vital that we challenge the stigma and talk openly about mental health.

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): My hon. Friend and I have worked on these issues over the last couple of years. She knows that 70% of people who enter treatment for alcohol issues also experience trouble with their mental health. The Public Accounts Committee recently released a report on alcohol treatment services, and recommendation 4 called on the Government to set out, without delay

“what it is doing to help improve integrated care for people with co-occurring alcohol and mental health problems.”

Will she use her position today to encourage the Government to act on that recommendation?

Dr Allin-Khan: I could not be more proud to work with my hon. Friend in this space. He is a powerful advocate and I wholeheartedly support all his efforts, and those of Members across the House, to support people who are living with alcoholism, and their families. I thank him; we will continue to support his work.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the shadow Minister and the Labour party for bringing this issue forward. Support for mental health across this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is a massive issue, including in my constituency. For example, one of my constituents told me they finally found the courage to seek help for their mental health, only to be told by health professionals, “We

[Jim Shannon]

can't do anything for you just now as your condition is not severe enough yet—you have no thoughts of suicide.” Does the hon. Lady agree that supporting those with mental health issues at the earliest stage—right away—is more beneficial, instead of forcing them to wait until it may be too late? At that stage, the situation cannot be turned back.

Dr Allin-Khan: I thank the hon. Member; it has been a pleasure to work with him in every single debate about mental health that I have held in the past three years, since I started my role. He speaks to the important point that prevention is the watchword that counts when it comes to mental health.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. Does she agree that the Government are failing people who are experiencing mental ill health, or even a mental health crisis? Psychiatrists are leaving the country because they are finding jobs overseas more accessible. People experiencing mental health crises are having to wait in A&E departments for too long; they waited for a total of 5.4 million hours during 2021, which is entirely unacceptable. Things need to change.

Dr Allin-Khan: I thank my hon. Friend for assisting me in writing my speech; she has pre-empted much of what is to come. She is a powerful advocate for her community and I am proud to share the Opposition Benches with her.

Laura Farris (Newbury) (Con): On that point, will the shadow Minister give way?

Dr Allin-Khan: I will make some progress, but I would be happy to take further interventions after that.

Amid all the anguish and pain, one thing comes through: people cannot access the mental health services they need. The stark fact is that the way the UK's mental health services are funded and distributed can exacerbate the problem, so instead of making people better, they are making them worse.

The current reality is that 1.6 million people are waiting for treatment. More than 1 million people had their referral closed without receiving any help in the last year alone. Last year, children in mental health crisis spent more than 900,000 hours in A&E and almost 400,000 children are on waiting lists. In the same period, adults experiencing a mental health crisis spent over 5.4 million hours in A&E. Black people are five times more likely to be detained under the Mental Health Act 1983 than white people. People with eating disorders are being put on a palliative care pathway.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): Will the shadow Minister join me in welcoming the work the Government have done to bring forward the draft Mental Health Bill? We both sat on the pre-legislative scrutiny Committee. Hopefully, the Bill will right some of those wrongs.

Dr Allin-Khan: It has been a pleasure to work with the hon. Member on the draft Mental Health Bill. However, as I will say later in my speech, I have little confidence that the draft Mental Health Bill will move

beyond the draft stage. We need to debate the issues in the House, to ensure that what we know needs to be fixed is actually fixed, so that we can help people in our communities, including black people, who are more likely to be detained under the Mental Health Act, and people with autism and neurodiversity, who are mistreated simply as a result of having that diagnosis, so that their lives can be better lived. We need these issues to come before the House, so that we can debate them and move forward.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an important point about the demand on A&E, but there is demand on other public services as well. When I have been out with the police in south Manchester, I have been shocked by the sheer amount of time they spend dealing with people in mental health crisis. I am sure we all know the amount of time our staff spend dealing with people in mental health crisis. Does she agree that it is a false economy not to invest properly in mental health services, because of the impact on other public services?

Dr Allin-Khan: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point; he is right. It is also a false economy because of the impact mental ill health has on families. Not investing in one person's mental ill health not only has an impact on their working and earning potential, but has a knock-on impact on that of their parents, siblings and other family members. People are currently sitting at home on suicide watch for their children because they cannot get access to the timely help and treatment they need. This is Tory Britain.

What has been the response from the Government to these alarming facts? Ministers have junked the 10-year mental health plan and binned thousands of responses to the consultation. Sen's law, set out in a private Member's Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Steve Reed), passed unanimously, but it has not been fully implemented. It was passed almost five years ago and there have been three subsequent Ministers, and yet we are in the highly unusual situation where it has not been commenced in full. Who exactly is against the monitoring of the disproportionate use of force? The House certainly was not against it when the Bill was passed.

The Government have announced plans for new mental health hospitals, but those new hospitals are not new. The hospitals announced on 25 May—Surrey and Borders, Derbyshire and MerseyCare—were already in the pipeline.

Let us talk about the Minister's own patch, to really see the scale of the issue. At his closest hospital, adults experiencing a mental health crisis waited 11,000 hours in A&E last year. There are over 5,000 children and 40,000 adults stuck on mental health waiting lists across his integrated care board. Thousands of local people were turned away from services before treatment; I am sure the Minister will agree that that is unacceptable. As ever, we have smoke and mirrors when we need bricks and mortar. If this seems bleak, that is because it is.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech about a very important issue. One of my constituents who works in psychiatric care has talked of staff having to deal with violence, verbal abuse, being swilled with boiling water and more. He says that they are under extreme pressure,

which is causing some to leave and putting more pressure on those who remain. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is a shocking and unsustainable state of affairs, and that we need a Labour Government who will invest in mental health services?

Dr Allin-Khan: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend, who works tirelessly on this issue.

After more than a decade of Tory Governments, if people need help, all too often no one is there. Last year, emergency service workers took more than a million sick days because of stress. NHS staff are at the sharp end of this mental health crisis. I know them, I work with them, and I see what they are coping with daily. They are heroes, but they simply do not have the resources, the staff or the leadership from Ministers that would enable them to do their jobs. They themselves suffer exhaustion, depression, stress and anxiety. About 17,000 staff—12% of the mental health workforce—left last year.

You will be pleased to know that I have had a look at the Government's amendment, Mr Speaker—I do my homework. There is the tired old £2.3 billion figure. How many times have we heard that trotted out? Actually, I can tell the House that it has been used more than 90 times over five years, and it has been spent in myriad different ways. Then there is the £150 million for mental health crisis units. But the amendment fails to mention the serious patient safety concerns that doctors have raised, and it is clear that the pressure on A&E remains as fierce as ever. There is also nothing about the recent announcement from the Metropolitan police that they will not help people in a mental health crisis.

Ministers need to get out of Whitehall and see what is really happening in our mental health service. If they did so, they would see what I have seen in recent months. They would see the junior psychiatrists whom I met recently—junior doctors who have devoted all their training to this profession, and half of whom plan to leave the NHS at the end of their training. They would see the doctor who told me of an incident in which six police officers were in A&E for 18 hours with a patient detained under section 136 of the Mental Health Act 1983. They would see a child arriving at A&E after self-harming, having been referred by the GP a long time ago but not been seen for weeks, which led to an escalation point and a crisis in A&E. We are seeing a system in crisis, people in pain and families in distress.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): The shadow Minister has referred several times to children's mental health and the crisis that often occurs when they present at A&E departments. Does she agree that schools have an important role to play when children have moderate mental health conditions, before those conditions escalate? The role of mental health support teams in schools is critical, but their funding is due to end abruptly next year, with only about half the programme complete. Will she join me in asking the Minister to commit himself to funding the full roll-out of mental health support teams or, better still, to back the Liberal Democrats' plan to provide a qualified mental health practitioner in every school?

Dr Allin-Khan: I invite the hon. Member to have a look at the plans we already have in place. She will be pleased to learn that one of our pledges is the provision

of a mental health specialist in every school. I invite her to support those Labour plans—and to come and join us over here if she feels like it.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Young people are bearing the brunt of the mental health crisis, and parents are worried sick. I see evidence of that every day in my inbox, and it is getting worse. When so little money is being spent on young people's mental health, even though we know that the vast majority of mental health conditions appear in people under the age of 18, is the balance right between the money spent on adult mental health and that spent on young people's mental health? If we want a preventive system that helps to cut costs for the taxpayer and helps people as well, is not investing early in young people the best way to achieve that?

Dr Allin-Khan: My hon. Friend is spot on in making the point, very articulately, that prevention is our watchword. It is vital that we have mental health access hubs in every community to give people the support that they need; it is essential that we have mental health specialist support in every school; and it is essential that mental health does not operate in a Health silo, because when it comes to improving adverse childhood experiences that can lead to poor mental health in later life, that is every Department's issue.

I have asked Ministers six times to tell us of their meetings with mental health trusts where there are reported abuse scandals, but they have failed to respond. In-patient services across England must be reviewed, with patients' voices at the centre. After a series of allegations in different settings, the Government have dragged their feet, and we are still waiting for the findings of their data exercise, in which no one even spoke to families or patients. They could start by giving statutory powers to the inquiry into deaths in Essex mental health units.

What else needs to change? First, we need to speed up diagnosis and treatment. The longer we leave a mental health disorder untreated, the worse it gets—just like cancer, sepsis and heart conditions. Delays cost patients their wellbeing and their families their peace of mind, and of course it costs the taxpayer more to treat a patient who is more acutely unwell after months and years of delay. The argument for prevention, early intervention, speedy diagnosis and timely treatment is clear. Labour will guarantee treatment within a month for all who need it, which will be better for patients and better for the NHS.

Secondly, we need a tough new target for delivery—something for the whole system to drive for, and something for the voters to judge us on. Labour will recruit 8,500 new staff, so that 1 million more people can access treatment every year by the end of Labour's first term in office.

Thirdly, we will reach out to our young people, and give the next generation the support that they desperately need. This is the generation who have known little or no security: children who have gone through the great financial crash, austerity and covid, robbed of their future and dismissed as snowflakes. We will open a mental health access hub for children and young people in every community, providing early intervention and drop-in services, and we will provide access to a mental health professional in every school. This is a true community, preventive approach in action.

[Dr Allin-Khan]

Fourthly, we will stop mental health policy being placed in a silo. As I said at the beginning of my speech, mental health policy cannot be disentangled from social and economic policy. A decision on Bank of England interest rates takes its toll on the mental health of a family in Tooting. We are all interconnected. The economy is not an abstract concept; it is people. The next Labour Government will present a long-term, whole-Government plan to improve mental health outcomes—mental health in all policies.

Fifthly, Labour Ministers will allocate to mental health its fair share of funding, as the economy grows and as resources allow. For starters, we will close tax loopholes, putting the country's mental health first. That is our plan and, crucially, it will not be solely the responsibility of the incoming new mental health Minister; it will be the responsibility of the whole Cabinet and the whole Government.

We have seen enough plans, we have heard enough announcements, and we have watched enough Ministers pass in and out of the revolving doors of 39 Victoria Street. Let us have no more Tory sticking plasters. Labour's health mission, guided by prevention and anchored in community, gives children the best start and boosts the economy, with more people in better health. With a clear plan, with clear costings and with resolute leadership, we will deliver the world-class health system that our society truly deserves.

1.9 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Neil O'Brien): I beg to move an amendment, to leave out from "House" to the end of the Question and add:

"notes the increased burden on mental health following the pandemic, including on young people and those with severe mental illness; recognises the historic levels of investment being delivered by this Government into services, with an increase of £2.3 billion per year in front-line mental health funding over the past four years; notes that current NHS targets around access to talking therapies and intervention in psychosis are being met due to the efforts of NHS staff; and acknowledges the investment in mental health teams in schools, as well as the ongoing investment into open access mental health helplines in the 111 service and into the estate, including three new mental health hospitals to be opened in the next two years accompanied by a further £150 million in investment in new mental health ambulances and the development of better alternatives to accident and emergency services, including crisis houses, safe havens and step-down services."

Improving mental health is a top priority for this Government. We can all agree that in the past it was not given the priority it deserves, and was seen as something to be ashamed of and not spoken about. Thankfully, we are changing that. We are working to achieve parity of esteem between physical health and mental health, with record amounts of investment going into NHS mental health services in England, and the stigma surrounding mental health is being reduced.

"The Five Year Forward View for Mental Health", which was published in 2016, was a major step forward and secured an additional £1 billion in funding for mental health, so that an additional 1 million people could access high-quality services by 2020-21. It was followed by the NHS long-term plan in 2019, which committed an additional £2.3 billion a year for the

expansion and transformation of mental health services in England by 2024, so that an additional 2 million people could get the NHS-funded mental health support that they need. It is also funding the increase in the frontline mental health workforce to meet the plan's ambition for 27,000 additional mental health staff by 2023-24. There were 138,610 full-time equivalent mental health staff at the end of 2022, an increase of 8,900 on the previous year and of 20,700 on December 2010, so the mental health workforce in the NHS is radically bigger. In total, we spent around £3 billion more on mental health last year compared with four years ago. That is an increase of a quarter.

Backed by this huge investment, we are expanding access to NHS talking therapies for adults to meet the long-term plan's ambition for an additional 1.9 million people to access National Institute for Health and Care Excellence-approved treatments for conditions such as anxiety and depression. From starting small in 2008, around 1.2 million people are now accessing NHS talking therapies every year, with 98% waiting less than 18 weeks for their treatment and 90% waiting less than six weeks. This means that we are delivering well over our national waiting time targets of 95% and 75% respectively.

Local mental health services are transforming community mental health care to give 370,000 adults and older adults with severe mental illnesses greater choice and control over their care and to support them to live well in their communities. We recognise that poor mental health is a major cause of sickness absence in the workplace and we are providing support to employees and employers on mental health in the workplace. We have announced additional measures to support workplace mental health, including a package to support the long-term sick and disabled to remain in or return to work. This includes £200 million for digital mental health to modernise NHS talking therapies, to provide free access to wellness and clinical mental health apps for the population, and to pilot cutting-edge digital therapeutics. There will be around £75 million to expand individual placement and support services to help more people with severe mental health illnesses into employment.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Neil O'Brien: I will make a little progress first.

We know that the number of children and young people experiencing mental ill health is rising, and that many of them will continue to experience mental health problems later in life. Spending on children and young people's mental health continues to grow, from £841 million in 2019-20 to £995 million a year later, and now to £1.1 billion in 2022-23. This means that we are helping more children and young people than ever before. In 2021-22, there were over 743,000 new referrals to children's and young people's mental health services, which is 41% higher than the year before.

Several hon. Members rose—

Neil O'Brien: I will make a bit of progress before I give way.

The long-term plan will ensure that 345,000 more children and young people can get the mental health support they need when they need it.

We are committed to ensuring that children and young people can access mental health support in school, so that they can access help with anxiety and depression and other common mental health services before problems become more serious. In that way, we can prevent—in exactly the way we all agree on—the problems from becoming more serious. That includes continuing to roll out mental health support teams to schools and colleges in England.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): The picture that the Minister is painting does not quite tally with the experience that I am seeing in families, many of whom are watching with a feeling of helplessness as their children's mental health deteriorates while they are on long waiting lists. In the NHS South West London ICB area, there are over 10,000 young people on waiting lists, and many have their cases closed without even getting the support they need. That leaves them with deteriorating mental health and it leaves their families in despair. How is it that the money the Minister is talking about does not seem to get through to the young people who need help?

Neil O'Brien: I will come to the point about waiting lists in a moment.

Let me complete my thoughts on prevention, which I think we all agree is important. There are 3.4 million pupils covered by mental health support teams in 2022-23, which equates to about 35% coverage of pupils in schools and learners in further education in England. We expect around 500 teams to be up and running by 2024, covering around 44% of pupils and learners, so it will be up from 35% to 44%. Over 10,000 schools and colleges now have a trained senior mental health lead, including more than six in 10 state-funded secondary schools in England. On prevention, the Government are also providing £150 million of capital investment in NHS mental health urgent and emergency care infrastructure over the next two years.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): While the Minister is addressing the issue of young people, can I say that I have yet to hear any news from the Department as to whether there will be a public inquiry into the deaths of the three young women who died under the care of the Tees, Esk and Wear Valleys Foundation NHS Trust. Can he enlighten me on that?

Neil O'Brien: This is an extremely important issue that the hon. Gentleman is quite right to raise. We will be producing the results of the rapid review in the coming weeks, so he will not have to wait very long.

Munira Wilson: Like other colleagues, I see many children in my constituency waiting well over a year, sometimes two years, to access child and adolescent mental health services, so I was alarmed when NHS England recently told me that, on the latest modelling, the number of NHS-commissioned training posts in London for child and adolescent psychiatry will halve by 2031. I have no idea what is driving this modelling, but given that one in six seven to 16-year-olds have a probable mental health disorder, will the Minister at least look into these figures and undertake to write to me to explain why we are seeing such a drop in the number of training places?

Neil O'Brien: Those are not figures that I am familiar with or recognise, but I will certainly take this up with the London commissioners because it sounds like an important issue. I have talked about the dramatic increase we have already seen in the mental health workforce, and we are setting out further steps in our long-term workforce plan, but I will take that away and look at it closely with other Ministers.

Mr Toby Perkins: One of the issues here is that the demand for mental health services has gone through the roof, from 3.6 million in 2020-21 to 4.5 million in 2021-22. My hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) was clear in her view, which I share, that the policies of this Government have been a factor in driving up the mental health demand. Does the Minister accept that? If not, what does he put it down to?

Neil O'Brien: I was just coming to that, but on the point about prevention and the social origins of these things, we are in agreement about tackling the origins of these things. In terms of financial security, that is why we are providing financial help worth £3,300 per household, one of the most dramatically generous packages anywhere in Europe. The question of good housing was raised earlier. We have the Social Housing (Regulation) Bill and we are taking action to extend the decent homes standard to the private rented sector.

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): Is it not the case that we have to be really careful about what we are talking about? There is a difference between mental wellbeing and mental health. We all suffer with our mental wellbeing but we do not all suffer with our mental health, and we therefore need to have the support that is appropriate. Social prescribing, for example, has a fundamental ability to help people who suffer with their mental wellbeing. Are the Government doing anything more to drive up social prescribing, so that GPs and allied professions can get the support from the third sector and other voluntary organisations that people so desperately need for their mental wellbeing?

Neil O'Brien: My hon. Friend, as an experienced clinician, makes an important and thoughtful point. This is exactly why we have so dramatically increased the number of social prescribers in primary care. An example in Britain is the parkrun practices initiative, which is connecting people to sporting and cultural activities that can improve mental wellbeing as well as mental health. My hon. Friend is completely right, and that is why this is a priority for us.

Andrew Bridgen: The suicide rate in North West Leicestershire increased by more than 300% during the lockdown. Does the Minister know what the increase was in his constituency?

Neil O'Brien: It is just not true there was an increase in suicides because of the lockdowns. There have been a whole series of careful studies of this and that is just not the case. I am afraid that my hon. Friend is not correct about this.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Eating disorders are a national scandal and have reached epidemic proportions. Anorexia nervosa has the highest mortality rate of any mental health disorder and a third of people with binge eating disorders are at suicide risk. With at least 1.25 million

[Wera Hobhouse]

people suffering from eating disorders and with soaring waiting lists, is it not time that the Government appointed something like an eating disorder prevention champion to tackle this incredibly difficult but rising crisis?

Neil O'Brien: I completely agree about its tremendous importance, and I take this opportunity to mention the incredible work on this hugely important issue by brilliant charities such as Beat. I will outline some of the general things we are doing to increase capacity further.

Janet Daby: Only a few weeks ago, I met a constituent who endured an awful kidnapping and rape. She had some initial counselling and therapy from specialist services, but she has now been on the waiting list for more than a year and a half. What would the Minister say to my constituent, who desperately needs therapy?

Neil O'Brien: I am terribly sorry to hear about the hon. Lady's constituent's case, which I will look at extremely closely. This is why we are putting in extra investment and tackling waiting lists.

Several hon. Members rose—

Neil O'Brien: I should make a little progress before taking further interventions.

The Government are providing £150 million of capital investment in the NHS's urgent and emergency care infrastructure for mental health over the next two years. Those interventions include £7 million for 90 new mental health ambulances, with the remaining £143 million going to more than 160 capital projects with a preventive focus. These include new urgent assessment and care centres, crisis cafés and crisis houses, health-based places of safety for people detained by the police and improvements to the NHS 111 and urgent mental health helplines. The hon. Member for Tooting talked about creating such facilities in the community, and we are already doing that. We are also investing £400 million between 2020-21 and 2023-24 to eradicate mental health dormitory accommodation, improving safety and dignity for patients. Twenty-nine projects have already been completed since the programme commenced in 2020-21, eradicating over 500 dormitory beds.

Dr Ben Spencer: Will the Minister join me in welcoming the construction of the new Abraham Cowley unit, which will eradicate the dormitories that were in my constituency?

Neil O'Brien: I join my hon. Friend in celebrating that unit and his advocacy for people affected by mental health.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for giving way, as I appreciate that he is trying to make progress. On the capital programme, one of the issues that my hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) highlighted is Seni's law, which will look at the treatment that patients receive in mental health units, where, sadly, restraint has led to deaths. The Minister talks about prevention, and we need to make sure that Seni's law, which was enacted in November 2018, comes forward now. Does he agree?

Neil O'Brien: The remaining provisions will be commenced as soon as possible.

We are working with the NHS towards implementing new waiting time standards for people requiring urgent and emergency mental healthcare, in both A&E and the community, to ensure timely access to the most appropriate high-quality support. We also recognise that there is much more to be done to improve people's experience in in-patient mental health facilities. The Minister with responsibility for mental health, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), has spoken to many Members following reports of abuse and care failings at a number of NHS and independent providers. We have been clear that anyone receiving treatment in an in-patient mental health facility deserves to receive safe, high-quality care and to be looked after with dignity and respect.

It is vital that, where care falls short, we learn from any mistakes to improve care across the NHS and to protect patients. That is why we have conducted a rapid review of mental health in-patient settings, with a specific focus on how we use data and evidence, including from complaints, feedback and whistleblowing reports, to identify risks to safety.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): The Minister wants to talk about data and evidence. We know that, within the mental health crisis, there are huge, long-established racial disparities, with young black men disproportionately being sectioned under the Mental Health Act 1983. The draft mental health Bill is still in train, and I would like to know exactly when the Government will table the Bill, which might stop these racial disparities and stop young black men disproportionately being sectioned.

Neil O'Brien: We are currently responding to pre-legislative scrutiny, so we are on the case. We are not just waiting, of course, and we are already doing things on these points, including through the culturally appropriate advocacy pilots for those at risk of detention and on the patient and carer race equality framework to avoid and prevent detention in the first place.

The rapid review's report will be published very shortly. NHS England has also established a three-year quality transformation programme that seeks to tackle the root causes of unsafe, poor-quality in-patient care, including sexual safety, in mental health, learning disability and autism settings.

Our draft mental health Bill, which has been mentioned a few times in this debate, is intended to modernise the Mental Health Act so that it is fit for the 21st century and works better for people with serious mental illness. The draft Bill has completed its pre-legislative scrutiny, and we will respond to the Joint Committee's recommendations very shortly.

In a world of increasing rates of multiple morbidity and diseases of increasing complexity, it is crucial that we continue our progress towards more person-centred, holistic care that considers a patient's physical and mental health needs together. That is why we announced in January that we will be producing a major conditions strategy to tackle the conditions that contribute most to morbidity and mortality across the population of England, including mental health. The call for evidence is now open, and I encourage everyone to make their views known before it closes.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): The Minister is talking about the mental health strategy now being part of the major conditions strategy. Is he aware that many mental health organisations see it as a retrograde step that, having conducted an extensive consultation and invited views, the strategy will now be put back even further?

Neil O'Brien: I assure the hon. Lady that all contributions were fed into the major conditions strategy process. The reason why we are making the mental health strategy part of the major conditions strategy, and why we are looking at co-morbidities, is because, as the hon. Member for Tooting mentioned, people with mental health conditions have a shorter lifespan and, in general, the cause is typically a physical co-morbidity. It is essential that we look at these things together if we are to make progress on tackling disparities.

We have committed to publishing a new national suicide prevention strategy later this year, and we are engaging widely across the sector to understand what further action we can take to reduce cases of suicide. The new strategy will reflect new evidence and the national priority for preventing suicide across England, including action to tackle known risk factors and targeted action for groups of concern. We are also providing an extra £10 million over the next two years for a suicide prevention voluntary, community and social enterprise grant fund. This competitive grant fund will help to support the sector to deliver activity that can help to sustain services to help meet increased demand for support and to embed preventive activity that can help to prevent suicide and stem the flow into crisis services.

Liz Twist: Of course it is good that we will have a refreshed national suicide prevention strategy, and of course £10 million is welcome, but it is not out there yet. In the meantime, the £57 million that was earmarked for local work on suicide prevention has run out. Will the Minister consider making urgent interim arrangements to ensure that this vital work can continue until the strategy is published?

Neil O'Brien: I am conscious that we need to help the sector to maintain and grow its levels of service.

I finish by paying tribute to all those who do so much to support people's mental health: frontline NHS staff, those working in the voluntary community and social enterprises, and all those who are quietly supporting a family member or loved one.

1.29 pm

Jon Trickett (Hemsworth) (Lab): I think the whole House agrees that there is a mental health crisis, but the Minister's presentation simply will not do. It was like a series of numbers read from a brief prepared by somebody who is remote from the reality of life in our country. It sounded complacent and like it was coming from on high, rather than from real experience.

I hope the House will not mind if I illustrate the general points I want to make by referring to my own area, as the experiences I am going to relate have a general significance for the country as a whole. First, let me agree with my Front-Bench colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan), that the seed beds that are creating the great demand for mental health services lie in the social and economic conditions that have been created following 13 years of

failed government. My constituency is 529th out of 533 English seats in social mobility—it is one of the most immobile socially. A child who is born today in the local hospital will die younger than those elsewhere in the country if they are in deprivation; there is no chance whatsoever of getting out of the crisis that so many families face, given the absence of social mobility across the country, but especially in areas such as mine. I am talking about deprivation where, in a constituency such as mine, access to a house, green space, healthy living and all the things one should expect to be able to achieve as a human being in one of the richest countries in the world are simply not available. That is the seed bed for the mental health crisis. I speak about my area, but this is a generic problem, as we all know. Even the Minister seemed to concede that in one of his responses, although the idea that the Government will somehow address the problems they have created after 13 years is preposterous.

The Minister talks a good talk on the Government's intentions, but under his Government NHS staff wages have fallen, and nursing bursaries have been cut, as have mental health beds. In my area of Yorkshire we have lost a quarter of our mental health beds since 2010—since the Conservatives came into power and Labour was last in government. The loss of a bed may not sound much, but if we think about it, we see that dozens and perhaps hundreds of people would use that bed in a year. Every bed lost has a huge impact on a series of individuals, families and even communities. The same applies to the loss of nurses and other qualified staff; these things are in decline. So it is no good the Minister standing there and repeating stuff that has been provided to him by the civil service.

It is scandalous that in my area of West Yorkshire 10,000 people in a single year were released from acute hospital with a recommendation that they receive mental health treatment and all of them failed to get a mental health appointment. They were then removed from the list without any opportunity to receive even the basic courtesy of a single half-hour meeting. Beyond that, in the same year, 60,000 patients in Yorkshire had to be referred to a provider outside their area. Let us just think about this: we are talking about people with mental health problems being sent to an area that is unfamiliar to them, miles away from anywhere they know or feel comfortable and loved in, in order to receive basic treatment. It is not acceptable that that is happening in Yorkshire.

Suicide has been mentioned by a number of colleagues, from all parts of the House. In West Yorkshire, the figure for men committing suicide is over 20 per 100,000, whereas the figure for the country as a whole is 16 per 100,000. Let us just think about that. It is because of the deprivation and the problems we face in our area. Why should we put up with a postcode lottery that fails to address the mental health needs of young people, with the result that we have a quarter more suicides in West Yorkshire than in the rest of the country? That is shocking, but this is the kind of society that the Government have created and they have then cut the services that would provide the basic support that a civilised society should provide.

Let me refer to two profoundly shocking cases, which I am sure are reproduced everywhere in the country. The first involves a family who have an 18-year-old

[Jon Trickett]

daughter. She has a mental health issue and it has led to her becoming immobilised physically. She was admitted to an acute hospital over the weekend—she is unable to move. The hospital insisted that she left yesterday, but there is no care package and no assistance for her. The doctor said, “My advice to you is to get some treatment, but you won’t get it on the NHS because you’ll wait for years. Your need is urgent. Go to a private practitioner.” That was what he recommended. We looked it up and found it will be £3,000 per month to get the treatment. This is treatment that should be provided by a civilised Government, but we do not have a civilised Government—it is shocking. This morning, that young woman of 18 was left on her own on a sofa—not even with a commode provided—with two glasses of water and a bloomin’ sandwich while the family went off to work to try to earn the money to pay. It is a disgrace that that happens in our society.

Finally, I come to the issue of people with mental health issues in care homes. These care homes are in some ways very good, but in other ways this is a racket. We have a care home in my area that the Care Quality Commission condemned in 2020. Nothing was done by the owners to improve the situation but the CQC did not go back, presumably because of covid, until November. It then said, “This home isn’t working, so you’ve got to move everybody out.” There are people there who are close to the end of life and others who have serious mental health issues. Closing that home is going to kill some people: let us be honest and blunt about it. It appears that its private owners are removing all the people in there with these mental health issues and putting them somewhere else, with no reference whatsoever and no care for people who have basically been commodities for them to use—but they are investing in the home. I have spoken to the CQC and asked: are those fit and proper persons to run such a home to care for people with mental health crises? My argument is that they are not and they have proved the point. They did not even go to appeal and the staff are being left on the scrapheap.

We have had a Government who, through austerity and the particular form of economic society they have created, have developed a major mental health crisis and then cut the required services. There is no prospect of their doing anything else to improve the situation. This is a serious problem. We must imagine ourselves in the situation of the family in the case I illustrated. This is a crisis that echoes throughout the land and it is not acceptable.

I finish on this point. We do need money putting into our mental health services, as everyone would agree. But why do the Government not start by saying that the staff—the carers, cleaners and all the clinical staff—get a proper rise? That would at least be a decent way to try to retain some of those people in house for now.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I ought to have said after the Minister had spoken that the original Question was as on the Order Paper, since when an amendment has been proposed as on the Order Paper, and the Question is that the original words stand part of the Question. I do not think that my putting that to the Chamber after the hon. Member for Hemsworth

(Jon Trickett) has spoken will have made any difference to his speech—I do hope not. I prefer to get procedure absolutely correct. It will be obvious that a great many people wish to speak this afternoon and we have limited time. Therefore, we must have an immediate time limit of five minutes, which is quite generous really. We begin with Dean Russell.

1.39 pm

Dean Russell (Watford) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. Before I begin, I will rip up my unwritten 50-minute speech.

I have previously said in this Chamber that, if suicide were a virus, we would be on the hunt for a vaccine; if loneliness were a disease, we would be looking for a cure. I welcome the debate today. I know that it is politically charged, but that is the nature of this Chamber. Any opportunity that we have to talk about mental health and to tackle the stigma around mental health must be welcome.

Of course, we are talking today about the support that is available to people, but one area on which I wish to focus is mental health in the workplace, which is a passion. We spend most of our lives in the workplace; we spend time with colleagues. We are perhaps not always truthful to ourselves about how we feel. Engagement in the workplace is essential to prevent mental ill health. One challenge is to ensure that there is parity across physical and mental health. I have argued about that in this place before, and received support from all parts of the House. I welcome parity around things such as first aid; that is essential.

I have been very pleased with the engagement that I have had with Ministers, especially the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Mims Davies), the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work, my hon. Friend the hon. Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove), and the Minister on the Front Bench today. I have also engaged with other Ministers in the Departments of Health and Social Care and for Work and Pensions. They have all been open to looking at how we can get better services and better support for colleagues in the workplace.

One challenge we face is stigma. I say gently and respectfully to Members in the Chamber today that, while of course these issues are politically charged and that we will all have a very strong view on this and on the need to make sure that services are in place, we are careful about the words that we use. When we talk about people not being able to get support, it might put off somebody from seeking and getting support. When we talk about some of the statistics, I ask Members to please be mindful about how they are used. We could deter a person in crisis from seeking help, because they might think that that help is not there, which could be dangerous.

I appreciate that we have a long way to go with mental health, but we have come quite a way. The support over the past few years and the change in stigma around mental health have been transformative, but we still have a way to go for the situation to be transformed. That means that, as politicians, chief executives of businesses and community leaders, we must ask ourselves whether we are doing enough. Are we talking about this enough? Are we looking at those solutions enough?

Dr Evans: My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech about raising awareness. Yesterday, I hosted members from the NFU, who candidly said that, a few years ago, they would never have been speaking about these kinds of issues. We know that rural communities and farmers in particular suffer when it comes to asking for help. Is it not exactly those organisations coming forward and speaking about the problem that allows us to have this debate?

Dean Russell: I thank my hon. Friend for his important intervention. This morning, I was fortunate to host the Royal College of Psychiatrists. We had a roundtable discussion with different charities, organisations and leaders in this space about what we need to do and what that looks like. It looks like more funding—there is always an argument for that and rightly so; it means ensuring that we support people who have gone through crises, and that we look at that long-term support; but it is also about how we shift the conversation. For me, it must be about parity between physical and mental health. A few years ago, an amendment was tabled that would have introduced more parity of funding. As a Government, we need to look again at that amendment. Other important steps would include a mental health Bill. I appreciate that we need to move forward with that as soon as possible, and I echo the calls for such legislation, but we should not be damning everything that has been done so far, because huge strides have been made, especially in relation to extra funding.

When I was a councillor many years ago, I worked with local schools to look at what support was in place. I wanted to know whether the children as well as the teachers were aware of the support that was available. If we were to do the same survey today, we would find that the situation is far better than it was 10 or 15 years ago, but, as I have said, there is still a way to go.

I want to finish on a few brief points. When we consider the challenges around mental health, we must understand that the problem is not mental health alone. There is always some sort of comorbidity and there is always some impact on physical health. When we talk about parity, we are not just saying, “one person with mental ill health and one person with physical ill health must be seen equally”. That, of course, is important, but we must also be mindful of the fact that if somebody has a mental health condition it may affect their ability to work. On the flipside, a physical health condition may impact a person’s ability to get out of bed in the morning and their ability to do exercise. All those things are essential.

I hope that my words, from the Conservative Back Benches, will echo across the House: we want to get to a position where mental health is a priority across all of society. Both the Government and our communities play a part in that, and how we talk about this matters. I hope that we can talk civilly about the opportunities that are available. I urge colleagues to talk about what support is out there as much as, quite rightly, challenging Government and all of us to do more.

1.45 pm

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): I also wish to speak civilly. For me, this is fundamentally a debate about mum. My mum was diagnosed with schizophrenia before I started primary school, so I have been talking about mental ill health all my life. Growing

up, we saw on a weekly basis the inadequacies in support, the rough treatment from mental health services and the results of poor medication. We cannot ignore the fact that there have been some improvements, but some of the worst of the ‘80s appears to be returning after 13 years of Tory Government. Governments have failed to improve the system, which is described as the Cinderella service, since before Cinderella was written, which apparently was as long ago as 1697—I discovered that only today.

This crisis is exposed in that lack of access to support, lack of outreach, lack of choice, lack of control over support being received even where it is received, lack of genuine community care and lack of priority being given to mental healthcare overall. It is also exposed through an overuse of detention. Detention is necessary when people cannot manage their own safety, but it is the most costly end of mental health treatment when all else has failed. It is more expensive than sending people to prison in this country, but it is over-relied on by a failing Government who are unable to see long-term needs and the means of saving funds as well as saving people.

As has been mentioned, this is also a crisis exposed by a rising inability to meet need, as demonstrated by the size of, and time spent on, waiting lists. The shadow Minister mentioned 400,000 children. I bumped into Karen, my constituent, on the bus this morning. She finally has an appointment for counselling after three years of waiting in Southwark. Therefore I speak today from personal experience and as an MP representing a community with a high prevalence of mental health conditions, including some of the highest levels of psychosis anywhere in the country. However, I am privileged to speak as MP of an area where there is greater support for some people.

Southwark’s Labour council has been at the forefront of instigating measures, including online support, the Quality Indicator for Rehabilitative Care, the Nest system for the under-25s and an equivalent wellbeing hub for the over-25s, which helped more than 2,000 people last year. I am talking here about fast access, professional support that does not require a GP referral or a long wait of time. This is vital support on the frontline delivered by a Labour council and an integrated care board, which are prioritising correctly.

We are also a community served by South London and Maudsley NHS Trust. SLAM staff do their best to meet needs, but, sadly, I see people and their families who are not best served. I know that SLAM wants to do more—I speak to the staff and I met the chief executive last week—but it is limited by a Government who lack ambition and intent. The Government are not just ignoring the crisis, but contributing to it through things such as benefit cuts, and allowing food bank dependency and debt in a way that contributes to mental ill health. This is also a Government who are cutting capacity. The Minister made some claims about figures at the Dispatch Box just now, but SLAM told me last week that, despite the level of the crisis, it is cutting £45 million this year. What that means in practice is horrible.

I wish to talk about the human impact. I met Stephen Crawford through the Walworth community council. I have known him since 2010. To be clear from the start, this was a man who was known to the local community and known to council care workers and local mental

[Neil Coyle]

health services. He had severe anxiety. He was a sweet, gentle soul, but he was a target for those seeking to misuse him and his home with criminal intent. Understandably, he became very agitated about his home following break-in attempts and thefts. He was ultimately sectioned and detained for his own wellbeing, but then discharged to the unsafe home that he had told everyone he was unable to live in. He called the London Ambulance Service daily. He and others called the police. The police told me they had visited and intervened 56 times in recent months due to his behaviour. It was a crisis for him, for his neighbours in the street, including Norma and the Groombridges, who were trying to help him, for the London Ambulance Service, which is already overstretched and struggling, and for the police, who now say they may have to stop responding to mental health call-outs.

Stephen was discharged and did not get sufficient support. On Wednesday 19 April, just three days later, he climbed through the window frame on the top floor of a Browning Street building. He told everyone he would take his own life. The police attended, but he fell and was pronounced dead the following week.

That is what the mental health crisis means in practice—the loss of life, the human tragedy. Stephen deserved better, and if individuals like him, whole communities such as mine and multiple public services are not to face similar situations, with the avoidable costs and loss of human life, mental health reform must deliver better. I hope we see a serious case review and I look forward to that coming forward.

1.50 pm

Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con): I very much welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate on a crucial issue. We have heard already about the importance of parity of esteem between physical and mental health, something I have been speaking about since my maiden speech. I am passionate that we achieve that parity.

I welcome the Government's announcements over many months, the actions and contributions of Ministers and the £3 billion a year increase in funding. The £10 million in the Budget for suicide prevention was especially welcome, as was the £150 million for mental health facilities. I particularly welcome the £3 million for the mental health crisis centre at the Carleton Clinic in Carlisle.

As we have already heard across the House, prevention is important in mental health. We have heard a lot about young people, and we know that, sadly, suicide is the biggest killer of people under 35. I pay tribute again to 3 Dads Walking; I have been privileged and humbled to work with the three dads, Andy, Mike and Tim, who tragically lost their precious daughters Sophie, Beth and Emily to suicide. They have been able to channel their personal tragedy into trying to help people and raise awareness about suicide prevention. We are working hard to get age-appropriate suicide prevention into the school curriculum. The Prime Minister and the Education Secretary have met us and we are making significant progress on that.

I think this is an area that really unites us in humanity across the House. I very much respect the shadow Minister and her clinical expertise in this area, and it is crucial that we talk about prevention. I am grateful to the 41 hon. Members who signed my early-day motion on suicide prevention in the school curriculum and increasing mental health first aid provision.

My hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Dean Russell) has been a passionate champion for mental health first aid training. I have had mental health first aid training during my career in higher education. I have also had ASIST, or applied suicide intervention skills training, and I can tell hon. Members that it is very important. It does not make someone a consultant in mental health, but it helps them to have those discussions and be able to signpost people to the help they need.

I have put that training into practice with people I have worked with, and a great sense of relief has welled up in some of these people, who have said, "Oh my goodness, Neil, you understand." I could then have discussions with them about seeking the support that they need. I passionately advocate that the Government work to increase mental health first aid training in educational settings and in the workplace. The more people we have on the frontline who can signpost people who need help, the better.

I also want to talk about rural mental health. Two or three weeks ago, our Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee published a report on rural mental health. I pay tribute to those who provide so much support to people out in rural communities, including charities such as the Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution, You Are Not Alone, the Farming Community Network, Farmerados and, more broadly, the Samaritans, Vetlife, Mind, PAPYRUS and Every Life Matters. Rural mental health is a critical issue.

The EFRA Committee has made strong recommendations to the Government. I was pleased to attend the NFU reception yesterday, which had rural mental health at its heart. Our inquiry covered some of the issues around stigma that we have talked about in this debate. People are reluctant to put their hand up and say that they are struggling, including farmers and vets—as a vet, my profession is sadly over-represented in mental health issues and incidents of suicide. It is important that the stigma is broken down and mechanisms put in place so that people can seek out support.

In rural communities there are also acute stress events such as animal disease outbreaks. I witnessed the trauma from foot and mouth disease in 2001, and those ripples still affect rural communities today. The mental health trauma on people when avian influenza comes and their animals or birds are culled out is significant.

Our inquiry has made recommendations and, as we have heard from those on the Opposition Benches, we need cross-Government working on the problem, with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs working with the Department of Health and Social Care, the Department for Education and the Department for Transport to mitigate issues such as rural isolation, connectivity, broadband and transport. It is so important.

This is an area that unites us in humanity across the House. I firmly believe that debates such as this can really help the Government to develop their policies and support people's mental health.

1.55 pm

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): At 11.33 yesterday morning, this House finished Prayers and the first questions to the Health Secretary began. Disgracefully, two hours and five minutes later, the Government's business was done and hon. Members were told that, if they had no further meetings, they could go home. This exhausted Government had literally nothing left to say or do.

It is therefore hugely welcome that my hon. Friends the Members for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) and for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) have stepped forward on behalf of the Government-in-waiting to ensure that today there is a debate on a matter of considerable importance. Every week in my constituency surgeries I meet parents exasperated that the treatment and support that they know their children need is not available. That can lead to the unchecked exacerbation of problems and children missing school—not the odd day, but months at a time. Whole years of their schooling are lost and family routines decimated as the entire family steps in to provide the support that an earlier intervention could have prevented.

Mental health is not a minority issue. Every year, one in four people will experience a common mental health problem. This Government are guilty of both underfunding mental health services and, through their actions, causing the number of people with mental health problems to rise. We all know that the Government have allowed our country's economy to end up in a terrible mess and that money is short, but it is welcome and right that the Labour party and my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North have been able to secure a commitment for additional funding from shadow Treasury colleagues—all of us who sit in Front Bench positions will know that is very difficult—to pursue the plans that are so desperately needed.

I want to talk about access to services locally. Stephen Jones in my constituency had a child with a mental health crisis that required in-patient treatment. The child was moved to Stoke-on-Trent, 70 miles away, because there are no child in-patient beds available in the whole of Derbyshire. The isolation that Stephen's child experienced exacerbated their problems and made it harder for the family to support them. I stress to my Front-Bench colleagues that, while we realise that specialist staff will not be based in every single village and town, we need to give real consideration to providing those specialist services close enough that families can easily play their part in supporting patients, particularly children, in their treatment and recovery.

I am pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Tooting focused on some of the causes of the mental health crisis. The Government are quick to talk about the increased amounts they are spending, but they are forced to spend more because there are more and more patients coming forward. If we had a huge expansion in the number of people with cancer, we would have to increase the number of cancer doctors, and yet we have far more people with mental health crises. The Government need to stop for a minute and think about the role they have played in causing that increase.

From the start in 2010, the Government's pursuit of people on benefits, their targeting of the unemployed and the mentally ill, their approach to work capability assessments and the reduction in housing benefit, leading

to record levels of poverty and homelessness, have all played a part in increasing the pressures on people and have in themselves added to the mental health crisis. No one is suggesting that those are the only causes—of course, very successful people can have mental health crises, too—but the Government should take that expansion in the numbers seriously.

The pressures on children in that period have exacerbated the problems. Between 2017 and 2022 alone, the number of children aged between seven and 16 with a probable mental health disorder rose from 12% to 18%. Shockingly, among those aged between 17 and 19, the figure more than doubled, from 10% to 25.7%.

Finally, let me turn to the Government's disappointing, inadequate and defensive amendment to the motion. It says everything about their complacency and lack of ideas that they should try to convince the House that they have already acted to reduce A&E stays. Last year in Chesterfield alone, people suffering a mental health crisis spent 5,254 hours in A&E. It is clear from the debate that our nation's mental health patients are being let down and the Government have neither the wit nor the will to fix it. I am pleased that Labour will prioritise this crucial area of health and I endorse the motion.

2 pm

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): As you and my hon. Friend the Minister are aware, Madam Deputy Speaker, there has been a tragic, historic issue of in-patient mental health deaths in Essex—it goes back to 2000—over a 20-year period. Roughly 2,000 people have lost their lives. An inquiry has been going on, but, as I said in the House in January, there has been deep concern about the lack of progress and the low level of engagement between Essex Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust and the inquiry. I also pointed out that families who have lost loved ones want to know that lessons have been learned, they want accountability, and, most important, they want to know that patients are not suffering the same today.

At the time, the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien), said that unless there was a "quantum leap in the level of co-operation"—[*Official Report*, 31 January 2023; Vol. 727, c. 51WH.]

with the inquiry, it would move to a statutory basis. I know that the Secretary of State treats the matter seriously—he met Essex MPs recently and is close to making a decision—but it has now been four months since that debate, so may we please have a decision soon?

In the meantime, I recently met EPUT to find out what is happening with its service. I will tell some positive stories. In March, EPUT announced that it was going to launch a mental health urgent care unit in Basildon. We have all heard stories of people in mental health crisis going to A&E, waiting hours and hours, and then not getting the specialist service that they need, but that new specialist 24/7 centre saw 200 people in its first month. Instead of what happened historically in A&E—90% of people waiting a long time before being sent home without a care plan—90% of people see the experts within four hours and leave with a care plan. That is transformational. The unit is also piloting a 24-hour paramedic.

[Vicky Ford]

Demand in Essex is settling down. It rushed through the roof during covid but is now increasing in line with population growth. Complexity also rose during the pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, about 30% of those going into in-patient units needed to be detained. At the peak of the pandemic and post pandemic, that figure was 70%. It is now down to 60%. Our waiting time to see a psychologist, which rose to a year, is now down to 29 weeks. Vacancies for all positions have been filled, so the trust will be fully staffed from September and expects the waiting list to drop to zero.

Furthermore, EPUT is trying new technologies such as the new and innovative neuromodulation centre, which opened six months ago in Brentwood and is having great success. The trust is also encouraged by the Government's announcements on electronic patient records. Enabling hospitals and mental health services to share patient records easily between them will make a huge difference. It is great news that the Government are behind that, but we need the funding for it.

Colleagues have mentioned eating disorders. Some may be aware that I suffered from anorexia when I was a teenager. It is still very difficult to talk about one's own mental health. I encourage everyone in the Chamber to please be mindful of the language that they use; I have found some of the language used so far in the debate very upsetting. I completely agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Dean Russell) about being mindful of the tone that we use, because there will be people watching who are suffering with mental ill health, and we must not scare them away from getting treatment.

I am particularly concerned that what is being seen on social media today fuels eating disorders. The speed at which young girls in particular are shown eating-disorder content on social media by platforms such as TikTok is outrageous. I am glad that the Government are tackling that.

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to mention social media, particularly in relation to teenage girls and eating disorders. I praise her for bringing her own experience to the Chamber. Another major contributor to the rise in mental ill health among young people in the last decade has been the isolation that social media can cause through bullying and so on.

Vicky Ford: My hon. Friend is completely right about online bullying. It is so important therefore that we get the Online Safety Bill through—it must not be delayed too much, although there are still issues to be looked at in the Lords.

I am very pleased that Ministers have announced that they will criminalise the intentional encouragement of serious self-harm, including eating disorders. I would like them to look again at the toggle on/toggle off issue that I mentioned last time we debated this, and—on another issue that is having an impact on children—to take seriously the need to prevent children from accessing online pornography, which is of an increasingly violent nature. Those matters are all related to the mental health of the nation.

2.6 pm

Kim Leadbeater (Batley and Spen) (Lab):

"We should be frank. We have not done enough to end the stigma of mental health. We have focused a lot on physical health and we haven't as a country focused enough on mental health."

Those are not my words, although I agree with them wholeheartedly. They were spoken in 2016 by the then Prime Minister, David Cameron. He went on to say that if we

"intervene much earlier with those suffering from poor mental health...we can stop problems escalating... By breaking the mental health taboo, by working with businesses and charities...I believe we can lead a revolution in mental health treatment in Britain."

Yes, yes and yes. My question is: why, seven-and-a-half years and four Tory Prime Ministers later, are we still waiting? Mr Cameron has long departed these Benches. This is not the occasion to lament the mess that he left behind, but the experience in my constituency—and, I respectfully suggest, in the constituencies of many, if not all, hon. Members—is that the Government's approach to mental health remains, all these years later, wholly inadequate.

We have heard a lot of statistics in the debate. The numbers matter, because they show the overwhelming scale of the problem that we are facing. Every one of those numbers is an individual, and around them is a network of family and friends whose lives are impacted day in, day out by the very real challenges of confronting mental illness. I have met many such individuals and families in my constituency. Just last week, I hosted a roundtable at which I heard heartbreaking stories of such daily struggles, many of which involve children and young people.

Amelia is now 16. She was diagnosed with autism at the age of seven. For the past nine years, her mum, Anna, and her family have been trying to get help and support, and they are on their knees with exhaustion. Amelia has attempted to take her own life several times, and has been so let down by the system that she says that she just does not trust it anymore. It feels to her that she only gets any kind of support when there is an absolute crisis. I believe that, if she had got the support that she needed a long time ago, she and her family would be in a much better place today.

Eli is 10. He has been diagnosed with Tourette's syndrome. He has various tics affecting his eyes, face, neck, back, hands and feet. He is a fantastic young man, but he is regularly in pain, which affects his ability to cope with days at school and has a huge effect on his mental health. Until recently, he was told that he just had conjunctivitis. His mum, Natalie, told me that she has struggled to find the psychiatric support Eli needs, and every time she calls CAMHS she is passed from person to person. She has been told that there are no NICE guidelines on Tourette's and the best they have been offered to date has been worry management.

Those are just two examples, but they reflect a much bigger problem across society and in all our communities. I have meetings regularly with teachers across Batley and Spen, but we spend far more time discussing the mental health needs of their pupils and their families than we do the many other challenges faced in education—another sector that is underfunded and under-resourced. We cannot keep pushing this issue back on schools. Teachers do an amazing job, but we cannot expect them

to take on responsibility for what is a widespread societal health issue because of more than a decade of lack of focus and national leadership on mental health.

It is not just teachers. Because we do not have the mental health experts and provision that we need in the places where we need them, it falls to others in the community to pick up the pieces. In Batley and Spen, I am incredibly proud of the many voluntary organisations, sports clubs and charities that do a magnificent job week in and week out under huge pressure. I pay tribute to groups such as Andy's Man Club, Game Changerz, Blue Tulips, Team Daniel and Luke's Lads, but the voluntary sector is propping up the NHS and society as a whole. That is not sustainable and it is simply not right. We would not expect teachers, sports coaches, voluntary groups and others to deal with a burst appendix, a broken leg or an ear infection, so why are we asking them to deal with the mental health crisis? They are, of course, part of a wider, holistic solution, but they should not be the only solution. That is not the parity of esteem between mental health and physical health that David Cameron spoke of. While I am hugely optimistic about the excellent plans Labour has to address the mental health crisis, people such as Natalie, Eli, Anna and Amelia cannot wait any longer, which is why today's debate is so important.

2.11 pm

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): As a now non-practising former consultant psychiatrist, I have a host of declarations I should make in terms of speaking in this debate. For the sake of brevity, I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests and my declarations as part of my work on the pre-legislative scrutiny Joint Committee, which list them in full.

This is an important debate and I shall focus on two angles. One is the delivery of mental health care and treatment and the other is the framework for that. I want to celebrate today the rebuild of the Abraham Cowley unit in my constituency. It gets rid of the awful dormitories that have plagued mental health care and treatment for some time. They are now gone, and we will have a brand new, rebuilt mental hospital. In fact, tomorrow, I am going to the topping out ceremony on the site to see the progress in delivering that. It will make a huge difference to the delivery of mental health care.

I used to work as an in-patient consultant psychiatrist. When people come into hospital for in-patient psychiatric treatment, it is often at the most difficult times of their lives. It is critically important that our mental health estate is fit for purpose and is a therapeutic environment. For too long, the mental health hospital estate has been the second cousin to acute physical health care and I am delighted that we are driving change forward in my patch. If people need in-patient care and treatment, they will get it in a new hospital that is fit for purpose. I just want to celebrate that and thank everyone who has been involved in getting it over the line, as well as all the people who work in that sector, including those who are looking after the patients who would have been in the old hospital, which is now a building site, and going through a stressful period of transition while the new hospital is set up.

My second point is about the draft Mental Health Bill. A few years ago, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), the former Prime Minister, suggested that we should review the legal framework we use when we treat people who are unable to consent or do not consent to treatment. Around every 20 years or so, we go through this process. We should be proud as a country that we have always been at the forefront of driving forward legislation and legal frameworks for dealing with people who cannot consent to treatment, the law of best interests and capacity. I was fortunate to be a panel member of the Simon Wessely review. I did that as part of my previous academic life, so Members can imagine my pride and delight in being part of the pre-legislative scrutiny Joint Committee on the draft Mental Health Bill.

I am slightly saddened by the debate today, because mental health—especially the frameworks we use to treat people who are severely unwell—needs to be above party politics. We are discussing the most invasive thing we do in medicine—detaining and treating people in hospital, sometimes for a substantial time. We need to think carefully about the right balance between choice, freedom and autonomy and making sure that people get the care that they need at the right time and under the right framework. I am glad that the Government have done pre-legislative scrutiny and we have worked on a cross-party basis to get this issue over the line. I hope that we will see the mental health Bill very soon.

My final point is about psychosis. The Government's amendment mentions the treatment of psychosis, which I know is often missed out in these debates and when people talk about mental health. Psychosis is one of the most disabling mental disorders and far and away the most costly and impactful, because it can affect people when they are quite young—

Vicky Ford: It is incredibly helpful to have my hon. Friend's detailed experience in this debate. Why does psychosis get missed out?

Dr Spencer: It is simply because of advocacy; the conditions debated tend to be mental health conditions for which people can advocate. We talk a lot about dementia, and the children of those suffering tend to advocate for them. For CAMHS, it is the parents who advocate. For common mental disorder, people are able to advocate for themselves, but psychosis can be—I do not want to make a broad generalisation—disabling and isolating, and can limit people's ability to advocate for themselves. From my research, I know that psychosis can break down family relations and alienate people. I am nervous about broad generalisations, and for the most part people can get better and do very well, but in some cases psychosis can be very disabling and limit advocacy.

2.18 pm

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): I welcome this debate because, like every other Member, my inbox is often full of cries for help from people who are suffering mental ill health or from family and friends trying to help them. Looking through recent cases I have had in St Albans, I see a litany of problems with the system. Many constituents have told me that they have had to wait for more than a year for diagnosis. Some have

[Daisy Cooper]

needed an urgent medication review. One parent told me they feared for their and their child's safety while the child was on a particular medication. They sought an urgent medication review, had an urgent referral from their GP, but the matter then sat with the psychiatrist for weeks and weeks. They were terrified during that time, waiting for a decision.

Other constituents have told me of their relief when they finally secured a mental health care package, only to find that it takes many weeks or months before the package can be put in place in practice. Those who have mental ill health and are also neurodiverse or have learning difficulties have told me about the hoops that they have to jump through. In some cases they have been told, "We can offer you mental health support, but it is not tailored or suitable for you because of your neurodiversity or your learning difficulties." I have heard about the frustration that those individuals feel because those services are not tailored to them as a person.

Then we have the emergency A&E admissions. Again, just a couple of weeks ago, I had a parent email me in total desperation from a hospital corridor because one of their children had attempted suicide and had been rushed to A&E. They were not safe to be left unsupervised, but they were supervised by somebody who was inappropriate to supervise them. The family were desperate to get their child to a safe place, but that did not happen for days and days—it was only with my intervention that it happened. As I am sure many Members know, it is really pleasing to be able to make a difference in those cases, but it is worrying to think about all those families who have not got in contact—others out there who are struggling alone.

There are real problems with A&E pathways and with children's mental health services. I hope that the Government will focus on those areas, but from speaking to my local mental health trust and hearing about the pressures that it is facing, is it really any wonder that we are having these issues? There were warnings at the start of the pandemic of an explosion of mental ill health, and I believe that the Government could have done a lot more to get ahead of that problem. For example, my local mental health trust has told me that there is not only an increased number of people looking for help but higher acuity. Therefore, instead of having a 2:1 staff-patient ratio, it often has to be 3:1. So even with the same staff headcount, there is less staff time for more people seeking help.

Those who work for the trust tell me of their frustration that the waiting lists are getting too long. They accept that medication reviews are often delayed because of staffing and resourcing issues, and there are huge pressures on the trust's budget. Not only is there the demand; there is the cost of out-of-area placements, having to pay for private beds where none are available in the NHS, and paying for agency staff to cover vacancies that are not filled. Our mental health trust in Hertfordshire is the smallest bedded mental health trust in the country. We have huge ambition to open a new bed unit in the west part of the county, but we need the Government and the NHS to get behind that ambition.

So what do we need to see? We need to see prevention, and we need to see it early. Research from New Zealand, which is often cited here in the UK, indicates that three in four people with mental health problems show symptoms

before the age of 25. That reinforces the need for prevention and the need to see it early, so I would like there to be a qualified practitioner in every single school. We need mental health community hubs in every community. We need to empower the charity sector—a sector that has barely been mentioned today. In St Albans, we have Time To Talk, Youth Talk and the OLLIE Foundation, which are all fantastic mental health charities that are working on tiny budgets. In Hertfordshire, we need support for mental health beds and, of course, we need to tackle the workforce problem. Until the Government publish their workforce plan, the lack of a workforce remains the biggest risk to service delivery in mental health in every single part of the country. I urge the Government to take action on those points.

2.23 pm

Miriam Cates (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Con): It is well reported that mental health difficulties have become both more prevalent and more talked about in recent years. Lockdown has certainly had a detrimental impact on the mental health of the nation, which is completely unsurprising. Isolation and loneliness are significant contributors to poor mental health. We have also had the economic consequences of inflation putting pressure on people's personal finances, and the consequences of the NHS backlogs that have been referred to in this debate, but I particularly want to focus on children's mental health.

As has already been mentioned by other hon. Members, we have had a rise in diagnosable mental health conditions among children since before lockdown. We have gone from about one in nine children having potentially diagnosable mental health conditions to one in six. I am sure we have all had cases in our constituencies—tragic stories of children who no longer leave home because they are too anxious, who are not able to go to school. We have seen a rise in the number of ghost children, many of whom are not turning up at school because of anxiety and mental health issues.

The Opposition have talked a lot about all the money that needs to be spent. The Government are spending money, boosting mental health spending by at least £2.3 billion by 2024. The motion calls for improved outcomes for people with mental health needs. We all want that, but prevention is better than cure, and it is simply not sufficient to call for ever more money to expand remedial capacity without addressing the root cause of the problem. It is a bit like having a leaky roof and calling for ever larger buckets to catch the drips: we need to fix the roof. Many will cite poverty, poor housing and not enough youth services as the causes. All are contributing factors, I have no doubt, but there are two less well understood, less talked about, and potentially more significant factors contributing to poor child mental health.

The first, which has been mentioned already, is the clear correlation between the rise of smartphones and social media and deteriorating mental health in young people. The extent of online harms cannot be overstated. My right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) mentioned pornography. Violent pornography is now routinely encountered by children on the internet, with 1.3 million visits a month by UK children to adult sites. There is also eating disorder and suicide content—again, as my right hon. Friend so articulately mentioned

—and child sexual abuse material and exploitation. Anxiety issues are compounded by social media platforms. Children stay up all night waiting for likes on their social media profiles. There is clearly a relationship between more time spent on screens and less outdoor activity, which is another good indicator for poor mental health.

There seems to be a relationship between children spending more hours on social media and worse mental health. The Online Safety Bill, which is going through the other place at the moment, will deal with some of those issues, but I urge Ministers to encourage their colleagues in Government to accept some of the amendments that their lordships have tabled to strengthen the age verification provisions, to make it absolutely watertight that children cannot access some of the worst of those harms. However, we urgently need some proper research into whether it is safe for teens to have smartphones or to go on social media at all. Some have said that their smartphones are as addictive as cigarettes—that they are the opiate trade of the 21st century. I applaud the campaign group UsforThem and its “Safe Screens for Teens” campaign, which is calling for proper research into the health impact of smartphones on teens and whether, like tobacco and alcohol, it is necessary for there to be a legal age limit for accessing some of these platforms, or indeed having a smartphone at all.

A second, under-discussed contributing factor to poor child mental health is family breakdown. We are not talking about a small number of children affected: the UK has the highest rate of family breakdown in the OECD and in the western world. Some 44% of our children will not spend their childhood living with both of their biological parents. There is not enough recent data on this issue, but Office for National Statistics studies from 2010 suggest that back then, 3 million children did not live with their father and 1 million had no meaningful contact with their father. Given those figures, a mental health crisis among children and young people is absolutely no surprise.

Of course, family breakdown leads to other factors that contribute to poor mental health, such as poverty and low income. Some 80% of single-parent households are on universal credit, I think. That is no surprise at all, as there is only one adult in the house to fulfil all the roles and responsibilities of a parent. It puts pressure on housing costs, as one adult is supporting the household—of course there are going to be pressures on housing costs. Single parents are absolute heroes, and I take my hat off to them. Being a parent is an incredibly difficult job when there are two adults in the house. Single parents are heroes, but few would say that it is an ideal situation.

Family breakdown is far worse for the poor, which of course is closely linked to marriage rates. Married relationships are statistically less likely to break down than cohabiting ones, and marriage rates have remained very high in high-income groups, but have collapsed in low-income groups.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Lady has exceeded her time.

2.28 pm

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): Can I tell Members on the Government Benches a little bit about the mental health crisis in Newham? We have a rocketing population that is young, with no commitment from this Government

that health funding will rise to match it. We have almost 41,000 children living in poverty. We have the highest proportion in the country of people living in damp, mouldy, overcrowded temporary accommodation. All of these people have no sense of security in their home at all: they do not know when their local ties will be shattered yet again by a forced move.

As we know, all of this impacts on mental health, and particularly on the mental health of children. I see that constantly in my casework, and local health leaders tell me exactly the same thing. It can hardly be a surprise to the Government that the number of young people being referred to mental health services is 30% up in Newham alone. Cases are increasingly more complex, more urgent and more in danger of spiralling into deep crisis.

Newham is the most diverse borough in the country, with the second highest rate of GP registrations by migrants. Our diversity has massive benefits, and I love it, but it requires clinicians to adapt their way of caring for people with different cultural backgrounds and languages. Despite all that, Newham's mental health spend is the lowest in London. With all those challenges, our clinicians and our health leaders are obviously struggling to meet their targets. Average waits in Newham between referral, assessment and treatment were at 12 weeks in 2021. Some patients are waiting for as long as a year, and that is after they have had a referral, which as we know is terribly difficult to access.

Our local mental health unit, which deals with only the most severe needs, is at 98% occupancy—far in excess of the clinical standard. Quality of care and patient care and safety are suffering. There is a dire shortage of specialist mental health beds for our older adults. We have older people waiting for long periods on utterly inappropriate wards and in beds that are no doubt sorely needed for those waiting for other hospital treatments. Many patients with mental health crises are waiting in emergency departments for more than 12 hours, and local health leaders are worried that those numbers will increase. Our mental health services are struggling even to react to some of the most dire situations, let alone being able to offer proactive support that prevents mental illnesses getting worse.

We are creating even more problems—greater problems for the future, greater costs for the Government, greater costs for the NHS, more antisocial behaviour, more homelessness and rough sleeping, and massive wasted economic and social potential. People's lives are being devastated by treatable ill health and completely avoidable misery. If we are not sitting in this place to avoid that, why are we here?

Labour's plan to transform mental health treatment is desperately needed in Newham, along with thousands more mental health staff and professionals in every school and accessible mental health hubs in every community. We sorely need a preventive approach so that we can bring this crisis to an end, and we need it now. Can I use my last 30 seconds to look at the Minister and ask whether she will meet me and my health providers and health leaders in Newham to talk about the massive underfunding that our borough and my community face?

2.33 pm

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): It is with some trepidation that I rise to speak in this debate, given the expertise and experience we have heard from

[Aaron Bell]

all parts of the Chamber so far. I draw particular attention to the speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer), who is no longer in his place but who shared his personal expertise as a clinician, and my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Dean Russell), who kicked off the Back-Bench speeches from the Government Benches. He made a well-constructed speech that spoke to his expertise in campaigning for mental health so assiduously in this place. I pay tribute to everyone on both sides of the Chamber who has brought forward their own personal experience, their family experiences and their constituency experiences of mental health.

I will not reiterate everything that the Minister and my hon. Friend the Member for Watford said, but the parity of esteem we are working towards in this country is vital, as are the record investment of £2.3 billion that this Government have put into mental health and the extra doctors and nurses who will support people. Most of all, it is about reducing stigma in mental health. It is not unfortunate that we are doing so, but it does create more demand.

The shadow Minister said that the causes of poor mental health were complex, and they are, but she then went on to basically try to lay it all at the door of the Government. That is not remotely fair or accurate, because the statistics are complex too. We should welcome more demand from people who were previously undiagnosed, and we should recognise, as my hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Miriam Cates) did a moment ago, that there have been societal changes, particularly with social media, which I referred to in my intervention.

At the very youngest ages, we are seeing an explosion in autism cases. I speak to the excellent Peter Pan Centre in my constituency, which deals with pre-school children with some of the most severe forms of autism, including those who are non-verbal. Next door is the excellent Merryfields special school, where a number of them end up going. Increasingly, those organisations are saying that the majority of their pupils are those with autism or autism spectrum disorder, and that simply was not the case 10 years ago. Again, that is probably because of better diagnosis—we do not fully understand the explosion in autism—but we must not assume that everything is to do with money being spent on things; it is to do with better understanding of mental health, more awareness and less stigma.

The pandemic affected the mental health of the entire nation, and I recognise that that has put a lot of pressure on young people in schools and universities, which I will talk briefly about as the Member who represents Keele University. On schools, I speak frequently with my heads and with parents who come to me trying to get statements for their kids. As we get a greater understanding of neurodiversity, there is obviously a real interaction between special educational needs and poor mental health. I was speaking to my county council yesterday, and the big issue is the availability of educational psychologists. My county council, Staffordshire, is doing a great job of training more of them itself, but that is a problem across the country, and we need to address it so that we can get children the help that they need with their education and their mental health earlier.

We have heard about the Department for Education funding and the training of senior mental health leads, with 400 already supporting more than 3 million children. There will be up to 500 next year, and more than 60% of state secondaries have a mental health lead. I want to see that get to 100% as soon as possible.

In my final couple of minutes, I will speak a little about universities, as the Member who represents Keele, which has 12,500 students. I am pleased that Keele has, as many universities do, a professional counselling and mental health team to support its students. More generally, the Higher Education Statistics Agency collects data from students on any disability that they have, including mental health conditions. In 2021-22, 416,000 UK students said they had a disability of some kind—that is 19% of UK students—and within that, 119,500 said they had a mental health condition, which is 5.5% of all UK students. That number is three and a half times higher than it was in 2014-15. Higher rates are found among women, undergraduates, full-time students and those in their second or later years. There is an issue here that we have to address, and I am pleased that the Government are doing so.

The covid pandemic fell heavily on students at university, particularly during the lockdowns and associated restrictions. At the height of the pandemic, many students, including those at Keele, struggled with the measures employed to prevent the spread of covid, particularly in university settings. Some had to socially isolate regularly and could not go home to see their parents. They were essentially locked in their room with nobody else there for a long time. Nightline, which co-ordinates student-run listening and information services, reported in November 2022 that it had recorded a 51% increase in calls in 2020-21. Numbers for the next year were 30% higher than that, which indicates that the pandemic has had a continuing effect on universities. I welcome that the Department for Education has asked the Office for Students to distribute £15 million for transition into university.

I am pleased with everything that the Minister said about what we are doing, and I end on the point that there is less stigma, which is a good thing, and if there are more people coming forward, that is a good thing too.

2.38 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): As we have heard from colleagues from all parts of the Chamber, we are in a mental health crisis. Unfortunately, it is becoming increasingly endemic. I pay tribute to the work of our offices, including my own team, who regularly deal with critical cases of mental ill health, including suicide calls, for which we have had to put on special training. That was happening before the pandemic too, and we need to recognise that.

Recent figures show that seven out of 10 secondary school children are expressing mental health distress. That should worry us. It has already been mentioned, but we know that there are risk factors and risk conditions that can contribute to the onset of a mental health problem. I will speak about the importance of early intervention a little later.

Oldham has the 37th highest prevalence of mental health disorders in the country. That puts it in the highest 20% in the UK; for reference, the Prime Minister's

constituency is in the lowest 6%. On the other side of the coin to this higher prevalence is our reduced funding. Research from the Children's Commissioner found that child and adolescent mental health services in Oldham received over £100 less in spending per child from the Government than those on the Isle of Wight. Similarly, in 2019 *The Guardian* reported that London had nearly double the number of psychiatrists in the north of England. As I have mentioned, it is true that things have got worse since the pandemic, but that is not just a consequence of the pandemic.

I want to focus on what needs to happen, because we need a serious plan, and I am not from the Minister's speech that the Government recognise that. The Opposition want to recruit thousands of new mental health professionals, which will go some way to addressing the lack of parity of esteem between mental and physical health services. That needs to be reflected in the Government's NHS workforce plan. We have waited ages for the Government to produce that and it makes the partygate report look quite prompt. As the Government sit on their hands and fail to produce a plan, the crisis continues to get worse. That is why we will commit to the biggest expansion of the NHS workforce in history. We must also look at the metrics we use. For example, we would guarantee treatment within a month. That would make such a big difference to all those people stuck on what feel like endless waiting lists in Oldham, Saddleworth and across the country.

Finally, I am pleased to see our party committing to a paradigm shift from the medical to the social model of health, focusing on prevention in communities as well as treatment. The Leader of the Opposition has committed himself to that in Labour's health mission, and we have also pledged that there will be a mental health hub in every community. We will go further than that: our commitment to addressing the rampant health inequalities across our country includes tackling the inequity in mental health. As we develop national policy from education to transport and finance, we will consider the impacts on health and health inequalities, including mental health. This is the difference a Labour Government will make. The next Labour Government have a plan that is both radical and credible, and for my constituency and for our country, it is long overdue.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. You will be well aware, because you have chaired many of the debates, that there has been a campaign in this House for over a year to stop SLAPPs—strategic lawsuits against public participation—which are used by very rich men to oppress free speech in this country. Just in the last hour or so, the High Court has ruled one of those SLAPPs cases out of order: the case of Mr Mohamed Amersi against the ex-Member of this House Charlotte Leslie has been struck down. In my view, that is a great victory for free speech. Because it is so important, I give notice that I will be raising the matter on the Adjournment.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his point of order. It of course needs no comment from the Chair, except to say that I think the whole House will agree with him that this is a good judgment and an important step forward. I do indeed recall chairing many debates on the matter,

and I am sure the whole House will look forward to his raising it on the Adjournment. We will recommence the debate with Danny Kruger.

2.43 pm

Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the speech of the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), who is a great champion of this cause. I am very proud to work with her on the all-party parliamentary group for prescribed drug dependence, which, after this debate, I am going to ask her to co-chair with me.

I want to call the House's attention and that of *Hansard* to the speech made by the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle). The distressing and powerful story he told of a constituent of his will remain with me as a terrible example of the state of so many of our constituents and of mental health services that do not work properly.

I welcome this debate, and I am afraid to say that I do recognise many of the descriptions given by Members on both sides. I want to call attention to the excellent services provided in my constituency of Devizes by the Green Lane Hospital, a mental health hospital that has been there for many years. However, even there we have many cases of constituents feeling that they have been let down and of genuine difficulty in accessing the services that are needed in time. Despite the good efforts made from the top of the system to the bottom, we simply are not doing well enough, so I welcome the debate, and I recognise the general point being made.

Of course, I agree with the argument put forward by the Opposition that we need more mental health services. The question is what those services should be, how they are organised and, indeed, whether we should use services as the frame for this whole debate. I wonder whether the term "services and relationships" would be more appropriate, and Members have mentioned the primacy of relationships. The fact is that we do not fully understand all the neurological origins of mental health conditions, but we do know that they are exacerbated by social circumstances, and that while medical treatment can help, what really helps is good relationships.

I know this from my own experience. For many years, I ran a project working in prisons and with ex-offenders, and we saw so clearly that, while of course the official and the essential responsibility for crime and criminality rests with the individual, it is usually relationships and relational skills or the lack of them that lead somebody into crime and into prison, and it is relationships and relational capacity and skills that help people to get out of an offending lifestyle. We also know this very well from all the evidence in studies of addiction, which is very closely correlated to mental health.

What do we do? There is consensus that we need more services and better services, but my concern is that we will end up focusing the system's efforts on quantifiable measures or quantifiable inputs—most of all, the prescription of pills and pharmaceutical treatments—so we will end up medicalising mental health, just as we medicalise so much physical health. I chair the APPG on prescribed drug dependence, as I have mentioned. The research that the APPG has supported, particularly by Dr James Davies of Oxford University, shows that a fifth of adults are on antidepressants, many of them because they cannot get off these pills, even though they

[*Danny Kruger*]

are only supposed to be prescribed for a certain time. We spend £500 million a year on prescriptions for medication that people should not be on, according to the guidance for those pills.

I worry about the trend towards the medicalisation of mental health, and I particularly worry about the Government's major conditions strategy, which I welcome. We cannot have a focus just on pharmaceuticals; we have to make it much wider. It should not just be about services, but about the relationships that support good mental health. I am pleased there is a strategy on mental health and there does need to be top-down action, but I would like it also to focus on undoing this over-medicalised model. We need more training for GPs to understand the social relationships at the heart of mental health, including how to support people who have acute conditions. We need more funding for social prescribing—that has been mentioned—which is a tremendous initiative. We need support for withdrawal services and a helpline for people who are addicted to prescribed drugs.

Overall, however, we need a bottom-up approach. I respect Labour's plan for more access hubs for mental health, more school mental health workers and more staff, but really we need system reform. The hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) mentioned the community mental health approach, and I like that phrase, but I think it includes much more than just more hubs and more staff. We need a whole system reform that prioritises the civil society organisations, families and community groups that have such a powerful role to play in supporting people with mental health.

Lastly, I draw attention to the new developing model called outcomes partnerships, whereby the public sector pays for results—not for inputs and not even for outputs, but for actual demonstrable improvement, whether it is in healthcare or mental health. It brings together all the different providers from civil society, the public sector and, indeed, businesses—we have mentioned the importance of workplace training—so that we get all the different players involved in a person's life, and so that the funding is more local and can be used on the preventive agenda, which is so important. Rather than just trying to pour more money into the top of the NHS and thinking that is going to work, we need to fund it from the bottom up.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I need to reduce the time limit to four minutes with immediate effect.

2.48 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I want to highlight the crisis faced by families dealing with mental health issues, particularly those with children.

The crisis has been brought to my attention by many constituents over the time I have been an MP, but today I would like to raise the issue of my constituent Stephanie, whose son is autistic, non-verbal, and has complex developmental and communication delays. Stephanie knew that her son needed an attention deficit hyperactivity disorder diagnosis from an early age, but was told that he could not be diagnosed until he was seven. When her

son did receive a diagnosis, Stephanie was told by the doctor that it was obvious how much he was struggling to cope with his life due to his ADHD. He is suffering from elevated levels of distress and unable to sleep through the night due to his inability to sit still for long.

Sadly, Stephanie was informed that there would be an 18 to 24-month wait for the community service MindMate to sign off the diagnosis and to be referred to child and adolescent mental health services, along with the medication plan. The CAMHS wait would mean a further 18 to 24 months to receive medication, so if they hit the longest waiting times at both services, her son would have been told that he needed medication at the age of seven and only receive his prescription at 11. Long wait times for diagnosis and medication mean that families across the country are turning for help to charities and support groups such as ZigZag, a Leeds autism support group based in my constituency that offers essential advice and support to thousands of families across Leeds. Stephanie has expressed her concerns and garnered support from other families with similar experiences.

The situation is at crisis point and requires immediate attention from the Government. We cannot ignore the struggles faced by families across the country dealing with the complexities of mental health issues. It is the Government's responsibility to ensure that our most vulnerable citizens have access to prompt and proper care. Those issues are just the start. For instance, Leeds University reports that it has seen an about 60% increase in demand for mental health services and that the issues are a lot more complex than they were before covid. It says that many students are arriving at university with anxiety and mental health issues as the support they needed in their formative years was simply not available. Huge pressure is being built up, like a dam that is going to burst.

Adult ADHD services in Leeds currently have 3,300 people on their diagnostic waiting list—that does not include all the people who cannot be bothered to see their GP because of the length of the waiting list—and they are receiving more than 170 referrals a month, which far exceeds their capacity. The waiting list is currently upwards of three years, with an added wait for medication after having received a diagnosis. Similarly, the adult autism diagnostic service in Leeds currently receives more than 100 referrals a month, but it has the resources to complete only 40 assessments a month.

The current situation is completely unacceptable. We need the Government to create a more effective and efficient mental health care system that is responsive to the needs of communities. We cannot continue to let down families like Stephanie's at every turn. It is crucial that we invest in the mental health sector and prioritise the wellbeing of all our young people.

2.51 pm

Olivia Blake (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab): As an officer of the all-party parliamentary group on eating disorders—an issue that I will raise in my speech—I thank the right hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) for her bravery in sharing her experience.

The statistics on the crisis in the NHS, as raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) and others, speak for themselves. The 5.4 million hours that people with mental health problems are waiting in

A&E is a scandal. We know that the longer patients wait for treatment, the worse and more dangerous their conditions can become. While I would love to make this speech about the importance of prevention, unfortunately we see a crisis in the NHS, so I will focus on the issues of acuity mentioned by the hon. Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper). Many of those who cannot access the mental health care that they need are children. A quarter of 17 to 19-year-olds have a probable mental illness. Nearly one in 10 seven to 16-year-olds and a third of 17 to 24-year-olds have tried to self-harm. My own NHS South Yorkshire integrated care board has a waiting list of 10,015 children.

If those figures were not horrific enough, I want to talk about one further horrifying effect: that of people with eating disorders—often children or young people—having to wait to be given a tier 4 bed in a specialist ward owing to the acuity of their condition and because of the lack of preventive care available. Last year, a parent wrote to tell me that they were struggling to secure a mental health bed for their child, who had been diagnosed with anorexia. They would have gone anywhere in the country to get their child seen given the care they received while they were waiting. They needed urgent in-patient mental healthcare, but no tier 4 beds were available, so they had to be admitted to a general ward instead.

When the parents first contacted me, their child was being restrained most days to be fed. They were worried that, without specialist support, repetitive restraint was only making things worse. I have since spoken to numerous eating disorder specialists, researchers and medical staff who have all told me about the rising number of children with eating disorders being restrained—often unnecessarily—by staff in general medical wards without training, recording or following guidance. I have heard more first-hand stories. I warn hon. Members that these are not nice experiences to relay, but they should be shouted from the rooftops because they are the human consequences of a system that is understaffed, under-resourced and under strain.

One person told me that, as a 17-year-old, they were restrained for feeding via a nasogastric tube three or four times a day by five people; that went on for about 10 months. Another person told me that they were restrained for daily NG feeds by five to six staff at a time for six months. Sometimes, they were held for an hour after the feed and would come out with bruises, despite their screams during the restraint. I have heard stories of 15-year-olds being restrained at 11 o'clock at night for NG feeding. To be clear, it is not just the people I have described who are suffering because they must wait for access to the care they need; it is also causing tension between psychiatric staff and medical staff on wards because these people are getting inappropriate care.

It is shameful that in such settings the use of restraint does not need to be recorded. Its use is heavily regulated in mental health settings for a reason. The use of restraint and restrictive practice is really consequential to the conditions that people go on to develop and their ability to recover. I am disappointed that in a letter and in response to me following a debate, the Minister refused to act and close the loophole. I ask her to think again about closing that loophole so that, no matter where a person is in the system, they have the same rights around restraint and that it gets recorded.

2.56 pm

Mrs Paulette Hamilton (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests because I am an independent lay manager. Everywhere we look in Britain at the moment, public services are crumbling. Chronic neglect by the Conservative Government means that people across the UK can no longer trust that they will be able to access mental health services when they need them.

As a lay manager in Birmingham and Solihull Mental Health NHS Foundation Trust, I often see the impact that dwindling services and limited resources have on residents across our city. In our local ICB area in December, nearly 3,000 children and almost 50,000 adults were on the mental health waiting list. In my constituency, parents have told me that their children are waiting a number of years for urgent mental health support.

Birmingham and Erdington are not unique cases. Since 2010, the Conservative Government have cut one in four mental health beds across the country as waiting times for treatment have soared. Currently, 400,000 children are waiting for mental health treatment across the UK. They are being denied the help that they need.

I am a mum and a grandmother. Like all parents, I want the next generation to have better opportunities than I did. That is why Labour's plan to recruit thousands more mental health staff, guarantee treatment within a month and provide access to a mental health professional in every school is so important. It is inconceivable that the Government have failed to put forward their own plan to recruit mental health staff or even reduce the shocking waiting times that our constituents are having to put up with.

I worked in the NHS for 25 years and, like many of my colleagues, I despair at how it has been treated by the Government. This year will mark 75 years of our incredible NHS, but, over the last 13 years, the Conservatives have done all they can to wreck it. People suffering with their mental health cannot afford to wait any longer for the support that they need. We need serious government. We need a Labour Government to tackle the crisis now.

2.59 pm

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): The Metropolitan police recently announced that it would stop attending mental health calls unless there was a risk to life. That has rightly generated much debate about the role of policing. However, it has not generated much debate so far on how, if we all believe in the right care, right person principles, we got into the position where the police are playing such a primary role, and where our mental health services are in that conversation. We know that the police are stretched. For all the Home Secretary's talk of increased police numbers, the Government are only restoring the officers they have been cutting since 2010. Alongside those cuts, years of austerity have hammered other public services. West Yorkshire police tell me that mental health-related demand increased by 60% between 2012 and 2022. We have allowed policing to become the one-stop-shop that we ask to pick up the pieces when everything else falls apart. Mental health practitioners are also undeniably stretched, but mental health specialists are the right people to provide mental health support, especially when somebody is in crisis.

[Holly Lynch]

I am in no doubt that the police will have tried various other ways of encouraging their colleagues in mental health trusts to recognise the leadership role they are required to play in the response to a mental health issue. I know that because I also spend a great deal of time locally in Halifax trying to do the same, and secure specialist support for people who need serious and urgent help. When someone is in real distress with their mental health or approaching a crisis, too often West Yorkshire police, Calderdale Council, charities and other partners—even the hospital trust—work together with my team and I to do what we can. Yet I am afraid that too often it has proved incredibly difficult to bring qualified mental health specialists into the team to even be a part of the conversation. That results in the wrong care for people at their most vulnerable.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) said, that is a false economy, because it falls to all the other services and partners to try to provide a degree of care that they are not qualified to provide. We should not criminalise people who are unwell out of necessity. The police are right to take a step back. The question is what will it take for mental health trusts and professionals to be able to step forward?

As our motion sets out, patients suffering with mental health issues waited more than 5.4 million hours in accident and emergency last year and we have nearly 400,000 children currently waiting for treatment. If we are proactive about mental health, it will, as has been outlined, be cost-effective in the long term and we can prevent more people from being in a crisis situation. A Labour Government would recruit thousands of mental health staff to expand access to treatment, provide access to specialist mental health support in every school, establish open access mental health hubs for children and young people, and bring in the first ever long-term, whole-Government plan to improve outcomes for people with mental health needs.

I read the Government's amendment to our motion. Does any MP who does their casework properly and is truly grounded in their constituency really recognise the picture it paints? The Government pat themselves on the back for hitting the target for interventions in psychosis. I checked what the target was. The standard is that 60% of people experiencing their first episode of psychosis will have access to a NICE-approved care package within two weeks of referral. We have all experienced supporting people in a psychotic episode. How long does it take to even get an assessment for that person to then hope that they are in the 60% of people who should get care within two weeks? It is not good enough. We need a Labour plan to deliver much more.

3.3 pm

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): There has been a narrative about whether it is increasing numbers of people becoming more aware of mental health that has led to more cases being reported, or whether there are actually more people suffering from mental health problems. I spoke to Michele Moran, the head on this issue for the Humber Teaching NHS Foundation Trust. She told me, indisputably, that we

have more people suffering from mental health conditions. We only need look at the examples coming into each and every one of our surgeries to see how desperate the situation has become. Like other hon. Members, I would like to thank my staff for the work they do in supporting people with mental health problems. I will give two examples.

One example is a 13-year-old boy who has not been in school for two years. The school funded three counsellor sessions for him, but it cannot continue to give the boy the level of support he needs. This is a crucial point. Schools are very willing to help, but teachers are not mental health professionals. We need the professionals in the system, which is why Labour's pledge to have professionals in schools matters so much. We all know how desperate the waiting list for CAMHS is and how difficult it is to get the level of support that is needed. We are left with families who are desperately struggling, having to rely on other family members and finding life incredibly difficult.

It is the same for another constituent with a 17-year-old daughter. She did not get the help she needed at the time she needed it. She could not access that primary care. What ended up happening was that she took an overdose, which she survived, but it was clear that her mental health was in such difficulties that she was sectioned. Her parents now find that only one of them is able to work, because the other parent has to be with their daughter at all times because of the difficulties she is facing. That is having a huge impact on their income and their standard of living.

In our area we have tried to do something different with the police. Right Care, Right Person is a joined-up approach from Humberside police, the clinical commissioning group—as it was at the time—local councils, mental health providers and hospitals to decide who is the right person to attend to someone in crisis, and then look at developments. It is not perfect, but it tries to address the difficulties we are having. Many of the cases the police have been sent to are still people actually struggling with their mental health, and the police, like teachers, are not the professionals always best placed to deal with someone in a mental health crisis. We are evaluating that as it goes along, but the demand for services is indisputable.

We need to take a step back a little and think about what is going on. We are talking about citizens advice bureaux providing counselling and support for people with mental health problems. The people that the citizens advice bureaux are supporting are not those who generally have mental health problems; they are people who do not have enough money to live, and their level of debt is causing them to have mental health problems. They are in a situation called negative budgeting, where, quite simply, the amount of money they have coming in is less than the amount of money going out. That is what is driving some mental health problems.

If we are to solve the mental health crisis, we must look at poverty, debt and the cost of living crisis. That is why I am so delighted that my hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) said that a future Labour Government's approach to mental health would be focused not just on health, but across the whole of Government. Until we have that joined-up approach, we will never really tackle the crisis our country faces.

3.7 pm

Simon Lightwood (Wakefield) (Lab/Co-op): West Yorkshire has among the highest rates of mental health issues in the country, with 28,630 children and 63,755 adults on waiting lists alone. The statistics show that Wakefield, specifically, is above average, with one in three people suffering from mental illness. As we all know, some of the primary causes are poverty, debt, poor housing and long-term physical health problems. Indeed, Eastmoor in my constituency has the highest prevalence of mental health illness, as well as those cause factors, too.

I know from my casework that the number of mental health cases coming into my office has been rising steadily over the past year. With mental health provision at breaking point, that is no surprise: more than 5.4 million hours waiting in A&E in 2021-22 for mental health patients; 1.6 million people stuck on long waiting lists for mental health treatment; and nearly 400,000 children currently waiting for treatment. On that last point about children, I am deeply concerned that Wakefield has the seventh-highest rate of under-18s under mental health care, with over 6,000 having contact with mental health services in the past year alone. Parents are left feeling helpless, watching their children's mental health deteriorating as they linger on waiting lists for months, if not years, to access treatment.

Much of the problem is caused by the number of mental health nurses in the NHS now being lower than when Labour left office. It is unacceptable that people are left turning to A&E because of staff shortages in mental health. I have had cases where patients have been advised that they will have to wait a year for their treatment to start and such delays are becoming more common. Nearly 10,000 people in West Yorkshire had treatment closed without even receiving an appointment. After 13 years of the Tories running down our health services, we need a Labour Government that will guarantee mental health treatment within a month for all who need it, recruit thousands of new mental health staff and ensure that mental health specialists are in every school. The scrapping by the Conservatives of the 10-year mental health plan shows a total lack of long-term focus on those with mental health needs. That is why Labour would bring in the first ever long-term, whole-Government plan to improve outcomes for people with mental health needs.

With mental health services on their knees, I will be voting for Labour's motion, and I hope the Government will finally give this area the attention it so sorely needs.

3.10 pm

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): The Conservative cost of living crisis is causing a mental health crisis. People living in poverty or, as we are increasingly seeing, under financial stress and in personal debt are more likely to develop mental illness, as so many hon. Friends have already said. Sadly, children from the poorest 20% of households are four times more likely to have serious mental health difficulties by age 11 than the wealthiest 20%, and after 13 years of Conservative Government our mental health services are at breaking point and patients are being failed. It is important that we talk about mental health in this place because it is a key issue. Like many other Members, I have constituents who are struggling to get the support

they and their children need; that is their lived experience and it is right that we hold the Government to account on it.

For children, recent research shows the average CAMHS waiting list in February rocketed by two thirds, and the 400,000 children on mental health waiting lists are waiting an average of 21 weeks for a first appointment. Data from December 2022 shows that children in a mental health crisis spent 7,034 hours in A&E in my Bedfordshire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust area. That is in the context of our Bedfordshire, Luton and Milton Keynes Integrated Care Board area having over 15,000 children on mental health waiting lists. This is distressing for both the children and their families.

Turning to adults, Royal College of Psychiatrists research from last October found that 43% of adults with mental illness said that long waiting times had worsened their mental health: 23% had to wait more than 12 weeks to start treatment and many end up turning to A&E departments. Indeed, data from December 2022 shows that adults in the Bedfordshire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust area, including the Luton and Dunstable NHS Hospital, spent over 11,000 hours in A&E.

It is right that I mention the many volunteers who operate in the mental health sphere. It is the end of Volunteers' Week 2023 so I want to make that shout out, particularly to the brilliant volunteers with the Luton, South Beds and Harpenden Samaritans, who are committed to supporting people struggling to cope or struggling with their mental health through the listening service the Samaritans offers 24 hours a day. If anyone listening to this debate needs support, they should call 116 123 for free from any phone 24 hours a day.

Finally, I want to state my support for Labour's community-focused preventive plan for mental health so that people will be guaranteed to be seen within one month, there will be 8,500 new mental health staff, with open access mental health hubs in each community and a mental health professional in every school. We need this bold plan; we need it now, and we need a Labour Government to deliver it.

3.13 pm

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): There is no doubt that our mental health system is broken. Like many other Members, I receive hundreds of emails from my constituents about the dire state of mental health services, and there is a story for every age and every system failure, but today I want to focus on young people, particularly students.

It will come as no surprise that the Mental Health Foundation found that 40% of students are not coping well with their anxiety. In Oxfordshire, a survey by The Tab in 2022 found a staggering 82% of students at Oxford Brookes University had self-medicated with drugs or alcohol to cope with mental health issues. Where students know that they cannot rely on the NHS, an added burden is put on university staff. Tutors increasingly find themselves acting as therapists or counsellors for their overburdened, ill or anxious students.

Oxford University is working hard to improve services. It has come up with a joint mental health committee and a more common approach across the colleges and departments. It deserves praise for that, but the students I have spoken to have made it clear that

[Layla Moran]

“University wellbeing services are not and cannot be a substitute for adequate mental health care”

and those gaps have dire consequences when severe mental health issues are left untreated. My constituents Jacque and Mark faced every parent’s worst nightmare when their son Rory reached crisis point. Rory was suffering from anxiety and depression and found no support after a year of absence. He tragically committed suicide at university at just 22. His parents told me that “we can’t bring Rory back, but we can help other young people preparing to go to uni.”

They are calling for a statutory duty of care for universities, which would force them to take proactive steps and intervene where a student is clearly at risk of harm. It is just common sense. It already exists between employers and employees. All we are asking is for the same duty of care to apply to students.

But, as we all know, the problems in young people’s mental health services are not restricted to those at university. So many people tell me the system is broken: parents, teachers, educational psychologists and clinical psychologists all identify the same failings. One parent wrote to me:

“I am breaking my heart listening to my son saying horrible things about himself, threatening to take his life, and struggling with his mental health in general. Next year we would have been on the waiting list for four years and nothing will probably happen.”

That story is not unique.

So it is left to voluntary organisations and local authorities to step in where this Government are clearly failing. Oxfordshire Mind and Restore do incredible work. Last year, I visited The Abingdon Bridge, a fantastic charity that provides specialist support for 13 to 25-year-olds. When I visited, it had 50 young people on its waiting list, who had to wait up to 24 weeks for an assessment and a further 10 weeks for counselling. Shockingly, that is still much shorter than CAMHS, where the waiting list is between two and four years.

We know how to fix this; it is about more funding. A senior healthcare professional in Oxfordshire told me that

“every pound spent on a child’s mental health saves thousands in the future.”

It is this Government who are failing our young people and their parents. The Government are dragging their feet. Young people and their parents deserve so much better than this.

3.17 pm

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): Suicide is a tragedy: it is a tragedy for the person, their loved ones and their community. As we have heard in the debate, suicide affects people of all ages. However, I am going to focus on one group: men. For men under 50, suicide is the biggest killer—not cancer, not other physical illnesses, but suicide. Mental health matters so much and it should be on a par with physical health. The NHS is there to look after and care for us all. That is the basic principle it was founded on. With suicide being such a big killer, it is only right that more effort and resources go into treating poor mental health.

Each suicide cracks an irreparable hole in the lives of loved ones. They often ask themselves, “Could I have done more? How did I not spot any signs?” or even, “Did I contribute towards it?” This would not be the case for physical illness; instead they would rely on professional healthcare. That is why the same resources need to be in place to treat poor mental health. Yet instead this Government have scrapped their 10-year mental health plan, displaying yet again that they are not interested in long-term planning. If it does not give them an instant headline, it seems the Government lose interest.

Of course, society has a role to play. For too long, men struggling or even displaying emotion are told to “man up,” “stop being a wimp,” or even, more cruelly, to “grow a pair.” Those words may seem harmless at the time, but in reality they are dangerous and cause tremendous harm. No one knows what is going on in somebody else’s head. That again reinforces why a national strategy is so important, not only to offer better and more accessible mental health care but to help to shift societal attitudes. We all have a role to play. How we conduct ourselves towards others is very important. In everyday life, we have an impact on every person we come into contact with. Pre-emptive mental health care is a must. That is why Labour’s plan to prioritise mental health care in an open access hub is so important.

Businesses and employers also have a role to play. They have a duty to their employees’ mental health. Modern workplaces should have accessible mental first aid in the way that they have physical first aid. For any strategy to combat suicide to be successful, it needs to be a priority of national Government. We need professional mental health support requirements for employers and a plan to change attitudes in society, not just a plan to swat the flies with. We need a plan that is resourced and put into practice.

We should make it easier for men to talk at work, in the pub and, most importantly, with professionals. Labour’s plan to recruit thousands of mental health staff would put us on the right path of caring for our men. The Government need to and should do more to solve that crisis, and our Labour Government will resolve it.

3.21 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): In Greater Manchester, the number of children on waiting lists under the NHS Greater Manchester Integrated Care Board is 23,510. The number of adults on waiting lists is 89,250, and the number of patients whose treatment was closed without receiving an appointment at all was 31,405. Those statistics represent people facing crisis, who desperately need help.

Like other Members of this House, I have heard many stories from constituents, including those waiting over a year for assessment and treatment for obsessive compulsive disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, autism or potential learning disabilities. Many have been forced, through desperation, to take out personal loans to pay for private assessments. Then, they have tried to privately fund their own treatment and medication. I have heard from constituents suffering with severe depression, waiting months for therapy and simply being told to ring 999 if it gets serious.

I have heard traumatic cases of teenagers battling serious mental health conditions who needed urgent help, with no bed available for them for hundreds of miles unless they chose to go on an adult ward, which I am sure for most children and young people would be an extremely frightening experience. I also hear the stories of our hard-working NHS mental health staff, who are overworked, overstretched, underpaid and at breaking point. So there is not a mere crisis in mental health; the service has effectively collapsed. Sadly, I fear for what is to come if the Government do not urgently act today.

Salford City Council estimated in 2021 that there would be between 36,537 and 40,902 additional diagnoses of anxiety and depression in Salford alone, equating to a point prevalence of between 14% and 15.8%. That was before the cost of living crisis hit. For those who reach crisis point, the outlook is equally frightening. An overstretched, underfunded ambulance service means that, often, the police are diverted to emergency mental health calls. That is why there was huge concern expressed recently in response to plans by the Metropolitan police to stop attending emergency mental health incidents.

More broadly, in addition to the chronic understaffing of mental health services, funding remains a huge issue. The Centre of Mental Health estimates that mental health conditions make up 28% of all referrals, but services receive only 13% of NHS funding. The Health Foundation found that the lack of funding meant that just four in 10 people seeking help would be able to receive it. The sad fact is that it makes no economic sense not to increase investment in the NHS and funding of NHS mental health services. As the Mental Health Foundation states:

“Poor mental health costs the UK a staggering £118 billion per year, but much of this is preventable.”

I welcome wholeheartedly the motion of my hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) and I will support it. The Government must recognise this crisis, properly fund our NHS mental health services, and properly recruit those staff and pay them the wages that they deserve.

3.25 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): The Minister spoke earlier about what the Government have done for the mental health service, but we have all known for far too long that people in mental health crisis are not getting the support that they need urgently. They need swift, accessible and effective support and treatment. I am glad that we in Labour have a clear and thought-through plan to address this issue and suicide prevention.

I want to start with some figures. The shadow mental health Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan), has already touched on the national figures. The figures from my local trust in the north-east are also worrying. Just in the 2021-22 financial year, adults in mental health crisis spent more than 1,134 hours in A&E at Gateshead Health NHS Foundation Trust, while children in crisis spent 180 hours there. The North East Ambulance Service received 3,622 emergency 999 calls from people in mental health crisis. NHS Digital figures for 2022 showed that, in the north-east and north Cumbria ICB alone, 31,345 children and 70,770 adults were on waiting lists, and 12,845 patients had

treatments closed without even receiving an appointment. Those staggering figures have been reflected nationally.

This morning, I met representatives from the charity YoungMinds, who told me that urgent referrals to CAMHS are the highest on record. Let us make no mistake: many of our young people are in acute crisis. Research by the charity shows that 43% of the young people turned down by CAMHS had experienced suicidal thoughts, psychosis or self-harm. As a result of having to wait so long, 26% had tried to take their own life.

In an intervention, I raised the concerns of mental health charities about the subsuming of the mental health strategy into the major conditions strategy. There is real concern that the voices heard in the mental health consultation will be lost and that a five-year major conditions strategy is too short to bring about the changes needed and to emphasise the cross-governmental work envisaged in the original plan.

As the Mental Health Foundation highlighted, “public mental health has traditionally received extremely minimal funding”,

of an average of about 2% of the public health budget of local authorities. That has been accompanied by a cut of 26% in public health grants in real terms. The Mental Health Foundation notes that we cannot simply “treat our way” out of mental health problems. We know that they are formed by hard socioeconomic factors that the Government need to address, and that the poorest regions, such as mine in the north-east, see the highest number of suicides. The Government need to work on that.

As the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on suicide and self-harm prevention, I have the pleasure of talking with many local organisations that have been formed by people who have personal experience of suicide. To name just one, James’ Place is a charity that offers professional support to men in acute suicidal crisis. It currently has centres in London and Liverpool, but I am delighted to say it will be opening a centre in the north-east, where, sadly, we have the worst suicide figures in the UK. There is so much more I could say, but I wish to emphasise my wholehearted support.

3.29 pm

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): As we have heard today, England is in the midst of a mental health crisis, and that is certainly true in the north-east. I join my hon. Friends the Members for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) and for Darlington (Peter Gibson) in calling for an independent inquiry into the Tees, Esk and Wear Valley NHS Trust. The testimonies I have heard have shocked me. I know that I can speak only in broad terms, but they include serious cases of improper care and misdiagnosis, and of putting people on waiting lists despite their feeling suicidal.

The Care Quality Commission reports that we have seen raise concerns about risk assessments, communications and record keeping, and a lack of observation. There have also been concerns raised about the lack of beds for children, as well as poor staffing levels, high staff turnover and a lack of neurodiversity training. Horrifically, young people have even taken their lives while in the care of the trust. We owe it to them, and all those who have been harmed, to investigate what is going on within the trust. Will the Minister commit to an

[Mary Kelly Foy]

independent, judge-led inquiry into the trust? She can either respond to me now or I can wait for her response in her closing speech. One thing is clear: this cannot go on.

I want to highlight the crisis in children's mental health. In my region, children spent over 1,000 hours in A&E because they were in a mental health crisis. There are over 30,000 children on waiting lists. Across England, one in six children aged five to 16 are likely to have a mental health issue. Children's happiness and sense of wellbeing continues to decline. With mental health trusts raising the threshold of how ill under-18s must be, we have seen a quarter of a million children being denied help for their mental health. Poor mental health compounds. Left untreated, it can spiral out of control, as we have heard many times today. No one should be in a mental health crisis, let alone children. The Government must invest in children's mental health today—no more delays and no more referrals. The Minister must allow children the happiness that they deserve.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Before I call the shadow Minister, I must say that I am very disappointed that seven Opposition Members who spoke in the debate are not back in the Chamber for the wind-ups, as well as about three Government Members. I must emphasise again that it is really important for people to get back to hear what the shadow Minister has to say, as well as the Minister. I hope that message will be conveyed back to those Members who are not here. I will say it again in the hope that they are back by the time the shadow Minister has finished his speech.

3.33 pm

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): It is a pleasure to close the debate on behalf of the shadow health and social care team.

We have had a thorough debate and we have heard some heartbreaking, harrowing and concerning things during its course. The amendment that the Minister has put down in response to the motion is reminiscent of "Alice Through the Looking Glass", because it does not bear any relationship to people's lived experiences of the mental health system in England or the contributions made by Members from both sides of the House to the debate.

I pay tribute to all who have spoken today. There have been some incredible speeches. We heard from the hon. Members for Watford (Dean Russell) and for Penrith and The Border (Dr Hudson), from the right hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), and from the hon. Members for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer), for Penistone and Stockbridge (Miriam Candidates), for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Aaron Bell), for Devizes (Danny Kruger), for St Albans (Daisy Cooper), and for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran).

We also heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Hemsworth (Jon Trickett), my hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle), who made an extremely powerful contribution, and my hon. Friends the Members for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins), for Batley and Spen (Kim Leadbeater), for West Ham (Ms Brown)—I ask the Minister not to forget her

request for a meeting; she is certainly someone to whom it is difficult to say no—for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel), for Sheffield, Hallam (Olivia Blake), for Birmingham, Erdington (Mrs Hamilton), for Halifax (Holly Lynch), for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy), for Wakefield (Simon Lightwood), for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins), for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer), for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) and for Blaydon (Liz Twist). Finally, we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy); I remind the Minister that she would like a response to her request for an inquiry into issues in her local area.

We are facing a mental health emergency in this country—

Vicky Ford: The hon. Gentleman has said that the Government's amendment bears no relation to the reality of what people are seeing. In my speech I mentioned the creation of a brand-new facility for patients in mid-Essex, which means that people in crisis are not spending many hours in A&E but are going to a bespoke 24/7 centre. That is the sort of provision that I want to support, and it is mentioned in the Government amendment but not in the Opposition motion.

Andrew Gwynne: Of course we need facilities in every part of England, but the fact is that after 13 years, too many parts of England are falling behind. We know that the mental health crisis in this country has become worse on the watch of the right hon. Lady's Government, and she should have a little contrition about the state of mental health services in England.

Vicky Ford *rose*—

Andrew Gwynne: I will not give way. We have heard enough from the right hon. Lady, supporting her "Through the Looking-Glass" amendment which bears no relation to the reality.

As we have heard today, people who require mental health support, no matter where they live—except in the right hon. Lady's part of England—will be confronted by a system that is buckling under the pressure of 13 years of Tory mismanagement, neglect and incompetence. The right hon. Lady shakes her head, but the figures speak for themselves. Last year, patients suffering with mental health issues waited more than 5.4 million hours in accident and emergency departments. There are 400,000 children currently waiting for mental health treatment, and 1.2 million people are waiting for community mental health care, with some patients being forced to travel more than 300 miles because there are no beds in their local area. My hon. Friend the Member for Hemsworth spoke powerfully about that. The Resolution Foundation has found that, of the 185,000 young people who are unable to work, nearly two thirds cite mental ill health as the reason. Suicide is now the leading cause of death in adults under 34, with about 18 people losing their lives every single day. As the cost of living crisis has worsened, we have also seen a knock-on effect on addiction and rehabilitation. Drug-related deaths are at a record high, and last year there were 9,641 deaths in the UK from alcohol misuse, a 27% increase on the year before.

Make no mistake: the emergency in mental health has become a public health crisis, and we need to see action. Our motion calls on the Government to adopt Labour's plan to recruit 8,500 mental health staff to expand access to treatment, to provide specialist mental health support in every school, and to establish open-access mental health hubs for children and young people. That would be paid for by the closing of tax loopholes, because politics is about priorities, and Labour's priority is to ensure that those who need mental health support have access to it in all parts of the country. Our priority is to build a Britain where patients start receiving appropriate treatment within a month of referral. I hope that those on the Government Benches will demonstrate that they share these priorities by voting for Labour's motion today.

Staffing is just one part of the equation. Like any public health issue, addressing mental health requires a holistic approach that recognises its complex nature. That is why Labour has committed to a whole-Government plan to improve outcomes for people with mental health needs and to address the social determinants that drive mental ill health for many people. Our mental health can be influenced by a multitude of different things. Secure jobs, fair pay and good housing are all building blocks for a healthy life, physically and mentally, and unless we improve people's lives in the round, positive change will remain out of reach.

It is for this reason that the next Labour Government will focus as much on prevention as we do on treatment. We will pioneer a transformative cross-departmental agenda with a mission delivery board at the heart of the Government ensuring that all Departments work to improve the wider determinants of health. We will boost capacity in mental and public health teams so that people can get the support they need before presenting at A&E or turning to substance abuse. We will also encourage the integrated care systems to identify opportunities to join up services within the community. Our aim will be for more patients to have one point of contact for appointments with a range of professionals and services. This neighbourhood team will include the family doctor, carers, health visitors, social prescribers and mental health specialists.

Our vision is to turn the national health service into a neighbourhood health service with the patient right at the heart of it. The benefits of this kind of work will travel far beyond improving the lives of individuals suffering from mental ill health. For instance, in my own region of the north-west of England there were over 140,000 calls to 999 from people in a mental health crisis last year, and in my own constituency local people spent over 6,500 hours waiting in A&E for mental health treatment. If we were to help people before they reached these crisis points, we would drastically reduce pressure on the wider health system and thereby improve patient outcomes right across the board.

The same is true of wider economic productivity. As we have heard in the debate, the Mental Health Foundation and the London School of Economics have estimated that poor mental health costs the British economy £117 billion a year. That is a phenomenal amount of money and a huge loss to our country's economic power. Improving mental health outcomes is therefore not just a moral imperative—although it is certainly that—but a practical one, and one that is essential if we

want the United Kingdom to prosper, as I hope and believe we all do. That is what we come to this House for. We want to leave our country in a better shape for our children than it has been for ourselves.

That brings me again to the motion. All Members of the House have the opportunity today to support a fully funded plan to improve mental health treatment. Those on the Government Benches can choose to put party politics first, but that will not change the fact that this Government have failed people on mental health. No matter what amendments they put before us, that does not change people's real, lived experiences or the experiences of Members on both sides of the House who deal with the impact of mental ill health in their constituency casework. The system is crumbling and more of the same will just not cut it, so I am enormously proud to be supporting Labour's motion today and I would strongly urge Members on both sides of the House to back it. It is time to give those suffering from mental ill health the treatment and support they deserve, and I commend our motion to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):

I reiterate for those who were not here that it is incredibly important that people get back in good time to hear the Opposition wind-up as well as the Government wind-up—that includes Ministers. I would expect anybody who was not here at the beginning of the Opposition wind-up, some of whom are still not here, to write to Mr Speaker to apologise. I take it that people will do that.

3.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

What a shame it is that the Opposition have chosen to play politics with mental health, as we heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) and my hon. Friends the Members for Watford (Dean Russell), for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer) and for Penrith and The Border (Dr Hudson), because these are important issues. All countries are facing challenges with rising cases of mental ill health and capacity issues, but we have made progress in the last 10 years. It was in 2016 that David Cameron first talked about changing the stigma on mental health and, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford put it so well, we want more people to come forward. The problem in the past was that people did not come forward, instead waiting until they became so acutely unwell that it was more difficult to support them.

Dr Hudson: A recurrent theme in today's debate, on both sides of the House, has been the importance of prevention and breaking down stigma. Does my hon. Friend agree that the message should go out from Members on both sides of the House that it is okay not to be okay, that people should reach out and that more people in all walks of life should be first aid-trained to help when people do reach out?

Maria Caulfield: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth (Dr Evans) said, we had an event with the NFU yesterday, and that is exactly the point we wanted to make. It was my right

[*Maria Caulfield*]

hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) who set about changing the status of mental health, putting it on a level playing field with physical health, not just in the services we provide but in funding and staffing, with parity of esteem across the board.

Let us look at some of the progress that has been made over the last 10 years. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan), said in her opening remarks that she is bored of this figure, but it is true that £2.3 billion of additional funding is being put into frontline mental health services, supporting another 2 million people to access NHS-funded mental health services.

We are already doing much of what shadow Ministers have set out this afternoon. We are already recruiting 27,000 additional staff into mental health services, with 20,000 of them already in place. My right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford highlighted the difference that is making in her local area. We are removing dormitory accommodation across the country through a £400 million capital programme, and 29 schemes have already gone through—that is 500 beds that are no longer in dormitory-style accommodation.

My hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge highlighted the difference that funding is making in his constituency. We are moving to a system of community crisis support and early intervention so that people do not get to a point where they need to be admitted. Our £190 million of capital funding is being used to build community crisis facilities up and down the country. We are investing in mental health ambulances: 20 are already in place, 40 will be in place by the end of the year, and 47 will be in place next year. The shadow Minister laughs about this, but when somebody is going into crisis, it is more appropriate that a mental health specialist team visits them in a mental health ambulance than an ordinary paramedic, who will inevitably take them to A&E.

Suicide is the leading cause of death in new mums, which is completely unacceptable. That is why we are investing in perinatal mental health services in every part of England—these services saw 31,500 women last year.

As we remove the stigma, it is important that we have the services to deal with the rising number of people who come forward and ask for help, as we want them to do. We have introduced three targets, the first of which is on access to talking therapies, where 75% of people should begin treatment within six weeks. Currently, 90% of people are doing so and we are meeting that target. When children and young people are referred for eating disorders, the target is that 95% should be seen within one week. We are currently at 77%, whereas last year's figure was 61%, so despite the rising numbers we are seeing more children with eating disorders—

Vicky Ford: I was incredibly upset by the shadow Minister's suggestion that I do not care about mental health. As someone who has suffered with mental ill health in the past and spoken in the Chamber about how hard it is to speak about that, I found that very upsetting. Mental health suffered greatly during the pandemic, especially that of children and young people—I was the children's Minister at the time. We all know that

we need to do better, which is why it is important that we learn about what is working now and about new innovations. On eating disorders, I particularly thank the Minister for getting the waiting list time down.

Maria Caulfield: I thank my right hon. Friend for that. It is important that we take the politics out of this argument, because no one in this Chamber, on either side, does not care about mental health.

The psychosis target we have introduced is that 60% of people should start treatment within six weeks, and we are currently at 72%. We are overperforming on many of those targets. NHS England has five new targets that we hope to introduce soon—

Neil Coyle: Will the Minister give way?

Maria Caulfield: Unfortunately, given the time I have left, I will not give way any more.

As for the challenges we face, we are seeing rising numbers, but we are seeing that in all parts of the country. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), talked about not judging Labour on its track record on health in Wales, where Labour has produced smaller funding increases for its health service; its 7.8% increase compares with the 8.6% increase that we have given in England. Mind Cymru has said that hundreds of people across Wales are currently waiting more than a year to access psychological therapies. The target is supposed to be that 80% of people in Wales access therapies within six months, but that target has never been met. It gets worse, because since 2020 the number of people waiting longer than a year in Wales for mental health support has increased by 17%. Labour talks a good game, but its actions speak louder than its words. I urge shadow Ministers to acknowledge that these problems exist in all countries and that we all face these pressures. A grown-up conversation would be about sharing best practice and working together to make that happen.

Many Members talked about preventive and early intervention therapies. My hon. Friends the Members for Bosworth and for Devizes (Danny Kruger) talked about that and about moving away from the medicalisation of mental health. That is why we are investing in talking therapies. For anyone who has not been on the Every Mind Matters website, let me say that it provides practical support for people who are anxious, distressed or not sleeping. It also provides for self-referrals to talking therapies. Since we introduced that, more than 1.2 million patients have accessed NHS talking therapies in the last year, helping them to overcome anxiety and depression. More than 90% of those people have had their treatment completed within six weeks.

Many Members talked about schools, and we are introducing mental health support teams in schools. We have almost 400 now, covering more than 3 million children, and about 35% of schools and colleges. More than 10,000 schools and colleges have trained a senior mental health specialist, including more than six in 10 state schools. That work is happening already and it is making a difference right now. My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Aaron Bell) highlighted how we need to move that into universities, and I would be happy to talk to him about how we can do that further.

On in-patient services and the quality of care, we have recently conducted a rapid review of mental health in-patient settings. The Secretary of State will announce the results of that soon. We have also introduced a three-year quality transformation programme, which seeks to tackle the root cause of unsafe, poor-quality in-patient care, particularly for those with learning disabilities and autism.

On suicide prevention, our forthcoming strategy will target high-risk groups and locations of concern. We will also provide £10 million of funding for charities that do so much good work in this space. I say to my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border that I would be very happy to meet the 3 Dads Walking, Andy, Mike and Tim. I know that they have met the Prime Minister.

Ms Lyn Brown: Will the Minister give way?

Maria Caulfield: I am just answering a question on suicide. I would be very happy to meet the 3 Dads Walking to learn the lessons for our suicide prevention strategy.

Ms Brown: Will the Minister give way now?

Maria Caulfield: I will not give way. I only have a few minutes left.

It is disappointing that Labour Members cannot understand the progress that has been made and are determined to make political points, damaging the work that our NHS staff up and down the country do day in, day out, backed by record levels of investment that have never been seen before in mental health services.

It is true that we have tabled an amendment this afternoon, in which the Prime Minister acknowledges how much work we have done in this space. With a rising number of people accessing mental health support, which is a good thing and not something to be criticised, we are investing in those services and in 27,000 extra staff.

Ms Brown: Will the Minister meet me?

Maria Caulfield: Madam Deputy Speaker, I will continue if I may.

Despite the disingenuous motion proposed by the Labour party, it is my privilege to hear about the valuable contributions being made up and down the country. It is so easy to talk down our services, but if Labour Members are serious about improving mental health services, perhaps they should talk to their Welsh counterparts. Action speaks louder than words. Mental health services in England are performing better than those in Wales. We all know that this is not really about improving mental health services; it is about using mental health as a political football, but we on the Government Benches will not play that game.

Question put (Standing Order No. 31(2)). That the original words stand part of the Question.

The House divided: Ayes 185, Noes 280.

Division No. 246]

[3.56 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy
vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-
Addy*)

Abrahams, Debbie
Ali, Rushanara
Ali, Tahir

Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Anderson, Fleur
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Ashworth, rh Jonathan
Barker, Paula
Beckett, rh Margaret
Begum, Apsana
Benn, rh Hilary
Blake, Olivia
Blomfield, Paul
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Ms Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Buck, Ms Karen
Burgon, Richard
Byrne, Ian
Cadbury, Ruth
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Carden, Dan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Chamberlain, Wendy
Champion, Sarah
Clark, Feryal (*Proxy vote cast
by Chris Elmore*)
Cooper, Daisy
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Coyle, Neil
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Daby, Janet
Dalton, Ashley
Davey, rh Ed
David, Wayne
De Cordova, Marsha
Debbonaire, Thangam
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dixon, Samantha
Dodds, Anneliese
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Eagle, Dame Angela
Eastwood, Colum
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Elmore, Chris
Eshalomi, Florence
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Fletcher, Colleen
Foord, Richard
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Foy, Mary Kelly
Furniss, Gill
Gardiner, Barry
Gill, Preet Kaur
Green, Sarah
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Dame Nia
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hamilton, Mrs Paulette
Hanna, Claire

Hardy, Emma
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Healey, rh John
Hillier, Dame Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollern, Kate
Hopkins, Rachel
Howarth, rh Sir George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Jones, Ruth
Jones, Sarah
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Afzal
Kinnock, Stephen
Lake, Ben
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Leadbeater, Kim
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Lightwood, Simon
Lloyd, Tony (*Proxy vote cast
by Chris Elmore*)
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lynch, Holly
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Maskell, Rachael
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonnell, rh John
McMahon, Jim
Mearns, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Mishra, Navendu
Moran, Layla
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Helen
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Murray, James
Nandy, Lisa
Nichols, Charlotte
Norris, Alex
Olney, Sarah
Onwurah, Chi
Oppong-Asare, Abena
Osamor, Kate
Osborne, Kate
Owatemi, Taiwo
Owen, Sarah
Peacock, Stephanie
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Mr Toby
Phillips, Jess
Pollard, Luke
Powell, Lucy
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rayner, rh Angela
Reed, Steve
Rees, Christina

Reeves, Ellie
Reeves, rh Rachel
Reynolds, Jonathan
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Rodda, Matt
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Siddiq, Tulip
Slaughter, Andy
Smith, Cat
Smith, Jeff
Smyth, Karin
Sobel, Alex
Stevens, Jo
Stone, Jamie
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Sultana, Zarah
Thomas, Gareth

Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Sir Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Vaz, rh Valerie
Wakeford, Christian
Webbe, Claudia
West, Catherine
Western, Andrew
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whittome, Nadia
Williams, Hywel
Wilson, Munira
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:

Liz Twist and

Mary Glindon

NOES

Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aiken, Nickie
Aldous, Peter
Anderson, Lee
Andrew, rh Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, rh Edward
Atherton, Sarah
Bacon, Gareth
Bailey, Shaun
Baillie, Siobhan
Baker, Duncan
Barclay, rh Steve
Baynes, Simon
Bell, Aaron
Benton, Scott
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, rh Sir Jake
Bhatti, Saqib (*Proxy vote cast
by Mr Marcus Jones*)
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Bone, Mr Peter (*Proxy vote
cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Braverman, rh Suella
Brereton, Jack
Brine, Steve
Bristow, Paul
Britcliffe, Sara
Browne, Anthony
Bruce, Fiona
Buchan, Felicity
Buckland, rh Sir Robert
Burghart, Alex
Butler, Rob
Carter, Andy
Cartledge, James
Cash, Sir William
Cates, Miriam
Caulfield, Maria
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Sir Christopher
Churchill, Jo

Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Simon
Clarke, Theo (*Proxy vote cast
by Mr Marcus Jones*)
Clarke-Smith, Brendan
Clarkson, Chris
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Coutinho, Claire
Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crosbie, Virginia
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, rh David T. C.
Davies, Gareth
Davies, Mims
Davis, rh Mr David
Davison, Dehenna
Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Dines, Miss Sarah
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Donelan, rh Michelle (*Proxy
vote cast by Mr Marcus
Jones*)
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duddridge, Sir James
Duguid, David
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Dunne, rh Philip
Eastwood, Mark
Edwards, Ruth
Ellis, rh Michael
Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
Eustice, rh George
Evans, Dr Luke
Evennett, rh Sir David
Everitt, Ben
Fabricant, Michael
Farris, Laura
Fell, Simon
Firth, Anna
Fletcher, Katherine
Fletcher, Mark
Ford, rh Vicky

Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, rh Lucy
Freer, Mike
French, Mr Louie
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Gideon, Jo
Glen, rh John
Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Griffith, Andrew
Grundy, James
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harris, Rebecca
Hart, Sally-Ann
Hart, rh Simon
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heapey, rh James
Henderson, Gordon
Henry, Darren
Higginbotham, Antony
Hinds, rh Damian
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Holmes, Paul
Howell, John
Howell, Paul
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, Jane
Hunt, Tom
Jack, rh Mr Alister
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkinson, Mark
Jenkyins, Andrea
Jenrick, rh Robert
Johnson, Gareth
Johnston, David
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Fay
Jones, rh Mr Marcus
Jupp, Simon
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kearns, Alicia
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Kruger, Danny
Kwarteng, rh Kwasi
Lamont, John
Largan, Robert
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Levy, Ian
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lockhart, Carla

Loder, Chris
Logan, Mark (*Proxy vote cast
by Mr Marcus Jones*)
Longhi, Marco
Lopez, Julia (*Proxy vote cast
by Mr Marcus Jones*)
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, rh Kit
Mangnall, Anthony
Mann, Scott
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Mayhew, Jerome
Maynard, Paul
McCartney, Karl
McPartland, rh Stephen
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, rh Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalf, Stephen
Millar, Robin
Milling, rh Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Damien
Moore, Robbie
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morris, Anne Marie
Morrisey, Joy
Mortimer, Jill
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Mumby-Croft, Holly
Murray, Mrs Sheryl
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Neill, Sir Robert
Nici, Lia
Norman, rh Jesse
O'Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Patel, rh Priti
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Philp, rh Chris
Prentis, rh Victoria
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, rh Jeremy
Quince, Will
Randall, Tom
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
Richards, Nicola
Richardson, Angela
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Rowley, Lee
Rutley, David
Sambrook, Gary
Saxby, Selaine
Scully, Paul
Seely, Bob
Selous, Andrew
Sharma, rh Sir Alok
Shelbrooke, rh Alec
Simmonds, David

Skidmore, rh Chris
Smith, Greg
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, Royston
Solloway, Amanda
Spencer, Dr Ben
Spencer, rh Mark
Stafford, Alexander
Stephenson, rh Andrew
Stevenson, Jane
Stevenson, John
Stewart, rh Bob
Stewart, Iain
Stride, rh Mel
Sturdy, Julian
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Syms, Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
Throup, Maggie
Timpson, Edward
Tolhurst, rh Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig

Trott, Laura
Tugendhat, rh Tom
Vara, rh Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Vickers, Matt
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Sir Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Warburton, David (*Proxy vote
cast by Craig Mackinlay*)
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Webb, Suzanne
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Wiggin, Sir Bill
Wild, James
Williams, Craig
Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Wood, Mike
Young, Jacob
Zahawi, rh Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:

Steve Double and
Julie Marson

Question accordingly negated.

*Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 31(2)),
That the proposed words be there added.*

The House divided: Ayes 278, Noes 0.

Division No. 247]**[4.11 pm****AYES**

Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aiken, Nickie
Aldous, Peter
Anderson, Lee
Andrew, rh Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, rh Edward
Atherton, Sarah
Bacon, Gareth
Bailey, Shaun
Baillie, Siobhan
Baker, Duncan
Barclay, rh Steve
Baynes, Simon
Bell, Aaron
Benton, Scott
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, rh Sir Jake
Bhatti, Saqib (*Proxy vote cast
by Mr Marcus Jones*)
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Bone, Mr Peter (*Proxy vote
cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Braverman, rh Suella
Brereton, Jack
Bristow, Paul
Britcliffe, Sara
Browne, Anthony
Bruce, Fiona
Buchan, Felicity

Buckland, rh Sir Robert
Burghart, Alex
Butler, Rob
Carter, Andy
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Cates, Miriam
Caulfield, Maria
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Sir Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Simon
Clarke, Theo (*Proxy vote cast
by Mr Marcus Jones*)
Clarke-Smith, Brendan
Clarkson, Chris
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Coutinho, Claire
Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crosbie, Virginia
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, rh David T. C.
Davies, Gareth
Davies, Mims
Davis, rh Mr David
Davison, Dehenna
Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Dines, Miss Sarah
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan

Donelan, rh Michelle (*Proxy
vote cast by Mr Marcus
Jones*)
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duddridge, Sir James
Duguid, David
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Dunne, rh Philip
Eastwood, Mark
Edwards, Ruth
Ellis, rh Michael
Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
Eustice, rh George
Evans, Dr Luke
Evennett, rh Sir David
Everitt, Ben
Fabricant, Michael
Farris, Laura
Fell, Simon
Firth, Anna
Fletcher, Katherine
Fletcher, Mark
Ford, rh Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, rh Lucy
Freer, Mike
French, Mr Louie
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Gideon, Jo
Glen, rh John
Gove, rh Michael
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Griffith, Andrew
Grundy, James
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harris, Rebecca
Hart, Sally-Ann
Hart, rh Simon
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heapey, rh James
Henderson, Gordon
Henry, Darren
Higginbotham, Antony
Hinds, rh Damian
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Holmes, Paul
Howell, John
Howell, Paul
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, Jane
Hunt, Tom
Jack, rh Mr Alister
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkinson, Mark

Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, rh Robert
Johnson, Gareth
Johnston, David
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Fay
Jones, rh Mr Marcus
Jupp, Simon
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kearns, Alicia
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Kruger, Danny
Kwarteng, rh Kwasi
Lamont, John
Largan, Robert
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Levy, Iain
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Loder, Chris
Logan, Mark (*Proxy vote cast
by Mr Marcus Jones*)
Longhi, Marco
Lopez, Julia (*Proxy vote cast
by Mr Marcus Jones*)
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, rh Kit
Mangnall, Anthony
Mann, Scott
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Mayhew, Jerome
McCartney, Karl
McPartland, rh Stephen
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, rh Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Millar, Robin
Mills, Nigel
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Damien
Moore, Robbie
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, James
Morrissey, Joy
Mortimer, Jill
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Mumby-Croft, Holly
Murray, Mrs Sheryl
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Neill, Sir Robert
Nici, Lia
Norman, rh Jesse
O'Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Patel, rh Priti
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Philp, rh Chris
Prentis, rh Victoria

Pursglove, Tom	Stride, rh Mel
Quin, rh Jeremy	Sturdy, Julian
Quince, Will	Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Randall, Tom	Syms, Sir Robert
Redwood, rh John	Thomas, Derek
Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob	Throup, Maggie
Richards, Nicola	Timpson, Edward
Richardson, Angela	Tolhurst, rh Kelly
Robertson, Mr Laurence	Tomlinson, Justin
Robinson, Gavin	Tomlinson, Michael
Robinson, Mary	Tracey, Craig
Rowley, Lee	Trott, Laura
Russell, Dean	Tugendhat, rh Tom
Rutley, David	Vara, rh Shailesh
Sambrook, Gary	Vickers, Martin
Saxby, Selaine	Vickers, Matt
Scully, Paul	Villiers, rh Theresa
Seely, Bob	Walker, Sir Charles
Selous, Andrew	Walker, Mr Robin
Sharma, rh Sir Alok	Warburton, David (<i>Proxy vote</i> <i>cast by Craig Mackinlay</i>)
Shelbrooke, rh Alec	Warman, Matt
Simmonds, David	Watling, Giles
Skidmore, rh Chris	Webb, Suzanne
Smith, Greg	Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Smith, Henry	Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Smith, rh Julian	Wiggin, Sir Bill
Smith, Royston	Wild, James
Solloway, Amanda	Williams, Craig
Spencer, Dr Ben	Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Spencer, rh Mark	Wood, Mike
Stafford, Alexander	Young, Jacob
Stephenson, rh Andrew	Zahawi, rh Nadhim
Stevenson, Jane	
Stevenson, John	
Stewart, rh Bob	
Stewart, Iain	

Tellers for the Ayes:

Steve Double and
Julie Marson

NOES**Tellers for the Noes:**

Sir Robert Goodwill and
Amanda Milling

Question accordingly agreed to.

The Deputy Speaker declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to (Standing Order No. 31(2)).

Resolved,

That this House notes the increased burden on mental health following the pandemic, including on young people and those with severe mental illness; recognises the historic levels of investment being delivered by this Government into services, with an increase of £2.3 billion per year in front-line mental health funding over the past four years; notes that current NHS targets around access to talking therapies and intervention in psychosis are being met due to the efforts of NHS staff; and acknowledges the investment

in mental health teams in schools, as well as the ongoing investment into open access mental health helplines in the 111 service and into the estate, including three new mental health hospitals to be opened in the next two years accompanied by a further £150 million in investment in new mental health ambulances and the development of better alternatives to accident and emergency services, including crisis houses, safe havens and step-down services.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker, on Monday, the Home Secretary gave inaccurate information to Parliament when she said that

“the asylum initial decision backlog is down by 17,000”.—[*Official Report*, 5 June 2023; Vol. 733, c. 557.]

The asylum initial decision backlog is clearly defined by the Home Office. It is the total backlog of initial decisions before and after June of last year, and Home Office figures show that it has gone up from 132,000 to 137,000 for main applicants since the beginning of December. It has gone up from 160,000 to 172,000 for all applicants in the first quarter of this year. On either measure, that backlog is up, and not down.

I raised this matter as a point of order on Monday, and the Home Secretary refused to correct the record then. I have written to the Home Secretary this morning, but have still heard nothing back. The ministerial code requires

“that Ministers give accurate and truthful information to Parliament, correcting any inadvertent error at the earliest opportunity.”

I know that the Home Secretary has a history of breaching the ministerial code but, Madam Deputy Speaker, would you agree that facts matter and that it is not acceptable for Ministers to fail to correct the record if they have given inaccurate information to Parliament? Have you heard from the Home Secretary about her intention to come and correct the record?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):

I thank the right hon. Lady for her point of order. As has been said before, and I think this was said when she raised the point of order yesterday, it is obviously not for the Chair to adjudicate in cases of differing interpretations of statistics. That said, if a Minister has made a mistake in the House, I would of course expect them to correct it. The right hon. Lady has put her perspective on the record. Ministers will have heard it, and I am sure the Home Secretary will reflect on whether a correction is required in this case. I see that the Whip, the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey), is writing this down and it will be fed back, and I am sure Ministers will do the same. I thank the right hon. Lady, and I think we will leave it at that.

Teesworks: Accountability and Scrutiny

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):

I call the shadow Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.

4.25 pm

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): I beg to move,

That an humble Address be presented to His Majesty, that he will be graciously pleased to give directions that the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities provide all papers, advice and correspondence involving Ministers, senior officials and special advisers, including submissions and electronic communications, relating to the decision by the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and the Prime Minister to commission a review into the Tees Valley Combined Authority's oversight of the South Tees Development Corporation and the Teesworks joint venture, including papers relating to the decision that this review should not be led by the National Audit Office.

Let me start by saying that I am really disappointed that it has come to this. Devolution was meant to empower people in every part of Britain to "take charge of their own destiny". This Government were elected on exactly that promise and exactly those words, and here we are standing in the House of Commons trying to persuade the Government to come clean about why they have chosen to block an independent inquiry that would help us get to the bottom of the use of public assets and funds on Teesside in the wake of some of the most serious allegations I have ever seen in my time in Parliament.

For nine years, since the Government accepted Greater Manchester's case for greater devolution, I and many others on all sides of this House have been pressing the Government to respect the right of people in every part of Britain to know how their assets and money are being used and to close the gap that currently exists by inviting people back into the conversation, and by building a system of local and national scrutiny and accountability that is fit for purpose, backed by a Government who are willing to open the books.

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): I think the key point in this debate was aired in what the hon. Lady said a moment ago, when she said that some of the most serious allegations she has ever heard aired in this House have been made. Will she stand with those allegations? At the moment, the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) has alleged "industrial-scale corruption". The hon. Lady has been very careful in all her public utterances, as indeed has he outside this Chamber, to avoid repeating that claim. Does she agree with him, or does she not?

Lisa Nandy: The problem, as the right hon. Member well knows, is that Members of this House and, more importantly, people on Teesside simply do not know the answer to that question. Serious allegations have been raised not just by Members on the Opposition Benches, but by respected national journalists who have conducted meticulous investigations, and the point of holding an independent inquiry is that these serious allegations and the questions that have been raised need to be answered.

At every juncture and at every level of Government, when it comes to fair and reasonable questions about the South Tees development corporation, accountability,

scrutiny and democratic control have broken down. It is only because of my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) and some tenacious, meticulous journalists, such as Jennifer Williams of the *Financial Times*, that we even know the bare facts of what has unfolded. People on Teesside should not have to rely on a national newspaper to discover what has been done with their assets, their community and their civic inheritance.

Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con) rose—

Lisa Nandy: If the hon. Member wants to say otherwise, she is very welcome to do so now.

Sara Britcliffe: Just for clarification, is the hon. Lady confirming that she will not repeat outside this Chamber the allegations made by the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald)?

Lisa Nandy: Honestly. It is about time that hon. Members stopped chirping and started paying attention.

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has accepted that an investigation is needed to give investors confidence. I saw him walking through the Chamber a moment ago, Madam Deputy Speaker—he could not get away quick enough. This is why we want to see an investigation launched without delay: to restore investor confidence and the confidence of the public in both the project and the devolution model itself.

The Secretary of State's decision to block the National Audit Office from investigating these allegations is nothing short of bizarre. It is an investigation that is backed by the Tees Valley Mayor, by the official Opposition and by three Select Committee Chairs. The National Audit Office has the experience, capacity and independence to carry out an investigation—it has said itself it was able to do so and that the Secretary of State has the power to order that investigation—so it beggars belief that the Secretary of State has blocked that inquiry and now set up a review where the terms of reference and the members have been hand-picked by him. Then to come to the House on Monday and be unwilling—or perhaps unable—to answer basic questions about why he chose to do that is completely unacceptable. Saying that consultations were had and that the Government do not wish to set a precedent will not do. For decades, people on Teesside have made a major contribution to the UK through the steel industry. The Teesworks belongs to them and they have the right to know what is being done with it in their name.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): The shadow Secretary of State is making an excellent speech to open the debate. Does she agree with me, as a member of the all-party parliamentary group on devolution, that we all want our regions to prosper and grow, but that things have to be done properly and be seen to be done properly?

Lisa Nandy: My hon. Friend is absolutely right and has been a huge champion of this for communities across the country. Most importantly, our regions will not prosper and will not grow unless we can have confidence that decisions are being taken in the right way and in the public interest, and the people of that region need to know that they will benefit from those decisions. That is the point of devolution.

Sir Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): Would the hon. Lady not agree that Teesside did not prosper or grow for decades after the demise of heavy industry and that it was only when Ben Houchen came along and started delivering for the people that people started realising that the Conservatives on Teesside were delivering, when Labour had failed for generations?

Lisa Nandy: I will take absolutely no lessons from a representative of a political party that stood aside and watched as the Tees works collapsed in 2015.

Labour is therefore asking the Government to provide all papers, advice and correspondence, including Ministers, senior officials and special advisers, relating to the decision by the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister to commission a review into the Tees Valley Combined Authority's oversight of the South Tees Development Corporation and the Teesworks joint venture, including papers relating to the decision that the review should not be led by the National Audit Office.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): The hon. Member is probably aware that, in addition to the scandal that she is outlining in her excellent speech, Woking Council has today issued a section 114 notice, following its having run up £1.9 billion of debts under a Conservative-led administration, when it has core spending power of just £14 million. Does she agree that a National Audit Office investigation is important for the people of Woking as well, because there is clearly inadequate scrutiny of decision making on public money?

Lisa Nandy: There is a wider point here, which is that devolution matters but it matters for a reason. It matters because decisions taken closer to people, driven by the people of the place they call home and for the benefit of those people, have the ability to transform lives. We need and deserve proper robust scrutiny arrangements and accountability in every part of the country, not just some, in order to ensure that.

I am sick and tired of hearing Conservative Members making accusations at our doorstep about unfounded allegations and naysaying about regeneration in the north-east. They are wrong and I suspect that they know it. The Labour Front-Bench team has not made allegations against Teesworks and the development corporation, and we will not do so before any investigation reports back. What we have asked for is honesty, transparency and clarity about what appears on the face of it to be an incredibly murky situation. It is the clear breakdown of local accountability that is sufficiently alarming that an investigation by the National Audit Office is required. We want to see this resolved. Conservative Members should want to see this resolved for the benefit of people on Teesside. The South Tees Mayor believes that is the case, as do three Select Committee Chairs, the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State—if he did not, no investigation at all would be forthcoming. Let me be clear that the Humble Address today is about ensuring that a proper, full and independent investigation can take place in terms sufficient to provide the public with confidence in the process and the outcome of the investigation. In hand picking a panel and terms of reference, the Secretary of State has done a disservice to the principle of independent scrutiny and to his commitment

to devolution, which until today I believed to be sincere. He has made it harder for confidence and transparency to return.

Brendan Clarke-Smith (Bassetlaw) (Con): I thank the hon. Lady for giving way and for being so generous with her time. Some of the claims she makes are quite serious and in this House we always want to act in the spirit of transparency and openness, but with these very serious claims, I would ask: where is the evidence—what is the basis of this in the first place? Perhaps she could outline some of the evidence she is using as the basis for making these claims in the first place.

Lisa Nandy: The hon. Gentleman might want to take that up with his colleague, the Mayor in question, who has referred himself and asked for a National Audit Office investigation. I do not know why Members on the Government Benches think his judgment is so poor that he should not have done that, but we believe he is absolutely right to have done that and we stand firmly behind him in asking for a proper investigation.

Incredibly, even by the standards of this shambolic Government, the terms of reference and the names of the panel members for this inquiry were sent to me seven minutes before this debate began. That genuinely is no way to conduct government. I assume that is where the Secretary of State is right now: sitting behind his desk knocking out terms of reference on the back of a fag packet. Clearly, I have not had much time, Madam Deputy Speaker, to read them, but on first sight what he has sent me looks like a system-focused review, rather than an investigation into what has happened. Ministers have still failed to give us an explanation as to why the National Audit Office cannot conduct its own investigation, a body that has capacity, resources and expertise, and is widely respected across the political spectrum. Instead, we are having a bizarre argument about the remit of a respected organisation that is patently able to conduct the investigation required. Can the Minister not see why the public would rightly raise an eyebrow?

It is completely unacceptable for the Government to hide from proper scrutiny. I remember a time when the Secretary of State could not wait to get to his place in this House. Nowadays, we barely see him. Where is he today? There is no clear justification for not ordering a comprehensive independent investigation from the National Audit Office. It cannot be right that hundreds of millions of pounds of public money have been handed over to a company that is now 90% in private ownership, and it appears that the Department has handed over that money and then simply walked away. This is a matter that has profound implications for people on Teesside, who rightly expect this site, through which they contributed so much to our country over so many years, to continue to benefit them and their community for years to come.

There is much we do not know about what has happened—that is the reason we need an independent investigation—but here is what we do know. When the 140-year-old steel industry on Teesside collapsed in 2015, thousands of jobs were lost along with a key political, social and economic asset for the communities of the north-east of England. In 2017, the South Tees Development Corporation began to collate over 4,500 acres of industrial land, including the site of the former steelworks, off the back of a Conservative Government promising hundreds of millions of pounds in taxpayer

funding for the project, something we had championed and welcomed. In the face of losing that key economic and social asset, it is absolutely right that all options were considered about how to build a wide programme of regeneration around the site and that the combined authority was given the autonomy to determine the strategy to regenerate the site. Even where we have strong disagreements about policy, strategy and direction, that point is not, and will never be, in dispute.

However, in May, an extensive report by the *Financial Times* detailed how the Government had spent hundreds of millions of pounds of taxpayers' money to support a project in which two private developers now hold a 90% stake. The deal never went through a public tender process. There was no consultation. There was no announcement. It also reports that those developers have secured £45 million already in dividends, despite failing apparently to invest a single penny of their own money in the project. In return for their role in securing the site, the South Tees Development Corporation awarded companies owned by the developers a 50% stake in the joint venture that would operate the project—a share transfer that also took place without any public tender. The new operating company, eventually named Teesworks Ltd, controlled the entire 4,500-acre site and its assets, including 500,000 tonnes of scrap metal. It was also given the option to buy any parcel of land on the site at market rate.

The announcement that freeport status was being awarded led the South Tees Development Corporation to fundamentally change its business model, according to documents obtained under freedom of information laws and published by *Private Eye*. Following that, in a complex two-stage process, the two developers ended up with a 90% stake in the project, also without ever going through public bidding. According to emails received again under freedom of information from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy—the Department with responsibility for the project in Government—one official only became aware of the deal via the media in January 2022 and expressed “concern” and “surprise”. The *Financial Times* reports that an official at the Department's office in the north-east responded that he had received “verbal” assurance locally that the deal was value for money. Can the Minister see why such serious concerns have been raised on both sides of the House, including by respected Members such as the Chairs of the Select Committees?

It is at this point that we called for the National Audit Office to investigate this matter in its entirety, to restore confidence for investors and the public in what was an increasingly murky affair. Indeed, the former chief executive of the Audit Commission, a public body that examined local government entities before it was disbanded by the Conservative Government, says the evidence

“calls for a full and thorough investigation by the National Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee, as the situation now appears far remote from the business case originally agreed with Government”.

Mr Simon Clarke: It is important to be clear that he is himself a former Labour councillor. The point in this debate is that we are offering an independent inquiry. As we have heard, an inquiry is under way and the reasons the NAO is not the appropriate body were set out very clearly by the Secretary of State in his letter.

Lisa Nandy: Can I just correct the right hon. Member? As he well knows, this is not an independent or full investigation. Perhaps he also has not had the courtesy of having been given the time by the Secretary of State to look at the full terms of reference, but it genuinely beggars belief to try to claim that this is somehow politically motivated. If Conservative Members believe that the call for a NAO inquiry is politically motivated, they might want to ask the Mayor what on earth he is doing calling for one himself.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): In all of this heat, it might be wise to be clear about the independent role of the NAO. The Comptroller and Auditor General has letters patent from the King and reports to this House, not to Government. He is independent and makes his own decisions, and it was his independent decision that it would be appropriate, because of the size of the site, to offer the opportunity to do an audit. It is then a matter for the Secretary of State to decide whether or not he asks for that to happen. It is a three-legged stool, because then the local organisations have to agree to open their books, too. It is important to be clear on the record that the NAO is not making political decisions here; it is a very independent decision by the chief auditor of this country.

Lisa Nandy: I thank my hon. Friend for making that point, which absolutely concurs with my experience of the NAO. Members on both sides of the House will have had experience of having written to the NAO to raise concerns, and all of us are treated with decency and impartiality by the NAO when it seeks to respond.

Unbelievably, the situation gets even more complicated. Questions were raised at that point about whether the NAO even had the ability to investigate. It turns out that it did, subject to the preparation of a suitably worded agreement between the Minister and the relevant body into which the examination is to be conducted. We called on the Secretary of State to provide such an agreement, which was met with radio silence. Into that void stepped the Prime Minister, who confirmed at Prime Minister's questions on 24 May to my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) that the Levelling Up Secretary had already announced an investigation into this matter, much to the surprise of our Front Benchers and Government Front Benchers, too. However, the Secretary of State has decided not to do so, instead preferring to hand-pick a panel of his own to investigate. Given that the Tees Valley Mayor has asked for an investigation and the NAO has the capacity and remit provided by statutory powers, we deserve to know why Ministers have decided to block that investigation, beyond what we have been told so far—that they consulted and decided against it.

Now that we have the terms of reference, let me say this to the Minister: it is utterly unacceptable to establish an inquiry that fails to ensure that all decisions that have led to the current situation are on the table, with no exclusion of factors that would impact a complete and fair assessment of whether the public interest has been protected. It must have expert support, administrative capacity and resources to ensure the same level of access that the NAO would have had. Any officials who

[Lisa Nandy]

worked at South Tees Development Corporation or public bodies on Teesside must be free to comply with an investigation, regardless of any non-disclosure agreements that exist.

The investigation must report back on what assessment the Department and wider Government made of the South Tees Development Corporation's decision to transfer a 50% stake in the joint venture without any public tender process. *[Interruption.]* I am grateful to the Minister for clarifying that from a sedentary position. Presumably, he has had a chance to read those terms of reference. It would have been nice if Members had been afforded the same courtesy. *[Interruption.]* The Minister is chuntering again from a sedentary position. That is precisely what we are attempting to do—establish the facts. That is what the Tees Valley Mayor is attempting to do—establish the facts. That is what the Chairs of the Select Committees in this House are attempting to do—establish the facts. And that is what the people on Teesside are attempting to—establish the facts. It says something about the extraordinary arrogance of this Government that they think that is an unacceptable request.

The investigation must confirm when Ministers were first made aware of the decision to increase the share to 90% and if an assessment of value for money for taxpayers was made in advance. Could the Minister confirm whether there was any discussion of the terms of reference with the relevant Select Committee Chairs—including the Chairs of the Public Accounts Committee, the Business and Trade Committee and the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee—or are the Government determined to show the same contempt for Members that they are showing for people on Teesside?

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): My hon. Friend was going through the events of the past week or so and the actions of Government, which smack of a cover-up. That is the fear and concern of the people of the Tees area and the wider public.

Lisa Nandy: I studiously avoided trying to prejudice any terms of the inquiry in advance of their announcement, but I was given seven minutes for a cursory glance at the terms of reference. If the Minister wants to tell people on Teesside that they deserve two minutes to understand the terms of reference, he is very welcome. That is arrogant and shows utter contempt for people in this country. Having looked at the terms of reference, I share my hon. Friend's view. To many people in this country, it increasingly looks like an utter whitewash.

As far back as 2015, I raised concerns with this Government that democracy must not be an afterthought in the devolution model. Where the public have been let into the conversation, it is because of some of our brilliant Mayors across the country, such as the Mayor of Greater Manchester and the Mayor of West Yorkshire, who have chosen to go out proactively and involve the public in conversations about the things that matter deeply to them and to their lives. As has been so often said, it is our right to have that information and to be in charge of our own destiny; it should not be in the gift of whoever happens to be elected. When the respected Chair of the Public Accounts Committee says that the

measures that we have around transparency, scrutiny and accountability are not sufficiently robust, Ministers must take that seriously.

On the Opposition Benches, we believe that the people on Teesside are just as deserving of safeguards to ensure that the public money and assets spent and used on their behalf are used for their benefit and in their interests as the people in London, Greater Manchester or the west midlands. These are our communities; they are our assets; it is our money; and it is about time this Government started to show some respect for a country that belongs to us.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Let me try to make an assessment of how many people are trying to catch my eye, so that I am able to gently point out that Back Benchers may have a relatively short amount of time to make their contributions. I hope that colleagues will bear that in mind.

I remind colleagues that if they speak in the debate, I want them to be back in good time for the wind-ups, including the Minister. If interventions are made on a speaker, it is normal practice to stay until the end of that speech.

4.51 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Lee Rowley): It is, rightly, a long-standing convention that Opposition parties in this place have the opportunity to raise their concerns through debates such as this, to deal with the big issues of the day and to use the precious time of the House to articulate their vision for the future of this country. On these occasions, the Opposition can choose the subjects, the words they use, the allegations they make and the inferences they allow to be drawn.

So here we are today, having a debate about a blighted and costly site, with a massive price tag when industrial activity ceased, that is being transformed for the benefit of those who live and work nearby, in a region that is on the up. The debate is not about the achievements to date, or the failure of successive Labour Governments and Members of Parliament to improve the lives of people on Teesside. Instead, it is a debate about technicalities. It is not about whether a review will happen, look at these matters in depth or be led by independent experts, because all that will happen. Neither is it about whether the facts will be established, as was raised by the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy), because they will be.

Instead, the Opposition have chosen to have a three-hour debate about the process by which a decision was made to have a review that is led by one group of people, instead of by another group of people. It is a debate about how we have chosen to set up a review, in the usual way that we choose to set up reviews rather than in the extraordinary way that the Opposition propose. The Labour party makes strange choices.

I want to say this, because it is important: the Government believe in the people and the places that make Teesside special. We have backed them with funding and powers to level up, which was sorely lacking under the 13 years of the previous Labour Government. That was why Ben Houchen was elected as Mayor in the first

place. His record of attracting investment and delivering for the Tees Valley speaks for itself. In that spirit, he approached the Government some time ago about an independent review of the South Tees Development Corporation and the Teesworks joint venture after the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) had made serious allegations in the House, which he will not repeat outside the House. I want to make it clear now that, as previously stated, Ministers and officials have so far seen no evidence of corruption, wrongdoing or illegality.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab) *rose*—

Lee Rowley: I give way to the hon. Gentleman, who can, perhaps, tell us precisely what corruption, wrongdoing and illegality he is alleging.

Clive Efford: I just want to point out to the Minister that what he is threatening my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough with is a strategic lawsuit against public participation. We have had debates in this Chamber about SLAPPs; in fact, the Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade, the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), who is sitting next to the Minister, has supported action against them and their use to cover up the Londongrad fraud whereby illegal money has been washed through London banks and financial centres. The Minister should think very carefully before he comes here and threatens people with legal action outside the House to silence democratic debate.

Lee Rowley: There is absolutely no silencing going on. We are debating, we will continue to debate, and we have set up a review to ensure that we understand the allegations that have been made. It is perfectly legitimate for me to point out that the hon. Member for Middlesbrough refuses to repeat those allegations elsewhere, and for people to draw whatever conclusion they wish to draw from that. However, it is also clear that the allegations being made threaten to damage confidence in Teesworks and its success—hence the Secretary of State's decision on 24 May to commission an independent review of the joint venture.

On the “Today” programme this morning, the hon. Member for Wigan was challenged with the observation that

“there is a danger that political parties throw about allegations of corruption”.

To that point no answer came this morning, and an answer certainly did not come in the opening speech. Now that the Labour party has chosen to allocate a significant amount of parliamentary time to this discussion today, it is incumbent on Opposition Members to spell out their specific concerns. They may have tried not to do that, but they need to state the allegations about which they are concerned.

We listened to a long speech from the hon. Member for Wigan, who set out a factual case about the events that happened in the order in which they happened, but made no comment about what element of concern she felt about each of them. There have been no specific allegations; nothing has been forthcoming except rumour, gossip and innuendo. Perhaps the hon. Lady does not wish to provide allegations, but Opposition Members have certainly alleged that this is the case.

Lisa Nandy *rose*—

Lee Rowley: The hon. Lady has already had a significant amount of time in which to speak, and I am not willing to give her more time to produce similar innuendo. On 20 April the hon. Member for Middlesbrough was very clear about industrial-scale corruption, but provided no further information. If Opposition Members cannot provide specific information, specific allegations and specific concerns in this debate, that will show how little interest they have in the truth rather than innuendo.

Lisa Nandy *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Lee Rowley: I will give way to the hon. Lady.

Lisa Nandy: Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker, for intervening to make sure that some basic manners and courtesies are respected.

May I ask the Minister to stop this ridiculous politicking? I have just set out for him a series of concerning points that have been raised by a respected national newspaper, with evidence behind them, many of which are not disputed by those involved in the proceedings. I have explained to him why an independent investigation is needed, and I answered those questions on the radio this morning, as he well knows. He may not agree that the National Audit Office is the best body to investigate, but if he disagrees with that, why will he not tell us the reason? That is all we are asking for.

Lee Rowley: I believe the hon. Lady said on LBC this morning that no allegations of corruption were being made. In the spirit of being willing to accept interventions, I am happy to take a further intervention from her. What specific allegations is she actually concerned about?

Lisa Nandy: We are concerned about the fact that no value for money is being achieved in this project, because of allegations raised in the report in the *Financial Times*, which set out that hundreds of millions of pounds have been put behind a project that Ministers appear to have handed over and then walked away, in a company 90% of which has been transferred into private ownership, where two investors have taken—apparently; allegedly—£45 million out but put not a penny in. We want to ensure that that constitutes value for money for the public and that this asset, which belongs to the people of Teesside, will be used for the benefit of people on Teesside for generations to come. If the Minister can reassure us in detail on those points, it would be absolutely wonderful. If he cannot, why will he not commit to an independent investigation?

Lee Rowley: That is, finally, extraordinarily helpful. For the first time in multiple questions to the hon. Lady, she has actually given an answer. She is concerned about value for money. Excellent! We are all concerned about value for money across local government. That is why we have a best value regime, which means that the Secretary of State announces inquiries and reviews, and appoints people to undertake them. The hon. Lady and her Front Bench team know that, because we have talked about it on numerous occasions in this place. They are completely aware of the best value regime that this Government use, because in 1999 it was the Labour party that endorsed that regime as part of its legislation.

Mr Simon Clarke: Will the Minister give way?

Lee Rowley: I will give way to my right hon. Friend, who actually knows what he is talking about on this issue.

Mr Clarke: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the fact that it is Labour's own regime that we are applying, but can we also get on record the fact that Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities officials do not believe that the threshold for a best value investigation has been met in this case? That is to say, the civil service does not believe that such an investigation is merited. We are doing it to dispel the allegations and smears from the Opposition.

Lee Rowley: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for clarifying that important point, particularly in respect of the Department.

It is important, given the inferences by the Opposition, to highlight what has actually been put in place. The specific terms of reference and the announcement that was made long before today are clear about the intention of the Government to clarify this matter. The review will be led by Angie Ridgwell, who is currently chief executive of Lancashire County Council and has over 30 years of experience across local government, central Government and the private sector. She will be supported by Quentin Baker, a qualified solicitor and director of law and governance at Hertfordshire County Council, and by Richard Paver, who brings significant financial experience and knowledge of combined authorities from his previous role as the first treasurer of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority. They bring significant experience of senior public leadership, specific financial and legal expertise, and confidence of detailed scrutiny. All Members of the House should support their important work so that they can proceed quickly and free from partisan comments.

There is still time for Labour Members to articulate why they are suddenly so keen on NAO-led inquiries in local government when they have not been keen on them before. When there are challenges or potential questions, there is a long-standing precedent of someone other than the NAO reviewing and assessing those concerns. Why should Labour Members know this? Because, as I said, they endorsed this process in the Local Government Act 1999. They confirmed that the Secretary of State could determine the approach where there were questions about local government bodies, and as far as I am aware, they have not critiqued the use of those powers when they have been used multiple times before, including in the last few weeks. Perhaps Labour Members could tell me which parts of the Local Government Act 1999—their Act, their decisions, their choices—they have randomly, abruptly and arbitrarily decided, simply for the purposes of an Opposition day debate, that they no longer wish the Government to apply.

If Labour Members are deciding that they no longer want to use the established regime, perhaps they could tell me which of the established reviews, inquiries, panels or commissioners they wish to switch into their newly preferred process. I do not remember this being requested when the Secretary of State intervened following an external review of Labour-led Sandwell Council in 2021, following allegations of serious misconduct by members

and officers that painted a deeply troubling picture of mismanagement. Should we move that to an NAO review?

I do not remember Labour suggesting this approach when the then Secretary of State determined to appoint experts to carry out an inspection at Labour-led Liverpool City Council in 2020 as a result of arrests made on suspicion of fraud, bribery, corruption and misconduct in public office. *[Interruption.]* There is a lot of chuntering on the Opposition Benches, but are they seeking to bring the NAO into that? The hon. Member for Wigan talks about hand-picking, but the Labour party appointed its own inquiry into the wrongdoing. That inquiry was led by a former Labour MP, supported by a peer newly ennobled by the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer). And I cannot remember the Labour party requesting an NAO review of Labour-led Croydon Council after a number of serious concerns about the council's governance and risk management were outlined in a public interest report by external auditors in 2020.

The cold, hard facts are these: the Mayor of Tees Valley has had much success over the past half a decade in bringing jobs, growth and economic development to an area that is now on the up and thriving again, thanks to its Conservative leadership and its engaged and constructive Conservative Members of Parliament. On this specific issue, the Government agreed to a request from the Mayor for a review, which is being set up in a similar way to other reviews. Those who will be involved have been appointed as others have been appointed in the past. The terms of reference have been published using a similar process and, if there is an issue, we will deal with it in the normal way. The experts who are giving of their time and expertise should now be given the time to get on with the job, in the normal way, and to present their conclusions when they are ready.

Sir Robert Goodwill: The hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) repeatedly called the site an asset, but it was a heavily contaminated industrial site. Indeed the former Labour Member of Parliament for Redcar, Vera Baird, suggested it could cost up to £1 billion to clean up the site. It is now an asset, but only because of Ben Houchen's actions.

Lee Rowley: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right, and that is one of the few facts that the hon. Member for Wigan left out of her contribution, in which there was no clarity about what she is actually alleging.

These are serious matters. Serious allegations have been made, and it is incumbent on us all to clarify the position as soon as possible, for the good of Tees Valley. The review we have set up will do that, and we look forward to it reporting in the usual way at the earliest opportunity. Members should welcome and support the review, and I hope against hope that, in the next two hours, they may still do that.

5.7 pm

Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab): This is an important debate. I raised the issue at Prime Minister's questions a month ago, and I stand here today unsatisfied at this Government's progress on being transparent with the people of this country on such a crucial issue.

This debate is not only about the conduct of government, both regional and national, but about priorities, the economy, the cost of living and trust. It is a debate about hard-working communities in the north-east that are being let down by their elected representatives. The north-east has suffered the greatest cuts to public spending since the Conservative Government took power in 2010, through their programme of austerity and their abolition of our regional development agency, One North East, which focused economic regeneration across the region from Sunderland to Teesside—its abolition damaged our economic prospects.

The beauty parade of the levelling-up competitions since 2019 was exposed by the BBC “Panorama” programme last year for tilting investment to the wealthy Conservative seats of Richmond and Newark while places like Stockton and Billingham missed out. The dereliction of the former Prime Minister David Cameron and the then Business Secretary, Sajid Javid, in letting the Redcar steel site collapse in 2015 was a shocking contrast to the intervention under Labour in 2009, which allowed the site’s rebirth with SSI.

Conservative Governments under five successive Prime Ministers have undermined both private and public investment in the north-east of England, which is why the people of Tees Valley were entitled to hope that, despite abandoning steel on Teesside eight years ago, the Tories’ belated promise to develop the SSI site would be made good.

In Sunderland, we know the importance of investment, because it gave birth to Nissan and its advanced manufacturing supply chain. We know the benefits that industrial rejuvenation provides in terms of good jobs that are skilled, well-paid and vital to local pride. On Teesside, the site that has become known as Teesworks is rightly billed as the biggest industrial opportunity in Europe. A large-scale site, connected to the port, with good energy supplies and the experienced industrial workforce on Teesside is not just a regional opportunity for the people of Middlesbrough, Stockton, Redcar, Hartlepool and the wider north-east; it should be an international opportunity for the UK.

That is what makes the details that have emerged about the activities of Ben Houchen and the South Tees Development Corporation so troubling. It is why this attempt by the Conservative Government to water down transparency and accountability is so damaging to the confidence that private investors need to have if Teesworks is going to be a success, as we all want it to be. It is why last month I asked the Prime Minister whether he or any of his Ministers had given commitments to BP, Equinor or any other companies about contracts at the Teesworks site. I was appalled by the triviality of his reply, when he asserted:

“Contracts at the site will be a commercial matter for the companies involved.”—[*Official Report*, 10 May 2023; Vol. 732, c. 334.]

We know already that interventions by STDC are shaking the confidence of outside investors. We need the confidence of an inquiry that only the NAO can provide, because we know that other issues in Tees Valley are already giving private investors cause for concern about their investments due to the behaviour of the Mayor and actors around the combined authority.

The *Financial Times* has done a superlative job of setting out the complicated issues around Teesworks. Another report by Jennifer Williams today about issues

with Mayor Ben Houchen’s approach to PD Ports suggests there are wider behavioural issues at stake. Its headline reads, “UK port accuses Ben Houchen of wasting public funds in legal action”, and, “Mayor accused of risking ‘the public purse and the reputation of Teesside’”. As the article states:

“PD Ports owns and operates Teesport, the country’s fifth-largest port by tonnage”.

It is an important asset for the north of England. Back in April 2021, *The Daily Telegraph* reported that the Mayor was

“mulling an audacious takeover of PD Ports”,

which is owned by Brookfield, and was seeking to “absorb” its container gateway. It is not for me to comment on a Conservative Mayor’s seeming addiction to nationalising economic assets, but since that article the issue has ended up in court.

Given the troubles at Teesworks, the *Financial Times* reports:

“Court papers filed by PD accused the STDC of foul play, claiming its chief operating officer at the time, Jerry Hopkinson, was told by then-STDC board member Paul Booth that the corporation’s intention was to buy the port ‘at a discount’ by denying access to its land and then ‘flip it to make a profit’.”

Mr Booth contests the account, while STDC itself says that the comments

“were made in a personal capacity”.

This is concerning. The problem that the people of Tees Valley and the country face is that there are clearly now a series of issues regarding the conduct of elected and appointed officials engaged with Tees Valley Combined Authority and STDC. These problems reflect troubling allegations at Teesworks.

The cavalier approach of Conservative Ministers and the Mayor to transparency and accountability is harming the investment prospects for Teesside. In case Ministers have forgotten, the rule of law stands at the cornerstone of our democracy. Not only are citizens entitled to know that the taxes they contribute will be spent well and that value is not being extracted from the public realm due to inappropriate dealings behind closed doors; businesses are entitled to know that their property cannot be simply nationalised by local Mayors to, as is suggested at STDC, “flip a profit”. The only way to end the doubts that investors and the public have about activities undertaken by Mayor Ben Houchen, TVCA, STDC and Teesworks is to ensure that there is a full investigation by the NAO. There can be no confidence in the pretence of an “independent” inquiry touted by a Secretary of State who has, in his own words, already found his Conservative colleagues innocent of all charges.

Given the economic situation in which this Government have left the country, we simply cannot allow more taxpayers’ money to be wasted, as it is here. That is why the Humble Address has been designed to enforce transparency and accountability on a Government who have, at every opportunity, tried to hide what they get up to and left hard-working taxpayers in the dark. Ministers have been involved in Teesworks from day one, so why has it taken the work of investigative journalists to bring this to light for the Government to realise that this merits an investigation at all? Is this wilful ignorance, or is it a fear of the public knowing what is really going on?

We have the covid inquiry, the hidden communications, the whole Boris Johnson Administration, and now this.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. That is the second time the hon. Lady has referred to sitting Members by name. I know that it is complicated because there are former Prime Ministers and former Secretaries of State who can be referred to by name, but, otherwise, Members must be referred to by their constituency, as I am sure the hon. Lady well knows.

Julie Elliott: I apologise, Madam Deputy Speaker.

As I and many other colleagues have noted, there is a way out of this for the Government. They can commit to the full National Audit Office investigation, which is so needed in an issue as important as this. They can let go of the idea of the Secretary of State picking the people he wants to carry out the investigation, as has happened with the investigation into the ecocide off the coast of Teesside, and let the NAO do its job, as it has the experience, capacity and independence to do this properly. There must be a reason why the Government do not want this to happen. I ask the Minister, as the Secretary of State is not in his place: why will he not support Labour's call for a comprehensive, independent investigation by the NAO, so that we can get to the bottom of what has actually gone on? Does he know something that the rest of us do not? When the investigation takes place, can he assure the House that those who were engaged in the process will be able to speak freely and honestly, irrespective of any non-disclosure agreements in place? That is extremely important, because the investigation needs to be thorough, transparent, and, above all, trusted. I know that "trust" and "honesty" are not the buzzwords of this Government, and they are not the buzzwords of this process, but they need to be.

5.17 pm

Jill Mortimer (Hartlepool) (Con): We all know why we are here. This has all transpired because of allegations made by the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald). Interestingly, he will not repeat those allegations outside of this Chamber and the immunity that it provides. At the end of May, I listened to "World at One" in which the hon. Gentleman was asked directly about the accusations that he made in the Chamber. Hats off to him: he performed verbal gymnastic feats of which Olga Korbut would have been proud. I have never heard anybody evade answering a direct question quite so well. I shall stop complimenting him now.

Mayor Ben Houchen and the Teesworks board were perfectly open to a National Audit Office review. I must declare an interest here: I sit on the Public Accounts Committee and I have every faith in the NAO to perform that review. However, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities decided not to go down that route, and for good reason—it is completely understandable why it made that decision. It would be an extension of the powers of the NAO, giving it jurisdiction over local authorities, which it currently does not have, and that could set an unnecessary and regrettable precedent.

There is to be an independent inquiry, which will follow the rules laid down in the Local Government Act 1972, and that should be sufficient for everybody. Sadly, those on the Opposition Benches once again seem intent on spreading scurrilous rumours and baseless accusations for their own political ends. They know that casting a shadow of doubt over the Teesworks site will deter investors—investors who would provide jobs and grow

the economy throughout the region for our people. Labour Members once again want to keep the poor poor. They are the enemy of aspiration and the friend of misery, and only by keeping their big, red socialist boot on the throat of the electorate can they hope for re-election. Conservative Members choose to be positive and to support people into well-paid jobs. We seek only to bring good futures, regeneration, growth and opportunity to our region, a region that Labour has ignored and taken for granted for generations.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I get the sense that there are quite strong feelings in this debate. I hope that everyone will bear in mind that we expect temperate and moderate language, and we expect the debate to be like that.

5.20 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): I want to raise three concerns in particular regarding Teesworks and Teesside. First, there are serious questions on the oversight of contracts that the Tees Valley Combined Mayoral Authority or its bodies have entered into on the land deal and other contracts relating to Teesworks, and the management of the project is risking its success. Secondly, there needs to be more scrutiny over the process by which contracts are won, not only at Teesworks, but at a sister structure in the airport. Thirdly, the Government's model of mayoral development corporations lacks sufficient local democratic scrutiny and accountability checks.

I want to add to the genuine arguments already made, in good faith, by colleagues in support of a full NAO investigation into Teesworks. There are simply questions that only the NAO can find the answers to—with every stone we overturn on Teesside, a new list of questions appears. Colleagues have already described the deal, so I will not repeat the details, but there are clearly questions that remain unanswered.

How did the developers first know to buy the option to lease from Redcar Bulk Terminal Ltd in 2019? What due diligence was done on their credentials to take over operations for the largest brownfield site in Europe? How much money have they personally risked on the project? Why was there no procurement exercise conducted for the relationship and no contract published?

Then there are the side deals that colleagues have touched upon. Failing an NAO audit on the entire project, will the Government's independent investigation look beyond the land deal to the project's side deals? Take Teesworks Quay Ltd, for example, or the contractors taking immense profits from the sites, and how those deals came about.

Those questions are all important, because we want to know that the progress of the project is by the book and that no corners are being cut, even though potential issues with the progress of the project have gained significant attention in the last year. Mass marine die-offs continue to plague north-east beaches, a worker only just survived after an excavator fell into the river and it is reported that relationships with significant industrial partners have flatlined, antagonised by the Mayor's legal action. But the public relations operation churns on, aggrandising speculative jobs—as we have heard again in this debate—and investment brought to the area, and painting a picture that just does not match the reality.

Coming to my second point, I am interested to know whether the investigation will scrutinise the process by which contracts have been won generally. Again, my concerns have come about because questions raised about the oversight of the projects have been brushed away, obstructed or avoided. Teesworks' sister structure at the airport, part of the freeport, is another Tees Valley CMA asset that has received millions of pounds of public money. The same two private developers at Teesworks became joint venture partners in Teesside International Airport Business Park in March 2020. What tender or public process was conducted for that?

Since the airport has struggled to reap rewards from the runway, it has turned to the business park to bring profit. In March, it awarded its first contract for the business park to GMI Construction Group. GMI was recorded as having paid for the lobbying services of Recognition Services Ltd, whose director, Graham Robb, conveniently sits on the South Tees Development Corporation board and reportedly does the Mayor's public relations, too. What was the significance of that relationship in the awarding of the contract to GMI? What tender process took place, and why will the Mayor not assure the public that due diligence took place? We need to address exactly what is going on in Teesside with that web of connected parties.

That points to my final concern on the whole governance model in the Tees Valley Combined Authority. It is only right that constituents in places with combined authorities should be able to hold local leaders accountable to the same standards as they can the Government here in Westminster, but almost every week, we hear new, disturbing reports out of Teesside that legitimately question the probity, decision-making and value for money across different wings of Ben Houchen's combined authority, following painstaking investigation from highly respected journalists.

Why has the Mayor been able to push decisions through, under the radar, with little or no scrutiny? What oversight of all those decisions really takes place, and why are the public not allowed to see any of it? Why are STDC and the developers allowed to mark their own homework? Why are the people responsible for the performance of projects also the judges of their progress? These basic questions point to a serious flaw in governance.

We are not raising these concerns to talk down Teesside. In fact, protecting and future-proofing the projects is the reason why these matters must be raised today. The stakes are so incredibly high; we need the projects to succeed. That does not mean closing more doors to scrutiny. Local accountability has clearly been unable to address these concerns, and Government supervision, or lack of, has allowed for what could be a huge failure in industrial strategy that affects the people of Teesside and our green ambitions.

This is an opportunity to finally right any wrongs by giving full investigatory remit to a body with the powers and capacity to probe deep into what has happened, including by ensuring that officials who have previously worked as part of STDC, the freeport or a related public body are free to comply with an investigation, regardless of any non-disclosure agreements that may exist. From there, we can learn lessons so that local communities can better scrutinise their combined authority Mayors through an operational structure that prevents conflicts of interest and the secrecy that has been so damaging

to local politics and business relations on Teesside—maybe taking inspiration from the Welsh Government's arrangements for Cardiff.

The Levelling Up Secretary knows that it is inevitable that this will all eventually come to light, so I implore him to allow a full NAO audit. If there is nothing to hide, why not open that door? For him to suggest that north-east colleagues are on a misinformation campaign is deeply disingenuous. Will he say the same of well-respected journalists, and news outlets such as the *Financial Times*, which are also asking these questions? I expect he will not.

I want these projects to be a success for Teesside and the wider north-east, which I care about deeply, but that should not mean that there are obstructions to finding out the truth. Selling a dream of success that does not match reality does not deliver that success to the people of Teesside. If the Government insist on proceeding with their own Department-led inquiry, it must answer the three concerns that I have laid out: why and how did the land deal and other contracts fall into private hands, what scrutiny is there of how wider contracts are won, and when will the Government remedy the gaps in oversight and accountability for the wider devolution ambition? Only once these questions have been addressed can we reassure Teesside communities that they are the priority, not private profit. Government obstruction without clear justification will only kick the can down the road, stalling any progress in the north-east. I urge the Government to reconsider their course of action.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I remind Members that we still have a large number of speakers to get in before the wind-ups.

5.30 pm

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): I am proud to speak today in support of Teesworks and our Tees Valley Mayor, Ben Houchen, as well as the process that the Government have put in place, of which more in a moment.

Teesside is being transformed, from our airport, saved after Labour let it drift to the brink of closure, to our town centres of Middlesbrough, Guisborough and Loftus benefiting from tens of millions of pounds of direct investment. We have the new mayoral development corporation to turbocharge the regeneration of Hartlepool. We have the Treasury's northern campus in Darlington and we have the UK's largest freeport on the Tees. Overshadowing, and indeed uniting, all of this is Teesworks, the largest brown-field remediation project in the country, and the beating heart of our industrial future. The site of the former Redcar steelworks was costing the taxpayer £1 a second as long as it stood idle. It is right that the Government and our Mayor have brought it back to life. Government investment of £246 million has been put in, but as we know, the cost of total remediation is some £482.6 million, as independently assessed. That is the reason for the joint venture established with the private sector.

It is important to clarify exactly what has happened. The first point is that the site has never been a public asset. The private sector Teeswork partners brokered a deal to take back control of the land from the Thai banks. It brought the deal and the land to the South

[Mr Simon Clarke]

Tees Development Corporation, not the other way round. That is why the Opposition's talk of no public tendering process having taken place is such a red herring.

The public-private partnership was agreed, moreover, by the TVCA cabinet, the STDC board, the Department for Business and the Treasury. Bob Cook, the Labour leader of Stockton council, voted in favour. The hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) stated on the BBC's "Sunday Politics" that he understood the reasons for a 50:50 split. A lot of revisionism is going on now.

Alex Cunningham: I have spoken to the leader of Stockton borough council and he has had no part in any decision relating to the transfer of those assets from the public to the private sector. He is a member of the combined authority, not a member of the STDC board. It is important that the right hon. Member recognises that.

Mr Clarke: The hon. Gentleman is completely wrong. Mr Cook voted for this structure and he cannot change that vote.

There is no credible suggestion that wrongdoing has occurred. Teesworks is double audited, first by Mazars and then by Azets, two separate auditors. There is then an audit committee for Teesworks. Here we come to the truly jaw-dropping fact that that audit committee is chaired by none other than Councillor Matthew Storey, the leader of Middlesbrough Council's Labour group and the head of the parliamentary office of the hon. Member for Middlesbrough. He chairs that audit committee—what concerns has he raised? He is part of the audit structure that is now being cast into doubt.

It is noteworthy that in the speech by the shadow Secretary of State we heard nothing that amounted to a substantive allegation. We heard a series of inferences and questions that amount to nothing more than the same tittle-tattle that has characterised this process, with the exception of the allegation of industrial-scale corruption that has been made but never substantiated, because the hon. Member for Middlesbrough knows that he would be sued for libel if he repeated it.

Clive Efford: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Could you confirm the rules regarding declarations of interest? If a Member has a declaration of interest on the register, should they not refer to it when they stand up and take part in debates in this House?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): It is up to each individual Member to determine whether their declaration of interest should be made during a debate. Clearly, processes are available should a Member not do so and other Members believe that they should have.

Mr Clarke: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I can confirm that no such interest exists, despite desperate attempts to insinuate to the contrary.

Who speaks for the Labour party in this debate? We have the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy), clear that she is making no allegations, but we had the hon. Member for Middlesbrough making very pointed, very serious allegations of criminal wrongdoing. There is a yawning gulf between the two.

The next key point I wish to raise is about the process that the Government have adopted to set up the independent investigation that has been announced this afternoon. As the Minister set out very clearly at the Dispatch Box, that is the legal structure for investigating when a best-value investigation is triggered. The irony here, of course, is that the civil service does not believe that that threshold has been met and has advised Ministers to that effect. [Interruption.] I have spoken to Ministers about this point and, as Ministers have made clear, that is the case. It is not Ministers asserting that this threshold has not been met: the civil service does not believe that that standard has been met.

As both the former Secretary of State and the former Minister of State for Local Government, I can say with total assurance that this process is normal and straightforward. In his letter to Ben Houchen a fortnight ago, the Secretary of State set out why one would not want to seek to extend the remit of the NAO in the way that is being proposed. We have the long-standing, Labour-instigated system of commissioning these independent inquiries under the Local Government Act 1999. The key point here, of course, is that it is not just public confidence but investor confidence that is being undermined by the Labour party. It is doubly ironic, therefore, that we have never seen Labour calling for a similar process anywhere else—as we heard from the Minister, not even in Labour-run Liverpool when actual criminal wrongdoing had taken place. To add insult to injury, was the Labour party's own investigation into its people's conduct in Liverpool independently led? No: it was investigated by one of Labour's own former MPs and a former council leader.

So we return to the purpose of this campaign—this vendetta. It is an attempt to systematically smear Ben Houchen, destroy Teesworks and make Teesside poorer. We have seen this movie before: earlier this year, not one but two independent reviews led by some of the most eminent scientists in the country thoroughly rebutted the idea that marine deaths were anything to do with the dredging at Teesworks, but just moments ago, we heard the hon. Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) again dredging up those allegations—you will pardon the pun, Mr Deputy Speaker—knowing full well that they are baseless. Labour will seize on any excuse and take any chance to try to talk down my region. I am sick to death of it, and so are the people of Teesside, because it is not in the public interest: it is in the Labour party's interest. That is why Labour pursues these wrecking campaigns.

Teesside has been rescued from a cycle of secular decline with some bold leadership and private sector investment, and the public back it. That is why, in 2021, Ben Houchen received 73% of the vote to carry on with his mission. I ask shadow Front Benchers to confirm whether they will respect the impartiality of the senior officials from the local government family who have now been tasked with conducting this investigation, and I ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough to confirm that in his speech, too. If they do not respect the integrity and impartiality of those officials, why do they not do so? What is wrong with the investigation that has been instigated this afternoon?

I directly challenge the hon. Member for Middlesbrough on this point, too—if it is established by that inquiry that his allegations of "industrial-scale corruption" are

baseless, as I firmly believe them to be, will he come to this House and withdraw the allegations that he has made here? If he does not, it will amount to one of the most flagrant abuses of parliamentary privilege that I can conceive of, and I believe that he should be ordered to this House by Mr Speaker in the event that he declines to do so.

This is a cynical, shameless, seedy attempt to talk down Teesside, to imply wrongdoing and to damage the interests of the very deprived communities that I am proud to represent. I look forward to the report of the independent inquiry. I will be voting against Labour's motion today. It is time to draw a line in the sand against this game playing by the Labour party. Labour Members have done it before—they have done it on the crabs, they have done it with the Teesside police and crime commissioner, and they have done it to the former Mayor of Middlesbrough. They know full well what they are doing. They abuse this place to make allegations, rely on others to amplify them outside and then feed off the clouds of suspicion and miasma of doubt that they create. All they have to offer is slander, negativity and decline—all the hallmarks of their toxic legacy on Teesside. Enough.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): There are seven Members wanting to take part in the debate, and we are going to do wind-ups of 10 minutes each. As the House can see, we have just under an hour for those seven Members. If people can focus their contributions so that everybody can get equal time, that would be really good.

5.41 pm

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): Secrecy is a disease that is threatening a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for the people of Teesside—an opportunity of thousands of high-quality jobs and a share of the dividend from hundreds of millions of pounds of taxpayers' money. It is secrecy that drives the suspicions, questions and doubts about how the Tory Tees Valley Mayor, Ministers and their cronies do business not just at the Teesworks site, but at our publicly owned Teesside International airport, which continues to lose millions of pounds and has twice been bailed out to the tune of £10 million using taxpayers' money.

Tomorrow will be the 13th anniversary of my maiden speech in this House. I was happy that day to tell the world how proud I was to be an adopted Teessider, and that remains very much the case today. We have a wealth of resources, from our people to our amazing cultural offer. We have our beautiful countryside, our coast and our amazing industrial base, which has created so much of our country's wealth, but we deserve so much more.

My hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) and I have been consistent in demanding openness and comprehensive scrutiny of decisions and the use of hundreds of millions of pounds of taxpayers' money by the Tees Mayor and his close-knit band of supporters and partners. The fact that several national newspapers, led by *Private Eye* magazine, have made front-page news of how business is done on the mayoral projects on Teesside warrants a completely independent

investigation not by a group appointed and favoured by the Secretary of State, but by the National Audit Office, which has confirmed that it could do one if given the green light by Ministers. The Tees Mayor is up for it; why are the Government not?

Similarly, I hope to see Ministers withdraw their opposition to the inquiry proposed by the Select Committee on Business and Trade, which would have the power to scrutinise in a way so far denied by all those concerned. It could also summon people here to give evidence. I have had all manner of concerns over the years as the Mayor has been aided and abetted by Ministers as senior as the Prime Minister himself, hiding not just the decisions made about the airport and the Teesworks site, but how those decisions were reached, who was involved and who was excluded.

I do not know whether you have heard of the Darwin's bark spider, Mr Deputy Speaker. It weaves the largest and most dense webs in the world. They can be as large as 28,000 sq cm, but that spider has nothing on the Tees Mayor when it comes to creating dense webs of secrecy, with organisations, companies and even charities created in an attempt to dodge full and proper scrutiny of how he and his mates do business and spend public money on what is referred to as the UK's biggest levelling-up project.

As has been alluded to, things came to a head last year when a record posted with Companies House showed that the once public asset that is the Teesworks site is now 90% owned by a small group of local businessmen, the shares having been transferred to them by the Tees Mayor and the board of the South Tees Development Corporation, but we still do not know why such a decision was taken and who exactly was party to it. For certain, it was not taken by the Tees Valley Combined Authority, made up of the elected Mayor and the elected leaders of the five local authorities. They were not even consulted, as far as I know.

The Mayor thinks he had to do business with two men in particular, Chris Musgrave and Martin Corney, because they owned what can only be described as a ransom strip of land on the Teesworks site and they would take on the liability of the hundreds of millions still needed to remediate the site. I have an issue with both his reasons, or perhaps "excuses" is a better word. The Tees Mayor took on the might of the Thai banks, which owned most of the site after SSI walked out on Teesside and ended over 100 years of steel production. He decided he would go as far as a compulsory purchase order, and to his credit, he acquired the site for the public. Why, then, did he not take similar action against the two local businessmen who were holding the public to ransom? He will not answer that question, but perhaps the Minister can help.

The Minister may also be able to help over the costs of the remediation of the site. The Government get no accolades for allowing the steel industry to die on Teesside, but I do give them credit for agreeing to fund the remediation of the site so it could be fully developed. During his short-lived tenure as the Government investment tsar for the Tees Valley, Lord Michael Heseltine—I am quoting him directly—said:

"The money to clean up the site will be what it costs. No-one knows what the condition of the site is and although there have been estimates, they are estimates based on guess work. So it is much better to make it clear"—

[Alex Cunningham]

and I agree that it is much better to make it clear that—“central government will pay the clean-up costs and underwrite them whatever the bill comes to.”

Successive promises were made by Government Ministers that the Treasury would fund that work, so there was never any need to find private capital.

We have heard the Tees Mayor claim that he may have been naïve in some of his dealings, but never did anything illegal. That may well be the case, but that naivety has cost our communities on Teesside the chance to share the dividends from the site and the public money invested in it. Sadly, however, we go back to the word “secrecy”. Were other companies and organisations considered for partnering with the Teesworks site? Were other offers made for the land? I have heard of one, and that was increased. What were the criteria and business case for selecting partners? It is all very much a secret, and none of the decision-making bodies is subject to the Freedom of Information Act.

I do not want to repeat all the accusations laid at the doors of the Mayor and his friends by the *FT*, *The Times*, the *Daily Mirror* and *The Guardian*, but I do hope we can get a fully independent investigation by the NAO into the wholesale transfer of assets, including the tens of millions of pounds of on-site scrap, to the private sector. That includes the *Private Eye* claim—a claim yet to be denied by the Mayor or anyone else—that Orion Kotrri, Mr Musgrave’s son-in-law, has been running the scrap operation. The South Tees Development Corporation has refused to say why he was selected for the role, who employs him or how he is paid. It is no secret that the business is being kept in the family.

The media and others are right that there are critical questions over how a bunch of local businessmen could already have extracted around £50 million in cash and assets from Britain’s biggest levelling-up project before a single business has begun operating on the site, and apparently without investing themselves. Perhaps all those concerned with the scrap should meet the challenge from *The Northern Echo*, which has said:

“There must be a ledger showing how much scrap has been sold which can put the facts in the open and enable people to judge whether there is any truth in the rumour”—

that is, the rumour of poor management.

Mr Simon Clarke: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Alex Cunningham: I will not.

Is the Minister aware of any such ledger of what are public assets, of where they have gone, and of what cost and value? *Private Eye* has established that decisions have been pushed through a board of the South Tees Development Corporation dominated by Houchen placemen and women in unrecorded discussions. Surely Ministers will recognise that they have some cleaning up to do. All we are seeking is for the truth to come to light. If the claims are not true, why is the Mayor not coming forward to publish all the relevant documents? Why is he not challenging, through the courts if necessary, all these media claims that he simply dismisses?

I would love to see the promises made by the Tees Mayor come to fruition. I want our communities to benefit from the jobs, but from much more than that

too. Just as London boroughs benefit from the massive council tax base, those on Teesside could benefit from the dividends from Teesworks, and goodness knows we need it. Our community in the Tees Valley faces soaring levels of hardship compared with the national average. Research released on Monday by the End Child Poverty coalition showed that, in Stockton-on-Tees alone, over 40,000 children are living below the poverty line.

The picture is the same across all of the constituencies of Members from Teesside represented in the Chamber, but time and again we have seen the Mayor and his Government fail our area. They failed to do anything to retain steelmaking on Teesside. Despite claims of help on the way, they allowed our historic and world-leading Cleveland Bridge and Engineering Company to go to the wall, with the loss of hundreds of highly skilled jobs. When the Sirius mine got into cash-flow difficulties, the Mayor promised help, but his Government brokered a deal for a multinational company to take over, leaving thousands of local investors with very little. Many of them were former steelworkers who had invested their redundancy pay in the venture. Who knows what could have been done if business had been handled in a different way on Teesside, with public benefit being the focus.

We need assets on Teesside. We need investment. We need to know what is going on with people’s existing assets and how they are being disposed of. If there are huge profits to be made from Teesworks—the scrap alone is said to be worth £100 million—surely they should be going into our communities for development and quality services and not almost exclusively into the pockets of private companies. We need answers. We need openness and transparency. We need to see an end to this secrecy.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I work out that if people keep to roughly eight minutes or so, everybody will get a fair go.

5.51 pm

Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con): As a Tees Valley MP, I am pleased to speak in this debate that is so relevant to many of my constituents. I have to admit that I am baffled by the Opposition’s choice of motion for the debate. If I were them, the last thing that I would want to do is spend hours discussing the lack of investment in the north-east by a previous Labour Government. It is only under a Conservative Government that we have started levelling up. The Opposition’s demand for the National Audit Office to investigate is also surprising, given their resounding silence when my right hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) ordered an inquiry into Liverpool, where actual corruption was taking place.

Labour has 17 Opposition days, which are meant to be used to discuss important issues, yet it has chosen to use today to throw mud at a successful levelling-up story. Labour could have used today to address the country’s priorities, which the Prime Minister set out in his five pledges. It could have talked about halving inflation, which has started to fall. It could have talked about economic growth, as recession is likely to be avoided: the OECD predicts growth of 0.3% this year

and 1% next year. It could have talked about falling national debt, with borrowing forecast to fall every year according to the Office for Budget Responsibility. It could have talked about reducing waiting lists. The figure for patients waiting over 18 months peaked in September 2021 at 125,000; in March this year, it was 10,737. Labour could have talked about stopping small boats. Compared with last year, crossings are down by 20%.

Has Labour chosen any of those subjects or talked about any of its own plans? No. Could that be because the news from the shadow Chancellor is that she wants to avoid unfunded spending commitments? Well, that would mean that Labour Members would have nothing to say. Could it be that even their supportive unions call their policies naive and say that they lack intellectual rigour and thinking? Where does that leave Labour? Back to the mudslinging and talking down places like the north-east.

I am sorry, but I am proud of the Conservative-led transition of the Tees Valley. Teesworks is an excellent example of an industrial area that was neglected until a Conservative politician, Ben Houchen, came along and decided to do something about it. I remind the Chamber that doing nothing with the steelworks would not have been a neutral act, either. Even standing idle, it cost the taxpayer hundreds of thousands of pounds every week, while in 2015 unions warned that clearing the site to repurpose it for housing or industrial developments would cost as much as £1 billion.

The site required so much work to become usable again that its value was in the negative hundreds of millions. Until recently, the joint venture appeared to have a level of cross-party support among local politicians. For example, the Labour leader of Stockton Council voted for it, and the independent leaders of Hartlepool, Middlesbrough and Redcar and Cleveland all approved it. A wide range of people and organisations in both the private and public sectors have been involved in the development of Teesworks, which is another reason why I find it difficult to believe that there could be some alleged secret tie-up to swindle taxpayers, as seems to be suggested.

It remains a clear and obvious fact that although the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) alleges industrial-scale corruption when he is in this place and enjoying the protection of parliamentary privilege, despite many requests he has declined to repeat those allegations where he would have to defend them. Can I also remind him that another great success story in the Tees Valley is the resurgence of Teesside airport, driven again by the Tees Valley Mayor, after its almost total demise under the control of Labour-led councils prior to his election? The airport is now enjoying further growth in both passenger numbers and as part of the Tees Valley freeport, delivering economic growth and employment.

We have already seen remarkable progress as a result of the joint venture partnership, including the demolition plan that is two years ahead of schedule. Less than £250 million of public money has been invested in the site, yet it has already secured over £2 billion-worth of private sector investment. I must also mention in passing the 2,750 long-term jobs that are being created through this project. Job creation is always appreciated, but it is all the more important in this case, where 1,700 jobs

were lost with the closure of the steelworks. Now that the site is doing well, Labour has decided to use it as another opportunity to talk down the north. Considering this was the first mayoral development corporation outside London, I think the record is pretty good.

The motion is about accountability and scrutiny of Teesworks, so we ought to note that Teesworks is double audited by Mazars and Azets, whose audit is then further audited by Mazars. Surely, if corrupt or illegal decisions had been taken, they would have been spotted by at least one of the accountancy firms, rather than going unnoticed? The Mayor, as has been said, requested that the National Audit Office become involved as a result of the accusations, but the Secretary of State decided that a more appropriate step would be to commission an independent review to consider the specific allegations.

As an aside, facts are always facts. The hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) alleged that—*[Interruption]*—Martin Corney's son, sorry, had benefited. That is just incorrect. If the hon. Gentleman would like to intervene and correct the record, that is a choice for him to make. Silence.

The Secretary of State's determination was that it would be inappropriate for the NAO to examine individual local government bodies. The fact that the Mayor requested NAO engagement would strongly support his contention that there is genuinely no corruption, wrongdoing or illegality.

I am disappointed that the Labour motion wastes parliamentary time and once again attempts to talk down progress in the north-east. It reminds me of the Leader of the Opposition, when it was announced that the Treasury was coming to Darlington, stating that it was not levelling up, it was giving up. With the success of Teesworks, Teesside airport, the Darlington Economic Campus and so on and so on, I for one am proud of what the Conservatives are doing to level up the Tees Valley. I hope that when we get a north-east mayor for the LA7, they will also be a Conservative and deliver in the same way that Ben Houchen has delivered, meaning that all my Sedgefield constituents can be as well served as that portion who reside in the Tees Valley.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): That was under eight minutes, so thank you.

5.58 pm

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): Much of the debate has been targeted at me and there has been a request for details of allegations. I trust I will be given the opportunity to set those out.

I am grateful to my colleagues on the Labour Front Bench for giving this issue such prominence today. I want to start by paying particular tribute to Richard Brooks of *Private Eye*. Without his amazing forensic tenacity and persistent investigative journalism over many, many months, we would not be having this debate today. Similarly, Jen Williams of the *Financial Times* has gone to the trouble of conducting in-depth investigations and has raised many pertinent questions, and *The Yorkshire Post* so courageously refused to be bullied or silenced. The BBC and many others have taken note of these matters. It is reassuring that investigative journalism is alive and well.

[Andy McDonald]

It is a complex web that has been woven and it requires significant attention to try to understand what has gone on. I share the bewilderment of those on my Front Bench that the Secretary of State is determined not to request that the NAO investigate these matters in full.

The core background to this saga is founded in the painful post-privatisation collapse of steelmaking on Teesside, which came to an end in 2015. It has left a massive hole in the local landscape and economy. The Tees Valley Combined Authority was established in 2016 under the Chancellorship of George Osborne, when the Labour Tees Valley local authorities, hamstrung by austerity, agreed to set up the new body, principally to focus on economic development and regeneration, transport and skills, led locally by Councillor Sue Jeffrey, then the leader of Redcar and Cleveland, Dave Budd, then the elected Mayor of Middlesbrough, and others. In May 2017, Ben Houchen was elected as Tees Valley Mayor and promised to bring back steelmaking to Teesside. Clearly that has not happened.

The South Tees Development Corporation came into being in August 2017, its principal task to assemble various pieces of land and bring them into public ownership to facilitate development, with the leveraging in of private investment a key element. People like Sir Alan Cockshaw, a most highly respected figure in the business world, Steve Gibson, the chair of Middlesbrough football club and Bulkhaul, and Paul Booth of Sabc all served on the STDC board and put in many hours of unpaid time—and, indeed, flew to Thailand at their own expense to further the negotiations with SSI's creditors to free up and secure the land.

The plan of the original board for development of the site was to remediate one parcel of land, develop it, let it, and then utilise that income to fund the next parcel, and so on. In effect, the outcome would have been a sovereign wealth fund for Teesside. All that changed with Ben Houchen's re-election in 2021. Those hard-working and generous board members were sacked by Ben Houchen and a new team brought in. While the funding was allocated from central Government—from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government—to be applied over three years from 2020-21 through to 2022-23, running into hundreds of millions of pounds, the Government made it clear that they were not in favour of sustaining an equitable public-private partnership beyond those committed moneys and that the private sector should take it on. So that was, and still is, the determinant ideology, and the end of any thought of a sovereign wealth fund for Teesside.

In the following rush, these concerning events have unravelled. It would seem that the private developers were very smart and in the right place at the right time. They seized on the opportunity when SSI got into financial difficulties and twigged that SSI was prepared to sell a particular asset in an attempt to assist in addressing its own financial woes. They secured an option to acquire a lease of some 70 acres of what was then SSI land not far from the Redcar bulk terminal. That was sold to Musgrave and Corney by SSI for some

half a million pounds. In effect, they became the putative default partner in what was to manifest itself later as Teesworks Ltd.

Other parties were interested in partnering with STDC, but they had no chance. There was no tendering process or proper procurement; there was no competition. Any inquiry will need to explain how these property developers came to acquire this key part of the site when the Tees Valley Combined Authority was pressing for a compulsory purchase order to buy the entire site.

More interesting things then happened in 2019. Mr Musgrave formed DCS Industrial Ltd, which was the vehicle for his Teesworks shareholding, and what we now describe as the SeAH site was acquired by STDC through its subsidiary company, South Tees Developments Ltd, from the former occupant, Tata Steel, for £12 million. This is the site upon which SeAH, the South Korean wind turbine company, will house its factory. The construction of the South Bank quay was made possible with a £107 million loan to STDC from the Government's UK Infrastructure Bank.

On 29 January 2020, Ben Houchen reported to STDC about the compromise of the compulsory purchase order process. But board papers reveal that in early 2020, STDC recognised the risks of getting into bed with Musgrave and Corney. Its business case for the taxpayer cash 18 months earlier noted the

“joint venture partners lack of experience on size, complexity and hazards associated with the South Tees site”

and the

“differing governance requirements between joint venture partner background and public sector requirement impacting procurement”.

Despite that, in March 2020 STDC formed Teesworks as a 50:50 joint venture with companies controlled by Chris Musgrave, Martin Corney and Corney's father-in-law Ian Waller, all of whom paid nothing for their shares. I trust that the right hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) will correct the record as far as Mr Waller is concerned.

STDC stated at the time that the joint venture company, Teesworks, would pay market value for the land it elected to buy. That changed fundamentally a little later. In early 2020, options were given by STDC for Teesworks to acquire freeholds from STDC. In August 2021, Gary Macdonald, the director of finance at STDC, reported to the board that there was now only a five-year window for development, which meant that there had to be a quick use of Government funds and

“a transfer of significant risk and rewards”

to the joint venture partners

“to incentivise the required pace of delivery”.

Those are the very people that STDC had expressed such doubts about just 18 months before.

That all begs the question, what value for money assessments did BEIS, DLUHC or the Treasury perform on this project, into which such vast sums of public money have been sunk? We should be able to see the Green Book calculations for all the different stages, ranging from the initial 50:50 arrangements through to the change to 90:10 in favour of the JV partners. In November 2021, the shareholdings of Musgrave, Corney and others via their various companies were increased from 50% to 90%. Again, they paid nothing for that increase in their equity stakes. Remarkably, they then

secured the major options to buy any parcel of land on the site. Presumably, the quid pro quo was that they would stump up when the public cash ran out. As STDC put it, the extra shares were

“in return for Teesworks taking on the future development of the site, together with the net future liabilities in preparing the site for tenants”.

The inquiry will need to see the details of the meetings between Houchen, Musgrave and Corney on all those matters. What did they discuss—and when—about the initial JV and the variation to a 90:10 split and the associated changes, such as options to buy land? Why were the share classes of Teesworks Ltd changed at the same time as the 90:10 split, meaning that no dividends have to be paid to the public sector, and can be paid only at the board’s discretion?

While the split was 50:50, the position was that Teesworks would pay market rates for the land it opted to buy. A freedom of information reply from STDC indicates that once the ratio was changed to 90:10, land acquired from South Tees Developments Ltd could be appropriated at a nominal sum of £1 an acre.

Teesworks did exercise its options to buy the freeholds constituting the SeAH site, but that was not known to the public until *Private Eye* revealed HM Land Registry’s entries dated 11 October 2022, showing that the river frontage, known as “new quay phase 1”, was transferred from South Tees Developments Ltd to Teesworks Ltd for the sum of £16.27, and VAT in the sum of £2.71. It also revealed further Land Registry entries dated 16 December, which show that a colossal parcel of industrial land known as “plot b south bank”, excluding the river frontage quay, was transferred from South Tees Developments Ltd to Teesworks Ltd for the stated sum of £96.79, excluding VAT.

Ben Houchen has said that the true consideration paid by Teesworks is actually £15 million, despite those Land Registry records saying otherwise. Apparently, the lower figures were adopted for tax reasons. If that is right, I am sure that His Majesty’s Revenue and Customs will have something to say about it, as might His Majesty’s Land Registry. If inaccurate or misleading figures are put on transfer documents, there are usually consequences. I hope the inquiry will examine those matters, as it should.

When will this mysterious £15 million be paid? In one of his many intemperate media rants, Mr Houchen claimed that the lands we are talking about have “never” been in the public sector, and that has been repeated here today. Really? Given the audit trail and what the Land Registry documents say, it is difficult to see how he could possibly sustain such an argument. I confess to feeling somewhat sorry for his officials, who have to sweep up behind him to sort out his inaccurate stories, but it still does not wash.

There then followed a series of transactions. Teesworks retained the freehold, but leased its 90-acre site to a private investor, now known to be Macquarie, the Australia-based global financial services company, for a peppercorn rent, for which Macquarie paid Teesworks a lump sum of £70 million to £80 million. In turn, TVCA, the taxpayer, leased the land from Macquarie, the investor, for an inflation-linked £3.65 million per annum for 40 years. TVCA then sub-let the land to SeAH for £4.3 million per annum. That means 90% of the £70 million to £80 million will be going to Musgrave,

Corney, Waller and their associate Chris Harrison, who have 45%, 21%, 19% and 5% shares in Teesworks respectively. That is a staggering £65 million-plus instant payday for the Teesworks joint venture partners.

While Teesworks is the freeholder for both sites, a clause in the transfer agreements ensures that the publicly owned South Tees Developments Ltd retains responsibility for environmental liabilities arising from hazardous substances. So Messrs Musgrave and Corney are not, according to that document, liable for cleaning up the site. The concern is that these property developers, who have never engaged in anything comparable to this undertaking, have become rich beyond anyone’s wildest dreams, all with the benefit of public moneys and opportunities.

Then there is the scrap. There was an agreement between STDC and Teesworks that as the by-product of the clearance and remediation works on the site, the proceeds from the scrap metal would be shared. There are hundreds of thousands of tonnes of metal on the site—approximately 500,000 tonnes in all. Up to now, a total of £94 million of valuable equipment, metals and other materials have been taken off site, weighed or otherwise. The sale proceeds are shared between STDC and Teesworks, with around £45 million going to Musgrave, Corney et al. Does the Minister believe that that represents good value for the taxpayer, who only three years ago owned all the metal on the site? Can he explain what is happening to the rest of it, which is estimated to be valued at up to £120 million?

What was there by way of a tendering or procurement process? Again, as was revealed by *Private Eye*, running the scrap operation is a man called Orion Kotrri, who just happens to be married to Martin Corney’s daughter. Any inquiry will need to ask how Mr Kotrri was hired, what his qualifications are for the job, whether that job was advertised and who employs him. Incredibly, we have now seen footage of Ben Houchen on a “trade mission” to meet the Albanian Prime Minister and the Mayor of Tirana, along with Martin Corney and Mr Corney’s Albanian scrap metal dealer son-in-law. We need to understand why they were present, given the visit was billed as a trade mission about international co-operation in travel and education. What did Mr Corney and his son-in-law have to do with that?

And then there is security. There is a fire raging at Teesworks right now. My hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) referred to the injury caused to the man who fell into the river, and let us not forget that two men died in the process of remediating the site. NE Security Ltd got the contract, initially worth £2.4 million, to protect the site, and then, a few months later, a further two-year contract worth £3 million. There are certainly some colourful characters involved, as has been reported by *Private Eye*, including those with a history of insolvency who owe HMRC £1.5 million, including an estimated £1.4 million to the anti-tax avoidance unit. Let us not overlook the proprietor’s son, who is in charge of health and safety on site, who has been given a prison sentence of 11 years and eight months for his part in running a drugs racket that stretched from Liverpool to Teesside. Both, of course, now have freeports. You could not make this up, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is the stuff of the movies.

Much criticism has been levelled at me for speaking up about these issues. I have to say to critics of my use of parliamentary privilege that they really must understand

[Andy McDonald]

that I will not be bullied, and that the use of privilege in this place is cherished and should not be derided. It is an important part of our democracy, and it is there so that Members of Parliament can raise well-founded concerns—as I have demonstrated today and on previous occasions—without fear or favour. So I ask those critics to grow up. They may or may not be advocates of SLAPPs, but they should be careful about embracing the concept of lawsuits being used to censor and silence critics.

As for the charge of being anti-business or “talking Teesside down”—a charge that is regularly levelled against me and against the Labour party—it is nonsense. Since the day I first set foot in this place I have been advocating the advancement of green industries, along with my friend and neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham). Not only are these industries critical to saving our planet; they are a key factor in bringing good, well-paid, secure, unionised jobs to Teesside, a region that desperately needs those jobs and is ideally placed, both industrially and geologically, to pave the way not only for hydrogen industries, but for carbon capture, utilisation and storage and so much more.

That is why the behaviour of the Tees Valley Mayor is so distressing. While my critics are still obsessing about me, I have to spell it out: businesses can read. Whether I say these things or not, these concerns are widespread, and if anything and anyone is undermining the confidence of investors, it is the reckless conduct of the Tories’ blue-eyed-boy in the north, Ben Houchen. If they really care about how public moneys are spent, and if they are truly as pro-business as they say they are, this Government must abide by their own declared strictures of “integrity, professionalism, and accountability”. They should wake up and smell the coffee, and join me in ensuring that these matters are fully investigated, and corrected, before it is too late, because if they do not, a Labour Government will.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): As I said earlier, the winding-up speeches will begin at 6.40 pm. Four Members are trying to catch my eye, so according to my maths, they have just over five minutes each if they want to use equal amounts of time.

6.17 pm

Matt Vickers (Stockton South) (Con): Having lived my entire life in Teesside, I know the challenges that it has faced, and I know the difference that being home to the UK’s first and biggest freeport will make in bringing investment and jobs to my area. It will create incredible opportunities for people to take up the jobs of the future in green technology and energy for generations to come. I understand that it will also provide a huge cash boost for local councils, with unprecedented revenue generated from business rates with the potential to turbocharge local services. Redcar & Cleveland Borough Council alone is set to receive as much as £30 million a year from 2026, and there is a hell of a lot more to come.

This is probably the largest levelling-up and remediation project in the country. Eight years ago the Redcar steelworks on the site closed, which caused devastation across Teesside, with 1,700 job losses. The huge site remained redundant, a scar on our community, and that redundant site was costing the taxpayer £13 million a year: yes, that is £1 for every second. The former Member of Parliament for Redcar suggested that it would cost up to £1 billion to clear the site. That has been done, and £246 million of public money has gone into the project, which has so far secured £2 billion pounds in private sector investment. On a site that caused so much heartache and pain, this project has already created 2,725 long-term jobs, and in the longer term it looks likely to create a total of 20,000 with the potential for a further 4,000 at the new airport business park. That is 24,000 great jobs that could make a huge difference to the lives of youngsters growing up in Stockton, Thornaby, Ingleby Barwick, Yarm, Eaglescliffe, Billingham and Middlesbrough, and not only are there jobs; the training is coming too, with the new Teesworks Skills Academy, as well as further opportunities being opened up in local colleges. These jobs and investments are a huge part of a bigger picture that has put Teesside back on the map, from the Darlington economic campus bringing senior civil service jobs and decision making to Teesside to saving Teesside airport, hooking up my area with the world and all the investors it has to offer. Teesside is on the up.

As well as benefiting from this and the potentially huge revenues that will come to my local council from the freeports business park at the airport, Stockton South is seeing unprecedented investment, including in a renewed railway station for Eaglescliffe; investment in high streets in town centres in Stockton, Thornaby and Yarm to bring back pride of place and support local businesses; a new purpose-built vocational training facility to open doors, opportunities, chances and choices for young people; and much, much more.

But there are always those who will talk down our area, deterring and jeopardising investments. They are more concerned about party politics than the interests of local people, and they lack the ambition to believe that we can do more on Teesside. When it came to the Mayor saving our airport after the complete and utter disgrace of the way it was cared for by Labour authorities, my Labour predecessor said that it was “fantasy politics” and that we should draw a line under the idea that anyone would buy back the airport. The hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) said that there was “no credibility” to the plan and that we would never see the money that was required. Well, with ambition and drive, Ben went on to save our airport and as the months go by, it continues to see more destinations and passengers added to its offering, much to the disappointment of the hon. Member. Now, thanks to its freeport status, the new airport business park is expected to create a further 4,000 jobs. Opponents are desperate to talk down our area, using parliamentary privilege to make comments that they are unwilling to repeat outside this place.

The decisions around the site, its ownership and its liabilities have gone through the combined authority cabinet, on which my Labour council leader—who I understand was previously employed by the hon. Member for Stockton North—sits. I understand that he raised

no concerns about the proposal and that he in fact voted for the joint venture. Yes, the hon. Member for Stockton North's former employee, the Labour leader of our local council, voted for the joint venture. Similarly—there is a bit of a theme here—the Labour group leader in Middlesbrough, who I understand might also be employed by the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald), chairs the authority's audit committee and never raised a single concern about the venture.

Teesworks is, as we have heard, heavily audited by two firms with a double audit. Moreover, the use of £246 million of public money has already been investigated and reviewed by the National Audit Office, which found it to be properly used in line with the business case. I think it is fair for people to make legitimate criticisms over the direction of the site, but what we have seen is politically motivated baseless smears, insinuation, tinfoil hats and mud throwing, with allegations of impropriety that people are unwilling to state outside of parliamentary privilege. It is wrong to play politics with something so important to the prospects of our area when unprecedented investment and jobs are on the line.

I have found that the door to the combined authority is always open and that it is willing to answer questions from me and my constituents. The independent review commissioned by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities in line with established practice—I think Labour established that practice—will provide yet another opportunity for questions to be asked and answered. It will also allow Members of this House to put forward any evidence, if indeed they have any. The tinfoil hats and politically motivated smears from the Opposition have real consequences for the people that I represent. They deter and jeopardise investment, jobs, opportunities and the huge revenue that my council will benefit from. This is a huge opportunity for Teesside and it is time for my Labour neighbours to get behind it and work with our phenomenal Tees Valley Mayor so that he can continue to deliver incredible change, investment and jobs for Teesside.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): The wind-ups will start at 20 minutes to 7.

6.24 pm

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): I start my brief contribution by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) on his forensic representation of this murky saga at Teesworks. The abuse and attacks will not deter him from unearthing the answers, as we can see from his fantastic speech. People need to back off and treat this issue extremely seriously. I give thanks and credit to *Private Eye* and the *Financial Times* for their fantastic journalism.

Mr Simon Clarke: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Ian Lavery: I will give way if the right hon. Gentleman says whether he or his party will seek recompense from *Private Eye*, the *Financial Times* and, perhaps, *The Northern Echo* for libel.

Mr Clarke: It would be helpful if the hon. Gentleman clarified that every single person cited in that *Financial Times* report, on which so much credence is being placed, is a Labour politician.

Ian Lavery: I was very gracious in giving way, and the right hon. Gentleman did not even answer the question. I think it is fair to say that the answer is no.

I also give credit to *The Northern Echo*. Despite its commercial considerations, and in the best traditions of that newspaper, it has put public duty above all other interests. It has published nine important questions, which are worth putting on the record.

The central allegation is that Musgrave and Corney have made £45 million from Teesworks in three years without investing any of their own money. By contrast, the taxpayer has put in £260 million, plus a £107 million loan. However, Teesworks says it has acquired a site that requires £483 million of remediation work, so it is a huge liability. Will the inquiry explain how much Musgrave and Corney have invested in the site? How much will they be required to invest in the site, and what is the business case for Teesworks raising the £200 million-plus that is required to complete the remediation?

Musgrave and Corney's entry point into the development was through their acquisition of part of the bulk terminal site in 2019. Will the inquiry explain how those two private investors came to acquire this key site when the combined authority was pressing for a compulsory purchase order to buy the entire site?

Musgrave and Corney's involvement has never been tested on the open market. Should there have been a public tendering process to find investors or firms to provide security for the site? That has been mentioned by virtually every speaker in this debate.

There is said to be 500,000 tonnes of scrap metal on the site. Sales have so far raised £90 million, with £45 million going to Musgrave and Corney. Does this represent good value for the taxpayer, who only three years ago owned all of this scrap? What is happening to the rest of the scrap on the site, estimated to be worth up to £120 million?

In August 2019, Musgrave and Corney's stake in Teesworks was increased from 50% to 90%, apparently to speed up work so that the site could take advantage of time-limited tax breaks to create the freeport. Why, given the huge amount of publicity surrounding Teesworks, did their increased ownership not become public knowledge until December 2019, when there was a filing at Companies House?

The Northern Echo has posed a number of other questions, and it deserves so much credit for what it has done on this murky situation at Teesworks on Teesside.

I will conclude simply by saying that transparency, clarity, accountability, integrity and scrutiny are all very important in a democratic society. They all seem to be really lacking at Teesworks in Teesside. Show the people of Teesside the respect that they deserve, for heaven's sake. Call in the NAO, as the Mayor and the Select Committee Chair are saying, to lead this inquiry.

6.30 pm

Ashley Dalton (West Lancashire) (Lab): In autumn 2021, the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, on a visit to Teesside, said:

"If you want to see what levelling up looks like, come to Teesside."

[Ashley Dalton]

So let us have a look. Hundreds of millions of pounds of taxpayers' money has been invested to bring forward local regeneration and jobs creation. The Tees Valley Mayor says that £2 billion of private sector investment has been leveraged and that almost 3,000 jobs have been created. What we do not yet know is how the joint venture partners in Teesworks were selected, why they were selected, and how or if any other potential joint venture partners had the chance to express an interest in being selected.

What outputs projects may have delivered is not the subject of this debate. What matters here is whether this is value for money, who is benefiting and how. It seems to have gone quite well for the joint venture partners. In the space of a few years, they have gone from having a 50% stake in the company to having a 90% stake. According to the *Financial Times*, they have also received £45 million in dividends and, as far as we can tell, they have not had to invest any of their own money in the project yet. The initial share transfer of 50% took place without any public tender process; the decision to transfer a further 40% stake also took place without any public tender process.

None of that is sure-fire evidence of anything untoward having happened. However, although we cannot demonstrate that anything untoward has taken place, there is inadequate transparency and accountability to give the people of Teesside, and taxpayers across the country, any confidence whatever that their money and their assets have not been inappropriately or unfairly spent.

I spent 25 years as an officer in local government and it was impossible to buy a ream of paper without a transparently awarded procurement framework, never mind appoint regeneration partners and transfer public assets worth millions of pounds. In my personal experience, the procurement and partnership rules in local government, and the need for open and transparent public tender processes and procedures, often draw groans of frustration from officers. However, it is also my personal experience that local government officers are acutely aware of the responsibility upon them not only to spend public money appropriately, but to be explicitly seen to do so.

Arguably, Teesside is the Government's beacon of levelling up. South Tees Development Corporation was the first ever mayoral development corporation to be set up outside London. More recently, the Tees Valley Mayor has been entrusted with another new development corporation, in Hartlepool, and, despite opposition from Middlesbrough Council, a new development corporation in Middlesbrough. So can we take it that the Secretary of State has confidence in the ability of the Tees Valley Mayor to set up and work with mayoral development corporations?

Mr Simon Clarke: On that point—

Hon. Members: No.

Ashley Dalton: I will give way. Go on—I am intrigued.

Mr Clarke: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way because it has been reported this afternoon that the Middlesbrough Labour party is pulling the rug from under the Middlesbrough Development Corporation,

which was established just a few weeks ago. Can she explain why that is the case and why it is forgoing the £18 million of Government support that that would bring, as well as the private sector support it would unlock? That seems to be a profoundly retrograde step for my town.

Ashley Dalton: It seems that quite a few of us believe that we should be looking far more into a wide range of these development corporations.

Andy McDonald: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way on that point. Is she aware that the position of Middlesbrough Council was to say, "Give us the money, don't give it to yet another self-appointed board under the tutelage of Ben Houchen"? Is she as amazed as I am that Ben Houchen has deliberately excluded PD Ports, the biggest employer and investor in the territory, from the consultation process? Does she not find that ridiculous?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Just before the hon. Lady responds, let me remind her that there is one more speaker to get in before 6.40 pm.

Ashley Dalton: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. What he has added enlightens us all and adds a lot to this debate.

As I have said, the current Tees Valley Mayor is apparently trusted deeply by the Secretary of State to work with mayoral development corporations, so why does the Secretary of State reject the Mayor's request for a National Audit Office inquiry in favour of a panel, handpicked by the Secretary of State, with a remit, scope and authority hurriedly thrashed out fewer than 10 minutes before this debate began and which, by the sound of it, is not approaching adequate?

I am a member of the Public Accounts Committee and cannot speak highly enough of the National Audit Office. Perhaps the NAO has indicated that it could not, or should not undertake an inquiry into Teesworks. But not so: the NAO has said that it is able and willing to undertake such an inquiry. We can assume then that the NAO sees no problem with it being tasked to do so, from the perspective of its remit, its expertise or its capacity.

Several hon. Members rose—

Ashley Dalton: I will not give way as I am nearly done.

When it comes to the spending of public money and the transfer of public assets into private ownership, it is not just the decisions made that cause concern among communities; it is also when those decisions appear to be made in the dark behind closed doors and without transparency. That is when people start to feel suspicious.

Therefore, to help me, others on the Labour Benches and the people of Teesside understand the Secretary of State's decision to reject the request of the Tees Valley Mayor, to decline the offer of the NAO and to set up a new panel from scratch, I invite the Secretary of State, assuming he is listening, to share his thinking, take the lid off decision making in Teesside and show the taxpayers of this country the respect and courtesy of an independent transparent inquiry that they can trust.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call Matt Western and ask him to resume his seat at 6.40 pm.

6.37 pm

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): The right hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) was incorrect when he said that all the members involved in that decision were Labour councillors; they were not. That is categorically incorrect. I just want to put that on the record.

As someone who worked in procurement, I say, if it smells of fish, it is fish. This reeks of fish. The negotiations, the poor governance and the poor value for taxpayers' money are a disgrace. Although this is a really important issue for the people of Teesside, the unfolding scandal has brought implications for the Prime Minister, for his freeport scheme and for this Government. What we are seeing is the first test of his freeport strategy and it is failing. It is thanks to the sharp investigative journalism of the *Daily Mirror*, which in January 2022 broke the story about the issues surrounding the project, that, ultimately, we are having this debate today.

The financial mountain that is being amassed by a few of the Mayor's friends is colossal—friends who are also donors to the Conservative party. Fortunately, *Private Eye*, the *Financial Times* and my hon. Friends who spoke earlier in the debate have made absolutely clear the scale, the detail and just how widespread this emerging scandal is. It is a long story full of twists and turns, but at the centre of it all we have the Conservative Mayor, Ben Houchen, with the help of two counterparts, Chris Musgrave and Martin Corney, and a few others.

It is a dark web of friends and family, property developers, PR companies and scrap metal merchants—the scrap metal story is perhaps the most egregious demonstration of how perverse this situation is. Half of the proceeds are now going to Messrs Musgrave and Corney and their companies. The day-to-day operation of this is led by Orion Kotrri, an Albanian man who, as we have heard, is married to Corney's daughter. I could go into all the other relationships, but they have been well covered by my colleagues.

There are more questions than answers. Seven people have spoken to the *Financial Times* to raise concerns about accountability and governance. We all want to see investment across our regions, and Teesworks is the Prime Minister's flagship freeport, but there seem to be parallels here with the personal protective equipment scandal, given the network of donors involved in the project. This is not a scheme—this is a scam.

6.40 pm

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to close for the Opposition in this debate.

Let me start by bringing us back to first principles. The Mayor of Teesside himself has requested a National Audit Office investigation into the Teesworks joint venture. That is backed by the Chairs of three parliamentary Select Committees. The Opposition, as hon. Members have heard, support it. The media support it. The only people who disagree with this are Ministers on the Treasury Bench and their Back Benchers. The purpose of the motion and the debate is to establish why the Government have taken the eccentric course of rejecting an NAO-led review. Is there a sound public policy reason or is it a partisan decision?

My colleagues have made very strong cases. My hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) set out in significant detail the pain the north-east has felt over 30 years of austerity; I would have thought that Conservative Members would have reflected on that, but they did not. My hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) reflected on the region's potential, which makes that pain doubly saddening. My hon. Friends the Members for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), for West Lancashire (Ashley Dalton) and for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) raised a range of very serious questions that simply must be addressed by a review that everybody can have confidence in.

I associate myself with what my hon. Friend the Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery) said about journalism and the courage of those various journalists who have taken this issue on. Despite all the criticism they have had from the players involved, they have stood up, done their job and shone a light on the issue, and we are having this debate today in part because of that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) set out an extraordinary, deep and detailed case, worth listening to by those colleagues who have sought to shout him down, both today and previously. He has shown incredible courage, knowing what is right for his constituents and doing what is right for his community when it would have been easier for him not to. There will have been days when he got out of bed, knowing the barrage that he was going to face, and it would have been easier not to, but he has too much courage to do that, and I salute that.

I turn to colleagues on the Government Benches. The hon. Member for Sedgefield (Paul Howell) said it was inconvenient that we were bringing this motion today. I understand that, but I gently say that it is for the Opposition to ask the questions and for the Government to answer them—they cannot ask the questions as well. The hon. Member for Hartlepool (Jill Mortimer) hit the nail on the head when she said that the Mayor has asked for this audit. It is not so unreasonable that we should ask for such an intervention when the Mayor himself has done so.

The hon. Member for Stockton South (Matt Vickers) asked, as did the Minister in his opening speech: why are we departing from established practice? This is the first time such a thing has happened. We have never had such an incident involving an elected Mayor or a mayoral development corporation. Of course whatever we do will be a new and novel approach, because we have never done it before. Falling back on false equivalence simply does not work.

I turn now to the right hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke), who made a bombshell contribution to this debate when he made it clear that he was basing his decision today on the discussions he has had with civil servants and the advice they were able to give him as a Back Bencher—advice that he knows we have not had any access to. At the root of the motion is the point that we need to know the information that is clearly available to some but not to others.

Mr Simon Clarke: I am afraid the hon. Gentleman has misunderstood what I was saying. I was saying that Ministers have not been advised by the civil service that

[Mr Simon Clarke]

the threshold has been met. That is a matter of public record. It is in the letter the Secretary of State sent to Ben Houchen at the end of last month and it was repeated by my hon. Friend the Minister at the Dispatch Box during his opening remarks. Ministers have been advised by the civil service that no such threshold for a best-value investigation has been met. That is not our view; it is the civil service's view.

Alex Norris: I chirped during the right hon. Gentleman's earlier contribution to ask him how he knew. I took from that—if I am wrong, the record will show otherwise—that he had had those conversations. Frankly, I think that that muddle is at the root of the issue.

Of course, this issue cannot be decoupled from the Government's supposed commitment to levelling up the country—a commitment on which, as has become increasingly clear over the past 18 months, the Government cannot and will not deliver. We have seen a levelling-up White Paper which talks more about a Medici-style renaissance than a real commitment to our communities; a bodged levelling-up fund that locked deprived areas out from getting the money that they need; and much-heralded levelling-up directors quietly canned even though they were supposed to champion the revitalisation of our nations and regions. What a waste. What a waste of the pent-up potential of our regions, towns and cities which is waiting to be unleashed if only the Government were serious about delivering on their promise. Once again from this Department, it is all press releases, no delivery.

Teesside was supposed to be the flagship, the proof of concept, which makes the concerns expressed today all the more crucial. If this is what levelling up is, who benefits from it? Who is it for? The questions keep mounting up, as colleagues have said. Reports in the media outline how millions of pounds of taxpayers' money have supported a project in which two private developers now hold a 90% stake despite seemingly never having entered a competitive process, and how those developers have taken significant dividends, outsizing their investment in the project. People rightly wonder how that has happened, who sanctioned it, whether value for money has been delivered, whether these concerns are legitimate, and if so, why has it taken dogged reporting on the issue, and colleagues in this place, for them to come to light?

Those are crucial questions that require answers, but rather than call in the National Audit Office, as the Mayor himself asked for, the Secretary of State has chosen to set up his own review, set the terms of that review and appoint the panel himself. We are now in the ridiculous situation where a flagship Government project that is facing serious allegations of failures in accountability is subject to a review set up and appointed by the Government themselves, and we are told that that will give the public the reassurance that they need. How can the Secretary of State expect the public to have confidence in that process? It is no wonder he did not come today and stand up for it, and instead sent the Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, the hon. Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley), whom I hold in high regard, into an impossible situation.

Let us face it: the Government are on their way to court for a statutory review that they themselves set up, because they are doing anything they can to avoid being candid in it. Now, they ask us to trust them and put our

confidence in a review that has not even those safeguards and powers, and they are surprised when we, the media and the public say that that is simply not good enough. We have waited for the answer today; it has not been forthcoming.

It is critical to public trust that the Government are transparent about the decision making that led to this process being adopted. The motion before us seeks to do just that by calling on the Government to release correspondence and communications pertaining to the decision not to order an independent NAO-led investigation and instead to commission their own review. For the sake of public confidence that all decisions have been made in good faith, and with the express intent to get the answers that the people of Teesside deserve, the Government should be open about how they reached their decision. That is all the more important because this does not relate to Teesside alone; it is the first project of its kind, with far-reaching implications for Mayors, combined authorities and development corporations. We need to know the truth now so that we can learn the lessons later.

The Government have had the chance today to establish a credible public policy reason why the Mayor's own self-referral to the NAO, supported by everyone but the Government, was rejected. We did not hear any such reason from the Minister; we heard false equivalence about processes pertaining to different public bodies. Unless the Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade, the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) takes this opportunity to change course, we must use Parliament to compel the release of the information behind the decision. We must vote for the motion.

6.48 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake): It is absolutely right that this place offers right hon. and hon. Members the opportunity to raise concerns about value for money or process, particularly when it comes to public money, so I am grateful for the contributions from both sides of the House, and in particular from so many fellow northern Members. Indeed, as a Back Bencher, I have on a number of occasions used the privilege that this House offers to raise concerns about other alleged wrongdoings, but I think it important that we consider our language, our tone and the content and context of the claims that are made. I think that it is wrong to exonerate someone without due process, as it is to condemn somebody without due process.

In the case of the South Tees Development Corporation and Teesworks joint venture, it remains the case that the Government have seen no evidence of corruption, wrongdoing or illegality. Neither have the auditors of the STDC, nor have my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South (Matt Vickers) or the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Ashley Dalton). However, the seriousness of the allegations, some of which have been made in the House and discussed today, could damage public trust, so it is right that they are investigated.

It is important to recognise that the review that we have commissioned was called for not only by Members of this House but by the Tees Valley Mayor himself. Our elected Mayors play an important part in championing their areas—convening communities, local leaders, businesses and investors to support levelling up in those

places. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Sir Robert Goodwill) and my hon. Friend the Member for Sedgfield (Paul Howell) highlighted, industry on Teesside was in decline prior to Mayor Houchen taking office. The project has the potential to deliver more than 40,000 jobs and billions of pounds of economic growth.

The Mayor has understandably raised concerns about the allegations made, recognising the damaging effects they could have on investments and job creation across the Tees Valley. That was a point raised by the hon. Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott). The continued allegation of corruption poses a real risk to our shared ambitions to deliver jobs and economic growth in Teesside. My hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Jill Mortimer) rightly stated that those concerns and allegations—unfounded at this point in time—deter investment in the region, a point also made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke). As he said in his final words, we have had enough of talking down the region.

The hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) said that people did not need to rely on his comments about the allegations being raised, citing newspapers that had raised them. But he must be aware that the *Financial Times* makes no allegations of wrongdoing, but merely quotes his comments made in this House. That is similar to the points made by the hon. Members for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery) and for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western). They raised facts, but they made no direct allegations as the hon. Member for Middlesbrough did. Those allegations are an ongoing concern, shared by the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, my right hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove) and me. That is why my right hon. Friend has announced the independent review, which will address the accusations directly and robustly.

As the Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley) confirmed earlier in the debate, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has also now published full details on the review, including the independent panel that will lead the review and the terms of reference. I can assure hon. Members that, in line with existing practice, the Government have appointed a panel composed of external, independent experts with extensive experience at senior levels.

As the lead reviewer, Angie Ridgewell brings extensive experience of senior leadership in local government. She is the current chief executive at Lancashire County Council, having previously held senior roles across the public sector, including as director-general of two Departments. Richard Paver and Quentin Baker have been appointed to ensure the panel are fully equipped to consider the complex legal, financial and commercial matters the review is likely to cover. Richard Paver acts as the finance lead for an existing non-statutory intervention at Wirral Council. Quentin Baker is currently director of law and governance at Hertfordshire County Council and has 17 years of experience acting as statutory monitoring officer for several large local authorities.

The shadow Secretary of State raised concerns about the extent of the review and I understand that, given the time that she had to study the announcement. But she

was not right to say that the review relates only to general governance, because it clearly specifically refers to allegations that have been raised, and the inquiry needs to respond on those issues, including commercial arrangements.

Members have raised the question of the prospective role of the National Audit Office. The Government considered carefully calls for an investigation to be led by the NAO. It is not, however, the NAO's role to audit or examine individual local government bodies, and its powers would not normally be used for that purpose. It would not be appropriate to expand so significantly the role of the NAO by asking it to lead this inquiry. In confirming the review, the Government have been clear that we would welcome any action by the NAO to update its review of Government funding arrangements. These are all points that were raised by the hon. Members for Sunderland Central, for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) and for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham), as well as by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris), who described that position as eccentric despite the fact that it is the established process—a process that Labour actually established.

It is important in this debate that we do not lose sight of the value of devolution in empowering our local communities. Mayoral development corporations are but one tool at the disposal of our elected Mayors to support renewal and regeneration where it is much needed—in places such as Redcar and Cleveland, Middlesbrough and Hartlepool, where the challenges of post-industrial deprivation are significant but the opportunities are equally so. Local and regional government working together with the private sector is an opportunity to provide the leadership and strategic direction needed to enable growth.

Equally, this Government have been clear about the importance of accountability and scrutiny for areas with devolved powers. The English devolution accountability framework, published this March by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, sets out the ways in which we expect mayoral combined authorities to make themselves accountable to both the public and Government. The forthcoming scrutiny protocol will set out how we expect such bodies to create a sustained culture of scrutiny.

Once again, I thank Members for their important contributions today. We should be focused on ensuring the best outcomes for the Tees valley, so this is an important debate to have. Only a few years ago, the Teesworks site was a burden to the taxpayer and a danger to the public, with a significant price tag merely to maintain its safety and security. We should not lose sight of the fact that investments in that site—public and private—are helping meet our net zero targets, while providing economic opportunity and a sense of prosperity for future generations.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 166, Noes 272.

Division No. 248]

[6.47 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (<i>Proxy</i>)	Ali, Rushanara
<i>vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-</i>	Ali, Tahir
<i>Addy</i>)	Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Abrahams, Debbie	Amesbury, Mike

Anderson, Fleur
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Ashworth, rh Jonathan
 Barker, Paula
 Beckett, rh Margaret
 Begum, Apsana
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Blake, Olivia
 Blomfield, Paul
 Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
 Brennan, Kevin
 Brown, Ms Lyn
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
 Buck, Ms Karen
 Burgon, Richard
 Byrne, Ian
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Carden, Dan
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Clark, Feryal (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Cooper, Daisy
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Coyle, Neil
 Creasy, Stella
 Cruddas, Jon
 Cummins, Judith
 Cunningham, Alex
 Daby, Janet
 Dalton, Ashley
 David, Wayne
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dixon, Samantha
 Dodds, Anneliese
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Eastwood, Colum
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Efford, Clive
 Elliott, Julie
 Elmore, Chris
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Fletcher, Colleen
 Foord, Richard
 Fovargue, Yvonne
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Green, Sarah
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Haigh, Louise
 Hamilton, Mrs Paulette
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn
 Healey, rh John
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hollern, Kate
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Howarth, rh Sir George
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana

Kane, Mike
 Kendall, Liz
 Khan, Afzal
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kyle, Peter
 Lake, Ben
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 Lavery, Ian
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewis, Clive
 Lightwood, Simon
 Lloyd, Tony (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lynch, Holly
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Maskell, Rachael
 McCabe, Steve
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonagh, Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonnell, rh John
 McMahon, Jim
 Mearns, Ian
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Mishra, Navendu
 Moran, Layla
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Helen
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Murray, James
 Nandy, Lisa
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Alex
 Olney, Sarah
 Onwurah, Chi
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Kate
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Owen, Sarah
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Lucy
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Rees, Christina
 Reeves, rh Rachel
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Shah, Naz
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Sobel, Alex
 Stevens, Jo
 Stone, Jamie
 Sultana, Zarah
 Thomas, Gareth

Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Trickett, Jon
 Twigg, Derek
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Wakeford, Christian
 Webbe, Claudia
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew

 Adams, rh Nigel
 Afolami, Bim
 Afriyie, Adam
 Aiken, Nickie
 Aldous, Peter
 Anderson, Lee
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Ansell, Caroline
 Argar, rh Edward
 Atherton, Sarah
 Bacon, Gareth
 Bailey, Shaun
 Baillie, Siobhan
 Baker, Duncan
 Baker, Mr Steve
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Baynes, Simon
 Bell, Aaron
 Benton, Scott
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Bhatti, Saqib (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Blackman, Bob
 Blunt, Crispin
 Bone, Mr Peter (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, rh Karen
 Brady, Sir Graham
 Brereton, Jack
 Brine, Steve
 Bristow, Paul
 Britcliffe, Sara
 Browne, Anthony
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buchan, Felicity
 Buckland, rh Sir Robert
 Burghart, Alex
 Butler, Rob
 Carter, Andy
 Cartlidge, James
 Cash, Sir William
 Cates, Miriam
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chishti, Rehman
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, rh Mr Simon
 Clarke, Theo (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Clarke-Smith, Brendan
 Clarkson, Chris
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
 Collins, Damian
 Costa, Alberto
 Courts, Robert
 Coutinho, Claire

Western, Matt
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, Hywel
 Wilson, Munira
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
 Mary Glindon and
 Liz Twist

NOES

Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crosbie, Virginia
 Crouch, Tracey
 Davies, rh David T. C.
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Mims
 Davis, rh Mr David
 Davison, Dehenna
 Dinenage, Dame Caroline
 Dines, Miss Sarah
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Donelan, rh Michelle (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duddridge, Sir James
 Duguid, David
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Eastwood, Mark
 Edwards, Ruth
 Ellis, rh Michael
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
 Eustice, rh George
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Everitt, Ben
 Fabricant, Michael
 Farris, Laura
 Fell, Simon
 Firth, Anna
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Fletcher, Mark
 Ford, rh Vicky
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Freer, Mike
 French, Mr Louie
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Gideon, Jo
 Glen, rh John
 Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
 Gove, rh Michael
 Gray, James
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Griffith, Andrew
 Grundy, James
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hancock, rh Matt
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy

Hart, Sally-Ann
Hart, rh Simon
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Henderson, Gordon
Henry, Darren
Higginbotham, Antony
Hinds, rh Damian
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Holmes, Paul
Howell, John
Howell, Paul
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, Jane
Hunt, Tom
Jack, rh Mr Alister
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, rh Robert
Johnson, Gareth
Johnston, David
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Fay
Jones, rh Mr Marcus
Jupp, Simon
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kearns, Alicia
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Kruger, Danny
Kwarteng, rh Kwasi
Lamont, John
Largan, Robert
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Loder, Chris
Logan, Mark (*Proxy vote cast
by Mr Marcus Jones*)
Longhi, Marco
Lopez, Julia (*Proxy vote cast
by Mr Marcus Jones*)
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan

Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, rh Kit
Mangnall, Anthony
Mann, Scott
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Mayhew, Jerome
Maynard, Paul
McCartney, Jason
McCartney, Karl
McPartland, rh Stephen
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, rh Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalf, Stephen
Millar, Robin
Milling, rh Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Damien
Moore, Robbie
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, James
Morrisey, Joy
Mortimer, Jill
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Mumby-Croft, Holly
Murray, Mrs Sheryl
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Neill, Sir Robert
Nici, Lia
Norman, rh Jesse
O'Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Philp, rh Chris
Poulter, Dr Dan
Prentis, rh Victoria
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, rh Jeremy
Quince, Will
Randall, Tom
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
Richards, Nicola

Richardson, Angela
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Mary
Rowley, Lee
Russell, Dean
Rutley, David
Sambrook, Gary
Saxby, Selaine
Scully, Paul
Seely, Bob
Selous, Andrew
Sharma, rh Sir Alok
Shelbrooke, rh Alec
Simmonds, David
Skidmore, rh Chris
Smith, Greg
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, Royston
Solloway, Amanda
Spencer, Dr Ben
Spencer, rh Mark
Stafford, Alexander
Stephenson, rh Andrew
Stevenson, Jane
Stevenson, John
Stewart, rh Bob
Stewart, Iain
Stride, rh Mel
Sturdy, Julian
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond

Syms, Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
Timpson, Edward
Tolhurst, rh Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Trott, Laura
Tugendhat, rh Tom
Vara, rh Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Vickers, Matt
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Mr Robin
Warburton, David (*Proxy vote
cast by Craig Mackinlay*)
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Webb, Suzanne
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Wiggin, Sir Bill
Wild, James
Williams, Craig
Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Wood, Mike
Wragg, Mr William
Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
Tellers for the Noes:
Steve Double and
Julie Marson

Question accordingly negated.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

*Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing
Order No. 118(6)),*

ANIMALS

That the draft Animal By-Products, Pet Passport and Animal Health (Fees) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2023, which were laid before this House on 18 April, be approved.—(*Robert Largan*)

*The Deputy Speaker's opinion as to the decision of the
Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until
Wednesday 14 June (Standing Order No. 41A).*

Small and Medium-sized Enterprises: Great Yarmouth

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

7.11 pm

Brandon Lewis (Great Yarmouth) (Con): First, I direct the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I do so specifically, not least because I feel passionately about small and medium-sized enterprises. I worked in them and ran them before I came to Parliament, and now I am again working with family businesses. A constituency such as Great Yarmouth is absolutely reliant on those SMEs—in fact, it is not so well known that our whole economy is. I will explain that in a moment.

My father ran a business, and I have always had a strong relationship with Great Yarmouth because his business—an SME that employed people—had a factory there. Because of how SMEs integrate into the community, even today, some 30 or 40 years since my father left that business, people who worked for him are still running a part of that business in Great Yarmouth. They are employing people who will go on eventually to run that business, and maybe they will set up their own businesses to form part of the Great Yarmouth business community.

Some 37,000 people in my constituency—roughly half of my voting constituency—work in SMEs. There are some 3,000 SMEs in Great Yarmouth. That sounds like a lot, but it is no surprise because across the country something like 99% of businesses qualify as SMEs. More than 50% of our working population work for SMEs. That is a huge number, and that is important, because these businesses drive our economy.

I have a strong interest in the housing industry. I was the Housing Minister, and I remember working with great house builders and household names, and some of the great multinational companies that we see started as sole traders and grew to be the big names that we know today. In sectors across our economy, there are big-name brands and companies employing people globally who started as family businesses. Some of them still are family businesses.

We need today's S's to become the M's of tomorrow and then to become the big companies that grow our economy. We get very focused on the big names, and they play a hugely important part, but for constituencies such as Great Yarmouth—particularly coastal communities where the tourism and hospitality industry plays such a key role—SMEs are at their heart.

SMEs play a part for the big companies as well. The oil and gas and renewable energy industry has a huge presence in Great Yarmouth, particularly in servicing. Companies such as Seajacks, which work around the world, are from and based in Great Yarmouth. They are there because an entrepreneur from the oil and gas industry had an idea, took the risk and developed it in Great Yarmouth. Now, he is employing people from across Great Yarmouth. When clients come to companies like Seajacks and others in the energy industry, they often take their clients, visitors and customers for lunch in places like the Imperial Hotel in Great Yarmouth, and restaurants like the Waterside, or Planet Spice in Ormesby. Those businesses are integral to big and medium-sized businesses. It is a symbiotic relationship. Our economies work because of all of those layers.

Small businesses are generally family-owned businesses. If not, they are at the very least locally owned or locally run. That means they have a very keen interest in the community, which they show by sponsoring local sports teams or cub scouts, or just by being involved in the community and knowing their staff who are a part of the community. The businesses are an important part of it. We have spoken in this Chamber a lot, and in my roles in government I have spoken a lot, about the pub industry and why pubs are so important to our communities. They are SMEs and a hugely important part of the community. Like many other businesses, if they have a regular customer who has not been in the pub that day, they may be the first in the community to realise there is a problem.

An SME owner or manager will generally know all their staff. In my business, before I came into Parliament, I knew all our staff by name. That does not happen in a conglomerate, but it happens in small and medium-sized businesses because their owners and managers are a part of that business and community. They also respect the local community in a different way—not to say that big companies do not respect their communities—because they are so reliant on it for their customers and their staff. They are much more integral to the local community, and much more focused on how they can work for it and support it. That matters, because that is what binds our communities together. It also ensures we can deliver social mobility. People can move and work in businesses in different sectors across the country, knowing that wherever they need to move to and wherever they want to work, there is a community they can be a part of; not just a housing estate or a business but a community, and the business will be a key part of that.

SMEs, particularly in hospitality which is so vital to constituencies like Great Yarmouth, have had a really tough time. As we came through the covid pandemic, they arguably had some of the toughest situations to deal with. In many ways, it was one of the fastest industries to recover, because we all wanted to get out and about and do things while we had the opportunity to do so, but those businesses still need help. VAT has been an issue for them since it has come back up, particularly compared to some of our competitors around the world. They also have to deal with business rates. SMEs find business rates to be a challenge, as they have to deal with high street values and prices, while competing with conglomerates that have out-of-town business rate values and prices. Any business we talk to will say there is a need for us, at some stage, to ensure that we are cognisant of the challenge of business rates, seasonal worker schemes across hospitality—and agriculture in a constituency like mine—and the wider basis of regulation and tax.

We all want things to be safe and regulated, but we have to remember that big companies can deal with that more easily. They can put teams together to manage it. It will be a cost to them, but they can manage it. SMEs often do not have the resource to do that. They need flexibility to be able to work with their workforce. They often have very small margins and need to be focused on their customers, rather than on what is sometimes seen to be unnecessary regulation and red tape, so we all have a duty to focus on that.

The Minister will be absolutely cognisant of that. From conversations we have had over the years, before either of us were in government, I know how successful

he was in the business sector and I know how well connected he is with the SMEs in his constituency, so I know we will be singing from the same hymn sheet. He has a reputation across the sector as someone who understands the sector and wants to deliver for it—something we all want to do. I just want to take this opportunity to be very clear about its value and importance, and to put on the record what we all know, which is why these businesses matter so much to our communities.

Robin Millar (Aberconwy) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making a really interesting speech. There are many different points I would like to pick up on, not least the similarity with my own constituency, which is also a coastal community that is highly dependent on tourism for its economy. He made a very interesting point about pubs being close to the people and often being the first to detect when things are wrong—when people are missing. Does he agree that pubs and all hospitality businesses are very often the first to indicate when there are problems? Just today, I was with a group of colleagues talking about the impact of energy pricing on the pubs and hotels in their constituencies. The phrase, “They are the canary in the coalmine,” was used. Does he agree that that is the case, and that energy pricing is proving to be a real problem for them at the moment?

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend is spot-on. That challenge has been fed into me recently by a number of businesses: they have asked what more the Government can do to ensure there is collaboration between the Government and industry to deal with energy pricing. The rise in energy prices is one of the big challenges coming out of the problems of covid and particularly the abhorrent invasion of Ukraine by Putin. The Government have rightly put protection in place for households, and I congratulate them on that, but many businesses are still struggling with rate rises of up to 400%. They are often businesses working on small, single-figure margins—often of 1% or 2%.

The pub industry is tough: it is hard work making sure the client and customer is happy and has a good experience. We need to make sure that we have the support in place to not lose more pubs. We all know we are losing pubs and that lifestyles are changing. It is not necessarily the Government’s responsibility to fix all those issues, but we do need to be cognisant of what more we can do to work with the energy industry to ensure that we have the biggest possible impact for businesses, as some of their rising costs through inflation go back to the challenges from rising energy prices.

My hon. Friend is right, too, that the hospitality industry is one of the first to see any warning light for our economy, as, indeed, is the housing sector. If we want more houses to be built across our country, we need SME house building businesses to be building. I know some of the chief executives of our big house builders. One of them, who sadly has passed away now, always said to me when I had responsibility for the sector in government that one of the challenges today is that the regulation and the restrictions on housing make it very difficult for people to do what he and some of his competitors did in the past—those big house builders that started as sole traders—which was to borrow money and get through the planning process in order to build even one or two homes.

If we were able to invigorate SMEs in the housing sector to build those small numbers of homes in our villages and towns across the country—wherever we need them; in the right places and of the right quality—that would make a huge difference to our economy, because it has a knock-on effect. It is not just about the house, which itself improves social mobility; it is about everybody who is employed in building the house, and about the person who moves into it going to buy some paint or whatever else to decorate it. That all adds to the economic boost and growth for our country, and it is why we benefit by about 1% of GDP for every 100,000 homes built in this country.

Our hospitality industry is a canary in the mine showing what condition the economy is in, as my hon. Friend said. Those businesses I was talking about earlier—the larger and the medium-sized businesses—entertain clients and customers, and hospitality notices first if there are fewer of them, if those businesses are taking less time to entertain because they have fewer customers and visitors, and if we as individuals are spending less money in hospitality.

It plays an important part in the economy. People think of hospitality in places like Great Yarmouth as being just there for visitors, but it is there for business as well. In Northern Ireland, I spoke regularly to businesses who would use the hospitality pull of Northern Ireland as part of the sales pitch for their business in the engineering sector. It is a very important sector for our economy, and it thrives and relies on those SMEs.

The majority of that sector is SMEs. Big companies like Haven Holidays have a huge presence in constituencies like mine, but it is the small businesses that knit things together and support people across the villages and the coastal towns. I have seen that at first hand in Hemsby in Great Yarmouth, where almost all the businesses are independent or family-owned. They have come together to protect the coastline and literally defend the homes of people, and they have helped people who have lost their homes when they have fallen into the sea because of the coastal erosion we have had over the last few years. There have been some very dramatic circumstances. The businesses with a sense of passion for their community—the publicans and business owners in Hemsby—have come together to drive the campaign to make sure we get the support for the residents who need it, as much as for the businesses themselves and the visitors who come to enjoy the beach that we want to protect.

I have seen time and again the importance of SMEs across the whole of the UK economy, as I have outlined. Many people—the majority in our country—are employed in SMEs. I know the Minister is cognisant of this, but in everything we do we should always be thinking about what more we can do to help today’s sole trader become a small business, and today’s small business become a medium-sized enterprise, with a view to how they grow into the big plc of the future; because without doubt for me in Great Yarmouth, our small and medium-sized, predominantly family-owned, businesses are the heartbeat of the constituency, and they end up being the heartbeat of our country.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Before calling the Minister, I must say that it is rare and impressive to hear a content-packed speech delivered without notes, so congratulations.

7.25 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake): I am sorry that I cannot emulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis) by speaking without notes, but I will do my best to ad lib a little. I thank him for securing this important debate. I love his words that SMEs drive the whole economy. It brought back the words of Winston Churchill about the private sector; he said that some people see private enterprise as a predatory tiger that needs to be shot. Some people see it as a cow that needs to be milked. Few people see it for what it really is: the strong horse that pulls the whole cart. That is exactly right. Everything we see in the public sector and in this House is paid for by the private sector, the taxes it raises and the jobs it creates.

I totally agree with my right hon. Friend on the title and the primary content of this debate—SMEs are the most important part of the sector. As he said, I started a very small business and grew it over time, but the pressure we were always under as our business grew was from smaller businesses starting up and putting pressure on our market share. I listened carefully to his points about his father's business and the legacy effect it has had on Great Yarmouth. That is my experience. Many people go into business for the potential financial reward, but also for the legacy: the jobs they can create and the business that they leave behind. That has a long-lasting effect on towns such as Great Yarmouth.

The Department for Business and Trade is seeking to make the UK the best place to do business in the world. We want to make it easier to do business every single day. My ministerial colleagues and I, as well as many others including my right hon. Friend, the Chancellor and the Prime Minister, are for business because we are from business. We understand how this works.

My right hon. Friend made the point about smaller businesses that start up and grow to become larger businesses. That is the fundamental basis of our strategy to scale up Britain. We want the start-ups to become scale-ups. That is one of our areas for development. We are No. 1 in the OECD for start-ups per capita, but in a survey of 14 OECD nations, we were 13th for scale-ups—businesses that have 10 employees or more after three years. That is our focus, and there are three key focus areas underneath that: access to finance, support and advice, and removing barriers and red tape. Those are critical issues for the SMEs I speak to.

When we speak about business, it is important to speak about the entire world of businesses in all sectors. Hospitality is very important in Great Yarmouth, where 23% of all jobs are in the tourism industry. In his intervention, my hon. Friend the Member for Aberconwy (Robin Millar) rightly said that the hospitality business feels that cold wind first, but also sees the benefit of the improvement in the economy first, too. It is truly the canary in the coalmine, as he put it.

In Great Yarmouth there are some fantastic opportunities for the future, not least in green energy. My right hon. Friend pointed out the businesses that are benefiting from that. I am aware of ASCO, which employs more than 100 people, providing services to the North sea opportunity that is green energy—30 wind turbines on the Scroby sandbank. There are many more opportunities in that sector.

In the Lowestoft and Great Yarmouth enterprise zone in his constituency, South Denes energy park and Beacon Park are boosting innovation and growth in the region. More recently, investment through the Great Yarmouth town deal and the future high street funds, building on previous support from the local growth fund, is helping the local area by supporting jobs and growth in that region.

I will go into some specifics about the three areas of focus I referred to earlier. First, access to finance is one of the primary concerns for small businesses as they open their doors and grow. We work closely with the British Business Bank to improve access to finance. I am pleased that as of March 2022, the British Business Bank programme has supported over 96,000 small and medium-sized businesses nationally with over £12.2 billion of finance. The programme is designed to bring benefits to start-up businesses, businesses with high-growth potential looking to scale up and businesses looking to stay ahead in the market.

I know my right hon. Friend the Member for Great Yarmouth has supported many initiatives in his time in this place, such as the important start-up loan scheme, which has delivered around £1 billion of finance to 100,000 companies. Those unsecured loans are vital to many people who cannot access finance to start a business. In his constituency, 95 loans have been provided, to a value of almost £800,000.

Inclusion is a priority of this Government, so I am pleased that in terms of all the start-up loans issued up until April 2023, 40% went to women, 20% went to people from a black, Asian or minority background and 32% went to people who were previously unemployed. Those are all disproportionately high numbers, which we should welcome.

Within the space of access to finance, we are also undertaking the payment and cash flow review. We know that is an issue for SMEs and we want to make it easier for them to be paid, as that is another source of finance. We have improved our equity finance offering through schemes such as the regional angels programme, supported by the British Business Bank, and the enterprise investment scheme, the remit of which has been extended.

We are looking at potential new opportunities on the back of open banking. Open banking was a huge success in this country and has been emulated around the world. There are now 7 billion API calls every month for open banking, connecting one banking app with another, and there are other fintech solutions. Open finance provides the opportunity to completely liberate opportunities for SMEs to access finance. Rather than going to their own bank and asking for a loan, they can ask many different providers for that finance, which will increase choice and opportunity.

Robin Millar: The Minister is following the speech given by my right hon. Friend the Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis) with another very interesting and helpful speech about what SMEs need. He is describing the Government's role in creating an environment in which SMEs can flourish. Will he comment on the importance of the regulation to which he referred, not just to say that there should be as little of it as possible but to set out what regulation is effective? Will he comment on whether it is right for the Government to intervene when the market is failing?

Kevin Hollinrake: My hon. Friend raises an important point, which I will come to shortly. He is right to say that we should intervene only where there is an exceptional circumstance, such as covid or a cost of living crisis, or where there is market failure, which is where we want to focus. For example, with SMEs working in the hospitality and house building industries, which he and my right hon. Friend the Member for Great Yarmouth both referred to, we know there is market failure and a need for them to access finance. We need to focus on those areas and ensure those sectors are provided with finance, when they cannot get it elsewhere.

The Government provide extensive business support, which is another key focus area, including through the business support helpline, the Help To Grow management scheme and a network of 38 growth hubs across the UK. The Help To Grow management scheme was launched in June 2021, to help close the productivity gap and lay the foundations for growth by providing SMEs with key skills in financial management, marketing and innovation. Our evaluation showed that approximately 90% of SME leaders surveyed reported that the scheme helped and Help To Grow management contributed to improved leadership and management of their business. I encourage my right hon. Friend, and all Members of the House, to share information about the scheme with local SMEs that could benefit from the opportunities it offers.

We know that businesses have emerged from the covid-19 pandemic, only to be faced with rising costs and dampened demand. In the autumn statement, we announced £13.6 billion of support for businesses over the next five years, including through reducing the burden of business rates for SMEs by freezing the business rates multiplier for yet another year, to protect businesses from rising inflation.

Over the winter, the Government intervened in the energy crisis by providing unprecedented support, in the form of the energy bill relief scheme and, more recently, the energy ill discount scheme.

The Government are freezing fuel duty, maintaining the 5p cut for a further year, and reversing the national insurance rise, which will save small businesses an average of approximately £4,200. That is in addition to the support previously announced in the form of an increase in the employment allowance to £5,000, the introduction of a zero rate of VAT on energy-saving materials, and the exemption of small businesses and microbusinesses from regulations where possible. That was raised by my right hon. Friend in his speech. These interventions show that the Government are on the side of small businesses, and understand the unprecedented difficulties that many have faced.

The last key focus is on removing barriers and cutting red tape. We are doing that through many mechanisms, such as improving the processes for public procurement, trade deals with Australia and New Zealand, and the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership. The working time directive recording requirements will potentially save businesses more than £1 billion a year. Landmark legislation in the form of the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Bill will make it easier for SMEs to access digital marketplaces.

The Government acknowledge that one of the significant barriers faced by SMEs across the country is late payments. We are determined to see those reduced to ensure that SMEs are given the best chance of succeeding and growing. That is why we are conducting a review of business-to-business payment policy, the prompt payment and cash flow review, which is scrutinising existing payment practices and measures. We need a stronger culture of responsibility in large businesses to support the smaller suppliers on which they rely. The Small Business Commissioner addresses small businesses' complaints about payments and the payment practices reporting duty creates transparency by requiring large companies to report on their payment times, while the prompt payment code sets standards and best practice in payment culture.

We are making substantial investments in Great Yarmouth to help the area to thrive and succeed. The borough secured a £20.1 million towns deal in 2021 to help level up the town. One of the fantastic projects supported by this intervention is the operations and maintenance campus for the energy sector. The town has also secured £13.8 million of future high street funding to help revive the town centre as a vibrant economic, cultural and community hub. That will help the town centre to develop sustainably into the future, supporting footfall, further regeneration and investment.

Great Yarmouth bid successfully in the second round of the levelling-up fund, and the Great Yarmouth riverside gateway project received £20 million to regenerate the railway station and the North Quay area of the town. We recently agreed a landmark devolution deal with Norfolk County Council, which will bring a wide range of benefits to residents and businesses in Great Yarmouth. It includes a £600 million investment for a further 30 years, equating to £20 million per annum, and Norfolk County Council can borrow against that further funding. The Norfolk broadband programme was awarded £5 million through the local growth fund to extend superfast broadband in the county, and it is estimated that that will lead to a £2 billion growth in the local economy and the creation of 1,500 jobs within 15 years.

The Government recognise that this is a challenging time for all businesses and we have provided unprecedented levels of support to help businesses and workers through these difficult times. However, data for Great Yarmouth show a 4% positive difference between the birth and death rates of businesses in Great Yarmouth in 2021, an encouraging sign that businesses are flourishing in the local area and that the local Member of Parliament is being highly effective. Furthermore, 667 Great Yarmouth businesses have been supported by their local growth hub and other partners, and there are 3,585 SMEs in Great Yarmouth in total. Over the last six months, there has been a sharp rise in job postings—vacancies, in other words—in Great Yarmouth, from 1,004 job postings in November 2022 to 2,229 in May 2023. That is a 122% rise. These are the highest vacancy volumes since October 2012 and they illustrate the health of the Great Yarmouth economy and the excellent work and representation by its local Member of Parliament.

Question put and agreed to.

7.39 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 7 June 2023

[MR CLIVE BETTS *in the Chair*]

Iran

9.30 am

Brendan Clarke-Smith (Bassetlaw) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government policy on Iran.

It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts, as always. I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

I am grateful to have secured the time for this important debate. In a dangerous and complicated world, Iran presents one of the most immediate threats to the UK's national interest and domestic security, but for too long the international community has taken a short-sighted and, I believe, misguided approach to the fundamentalist regime in Tehran. That has led to an emboldened Iran flagrantly violating the 2015 joint comprehensive plan of action nuclear deal, expanding its regional influence and support for terrorism, and committing human rights abuses against its own citizens with impunity.

The collective failure in policy on Iran over the past decade or so is exemplified by the Biden Administration's ongoing efforts to separate Iran policy into different areas—human rights abuses, the nuclear programme, ballistic missiles and support for terrorism—regardless of how interlinked they all are. History has shown that those policy areas can only ever be dealt with as a whole, and it is my contention that the failed approach is no longer tenable, and that the UK should take the opportunity to pursue an independent Iran policy and steer our own ship.

We need to be frank about the nuclear programme: Iran has never been closer to developing a nuclear weapon, and the JCPOA has comprehensively failed to halt Iran's nuclear advances. Iran has been overtly breaching the JCPOA since May 2019, and even produced uranium enriched to a purity of 83.7%, which is a small technical step from the 90% threshold required for a nuclear weapon.

The country has accumulated enough uranium enriched to 20% and 60% purity that it could produce at least two nuclear bombs within months. Those levels are grossly in excess of the 3.67% permitted by the JCPOA and the level required for a legitimate peaceful civil nuclear programme. The UK Government have rightly likened the JCPOA to a hollow shell, but the US-led diplomatic efforts seek a so-called partial nuclear deal, after the US abandoned its wishful desire to secure a longer, stronger JCPOA.

Reports suggest that the Biden Administration's partial deal would permit Iran to enrich uranium to 60%. That is concerning enough, but it stands to be compounded by significant sanctions relief. The US and South Korea are understood to be discussing ways to release \$7 billion in Iranian funds held by Seoul, and an additional \$10 billion held in Iraq might be on the table. Not only would Iran face no penalty for breaching the agreement; it would be permitted to remain mere months from possessing a nuclear weapon. It would also enjoy the benefits of a desperately needed economic boost.

Many colleagues in the House will share my grave concern about those developments and recognise the implications for existing and future international agreements, which apparently can be violated without consequence. Will the Minister provide an update on what discussions he has had with the Biden Administration on their efforts to secure a partial nuclear deal? Will he explain how Iran's status as a threshold nuclear state aligns with our long-standing and crucial policy of preventing Iran from developing a nuclear weapon?

On sanctions, Iran's systematic non-compliance necessitates a full snapback of sanctions in accordance with United Nations Security Council resolution 2231, which at this late stage is one of the few remaining diplomatic tools. It must be remembered that Iran has historically been acutely sensitive to sanctions. The UK must take a decisive, independent approach to secure the snapback. The UK has the power legitimately to trigger the snapback mechanism, and in doing so would demonstrate that when we sign agreements, they are worth more than the paper they are written on. Will the Minister explain the UK position on that, and say what steps we would take to initiate that last-resort mechanism?

Iran has the largest and most diverse ballistic missile capability in the middle east. In defiance of UN resolutions it has continued to develop and test advanced missiles capable of delivering a nuclear payload over thousands of miles. Iran is now openly using those weapons in conflict and has even killed a US national in recent years, yet the threshold for Iran's use of force continues to drop due to an apparent lapse in western resolve.

In October this year the situation will become much worse as current restrictions placed on Iran's development and transfer of missiles and missile tech will lapse in accordance with a sunset UN resolution and the JCPOA's annex II. The mosaic of organisations set to be delisted covers the who's who of Iran's ballistic missile programme, including the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Al-Ghadir Missile Command and Aerospace Force, as well as Iran's Ministry of Defence and Armed Forces Logistics.

Can we imagine a world where Iran is legally able to provide President Putin with ballistic missiles for his murderous attack on Ukraine? At a time when the UK and the EU are stepping up on drone sanctions and human rights sanctions, we risk taking our eye off a much more lethal threat. Again, the UK can play a decisive role here. Thanks to Brexit and our newly acquired autonomous sanctions capabilities, the UK has more room to act in this space than the EU. I call on the Government to ensure the UK leads the way by not delisting those entities, and by building a coalition with our allies in Europe to follow suit.

Sir Gavin Williamson (South Staffordshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. He touched on an important point about the flow of weapons going from Iran into Ukraine. We need to do more to plug that flow or we will undermine all our other efforts to support Ukraine. Swift action is needed. It is important to lead the way, as we have continuously done in terms of the war in Ukraine.

Brendan Clarke-Smith: I thank my right hon. Friend for his point. He has hit the nail on the head. There are knock-on effects as Iran's missiles have the potential to

[*Brendan Clarke-Smith*]

interfere in other conflicts, and that is so damaging and undermines what we are all trying to do. This House has been very much united in supporting Ukraine, so he is right in what he says.

Iran's egregious human rights abuses also necessitate a robust policy response. My constituents were disgusted by the graphic footage of regime forces brutally suppressing protesters seeking the sorts of basic freedoms that we all take for granted. The UK has responded well to Iran's many abuses. I applaud the Foreign Secretary's leadership in introducing comprehensive and ever-growing lists of sanctions against organisations and individuals responsible for the suffering of ordinary Iranians.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): Two Iranian grandmothers were recently sentenced to 10 years in prison simply for being Baha'is. They had not long ago already served 10 years for the same reason. Will my hon. Friend join me in standing firm in the UK's opposition to such sentences, particularly the use of blasphemy and apostasy laws, which can involve the execution of individuals in Iran simply on account of what they believe?

Brendan Clarke-Smith: My hon. Friend is right. We must do everything we can, in Iran or elsewhere, to protect religious minorities and everyday citizens against appalling abuses. She gives a fine example of the kind of thing we are dealing with. She certainly has my full support and I thank her for her personal efforts; I know this is an issue that she is passionate about and works very hard on.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): The human rights abuses extend to women and girls and also the LGBT community. Since 1979, between 4,000 and 6,000 members of the LGBT community have been executed. Does my hon. Friend see that as a cause for concern?

Brendan Clarke-Smith: My hon. Friend is completely right. That is something that people in this and many other countries would be horrified by. The community has suffered for many years and Iran in particular has a disgraceful record this this respect. Not just in Iran but around the world the UK has an important role to play in promoting LGBT rights and ensuring that everybody enjoys the same rights that we enjoy in this country. There is still a long way to go, even in this country, in what we can do to support people, but in Iran there is a huge problem. I thank him for his point; he is spot on.

Fiona Bruce: We also hear of the death penalty being used to execute young people for crimes committed when they were below the age of 18. Will my hon. Friend join me in calling on the Iranian authorities to honour their international human rights obligations, and immediately halt all executions of juvenile offenders and commute all death sentences?

Brendan Clarke-Smith: I absolutely join my hon. Friend in that call. Regardless of people's views on the death penalty, everyone should have a free and fair trial and no civilised country can accept a minor found guilty of a crime being made to pay the ultimate penalty. We must also push against the treatment of citizens who have been subject to the death penalty without fair due process—a point to which I will return.

The regime's appalling treatment of its own citizens speaks volumes. We must act, as an ongoing warning that the Republic cannot be trusted and must not be treated as an equal in any sort of negotiations. Lest we forget, the JCPOA's failure to address Iran's human rights abuses speaks to the failure of the compartmentalised approach to Iran policy from which we must break free. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps is Iran's foremost practitioner of human rights abuses, and it is deeply regrettable that we have not acted decisively against the organisation by proscribing it in its entirety. We must be unambiguous. All of Iran's malign activity is underwritten by the IRGC and its elite Quds Force. It is directly instigating conflicts around the world through its funding, arming and training of countless terror groups, many of which are proscribed in the UK for very good reason.

The IRGC is also reaping great financial rewards from its deep involvement in the international drugs trade, with a particular presence in South America. The dangerous captagon drug trade—much of which is centred in Syria, thanks to Iran's control of the country—is now entering Europe, posing a profound policy challenge to the entire continent; it is no longer possible to dismiss the IRGC as a distant threat. The people of Ukraine know better than anyone what happens when the Iranian regime is left unchecked. IRGC-supplied suicide drones have wrought terror across Ukraine and brought the Iranian threat into the heart of Europe, making Iran directly complicit in President Putin's hideous war crimes.

The IRGC's charge sheet for its publicly documented activities against the UK is grave and growing: 15 planned terror assassinations in the UK have been foiled by MI5 since 2022; British civilians have been killed around the world, as have UK armed forces in Iraq and Afghanistan; an attempted bomb attack on British MPs in Paris a few years ago; the radicalising of British citizens in the UK using a network of religious centres, one of which is undergoing an active Charity Commission inquiry; the use of British crime gangs to gather information for terror attacks in the UK; attempted attacks on a London-based Iranian news channel, harming freedom of the press in this country; and cyber-attacks against UK critical national infrastructure and this place.

The House of Commons has already voted unanimously to call on the Government to ban the IRGC, so the question now is: what are we waiting for? In the vacuum, IRGC activities have expanded and concerns are growing across the UK. Back home, millions of Iranians are fighting the pernicious IRGC in their ongoing and life-threatening efforts to secure greater freedoms. But such efforts are by no means limited to Iran. Here in the UK, one man—Mr Vahid Beheshti—has exemplified the courage and commitment of Iranians in standing against the IRGC.

I commend the Vahid's bravery in his extraordinary 72-day hunger strike outside the Foreign Office, which resulted in him having to spend two weeks in hospital due to ill health. I was heartened by Mr Beheshti's release from hospital and applaud his strength as well as that of his wife, Councillor Mattie Heaven. Undeterred, the sitting by Vahid and his many supporters continues outside the Foreign Office and has now surpassed an extraordinary 100 days, but this remarkable self-sacrifice has only been necessitated by our inaction and failure to proscribe the IRGC in its entirety. During the hunger

strike, Mr Beheshti's campaign for proscription received an unprecedented volume of cross-party support, and it was an honour to join 125 of my colleagues from all corners of Parliament in writing to the Prime Minister in solidarity with Mr Beheshti. It is hard to think of an issue that has received such broad parliamentary support.

Sanctioning the IRGC in its entirety is a welcome step, but I am afraid it fails to adequately reflect the extent of the threat posed by the Islamic Republic's brutal enforcers. Today, I reiterate the call of so many by again urging the Government to proscribe the IRGC in its entirety. Reports suggest that the UK has come under pressure from the Biden Administration over the question of proscription, which jars with their active decision not to delist the organisation from their own proscription list. The UK Government must pay no heed to these overtures and instead put our national security interests first.

The UK should show its commitment to rooting out Iran's support for terrorism by proscribing the IRGC and leading essential international efforts to end its financing of terror surrogates. There is clearly support for this landmark step within Government, and I particularly applaud the Minister for Security, who has done so much to raise public awareness of the dangers of IRGC activity within the UK. I also note that the Prime Minister has previously said that IRGC proscription

"must now be on the table",

and he vowed unequivocally in December last year that he would utilise

"the full range of tools at our disposal to protect UK citizens from the threat of the IRGC".

It all begs the question, if not now, when?

This is by no means the first debate in this place on the urgent need to respond to Iran's malign activities across the world, and I dare say it will not be the last. It is hard to escape the assessment that Iran, emboldened by the absence of IRGC proscription and a snapback of biting sanctions in response to its nuclear transgressions, has systematically escalated its deplorable efforts to export bloodshed and instability. The Iranian regime is ruthlessly holding the threat of terrorism and its expanding missile capabilities over our heads. There is a real risk that the UK and our western allies will become the agents of Iran's deterrence here.

US-led policy towards Iran has been shown as ineffective and, in many cases, harmful to UK national interest. A clear-eyed analysis of Iran's behaviour and activities means that the UK-Iran relationship cannot simply continue as business as usual. It is time we pursued a robust, independent approach. We have rightly led the way in defending Ukraine against unprovoked attacks, and I applaud the Government's relentless commitment to sanctioning Russia. Now, let us take the same principled approach in our Iran policy and lead from the front.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): Order. Six Members have indicated that they would like to speak, which gives each of them about seven minutes. That is on a voluntary basis, but it would be helpful if Members followed that guideline.

9.47 am

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (Brendan Clarke-Smith) on securing this important and timely debate.

As we have heard many times in and outside the Chamber, the Iranian regime's latest wave of homicidal attacks on its own people began in September last year after the murder of Mahsa Amini by the Iranian police. Since the crackdown against the subsequent protests began, more than 500 people have been killed, more than 50 people have been executed and at least 20,000 have been detained. Those are rough figures; they are probably an underestimate of what has actually happened, for obvious reasons.

At the apex of every brutal activity perpetrated by the Tehran regime is the IRGC, as the hon. Member said. It is a worldwide operation, and let us be clear what we are dealing with: the clerical fascists and homicidal maniacs who run Iran, and their monstrous servants in the IRGC, are effectively the modern-day version of the Nazis. If they had been around in 1939, they would have been advocating declaring war, but they would have been on the other side, not the side of the allies. They want to wipe Israel off the face of the planet, they want to murder Jewish people and gay men and women, and they want to take women as a whole back to the stone age. They are doing their best to do that not only in Iran, but elsewhere.

That repellent view of the world also applies to Tehran's proxies. We are dealing not just with Hezbollah and Hamas, as bad as they are, but with the criminal gangs to which the hon. Member referred. They operate in this country, across Europe, in North America and elsewhere. That terrorist and criminal network poses a clear threat, way beyond Iran and the middle east.

I would have thought that the very least the Government—indeed, any democratic Government—could do is proscribe the IRGC in its entirety, as the hon. Member said. What perplexes me is that I and many other Members on both sides of the House have raised this issue repeatedly on the Floor of the House of Commons. I have a lot of respect for the Minister, but I have heard Minister after Minister expressing sympathy with full proscription at the Dispatch Box, and then nothing happens. That leads me and Members on both sides of the House to the conclusion that FCDO and Home Office Ministers sympathise with the idea of proscription, but that somebody in Downing Street, the FCDO or the Home Office is blocking it. I for one cannot see the rationale behind failing to proscribe the IRGC.

Sir Gavin Williamson: Does the hon. Gentleman think that there are certain similarities with the reluctance to proscribe the political wing of Hezbollah? There is a lot of political will to make that proscription happen, but there seems to be a reluctance within the FCDO. Are there not parallels with the IRGC there?

John Cryer: That is probably true. The rationale is normally that elements at the heart of Government say, "We still have to talk to these people." Well, actually, they do not need to communicate with them. We are talking about Nazi terrorists, not a rational organisation. The right hon. Gentleman makes a fair point.

[John Cryer]

I believe strongly that no Member of this House or of the House of Lords should have any relationship whatever with any arm of the Iranian state. Anybody who has been elected to the House of Commons or sits in the House of Lords and who has a relationship, particularly a pecuniary one, with Press TV—I think we all know what I am talking about—should look in the mirror and ask themselves why they are taking money from fascists.

9.52 am

John Howell (Henley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. As leader of the UK delegation to the Council of Europe, I have a great deal of respect for the European Court of Human Rights and for the liberties—our liberties—that it defends, but those liberties continue to be fundamentally challenged in the dark authoritarian corners of our shared international community, and no more so than in Iran.

Iran's human rights abuses are well documented, and we have discussed some of them. They make for disturbing reading. Never in the Islamic Republic's 44-year brutal reign has it faced such widespread and far-reaching calls for freedom. The country has been rocked by the largest and most diverse protests yet. By December, an estimated 516 Iranian civilians had been killed by the regime as a result of egregious and brutal crackdowns on freedom of expression, contributing to the almost 600 executions that had been reported over 2022—the highest figure since 2015. Many were peaceful protesters killed with live ammunition and buried in unmarked graves without their families receiving notification. One particularly heinous tactic that the regime is using is chemical attacks, which it unleashed against a reported 91 girls' schools from November 2022 to March 2023, leaving hundreds hospitalised. I ask the Minister what assessment has been made of those sickening attacks.

Iran's state-endorsed summary executions and the ever-tightening screw on the rights of women and girls point to crimes against humanity. Tehran even recognises that its treatment of women and girls diverges significantly from the freedoms that women enjoy in the west, which Iran's Supreme Leader declared in 2017 to be a "Zionist plot to destroy human community".

That would be laughable if it were not so horrific for the girls living there. What more can the Minister's Department do to support the rights of Iranian women and children suffering under the tyranny of Tehran?

Iran's suppression of the press is no less ruthless, leading to its being ranked 177th out of 179 nations in the 2023 world press freedom index. For their coverage of Amini's brutal murder, two journalists, Elaheh Mohammadi and Niloofar Hamed, have been accused of colluding with hostile powers, a charge that carries the death penalty under Iran's Islamic law. In October, the IRGC accused the two of working for the CIA. Mohammadi's lawyers have reportedly been denied the chance to defend her. We must call for their trials to be held in public, not behind closed doors where the regime has so often delivered corrupt verdicts with impunity.

Documents obtained from its official business registry show that in order to control its desperate population, Tehran has turned to Chinese face recognition surveillance technology. What steps can be taken to ensure that

China does not export that technology to Iran? Will the Minister commit to providing ordinary Iranians with the software to gain internet access and protect journalistic autonomy? We must ensure that they do, whether overtly or covertly.

The treatment of Iran's LGBT community is reprehensible, even entailing the risk of hanging sentences designed for maximum suffering and intimidation. Human rights groups claim that, since 1979, between 4,000 and 6,000 gay people have been executed. I am confident that the Minister will agree that the Government must do more to ensure that all people should be free to love who they wish, and that they will jointly inquire whether the LGBT rights organisations that the Government are empowering to assist in giving asylum to and strengthening Iran's LGBT community can be strengthened even further.

The buck for all this stops with President Ebrahim Raisi and Supreme Leader Khamenei. What good are sanctions if the regime's two most powerful despots are exempt? The Government must prove to ordinary Iranians that we are prepared to hold their tyrants accountable through targeted and personal sanctions. That is the only way we can fulfil our commitment to fundamental human rights, for the rule of law must be the ethos of a global Britain, unafraid to stand up for the individual and proud to lead our allies in the pursuit of justice.

9.58 am

Sarah Green (Chesham and Amersham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I thank the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (Brendan Clarke-Smith) for securing this morning's debate.

Like most people, I was appalled by the shocking death of Mahsa Amini last year at the hands of the Iranian authorities. The brutal crackdown that has followed, which has left hundreds dead, raises urgent questions about what more can be done to support the Iranian people. In recent months, my office has been contacted by countless constituents concerned about the deteriorating human rights situation in Iran. Among the issues that they have raised are the persecution of women, the right to freedom of religion or belief, and the continued detention of British citizens. Even before the terrible scenes last year, the British Government's report on human rights and democracy found that women in Iran were

"unable to participate fully in society."

The crackdown that followed the death of Mahsa Amini has seen brutality against women and girls taken to new levels, including the possible use of gas poisonings by the regime to intimidate female students and to force schools to shut. Members across the House welcomed the release of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and Anoosheh Ashoori last year, but the regime continues to arbitrarily detain other British nationals, including Morad Tahbaz and Mehran Raoof, and we should not forget the execution of dual British-Iranian Alireza Akbari earlier this year.

There are two areas that I would like the Minister to address. First, I called on the Government earlier this year to help to prevent the closure of BBC Persian Radio by providing emergency funding similar to the funding provided last year for the BBC World Service in Ukraine. Access to free and independent media is a vital tool for the Iranian people in helping to counter the

disinformation of the regime, so my first ask is that the Government reconsider their position on BBC Persian Radio—or a version of it, given that it has now closed.

Secondly, I echo calls for the Government to stop prevaricating and proscribe the IRGC as the terrorist organisation that we all know it is. As the Foreign Affairs Committee has said, it would be a logical extension of the existing restrictions on IRGC members and would help to send an unequivocal message to the regime that the malign activities of the group will not be tolerated. These measures would strengthen UK policy towards Iran and help to challenge the actions of the regime at home and abroad.

10 am

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): As always, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bassettlaw (Brendan Clarke-Smith) on securing this crucial debate, because the Iranian regime represents a troubling international challenge that requires urgent attention from the United Kingdom. I am grateful that Members across the House are in attendance this morning and that we have the opportunity to press the Minister on these important matters.

I am concerned that for some years the UK's policy towards Iran has been largely incoherent, with no clear strategy in place to address concerns on the international stage or, indeed, domestically in Iran. The sanctions on individuals involved in the violent crackdown on protesters following the death of Mahsa Amini in September last year have had a limited impact on the situation on the ground in Iran. As of June 2023, as my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (John Cryer) said, more than 500 protesters have been killed and as many as 20,000 have been arrested, although those figures are likely to be underestimates.

The regime has largely been able to suppress protest through strict censorship, through the enforcement of internet blackouts and through police brutality, so my first question to the Minister is what assessment the Foreign Office has made of the impact of the sanctions currently in place. Is the Department now considering employing the UK's Magnitsky-style sanctions, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) has called for?

John Howell: I applaud what the hon. Gentleman is saying, but I wonder whether he has picked up on the role that Iran is playing in the dispute between Azerbaijan and Armenia. We are moving to a conclusion of that in favour of both countries—a peaceful settlement—but Iran seems to be out to spoil it and to make a big play of the situation.

Andrew Gwynne: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. The problem is that Iran is a disruptive force in large parts of the globe; it seeks to destabilise and undermine political deals bringing countries together. He makes a very sound case about what is happening in that part of the world.

The picture internationally is no less grave. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, a branch of the Iranian military, has never been more powerful. Indeed, it is perhaps an understatement to refer to the IRGC as a branch; Reuters has called it an industrial empire, and it is estimated that anywhere between 10% and 50% of the

Iranian economy is controlled through the IRGC's subsidiaries and trusts. The IRGC has been linked to terror attacks, hostage takings, assassinations, human rights violations and the intimidation of journalists and critics across the globe, including here in the United Kingdom. From Yemen to Lebanon, from Iraq to Israel, and from Syria to Saudi Arabia, Iran has waged an ideological war against peace and stability—the very point that the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) was making. The IRGC provides financial support to several terrorist groups, including Hezbollah, Hamas and the Taliban.

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful speech. I have a lot of sympathy with him about the proscription of the IRGC; he is right to describe it as a global problem. Would he not contend that it would be a mistake to think that Iran is not a rational actor in the world? The regime is not an irrational actor in the world. I make that point because it is very important that we work with allies across Europe and around the world to deal with this problem, particularly around such things as the relationship between the IRGC and money laundering, and its financial reach around the globe.

Andrew Gwynne: The hon. Gentleman is right that we cannot do this alone: we have to work with allies and, because of the global reach of the IRGC, he is absolutely right that we must have a global approach as well. The point is that the involvement of the IRGC in other terrorist groups, particularly in the middle east, is to further Iranian foreign policy goals. It is a major barrier to peace across the middle east, including to a two-state solution between Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

The IRGC's commander, General Hossein Salami, has stated his intention to erase Israel from the global political map, something that is particularly concerning given the creation of IRGC proxy-controlled territory in Syria and Lebanon. Despite calls across the House, and despite the serious threat that the IRGC poses domestically and internationally, the British Government have so far resisted calls to proscribe it as a terrorist organisation. I have raised the matter in the House on a number of occasions, and have been told time and again by the Foreign Secretary that the UK does not “discuss or speculate about future proscriptions”.

I hope that the Minister can provide more clarity today. I am not asking him to “discuss or speculate”, but to signal to us that the Government appreciate the concern of Members across the Chamber about this issue and will strongly consider the points raised here. It was reported in January that the Government planned to proscribe the IRGC imminently, but nothing materialised. This is a matter of urgency, and I cannot fathom why the Government are not acting more swiftly to proscribe this dangerous organisation in its entirety.

Over the past six months there have been several developments in the middle east region that strengthen the hand of the Iranian regime. They include rapprochement with Saudi Arabia and the readmittance of its Syrian ally to the Arab League, which is all happening in parallel to the United States' gradual withdrawal from the region. The Iranian regime is already one of the biggest supporters of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and is one of the few countries in the world openly supporting Russia with attack drones.

[Andrew Gwynne]

Since 2015, the regime has almost entirely violated the terms of its nuclear arms deal, to which the United Kingdom is a signatory. Despite its responsibilities as a signatory, Britain has given no indication of how it plans to contain Iran's nuclear ambitions in the absence of a renewed deal. Of most concern is the fact that the provisions in the agreement restricting the development of Iran's ballistic missile programme will expire in October. We must not allow these sanctions to lapse. Put simply, the threat is growing both regionally and across the globe, and the United Kingdom must develop a robust and coherent policy on Iran as a matter of the utmost urgency.

10.9 am

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I warmly congratulate the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (Brendan Clarke-Smith) on securing the debate. It is always encouraging to see Government Back Benchers making use of Westminster Hall to hold Ministers to account. There was a very well attended debate on Iran in the Chamber in January scheduled by the Backbench Business Committee. This has been a useful opportunity, six months down the line, to review the situation. A clear consensus is emerging among Members from all sides of the House.

Many other emergencies and crises flare up around the world and demand our immediate attention. The situation in Sudan is a clear recent example. Just because other crises have dropped down the news agenda does not mean that they are any less critical or cause any less distress to those on the ground. That is particularly true of Iran, as we have heard today.

On a daily basis, the regime continues to persecute and oppress far too many of its citizens. The hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) spoke very powerfully about the oppression of the LGBT community, and women of course face an enforced dress code, the enforcement of the hijab, and restrictions on the right to work and their freedom of movement. The UN's working group on arbitrary detention has concluded that there is a "systemic" problem with arbitrary detention in Iran that

"amounts to a serious violation of international law."

At least seven people who participated in the anti-Government protests last year have been executed since January, including three last month.

Yet still the cry for "Zan, Zendegi, Azadi"—women, life, freedom—rings out on the streets of Tehran and across the country. The determination of the protesters has been inspiring, as has the solidarity expressed by so many communities and individuals around the world, not least constituents in Glasgow North, who regularly contact me to express their concern about human rights in Iran and their support for people campaigning for democracy and change.

Some of those constituents, of course, are Iranian themselves and have come here seeking safety and refuge, while still heart-sick with worry about their friends and family who remain in Iran. They look to the UK Government for action, and sadly, in too many areas, they find it lacking. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard

Corps continues to act with impunity both within and outside Iran's borders. There has been plenty of evidence—we have already heard some of it—of the IRGC operating on UK soil. Yet we still wait, as almost every hon. Member has said, for the UK Government to follow the United States in proscribing the group and declaring it a terrorist organisation. That action would allow law enforcement authorities to take action and ensure that no officials or individuals guilty of human rights violations through that group can evade justice.

The Government also need to step up their action on UK-Iranian dual nationals who have been arbitrarily detained in Iran. As others have said, the release of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe after so many years was a joy and relief, but Morad Tahbaz, Mehran Raoof and others still remain in prison with uncertain futures.

The Government must work with international allies to address Iran's growing determination to influence hostile activity in the wider region and, indeed, around the world. Iran provides weapons to groups that provoke conflict in the wider middle east and is now recognised by the US National Security Council as one of the top military backers of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It acts with increasing impunity on its nuclear programme—reports in recent days suggest that a new mountain storage facility is being created for its military arsenal—and the development of hypersonic missile systems that could bypass the existing air defences of other countries in the region.

Is it any wonder, therefore, that the regime's behaviour towards its own citizens and the wider world results in so many people from Iran wanting to seek refuge elsewhere? And yes, they include thousands of people who have arrived here on small boats in recent years, hundreds of whom have been referred for assessment under modern slavery legislation. But the Government want to make those people—men, women and children who are fleeing the oppression that we have heard about repeatedly in today's debate and who are seeking to join friends or family, or perhaps speak English but not French or German—criminals. They want to tell them that they are not welcome; they want to deport them to Rwanda. Some hon. Members will have heard me say this yesterday, because that is also the Government's attitude to people who arrive here from Afghanistan.

How can the Minister, or any Minister from this Government, get up in a debate such as this and condemn Iran's or any other regime's human rights record, when the UK Government want to criminalise people for seeking asylum, which is a fundamental human right? There is no such thing as an illegal asylum seeker. If the UK Government want to stop people coming here on small boats from Iran, they need to establish safe and legal routes that would allow people to arrive by regular means and, more importantly, they need to promote the rights of women, life and freedom in Iran. They need to be prepared for the day when democracy begins to prevail, and ensure that, when that day comes, they are able to offer whatever help and support might be asked for. That probably means finding money from an already stretched aid budget and perhaps rethinking the cut from 0.7%.

There is no question about the solidarity among hon. Members in today's debate or among our constituents with the protesters and ordinary folk in Iran who want to see freedom, democracy and respect for human rights.

There are practical actions that the UK Government can take but have not yet. If and when they do, they will have our support; until then, debates such as this will continue to hold them to account.

10.14 am

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (Brendan Clarke-Smith) on securing this important debate.

Many different communities have made their homes in my constituency of Richmond Park after escaping oppressive regimes. I am the proud parliamentary representative of a large Tamil community who came here from Sri Lanka several decades ago and, in the south-eastern corner of my constituency, New Malden hosts the largest community of North Koreans in Europe. More recently, we have been glad to welcome any Hongkongers.

However, when I looked at my constituency's census data earlier this year, I was surprised by just how many Iranians I represent, and I wondered why they had not been as visible a community as others. I made it my businesses to reach out to my Iranian constituents and to better understand their concerns. Last week, I met a number of them in Diba, a Persian restaurant in central Richmond, to discuss the situation in Iran and the UK Government's response. I pay tribute to the many British-Iranians working tirelessly to shine a light on the abuses being perpetrated by the regime and thank those constituents who took the time to share their concerns with me.

It is almost surreal to imagine the daily struggle that Iranian people face. Simple things that we take for granted in Britain are now distant memories to most Iranians. Young girls are being deprived of an education out of fear that they will be poisoned if they go to school. Journalists and lawyers are being thrown into jail and sentenced to lashings without fair trial. Thousands of people are executed every month for defending their freedom. Women are unable to dress as they wish, travel as they wish or spend their time as they wish; all the things that bring joy to life are being wiped from Iranian existence. I was particularly struck by one of my constituents who described the current regime as a "coup"—a sort of foreign entity that in no way represents the culture of values of the Iranian people but which has occupied their country and stolen their freedoms. It is a force that acts to suppress and control its citizens through fear.

The Iranian people have stood up and spoke out against the evil forces of the Iranian regime and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in particular. The IRGC not only exerts terror on the Iranian people but props up a network of terrorist groups across the middle east, spreading war and violence across the region. The Foreign Affairs Committee and hon. Members from across the House, within this debate and in other forums, have called for the IRGC to be finally designated as a terrorist organisation. The Liberal Democrats support that case.

In January this year, it was reported widely that the UK Government would review the case for proscription but, five months later, no progress has been made. The Prime Minister even said that there was a case for proscribing the IRGC during the Conservative leadership

election last summer, as other Members have in this debate. Will the Minister update us on why it is taking such a long time? It is a crucial point that my constituents made to me.

We must remember that it is not just in Iran that people live in fear. The terror of the Iranian regime extends beyond the country's borders and right to our doorstep here in the UK, a point that the hon. Member for Bassetlaw made most profoundly. I have heard at first hand from my constituents about physical threats made to British-Iranians residing in London. The UK Government simply cannot stand by and allow this to happen. Will the Minister take urgent action to protect the safety of British citizens and Iranian nationals based in the UK? In addition to proscribing the IRGC, we need more proactive investigations of individuals in the UK who may be connected to the Iranian regime, including family members of Iranian officials who we have sanctioned. Some are based in this country, living the high life on the back of stolen wealth like the Russian nationals we are familiar with already. I urge the Government to heed the call of Anoosheh Ashoori and ensure that our Magnitsky sanctions regime is properly deployed against those individuals.

Sanctions are a frequently pulled foreign policy lever, and I welcome those imposed by the UK Government on individuals connected to the Iranian regime, including members of the IRGC. However, sanctions imposed by other countries, including the United States, have had a significant impact on my constituents' ability to access funds from their Iranian bank accounts. They are unable to send money to friends and relatives in Iran or to support Iranian non-governmental organisations carrying out vital humanitarian work as the Iranian economy collapses.

I have also spoken to several constituents who have had transactions blocked or their UK bank accounts closed down entirely without reason. One of my constituents has had all her bank accounts suspended by NatWest without any warning or explanation, leaving her entirely cut off from her money. I would welcome comment from the Minister on whether the Government can provide any support to British Iranians who are currently unable to access their funds.

The ongoing deterioration of the humanitarian situation in Iran has unsurprisingly led to an increase in Iranians seeking refuge outside their home country. I have been in touch with some of the asylum seekers who are currently living in a hotel in my constituency, around a third of whom have travelled here from Iran. Thanks to the continuing dysfunction in the Home Office, these Iranians could wait years for their applications to be processed. The Liberal Democrats call on the Government to work with international partners to set up safe and legal routes, particularly for Iranian women fleeing persecution. We simply cannot turn our backs on these vulnerable women.

It is high time that the UK Government took substantial action to support the Iranian people's fight. Having spoken to my Iranian constituents, I now understand that more than any other group of people who have sought sanctuary in Britain, they continue to live in fear of the regime that they have fled from. Their voices have been suppressed by the activities of the IRGC in this country, which we must address urgently. The Iranian community here have so much to contribute to this

[Sarah Olney]

country. They are highly educated, and have an extraordinary wealth of culture and heritage to share with us, but, like the women and girls residing in Iran, it is kept hidden away by this oppressive regime.

I look forward to hearing the Minister's contribution to this debate and I hope that it will provide some desperately needed answers. At the very least, we must support the British Iranian families in this country and listen to what they are urging us to do, which includes the proscription of the IRGC as well as putting an end to threats to individuals residing in our country by the Iranian regime.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): We now move on to the Front Benchers, who have 10 minutes each as a minimum, although there is a bit of flexibility. Then, whatever time is left at the end of their contributions will be extra time for the Minister to respond in, which I am sure he will welcome.

10.21 am

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts, and I thank the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (Brendan Clarke-Smith) for securing this debate today. His contribution to it was eloquent, insightful and detailed, which I appreciated.

The UK and Iran have had a long, complex and often difficult relationship, stretching back over several centuries, let alone decades. As the 17th largest country in the world both by size and population, which is located at a strategic intersection between the Arab, Turkish, Russian and Indian worlds, Iran as a nation has always had significant influence beyond its borders, both regionally and throughout the wider world.

For the past 44 years, the Islamic Republic of Iran has operated a regime of oppression, internally and externally. As that oppression continues and even escalates, it is important that the UK Government proactively challenge the threat that Iran poses to universal human rights, as well as to regional and global stability. I begin my contribution today by stating that the Scottish National party stands in full solidarity with Iranian women, men and young people calling for democratic change. The bravery of Iranian citizens who stand up against brutality and dictatorship is beyond inspiring, and we in the SNP echo their rallying cry of “Zan, Zendegi, Azadi”—“Women, Life, Freedom”.

Last year, Iran catapulted to the top of international news cycles when mass anti-Government protests rocked the country. The springboard for the recent attention on Iran was the killing of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini at the hands of the Iranian regime. Detained by Iran's notorious “morality police” for allegedly wearing her hijab too loosely, she was beaten and tortured, which led to her falling into a coma in police custody and later dying in hospital. This was state-sanctioned femicide of a young Kurdish woman. Her brutal murder, carried out by the Iranian regime, sparked outrage and protest across Iran, resulting in the largest anti-Government protest movement in the country in years.

Tragically, the Iranian state has responded in a predictably vicious fashion. Iranian forces have been targeting women at anti-regime protests with shotgun fire to their faces,

breasts and genitals, according to interviews with medics across the country. Just like the femicide of Mahsa Amini, which sparked the protests, these attacks could not be more gendered.

Over 500 people were killed during the protests, including 16-year-old Nika Shakarami, who was videoed while standing on and burning a headscarf as part of an anti-Government protest. She subsequently disappeared, having been chased by the police, and was eventually located in a mortuary 10 days after she went missing.

At least 19,000 protesters were detained, with the first death sentence imposed on one of them by an Iranian court coming in November 2022. The UN's independent international fact-finding mission to Iran has cited reports of unfair proceedings and said that some of those who have been executed had been subject to torture or other forms of mistreatment. This year, conservative estimates suggest that Iran has executed 209 people, mostly for drug offences, although that number is probably far lower than the reality. Many of those executions have been public hangings using cranes. Indeed, some people have been punished by the removal of limbs or by being blinded.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk, said:

“The weaponisation of criminal procedures to punish people for exercising their basic rights—such as those participating in or organising demonstrations—amounts to state sanctioned killing.”

Sadly, those violent and appalling tactics are nothing new in Iran, and they have been in the oppression arsenal of the Iranian regime, security forces and police for many decades. The Islamic Republic of Iran was founded on murder and terror in 1979, and murder and terror have been used ever since to keep the regime and its barbaric leadership in place. In the five years following the revolution, up to 10,000 opponents of the new regime were executed, and in 1988, on the orders of Ayatollah Khomeini, thousands—probably tens of thousands—of political prisoners were executed without trial.

Protests are quelled through violence, murder and arrest, as happened during the 2009 Iranian presidential election protests and the 2019 Mahshahr massacre. Every day, the regime inflicts on its citizens arbitrary detention and killing, torture, denial of freedom of assembly and expression, gender-based violence, and discrimination against and persecution of minorities.

The Iranian regime and its security apparatus commit grave human rights violations daily, and that is not simply limited to the territory of Iran, because the wider Iranian regime and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps contribute to alarming security and human rights violations around the world, which every speaker in the debate has mentioned.

The preamble to the constitution of the Islamic Republic states that

“the Constitution provides the... basis for... the continuation of the Revolution at home and abroad.”

Iran has ambitions to be the dominant regional force in the middle east, and since the 1980s it has provided support for the Hezbollah armed group in Lebanon and the Assad regime in Syria. In recent decades, Iran has supported Shi'a militias in Iraq, especially following the 2003 US-led invasion, and has backed a Houthi

group in the ongoing conflict in Yemen. The regime also has a history of providing missiles to Hamas in the Gaza strip.

Iran's flagrant disregard for international law is also evident in its behaviour far beyond the region and its neighbours. As set out last year by Ken McCallum, the head of MI5, Iran's aggressive intelligence services are a direct threat to people in the UK, and the Metropolitan police have reported 15 foiled plots since the start of last year either to kidnap or to kill UK-based individuals perceived as enemies of the Iranian regime.

In February, independent television network Iran International—one of the most prominent providers of news from the recent wave of anti-Government protests in Iran—suspended its operations in the UK because of threats against its London-based journalists. Two British-Iranian journalists from the channel were warned by police of a possible risk to their lives, with the TV network stating that it had made the decision owing to “a significant escalation in state-backed threats from Iran”.

The threats had grown to the point at which it was no longer thought possible to protect the channel's staff. This is here in the UK, but still we have not yet proscribed.

Not only do the UK Government have a responsibility to ensure the safety of those living in the UK who are targeted by the Iranian regime; they must protect UK-Iranian dual nationals in Iran, and it is deeply worrying that the FCDO continues to fail those nationals who have been arbitrarily detained there. The shameful execution of Alireza Akbari in January should serve as an urgent wake-up call to the FCDO on the callous barbarism of the Iranian regime and the serious injustice and failings of the Iranian judicial system. The FCDO needs to do better to protect UK nationals.

In December, Iranian state media reported that seven people with links to the UK, including some with dual nationality, had been arrested for involvement in protests. The FCDO must urgently provide an update on the whereabouts and wellbeing of those individuals, as well as an update on the efforts being made to secure their release.

Dual UK-Iranian nationals Morad Tahbaz and Mehran Raoof remain in arbitrary detention in Iran, and they have long been used as political tools by the Iranian regime. Their safe release and full pardon should be at the forefront of the FCDO's work. We are well aware of the treatment of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, Anoosheh Ashoori and other dual UK-Iranian nationals detained, and even tortured, in Iranian prisons.

The FCDO cannot make the same mistakes with currently detained dual nationals that it has made in the past. Given the significant and continued human rights abuses, and the security threat posed by the Iranian regime, both inside and outside Iran, the UK Government must take bold action, and action now, to safeguard Iranians globally and send a strong message against the regime's tyranny. Just as the UK Government have done with the Russian Wagner Group, the SNP calls on the Government to formally proscribe, without hesitation, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as a terrorist organisation. The SNP wholeheartedly welcomes reports that the UK is set to formally proscribe the Russian mercenary Wagner Group as a terrorist organisation. Alongside that move, the time has come for the UK Government to finally proscribe the IRGC not only

because it is in the national interest, but because it is morally the right thing to do, and there is unanimity in this Chamber for it. We have to do it in solidarity with those facing daily repression at the hands of the Iranian regime and in honour of the tens of thousands who have lost their lives to that group since 1979. We know the IRGC is operating on UK soil and is violating human rights on a daily basis in Iran. The United States formally proscribed it in 2019, and it is now time that the UK follows suit.

While the SNP welcomes the UK sanctioning of top Iranian security officials since the beginning of the regime's clampdown on protesters in 2022, we call on the FCDO to consider sanctioning the highest echelons of Iranian political society, including the supreme leader, given the inexcusable continuation of state-sponsored violence and killings.

10.31 am

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I thank the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (Brendan Clarke-Smith) for securing this timely and important debate. Many of us share his concern about the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. I and others have visited Mr Beheshti, as I am sure he has, outside the FCDO on King Charles Street. My hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) and I have been to see Mr Beheshti, and we had lengthy conversations with him. The Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns), has lent her considerable influence and weight to that debate as well.

We look in awe at the bravery of the protesters in Iran led by women and girls following the shocking death of Mahsa Amini and those women who continue to fight for “women, life, freedom” and the right to live their lives as they choose. We look in horror at the brutal repression carried out by the regime against those courageous women, men and children; at the breaches of freedom of religion or belief, as the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) put on the record; at the suffering of the Baha'i community in particular, and at the crackdown on journalists and freedom of speech online.

In response to the protests, state repression has seen Iranian security forces unlawfully firing live ammunition and metal pellets at protesters, killing hundreds of men, women and children and injuring thousands. Thousands more have been arbitrarily detained and unfairly prosecuted solely for peacefully exercising their human rights. Women, LGBT+ people and ethnic and religious minorities have continued to be targeted by the regime, suffering discrimination and violence, enforced disappearances, torture and other ill treatment, including through the deliberate denial of medical care, which has been reported as widespread and systemic.

While street protests in Iran have lessened in recent months, the regime's repression continues and state-sponsored brutality escalated again recently with the execution of three more protesters: Majid Kazemi, Saleh Mirhashemi and Saeed Yaghoubi. Sentenced to death in grossly unfair trials without evidence and amid serious allegations of torture, their executions were designed to strike fear into the hearts of ordinary

[Catherine West]

Iranian people and to suppress dissent. As Members have mentioned, Volker Türk, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights said that it

“underlines our concerns that the Iranian authorities continue to have scant regard for international law”,

with the death penalty

“applied following judicial proceedings that failed to meet acceptable international standards of fair trial or due process.”

Indeed, the exact number of executions is unknown due to the lack of Government transparency and, sadly, that figure is likely to be much higher. Today, Amnesty International reports that at least 11 people sentenced to death are at grave risk of execution in connection with protests. We believe the international community has an important role to play and that the UK must stand unequivocally against the death penalty in all circumstances and wherever it is used in the world. I share concerns raised by human rights groups that the continued use of the death penalty in Iran demonstrates the limits of discrete diplomacy. What assessment has the Minister made of the spate of executions so far this year in Iran, and what concrete action are the UK Government taking with our international partners in response to the execution of three more protesters last month? With a further 11 people at grave risk of execution at the hands of the Iranian regime, what additional diplomatic pressure can be applied to ensure that the regime stops this horrific wave of execution?

As the hon. Member for Bassetlaw laid out in his opening remarks, Iran poses an increasing military threat at home and abroad. In Ukraine, Iranian-made Shahed drones have played a central role in Russia's illegal war and its attacks on civilian targets in Ukraine. Last week, in response to Russian airstrikes attacking Kyiv, Ukraine introduced sanctions against the Iranian regime to stop Iranian goods transiting through Ukraine or using its airspace, as well as trade, financial and technology sanctions. Is there more that we can do here on sanctions? In the March refresh of the integrated review, the UK Government restated their aim to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon, but there are deep concerns that the failure to restore the joint comprehensive plan of action and the stalling of talks since September 2022 may mean that Iran soon makes irreversible nuclear progress, rendering previous commitments meaningless.

Looking at the middle east and Iran's role in the region more widely, we continue to be concerned about the regime's support for terror groups and militias, as seen in its threats against Israel and its continued military involvement in Syria and elsewhere. We have seen other developments in the region, such as the recent rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Would the Minister give us his assessment of that development?

Here in the UK, since the start of 2022, Iran has been responsible for at least 15 potential threats against British or UK-based individuals perceived as enemies of the regime. In February this year, Iran International TV was forced to suspend its operations in London after state-backed threats were made against its journalists, in a deeply worrying attack on press freedom. Just last week in the IPU room here in Parliament, the well-known BBC Persian TV presenter Farnaz Ghazizadeh shared a platform with me and others, and she spoke movingly about her desire to see greater freedom of expression

for Iranians and greater safety in the UK for her and her colleagues. Does the Minister believe enough is being done to protect Iranian diaspora members in the UK?

I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say on the wider calls from Members across the House, including my hon. Friends the Members for Leyton and Wanstead (John Cryer) and for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), and from the Iranian diaspora community to formally proscribe the IRGC as a terrorist organisation, either by using existing terrorism legislation or by creating a new process of proscription for hostile state actors. There must be a way of doing that.

As I draw my remarks to a close, I would like to focus on one final area, and it is something this House has been all too aware of in recent times: Iran's engagement in state hostage-taking, which the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention has described as a “systematic problem.” Today, British dual nationals Morad Tahbaz and Mehran Raoof remain incarcerated in Iran. We look back to the case of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, her brave husband Richard, her wider family and the community. It was my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) who skilfully brought that case to this House, and my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East (Janet Daby) did the same with the case of Anoosheh Ashoori and Aras Amiri, who has spoken out this week about the ordeal she suffered in Evin prison. She wants to see other political prisoners—women like her, who are stuck in Evin—freed for good.

Last month, the Foreign Secretary told the House that the UK continues to

“make every effort to support British dual nationals incarcerated in Iran”—[*Official Report*, 14 March 2023; Vol. 729, c. 692.]

and that this remains an “ongoing piece of work.” However, the Foreign Affairs Committee was critical of the FCDO and its approach to assisting British citizens incarcerated abroad under false pretences and has urged the Government to go further to strengthen abroad and in Whitehall our deterrence against arbitrary detention of British citizens. What assessment has the Minister made of the competence of the FCDO in that regard? Is it an effective response to widespread human rights abuses of imprisoned British nationals?

The courage of the Iranian protesters is extraordinary. What we say in this place matters, so we must continue to shine a light on the situation and share our collective revulsion at the regime's human rights violations. That will spur us on to take brave actions, including giving serious consideration to proscribing the IRGC.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): I ask the Minister to allow at least two minutes at the end for the mover of the motion to wind up the debate.

10.40 am

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Mr Andrew Mitchell): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts, as all Members have made clear. I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw (Brendan Clarke-Smith) for securing this important debate. Members across the House will agree that this has been an eloquent and sincere debate, and we have been united in our assessment of the Iranian threat not only in the United

Kingdom but around the world. I am extremely grateful to the many hon. Members, including my hon. Friend, who contributed, and I will try to respond to all the points that they made.

As the House knows, my noble Friend Lord Ahmad leads on these matters with great distinction. I will pick up some of the themes that he has set out in the past and has said are extremely important.

The hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead (John Cryer), who often speaks on these matters, made a point, which was picked up by others, about the way in which the rights of girls and women—not, alas, only in Iran, but in many places in the world—are receding. I am grateful to him for underlining that point.

My hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell), who is, of course, the leader of our mission to the Council of Europe, made a point that was picked up by the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) about schoolgirl poisonings, and I want to touch on that. The reports of schoolgirls being poisoned in Iran are deeply sinister, and we are continuing to monitor the situation closely. As the Minister for the middle east said,

“It is essential that girls are able to fully exercise their right to education without fear.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 9 March 2023; Vol. 828, c. 889.]

The regime must hold those responsible to account.

The hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Sarah Green) made an important point about free media and the role of the BBC. I should stress to the House that the BBC is operationally and editorially independent from the Government, and decisions about how its services are delivered are a matter for it. Only a small fraction of the BBC’s Iranian audience receives BBC news solely via radio; the vast majority watch BBC Persian on TV and online, and both services will continue under the BBC’s current plans.

The hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) talked about the effect of sanctions and the important opportunities presented to the House by the Magnitsky legislation, which he and I were heavily involved in promoting. The UK has imposed more than 70 new human rights sanctions since the protests sparked by the death of Mahsa Amini in September. Those sanctions send a clear message to the regime that we will seek to hold it to account for violent repression of its own people. We are obviously keeping those Magnitsky provisions under review, as we always should.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) also highlighted the attacks on the rights of women and raised the importance of getting back to 0.7% as soon as possible. I thank him for that. The hon. Member for Richmond Park spoke about the North Koreans, Tamils and Iranians in her constituency and underlined the fact that Britain has always sought to be generous in providing sanctuary for those fleeing persecution. She raised other points, some of which I will come to in a moment, but I want to thank her for her efforts on behalf of Iranians in her community. The UK maintains targeted sanctions against individuals and organisations responsible for human rights violations, nuclear escalation, regional destabilisation and other malign activity. Although I do not know the full details of the specific case that she has raised, our sanctions do not aim to target

ordinary Iranians. If she wishes to take up with me the specific point that she made earlier about bank accounts, I will be happy to look into that for her.

The hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) made an eloquent speech in which he charted Iran’s contribution to international civilisation in the past. That contribution has been perverted over the last decades and he set out an eloquent charge sheet against the regime. He also raised the issue of UK detainees. I want to emphasise that the safety of UK nationals remains a top priority. We do, however—the House will understand this—respect the wishes of individuals and their families regarding the specific details of the cases being shared in public, but I can assure the House that we are guided first and foremost by the best interests of those individuals and we work closely with the families whenever we can.

Turning to the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West), who speaks for the official Opposition, I will come on to the significant matter she raised in her speech, but I want to make a couple of points first. I recognise what she said about Nazanin and her husband Richard and all that went on. She spoke for everyone in the House when she made those points. She also raised the case of Mr Beheshti. He has met ministerial colleagues in both the Home Office and the Foreign Office, and I very much share the hopes for his ongoing good health, which was raised by others in this debate. I hope Mr Beheshti will be reassured by the fact that the Government will continue to protect our security and that of our partners in the region by holding Iran to account for its destabilising activities.

On the point that the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green and others have raised about consular detainees, we in the Government urge Iran to stop its practice of unfairly detaining British and other foreign nationals. We will continue to work with like-minded partners to hold the regime in Iran to account. It remains entirely within Iran’s gift to release any British national who has been unfairly detained. We do not and will never accept our nationals being used for diplomatic leverage.

Catherine West: The Minister is making an excellent response to all the Members here, which is appreciated across the House. On the criticisms in the FCDO report on how British nationals are treated by consular missions abroad, does he believe that those criticisms are correct? What does he think the FCDO needs to do to make good on the current arrangements?

Mr Mitchell: This is a very important area of work carried out by the Foreign Office. There is an inquiry into the consular approach in Sudan, to which I will give evidence shortly, but the hon. Lady is right. How we treat consular detainees and how the consular system works is a vital part of our work. We look very carefully at any suggestions from the House or the Foreign Affairs Select Committee on how that can be improved. It is extremely important to do so without fear or favour, and we take advice from all quarters on how such services can be made better.

I turn now to the current situation. I want to emphasise that Iran’s reprehensible behaviour has escalated in recent months. As has been pointed out throughout the debate, its human rights record is appalling, with surging

[Mr Mitchell]

use of the death penalty, increased restrictions on women, intensified persecution of religious minorities and the further erosion of media and civic freedoms. The regime has brutally cracked down on protesters and made repeated attempts to target people outside Iran. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw set out, since January 2022 we have identified more than 15 credible threats to the lives of UK-based individuals, orchestrated by the Iranian regime.

Iran's supply of drones to Russia to support its illegal war in Ukraine is deplorable and a direct violation of United Nations Security Council resolution 2231. Those drones are being used to attack Ukrainian citizens, cities and critical infrastructure. Iran's escalation of its nuclear activities is threatening international peace and security, and undermining the global non-proliferation system.

We are working relentlessly across Government and with the international community to hold Iran to account for its unacceptable behaviour. In that context, I will look first at UK action. Let me begin by addressing Iran's appalling human rights record. The executions of three more protesters in May is a shocking reminder of how the regime uses the death penalty to instil fear and suppress dissent. In 2022, Iran executed at least 576 people—nearly double the number the previous year. The death toll includes Iranians who were children at the time of their alleged offence, which is a flagrant breach of international law. The latest estimates indicate that the rate of executions continues to climb. One human rights group recorded at least 142 executions last month alone—a truly staggering number. Inside Iran, such killings have met with public outcry. The people of Iran have had enough of their Government's impunity and violence, and they are rightly demanding a better future.

The UK will continue to seek to hold Iran to account for its behaviour. As the House will know, His Majesty's Government strongly oppose the death penalty in all circumstances, and our ambassador in Tehran ensures that Iran's leaders are left in no doubt about the political and diplomatic price they are paying for their brutality. Since last October we have sanctioned more than 70 individuals and entities for their human rights abuses, including the Prosecutor General, who is at the heart of Iran's barbaric use of the death penalty.

I move now to the issue of state threats. Over the past 18 months, we have seen the regime orchestrate multiple credible threats to the lives of those living in the UK, including towards media organisations and journalists. We will always stand up to such behaviour from foreign nations, because our priority is the safety and security of the UK and those who live here. We have repeatedly made it clear to the Iranian regime that the threats are intolerable and will be met with a significant response. We are working tirelessly across Government and with our international partners to identify, deter and respond to such threats. It is time now—indeed, it is long past time—for the regime to listen. It must stop threatening the lives of ordinary people in Iran and elsewhere, including in this country.

I turn to an issue that was, I think, raised by everyone who spoke in the debate: the IRGC's regional activity. We take very seriously the threatening behaviour of the

Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Not only have we sanctioned the organisation in its entirety, but we have sanctioned 29 individuals and entities affiliated with it since last October. That includes the Basij force—the arm of the IRGC that is mobilised to enforce brutal repression on the streets of Iran—and, most recently, four commanders under whose leadership IRGC forces have opened fire on arbitrarily detained and tortured protesters.

As has been repeatedly underlined in the House, the list of proscribed terrorist organisations is of course kept under review. As the House knows, and usually accepts, we do not routinely comment on whether an organisation is under consideration for proscription, but the House may rest assured that across all parts of the Government, those matters are kept under the closest possible review and are looked at to assess the most effective way of proceeding in what everyone in the debate has made clear is an absolute priority.

The regime's wider destabilising activity is rampant. It includes support for a number of militant groups, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and Syria—as the hon. Member for Dundee West set out—militias in Iraq and the Houthis in Yemen. HMS Lancaster, the UK's permanent naval presence in the Gulf, has interdicted Iranian weapons transfers to the Houthis—further evidence of Iran's destabilising activity in the region. We are working across Government and with our international allies to ensure that our collective response is robust, deters the regime from such malign activity and holds it to account wherever possible for threatening international security.

I return to the point I made earlier about Iran's support for Russia. Iran is now one of Russia's top military backers, supplying hundreds of drones that have been used to bombard Ukraine. Iran is testing its weapons in a new theatre through those sordid deals and, in return, Russia is offering military and technical support to the regime. We strongly condemn Iran's actions in supporting Russia's illegal war, and we have sanctioned 11 individuals and two manufacturers responsible for supplying drones. We will continue to call out that desperate alliance on the international stage and hold Russia and Iran to account.

Meanwhile, Iran's nuclear programme has never been more advanced. Iran refused to seize the critical opportunity to sign the revised joint comprehensive plan of action in August last year, making demands outside the scope of the agreement. The International Atomic Energy Agency has repeatedly highlighted Iran's lack of co-operation with long-running investigations into undeclared material. Iran's malign activity has made the diplomatic context even more challenging, but we remain committed to ensuring that Iran never develops a nuclear weapon and are working closely with our partners to find a diplomatic solution.

We are working relentlessly across Government and with the international community to hold Iran to account for its unacceptable behaviour, its appalling treatment of its own people, its reprehensible support for Russia's illegal war and its escalating nuclear activities. Just like the Iranian people, we want to see a more responsible Iran—one that respects the rights and freedoms of all its citizens and does not threaten international peace and security. We urge the country's leaders to listen to their citizens as they demand a better future.

10.58 am

Brendan Clarke-Smith: It has been a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. It would be remiss of me not to congratulate Sheffield Wednesday on their promotion.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): I can reciprocate for Notts County—being completely neutral in the Chair, of course.

Brendan Clarke-Smith: Thank you, Mr Betts; that is much appreciated.

I thank the Minister for the update on what the Government are doing to address many of the concerns raised today, and I thank all Members present for their impassioned and eloquent speeches, which showed the very best of this House.

The hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead (John Cryer) made some excellent points, with which I agree entirely; his example of Press TV was a good one. My hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) and the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) made excellent points about the worrying number of executions and the treatment of women, children and the LGBT community. I am sure the Government are bearing that in mind.

The hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Sarah Green) talked about British nationals and Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe. It is very important that we understand the Iranians currently living in the UK. The hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) also mentioned her constituents. I thank her for those examples, which added a human touch to what we are discussing.

The hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) discussed the treatment of protestors, which has been horrific, and the importance of internet access and a free press in addressing that. That was also touched on by the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law), who gave some excellent examples of the horrific treatment we have seen. I thank the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) for her remarks regarding Mr Beheshti and the brave people who speak out.

I hope the debate will encourage the Government to take further action and, ultimately, to fully proscribe the IRGC.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Professional Wrestling: Event Licensing and Guidance

11 am

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

That this House has considered the matter of professional wrestling event licensing and guidance.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Betts. The all-party parliamentary group on wrestling is without a doubt one of the most joyous and exciting in this institution. I am proud to be an active vice-chair, and I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) and the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mark Fletcher)—our co-chairs—and to our group secretary, Danny Stone. They have brought serious and appropriate discussion of wrestling into this place, where too often in the past it was mocked.

Among our number we have fans of World Wrestling Entertainment, All Elite Wrestling, Impact, New Japan Pro-Wrestling and, most importantly, British promotions such as the all-women show EVE, PROGRESS, Revolution Pro Wrestling, NORTH, TNT and Renaissance, as well as start-ups such as the all-new women's promotion, Galzilla, which literally hatched from an egg on the stage at the amazing Wrestling festival in London this year. Those wrestling promotions span the country, as do wrestling schools. In my constituency of Warrington North, we have our own wrestling academy, the Warrington Wrestling Academy, and I look forward to many Warringtonians making their way to the major leagues in years to come.

Fans often remark that, in the UK, one could go to a wrestling event nearly every night of the week, if one wanted to do so, and pack out the weekends with entertainment. Shows run in schools, gyms, entertainment venues and even fields. Of course, to run events safely and to a standard, there is a licensing requirement—or at least there should be.

In April 2021, the APPG released what constitutes the first ever thorough, systemic parliamentary analysis of wrestling. One of its key themes is the categorisation of wrestling as either theatre or sport. That might appear a simple matter, but wrestling involves serious athleticism alongside dramatic performance. There are competitions, albeit predetermined ones. Both Sport England and Arts Council England have funded wrestling, but neither particularly wants the responsibility of being a home for English wrestlers or wrestling.

Our APPG took the view—a novel one, I think—that for wrestling schools, the designation should be sporting, whereas promotions should be classed as theatrical. As the report made clear, defining promotions as theatrical entertainment opens up conversations about licensing, representation, governance, and improved policies and procedures. On the matter of policies and procedures, we were pleased to work recently with Loughborough University, with support from the PlayFight wrestling school, on the first ever parliamentary conference on wrestling, and we are developing a guide to better practice, which we hope will be informed by those in the industry, to help others across the British wrestling world.

[Charlotte Nichols]

We were told during the all-party group's inquiry that the lack of a definition, whether as sport or art, created a minefield when it came to insurance and licensing. We have concerns that for promotions, the licensing system may still be somewhat of a minefield, particularly when people are navigating different licensing schemes. We know for certain that there are issues in this wholly unregulated industry. Concerns were raised with us about poor or, in some cases, illegal practices, ranging from tax malpractice and fraud to dangerous health and safety arrangements and sexual harassment. We were repeatedly warned about a lack of adequate medical supplies and supervision. The inquiry received one submission that drew on a wider understanding of promotions in the north of England and suggested that expertise to identify and treat injuries was "only intermittently present" at shows.

I am particularly grateful to Professor Claire Warden at Loughborough for her insights. She highlighted how the approaches of local councils can differ remarkably in just a few miles, even if the language used in licensing forms is similar. In Leicester, for instance, wrestling is considered "regulated entertainment"—in itself interesting, given the wholly unregulated nature of wrestling in actuality—alongside the performance of a play, exhibition or music, or an indoor sporting event. Boxing is the only sport mentioned on the list.

In Nottingham, wrestling is licensed under the "regulated entertainment" classification, but with a caveat that, although no licence is required for Greco-Roman or freestyle, combined fighting sports are licensable as boxing or wrestling entertainment, rather than an indoor sporting event. Similarly, Derby City Council, which has a whole section on boxing, wrestling and fighting sports, seems to compare wrestling to mixed martial arts rather than theatre.

Manchester thinks about numbers, acknowledging that a licence is not required for a play, dance, film, indoor sporting event or, indeed, boxing or wrestling, defined as a

"contest, exhibition or display of Greco-Roman wrestling or freestyle wrestling between 8am and 11pm,"

where attendance is 1,000 or fewer. By including the sense that wrestling might be a "display" rather than a contest, it opens up potential for confusion about whether professional wrestling is included. Surely all Greco-Roman and freestyle wrestling is a contest, as that is what actively defines them as different from professional wrestling.

There are difficulties, too, in other areas. I appreciate that this is a devolved matter, but we are told it can be difficult to run shows in Edinburgh, for example, because wrestling is classed as sport for licensing purposes, and therefore performances in theatres and other venues can apparently be very difficult.

What that means in actuality is confusion and potentially dangerous situations. There are examples of licensing schemes causing problems. In Derby, one venue had a licence for live music and sports events, but the council required a temporary licence for wrestling, which was seen as separate from sport. The council refused the licence to the venue, owing to fears about congestion—notably, not about safety or the suitability of the athletes or venue.

Another interesting story emerged in 2011, when the Royal Albert Hall, a venue famous for holding wrestling shows since the beginning of professional wrestling, faced local opposition to its request to add boxing and wrestling to the list of permitted activities. The complaints seemed entirely focused on

"problems with antisocial behaviour, public safety, noise and disturbance, and degradation of the surrounding area."

Again, safety was not mentioned, but there was the sense, as there is so often, that wrestling appeals to people less socially acceptable to residents than, say, Proms-goers.

A similar opinion seems to be held by residents around Headingley in Leeds, despite the fact that it is a sporting venue. In that case, the council's licensing committee unanimously refused the application, saying that the event was

"very different in nature and duration to rugby matches held regularly at the venue."

Wrestling Resurgence, a midlands-based promoter, sent us the various procedures it puts in place when obtaining a licence from Nottingham City Council—specifically, that a medic must be present—but argued that

"some form of 'fit and proper persons' test should be in place for prospective promotions, similar to ownership tests in football, or that at minimum some basic standardised requirements put in place."

The company highlighted the disparity in licensing requirements, saying:

"In Nottingham, where we run events, it is a requirement that wrestling event organisers ensure a medical professional is present at all times during a performance. This is something that is not required in Leicester."

We certainly think that medics are a must, but, as Wrestling Resurgence says,

"A national approach to licensing would be very welcomed."

It is quite right—it would.

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech, and I am proud that she is the vice-chair of the APPG that I proudly co-chair. On Monday, I attended a very special conference at Loughborough University with Professor Claire Warden, focusing on concussion in professional wrestling. The point about licensing was raised time and again, as was the utmost importance of having a registered professional medic available at events. That should be part of the requirements, given the nature of the sector and performances, because concussion is likely. That is why such provisions are vital. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Charlotte Nichols: I could not agree more. I know that British wrestling is doing a lot of work with the Rugby Football League, for example, on concussion protocols. Unfortunately, despite the pre-determined nature of what happens in a wrestling ring, injuries and accidents are common, so medics should be there to make sure that such risks can be mitigated as far as possible.

The evidence I mentioned fed into the APPG's inquiry and our recommendation that:

"For any sized promotion, having even limited safety measures in place should be part of the key requirements for running an event, either through requirements to use council property, the TENs licence or a governing body and in the absence of the latter, we recommend that the Home Office brings forward proposals to

broaden TENs licence guidance to include health and safety and other minimum standards protocols for wrestling suppliers. We recognise that the legislation is different in Scotland and Northern Ireland, but we request that both devolved administrations assess whether their current licencing rules adequately cover wrestling promotions”.

In June 2021, we wrote to the then Minister of State at the Home Office, Lord Stephen Greenhalgh, to seek his assistance with the implementation of the recommendation in the APPG’s report, which was welcomed at the Dispatch Box by the Government. We asked about the possibility of widening the temporary events notice licence guidance to include health and safety, and other minimum standards protocols, for wrestling suppliers, and sought guidance on arrangements for Scotland and Northern Ireland. The APPG followed up on the letter, but to no avail, so I am delighted that the Minister will be able to update us today on what progress there has been and what plans might be in place.

I hope the Minister can also demonstrate a degree of updated thinking. Cam Tilley, who wrestles under the moniker Kamille Hansen—and who is a former researcher in this place—pointed out to us, through the dissertation that she has just finished on related issues, that these matters have already been discussed in this House. In the 1960s, questions were posed about the prohibition of wrestling performances by women, with the reply that there was no evidence to suggest that the issue was widespread enough to merit action and that this was ultimately a matter for local authorities to decide on as part of their licensing powers. However, London County Council had already fallen into the mode of effectively banning women’s wrestling in venues that it had licensed in the previous decades.

In 2002, during a debate on what would become the Licensing Act 2003, the other place was told:

“we know that boxing and wrestling and their audiences present a significant issue with regard to public safety. As the noble Baroness said, the relationship between wrestling and its audience is particularly engaging, and its showmanship can engage the audience very directly. But, as has been known for many decades, boxing also engages passions. From time to time, boxing bouts have aroused as much vigour in the audience as in those participating in the ring—in some cases, rather more than occurs in the ring.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 12 December 2002; Vol. 642, c. 391.]

Wrestling and boxing are far from the same; I speak as someone who has now been to multiple wrestling shows, large and small. That is not to say that boxing is always violent or problematic, but the lumping together of boxing and wrestling for licensing purposes has certainly caused problems. Wrestling has no concussive intent—although, as my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd said, of course concussive injuries occur—whereas the sole intent of boxing is to knock out the opponent. To conflate the two for licensing purposes makes very little sense.

We were told that some years ago that Tower Hamlets turned down wrestling events on advice from the local police, who had taken a decision based on boxing events. Similarly, we were told that in the past inter-promotional wars were waged between those wrestling companies that had clocked the importance of boxing-related restrictions on a licence and those that had not, with one company forcing another to forfeit a licensing opportunity.

The constant association of wrestling with boxing is deeply problematic. The concern is always that the local licensing process is so complex and likely to lead to

rejection that wrestling shows are occurring around the country in unregulated venues or without licensing. We in the APPG would like to see some consistency in approaches to licensing, enhanced confidence for promoters so that they can hold a show, and certainty for all about how wrestling should be categorised by local authorities and what the requirements are or should be. I hope that the Minister can begin to set out that pathway to clarity for us today.

11.14 am

The Minister for Media, Tourism and Creative Industries (Sir John Whittingdale): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I congratulate the hon. Member for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols) on obtaining this debate and on her very informative speech. I pay tribute to her and her colleagues in the all-party parliamentary group—I am delighted to see the co-chair, the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones), present. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friends the Members for Peterborough (Paul Bristow) and for Bolsover (Mark Fletcher), who are active members. One of the things that come out of the all-party group’s extremely comprehensive and informative report is those Members’ shared passion for wrestling.

British wrestling has a long heritage dating back several centuries in the UK. It goes as far back as travelling fairs and carnivals in the 19th century, where skilled wrestlers showcased their abilities. Over time, it has evolved into a distinctive style that emphasises technical prowess and a connection with the audience—the report makes that point strongly—which is one of the key elements of British wrestling. British wrestling contrasts with the American version that we all too often see on our screens, which prioritises flashy manoeuvres and larger-than-life characters.

Frequently, British wrestling takes place in small, intimate venues that allow fans to be in close proximity, creating an atmosphere in which the crowd’s reactions become an integral part of the show. I am old enough to recall watching wrestling on ITV on Saturday evenings. Kent Walton would open the proceedings with “Greetings, grapple fans” each week, and we saw characters such as Kendo Nagasaki, Jackie Pallo, and of course the larger-than-life characters of Max Crabtree, the promoter, and his brother, Shirley, who became better known as Big Daddy. Those times are long gone, but it is encouraging that British wrestling has seen a resurgence, with a high calibre of talents and promotions. We now have elite wrestlers such as Saraya Bevis, Pete Dunne and Tyler Bate representing the UK in international promotions such as WWE. That has allowed the UK’s scene to rival the larger promotions across the world. That is an important part of soft power, which is of great importance to my Department.

Wrestling is a thriving industry. There has been not only an increase in the number of shows booked, but a steady rise in audience numbers. I read the chapter in the report on the impact on the sport of covid-19; wrestling was obviously not alone, but its nature meant that it was hit particularly severely by the pandemic. Since then, great progress has been made, and British promotions such as Progress Wrestling, Revolution Pro Wrestling and Insane Championship Wrestling have dedicated followings and showcase some of the best talent.

[*Sir John Whittingdale*]

The hon. Member for Warrington North went through a number of the recommendations of the APPG report, which covers a broad range of issues, and I will say a few words on each of them. A lot of the recommendations, including the one on safety standards and safeguarding, are to some extent in the gift of the wrestling industry itself. Of course, everyone deserves to work in a workplace that feels safe and secure, and I think we all agree that wrestling needs to put safety and wellbeing at the forefront of its priorities. However, there is no need for the industry to start with a blank sheet of paper. There is already a wealth of information from other sectors that can be used as a starting point.

Charlotte Nichols: The Minister refers to information from other sectors that can be used as a starting point, but conflating wrestling and boxing is part of the problem, as I highlighted in my speech. Does he not think that it is time that we had some simple, clear, basic guidance from the Home Office to local councils about how to license a safe wrestling event?

Sir John Whittingdale: I think there are two separate points there about the health and safety guidance and the licensing. I fully acknowledge that there is a lack of clarity—shall we say?—in each of those that could be addressed.

Let me start with safeguarding, which is an important way of ensuring that the interests of children and young people are protected. The child protection in sport unit provides a framework of standards that organisations working with children and young people should meet. For the arts and entertainment sector—I recognise that part of the problem relates to the fact that wrestling sits somewhere between the two—the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children has produced guidance. The Department for Education has been helpful in advising local authorities and individuals working with children in all types of professional or amateur performances, paid sport or paid modelling.

The APPG report states that sports coaches should be considered to be in a position of trust for the purposes of child sexual offences and recommends that wrestling coaches should be explicitly recognised as being in such positions of trust. Recent amendments made to the Sexual Offences Act 2003 by the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 mean that sports coaches are now recognised as being in a position of trust as regards those in their care and the criminal offences linked to that position. The 2022 Act states that sport includes

“any form of physical recreation which is also engaged in for purposes of competition or display”.

We believe that includes a range of activities such as wrestling.

On licensing requirements, I recognise, and the hon. Member for Warrington North has set out, that there is disparity across the country between the attitude taken by different authorities. There have been quite disturbing incidents such as the one in County Durham, when children were subject to what most people would regard as inappropriate content during something that was billed as a family show. I do not think that is widespread, but it must be carefully monitored.

Professional wrestling events are licensed through the entertainment licensing system, and local authorities, in carrying out their functions, must consider the licensing objectives. Those are, as the hon. Lady knows, the prevention of crime and disorder, public safety, the prevention of public nuisance and the protection of children from harm. It is for regulating authorities to look at events such as the one in County Durham and take them into account, alongside issues such as public safety, protecting children and preventing disorder. In my constituency, there was an application for a wrestling match and there was a lack of awareness of some of the requirements. We are happy to talk about the issue further with the Home Office, which has ultimate responsibility for licensing, and to draw its attention to the hon. Lady's speech.

Charlotte Nichols: Having spoken to local councillors, I know that a number of wrestling events take place in Warrington. They find that lack of clarity troubling because many do not have the knowledge and understanding of the wrestling sector that the Minister does, so they are not sure what they are meant to be looking at when determining whether an event should be licensed. They need something that makes it clear to them; a tick-box exercise when making such determinations would be beneficial. Does the Minister agree?

Sir John Whittingdale: Certainly. I agree that it would be helpful if we removed the confusion and lack of clarity. As I said, licensing is a Home Office responsibility but, if further work can be done to provide guidance or advice, I am happy to ask the Home Office to look at that. I am sure the hon. Lady, the hon. Member for Pontypridd and members of the APPG will be happy to pursue that with the Home Office, but I have absolutely taken note of what she has said.

Building on licensing, the APPG recommended that the industry adopt a set of health and safety standards. I was pleased to hear that the Health and Safety Executive met the APPG in February, and it was agreed that the best way forward will be for the industry to take the lead on the production of new guidance. The HSE has offered to provide support through reviewing relevant sections and providing advice on drafting matters relating to health and safety law, but it is the case that industry-led guidance is generally respected and well received by the industry since they have ownership of it. It can make a significant difference. I take particular note of the recommendation that it should include provision that a doctor should always be present for matches. That clearly makes sense, and I am sure that the HSE will be happy to talk about that further when drawing up the guidance to which I have referred.

Reference was made to the issue of concussion guidance. Such guidance has recently been published by my Department and the Sport and Recreation Alliance for a number of different sports, and I am aware that it is of great relevance to wrestling as well. The hon. Member for Warrington North referred to the Concussion in Wrestling: Building a Better Understanding conference that took place in Loughborough on Monday, where I am sure some of the expert evidence will have been very helpful. It is a matter of great concern.

The wider question of trying to prevent brain injuries and concussion in sport is one that we have debated in the main Chamber and here in Westminster Hall. The

guidelines have been drawn up by an expert panel of domestic and international clinicians and academics in neurology and sports medicine, and they set out steps to improve the understanding and awareness of the prevention and treatment of concussion in grassroots sport. I hope that this will help the wrestling community to have a better understanding of concussion recognition, and will ultimately help to make wrestling a safer sport for those participating.

I refer to wrestling as a sport, although the APPG report made a good point by describing it as “sport-art”, because it has elements of sport and elements of entertainment and performance. That brings me to my final point, which is about the issue of categorisation. I am aware that the APPG report suggests that the training for wrestling should be considered a sport, while the performance element is entertainment. This is not something that the Government generally get involved in classifying; it is left to the five sporting bodies, and I know that the APPG is in conversation with Sport England. As has been pointed out, Sport England supports British Wrestling with funding, but professional wrestling is still regarded as entertainment. However, the report’s recommendations are certainly worth pursuing, so I encourage the APPG to talk further to Sport England. We would be happy to help facilitate that, if it would be helpful.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Warrington North on securing the debate and all her colleagues involved in the preparation of the extremely helpful and comprehensive report. We will consider the issues further. We all want to see a successful wrestling industry in this country, for the benefit of both its participants and the fans. Once again, I thank the hon. Lady for giving us the opportunity to debate the matter.

Question put and agreed to.

11.28 am

Sitting suspended.

Pupil Roll Numbers and School Closures: London

[MR PHILIP HOLLOBONE *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): The sitting is resumed. We come to an important debate on pupil roll numbers and school closures in London.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered pupil roll numbers and school closures in London.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr Hollobone. It is a pleasure to lead my third Westminster Hall debate and to discuss this really important issue. I am grateful to everyone for coming. I also thank London Councils, which has supported me to raise this important issue.

This is an emotive topic. I think everybody here remembers when they went to school; those experiences really do stay with us for life. I still have memories of when I went on a visit from primary school to big school—secondary school—in my summer uniform. I thought this place was like Hogwarts, but when I walked into secondary school it felt like Hogwarts too, because it was so much bigger! Schools are places that communities are built around: places where, as children, we learn to make friends and find our passions in life; and, as parents, we watch our children learn about the world and their place in it.

As a proud Londoner who has lived in Lambeth all my life and now has the opportunity to represent my home constituency of Vauxhall, this debate is personal for me. I went to four schools in total: Durand Primary School and St Helen’s Catholic Primary School, then to Bishop Thomas Grant School and St Francis Xavier Catholic Sixth Form College, all of which were a short trip away from where we stand now. We will talk about policy over the course of the debate, but this is a human issue. We all care deeply about the communities we represent, and schools sit at the centre of them. We all want our city to thrive, with an education system that produces the next generation of Londoners—one that gives them the chances we all had. That is a shared purpose that I hope will define this debate.

The current situation facing London schools is a difficult one. There has been a sharp decline in the number of children born here. In fact, the latest data shows that between 2012 and 2021, there was a 17% decrease in London’s birth rate, which represents a reduction of over 20,000 births. We are only just beginning to see the effects, as children born across that period reach school age, but it is already clear that it will have a drastic impact on the number of pupils attending London schools. The scale varies across boroughs, but it is predicted that reception numbers will fall by an average of 7.3% by 2027—a drop of more than 7,000 pupils. And it is not just primary schools; secondary schools are seeing the same thing happen at a slightly delayed rate, with an anticipated decline of 3.5% over five years. That figure will increase further over time as children currently starting primary school reach secondary age.

[*Florence Eshalomi*]

The declining birth rate leaves many schools facing an uphill struggle to stay afloat. Our national education funding model works on a per pupil basis. Across the country, schools are already working hard on very tight budgets.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a fantastic speech. Many headteachers in my constituency of Battersea have raised concerns about the viability of their schools remaining open. Obviously, the inflation challenges are having an impact on their budgets, but, more importantly, is the fall in the numbers of children coming into their schools. Form entry is reducing due to things like the pandemic, London becoming an unaffordable place to live, a lack of affordable housing, Brexit and many other factors. If schools are having to close, which has been the case in some London boroughs—thankfully not in my own constituency—they will leave a hole in our communities. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government need to work with our teachers and all authorities to look for solutions to ensure that we do not see schools in our communities closing, which also takes away choice from families and children?

Florence Eshalomi: I thank my hon. Friend for making such an important point; her constituency neighbours mine, so a number of my constituents attend schools in her constituency and vice versa. This is about parental choice. The fact is that if schools are closing in some London boroughs and the Government do not address the situation now, there could be a ripple effect. I will come to that point later.

This process happening in secondary schools. Our national education funding model works on a per pupil basis and across the country schools are struggling. In Lambeth, where my constituency is, we are sadly at the forefront of these pressures. It is predicted that we will be hit harder than any other London borough, with an anticipated drop of 15% in the number of reception pupils by 2027. Secondary school numbers are also predicted to reduce by more than 12% over the same period.

The reality is that this trend can be linked to the Government's record. In the years before they came to power in 2010, Lambeth experienced a 19% increase in demand for reception places. As a result, schools were built, refurbished or redeveloped across the borough to account for this fast-growing population of school-age children. I feel proud that I added to their number with my son, who is six years old today, and my daughter, who is eight; they both attend Lambeth schools.

The Tory failure to manage the economy has led to the spiralling cost of living crisis and the situation is not helped by the lack of affordable housing being built. This has priced people out of their communities and caused the decline in school numbers across Lambeth. Sadly, we are witnessing the harsh impact of this situation. Two schools in Lambeth are closing because they do not have enough pupils to be financially sustainable.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this important debate. She made a powerful point about the sky-high childcare and housing costs in London, which are driving people out of the capital. In Richmond upon Thames, we have not quite seen the level of reduction in pupil numbers that

there is in Lambeth, but in my constituency of Twickenham we had to close down eight reception classes in the last academic year and seven reception classes this year. In a few years, that will feed into the secondary school sector, where, of course, academies can raise their pupil numbers at will and local authorities have no control over them. Does she agree that it is high time that local councils were given strategic powers to co-ordinate all school places and admissions in their area, so that every child can go to a good local school?

Florence Eshalomi: I agree. That is something that my party is committed to. I hope that my colleague—the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan)—will be able to outline why it is important that we have that approach.

Archbishop Tenison's School in my constituency announced in May that it will close at the end of this academic year, and it was closely followed by St Martin-in-the-Fields High School for Girls in Tulse Hill, which is represented by another constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), although young pupils also attend it from my constituency of Vauxhall and that of my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Bell Ribeiro-Addy). Both these secondary schools have histories dating back to the 17th century and their closures will leave a huge hole in the communities they have served.

I will say a bit more about Archbishop Tenison's School, because its closure has directly impacted my constituents. The beautiful, grand, 1920s school building is matched by the school's history. The school overlooks the Oval cricket ground and has proudly offered high-quality education to many generations of south Londoners who have studied there. I have had the pleasure of visiting on many occasions, and every time I have been struck by the strong sense of community. Pupils from all different backgrounds feel at home there.

The school's closure has caused an outpouring of sadness. I was contacted by so many constituents who were shocked by the announcement, many of whom were former pupils with so many happy memories to share. The closure has caused significant practical disruption for the current students, which brings me back to the people at the centre of what we are discussing: the children and the school staff who have to bear the brunt of what is happening.

Mr Hollobone, I want us all to imagine what this would feel like: imagine what it would be like to be in the middle of your school journey, in a place you know like the back of your hand, having navigated the corridors where you have made friends you have seen every day for years; you feel at home. Then, one morning—out of the blue—you come to school to hear that your school is closing. You are probably preparing for exams and coping with the stress of being a teenager, but at the same time have to start at a completely new school, maybe in a new area, with new teachers, new classmates and new buildings. The uncertainty of the situation is having an impact on our young people mentally, and this will happen to many children in the years ahead if we do not act now.

Fortunately, neighbouring schools have rallied round to help minimise the impact for students from Archbishop Tenison's. I am particularly grateful to St Gabriel's

College, which has agreed to take on a majority of the students in exam years, as well as a majority of the teaching staff. Earlier this week I had the pleasure of visiting St Gabriel's with my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth South, and we saw preparations for the new students. Many areas would not be lucky enough to have such a sustainable alternative nearby, but even where a new school is found, the process will be disruptive for all involved.

My central point is a simple one: without action to address falling pupil numbers, Archbishop Tenison's and St Martin-in-the-Fields will be joined by other good schools across London being forced to shut their doors. Data from London Councils shows that there are 14 parliamentary constituencies in London where at least one school has already closed or is consulting on closure—that is just in the last two years—but it does not have to be inevitable.

The Government have to act to address the core issues driving young families out of the capital and causing the birth rate to fall. There are a number of factors behind this behaviour. During the pandemic, we saw many families move away from London to be closer to relatives during the lockdown. Some have chosen to resettle where they are, because moving back to London is, frankly, too expensive. The picture has not been helped by the loss of many young European families who were living here in recent years. The uncertainty of the Government's post-Brexit immigration policy has meant that we have lost the stability we had in previous years, and this has caused many to move away from the UK, leaving a hole in London's workforce and meaning fewer people are settling here. Those factors have played a part in putting schools under pressure in recent years.

The single most important reason for the fall in the number of children growing up in London is the affordability crisis. It is an issue frequently discussed in the context of the cost of living. Sky-high inflation has pushed up the cost of everything from food to energy bills and household goods; we have all spoken about the issues and the pressing need for the Government to do so much more, but London's affordability problem has long-term roots, starting with the extortionate cost of housing. The impossibility of finding an affordable place to buy as a young adult is a problem across the country, but it is particularly significant in London.

The average property sale price in London is now over half a million pounds. That is wildly out of reach for so many young couples wanting to start a family, and the private rental market is not a suitable alternative. Private rents have soared in recent years, driven by rising demand and falling supply. I have heard from so many of my Vauxhall constituents who face the choice between paying nearly double the rent to renew their tenancy or having to battle—in some cases, with up to 60 people—just to view a rental property. For a young family with children, that is no option.

Despite the best efforts of our councils to cope with the rapid rise in demand, social housing waiting lists are at an all-time high. Taken together, that means that young couples on lower and middle incomes simply have no choice but to leave London and look for cheaper housing elsewhere. Fewer children are being born here because of that, which fuels the drop in demand for school places. The housing crisis runs through so many issues we face, but if we are serious about protecting the

future of our fantastic schools, Ministers must ensure that London remains a place where people of all backgrounds can afford to live.

Without more young families staying in London, we may sadly lose more schools. I have already spoken about the impact of school closures, but the loss of a school is also a wider risk to national education standards. As schools close and pupils are relocated, existing schools become larger. Over time, that creates a culture of survival of the biggest, where smaller schools are consumed by those with more capacity. We have already seen that locally with larger academies seeking to expand at the expense of neighbouring schools. That trend threatens the mix of small and big schools that defines London's school ecosystem, reduces parental choice, and leaves smaller schools unable to compete, even if they are performing well.

For most pupils, what does that mean? It means longer commutes, and bigger class sizes, which puts pressure on our teachers, who are so stretched that some are at breaking point. Some are leaving the profession they love and care about, while the others are left with less time to spend with our children. Also, resources for specialist teaching are squeezed, and those with special educational needs are adversely impacted. Collectively, all those factors damage school standards.

The reality is that where education declines, the life chances of future generations suffer. That is what is at stake when schools close. The importance of that has been reflected in recent media coverage. Last month, the BBC reported that London is becoming “a city without children”. That should worry us all. London is a vibrant, diverse and young city, built on young people. If there are less of them living here, our economic strength to compete in a global world will be harmed. The UK economy will be hit hard by our capital city falling behind.

But what do we have? So far, Ministers have been silent, acting as if this is not happening on their watch. There are spatial impacts: if people are priced out of their home communities, gentrification will accelerate. I am proud to be a working-class girl from Brixton, and I still live there today. I know how important lifelong Londoners are to this city. I am proud to meet so many of them on my walkabouts across my constituency. They are the lifeblood of London, which would be so much poorer without them.

I have five simple asks of the Minister to help. First, further school closures can be avoided if the Department for Education recognises the pressure in the system. Will the Government please work with school leaders and local authorities to identify schools at risk of closure and to work out a plan?

Secondly, London's birth rate means that pupil roll numbers will fall over the next few years. We have to plan ahead. Will the Minister address the inequalities in school funding? Will he work with the sector to develop a collaborative approach to the challenges ahead, so that we do not see disruption to education standards?

Thirdly, affordable housing shortages are driving young families out of London. The Mayor of London and many of our councils do all they can to increase the supply of affordable housing, but the reality is that the national planning framework, which the Government control, is stacked in favour of developers building

[*Florence Eshalomi*]

high-end housing that no one can afford. Will the Government bring forward their long-awaited planning reform? Will they put power back in the hands of local communities, so that those communities can have development that meets the needs of the local population?

Fourthly, the local housing allowance is a lifeline for many low and middle-income families in the private rented sector, but the Government have frozen its rate since April 2020. Rents have gone through the roof since then. Will the Minister please ask the Chancellor to reverse that real-terms cut to housing support and give hope to the millions of people who have been forced out of their homes?

Finally, will the Minister meet me and other interested MPs to discuss the issue in more detail? Will he work with us to find a solution?

I will end by taking us back to the heart of the issue: the children who have their life chances impacted by what has happened to our schools in recent years. The Government may want to look away and pretend that this is nothing to do with them—that it is the fault of, and down to, the multi-academy trusts or MATs, the education authorities and the schools—but the reality is that Ministers are the ones with the power to do something. I urge them to act now.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): The debate can last until 4 o'clock. I am obliged to call the Opposition spokesman no later than 3.37 pm and the Minister at 3.47 pm. The guideline limits are 10 minutes each for the Opposition spokesman and for the Minister. The mover of the motion will have three minutes at the end to sum up the debate. Until 3.37 pm, we are in Back-Bench time.

2.49 pm

Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Hollobone, for letting me follow my dear friend, my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi), and for accepting my apology for having to go to another meeting, although I will come back.

I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. We know that some mainstream primary schools are not as inclusive as they could be in admitting children with special educational needs and disabilities. I have been approached by many parents in my constituency who would like their children with special needs to go to a mainstream school. The surplus of places in many primary schools across London gives us an opportunity to identify ways of making them more inclusive to children with special educational needs and disabilities. We need to ensure that schools are appropriately funded to meet the needs of children with SEND. However, some children with SEND need provision that is best delivered by a special school. Given the shortage of local special schools in London, I hope the Minister will commit to support and fund local authorities so that they can expand local specialist provision where there is a clear need.

2.51 pm

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship once again, Mr Hollobone. I too congratulate the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi) on securing

the debate. We have a shared history as councillors in London and as parents of young children, so this issue is close to our hearts. I will touch on the recent history of school place provision in London, outline some of the emerging challenges that I hear about in my constituency—especially, as the hon. Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma) mentioned, the emerging challenge in respect of SEND places—and briefly make some suggestions that the Department may find helpful in resolving those challenges.

When I was first elected as a councillor in Hillingdon just over two decades ago, the council was seeking to open a new school, which is thriving today as Ruislip High School. It was built on green-belt land, and local residents were concerned because they recalled that, just a decade or so earlier, the council had closed Southbourne Secondary School in south Ruislip, not far from the new school, because at that time there was a massive over-supply of school places.

There has been a long history in the capital of variations in the number of children, which goes through cycles. When my local authority engaged with the Building Schools for the Future programme, under my leadership as cabinet member for education, it was a condition of Hillingdon's entry that at least one secondary school per constituency be closed to reduce excess capacity. By the time we were a year or so into that programme, we looked at it again with a view to increasing places significantly, because the live birth data supplied by the NHS demonstrated that the demand for places, although relatively low in the immediate future, would rise rapidly.

The need to plan strategically has been a current issue in all our constituencies for a good long time. The number of pupils grew swiftly following the late 2000s financial crash, hit a peak following a massive expansion in school capacity across the capital, and has begun to tail off in recent years. That initial expansion of school capacity across the capital was primarily led in its early years by local authorities, which fulfilled their statutory duty to ensure that every child who wants and needs a school place can be offered one in their local area.

As time has moved on, we have seen increasing reliance on central control from the Department for Education, as additional capital funding has been moved from local authorities and expansion funds have instead been primarily routed through the free schools programme. A welcome feature of that programme is the significant increase in the number of children attending schools that are good or outstanding, which we often hear Ministers talk about. The fact that the funding was restricted over that time to schools that were already good or outstanding has been positive, as it ensured that in-demand schools could expand, but the reduction in the number of places creates a challenge because the geographical concentration of the surplus places is different from where demand is.

With some of the schools that have been expanded—in and around my constituency and serving some of my constituents I know of schools such as John Locke Academy, Lake Farm Park Academy and St Martin's—the local authority built the school, ran a bidding process to find a free school provider to deliver the education in it, and ensured that the additional places, when they were required, were delivered on time and on budget in the locations where there was a great deal of demand. Those schools continue to thrive to this day.

When it comes to the emerging challenges, London Councils has done some excellent work to highlight not just the impact that we all hear about as constituency Members of Parliament but what they mean across the capital. Over the same period of time as pupil numbers have been dropping, we have seen a number of changes to the schools funding formula, which has tightened so that there is comparatively much less scope today for a local authority and the schools forum of local schools that work together to support schools with declining numbers—unless there is clear evidence that the surplus places will be used again within the next three years.

Local authorities that use birth data and child-registration data from the local NHS tend to have extremely good visibility of what the numbers are, but by its very nature that data is limited to the point at which the child is born at a local hospital or registered with a local GP as a new mover into the area. Broadly speaking, therefore, we are talking about a five-year time horizon for when we can be accurate about that.

As the hon. Member for Vauxhall alluded to, there has been much debate about why the child population of the capital has been reducing. The data from the Office for National Statistics clearly shows that there is a reducing birth rate, which is having an impact. Anecdotally, schools have told me that increased family mobility as people seek bigger homes outside the capital at affordable prices, and Brexit in locations with a high level of rental accommodation that was regularly occupied by families from the European Union who are no longer coming here, have had an impact on the numbers of children coming through their doors. But the challenges are manifesting not just in inner London: those of us in the suburbs are seeing a significant impact. For example, according to London Councils figures, in the London Borough of Hillingdon we are seeing a decline of around 15% in overall numbers—one of the highest rates in outer London.

Why does this matter? Why does this situation create such a challenge, given that these things are part of the normal warp and weft of population change? Looking at the figures, it is fairly clear that the funding formula, whereby almost all the money a school receives comes based on pupil numbers on a per capita basis, means that a class needs to be full or nearly full to break even.

Let us take the example of two schools in my constituency: Cannon Lane Primary School in Harrow, and Bishop Winnington-Ingram Church of England Primary School in Hillingdon. According to Department for Education figures, Cannon Lane receives £4,249 per annum per child and Bishop Winnington-Ingram receives £4,816. It costs around £60,000 with on-costs to put a teacher in the classroom, and two teaching assistants on top of that are a further £60,000 with on-costs. A share of the school's overheads will pretty quickly get us to £150,000 to £180,000, meaning we can quickly understand that if a school does not have a nearly-full class, the amount of money coming in per child will not add up to enough to break even for the school's budget.

Schools that face significant demand for places, but where that demand is less than is needed to fill a class, are going through a process of reducing their planned admission number or PAN—the stated capacity of the school.

Munira Wilson: The hon. Gentleman is making a well-informed speech. On that point about pupil admission numbers, it is my understanding—I am happy to be corrected—that if a school has a published plan of 60 and 45 parents put down that school as a first choice, those 45 places have to be granted and therefore the school has to open two classes, even though it is only one-and-a-half classes full. As a result, the school ends up with the shortfall in cash that the hon. Gentleman has outlined.

Does the hon. Gentleman think that, as well as some of the strategic planning powers I talked about for local authorities, there needs to be an interim measure whereby the Department for Education provides some sort of additional funding or grant for those classes that are not full? Schools in my constituency are asking parents for money for glue sticks and to be in sports teams, and are cutting teaching assistants because they are struggling so much financially.

David Simmonds: The hon. Member makes a good point. We also see the converse of the situation in which a school has fewer applications than it has places, and this creates additional pressure on places: rather than maintaining a PAN of 60 with 45 applications, a school makes a decision to reduce its PAN to 30, which means that 15 children who want to be in that school but do not have a place are put somewhere else in the system. I will discuss later a way in which we might be able to address that.

Within the context of reducing pupil numbers, we are consequently seeing significant localised pressure on school places where local authorities are still having to look to expand schools to meet demand. There has always been a need for some spare capacity—5% was the traditional rule of thumb to allow for normal fluctuations—but because we have seen the loss of many of the strategic levers that local authorities could use for planning that, we now see a hotch-potch of situations in which some schools remain under acute pressure to find capacity for more children while others relatively close by struggle for numbers and reduce their planned admissions number.

From a parent's perspective, everything seems absolutely fine if their child is the one that gets into their school of choice. If that school has reduced its planned admissions number from 90 to 60, but their child is one of those 60, that is fantastic. But if someone's child is one of the 20 that cannot get in, they are displaced to a school that is not of their choice. That situation creates unhappy children and a financial challenge for the system, which tries to find another place for the children to go.

None of this is helped by the fact that although councils have no control over the dedicated schools grant—the ringfenced budget that funds schools—it is still legally part of councils' budgets, so a duty is imposed on them to ensure that over a period of time the dedicated schools grant breaks even. I know Ministers have been working on that with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, which has overall responsibility.

We see the converse of this challenge in respect of SEND places. The Timpson reforms represented an enormous transformational change in the approach to SEND education across the whole country. The downside is that the huge expectations that were raised by the reforms—particularly the extension to the mid-20s of

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the age entitlement for young people to access education and training—did not come with sufficient funding to ensure that they were delivered in reality. That is one reason why we see such enormous pressure on SEND in the capital.

Audit data from the London boroughs on the children who are given education, health and care plans and those who have some form of diagnosis demonstrates that the decisions are entirely the right ones. The children are meeting the relevant tests and criteria for the NHS, educational psychologists and so on, so the levels of need are undoubtedly being correctly assessed. We can see councils across the capital—I certainly include in this Hillingdon and Harrow, which serve my constituents—that are enormously challenged by rising demand against a backdrop of the reforms not being funded in line with the expectations that families now reasonably have.

There are many small, specialist SEND providers in the capital—for example, Sunshine House in my constituency—that are very popular with parents. They can offer a very high-quality service, but they are also often extraordinarily expensive, with a single place funded by a local authority not infrequently costing in excess of £1 million a year per child.

The delivery of the additional capacity that we require has been quite slow in the centralised programmes compared with the council-led ones. In my constituency we have seen additional SEND place capacity created through the local authority, such as the Eden Academy and specialist resource provision at other schools, all delivered on time and on budget. But some of the larger free school programmes, which are to deliver the bulk of the additional places we need, are many years behind where they need to be. Although there might be good reasons for the delays—we all understand the period of covid—the reality is that they impose massive cost pressures on our DSG high-needs blocks.

Although safety-valve agreements are being reached at individual local authority level, we need to recognise that the failure of programmes to deliver places on time, even if they eventually arrive, is the main reason why we see such a high level of pressure on the DSG across London for SEND. We know that the in-borough SEND—the state school places—is significantly cheaper than the private sector provision, but the awaited reform of SEND financing cannot come soon enough to make sure that the cost pressures are eased and that parents and children's expectations can be met.

Let me conclude with some ways forward. I know there has been some consultation on this matter, but my first ask of the Minister is that we look at the enhancement of local authority flexibility to allocate budgets much more strategically in order to ease the way forward, especially when schools go through a transition period of downsizing. Rather than a sudden step from 90 children down to 60, which has a huge impact on the ability of parents to get their kids into a school, as well as a major financial impact on the institution itself, we should smooth that process out and recognise the fluctuations in rising and falling demand.

My second ask is for greater powers for local authorities to strategically plan, recognising that in the context of falling rolls there are areas of growing demand, not just for SEND but mainstream as well. There is an urgent

need to be able to direct the overall school-planned admissions number to ensure that the provision matches the demand in a local area.

My third ask is that we do not forget that London is likely to see its population increase again at some point in future. We know that our capital's population is smaller at the moment than some of its past peaks, that the density of the population has been reducing and that the crowding has been dropping for decades, but it will almost certainly begin to rise again in due course. To facilitate that, multi-academy trusts should be prohibited from selling or disposing of any land or closing sites without the agreement of the local authority that has the legal duty for school places in the area.

I finish by thanking London Councils, and in particular the leader of one of my local authorities, Councillor Ian Edwards, who is the lead member for children's services at London Councils, along with the officer team that have been supporting him. I place on the record my thanks to the leaders and members in Harrow and Hillingdon, particularly Councillors Hitesh Karia and Susan O'Brien, for their work. I also thank the hon. Member for Vauxhall again for securing the debate on this important issue.

On a positive note, this is an opportunity for us to thank the teachers and councils of London for the work they have done to ensure that this remains, to this day, one of the best cities in the world in which to get an education.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. To make sure we can get everyone in, we will have a formal seven-minute limit on speeches.

3.7 pm

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi) on securing this debate and on her thought-provoking opening speech. Her personal reflections remind us all that children are at the heart of this. They only get one go at a primary and secondary education. It is up to us and the Government to ensure that their experience at school is as positive as it possibly can be. It is so important that we discuss this particular issue: it has already been said that it is very much an issue in Lambeth, and I see the particular pressure there, but we are also experiencing it in the outer boroughs of Richmond and Kingston.

I am pleased to be able to put forward my concerns and those of my constituents regarding the financial sustainability of schools across London in the light of falling pupil numbers. As has been said, schools throughout the capital have seen a significant decrease in enrolment in recent years due to the 17% decrease in the birth rate in London over the past decade, as well as shifts in local child populations following Brexit and the pandemic and their impacts on our local demographics.

For my constituents in Richmond Park, the resulting higher proportion of unfilled school places has resulted in a really worrying decrease in school budgets, which are determined on the basis of headcount rather than assessment of need; I pay tribute to the hon. Member

for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds) for his very detailed speech setting out how these decisions are made and the impacts that they have. The Government must ensure that the quality of education and the wellbeing of our children do not decline along with the headcount. I am already hearing from primary and secondary school headteachers across my constituency that funding pressures are resulting in impossible decisions over which cuts to make.

One impact that I am seeing in the Richmond part of my constituency, which goes across the Richmond and Kingston boroughs, is that many of our primary schools are single form entry and have been for many years. When there are falling roll numbers in a single form entry school, it has a massively disproportionate impact on the budget, because, as the hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner said, so much of it is allocated on a per-head basis. All the fixed costs do not decrease with the number of children on roll, so when schools are funded on a per-head basis, the impact on single form entry schools, of which I have a number in my constituency, is disproportionate. I would like the Minister to address that.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): This debate is clearly about London, but I always come along to support Members, and I want to support the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi) today. I apologise that I was not here at the beginning of the debate; I wanted to be, but I was speaking at another event and could not be here quicker.

The focus for me back home in my constituency is children with special needs. I have never in all my life seen as many children with special needs. I do not know whether that is because there is more recognition of those needs now, but money needs to be set aside for them. The reason I say that is quite simple: schools pave the way for instilling the qualities and skills that children require to better themselves for potential apprenticeships, further study and employment. Children are a treasure. We have a responsibility, and the Minister and Government have a responsibility, to make sure we do better for children and prepare them for the future. Does the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) agree?

Sarah Olney: It is always a privilege to take an intervention from the hon. Member. I do agree, particularly with his point about special educational needs.

Some headteachers in my constituency are having to make extremely difficult choices about how to allocate their reduced budgets, which are being cut because of falling rolls. Some are being forced to cut back on the number of teaching and support staff they employ, which has an additional impact on those with special educational needs or on the variety of subjects and extracurricular activities they offer. Others are not able to purchase essential classroom supplies or to fund pay rises for their hard-working teachers. Some cannot afford the necessary resources to support not only students with special educational needs, but the growing number of students who are coming to school with mental health and emotional challenges, which is an emerging cause for concern. A decline in pupil roll numbers that directly feeds a decline in school funding is only exacerbating those impacts.

Many parents and teachers in my constituency have written to me about the effects of the tightening school budgets. One primary school headteacher reached out to inform me of the difficulties of caring for children with special educational needs when they have limited funds. He said:

“Each school incurs a significant cost when enrolling a child with special educational needs, and while my own commitment to inclusive education for all will never be dampened, I am aware of school leaders who have been put in the impossible position of not being able to afford to support these children.”

One concerned parent wrote to me about a request from their children’s school for financial donations, just so that the school could

“maintain the basic services they provide.”

I have also received letters from children, with one schoolgirl writing to say:

“An example of schools needing more money was when my French teacher couldn’t provide any of the necessary worksheets because she had run out of money to use the school printer.”

I welcome the recent relaxation of the rules relating to which schools experiencing a decline in pupil numbers can benefit from a falling rolls fund, but, crucially, this does not make carving out the money for a fund any more affordable. I have spoken to councillors in my constituency, who tell me that having a falling rolls fund would only increase the financial pressure on all schools, including those without falling rolls, because it effectively moves money from schools with full rolls to those without. In the overall picture of the increasing and critical pressure on school funds, there is simply no spare funding for schools to help other schools in their area, however much they would like to and however committed they are to working together, which is a real feature of Richmond’s schools.

I want to touch quickly on the topic of empty classrooms, which we are seeing. The hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner and my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) mentioned the decrease in the published admission number. The Government should give some thought to the potential upside of the situation and to what we might use some of those empty classrooms for. We could utilise them for community benefits, particularly wraparound childcare; the Minister will know from countless previous debates what a massive issue that is for families across the country, and particularly in London.

We could also use those empty classrooms for youth work, for which there is a growing demand from young people from all sorts of backgrounds, and for careers advice, which is a particular passion of mine. We should be introducing young people to the full range of opportunities that await them when they leave school. I hear from countless business groups that young people do not know enough about their industry. The Government should think seriously about using some of the classrooms that are becoming available for some of those opportunities.

Reduced enrolment numbers are also putting private childcare providers across London at risk of closure. The issue is compounded by other factors such as increased energy, food and staffing costs, as well as recruitment issues. In my constituency of Richmond Park, I was concerned to hear last month about the closure of Maria Grey Nursery School, a popular nursery in central Richmond. Many parents have expressed to me how deeply saddened they are to be losing this

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treasured institution, which has been a part of Richmond for several decades. Again, that is because of the lack of demand from local families.

We are seeing record falls in the number of childcare providers, with thousands of providers exiting the market each year. That adds to the pressure on London families, who—never mind the fact that childcare is increasingly unaffordable—find securing a place with a childcare provider increasingly difficult. Again, that is linked to the issue of lack of demand. It is essential to shore up—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. I call Clive Efford.

3.16 pm

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to take part in a debate under your chairmanship again, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi) not just on securing this debate, but on her outstanding opening speech.

I will start with some local pleading. The Minister may be aware of the Avery Hill site, the former university campus in my constituency that was purchased to build the new Harris Academy school. The Minister's officials do not need to rush; I am not expecting answers today. [Interruption.] Oh, they came prepared—well done! The Minister will recall—I may have written to him in the past—that my concern is about the provision of places, but the Government decided to go ahead with the scheme. It is now on hold, because we lost the contractor for whatever reason—we need not go into that today. I understand that the Department is reviewing schemes such as the Harris Academy. School rolls suggest that we have surplus places for the foreseeable future in Greenwich. My council reports a 10% surplus in year 7 places, and London Councils predicts that between now and 2027, demand for those places will go down by another 2.5%. If the Government are minded not to go ahead with that scheme, may I please have a discussion with the Minister about the future of the site? It is a very important one for my constituency.

On the issue of school rolls generally, I make the same points as everybody else. Because we fund schools by headcount, the impact of falling school rolls can be considerable; as hon. Members have said, it still costs the same to run the school. As one of my headteachers, who does not have a falling roll but has financial difficulties over the next three years, wrote to me:

"This is mainly due to increased salary and pension contributions of all staff, a significant increase in the number of pupils with complex needs who require additional adult support. We have over 20 children out of 400 who have Education Health Care Plans".

That number is increasing and the needs of those children are becoming more acute. Schools are therefore facing financial difficulties because of factors other than falling rolls.

When a school roll falls, it is not necessarily the case that the costs for the school fall, and we need to have some flexibility around that. I will not elaborate on that, because many people have made excellent points on the issue; what I want to mention is that a big proportion of schools' costs is staffing costs, which makes it difficult to be flexible when school rolls fall. The Government should not ignore that.

The other, wider issue for us in London is the cost of housing. Affordable housing that families can live in is being hollowed out in central London. That is an issue not just for school rolls, but for the economy. There are people being priced out of London who are essential for certain types of job. We have to address the issue of creating truly affordable rented social housing back where it used to exist, in places such as Southwark where I used to live. I used to play football with friends who went to Archbishop Tenison's, because Lambeth is not far from Walworth. I remember those schools well, but the places we used to live in no longer exist.

That is the problem that we are facing in central London. We have privatised the provision of social housing. We have relied on private developers to deliver on social housing through planning gain. When we stopped local authorities building houses, we slowed the provision of social houses. Against the loss of those houses being sold, we have hollowed out large parts of London, which has very high land values for social housing. It is a problem not just for schools but for our economy, and it is something that we must address.

The Mayor is doing everything he can. Local authorities are trying to do as much as they can with the resources they have, but this requires a Government willing to step in and make the serious change we need if we are to address population decline in central London. The birth rate is down in London, but it is not down in the rest of the country; I urge the Government to look at the reasons behind that.

I will finish by urging the Government to consider the facts that everyone has set out in this excellent debate. I also ask the Minister to contact me about the Avery Hill site, if he is not going to go ahead with the school.

3.21 pm

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Streatham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate my hon. Friend and neighbour the Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi) on securing this debate and on her excellent opening speech.

What we are seeing unfolding right across London is a vicious cycle of soaring living costs and, as a consequence, falling budgets for local authorities and schools. My hon. Friend pointed to London's 17% decline in the birth rate, which accounts for 23,000 fewer babies in our capital. That crisis is most acutely felt in inner city boroughs such as ours, Lambeth. Yes, it is true that lifestyles are changing and some people are choosing to have fewer kids, but those who want more cannot afford to have them. Even if they could afford them, they cannot afford the size of house to put the kids in.

Since 2001, our borough has seen a 10% drop in households with at least one school-age child. I am sure other Members visit their schools, as I do. I really enjoy speaking to the wonderful children in my constituency; they always have the best questions. As other Members were speaking, I was thinking that if schools continue to close, I will have to spend a lot more time with all of them instead of with the wonderful children in my constituency. That is really sad, because they really are the best of us, and they show us why we continue to do the work we do here.

Since schools mainly receive cash per pupil, empty desks mean debts. Debts leave schools and local authorities with little choice in practice, given wider budget constraints.

Teachers and staff end up losing their jobs; their families are then affected in a vicious cycle. After a decade of austerity, there is nothing left to cut. That is why we face the closure of two of our 19 state-funded schools in Lambeth: St Martin-in-the-Fields High School for Girls in Dulwich and West Norwood, and Archbishop Tenison's in my hon. Friend's constituency of Vauxhall.

This is personal for me, as it is for my hon. Friend, because it is happening in Lambeth, but also because my brother went to Archbishop Tenison's and my sister went to St Martin-in-the-Fields. I spent a lot of time there because my mum was always insistent that we went to each other's school events—as the youngest, I certainly enjoyed visiting theirs more than they enjoyed coming to mine, but we spent a lot of time in those schools. Being older than me, they were lucky to get a place in Lambeth at the time, because we had a serious shortage of secondary school places. A lot of the kids in our borough had to go to school out of borough.

When academies came in, although there was a lot of scepticism, people were happy that we were getting more schools in our constituency. We did not think it would create a situation in which some academy chains seemed to be given licence to build—we do not understand why—and allowed to increase their numbers. We did not think that that would affect schools that have been in our area for such a long time. Usually, when we hear about schools closing in Lambeth, it is because they are bad schools. These two schools are not bad. They have been the finest in our area for a very long time.

At the root of the issue is the problem of soaring housing costs, but the Government refuse to give us in London the powers we need to tackle them. We often hear Government Members talking about the “metropolitan liberal elite” and making off-coloured gibes about north London Labour MPs, but inner-city London boroughs continue to experience some of the highest levels of child poverty anywhere in the UK. The latest data from End Child Poverty shows that 29.9% of children living in my constituency of Streatham were growing up in poverty last year—that is 7,465 children. The data also shows that 35.5% of children in Lambeth, the borough my constituency is in, were growing up in poverty last year—that is 21,812 children. This is in one of the richest cities in the entire world. It does not exactly scream “metropolitan liberal elite”.

Housing costs are arguably the largest driving factor behind all of this. They are people's biggest expense. At the heart of the debate is the question of who our city is for: is it a place for families to make their home, or is it a playground for the rich? I will point to a few solutions, focusing particularly on housing.

We need to enhance renters' rights. Average monthly rents in London have risen above £2,500 for the first time. The Government should be using the Renters (Reform) Bill to close the eviction loopholes and give the Mayor of London power to control private rents. We need a higher proportion of genuinely affordable housing for new build developments, not this dodgy definition of 80% of the market rate, which is not affordable for people in my constituency or for most people across London. We need to get empty homes into circulation, as well as a mass council house building programme. I am glad that the next Labour Government

have committed to 100,000 social homes, considering the Conservatives clearly had no plans to build homes, let alone affordable ones.

I heard about a time, way back when, when public sector workers used to get favourable rates on mortgages or even get accommodation to help them. When I think of all the public sector workers who are being priced out with their families, that is something that we should look towards. They should absolutely be paid more and, given what they are doing, we need to keep them in London, but they are all being pushed right out. We need school funding levels to increase and to keep pace with inflation. We need to give local authorities responsibility for in-year admissions, as has been set out in the schools White Paper, and the power to direct all schools to accept local children. They should be given the power to manage academies' reduction of PAN or closure. That is really important.

Loads of people point to how growing up in the country was lovely. I am sure it was—they have a lot of hay fever and such—but I loved my childhood growing up on Brixton Hill in London. Being able to live in this fantastic city as a child made me who I am, and I am really sad that if we do not fix some of these policies, children will not have the wonderful experiences that I had.

3.28 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under you, Mr Hollobone, and to follow such excellent speeches, particularly from my constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney). I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi) for bringing us this debate. I thank the hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds), who I worked with during my relatively short career as lead member for education; he has had a long and distinguished career, both in Hillingdon and at the Local Government Association, and his expertise has really added to the debate. I also thank London Councils and Hounslow's school organisation and access to education department for their briefings.

This is an incredibly important issue for schools, especially as they have faced so many challenges both pre and post covid. Having recently met a group of secondary school headteachers in Hounslow, I know only too well the issues they face. The top issues that they brought to me were school staff leaving in record numbers, the difficulty of recruiting new staff, especially maths teachers, and the difficulty of retaining experienced staff to go up the management ladder in education. They also addressed the lack of specialist support for children with SEND and the huge funding black hole. Those issues, especially the funding challenges, are the direct impact of 13 years of Conservative rule. Just recently, the chair of a board of governors and a large number of parents from just one primary school wrote to me about the impact of funding cuts on them. They make a difficult job even harder for our schools and their staff.

On school closures and pupil numbers, Hounslow borough is seeing a decrease of over 5% in year 7s, and a 10% decline in reception recruitment is expected over the next three years. There has been a particularly strong decline in primary places. Hounslow is having to

[*Ruth Cadbury*]

cut the size of many local schools. It is taking out 25 classes and 850 places over the last, current and next school year.

Before I cover the impact that those issues will have, it is worth considering what is causing the decline. As others have said, the main cause is the housing crisis across London. More and more families are having to move out of London. I was recently contacted by an NHS worker who was unable to find someone from whom she could rent a home locally. She has two young children. She learned that the landlords of the few flats she could afford were not prepared to rent to a family with young children; that is just one example of a London-wide crisis. Working people with young children who can just about get on the housing ladder can do so only outside London, so if they can move out of London, they do. Not only schools but the NHS and businesses have told me that they are struggling to find staff who can afford to live in our city. It is in that context that we are seeing such a decline in school places, and in the number of children on school rolls, across London.

This debate is as much about the housing crisis as it is about schools, but there is another issue raised with me by heads and others: their concern for the increased number of children—we do not know how many—who may still be in London but are not registered in any schools. While many of them may well be being home-educated quite well by their parents, there could be many others who are not. The Government and local authorities have no way of knowing who or where those children are, or how many of them there are. I would like to know what plans the Government have to address that concern.

I will move on to the impact that this contraction in numbers has on our schools. It makes it harder for local authorities to plan school places, particularly as voluntary-aided academies and free schools sit outside the schools organisation system. I look forward to hearing how the Government aim to address that anomaly. As others have said so eloquently, the uncertainty around school numbers puts schools under even greater financial pressure, over and above what they face anyway.

I will also raise another challenge faced by schools in Hounslow and across London, which is the sheer number of in-year applications. That started especially with the generosity with which local families opened up their homes to families fleeing Ukraine, but in our case, the numbers are also affected by Home Office decisions to stand up local hotels as accommodation for asylum seekers; I think we had 11 such hotels in Hounslow at the last count. Then there is the other challenge—the other side of the coin: when those hotels are stood down and emptied by the Home Office, usually with a week or two's notice, those children disappear from our area.

Hounslow received 4,500 in-year school applications last year. It is incredibly difficult for schools to plan when those applications have to be managed under the published admission number system and census system. We are talking about children from Ukraine, Afghanistan and Syria, and asylum seekers from all over the world. Many of those children have additional needs. While schools are providing support, it comes at a cost that they are not compensated for. Not only is there the lack of English language skills—schools need to get those

children up to speed quickly on their spoken, written and listened-to English—but there is need for SEND support. Many of the children are suffering from trauma. Sometimes students—even secondary students—arrive in school mid-year, mid-school career, having never been in formal education. My second question is: will the Minister address the in-year challenge for all local authority officers, and the fact that non-maintained schools are outside the systems? I hope that the Government are listening, and will support schools, students and parents in addressing those challenges.

3.35 pm

Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi) on securing this important debate, and thank her for inviting me to a brilliant school in her constituency earlier this week to see at first hand the impact of falling pupil numbers, and the knock-on impacts on other schools and the community at large. As Members have outlined, those impacts are not to be ignored. Schools with long, rich histories are closing. School leaders and staff have to deal with the uncertainty of not knowing whether their job will exist come September. Parents and children have to cope with the uncertainty of their school potentially shutting.

We have had a range of helpful and insightful speeches and interventions today. My hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall spoke with passion and expertise about issues faced by not only her constituents but schools across London. She rightly spoke about the impact on parents' choice, the need for schools to co-operate and work in partnership with other schools and the local authority, the impact of people being priced out of London, and why finding solutions to those challenges is vital for children and their life chances.

My hon. Friend the Member for Eltham (Clive Efford) made insightful comments about the challenges faced by schools in his constituency, especially around SEND places. My hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma) made similar points, which were hugely helpful. My hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Bell Ribeiro-Addy) made helpful points about the need for truly affordable social homes in London, and the poverty that many communities in the capital face. My hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) spoke powerfully about the implications of falling rolls on the workforce, and on recruitment and retention; I thank her for her contribution.

As has been highlighted, falling pupil numbers and school closures affect not just London. They are impacting different parts of the country at an increasing rate. Recent analysis by *The Guardian* showed that more than 90 English primary schools are to close or are at risk of closure because they are more than two-thirds empty. A quarter of those at-risk schools are in rural villages, and one in six is in a more isolated part of the country. As Members have said, the problem is most pronounced in urban centres; nearly half of at-risk schools are in cities and towns.

While school closures are threatened across the country, it is in London that the problem is most urgent. The total number of primary school pupils in London schools has dropped by over 23,000 since before the pandemic. There are many reasons for that. First, the falling birth

rate, in part caused by the rising cost of housing and the cost of bringing up children, is a major factor. Also, some families have left London in recent years, particularly following the pandemic. Research suggests that a further 2.5% of primary school pupils left for private or home education last year. Many attribute that to the growing number of children struggling with their mental health or not getting the support that they deserve. The same could be said for the increasing number of children with SEND whose parents have taken them out of the school system all together.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall said, most school funding is per pupil, so when numbers start to fall, a school's overall funding falls. The Government rightly changed the rules recently so that all schools are eligible for funding to help manage declining pupil numbers. Association of School and College Leaders general secretary Geoff Barton said:

"Some small primary schools are barely financially sustainable as it is and any loss in pupil numbers is virtually impossible to absorb."

Having spoken to school leaders, I know that the Government's approach to school admissions is clearly a major factor. Instead of operating a logical system for school place planning, the Government have opted for a wild west approach. Instead of encouraging schools to co-operate, the Government incentivised them to compete. We have heard from Members about how perverse incentives have caused some schools to expand in areas where that is not needed, causing other schools nearby to close. We are talking not only about struggling schools with poor track records, but good schools with long and rich histories closing their doors—schools that are tied to their communities and have a big impact on them. No one seems to be able to do anything about it.

Clearly, some factors are beyond the Government's control, but a lot of issues could have been avoided. If we are to put children at the heart of the system, we must take a more careful look at what is going on. My hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) told me about the situation of the St Martin-in-the-Field High School for Girls in her constituency. Shortly before last week's half-term break, staff and pupils were told that their school would close to most year groups from September, and completely from July 2024. That decision came as a terrible shock to the whole school and the wider community, of which the school has been a part for so many years. She pointed to the lack of any role for the local authority in school place planning over the past decade as being part of the problems that have led to St Martin being forced to close. The Government have continued to allow the expansion of some local schools to go unchecked, and local councils have no ability to intervene and stabilise school provision in order to protect schools that are at risk.

With falling birth rates, threats of school closures will increase. The Department for Education expects the number of pupils at state-funded schools to decline by 944,000 over the next decade, but as we have heard, the Government appear to have no long-term vision for dealing with that. Labour has been clear that we want all schools to co-operate with their local authority on admissions and place planning. We want governors' and parents' voices to be heard more consistently when it comes to discussion of the direction of local schools.

We will not impose top-down structures, but we will demand collaboration and co-operation in the best interests of our children and the local communities that schools serve.

As Members have highlighted, even the threat of school closures can have a big impact on everyone in a school community. For school leaders, that threat can be incredibly stressful. Not only are they worried about their own job, but they feel responsible for their staff's employment, and face pressure from parents who are rightly concerned about their children being forced to move school. Teachers in schools at risk are more likely to look for jobs elsewhere, which, during a teacher recruitment and retention crisis, can leave the at-risk schools in an even worse position. School closures also force children to leave the teachers and school support staff with whom they have forged relationships, the routine that they have grown comfortable with, and their friends.

The impact of declining pupil numbers on primary schools is already being seen. In the coming years, those reduced numbers will feed into secondary schools in London and across the country. Labour has been clear that we need a system in which schools are encouraged to co-operate for the shared benefit of teachers, parents and children, rather than compete at the expense of those involved. We need a Government who can deliver a long-term strategy to deal with the impact of the issue, not one who hope to kick the can down the road so that they do not have to address it.

Will the Minister outline the steps he is taking to promote the financial sustainability of schools with falling pupil rolls? What steps is he taking to ensure that schools co-operate on the issue, to their shared benefit? Finally, what is his Department doing to plan for the expected decline in pupil numbers and the impact that will have on schools across the country? I look forward to hearing his remarks and his answers to my questions. Once again, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall, and I restate my praise to her for securing this debate.

3.44 pm

The Minister for Schools (Nick Gibb): It is a pleasure to participate in yet another debate that you are chairing, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi) on securing a debate on this important subject, and for opening it so clearly.

I am aware of the recent report by London Councils on managing surplus places, which highlights the key challenges facing London boroughs. Since the baby boom at the turn of the millennium, we have seen substantial growth in pupil numbers. The Government responded to that by supporting the creation of almost 1.2 million new school places since 2010. In addition to our investment in the free schools programme, the Government have committed over £14 billion of capital grant funding to support local authorities in building new mainstream school places between 2011 and 2026. It is the largest investment in school capacity in at least two generations, and includes £3.5 billion for London alone.

I can recall many debates on the "Today" programme with my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds), back when he represented

[Nick Gibb]

the Local Government Association, about whether there were enough school places in London; it was almost an annual event for us—and here we are today. As we have seen, population trends do change. In London, the number of young people is falling faster than elsewhere. This is for several reasons, including decreasing birth rates, changes in international migration patterns since the UK's exit from the EU, and more families relocating outside of London since the pandemic, as my hon. Friend explained so well.

The Government recognise the crucial role that local authorities play in planning local services for their community and championing the interests of children. Local authorities are legally responsible for ensuring that there are enough school places in their area. It is for local authorities, working with academy trusts and other local partners, to balance the supply and demand of school places in line with changing demographics. They have done so for many years. The uncertainty regarding future demographic changes means it is even more prudent for local authorities to remain flexible.

Ruth Cadbury: I am grateful for the Minister's remarks about the role of local authorities. Will he admit that the free schools programme over the last 10 or so years made it very difficult for local authorities to plan school numbers? Back then, during a time of growth, we desperately needed a mixed, non-faith school between Chiswick and Hounslow for the whole of the Isleworth and Brentford area, yet the resources were taken by a free faith school, and a large proportion of its catchment came from a long distance away. Had the local authority been able to broker that decision, we might have had a more locally approached solution. Now we have declining numbers, and I am raising the contrary issue.

Nick Gibb: I understand the point the hon. Member is making, but free schools have been crucial in raising standards in our school system. The issue was not just numbers, but what we could do to deliver standards. I can think of a school in the constituency of the hon. Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma) that opened in 2018 and was in January judged as outstanding. These are important factors to take into account. This is about quality as well as numbers.

Some spare capacity should be retained in the system to manage shifting demand, provide for parental choice and support the effective management of the admissions system. Local factors should be carefully assessed, along with considerations of quality, diversity and accessibility of local provision, and the forecast demand for places, in determining the most appropriate approach in each area. Local authorities are well placed to do that. They have seen periods of decline, bulges and shifts in local patterns before, and have shown they are adept at managing them.

The Department expects local authorities to work collaboratively with their partners to ensure that they are managing the local school estate efficiently and reducing or re-purposing high levels of spare capacity, to avoid undermining the educational offer or financial viability of schools in their area. I know that local authorities, together with trusts, are already considering a range of options for the reutilisation of space. That

includes, for example, co-locating nursery provision, as well as options for reconfiguration, including via remodelling, amalgamations and closures where this is the best course of action. Lambeth has rightly been proactive in addressing this issue and is consulting on reducing the capacity of eight primary schools.

The Department continues to engage with local authorities on a regular basis to discuss their plans and potential solutions. One solution is the support and benefits obtained from being part of a strong and established multi-academy trust. The Department believes that all schools should be in strong families of schools, benefiting from the resilience that that brings and the support of the best in the group. That is why, over time, the Department would like all schools to be in a strong multi-academy trusts. By centralising operational and administrative functions, schools within a MAT can save time and money, which can be reinvested directly into areas that have the greatest impact.

The hon. Member for Vauxhall referred to housing issues, as did a number of other Members, including the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), who has just intervened. The provision of affordable housing is part of the Government's plan to build more homes and provide aspiring homeowners with a step on to the housing ladder. Our £11.5 billion affordable homes programme will deliver thousands of affordable homes for both rent and to buy across the country. For London, £4 billion has been allocated, to deliver much-needed affordable and social housing in the capital. Since 2010, we have delivered over 632,000 new affordable homes, including over 440,000 affordable homes for rent, of which over 162,000 are for social rent. In fact, more than a fifth of overall delivery between April 2010 and March 2022 was in London, with over 89,000 homes for rent.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy: Can the Minister please outline how he defines “affordable” and why, if the homes are “affordable”, so many of my constituents find themselves unable to afford them?

Nick Gibb: That question is for another debate, I suspect, especially as I have only six minutes left; I would love to debate that issue with the hon. Member on another occasion. However, we are absolutely aware of the concern and the problem, which is why we are investing, as I said, £4 billion in affordable housing in London alone.

Although the challenge facing mainstream schools is evident, it is important to recognise that there is still a need to increase the supply of places, particularly for children with special educational needs and disabilities—a point made by the hon. Members for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon) during this debate.

The number of children with SEND continues to increase in London, providing local authorities with an opportunity to think creatively about how to organise and structure high-needs provision alongside or within mainstream schools. Some £400 million of the £2 billion in additional funding for schools announced in the autumn statement will go to local authorities' high-needs budgets and we are investing £2.6 billion in capital funding between 2022 and 2025 to help to deliver new school places for children with special educational needs.

Across London boroughs, councils will work with schools and the wider community to find alternative solutions to closure wherever possible. However, the school estate needs to be managed efficiently, which sometimes means reducing or repurposing high levels of spare capacity, including through closure, where places are not needed in the long term.

I know that the hon. Member for Vauxhall is particularly concerned about two schools in Lambeth that are in different stages on the path to closure: Archbishop Tenison's School and St Martin-in-the-Fields High School for Girls. Both have a rich history going back hundreds of years. Their trustees explored all the options available and came to the difficult decision to seek a closure, through mutual consent with the Department. I understand how troubling that will be for pupils and their families. School closures are always a last resort. When a school closure is proposed, the regional director will work in consultation with the local authority and trust to gather information and assess the options, with the Secretary of State taking the final decision on the closure of academies. Minimising disruption for children at these schools will always be the Department's top priority.

The hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) raised the important point about empty places when pupil numbers fall and the impact that has on school budgets. To support local authorities to meet their sufficiency duty, the Department for Education provides them with revenue funding for growth and falling rolls, through the dedicated school grant. From 2024-25, the Government will additionally give local authorities more flexibilities to support schools seeing a significant decline in pupil numbers, where these places will still be needed within the next three to five years. Local authorities will be able to use their growth and falling rolls funding allocations to meet the revenue costs of repurposing school places.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner requested a ban on academy trusts disposing of school land. Land and buildings are in fact held in trust, and the most common result of a closure is for the land and building to revert back either to the local authority or to the diocese if it was a Church school.

The hon. Member for Eltham (Clive Efford) raised Avery Hill, which I would be very happy to discuss with him. The free schools programme has been pivotal in meeting the demand for places since 2010, and has provided thousands of good new places across the

country. In 2022, pupils in primary and secondary free schools made more progress on average than pupils in other schools. I have already referred to the outstanding free school in Ealing, the Ada Lovelace Church of England High School, which recently received a very good Ofsted report.

The performance of schools within the Harris Federation is even more impressive. Harris is one of the strongest and most successful multi-academy trusts. It educates more than 40,000 children in 52 schools across London, and 98% of its schools have been judged either good or outstanding by Ofsted. The Department continuously reviews the viability of all schools in the free schools pipeline, and we are looking closely at all the arguments for and against the free school at Avery Hill. We will open the school only when we are confident that it will be good, viable, sustainable and successful.

I am proud of the work that the Government have done since 2010 to ensure that we have school places where and when they are needed. As population trends change in London and across the country, we will keep supporting local authorities and trusts to ensure that any changes to local schools come with minimal disruption to our children and young people.

3.56 pm

Florence Eshalomi: I thank all Members who have spoken in the debate. The sense is that this issue will not go away—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. I am afraid that a Division has been called in the House. Does the hon. Lady wish to return in half an hour, or is she happy to end the debate now?

Florence Eshalomi: I am happy to end the debate now. I thank the Minister. I note that he has not answered any of my questions, so will he meet me?

Nick Gibb indicated assent.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. I believe that there are two votes, so the sitting will be resumed at 4.27 pm. I am ending the debate without the question being put.

3.57 pm

Sitting suspended for Divisions in the House.

Hazaras in Afghanistan

4.27 pm

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): This debate can run until 4.57 pm.

Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the situation of Hazaras in Afghanistan.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I am extremely grateful for the opportunity to have this debate. I am also grateful to my constituents who have come to join me today. Hazaras from not just Peterborough but across the country are sitting in the Gallery, listening to the debate—the first, I think, in the Palace of Westminster devoted purely to the Hazaras and their situation in Afghanistan.

The Hazaras are one of Afghanistan's largest ethnic groups. Exact numbers are unknown, as there has been no accurate census of the Hazara population, but some estimate it to be between 20% and 30% of Afghanistan's population. They are predominantly, but not exclusively, Shi'a. The number is often disputed by the Hazara community themselves, who believe that they are underrepresented in order to be denied adequate funding and political representation.

For over a century, the Hazara community has suffered from targeted discrimination, persecution and massacres because of their ethnicity and religious sect. Identifiable by distinctive features, Hazaras cannot hide their ethnicity from aggressors. As early as the 1890s, about 60% of the Hazara population were slaughtered during genocidal campaigns. Those who survived were dispossessed of their land, displaced from their homes, with some even being sold as slaves. Oppression continued throughout the 20th century, as Hazaras were denied access to education and political rights. To this day, Hazara areas in Afghanistan remain some of the poorest parts of the country.

I am proud to be chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Hazaras. As I say, I have a number of Hazara constituents in the great city of Peterborough. The community there is growing, with over 140 Hazara families living in my city. They have an amazing community centre called the Peterborough Afghan Shia Association—or PASA—to help residents with numerous issues. They are a real asset to my city. That is why this debate is so important to me personally. It is paramount that we raise awareness of and stand up for minorities such as the Hazaras in Afghanistan.

The Hazara community in Peterborough are not just any community; they are our neighbours, our co-workers and our friends. They have been targeted in Afghanistan in places of worship, over cultural festivals, in sports clubs, at wedding ceremonies, at hospitals and schools, during peaceful protests, on public transportation and in the streets. For example, on 8 May 2021, a Hazara girls high school was attacked in Kabul, killing over 100 students and injuring over 160 others. On 19 April 2021, two other Hazara schools were attacked in Kabul, again killing 126 students and injuring 60. Two days later a Hazara mosque was attacked in northern Afghanistan, killing more than 50 worshipers and injuring hundreds more. On 30 September 2022, at attack at an education centre killed more than 60 female Hazara students and injured over 100. Those are just a few examples of attacks against Hazaras in Afghanistan

over the last few years. Unfortunately, that is the tip of the iceberg, and it is something that the Hazara community have to live with each and every day in Afghanistan.

The persecution of the Hazaras has continued into the Taliban era, but it has been around for a lot longer than that. Thousands of Hazaras were killed in massacres during the civil war, as they were under the Taliban Government. Since the takeover of Afghanistan, again by the Taliban, in August 2021, the plight of the Hazaras has only increased.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for bringing this debate forward and thank him for being a champion—I use that word honestly because it is the right one—in this House for the Hazaras. Other debates he has secured in Westminster Hall have been an indication of that. The Hazaras have long faced discrimination and violence. When the Taliban were last in power the Hazaras faced targeted violence. They fled to Iran and Pakistan for safety, such was their fear of what would happen to them or their families if they remained. The Taliban's restrictions disproportionately affect women from religious minorities. As chair of the APPG for international freedom of religion or belief, I have spoken for the Hazaras before, and I would do so again. I commend the hon. Gentleman, and I also suggest that what he is doing—what we in this House are doing—today is being a voice for the Hazaras, and for their community here.

Paul Bristow: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention; today is just the start. This is the first dedicated Commons debate on the issue, but we have raised questions on it before. I want to work with Members such as the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin)—and others too—so that we can end the suffering. I hope that this is just the start of an extended campaign to protect Hazaras in Afghanistan.

Hazaras face suicide attacks, forced displacement, torture and even execution. Those displaced people then have to make the harrowing journey, as the hon. Member for Strangford said, to find safety in other countries in the region and in Europe. To date, however, not a single perpetrator has ever been brought to justice, and the attacks against the Hazaras have been allowed to go on without punishment. Enough is enough; this cannot continue.

Action is required to thoroughly investigate these crimes, bring perpetrators to justice and take further steps to protect the Hazara people in Afghanistan. Alongside colleagues and external advisers, I was part of the inquiry into the situation of Hazaras in Afghanistan, which was published last year. In its report, there were numerous recommendations for the United Kingdom Government, as well as the International Criminal Court and the UN. The recommendations to the Government were:

“Monitor the situation of the Hazara, collect and preserve the evidence of the atrocities...Conduct an inquiry into the issue of sexual violence against the Hazara in Afghanistan...Recognise the specific targeting of the Hazara in Afghanistan and their vulnerability as a result (including for the purposes of asylum resettlement to the UK under”

the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme. The report also recommended that the Government:

“Assess the situation and identify a comprehensive response plan, including in accordance with the UK's duties under the Genocide Convention...Assess whether and how the Hazara

communities have access to humanitarian aid provided by the UK...Ensure that the UK Aid provided to Afghanistan researches the Hazara communities...Engage in a dialogue with Afghan-neighbouring countries to ensure that the Hazara fleeing persecution in Afghanistan are provided with assistance and not returned to Afghanistan...Impose the Magnitsky sanctions against all those responsible for the atrocities...Call upon the Taliban-run 'caretaker government' to ensure that all atrocities against the community are investigated and the perpetrators are brought to justice...Provide capacity assistance to help with investigations and prosecutions of the perpetrators."

We, along with the international community, have a responsibility to do whatever we can to protect and to bring about justice whenever we can.

Taiwo Owatemi (Coventry North West) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing such an important debate. As mentioned by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), the Hazara community has long faced persecution and attacks in Afghanistan. I represent a large Hazara community in Coventry North West, and I understand how the group has been overlooked and forgotten in the broader understanding of Afghanistan and the wider region. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Government must heed the recommendations of the UN special rapporteur's report regarding the protection of the historically persecuted Hazara community?

Paul Bristow: I agree with the hon. Lady. We should pay absolute attention to recommendations from the UN and others, to ensure that we end the persecution of Hazaras and bring about a decent resolution for that community. We and the international community have a responsibility to do whatever we can. The report's recommendations are a good start in achieving that, and there was considerable value in producing it—something that is underlined by a number of references made to it by other Parliaments around the world and by the Hazara community itself.

The Hazara community is now finally getting a voice internationally, after many years of suffering at the hands of the Taliban and other extremist groups without there being the same sort of awareness of these atrocities. Last week, I spoke remotely at an event held in the Canadian Parliament, organised by the Hazara community in Canada. This is not just a UK fight; it is an international fight, where Hazara communities across the world can unite to press for justice. The seminar was hosted by Members of the Canadian Parliament and its aim was to discuss the ongoing atrocities in Afghanistan, with a particular focus on human rights violations against Hazaras.

Those are positive steps, but they are not enough. The persecution of these people cannot continue. We must use our diplomatic channels and foreign aid budget in a targeted way specifically to assist Hazaras as well as other persecuted minority groups. Crimes against the Hazara in Afghanistan may, because of the intention to eliminate their culture, faith and way of life, constitute genocide. Given the severity, there is a case for something like the independent tribunal into crimes against the Uyghurs, which was chaired by Sir Geoffrey Nice KC, to be established and to examine the evidence regarding Hazaras in Afghanistan.

Whatever happens, we cannot walk away from our responsibility to this great people. There has been silence for too long, but I am determined to continue working

with other members of the all-party parliamentary group, and with those in the Hazara community in my city and beyond, to ensure that this does not continue.

Lastly, I would like to put on record my tribute to the Hazara community—a community I did not know a great deal about before I became a Member of Parliament, to be honest. I have made some fantastic friends over the past couple of years in my constituency and through my involvement with the APPG. I hope we can continue to work together and to make a positive contribution to the Hazara community, some of whom are in the public gallery here today. You are no longer just my constituents—you are my friends.

4.39 pm

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I commend the hon. Member for Peterborough (Paul Bristow) for securing this important debate and for the work he and fellow MPs in the APPG do to protect and enhance the human rights and status of Hazaras around the world.

In the aftermath of the withdrawal of international troops from Afghanistan, violence against the Hazara population has escalated. With a long history of persecution, including by the Taliban, the threat of genocide is real.

It has been 10 months since the APPG published its excellent report, which documented human rights violations against the people of Afghanistan—in particular, the Hazara ethnic and religious group. According to Human Rights Watch, the Shi'a minority has been subject to suicide bombings, as well as sustained attacks on mosques, girls' schools and workplaces. The Taliban leadership may have moderated its rhetoric to please the international community—it claims it will protect all ethnic groups—but it has done nothing to stem the growing number of crimes being committed by its fighters.

The only hope for the Hazara people is that the international community stays true to its commitment to human rights and pressures the Taliban into concessions. Although there are limitations on what we can do, the United Kingdom and the international community have a legal, moral and political obligation to protect the Hazara people. The UK Government should allocate resources to provide immediate humanitarian aid to the affected Hazara communities.

I assure my constituents from Hazara communities, and the Hazara community around the UK, that they are not alone. As the hon. Member for Peterborough said, this is only a start. I assure the Hazara people in Afghanistan that I and colleagues in this House will stand up for them and raise the issues that their communities face in these difficult times. They have my support. I also assure my constituents that they have my support and that they can come to me whenever they feel they need my support. I am there for them.

4.41 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Mr Andrew Mitchell): It is a pleasure to serve on your watch, Mr Hollobone, in my second appearance in Westminster Hall today.

I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Paul Bristow) for securing the debate. I pay tribute at the outset to all his hard work in support of the Hazara people not only in the UK but internationally.

[Mr Andrew Mitchell]

We all recognise that, in his impressive chairmanship of the all-party parliamentary group, he is doing a great deal of good to advance this most important cause—that of the Hazara people.

I also thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who reliably intervened, as he does so often in these debates, in support of the oppressed, wherever they are around the world. I also thank the hon. Member for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi), who spoke eloquently in support of the Hazara people in a brief intervention, and the hon. Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin), who made it clear that his support for the Hazara community and his knowledge of this issue are extensive and helpful.

I will try to respond to all the points raised during the debate, and I will start with the current situation. The Hazara people make up around 10% of the population of Afghanistan, and they are overwhelmingly Shi'a. They have historically been one of the country's most persecuted groups and they have faced continued repression under the Taliban.

The UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan, Richard Bennett, has reported numerous serious human rights abuses committed against the Hazara people by the Taliban since August 2021, including summary executions, enforced disappearances, arbitrary arrests, torture and other ill treatment. He has documented how Hazaras have been forcibly evicted and have had their land expropriated, often with only a few days' notice.

In September 2021 alone, at least 2,800 Hazara residents were forcibly displaced from 15 villages in the provinces of Daykundi and Uruzgan. When community representatives called for an investigation, they were arrested. The special rapporteur has reported a “clear trend towards Pashtunisation”, with the exclusion of minority groups from decision making and the failure of the Taliban to protect at-risk, predominantly Hazara institutions. There are also reports from the United Nations of an increase in inflammatory speech, both online and in mosques during Friday prayers, including calls for Hazaras to be killed.

The Hazara people have suffered a series of deadly attacks by Daesh and other terrorist groups. There was a horrific attack on the Kaaj educational centre last year, which killed dozens of young people and was outrightly condemned by my noble Friend the Minister for South Asia. The Taliban responded by expelling Hazara students from universities for planning protests against the attacks on their community. The Taliban have a duty to protect the whole population of Afghanistan for as long as they are in power, yet they are often the greatest source of the repression. The UK Government and Members across the House condemn them utterly for that.

I will turn now to the action the UK Government are taking. We closely monitor the human rights situation in Afghanistan and work with our allies to press the Taliban to respect the rights of all Afghans and protect Hazaras and other minority groups from terrorist attacks.

We urge the Taliban to engage in a constructive dialogue with all parts of Afghan society and to establish inclusive governance. We raise our concerns about the Hazaras and other minority groups in the United Nations and other multilateral fora. In March we worked with the Security Council to renew the mandate of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan and to call for inclusive governance with meaningful participation of minorities.

We are also working closely with international partners to ensure that credible human rights monitoring and accountability mechanisms are in place. In October we co-sponsored a Human Rights Council resolution to extend the mandate of the United Nations special rapporteur. We are working with the international community to respond to the recommendations the rapporteur made to the council in his February report.

My hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough took part in the cross-party Hazara Inquiry, and we are grateful to him and his colleagues for their report. It has done much to raise awareness of the plight of Hazaras in Afghanistan. In line with the report's recommendations, we continue to monitor and document discrimination and abuses against Hazaras, both through the United Nations and other institutions, and through our own programme work. We have discussed aid distribution with our partners. The UN World Food Programme has told us that there is no evidence of systematic discrimination against Hazara people in aid distribution, but we will of course continue to monitor the situation. We continue to consider the other report recommendations and to discuss the most effective course of action with our international partners.

Ministers and officials engage regularly with a range of Afghans, including Hazaras, to ensure our policy and programming reflect the needs of the entire population. Our most recent contact with Hazara groups was between officials and a representative from the Hazara National Congress on 24 May. My noble Friend the Minister for South Asia last met UK-based Hazara groups in December, and we will continue to engage with the Hazara diaspora. We also provided a platform to Hazaras at the ministerial conference on freedom of religion or belief in July, which allowed them to raise awareness of the situation of Hazaras in Afghanistan and to exchange views with Ministers and policymakers from across the world.

I will conclude by emphasising that the British Government will continue to work closely with international partners to press the Taliban on our human rights concerns, including the treatment of the Hazara people. We will also continue to work to ensure credible monitoring and accountability mechanisms are in place, including by supporting the UN special rapporteur. It is a tragedy to witness the reversal of the human rights progress made in Afghanistan over the last 20 years. We will never compromise on our belief and insistence that all Afghans, regardless of ethnicity, religion or gender, should be free to play a full role in their communities, their economy and their governance. Without a more inclusive system, Afghanistan will not be able to progress and to fulfil the potential of its people.

Question put and agreed to.

Asylum-seeking Children: Hotel Accommodation

4.50 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the accommodation of asylum-seeking children in hotels.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Hollobone.

In preparation for the debate, I spoke to many organisations that support unaccompanied asylum-seeking children day in, day out. It was impossible not to be moved by some of their testimonies. A children's rights officer at the Scottish Refugee Council shared this:

"All the children I worked with demonstrated little to no knowledge of systems in the UK prior to arrival, they were completely bewildered. They were also terrified, terrified of anyone they perceived to be in a position of authority. At times that included me, until they got to know me. One girl even asked me if I intended to send her back to her village, where she was at risk of female genital mutilation..."

Another girl I worked with had been in Scotland for around two months when I received a call from the hospital asking me to attend, as she was very distressed. She was pregnant. As soon as the doctor left us alone, she broke down sobbing, asking me if the Home Office would kill her for being unmarried and pregnant."

Those are just a couple of anecdotes, but they speak to the reality of life in the hostile environment for many highly vulnerable children who have reached our shores. Those anecdotes should shame UK Ministers who have used degrading language such as "asylum shopping" or "invasion" to describe people risking their lives for safety and refuge in this country. Many have experienced physical and sexual violence, persecution, torture, human rights abuses and extreme poverty. Their perilous journeys to the UK have exposed them to exploitation, human trafficking and modern slavery.

Two years ago, when the Home Office started to house unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in hotels, we were told that it was on a short-term, emergency basis until permanent placements could be found via the national transfer scheme. It should not be forgotten that such hotels are considered to operate unlawfully: under section 20 of the Children Act 1989, children under 16 should be in the care of local authorities, not in unregulated accommodation where they lack the same protections as other looked-after children. Children whom the Refugee Council in England has spoken to say that they feel anxious, frightened and lonely in the hotels, with no phone to communicate and clothes that do not fit them properly.

Since the Home Office took charge of the day-to-day care of unaccompanied children, at least 4,600 of them—some as young as 10—have been placed in such accommodation. We know that the number is rising, but up-to-date and accurate figures have been hard to come by.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): I thank the hon. Lady for securing the debate. She is making a powerful speech on an important topic. In January, at Prime Minister's questions, I asked about the 200 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children who were missing from Home Office-run hotels. Two months later, a response to one of my parliamentary questions stated that 186 of those children—some of the most vulnerable

young people in the country—were still missing. Does the hon. Lady agree that if we as politicians are not safeguarding the most vulnerable children in the country, we are letting them down severely?

Deidre Brock: I absolutely agree. I will elaborate on this, but it is our moral and legal duty to assume responsibility for those children, and that has been sadly lacking from the Government and the Home Office.

In early April, the Children's Commissioner for England requested data on the number of children in Home Office hotels since July 2021. I understand—I hope the Minister will bring us up to date—that the Home Office has yet to reply to that statutory data request. I believe that is unprecedented, so I will be very interested in whether the Minister can explain why that information has not been provided and when the Home Secretary will endeavour to do so.

Part of the issue is that the real number of children in the system is obscured by the visual age, or "glance", assessment process. The Refugee Council report "Identity Crisis" highlights the cases of 233 children that it supported last year, 94% of whom the Home Office wrongly judged to be over 18. They were housed with adults, with no access to support or education and at clear risk of abuse and neglect. On top of that, last year the independent chief inspector of borders and immigration found staff at some hotels without Disclosure and Barring Service checks.

Shockingly, despite repeated warnings by the police that children would be targeted by criminal networks, the Home Office has failed to prevent hundreds from going missing, as the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) referred to. She mentioned the 440 occurrences that we know of and the 186 children who remained missing as of April 2023. Members from across the House have asked time and again about that, but have received little detail on what action is being taken.

The UK Government's inability or unwillingness to guarantee the safety of those children has been condemned at home and abroad. More than 100 charities wrote an open letter to the Prime Minister in January calling for the Home Office to stop accommodating separated children in hotels, without delay. UN experts echoed that call in April, commenting that the UK is failing

"under international human rights law to...prevent trafficking of children."

A report published by the independent chief inspector of borders and immigration in October last year recommended that a viable and sustainable exit strategy from the use of hotels should be delivered within six months. The Home Office has no exit strategy; instead, Ministers are doubling down. The asylum hotel accommodation system is becoming institutionalised, and the Illegal Migration Bill—or, as it is known by some, the refugee ban Bill—will empower the Home Secretary to accommodate even more children outside the care system.

Under article 22 of the UN convention on the rights of the child, children seeking refugee status must receive appropriate protection and humanitarian assistance, but the Illegal Migration Bill is effectively a ban on the right to claim asylum if the claimant arrived in the UK irregularly, such as through trafficking or modern slavery,

[Deidre Brock]

regardless of their individual circumstances. It will create a two-tier system where the immigration status of refugee and asylum-seeking children overrides their rights as children in the UK. It has been said to me that, in the eyes of the Home Office, they are seen as illegal migrant first, everything else second.

Analysis by the Refugee Council based on publicly available sources and conservative estimates suggests that 45,000 children could be detained in the UK under the Government's plans. Both the Children's Commissioner and the chief inspector have warned about the pressure that that will put on local authorities in England to fulfil their duties under the Children Act.

The Bill also includes an attack on devolution, which is unfortunately becoming customary from the UK Government. Clause 19 gives the Home Secretary the unilateral power to extend the provisions to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Lady on obtaining the debate and doing the research beforehand. What is her experience of the Home Office's interaction with the devolved Scottish Government and local authorities in Scotland? In Wales, we have found its approach extremely disappointing—riding roughshod over devolution and not taking any notice of the way that we treat children in Wales.

Deidre Brock: I agree entirely. That has certainly been the experience of the many different organisations that I have spoken to in Scotland, and that is what they say to me. As always with this Government, the proposals that Scottish Ministers put to UK Ministers are often either ignored or not taken fully into account. Again, I hope that the Minister can assure us otherwise.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): I congratulate the hon. Lady on obtaining the debate. Further to the intervention by the hon. Member for Llanelli (Dame Nia Griffith), whose constituency neighbours mine, we have a specific issue in Carmarthenshire, where a hotel will be used to house asylum seekers without any consultation whatsoever with the local authority. The Welsh Government have a policy that Wales is a nation of sanctuary, and it is beyond my understanding why the UK Government would act unilaterally without discussion with the Welsh Government or Carmarthenshire County Council.

Deidre Brock: I was looking at a contribution by the Local Government Association, which I believe operates only in England, and that seems to be one of its bones of contention too, along with the fact that insufficient moneys are being provided to support the welfare of these children and other asylum seekers. Again, I hope that the Minister will address that point.

The Scottish guardianship scheme, run through the Scottish Refugee Council and the Aberlour charity, provides personal, sustained support for these children, and it is funded by and delivered on behalf of the Scottish Government. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), who will be winding up the debate for the SNP, has urged the UK Government to provide a similar scheme to support, in particular, young people in care in Scotland.

Clause 23 of the Illegal Migration Bill strips Scottish Ministers of their powers under the Scottish Parliament's Children (Scotland) Act 1995 to support and assist victims of trafficking if those victims meet removal criteria, with very limited exceptions. Given that that clearly encroaches on devolved responsibilities, will the Minister tell us why the legislative consent motion process was not engaged? Scottish local authorities are responsible for caring for these children and treating them as they would other looked-after children. If there are credible indicators of exploitation or other issues, local authorities have obligations under Scots law to intervene. Under the European convention on human rights, Police Scotland and local authorities have a duty to protect, investigate and take people out of a trafficking situation, but that will clash with the requirements on Home Office officials to remove people.

Even if those powers are used sparingly, as the UK Government claim they will be, organisations and charities in Scotland remain terrified about the effect of moving responsibility to the Home Office and away from Guardianship Scotland, the scheme I mentioned that is delivered on behalf of the Scottish Government to all unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and survivors of child trafficking. The Scottish Refugee Council says that some of these children are so afraid of the Home Office that they are up the entire night before their interview, praying that they will not be removed or detained. The possibility of being taken into Home Office care, coupled with the closing down of asylum and trafficking protections, while the prospect of removal looms, will lead only to more children running away. That will be a powerful recruitment tool for traffickers, who might look like a preferable option over being deported to Rwanda or remaining in detention.

We in the SNP have said repeatedly that creating safe and legal routes is the only realistic way to disrupt the human traffickers' business model. If the Home Office has no interest in creating an asylum system that is based on fairness and dignity, it should devolve the necessary powers to the Scottish Parliament to allow Scotland to do so.

In the meantime, we need answers from the Home Office, so I close with these questions. Will the Minister give us the latest figures on how many unaccompanied asylum-seeking children who went missing from Home Office hotels are still missing? Will the Home Office commit to publishing a written report on the circumstances surrounding those missing children, including immediate steps to prevent similar issues from happening again? Finally, will the Minister advise whether and how an order from the Home Secretary under clause 16 will supersede protective orders issued by the Scottish courts? As a signatory state to the United Nations convention on the rights of the child, the UK needs to step up and meet its responsibility to uphold all children's rights to protection, health and education.

The children's rights officer from the Scottish Refugee Council whom I mentioned earlier recalled a boy from Afghanistan she had worked with through the guardianship service who was haunted by the image of his inconsolable mother saying goodbye to him. Rather than compounding the fear and trauma of children like him, we have a legal and moral duty to look after them.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. The debate can last until 5.57 pm. I am obliged to begin calling the Front Benchers no later than 5.34 pm, so the four Members standing have just about half an hour between them. The guideline limits for the Front Benchers are five minutes for the SNP spokesman, five minutes for the Opposition spokesman and 10 minutes for the Minister, and then, hopefully, Deidre Brock will have three minutes at the end in which to sum up the debate.

5.6 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you, Mr Hollobone, for calling me to speak; it is not often that I get called first, so this is a real pleasure.

I commend the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) for securing the debate. I spoke to her beforehand. She has a big heart and she brings forward issues that concern us. She referred to a moral obligation. I, too, feel that we have a moral obligation to deliver for those who seek sanctuary and help. I have been very clear and consistent in my approach to the refugee crisis and I will be equally clear today. It is a real pleasure to see the shadow spokespersons and the Minister in their places. I know that the Minister will try to address some of the questions that we will put his way.

As I said, I believe that we have a moral obligation to help those who are displaced in the best way that we can. I believe very much in the foreign aid budget and in giving a fresh start to women and children who have been oppressed and are in danger, or have left danger.

My heart is for the family unit. I am very much a family person; I focus on family. I understand that we cannot take the world in and that we must be selective about who comes to our country. I do not believe that limited capacity should be given to every young, single, fit man who is able to build a life safely in other countries. However, today's debate is on a matter that is close to my heart—children who are in need of compassion, care and a decent standard of living.

There are not many people in the Chamber who will not be bothered by the subject of this debate when they see the photographs and the stories on TV. Indeed, in our constituencies, we experience the cases and hear the heartbreaking stories that the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith referred to.

Since June 2021, 4,500 unaccompanied migrant children, some as young as 10, have been placed in hotels. I was shocked to learn that some 440 children have gone missing from hotels and that, as of April 2023, 186 of those children still had not been found.

Child trafficking is the most horrible and destructive crime, committed by those who have no morals and no scruples about what they do, and it is not limited to third-world countries; it happens here daily. Data from the UK's national referral mechanism for the year ending December 2021 showed an increase of 9% in the number of potential child victims being referred compared with the previous year—an increase from 5,028 to 5,468. That is a stark figure, and it should give us some focus.

It grieves me to think of a child coming from the frying pan of a war-torn nation, with the ravages that that brings with it, and seeking safety in our great nation of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland only to become a victim of trafficking. We are under an obligation to prevent that from happening.

I believe that children in hotels must be treated in the same way as looked-after children in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. There must be accountability for their wellbeing. With the greatest of respect, I am not sure that children are currently being looked after to an acceptable standard. I seek the Minister's assurance that that is the case, especially since children in Home Office hotels are not classed as looked-after children, which I suggest means that the appropriate protections and safety measures may not be in place. Prolonged stays in hotels have an impact on whether children will meet the 13-week rule for care leaver support once they move into local authority care.

I am conscious of the wee note that you sent me, Mr Hollobone; I will comply with your request and conclude. I commend the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith for bringing this issue forward. It must be addressed. I think that other Members, in their contributions, will add to our requests and to the concern that we have in our hearts for asylum-seeking children in hotels. I look to the Minister for a clear and concise strategy for these children, to fulfil our obligations as a nation that simply does the right thing. We have a chance to get this right. We must take that opportunity and deliver for the asylum-seeking children in hotels right across this great nation—this nation that reaches out and helps. I know that the Minister wants to help, but it is important that, through this debate, we receive the assurances that we seek and have our requests addressed.

5.11 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Hollobone. It is a particular pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who gave a typically eloquent and heartfelt speech. I am also grateful to the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) for securing this important debate and for her powerful introduction to it.

In July 2021, bypassing councils and operating outside the statutory national transfer system, the Home Office started using hotels to house unaccompanied children who have experienced unimaginable horror and upheaval coming to our country in search of safety. This was initially characterised by Ministers as an emergency measure and, as we have heard, since then there have been 447 missing episodes, and 186 children are still missing, according to figures revealed in a parliamentary question in April. A significant number of those children went missing from a hotel in Hove, which neighbours my constituency. Brighton and Hove prides itself on being a city of sanctuary, and the safeguarding crisis created by the Home Office remains a matter of profound concern to our community.

I shall touch on just three things: first, the lack of legal basis for this Home Office practice and regulatory failure; secondly, the Government legislation that makes matters worse; and thirdly, what safeguarding for these truly vulnerable children should really mean.

First, Brighton and Hove City Council has been raising concerns about the dangerous practice of using these hotels for the best part of two years, since Ministers first started bypassing councils. After months of obfuscation, on 24 January, when Mr Speaker granted my urgent question about the hotels and missing children, the

[Caroline Lucas]

Secretary of State did not even show up; instead, she sent the Immigration Minister, who again is here today. Meanwhile, as we have heard, multiple children's charities have been clear that they consider there to be

"no legal basis for placing children in Home Office hotel accommodation".

In April, UN experts called for the UK Government to

"put an end to the practice of placing unaccompanied children in hotels".

While there has been a significant reduction in the practice in the first quarter of this year, shockingly, the Government are now legislating to provide a legal basis for hotel use to continue.

These hotels quite simply should not be used, and when they have been, serious safeguarding questions have gone unanswered. For example, earlier this year, I met both the independent chief inspector of borders and immigration—the ICIBI—and the Ofsted chief inspector. I raised the concern with both of them that the use of these hotels amounts to the Home Office running unregistered children's homes with no inspection framework. I have since written to and questioned Ministers repeatedly to ask: if they persist in using these hotels against all the advice, will they at least consider an Ofsted-led inspection regime? As with many other important questions, the non-answer is that Ministers consider the best place for children to be a local authority placement—well, yes, it is, but the Government are not doing that. I have had yet another letter to that effect this week, which makes it clear that, in fact, they expect hotel use to continue. Indeed, Brighton and Hove City Council has just been warned that the Government may use the hotel in Hove again, despite the time that has been available for proper planning to avoid that. Will the Minister commit today to a full and immediate consultation with the local authority on all aspects of the scheme, including its legality, before any more children are placed there?

I sincerely hope that the steps the Government are taking to increase foster placements work, but I know from discussions with directors of children's services that there is an acute national shortage of such placements, and we should not forget that, with their 13 years of cuts, that is something for which Ministers are also responsible.

As we have heard, the Government are now pushing through their unspeakably cruel and immoral Illegal Migration Bill, which breaks international law. It will strip children of their rights to claim asylum, legislate for the use of hotels, and increase the risk of children going missing. Like the Children's Commissioner, and in concert with the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith, I am gravely concerned that, as a result of young people's fear that they will be deported at age 18, potentially to Rwanda, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children will be more likely to go missing from care to avoid that, and therefore be at even greater risk of exploitation and abuse by traffickers.

I have asked Ministers what unaccompanied children are told about their rights when they are first placed in hotels. What will unaccompanied children be told now? Is it really the Minister's intention to legislate to strip

them of their asylum rights the day after they turn 18, when they could be put on a plane to Rwanda? Is that really what he intends?

Safeguarding surely means remaining shocked that the Home Office has been housing children without legal basis and that we still do not know where nearly 200 of those children are. I and other Members have repeatedly questioned the Minister about the need for a national dedicated operation to find them. His answers have not instilled confidence. On the contrary, the Government's plan to degrade children's rights even further will increase the risks.

The Minister for Immigration (Robert Jenrick): After the hon. Lady's debate, I invited her to visit the hotel in Hove that she says she is profoundly concerned about. Has she visited it? If so, what are her reflections having visited it?

Caroline Lucas: I am delighted to take that intervention because, alongside the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle), I did indeed visit those premises. In fact, we took some food there from a local restaurant that was offering its food to that hotel because a concern had been raised that the food people were getting was pretty inedible most of the time, so they were delighted to have more suitable and appropriate food.

I have no problem with the conditions inside the hotel. As the hon. Member for Hove and I have repeatedly said, our concerns stem from what happens when the child steps outside that hotel. Frankly, everything that I saw does not take away the concern that young children, particularly traumatised young children, simply should not be housed in such hotels. However, I am glad to put the Minister's mind at rest about the fact that I have visited the hotel and that I know of what I speak.

Safeguarding means that Ministers should close their nasty, hostile environment playbook. They should back more generous family reunification rights and support safe, functioning legal routes. Safeguarding means not housing children in hotels at all and scrapping the illegal and immoral Illegal Migration Bill.

5.18 pm

Olivia Blake (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I thank the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) for securing this important debate. Before I begin, I point Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests and the support that I receive from the Refugee, Asylum and Migration Policy project for my work on these issues. I also co-chair the all-party parliamentary group on migration.

It is an absolute scandal that 440 asylum-seeking children have gone missing from Home Office hotels and that, according to the Home Office, there are still 186 who have not been found. But that is only half the question. Are the children who have been found safe, and what is happening about the remaining 186? It is alarming that the Government seem interested in the horrific crime of people trafficking only when it can be used as an opening to restrict the rights of people claiming asylum in this country. When we deal with missing children who are in real danger of ending up in the hands of traffickers, it seems that the Home Office is

not concerned enough to act swiftly and thoroughly. Will the Minister update us on what steps he is taking to ensure that children in Home Office care are given the care and support they need and that they are safe? What actions have been taken to find the lost children?

Some organisations I have spoken to have raised concerns about whether the missing persons protocol has been properly followed. That is an important point. When a child first goes missing, those crucial early hours and days can help in finding them quickly and preventing further harm. Will the Minister give clear assurances that the protocol has been followed for every missing child? Will he also say whether there are instances in which the full guidance was not completely followed? If so, why that was the case? Can he give any new update on the number of children who have gone missing since the start of this year? If we do not understand how it is possible for that to happen in the first place, we cannot prevent it from happening again. Therefore, will the Minister commit to publishing a report on the circumstances around the disappearances, including lessons learned and immediate steps to prevent a repeat?

The policy of accommodating children in hotels was supposed to be temporary, but as is so often the case with the Government, a crisis has turned into business as usual. To my knowledge, since 2021, 4,500 unaccompanied children, some aged as young as 10, have been placed in hotels. Will the Minister make available as soon as possible the latest figures on how many unaccompanied children are currently housed in Home Office hotels? According to the Refugee Council, those hotels essentially operate outside the child protection system and that is a fundamental point in this debate. Local authorities are often not involved in looking after those children's welfare or their best interests. They are not classed as looked-after children, but children are children both morally and under the law. The matter needs to be thoroughly looked at because it is clear under section 55 of the Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Act 2009 that the Home Secretary is obliged

“to safeguard and promote the welfare of children who are in the United Kingdom”.

Children in Home Office hotels must be treated like all resident UK children in the statutory children's protection framework. Does the Minister seriously believe that accommodating children in hotels is compatible with that obligation?

The Children's Commissioner has been mentioned. The Home Secretary was given a hard deadline of 17 April to provide a response to the Children's Commissioner about her concerns around the appropriateness of care and I am surprised that that has not been provided. That is highly unusual. Will the Minister clarify whether that is due to the Home Office's failure to systematically record the data that has been requested, or whether it simply constitutes a refusal to provide the information?

Two years after the Home Office began using hotels, there is still no strategy for moving children into suitable accommodation. It is business as usual and that is unacceptable. Will the Minister provide an update on the plans to develop a strategy to move the children out of hotels and into the care of social services through the national transfer scheme? Will he outline the steps taken to support local authorities with procuring additional placements for children? I have spoken in this place

before about the current extreme costs of placements for local authorities, where £15,000 is not enough and will not cover months or weeks of many of the placements that local authorities are trying to procure from the private sector. More needs to be done in that space.

A recent report in the UK on the implementation of the UN convention on the rights of the child found a serious regression in the rights and protections of refugee children in the UK. That is shocking and forms part of a worrying trend that the Government are providing substandard care and potentially dangerous accommodation to refugees, whether that be through overcrowded hotel rooms, disused army barracks in which diseases spread or now a new masterplan for barges that essentially detain people offshore. The cruelty in that is evident, especially when we are considering children.

Others have touched on how the Illegal Migration Bill will affect children and significantly undermine the Children Act. When will the Government finally produce their impact assessment of the Bill and why, after all the failings the Government have presided over in this space, does the Home Office intend to legislate for new powers to house asylum-seeking children outside the provisions of the Children Act? Will the Minister look again at the individual approach to safeguarding that is necessary for each child? Will he recognise that children can, and do, often have other vulnerabilities such as disability? What actions are being taken to ensure that those are being taken into account?

We all have a responsibility to keep children safe. We know from safeguarding failures that have been reported both historically and more recently that safeguarding must be everyone's top priority. The Government cannot pass the buck on this; they must intervene to keep children safe and to ensure that these children are found and then made safe.

5.25 pm

Tahir Ali (Birmingham, Hall Green) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I thank the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) for securing this debate. I find it outrageous that, since July 2021, more than 400 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children have gone missing from Home Office hotels. I could stand here and say that Government Members are so and so, but no, I will not do that, because this is about the children. This is about children, who matter more than anyone else in this country.

We have a responsibility as corporate parents, as did local authorities, and it is incumbent on us all to recognise that the system in place is not fit for purpose and that we must do all that we can to protect the children from going missing. One child missing is one too many.

However, instead of urgently intervening, the Government announced in January that 200 of those 400-plus children were still missing. That number came down to 186. What it is today, I do not know, but I would guess that it is far more than the 200 reported earlier in the year, not less than that.

What has gone wrong fundamentally? That is what we need to look at. We have had announcement after announcement, but the reality is different from what the Government and Ministers have been saying regarding not only refugees and asylum seekers but—most importantly, the issue being debated today—unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

[Tahir Ali]

Do we treat them as if they matter less than the children of this country? Are they second class to them? Are they third class to them? If they are not, this is a serious issue that no other parent figure would get away with. If 200 parents were responsible for this issue, action would be taken against them, but where is the action that is needed regarding those responsible? We can pass the buck all we like, but the fact is that these children have gone missing on our watch. We must take responsibility for that.

Rather than shift blame from one place to another Department, to another institution, to local government, to the Home Office, to Ministers, we need to work together. Whether that urgent work is through the Select Committee process or another mechanism, it must be done to ensure that we do not have any more children going missing and that children are not denied fundamental protections but are afforded the opportunity of safeguarding, which is central to all this.

This is a plea today for us all to come together on this issue and put the politics to one side. We must look at the interests of the children, stand behind them, and say that enough is enough.

As the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith said earlier, I believe that some of the staff at these hotels are not even DBS checked. How can we allow basic fundamentals like that to slip through the net? The staff working at the hotels where the children are living, and going missing, are not even DBS checked. Can the Minister confirm whether that is true? Honestly, would we allow any of our children to stay in such places for even a minute, let alone days, weeks or months on end? These children are our children—that is all I have to say.

5.30 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Hollobone. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) for calling this afternoon's debate, because it is as important as it is timely.

I will start where the hon. Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Tahir Ali) left off: if any one of these children were our child, we would be frantic. If your child goes missing for a couple of minutes or a couple of hours, you are on the edge of your seat—you are terrified. A child inadvertently went missing on a street near me, and the whole neighbourhood was out searching for that child. The child was found and everything was all right, but who is searching—who is going street to street and door to door—to look out for every one of those 186 children who are still missing? We know that if it were any one of ours, that is exactly what we would be doing in that situation.

As a corporate parent, the Home Office has taken on these children in these hotels, outside the legislative framework that should be there to protect them. What is the Home Office doing to find each and every one of those children? By putting 4,500 unaccompanied children into hotel accommodation in that way, it has put every single one of those children at risk. There were 440 missing episodes and 186 children still not found as of April 2023. Can the Minister update us on how many of them remain missing—unfound, lost, perhaps falling into the

hands of traffickers, perhaps terrified at the prospect of being removed to Rwanda or locked up or detained indefinitely?

It is very clear to me that the Illegal Migration Bill will make a very bad situation significantly worse, because it will remove rights from those children. They will never be able to claim asylum; they will not be counted; they will not matter; they will be left in limbo forever. Further to that, the Home Office is overruling in this legislation the obligations that devolved Administrations have, as the hon. Member for Llanelli (Dame Nia Griffith) and others have pointed out. In Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland we have legal obligations, both in our legislation on children and in our provisions on trafficking, that the Illegal Migration Bill seeks to overrule.

My hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith mentioned the Scottish Guardianship Service, which is operated by the Scottish Refugee Council and Aberlour. I always want to pay tribute to that service, because I know how hard those support workers work to ensure that the children in their care are looked after properly and given support. Those workers come to my surgeries in support of the children they look after, and they do a tremendous job, but they know as well as I do that the Illegal Migration Bill will prevent them from providing any service at all. That service, on the Home Office's watch, will become obsolete: there will be no refugees, because this is a refugee ban Bill.

In order to safeguard the children in its care, the Home Office should be answering questions about the legal basis for holding children in hotels in the way it has done, as the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) so correctly pointed out. The hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Olivia Blake) asked whether missing person protocols have been followed in those cases, and what the strategy is to get children out of that inappropriate accommodation and into somewhere they can be, and remain, safe.

The independent chief inspector of borders and immigration has said:

"long-term hotel accommodation is not suitable for families with children. A hotel car park does not constitute a safe or appropriate play area, nor does it provide the variety of activities required by children."

It is children that we are speaking of this afternoon. They should have space to learn, play and grow, but when the Home Office houses them outside the usual rules and obligations that organisations in England such as Ofsted would have, it prevents that system from having any kind of integrity.

That is not the only way in which children are inappropriately accommodated. In my constituency in Glasgow, I have children who have been in bed-and-breakfast accommodation for a considerable time. Families are squeezed together in a room without cooking facilities and without the ability to live a proper life with space to grow and live. There are children who cannot study for school because they do not have the space, because they are crammed into a small room.

I know that this is a choice. The Home Office has outsourced this to organisations such as Mears, and in doing so it has turned a blind eye to the situations that families find themselves in. I know that Mears has three and four-bedroom flats, but it chooses to put three or four people into them because it will get more money for that, rather than housing one family. That is a choice.

It also chose to have a mother-and-baby unit in Glasgow that left babies with no room to crawl safely on the floor. That is a choice, outsourced by the Home Office to its accommodation providers.

I ask the Minister: what if these children were his own? What is he doing to ensure their safety and ensure that they can prosper, grow, thrive and get the protection they so richly deserve?

5.35 pm

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Hollobone. I thank all hon. Members for their excellent contributions, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) on securing this vital debate. Colleagues have set out, far more eloquently and powerfully than I could, the deeply troubling situation in which we find ourselves. Rather than repeating that, I will set out Labour's plans for addressing some of the challenges that we face because of the broader chaos and shambles of the asylum system across the board, which is the root cause, context and backdrop for the appalling issues that we are discussing. I will then ask the Minister some more specific questions.

Labour has spent the past nine months urging the Conservative Government to adopt our five-point plan to end the dangerous channel crossings, defeat the criminal gangs and reduce the asylum backlog, based on hard graft, common sense and quiet diplomacy. First, we would scrap the unworkable, unaffordable and unethical Rwanda scheme and redirect the money put aside into an elite cross-border 100-strong police unit to relentlessly pursue the real enemy, the ruthless criminal smuggling gangs, upstream where they are operating away from the French coastline. Secondly, we would negotiate an agreement with France and the EU that would enable us to return asylum seekers who have crossed on small boats back to mainland Europe in exchange for a more generous but strictly capped offer from Britain on resettling genuine refugees with family connections in the UK. Thirdly, we would clear the backlog by fast-tracking the processing and returns for low grant rate countries, and we would address the incomprehensible decision to downgrade the seniority and expertise of Home Office decision makers. Fourthly, Labour would fix the broken resettlement pathways, particularly the Afghan schemes. Finally, we would develop an international development strategy that would include tackling the root causes of migration.

We need to look at the issues surrounding unaccompanied children, and Labour would look very carefully at how they are treated within the system. We are deeply concerned about the changes that were introduced in January this year with regard to short-term holding facilities. Ahead of the changes coming in, I wrote to the Minister privately to raise my concerns, particularly on the scope for women and children—some of whom will be fleeing sexual violence—to be held in small rooms together with men they do not know. Unfortunately, I have not received a reply to that letter. I know that the Minister is a very busy man, but perhaps he could comment on why I did not receive a reply within the expected three-month window. Perhaps he will also make clear what action he is taking to ensure that women, girls and unaccompanied children are safeguarded.

Meanwhile, the Illegal Migration Bill has raised real concerns. Clause 14 will disapply the safeguard duty to consult the independent family returns panel when a child will be removed or detained. Clauses 15 to 20 deal with issues relating to the rights of separated children, with the provisions likely to undermine the key principles of the child protection framework, including by giving the Home Secretary the power to terminate a child's looked-after status when they are in the care of a local authority.

For the past 18 months, the Home Office has been providing accommodation to vulnerable children, yet provision of accommodation and support to children sits outside the Home Office's competence and knowledge base, raising serious concerns over safeguarding. It was therefore shocking but not surprising that the Minister announced on 24 January that as many as 200 unaccompanied children had gone missing from hotels. What progress has he made on finding those children? What additional safeguards are in place?

Charity workers have said that children are being picked up by gangs from outside their accommodation. What action is the Minister taking to prevent that? We have heard heartbreaking stories from my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) about children who have been sexually assaulted. On 7 November, she asked the Minister to publish the details of all those cases and the number of incidents. Does the Minister have the latest data on that to share with the House?

I will end with some additional questions on wider asylum system failures, which have led to vulnerable children being placed in dangerous conditions. Last December, the Prime Minister said that the Home Office would recruit 700 new staff to the new small boats operational command. How many are in post? Last year, the Home Office announced plans to increase the number of asylum caseworkers from 1,277 to 1,500 by the end of March this year, and then to 2,500 by the end of August. Will the Minister tell us whether he has met the first target and what progress he has made towards the second? Less than 10 years ago, almost 90% of asylum claims were decided in six months. Last year, that figure stood at barely 10%. Can that possibly be explained by anything other than incompetence? Is there perhaps another agenda that explains why the backlog is so large?

The asylum system is a mess. Vulnerable children are victims of this failing system, a system that has failed because of 13 years of sleeping at the wheel and the Government taking their eye off the ball. We need a Labour Government to sort this out—and we need that as rapidly as possible.

5.42 pm

The Minister for Immigration (Robert Jenrick): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I will come first to the points raised by the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock), who secured the debate. I think it has to be said that it is surprising that she would choose this topic, important though it is, given the extremely poor record of the Scottish Government.

Just to be clear on the facts, there have never been any temporary UASC hotels in Scotland. They were all in England. In Scotland as a whole, the Home Office's internal unverified data suggests that there are currently

[Robert Jenrick]

398 individuals in Scottish local authority care. That compares with 8,206 in local authority care across the United Kingdom. I add the caveat that those numbers require further assurance, but they suggest that Scotland is not taking its fair share.

Alison Thewliss: Will the Minister give way on that point?

Robert Jenrick: I will make the point, please. I have listened to the comments that were made earlier.

With respect to accompanied children, there are currently 24,300 children under the age of 18 in our accommodation across the United Kingdom. Of those, 1,353 are in Scotland. That represents just 5.6% of the overall population, when Scotland's total population makes up 8% of the United Kingdom. Of the unaccompanied children in Scotland, only 27 are in a hotel—that is one hotel. That is not a hotel in the constituency of the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith, but I am told that there are no reported issues in that hotel.

The point I am making is twofold. First, the Scottish Government are doing nothing to resolve this issue, so, with the greatest respect to the hon. Lady, this is humanitarian nimbyism. It is posturing of the absolute worst kind. If the hon. Lady cared so deeply about this, the first thing she would do after leaving this debate would be to go and speak to the Scottish Government and then to each and every one of the SNP local authorities that are not playing their part in the national transfer scheme. That is the best thing that she could do to help vulnerable children who are currently or might in future be in hotels in England to get the good quality care that they deserve.

With respect to the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), who raised a point about the hotel in Hove, the reason I asked her whether she had visited the hotel—I am pleased that she has done so—is that I was aware that the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) had visited the hotel. I am pleased to see that they visited together, but when I visited I was told by the staff that certainly the hon. Member for Hove, who is not in his place any more, left satisfied that the accommodation was of a high quality and that the individuals working there were doing a good job. In a previous debate, the hon. Member said that I was ignorant and that I did not know what was happening in the hotel. Well, I went to visit the hotel immediately after that, and not only did I see extremely good work being done there, but I heard from the people doing that work that the hon. Member felt that the work was of that quality.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP) *rose*—

Robert Jenrick: I will not give way. What I saw when I visited the hotel was security guards, social workers, and team leaders who previously worked for the police and the military all doing a superbly good job.
[Interruption.]

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. The Minister heard the debate in its entirety with courtesy. I want the Minister to be heard with courtesy in his response. Mr Grady, you have been very well behaved throughout the whole debate. Let's not spoil it now.

Robert Jenrick: Thank you, Mr Hollobone. It is important that we approach this debate in the spirit not of posturing but of seeking to find solutions to this difficult problem. Obviously, the enduring solution is to reduce the number of unnecessary and dangerous crossing across the channel all together. That is the purpose of the Illegal Migration Bill. If we cannot do that, or until we do it, as soon as a young person arrives in this country we have to treat them with the greatest decency, respect and compassion, and the way to do that is to get those young people into local authority care as quickly as possible.

Given the numbers of people crossing the channel at the moment, it is not possible to do that instantaneously. On a single day last autumn, 1,000 people arrived at Western Jet Foil. The UK had literally saved their lives. We then had to feed, clothe and water them, and do security and health checks on them—all, incidentally, in 24 hours. To the point from the shadow spokesman, the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), that is why I changed the law to 96 hours. I will never compromise on security checks when people arrive in this country. It is not possible to security check 1,000 people in 24 hours, and I wanted to make sure that the police and our counter-terrorism officers have the powers they need. Ensuring those young people leave Western Jet Foil and go as quickly as possible to good quality local authority care has to be the mission of us all. That means supporting local authorities in every single part of the United Kingdom to step up and play their part.

The Home Office is doing this in a number of ways. We have provided financial incentives; I created a further financial incentive—a pilot of £15,000 per young person to encourage local authorities to take those individuals as swiftly as possible on the national transfer scheme. That has had success. Today there are no unaccompanied young people in hotels whatsoever. There may well be more young people in the future if more small boats cross in the months ahead. We need to encourage more local authorities to take part in that scheme.

I completely appreciate the points that have been made by a number of hon. Members that there are huge capacity constraints within local authorities and local authority care homes, and that there is a desperate shortage of foster carers. Those are issues that we should all be united in trying to tackle. The Home Office, in the short period when we house people in an emergency situation in hotels, will always do so decently and will always ensure that those hotels are as well run as possible, but we have to get people out of hotels and into local authority care as quickly as possible.

Dame Nia Griffith: Will the Minister clarify whether, if he goes ahead and uses the Stradey Park Hotel in my constituency for asylum seekers, he is considering housing any unaccompanied children there? What measures will be taken to prevent them from going missing?

Robert Jenrick: As far as I am aware, we do not intend to use that location for unaccompanied children. I will confirm that in writing, but that is not my understanding. To the point that the hon. Lady and others made about what we do when a young person goes missing from one of the hotels, as a parent and a Minister I take this responsibility extremely seriously. When I heard that young people had gone missing from the hotels, I wanted not only to visit them, but to meet all the officials involved in the task.

When I visited the hotels, including the one in Hove, I wanted to meet the social workers privately, not with Home Office officials or others present, so that I could hear directly from them, in private, whether they believe that we are doing everything we can and that we treat a missing person who is a migrant in exactly the same way as we would treat a missing person who is a British citizen—my child or your child. I was told, time and again, that we do: that we follow exactly the same processes in reporting missing people; that we engage thoroughly with the local constabularies, which are fully involved; and that we have created a specific new process called the MARS—missing after reasonable steps—protocol by which we report missing persons

That MARS process has had some success and has enabled us to track more individuals than we did previously. Crucially, every single step is taken as it would be if any other young person in this country went missing. We also have as thorough procedures as is possible in the hotels for checking people in and out, when they leave to go to the park or for a walk, as they can in such facilities.

On that point, it is worth noting that the facilities are not detained facilities. In the debate, I heard no hon. Member urging us to create detained facilities for young people. As long as the facilities are non-detained, inevitably some young people will decide to use the opportunity to leave, which on the intelligence we have is mostly to meet family or friends, or to prearranged meetings with individuals whom they had already agreed to meet, who would no doubt then help the young people to work in the grey or black economies. We have heard no evidence that people have been abducted from outside hotels. In this important debate, we have to trade in fact, not anecdote.

Patrick Grady: Will the Minister give way?

Robert Jenrick: I will give way briefly to the hon. Gentleman, but I must wrap up soon, because we have only a few minutes left.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. Before the hon. Gentleman intervenes, I should say that the Minister has two minutes left.

Patrick Grady: The Minister says he met staff and officials. Did he meet any of the children? Did he look any of them in the eye and tell them that they should not be here and were not welcome?

Robert Jenrick: Well, I regret giving way. I thought that the hon. Gentleman wanted to make a serious point; sadly, he wanted to make a frivolous one. I did talk to the young people—of course I did—to understand their perspectives. We care deeply about their safety. We want to ensure that fewer young people cross the channel illegally in small boats. I urge the hon. Gentleman to go to see the conditions that those young people are in when they get into those small boats: the risk to personal safety that the crossing involves; the cruelty and depravity

of the people smugglers and traffickers behind the trade; and, at times, the irresponsibility of parents and others who put their children through this journey.

Caroline Lucas: Will the Minister give way?

Robert Jenrick: I cannot, because I have to bring my remarks to a close.

The purpose of the Illegal Migration Bill is to put an end to this trade once and for all, so we can focus our resources as a country on supporting young people and families, among others, who are in great need, directly from conflict zones—through our world-class resettlement schemes such as those we have established in recent years—from Ukraine, from Syria and from Afghanistan, and through the global scheme that the United Nations runs on our behalf. We want the UK to be an even greater force for good in the world, and we do that—

Caroline Lucas: On the hotels, will the Minister give way?

Robert Jenrick: I cannot give way because there is no time left.

We do that by beating the people smugglers and stopping the boats.

5.54 pm

Deidre Brock: I am glad that I was able to secure the debate. I was outraged to hear about those missing children, and what appeared to be shocking indifference by the UK Government in regard to their going missing. I was very dissatisfied with the inadequate response that the Minister recently gave to a Member about this.

I have seen nothing but an unrepentant, defensive attitude from the Minister today, with no answers to the many questions raised by Members today. I remind him that Glasgow City Council, under an SNP Administration, has consistently taken more asylum seekers than local authorities in most of England, particularly the south-east. *[Interruption.]* No, it is not. Scotland has taken more arrivals per head of population under the Homes for Ukraine scheme than any of the four UK nations. I remind the Minister that councils across the UK have pointed out that Home Office funding for the dispersal scheme is insufficient and must be looked at again.

The proverb, “It takes a village to raise a child”, surely means that all of us are responsible for every child’s wellbeing, and that includes Government Ministers and the UK Government. We want transparency, accountability and responsibility from Ministers on that, and I am sorry to say that I did not hear any of that from the Minister today.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the accommodation of asylum-seeking children in hotels.

5.56 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 7 June 2023

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Local Television

The Minister for Media, Tourism and Creative Industries (Sir John Whittingdale): The Government have today published on gov.uk a consultation addressing arrangements for the renewal of the local TV multiplex licence and for the renewal, or relicensing, of the 34 individual local TV services currently operating across the UK. The consultation also seeks views on the current statutory objectives for local TV services.

The licences for the local TV multiplex, and for all 34 local TV services, are due to expire on 25 November 2025. In the broadcasting White Paper “Up Next”, published last year, the Government committed to changing the local TV licensing regime to enable the renewal of the local TV multiplex licence until 2034. This was to mirror the changes to the national digital terrestrial television multiplex licensing legislation made in 2021.

The White Paper also confirmed that the Government would consult on the detailed arrangements and conditions for the renewal of the local TV multiplex licence, and on options for the renewal or relicensing of individual local TV services at the same time.

The 12-week consultation we are publishing today, which is open to both industry participants and members of the public, sets out the Government’s proposals for the future of both the multiplex licence and, in turn, the individual services across the UK.

The Government’s approach to the consultation reflects that, a decade on from the launch of the first local TV service in 2013, the sector has weathered many challenges and continues to play an important role in the wider broadcasting ecosystem through its ability to provide local news and content—particularly to those who are digitally excluded. It also reflects that some local TV services have struggled to generate stable revenue streams, maintain consistent audience numbers, and sustainably fund genuinely local content.

A copy of the consultation document will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS828]

EDUCATION

Further Education Capital Funding

The Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education (Robert Halfon): Higher technical qualifications (HTQs) are a key part of our skills reforms, addressing skills shortages and employer demand. We are now approaching the end of the first year of delivery, which has seen over 70 providers across the country able to offer 31 digital HTQs, and more qualifications are being taught from this September in construction and in health and science. Today, the Secretary of State for

Education, my right hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan), and I will be joining providers, employers, learners and others to celebrate these successes.

This Government are committed to the success of HTQs, providing £70 million of funding to help providers build their capacity to deliver excellent higher technical training. We are also investing £300 million in prestigious, employer-led institutes of technology, which will further support the teaching of HTQs.

Building on this, I am pleased to announce the launch of a second round of the higher technical education skills injection fund (SIF), which will provide up to £48 million of funding to support providers in delivering HTQs in occupational areas including digital, engineering and manufacturing, and protective services in the 2024/25 and 2025/26 academic years.

The SIF offers both capital and resource funding, supporting providers to purchase industry-standard specialised equipment, market their qualifications, upskill staff, develop their curriculum, and more. This will further support the growth of high-quality level 4 and 5 provision that meets the growing employer demand for higher technical skills, helping raise productivity and unlock potential.

Details of the SIF, including how providers can apply and details of webinars to provider support and guidance, will be published on www.gov.uk today.

I am pleased also to announce that details of the 66 qualifications that have been approved as HTQs in the latest cycle will be published on the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education’s website today.

I would also like to use this statement to thank those employers and providers who have already helped develop and deliver HTQs, and to encourage others to do so. Working together, we can ensure that more people climb the ladder of opportunity to long-term job security and prosperity.

More information about HTQs is available from

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/higher-technical-qualification-overview>.

[HCWS826]

Higher Technical Education

The Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education (Robert Halfon): Higher technical qualifications (HTQs) are a key part of our skills reforms to address skills shortages and employer demand. We are now approaching the end of the first year of delivery, which has seen over 70 providers across the country able to offer 31 digital HTQs, and more qualifications are being taught from this September in construction and health and science. Today, the Secretary of State and I will be joining providers, employers, learners and others to celebrate these successes.

This Government are committed to the success of HTQs, providing £70 million of funding to help providers build their capacity to deliver excellent higher technical training. We are also investing £300 million in prestigious, employer-led Institutes of Technology, which will further support the teaching of HTQs.

Building on this, I am pleased to announce the launch of a second round of the higher technical education skills injection fund (SIF), which will provide up to £48 million of funding to support providers in delivering HTQs in occupational areas including digital, engineering and manufacturing, and protective services in the 2024-25 and 2025-26 academic years.

The SIF offers both capital and resource funding, supporting providers to purchase industry-standard specialised equipment, market their qualifications, upskill staff, develop their curriculum and more. This will further support the growth of high-quality level 4 and 5 provision that meets the growing employer demand for higher technical skills, helping to raise productivity and unlock potential.

Details of the SIF, including how providers can apply and details of webinars to provide support and guidance, will be published on gov.uk today.

I am pleased to also announce that details of the 66 qualifications which have been approved as HTQs in the latest cycle will be published on the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education's website today.

I would also like to use this statement to thank those employers and providers who have already helped develop and deliver HTQs, and encourage others to do so. Working together we can ensure more people climb the ladder of opportunity to long-term job security and prosperity.

More information about HTQs is available from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/higher-technical-qualification-overview>

[HCWS827]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Tackling Obesity

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Neil O'Brien): The Government are committed to helping people live healthier lives. The 2019 health survey for England estimated that over 12 million adults were living with obesity—28% of the population in England.

Tackling obesity, which increases the risk of a range of serious and chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease and diabetes, remains a key priority.

The Government are announcing that up to £40 million of funding will be provided over two years to pilot ways to make the newest and most effective obesity drugs accessible to eligible patients living with obesity outside of hospital settings.

Earlier this year, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) recommended the use of semaglutide (Wegovy) when it launches for adults with a body mass index (BMI) of at least 35 and one weight-related health condition—such as diabetes or high blood pressure. There is evidence from clinical trials that, when prescribed alongside diet, physical activity and behavioural support, patients taking Wegovy can lose around 15% of their body weight after one year, reducing the risk of obesity-related illnesses. Some patients taking this weight-loss drug can begin to lose weight as quickly as within the first month of treatment. Another drug known as tirzepatide is expected to be assessed by

NICE for weight loss. Losing weight can help to reduce the risk of obesity-related illness, which in turn can reduce pressure on the NHS, cut waiting times and realise wider economic benefits.

NICE advises that weight-loss drugs are prescribed within a specialist weight management service. Currently, these services are mainly based in hospitals, which means that only around 35,000 people per annum have access to weight-loss drugs, when millions more could potentially benefit.

The £40 million pilots will explore how approved drugs can be made safely available to more people by expanding specialist weight management services outside of hospital settings. This includes looking at how GPs could safely prescribe these drugs and how the NHS can provide wraparound support in the community or digitally. This could increase dramatically the number of people who have the opportunity to benefit from these treatments and provide more equitable access.

The pilot will be delivered by NHS England working closely with the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities (OHID) and NICE. The pilots will be designed with input from primary and community care organisations and existing specialist weight management services. There will be a robust and independent evaluation led by the National Institute for Health and Care Research to ensure any wider roll-out is informed by the best possible evidence.

The pilot builds on the firm action the Government are already taking to tackle obesity. This includes introducing the soft drinks industry levy, which has seen the average sugar content of drinks decrease by 46% between 2015 and 2020, and investment of £350 million to boost school sport to help children and young people have an active start to life.

Last year the Government announced £20 million for the Office for Life Sciences' obesity mission. This is in addition to the £40 million announced today and will explore innovative ways to best utilise promising medicines and digital technologies to help NHS patients achieve a healthy weight.

The Better Health: Rewards app is also being piloted in Wolverhampton. It is offering incentives such as vouchers for shops, gym discounts and cinema tickets for people who eat healthily and exercise more.

The Department for Health and Social Care launched a call for evidence in May to inform the major conditions strategy, including further work to tackle obesity.

[HCWS831]

Reciprocal Healthcare: 2021-22 Annual Report

The Minister for Health and Secondary Care (Will Quince): I have today laid before Parliament the second annual report on international healthcare payments pursuant to section 6 of the Healthcare (European Economic Area and Switzerland Arrangements) Act 2019.

The 2019 Act implements the social security co-ordination protocol to the EU-UK trade and co-operation agreement, the UK/Switzerland convention on social security co-ordination and the various separation agreements with the European economic area and Switzerland.

These European-wide arrangements ensure UK residents continue to benefit from reciprocal healthcare arrangements when they visit, study or live in European Union member states. Specifically, UK residents can access necessary healthcare when they travel to Europe (the global health insurance card scheme) or access planned healthcare if they meet certain criteria (known as the S2 scheme). Eligible UK state pensioners, frontier workers and certain other groups can have their healthcare costs covered by the UK Government when they move to Europe (known as the S1 scheme).

Building on the successful continuation of our European reciprocal healthcare agreements, the Government are now seeking to broaden the benefits of the GHIC. New or refreshed arrangements are being negotiated with our overseas territories, Crown dependencies and other states, where reciprocal healthcare cover will bring greater benefits to the UK. The amendments passed in the Health and Care Act 2022 will enable the Government to implement comprehensive healthcare agreements with countries outside the EEA and Switzerland when it comes into force in 2023.

The report I laid before Parliament today covers the Government's expenditure on reciprocal healthcare under the powers conferred by the 2019 Act between 1 April 2021 and 31 March 2022, pursuant to our international commitments in the UK's agreements with the European Union, member states of the European economic area and Switzerland. The report also includes the states and jurisdictions with which the Government are currently negotiating new reciprocal healthcare arrangements.

[HCWS829]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Elections Act 2022: Implementation

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Dehenna Davison): My hon. Friend the Minister for Faith and Communities (Baroness Scott of Bybrook) has made the following written ministerial statement:

The Elections Act 2022 delivers our commitment to maintain the integrity of UK elections making sure they remain secure, fair and modern. Through the Act, Parliament resolved to update the

franchise for European citizens to reflect the decision made by the UK people in 2016 to leave the European Union, and the new relationship we have with Europe.

The automatic right that European citizens have to vote and stand in local elections in the UK granted solely as a consequence of our EU membership is not one which can continue. There has never been a general right for European nationals to vote in Parliamentary elections—choosing the next UK Government is already rightly restricted to British citizens and those with the closest historic links to our country, and this will not change. Going forward, the local voting rights of EU citizens living in the UK should be considered alongside the rights and interests of British citizens living abroad.

In future, the rights of EU citizens living in the UK will rest on the principle of a mutual grant of rights, through agreements with EU member states. These bilateral voting and candidacy agreements ensure that we also protect the rights of British citizens living in EU countries. We have already secured such agreements with Spain, Portugal, Luxembourg and Poland.

In line with the Government's commitment to respect the rights of EU citizens who chose to make the UK their home prior to the end of the implementation period, all EU citizens who have been living in the UK since before 31 December 2020 will also retain their voting and candidacy rights, provided they retain lawful immigration status.

As part of the process of implementing the Elections Act, I have today published the draft statutory instrument, the Representation of the People (Franchise Amendment and Eligibility Review) Regulations 2023, with an accompanying draft explanatory memorandum. The statutory instrument will make the requisite changes to voter registration and electoral administration processes to implement this franchise change. It makes changes to processes to facilitate the future registration of eligible EU citizens under the updated criteria, and it also sets out a fair and transparent process by which electoral registration officers will undertake a one-time review of those EU citizens who are currently registered to determine if they remain eligible to vote in the relevant polls. We will continue to engage with key stakeholders to support efficient delivery of these important changes, as we have throughout development of the policy and processes.

These changes will apply to all levels of local election in England and other local polls or referendums, and to Police and Crime Commissioner elections in England and Wales. A parallel statutory instrument will also apply these changes to local elections in Northern Ireland and elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly. Other local and devolved elections in Scotland and Wales are within the remit of the devolved Administrations and so are not in scope.

The statutory instrument is published in accordance with the procedure required by schedule 8 to the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 and agreed with Parliament. The statutory instrument is being published, in draft, at least 28 days before being laid in draft to be considered under affirmative procedures in parliament.

[HCWS830]

Ministerial Corrections

Wednesday 7 June 2023

EDUCATION

Safety of School Buildings

The following are extracts from the Opposition day debate on the Safety of Schools Buildings on Tuesday 23 May 2023.

Nick Gibb: Despite the shadow Minister's grudging mention of a successful bid to the £450 million condition improvement fund announced yesterday, I congratulate Farringdon Community Academy in her constituency on its successful £1.5 million bid.

[Official Report, 23 May 2023, Vol. 733, c. 228.]

Letter of correction from the Minister for Schools, the right hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Nick Gibb):

An error has been identified in my response to the speech of the hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson).

The correct information should have been:

Nick Gibb: Despite the shadow Minister's grudging mention of a successful bid to the £450 million condition improvement fund announced yesterday, I congratulate **Eppleton Academy Primary School** in her constituency on its successful bids.

Nick Gibb: Last December, I had the chance to visit Guiseley School in Yorkshire, where I saw for myself the transformative effect that the new, modern buildings being provided will make to the entire school community. That was under the school rebuilding programme.

[Official Report, 23 May 2023, Vol. 733, c. 230.]

Letter of correction from the Minister for Schools, the right hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Nick Gibb):

An error has been identified in my speech.

The correct information should have been:

Nick Gibb: Last December, I had the chance to visit Guiseley School in Yorkshire, where I saw for myself the transformative effect that the new, modern buildings being provided will make to the entire school community. That was under the **priority school building** programme.

Robert Halfon: I can also confirm that the constituency of the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) will be getting £1.8 million.

[Official Report, 23 May 2023, Vol. 733, c. 257.]

Letter of correction from the Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education, the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon):

An error has been identified in my closing speech.

The correct information should have been:

Robert Halfon: I can also confirm that **Gateshead local authority, where the constituency of the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) is**, will be getting £1.8 million.

JUSTICE

Victims and Prisoners Bill

The following is an extract from the Second Reading debate on the Victims and Prisoners Bill on 15 May 2023.

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Chalk): On her specific point, what I think is exciting and heartening about the Bill is that it contains a duty on the Secretary of State and police and crime commissioners not just to promote awareness of the code—important though that is—but to promote compliance. If there is not compliance, there is also a duty, effectively, to publish that, so that it is plain for everyone to see. The local PCC will be publishing that, which means that the hon. Lady can get some accountability.

[Official Report, 15 May 2023, Vol. 732, c. 586.]

Letter of correction from the Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice, the right hon. and learned Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk):

An error has been identified in the response given to the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) during the Second Reading debate on the Victims and Prisoners Bill. The correct response should have been:

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Chalk): On her specific point, what I think is exciting and heartening about the Bill is that it contains a duty on the Secretary of State and **criminal justice bodies** not just to promote awareness of the code—important though that is—but to promote compliance. If there is not compliance, there is also a duty, effectively, to publish that, so that it is plain for everyone to see. The **Secretary of State** will be publishing that, which means that the hon. Lady can get some accountability.

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**not later than
Wednesday 14 June 2023**

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