

Tuesday
4 July 2023

Volume 735
No. 184



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Tuesday 4 July 2023

House of Commons

Tuesday 4 July 2023

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

The Secretary of State was asked—

Energy Transition Projects: Scotland

1. **Ian Blackford** (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): What steps he is taking to support energy transition projects in Scotland. [905766]

14. **Dr Philipa Whitford** (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): What steps he is taking to support energy transition projects in Scotland. [905780]

The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Grant Shapps): We are supporting Scotland through the North sea transition deal, contracts for difference for renewable energy, and more than £80 million of net zero innovation portfolio funding.

Ian Blackford: I thank the Secretary of State for that response, particularly in relation to CfDs. Will he commit today to a clear pathway for the true commercial-scale development of tidal stream energy? A ringfence in the CfD auction is welcome, but it is only scratching the surface of what the industry can deliver. Investors in projects are stalling, as they need long-term visibility. The industry—and, indeed, all of us—needs this technology to succeed. Let us unlock this predictable, renewable power and create an industry and sector that we can be proud of and that can be made on these islands. We need a commitment today that the ringfenced budget will increase, to allow costs to fall and true-scale projects to be delivered. If we want energy security, here is the pathway.

Mr Speaker: We are meant to be asking questions, not making statements.

Grant Shapps: Fortunately, the answer is pretty straightforward. As the right hon. Gentleman mentioned, we are doing tidal power in this CfD round. That is to be welcomed and we look forward to this industry expanding in the future, as some of the technicalities and technical difficulties are resolved. I know that the Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, my hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie) has visited recently to see this in action.

Dr Whitford: Energy storage is vital to managing demand as we switch to renewable electricity. Pumped storage hydro is the most efficient large-scale storage

method. UK capacity could be more than doubled by six projects across Scotland that have been shovel ready for more than five years. They take a long time to build, so why are the UK Government not supporting investment in infrastructure that is critical for our future energy security?

Grant Shapps: I have discussed this matter with SSE in relation to that particular hydro storage project, and my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State met MSPs yesterday to discuss the subject as well. We are keen to have this kind of hydro storage, which is why our plans allow for it to be taken forward. However, I have to say to Opposition Members—all of them—that it is no good just having one kind of storage or one kind of tidal power; we also need to protect the Scottish economy with oil and gas to make sure we are not subjected to Putin or any other dictator holding us to ransom over our energy security.

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): It is good to hear that the Secretary of State is supporting the economy in Scotland, but my question is: how are the UK Government investing in grid capacity in Wales? In Wales, such investment is crucial if we are to support energy transition projects such as the Holyhead hydrogen hub, Minesto, Morlais, BP Mona, Lightsource BP and, of course, new nuclear at Wylfa.

Grant Shapps: Grid capacity in Scotland, Wales, England and Northern Ireland is at the top of our list. The Winsor review has done a lot of work to look at how we can speed up the delivery of that capacity, given the big transition that is going on and this country's big lead in renewables, which makes that necessary.

Mr Speaker: I call the Scottish National party spokesman.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): On pumped storage hydro, it is as though the Secretary of State just does not get it. It increases energy resilience and would reduce the £4.2 billion balancing costs that are getting paid out at the moment. The 1.5 GW Coire Glas scheme can be delivered in seven years, and it would power 3 million homes for a 24-hour period. The Government have found £700 million for Sizewell C and they have implemented cap and floor mechanisms for interconnectors, so why is he not having proper discussions with SSE about a cap and floor mechanism?

Grant Shapps: The Secretary of State does in fact get it, because we support the idea of having things such as hydro power. Again, I have to say that there is a choice where taxpayers' money is spent. It has to be done competitively in the round. To be talking merely about storage and not the generation, including nuclear power, which is a key part of this country's energy security future, simply means that the overall view that the SNP has is unbalanced when it comes to how we power our nations.

Alan Brown: The Secretary of State has proved he still does not get it—he is not having proper discussions with SSE. If we move to carbon capture and storage, the Climate Change Committee's progress report identified "risks" and "significant risks" associated with industrial clusters and carbon dioxide storage, which proves it is

nonsensical to have Acorn as a reserve. When will the Government announce the track 2 clusters and provide parity for Acorn? When does he envisage Acorn starting construction? That is vital to meet the 2030 targets.

Grant Shapps: As the hon. Gentleman knows, we have already pumped £40 million into Acorn. It is on the reserve list. He asks when; the answer is this year for track 2 and track 1 expansion. So I say it again: the Secretary of State does get it.

Energy Intensive Industries: Decarbonisation

2. **Bill Esterson** (Sefton Central) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to help energy intensive industries decarbonise. [905767]

The Minister for Energy Security and Net Zero (Graham Stuart): The Government are investing billions to support the development and deployment of carbon capture, utilisation and storage, hydrogen and other decarbonisation technologies, and have a range of policies supporting industrial decarbonisation, such as the industrial energy transformation fund and local industrial decarbonisation plans.

Bill Esterson: There are 23 clean steel projects across Europe, but none in the UK. Meanwhile, the UK is the only country in the G20 where steel production is falling. Other countries recognise the importance of their domestic steel industries, and they recognise the importance of investing in low-carbon steel. Why do this Government not support our steel?

Graham Stuart: As the hon. Gentleman knows well, this Government do support the UK steel industry. On his broader point, which he mentioned in his original question, UK industrial emissions have fallen 65% since 1990, and we are making significant investments in industrial decarbonisation, not least the £20 billion announced at the end of March, which will contribute to decarbonisation through CCUS and help the steel industry.

Dominic Raab (Esher and Walton) (Con): Do Ministers agree that the Government's competition for small modular nuclear reactors will help provide the volume of energy we need for energy-intensive domestic industries and, over the long term, at a lower cost than previous nuclear power stations?

Graham Stuart: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. There is enormous enthusiasm on the Government side of the House for the potential of nuclear, including small modular reactors. We are determined to see that go forward as quickly as possible, which is why the new organisation, Great British Nuclear, is doing a rapid down selection of technologies this year, precisely in order to unlock the benefits that my right hon. Friend so correctly highlights.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Energy Security and Net Zero Committee.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): On decarbonisation, many organisations, such as the Institution of Civil Engineers, are asking about the Government's net zero growth plan, which said:

"The public will play a key role in the transition and therefore we will set out further detail on how Government will increase public engagement on net zero."

Can the Minister clarify when that detail will be published?

Graham Stuart: I thank the Chair of the Energy Security and Net Zero Committee. He is right that as well as top-down Government policy, we must unlock the huge public desire of people to play their part and make sure we have the right information in place. That will be provided and produced as soon as possible.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): The Minister will welcome measures that many businesses are already undertaking simply because they are the right thing to do, including traditionally carbon-intensive industries, such as cement manufacturing. Cemex in my constituency is investing to use decarbonised raw material and trialling the use of hydrogen in the combustion process, which will significantly reduce the amount of CO₂ generated by every tonne of cement manufactured in Rugby?

Graham Stuart: My hon. Friend is right, and he is right to champion those industries that are working so hard to decarbonise already. As my hon. Friend says, we have the net zero hydrogen fund, which will provide up to £240 million by 2025 to support the development and construction of new low-carbon hydrogen production plants, which will be able to assist in cement as well as other industries.

Lithium-ion Battery Storage Facilities: Regulation

3. **Dame Maria Miller** (Basingstoke) (Con): What assessment he has made of the adequacy of regulations for industrial lithium-ion battery storage facilities. [905768]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Andrew Bowie): It is a priority for this Government that all net zero energy infrastructure is built, operated and maintained in an appropriate and safe way. My officials work closely with the industry-led electricity storage health and safety governance group to ensure an appropriate, robust and future-proofed health and safety framework is sustained as storage deployment increases.

Dame Maria Miller: We need to increase power storage, but the potential fire risks associated with lithium-ion battery storage facilities are now becoming widely acknowledged. What is my hon. Friend doing to ensure those facilities are not built in inappropriate locations, such as Basing Fenn in my constituency, which is a site sandwiched between a rare north-flowing, salmonid chalk stream and a hospital?

Andrew Bowie: I thank my right hon. Friend for her question and her tireless campaigning on this important issue. As I discussed in that very positive meeting that I had with her yesterday, I have been working with colleagues across Government to establish the appropriate treatment of these facilities in planning and environmental regulation. Every site should be considered on its own merits and is a decision for our local authorities.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Will this Government stop chuntering on about batteries and battery storage all the time? Will they get down to JCB and see its innovative new hydrogen fuel car and

heavy goods vehicle? Is it not about time that we realised that hydrogen is the future and that this Government should be building a pipeline of hydrogen throughout the country?

Andrew Bowie: I will not be drawn on chuntering on by the hon. Gentleman, but let me just say that it was this Government who allowed JCB to proceed with that technology and to develop it at commercial scale. I am pleased to tell him that the Secretary of State will be visiting imminently.

Floating Offshore Wind: Supply Chain

4. **Stephen Kinnock** (Aberavon) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help increase the potential benefits of floating offshore wind for the supply chain. [905769]

The Minister for Energy Security and Net Zero (Graham Stuart): The Government are committed to placing the UK at the forefront of the floating wind sector. I am delighted to announce that the Crown estate will be providing an update to industry this morning on a 4 GW leasing round in the Celtic sea and has already commissioned the survey work required to support it.

Stephen Kinnock: The development of floating offshore wind in the Celtic sea is a once-in-a-generation opportunity for my Aberavon constituency, for Wales and for the entire United Kingdom. Last week, the Climate Change Committee rightly blasted the Government for failing to deliver on their net zero commitment. I am profoundly concerned that floating offshore wind will be squandered due to the lack of grip and direction that the committee described. When will the Minister be bringing forward an industrial strategy for floating offshore wind, which will ensure that Welsh manufacturing and Welsh jobs are placed at the heart of turbine and substructure fabrication, starting with the vital seabed licensing process.

Graham Stuart: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. We are the world leader in floating offshore wind and we are determined to stay there in order to realise the industrial benefits, which he rightly champions, and the opportunities in Wales. The floating wind demonstration programme—[*Interruption.*] The Labour Front-Bench team really do not like to hear this, do they? The fact that we have cut our emissions more than any other major economy on earth under this Government is what leads those on the Labour Front Bench to sense their own inadequacy, because they know what they left behind. That floating wind demonstration programme is supporting innovation with £31 million of Government funding matched by £30 million from industry.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Floating offshore wind and all these exciting generation technologies are wonderful, but all of them will come to nought unless we can increase the speed and capacity of the grid connections to get the electricity onshore and to the users who need it. What is the Minister doing to sort out the national grid and to speed up the way in which grid connections are made, because, without this, we will go nowhere?

Graham Stuart: My hon. Friend puts it so well. It is so true: whatever the generation, if we cannot get the electrons where they need to go, we are frustrated. That is why we are determined to speed up the connections.

That is why, from the Pick report on offshore wind to the Nick Winser review, this Government, led by the Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, my hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (**Andrew Bowie**)—this is the first time that this country has had a networks Minister—are absolutely focused, in a laser-like way, on making sure that we speed up and get the delivery of the infrastructure that we need to deliver the green transition.

Onshore Wind Proposals: Community Engagement

5. **Alexander Stafford** (Rother Valley) (Con): What steps his Department has taken to ensure local community engagement in onshore wind proposals. [905770]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Andrew Bowie): The Government want communities to participate in and benefit from onshore wind proposed in their local area. On 11 May, the Government issued a consultation for onshore wind partnerships in England, proposing improvements to the current system of community engagement and benefits.

Alexander Stafford: Some energy firms give discounts to those who live near onshore wind farms when the wind blows. Unfortunately, though, that is not the case everywhere. Will the Minister look again at this policy nationally so that my constituents, such as those who live in Ulley near Penny Hill wind farm, and even myself—I live in Harthill near Loscar wind farm—will see the benefits of clean, green wind power reflected in their energy bills?

Andrew Bowie: The consultation on onshore wind partnerships proposed that the Government work with RenewableUK to update the industry-wide community benefits protocol for onshore wind in England. An updated protocol would seek to encourage more innovative approaches, for example through developers supporting local energy bill discounts. The consultation closes on 7 July.

Anna McMorris (Cardiff North) (Lab): I am not sure there is much point in community engagement when there is no onshore wind. We do not have any onshore wind. Last week, we heard the Climate Change Committee's devastating report on this country's commitment to net zero. When will this Government unlock the barriers to onshore wind?

Andrew Bowie: I completely refute the suggestion that we have no onshore wind. Onshore wind contributes 14 GW of power to the UK's national grid as we speak, and of course we support the deployment of onshore wind with communities.

Mr Speaker: We come now to the shadow Minister.

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): The Minister is sort of right that there have been some onshore wind turbines built just recently—two since February 2022, so there is not much chance of community engagement there, to be honest. In December, the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities promised that the onshore wind ban would be completely lifted by the end of April this year. Why have the Government broken that promise?

Andrew Bowie: I will take no lectures from the Labour party on developing renewable electricity. When Labour left office in 2010—[*Interruption.*] They do not like to hear this, but when Labour left office in 2010, less than 7% of the grid was accounted for by renewables. Now it is 43%.

Dr Whitehead: I think maybe the Government should take lessons from Labour. It is now generally understood that the Government consultation is likely to lead to only minimal relaxation of planning rules and that onshore wind will effectively remain banned. Tory peer Lord Deben, chairman of the Climate Change Committee, said of the consultation on Saturday that it is simply unacceptable that the Government are still discussing whether they are in favour of onshore wind or not when it is widely recognised as one of the cheapest forms of energy generation. He is right, is he not?

Andrew Bowie: I really wish the Labour party would stop talking down what we are doing on renewable electricity. I remind the House that the consultation on onshore wind finishes on 7 July.

Energy and Trade Intensive Industries

6. **Mrs Heather Wheeler** (South Derbyshire) (Con): What assessment has his Department made of the adequacy of additional support for energy and trade intensive industries. [905771]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Amanda Solloway): Wholesale energy prices have fallen significantly since the peak of the energy crisis, so the energy bill discount scheme strikes a balance between providing support and certainty to business and limiting the impact on public finances.

Mrs Wheeler: I thank my hon. Friend for a proper Derbyshire answer. Can she give more information on how the Government are working to help wedding venues and hospitality in general with extreme costs for electricity and gas, particularly where businesses have signed long-term contracts in the face of falling world prices?

Amanda Solloway: I thank my hon. Friend from South Derbyshire—it is a great county to live in, with great hospitality—for her question. Businesses, including the hospitality sector, have already benefited from the energy bill relief scheme, which ended on 31 March and provided £7.4 billion of support. We are mindful of the fixed-term contracts, which are a supplier issue, and we are constantly engaging with stakeholders and suppliers on that.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): Last week I attended the opening of the first phase of a new solar farm at Newcastle airport. It was 50% funded by the regional development fund, which post Brexit we no longer have access to. The further three phases are vital to ensure that the airport meets its net zero target and the Government meet their solar target, so what are the Government doing to ensure that those further three phases will be supported in some way by the Government?

Amanda Solloway: I thank the hon. Lady for that information. With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will take that question away and find out more details.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): The director general of UK Steel said this week:

“There are huge question marks over if government really wants to sustain steel, the backbone of British manufacturing, or just leave it to shrink and rely on other nations’ supply.”

He is right to say that. It is four years since the Government promised the green steel fund, but not a penny has been paid. Why are the Government failing our steel communities so comprehensively?

Amanda Solloway: That is absolutely not true; we are legislating for that at the moment. It is incredibly important to the Government that we combat that and support the energy and trade-intensive industries.

Kerry McCarthy: The Committee on Climate Change said last week that

“the Government has high ambitions for decarbonisation but no policy to deliver it”.

We have been slow to react to the US Inflation Reduction Act and to the EU’s proposed green deal industrial plan. The right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), who, for the benefit of the Minister, is not from the Labour Benches, said:

“Where the UK once led, we are now falling behind.”

When will Ministers snap out of their appalling complacency and come up with the strategy and timeline that we need to support the UK in the global race for green jobs and investment?

Amanda Solloway: We have met all our carbon targets and will continue to do so. The Government have made the commitment to continue hitting and progressing on those targets.

Clean Energy Projects: Planning System

7. **Clive Efford** (Eltham) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities on the adequacy of the planning system for clean energy projects. [905772]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Andrew Bowie): My Department has been working closely with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities on delivering the proposals in the published action plan for reforming and speeding up the nationally significant infrastructure project planning process. An important part of those reforms involves updating and strengthening the national policy statements for energy.

Clive Efford: Last weekend, James Robottom, the head of onshore wind at RenewableUK, said that he does not expect much from the Government’s consultation on planning. He said that obstacles to new onshore wind development would

“severely hinder investment in the onshore wind industry and its supply chain due to the high level of risk and uncertainty they create. We are being denied the opportunity for thousands of new jobs and billions in private investment”.

In the meantime, that is costing English families £180 per year. It means damage to the economy, damage to the environment, and higher bills for families. Is it not time that we got this useless Government out of the way so that we can sort it out?

Andrew Bowie: This useless Government who have delivered 43% renewables on to the grid! I would much rather take our record on renewables than the Labour party's any day of the week. The consultation on national policy statements closed, as the hon. Gentleman knows, on 23 June, and the Government remain on track to present them to Parliament and bring them into effect by the end of 2023.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): Local authorities have a presumption in favour of solar, and quite right, too, but should they not also consider the cumulative effect of solar farms? Wiltshire is the second largest county in England for solar farms. If the new Red Barn project at Kington St Michael is added, it will be one of the largest solar farms in Britain. We are covering our good agricultural land with solar farms in counties such as Wiltshire. When the forthcoming planning policy guidance is reconsidered, will the Minister undertake to include a presumption against solar farms on grade 3a and 3b agricultural land?

Andrew Bowie: Food security is incredibly important, and we will, of course, prioritise less productive land for the deployment of solar farms. Our reforms aim to ensure that infrastructure developers consider, at the outset of their programmes, how projects can address the legitimate concerns of affected communities, engaging regularly with them throughout the pre-application phase and beyond. Engaging with statutory consultees early during the pre-application stage will also benefit local communities and farmers through high-quality applications.

Energy Security: Gas Imports from Russia

8. **Mr Gagan Mohindra** (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the impact of ending gas imports from Russia on energy security. [905773]

The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Grant Shapps): Ending Russian imports in April 2022 has shown that Russian gas belongs in the past. Our system was well supplied last winter by North sea gas and reliable imports—a far cry from Labour's energy surrender plan, sponsored by Just Stop Oil, which would put us back at square one and in the hands of despots such as Putin and his tyrannical regime.

Mr Mohindra: I welcome the Secretary of State's answer. Could he explain what steps his Department is taking to ensure that no country will ever be able to hold the UK to ransom through our energy supply?

Grant Shapps: It is about having a balanced energy supply, which means renewables, nuclear power, and yes, where necessary, oil and gas licences—to do without them puts the security of every single person in this country at risk and means that household bills will go up. Sadly, that is exactly the policy of His Majesty's official Opposition.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): A recent report by the Energy and Climate Intelligence Unit shows that, regardless of Ministers' plans to expand domestic oil and gas production, imports of gas will continue to rise significantly unless we tackle demand. New oil and gas licences simply will not deliver energy security as the oil and gas is sold at global prices on international markets. They will cost the taxpayer dearly while being a disaster for the climate. Will the Government finally do what is needed by ruling out new licences and committing instead to measures that will genuinely make the UK energy secure, including a nationwide street-by-street home insulation programme, unblocking onshore wind, and installing new solar on every roof?

Grant Shapps: We have gone from 14% of our homes being insulated under the previous Government to nearly 50%—it will be 50% this year—and we have set up an energy taskforce to reduce the usage of energy and make it more efficient. However, the policy of the hon. Lady's party, and that of the official Opposition, of importing all the oil and gas that we require and not providing new licences is simply insane. It means that every single family in Britain will be subject to the next tyrant like Putin, and that the carbon used will be double what is taken from the North sea. It is bonkers policy.

Net Zero Target: Population Increases

9. **Sir Christopher Chope** (Christchurch) (Con): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of increases in the population on the ability to meet net zero targets. [905774]

The Minister for Energy Security and Net Zero (Graham Stuart): Population growth is taken into account when setting our decarbonisation goals. Specifically, it is accounted for in our baseline emissions projections, which help determine the effort required to meet our carbon targets.

Sir Christopher Chope: Does my right hon. Friend accept that in 2050, on present Government policies, we will have 25 million more people in this country than there were in 1990, the base date for carbon dioxide emissions? He obviously accepts that a higher population leads to higher global emissions, but can he also say that when it comes to climate change, it would be a good idea for this Government to concentrate on a net migration policy, rather than net zero?

Graham Stuart: As my hon. Friend knows, the Prime Minister is absolutely determined to bring net migration down to sustainable levels. I would also point out to him that the UK does not set decarbonisation targets per capita, because all countries need to reduce emissions in absolute terms. We are determined to play our part in doing that—to move to net zero, but in a pro-growth, pro-business manner.

Kenny MacAskill (East Lothian) (Alba): It is not simply about empowering future generations, but those that exist. That is why the roll-out of smart metering is important. The latest quarterly statistics claim that 57% of UK households have smart meters, but that masks the fact that only four out of 32 Scottish local authorities are above 50% in the roll-out of smart metering, five are below 30%, and three island councils

are below 10%. All those are also the areas with the highest fuel poverty. As we approach March 2024, when radio teleswitching will go off, how will we ensure that people have access to smart metering, enabling them to get off-peak tariffs?

Graham Stuart: The hon. Gentleman is right, both to enthuse about the importance of smart metering and the benefits it can bring—even more so as we move forward in the coming years—and to highlight the importance of ensuring, as ever, that something so important is equitably distributed. I, or colleagues, would be happy to meet him to discuss how we make sure that the issues he has rightly raised are addressed.

Rooftop Solar Panels

10. **Mr Laurence Robertson** (Tewkesbury) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase the use of solar panels on building roofs; and if he will make a statement. [905775]

The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Grant Shapps): The Government are supporting the installation of rooftop solar in numerous different ways: financial incentives, performance standards and the solar taskforce.

Mr Robertson: For years now, I have been trying to persuade Governments of all colours to change building regulations to require all new buildings to be fitted with solar panels. That would have the benefit of securing supply, reducing household bills considerably and helping us towards net zero, so why do we not do it?

Grant Shapps: I assure my hon. Friend that I am a great enthusiast for solar panels—I have had them on my home for the past 12 years, and they perform very well. I want to see more people do that. In fact, over that period, we have gone from virtually no renewables in our system—6.9%—to 43% in the last quarter. I am very keen for that expansion to go further and faster. We need to ensure that it is part of the building code, but we also want to make sure that other forms of renewables can be installed, so it is a balance between not being too prescriptive and making sure that we make speedy progress, particularly on all the commercial rooftops in this country.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): A few weeks ago, I had the pleasure of visiting an innovative housing project in Rumney in my constituency, which had solar panels in nearly all the new buildings but also ground source heat pumps, electric vehicle charging points and battery technology in the houses, bringing down bills for the residents while contributing to net zero. Will the Secretary of State join me in praising Cardiff's Labour council and the Welsh Labour Government for the work they have done on this issue, and will he explain what we are doing to ensure greater manufacture of those technologies in this country?

Grant Shapps: Of course, I am delighted that the Barnett formula stretches so far in providing some of the excellent additions to those buildings. I just want to repeat that no Government have gone further and faster in the G7 than this one in introducing renewables and ensuring that they now power a very significant part of

our grid. We want to go further and faster still, and we will make sure that things such as building codes help with that plan.

Net Zero Projects: Skills

11. **Stephen Farry** (North Down) (Alliance): What assessment he has made with Cabinet colleagues of the adequacy of workforce skills for delivering net zero projects. [905776]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Amanda Solloway): We recognise that having the right skills within the workforce is critical, which is why we established the green jobs delivery group.

Stephen Farry: The Climate Change Committee has expressed concern that the UK is falling behind on a range of net zero commitments, including on skills. A skilled workforce, alongside new green jobs, is a key component of the green new deal, but the workforce plan is not due until 2024. In the light of the urgency of addressing climate change, will the Government commit to bring that forward to some time later this year?

Amanda Solloway: We are working as quickly as we can on ensuring this. The new skills that will be required are really beneficial for the UK economy, so we are keen to work with the green jobs delivery group and the Department for Education in looking at apprenticeships and how we can push this forward as quickly as possible.

Clean Energy Technology: Private Sector Investment

12. **Nicola Richards** (West Bromwich East) (Con): What steps he is taking to encourage private sector investment in clean energy technologies. [905778]

17. **Dr Kieran Mullan** (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con): What steps he is taking to encourage private sector investment in clean energy technologies. [905784]

The Minister for Energy Security and Net Zero (Graham Stuart): Our "Powering up Britain" plan seizes opportunities from the transition to a decarbonised energy system. Our policies, backed by billions of pounds of Government funding—but more importantly, leveraging in about £100 billion of private investment—will support up to 480,000 jobs in 2030.

Nicola Richards: Enfinium is building a new energy-from-waste facility in my constituency, which will process nearly 400,000 tonnes of waste to generate electricity for more than 95,000 homes and businesses each year. Will the Minister join me in welcoming this investment in renewable energy, and outline how the Government are supporting energy-from-waste facilities across the country?

Graham Stuart: I thank my hon. Friend, and I am delighted to join her in welcoming this new investment, which will be a huge asset to her community as well as having positive national implications. Energy from waste with combined heat and power is supported through pot 1 of the contracts for difference scheme—our auction system. We expect to announce the results of the latest round in early September, and I hope the House will watch that announcement with great interest.

Dr Mullan: What assessment has the Minister made of the role of a tariff support mechanism to encourage short-term private sector investment in deep geothermal to support levelling up?

Graham Stuart: There is no greater champion than—or anyone in this House with half the knowledge of this, as far as I can tell—my hon. Friend in supporting the potential of deep geothermal. When the Prime Minister responded to his report, I know he thanked my hon. Friend for all the work that went into it. I can confirm that geothermal technologies that generate electricity are eligible for the contracts for difference scheme. We are also supporting and encouraging the development of geothermal heating projects through the green heat network fund, which supports the development of low-carbon heat networks. Under the leadership of my hon. Friend, I am confident that geothermal has a positive future.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): Private sector businesses in the Humber are ready and willing to invest £15 billion in carbon capture, storage and decarbonisation projects. However, this is being put at risk because, of the eight track 1 carbon capture and storage projects selected, not a single project was approved for the Humber, despite the Humber being the largest carbon emitter in the country and the fact that 80% of the UK's licensed CO₂ storage capacity is accessible from the Humber. When will these businesses get the clarity they need? When the track 1 expansion process is launched, will both Humber pipelines be approved?

Graham Stuart: I thank the hon. Lady for her question, and she is right to be frustrated because of the enormous potential both to decarbonise and to unlock industrial benefits for the area. We are moving as quickly as possible. I have already said that the Viking project and the Scottish cluster are in the favoured position, and the team is moving as quickly as possible this year to provide more certainty and unlock further investment.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Private sector investment in clean energy is vital, but does the Minister agree that one reason that the United Kingdom, despite having the highest tidal range on planet Earth after Canada, still uses so little of it, is a lack of public sector leadership? Areas such as Morecambe Bay, which could contribute to tidal energy, bringing down people's bills and protecting us against Putin, are something that we could move forward. Will the Minister agree to meet me and other MPs around the bay, so that we can bring forward plans to get the most out of our tidal energy?

Graham Stuart: I am not an expert in the hon. Gentleman's history on this topic, but I hope it has been consistently in favour of tidal energy, and therefore different from so many other areas of policy. I share his enthusiasm for the potential of tidal energy. That is why we are the world's leading nation in the deployment of tidal range, and why tidal power is eligible for the contracts for difference scheme. Notwithstanding so many issues, I would be happy to meet the hon. Gentleman.

Community Energy Projects

13. **Mr Ben Bradshaw** (Exeter) (Lab): What steps he plans to take to support the development of community energy projects. [905779]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Andrew Bowie): The Government are supporting local authorities and community energy groups to work together to develop projects within UK growth funding schemes, such as the UK shared prosperity fund. Ofgem also welcomes funding applications from the sector to the industry voluntary redress scheme.

Mr Bradshaw: Why did the Government remove amendments from the Energy Bill last week that would have supported community energy and local energy trading?

Andrew Bowie: As we have outlined previously, the Government do not support the amendments that were tabled in the Lords, and believe that the issues raised should be considered as part of wider market reform. However, we are proactively working with parliamentarians and the community energy sector to discuss whether further support from the Government for the sector is needed, and if so, what might be feasible.

Prepayment Meters

15. **Anna Firth** (Southend West) (Con): What energy cost support his Department has provided to customers on traditional prepayment meters. [905781]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Amanda Solloway): The Government have provided support to customers on traditional prepayment meters through the energy bills support scheme and energy price guarantee.

Anna Firth: I very much welcome the measures that the Government have announced to support those on traditional prepayment meters, but many residents in Southend West, such as those living in Trafford House in Leigh-on-Sea, are on communal heat networks. They are still facing higher prices and have no control whatsoever over their heating. What are the Government doing to encourage heat suppliers to apply for the energy bill discount scheme ahead of the deadline at the end of this month, which will benefit my constituents who have no control over their energy bills?

Amanda Solloway: My hon. Friend is a great advocate for all her constituents, and she will be interested to hear that the Government are committed to supporting domestic heat network customers with their bills. That is why we introduced the energy bills discount scheme heat network support, which aims to ensure that heat network customers do not face disappointingly higher bills compared with customers in equivalent households.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): Can the Minister tell us the value of prepayment meter vouchers not cashed by the 30 June deadline? What can the Government do to ensure that support reaches those people who are eligible to get it?

Amanda Solloway: All hon. Members will know how abhorrent we found the use of forced entry to people's houses over prepayment meters. However, we have worked hard and consistently to ensure that all those on prepayment meters are treated fairly and given support.

Small Modular Nuclear Reactors

16. **Mr Rob Roberts** (Delyn) (Ind): What steps he is taking to introduce small modular nuclear reactors into the energy mix. [905783]

19. **John Spellar** (Warley) (Lab): When his Department plans to complete its competitive process for small modular nuclear reactor technologies. [905786]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Andrew Bowie): I am pleased, and indeed proud, to say that Great British Nuclear will be holding a competition for small modular reactors, because we want to attract the best designs from both domestic and international vendors. The Government's ambition is to select the leading technologies by autumn, providing co-funding to any viable new technology. Our commitment to a nuclear programme and to Great British Nuclear will enable the UK to be on a path to achieve its ambition to become a global leader in nuclear energy and small modular reactors.

Mr Roberts: As members of the Welsh Affairs Committee heard during a visit to the United States in January, small modular reactors should play a significant role in transition, alongside large-scale nuclear projects. Does the Minister agree that while north-west Wales has excellent scope for large-scale projects, parts of north-east Wales would be outstanding prospects for an SMR site, as well as capitalising on the region's amazing manufacturing and engineering capabilities to drive that part of the energy mix forward?

Andrew Bowie: The Government recognise the support for nuclear power across north Wales. Great British Nuclear will work with the Government on access to potential sites for new nuclear projects to achieve our long-term ambition. As a first step towards the development of the new national policy statement for nuclear, we will consult later this year on a proposed way forward for determining how new nuclear developments, including SMRs, might be located.

John Spellar: The Minister will know that this country has been producing small nuclear reactors for our submarines for more than 50 years. Does the Minister understand that while he is dithering around with his time-wasting international competition, those international competitors are out there in the market getting the orders and selling, backed to the hilt by their own Governments? Is this going to be yet another great British development created by our scientists, engineers and skilled trades, but allowed to slip away by blinkered civil servants and weak Ministers who cannot make a decision?

Andrew Bowie: Rolls-Royce is a great British company, which is why we previously made up to £210 million available from the advanced nuclear fund to Rolls-Royce SMR Ltd to support the development of its small modular reactor design. Great British Nuclear will launch the first-stage selection process for small modular reactors,

which is expected to attract the best designs from domestic and international vendors, which will be great for this country. By the way, we are going three times faster than any comparable country on this project.

Energy Costs: Support for Households

18. **Hannah Bardell** (Livingston) (SNP): What plans he has to support households with energy costs in winter 2023-24. [905785]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Amanda Solloway): The Government are committed to cheap energy for all. Last winter, we covered half a typical energy bill through the combined support of the energy price guarantee and the energy bill support scheme since October, with a typical household saving around £1,500 by the end of June.

Hannah Bardell: There is a huge gulf between the reality and the practice of the Government. The Public Accounts Committee has warned this Tory Government about their lack of planning on support for consumers with the cost of energy this winter. Lack of preparedness seems a serious ailment within this Government. Given that Sense research has found that more than 30% of disabled people are cutting back on their use of medical equipment, when will we get a proper plan from this Government, instead of the profiteering off the backs of the most vulnerable, as we see from so many energy companies?

Amanda Solloway: We are of course making plans, and I do not accept that we are not planning. We are also talking to stakeholders and ensuring that we are giving the best support we can to all those who will be vulnerable in winter 2023-24.

Topical Questions

T1. [905791] **Ruth Cadbury** (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Grant Shapps): Next week will mark the 500-day anniversary since Putin launched his invasion of Ukraine and began trying to blackmail the world on energy. As ever, Britain stood strong in the face of tyranny, and I am pleased to report that from Saturday just past, energy bills are falling by an average of 17% for households. We are committed to powering Britain from Britain, despite some alarming energy surrender plans coming from the Opposition.

Ruth Cadbury: The Climate Change Committee's report published last week found that of the policies and consultations that are the responsibility of the Secretary of State's Department, no less than 33 are overdue. He cannot blame anyone else. Will he now own up to the Government's appalling failure?

Grant Shapps: The actual data argues the opposite way. We have met all our carbon budgets to date. The Climate Change Committee last week said that the chances of reaching carbon budget 4 are "slightly increased". We are confident of meeting it, and we have

set out our plans for carbon budgets 5 and 6. I have to say that given that this country has the best record in the world among developed nations for getting carbon under control, it is surprising to hear the Opposition's view.

T2. [905792] Mark Fletcher (Bolsover) (Con): Our domestic nuclear sector and our military are struggling to recruit and retain enough nuclear engineers. What discussions is the Minister having with the sector and the Department for Education to create a long-term workforce plan to solve the issue?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Andrew Bowie): Since day one, the skills challenges that we face have been a top priority for me, which is why my Department is working closely with the Ministry of Defence, the DFE and the sector to tackle them. With the employer-led Nuclear Skills Strategy Group, we have deployed a joint plan of skills actions to support the civil and defence programmes, but I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss that further.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): Six days ago, the Climate Change Committee delivered its most scathing assessment in its history on the Government's record, saying that they were off track on 41 out of 50 key targets. It said that we have gone "markedly" backwards in the past year, on the Secretary of State's watch. Who does he blame for this failure?

Grant Shapps: As has been discussed more than once in these questions and answers, we have taken this country from having only 7% renewable energy to over 40%. We have decarbonised faster than any other G7 nation and we are on track for carbon budget 4, having already overdelivered on carbon budgets 1, 2 and 3. Based on our record to date, we are doing a pretty good job.

Edward Miliband: That answer is total complacency from a Secretary of State who has just been proven to be failing on every major aspect of his agenda. That is why Lord Goldsmith resigned. Lord Deben has said he is failing, and the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) has said that we are losing the global race. Is not the truth now that even the Tories do not trust the Tories on the climate crisis?

Grant Shapps: This is one of the problems with not being prepared to follow the data, which shows us overdelivering on the commitments of carbon budgets 1, 2 and 3, and that we are more likely to meet carbon budget 4 than we were a year ago. If the right hon. Gentleman wants to ignore all that and still roll out his pre-written question, that is how we get to his conclusions. The truth is that the Government are delivering on the issues of climate change while protecting every single household in the country from Putin's tyranny. I am afraid that has already been surrendered by the right hon. Gentleman, who subscribes to the Just Stop Oil approach.

Mr Speaker: Order. Can I just ask the Secretary of State to please not take advantage? This is topicals. Please tell me if you want to pick a Member who you do not want to be able to ask their question.

T4. [905794] Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Will the Minister tell the House what his latest assessment is of the full financial cost to the United Kingdom of reaching net zero, and, if the UK reaches net zero, what difference that would make to global temperatures?

The Minister for Energy Security and Net Zero (Graham Stuart): We estimate that the net cost excluding air quality and emissions-saving benefits will be equivalent to about 1% to 2% of GDP in 2050. As my hon. Friend knows, emissions are global, and we all need to play our part. The UK has a part to play in tandem with others, and that is why I will be working with other Ministers at the conference of the parties in Dubai.

T3. [905793] Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab): The Climate Change Committee has slammed the Government for their failure on energy efficiency, with the number of homes helped under the energy company obligation having fallen by half between 2021 to 2022 and now standing at a tenth of the level under the last Labour Government. Instead of the usual complacent nonsense, will the Minister explain why the Government are failing to insulate Britain's homes and what he will do about it?

Graham Stuart: The hon. Gentleman is right to be frustrated about progress. But as the Secretary of State said, when the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), who is chuntering on the Front Bench, was in power, just 14% of homes were decently insulated; by the end of the year, it will be more than 50%. We have set up the energy efficiency taskforce because we want to go further and faster. We are determined to do more. We are spending £12.6 billion over this Parliament and the next, and—

Mr Speaker: Order.

T5. [905795] Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): Many businesses across my constituency, including Lishman's butchers and Clip 'n Climb in Ilkley, have kindly contacted me about needing additional support to help with their energy prices. The Government have done a huge amount to support domestic users, but will the Minister outline what more support can be provided to small independent businesses?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Amanda Solloway): My hon. Friend will be interested to hear that the Government provided more than £7.4 billion of support to businesses—more than £35 million a day—through the energy bill relief scheme last winter.

T6. [905796] Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): Mine water heating is an emerging technology that employs the heat stored in former mines to heat buildings. It is low-carbon and efficient, and it could be a boon for our country, especially in deindustrialised areas such as County Durham that experience high levels of fuel poverty. What forms of support is the Minister offering? Will he meet me to discuss how we can take this forward in the north-east?

Graham Stuart: I share the hon. Lady's enthusiasm. We are taking steps to support this technology, and I would be delighted to meet her to discuss it further.

T7. [905797] **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): Lots of green renewable energy is generated in Northamptonshire. For the last year for which figures are available, what was the total output, and the breakdown by type?

Graham Stuart: Unfortunately, we do not have public data by constituency and do not yet have the full data for 2022. However, I can tell my hon. Friend that in 2021, north Northamptonshire generated a total of 362 GWh of renewable electricity. The people of Kettering, like their representative, want Kettering to be one of the greenest constituencies in the country.

T9. [905799] **Olivia Blake** (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab): The Secretary of State has signalled that his party will finally drop the nonsensical proposed hydrogen levy—another welcome Government U-turn. Will he confirm that it is, in fact, a U-turn? Will he outline exactly how the much-needed investment in green hydrogen technology will be paid for without already struggling households being made to foot the bill? [R]

Grant Shapps: The whole House will welcome the hydrogen economy as an important way to store power. It is becoming increasingly apparent that that power is most likely to be used in heavy industry as well as heavy transport. This Government are committed to hydrogen power, but we are also keen to ensure that it does not impact on people's energy bills, just as those bills are starting to fall thanks to the support that we provided families with this past winter.

T8. [905798] **Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): The contracts for difference auctions have been very successful in kickstarting the British success story that is offshore wind. [Interruption.] However, the mechanism now needs adaptation to maximise job creation in places such as Lowestoft and to ensure that we adopt a strategic approach to the provision of enabling infrastructure such as ports and the grid. I would welcome an update from my right hon. Friend on the Government's work on this important issue.

Graham Stuart: I could only just hear my hon. Friend's question, as the shadow Secretary of State made it quite hard to hear. The Government recently completed a call for evidence on this very subject, looking at the introduction of non-price factors in the contracts for difference scheme so that it values things other than just cost deployment. My hon. Friend, like all Members on the Government Front Bench, wants the maximum number of jobs created and retained in this country.

T10. [905800] **Catherine McKinnell** (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): Lord Deben has urged the Government to

"find the courage to place climate change once again at the heart of its leadership."

Does the Minister share concerns that the Prime Minister and, therefore, this Government are just too weak to stand up to their Back Benchers and really grasp the opportunity and necessity?

Andrew Bowie: It was this Prime Minister who created the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, and it is this Government who have delivered more than 43% renewable electricity on to the grid. We will take no lectures from the Labour party on combating climate change.

Lia Nici (Great Grimsby) (Con): Will my hon. Friend please outline what his Department is doing to look at the import of green hydrogen feedstock into the UK, to increase the scale and speed of the UK industry and help us achieve our 10 GW capacity by 2020?

Graham Stuart: I am aware of proposals on the shipping and possible piping of hydrogen and the important part that must play. If we are to decarbonise all of British industry, we will need shipping as well as piping. I will be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss what further we can do.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): I very much welcome the recent progress on developing carbon capture, usage and storage on Teesside. I hope we will see the final confirmation that it will happen and the work will start. That said, local industrialists and investors are concerned that the Department is not now asking BP to build the CO₂ collection pipework as originally planned, meaning that it will not go to CF Fertilisers or Kellas or pass by the Alfanar site. Could the Minister provide an update, please?

Graham Stuart: We are moving at top speed to drive forward CCUS. We are in a world-leading position. The opportunity is enormous in the Tees, the Humber and areas in the north-west as we seek to get that right and embed those industries in this country.

George Eustice (Camborne and Redruth) (Con): The unique geology of Cornwall means that there is huge potential for geothermal energy. There are a number of projects bidding for the current allocation round. Geothermal energy has a competitive strike price, has lithium as a by-product and makes use of mature technology. Will the Secretary of State ensure that those benefits are properly factored into any assessments?

Grant Shapps: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right about the opportunities of geothermal. He will be pleased to know that it just received a potential allocation through the contracts for difference round. As he and other hon. Friends have pointed out, geothermal has great potential in this country, and we look forward to supporting it.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): Communities in Padanaram, Forfar, Aberlemno and Stracathro in my constituency have been on the receiving end of an extraordinarily flawed consultation by SSEN—Scottish and Southern Electricity Networks—on taking a 400 kV line from Tealing to Kintore. I welcome the investment, but can the Minister advise on the minimum standards for consultations on capital infrastructure of this nature, and why will Ofgem not mandate that there is a community benefit?

Grant Shapps: I will, with the hon. Gentleman's permission, arrange to write back to him in a more detailed structure, given that the development is

actually in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie).

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): Unlocking access to the grid will unlock significant private sector capital ready to come in for microgeneration of battery storage projects. Can my hon. Friend give me an update on the timing for the Winser review and the Government's response to it?

Andrew Bowie: The Government have received Nick Winser's review and it will be published imminently.

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): Following a debate in Westminster Hall on making heritage buildings more sustainable, will the Secretary of State undertake to meet his colleague the Minister with responsibility for culture to push for the urgent revision of guidelines to allow greater flexibility in the siting of solar panels and other renewable installations on heritage buildings, in order to make them more environmentally sustainable and economically viable?

Amanda Solloway: Speaking for myself, I would be delighted to have a meeting on that subject.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): At a time when the cost of generating electricity is falling thanks to the increasing use of renewables, my constituents do not understand why the price of electricity remains linked to the price of gas. I know that the Government are undertaking a review of electricity market arrangements. When might they expect to see a change?

Graham Stuart: My hon. Friend is quite right to ask that question. We would all like to see gas setting the price of electricity less frequently. That is why we are

accelerating the take-up of renewables, which were so pitifully low in quantity when Labour was in power. We need a Conservative Government to keep up progress and lower bills right across the country.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The Secretary of State outlined the progress being made on small modular nuclear reactors. Can he provide an estimate of how many there might be within 10 years?

Andrew Bowie: Great British Nuclear will be launched later in July. We will also be launching the draw-down selection process for which technologies we will invest in and support. I would be delighted to speak to the hon. Gentleman in more detail about that progress moving forward.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I think my constituents, not least those who are part of the Glasgow Community Energy co-operative, will be disappointed with the Minister's answer to the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw). The Minister is extremely familiar with the clauses that form part of the proposed community energy Bill. They are not acceptable as amendments to the Energy Bill before this House. Will the Government bring forward their own amendments, so that community energy groups can have the confidence they need to take forward their projects?

Andrew Bowie: As I said, we are working with the sector and parliamentarians to find a way forward to further support community energy projects. As part of that, I would be delighted to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss it further.

Violence in the West Bank

12.33 pm

Beth Winter (Cynon Valley) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs if he will make a statement on the violence in the west bank.

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): The accelerating cycle of violence in the west bank risks another round of bloodshed and the Government are doing everything possible to urge the de-escalation of the situation. The latest operation by the Israel Defence Forces in the Jenin refugee camp in the northern west bank on Monday is the latest episode in a conflict that has become more worrying as the year has progressed. While the UK firmly supports Israel's right to defend itself and its citizens against terrorism, we urge the Israel Defence Forces to demonstrate restraint, adhere to the principles of international humanitarian law and prioritise the protection of civilians.

While the security situation today remains fragile, the UK welcomed Israeli and Palestinian engagement at meetings in Aqaba on 26 February and Sharm El Sheik on 19 March. We are clear-eyed that those meetings have not been a silver bullet, but they are an open, meaningful channel of communication between senior Israelis and Palestinians. At times of strife, this is important in assisting de-escalation and reducing violence. We have consistently engaged with both the Israelis and the Palestinians to urge them to de-escalate tensions and to support efforts towards renewed negotiations.

My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary spoke to the Israeli Foreign Minister, Eli Cohen, on 26 June—when they discussed the security situation in the west bank—having spoken to the Palestinian Prime Minister, Mohammad Shtayyeh, on 16 June. I can confirm that the Minister for the Middle East, Lord Ahmad, will be discussing the evolving situation with the Israeli ambassador later today, further to discussions in recent days. He also spoke to the Palestinian Foreign Minister, Riyad al-Maliki, on 5 May. Our ambassadors in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem regularly speak to both the Israeli Government and the Palestinian Authority to urge de-escalation and to make clear our expectation that all sides avoid unilateral steps that move the parties further away from dialogue.

Let me finally draw the House's attention to the statement that the Foreign Secretary made jointly with his Canadian and Australian counterparts last Friday. The UK opposes Israel's announced proposal to expand settlements across the west bank, and we ask Israel to halt and reverse its policy of supporting settlement expansion. Settlements are not the only obstacle to peace, but they are an important one, and our concerns about these recent steps are clear. The lives lost in this wider conflict are tragic. There is an urgent need for all parties to avoid further escalation in the west bank and Gaza, now and in the days ahead.

Beth Winter: The past 24 hours have seen a horrifying military assault by the Israel Defence Forces on the overcrowded refugee camp in Jenin. The UN Refugee Agency says that about 15,000 people live in less than half a square kilometre in the camp, yet we have all witnessed on our screens the Israel Defence Forces

launching air attacks, including attacks from drones, and they have sent in hundreds, if not thousands, of ground troops in the largest military action in the west bank for 20 years. News agencies are reporting 10 deaths of Palestinians, including three children, and 100 Palestinians injured, while the Palestinian Red Crescent says that it has evacuated 3,000 people. The UN's Vanessa Huguenin has said:

"We are alarmed at the scale of air and ground operations that are taking place in Jenin".

The World Health Organisation has said:

"First responders have been prevented from entering the refugee camp".

Meanwhile, the Palestinian Authority leadership has resolved to

"immediately petition the UN Security Council to implement Resolution 2334 and the relevant resolutions on providing international protection to the Palestinian people, stopping unilateral measures, and imposing sanctions on the occupying power."

The UK currently holds the presidency of the UN Security Council and is therefore responsible for guiding its response to requests made by the Palestinian Authority. May I therefore ask the following questions? What are the UK Government doing in their capacity as President of the UN Security Council? How have they responded at the UN to the Palestinian Authority's call for international protection? What has the Foreign Office said to its Israeli counterpart about the Israel Defence Forces preventing medical staff from accessing the Jenin refugee camp, or firing tear gas into hospitals sheltering children and elderly residents?

Finally, what steps will the Foreign Secretary take to review whether the IDF have made any use of UK arms sold to Israel in this attack? Will he immediately suspend all arms sales, including surveillance technology, and will he ban collaboration between the UK and Israel's armed forces and military industries as a result of this horrific attack on civilians?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I thank the hon. Lady for bringing the urgent question to the House. This is a matter of deep concern to us all. We will continue to urge the Israel Defence Forces to demonstrate restraint in this operation so that all parties can try to avoid further escalation in the west bank and Gaza. As I have said, while the UK will always support Israel's right to self-defence, the protection of civilians, particularly children, must always be prioritised, and we expect the armed forces' conduct always to be in line with international humanitarian law. We therefore call on Israel to adhere to those principles of necessity and proportionality while defending its legitimate security interest.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): We stand on the precipice of the Gaza crisis of 2023 and the third intifada. Yesterday, an Israeli military incursion into the Jenin refugee camp resulted in the deaths of more than 10 refugees. Hundreds were injured and, as the hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Beth Winter) says, the ensuing gun battle has prevented civilians from getting the aid and medical care they need. Today, five Israeli civilians were killed in a terrorist car ramming and a stabbing, and we are in an endless cycle of violence. We need a return to the diplomatic table. Jordan and Egypt

have been trying to facilitate that and stand ready to continue to do so, but they must see meaningful efforts to stand up for the agreements reached at previous meetings, such as the one in Aqaba.

I therefore call on the Government to try to secure the following. The Israelis must stop the expansion of illegal settlements; we are seeing that continue and it must stop—they agreed to do that at Aqaba. We must see Hamas end its terror attacks on Israel. They are wrong—they are terror attacks—and although we have no influence over Hamas, we must use our voice to make it clear that it must immediately stop. As the UK, can we urge our Israeli friends to show restraint? Can we appoint a middle east peace process envoy who can be tasked with spending their entire time working with our allies around the region to de-escalate the situation? Our voice is unique and will be heard, and we have a role to play in the peace process. Finally, will we use our UN Security Council presidency? Through that role, we can shed light on what is taking place.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I thank the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee for her salient and wise comments, as always. May I reiterate that on Friday the Foreign Secretary made a joint statement with the Canadians and Australians to set out very clearly our opposition to Israel's announcement of the expansion of settlements across the west bank? We are asking Israel to halt and reverse that policy of settlement expansion with immediate effect.

More widely, of course, we recognise the very real security challenges facing Israel and the Palestinian Authority and condemn all terrorist groups planning and carrying out attacks, but we mourn the loss of innocent lives. Indeed, the injuries to civilians and particularly children are deeply concerning. We will continue to speak and our colleagues are speaking to our Israeli teams today about the urgent need for all parties to de-escalate and prevent the further loss of civilian life.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): We must all be extremely concerned about the situation in the refugee camp in the city of Jenin, as well as the ongoing deteriorating situation in the conflict as a whole. Israel has the right to defend itself against militant groups, but that right must be exercised proportionately and in line with international law. I am therefore very concerned that reports suggest there are significant civilian casualties in Jenin. I am also aware that statements from the spokesman for the United Nations Secretary-General suggest that this military operation has not been conducted within the parameters of humanitarian law. The Secretary-General is said to be "deeply concerned" about the situation on the ground.

Likewise, I am extremely concerned about the breaking news of a suspected car ramming in Tel Aviv, where latest reports suggest that at least five people are injured. Can the Minister provide an urgent update on the situation? We will always condemn acts of terrorism, which only make peace harder to achieve.

On Jenin, I am concerned about reports that emergency health teams have been prevented from entering Jenin to treat the injured and to help people in general, and that two hospitals have been damaged. The World Health Organisation has reported that three children

have recently been killed. I am sure that everyone in the House will agree that it is truly appalling that children—Palestinian and Israeli—continue to be the innocent victims in this conflict. Does the Minister agree that all civilian deaths must be thoroughly and impartially investigated and that there must be meaningful accountability?

Let me be clear that the Opposition will continue to be strong and consistent advocates of justice, human rights and international law in this conflict. We also condemn the unacceptable use of violence against civilians in all circumstances. In our view, there will be a lasting peace only when there is a negotiated diplomatic settlement to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The only real solution will be a settlement based on two states: a safe and secure Israel alongside a viable and independent Palestinian state. We strongly oppose actions that make this two-state solution harder to achieve. So my fundamental question is: what of substance are the Minister and the Government doing to bring this immediate conflict to an end and to lay the foundations for a two-state solution?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I do not have the latest information on the Tel Aviv attack, but I understand that Hamas are claiming it as one of theirs. We absolutely condemn Hamas's use of indiscriminate violence and attacks of this nature. There can never be any justification for such acts of violence, and we will continue to call on Hamas and other terrorist groups to permanently end their incitements against Israel. Importantly, Ministers and our ambassadors will continue to work very closely, today and in the days ahead, to urge the de-escalation of the present situation in Jenin.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): Understanding that this comes in the context of, for years, Israel building settlements that block the route to a settlement of this dispute, and understanding that Israel is failing to show restraint, failing to follow international humanitarian law and failing to protect civilians, what are the Government actually going to do?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: As I say, the statement that the Foreign Secretary put out with his Canadian and Australian counterparts last week set out a clear message to the Israelis about stopping the settlement expansion. We will continue to work with our friends and allies to make that message clearly heard.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Violence on all sides must be condemned. However, contrary to what the Minister said, illegal settlements are a barrier to peace, yet the UK Government continue to fail to take any meaningful action towards preventing that. This violence represents a serious escalation of tensions on the west bank. As we have heard, Palestinians and Israelis have lost their lives. What assessment has been made of the potential chain reaction of violence that this could unleash?

It has been confirmed that thousands of people have been displaced from the camp. What discussions has the Minister had with international colleagues on how to minimise the suffering of those refugees—civilians—who have now been displaced twice? This morning, UN aid agencies voiced alarm at the scale of Israel's military operation in Jenin, reporting that water and energy

[Drew Hendry]

supplies have been damaged, so will the UK Government commit to working with partners to provide additional humanitarian funding to restore these vital supplies for people there?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: The UK's position is clear: settlements are illegal under international law and they call into question Israel's commitment to the two-state solution. So we have urged Israel to halt that settlement expansion, which is threatening the physical viability of a Palestinian state. To the hon. Gentleman's point, we are working with our partners the United States, France, Germany and Italy to strongly oppose these unilateral steps.

I am afraid that I do not have the latest information on humanitarian funding, but our teams work very closely through the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration and other humanitarian organisations. I would be happy to ask the relevant Minister to update the House later on what the latest commitments are.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Clearly, this morning's car ramming is only the most recent of the terrorist attacks that have emanated from the city of Jenin. So far, Operation House and Garden has resulted in the destruction of three labs, hundreds of improvised explosive devices and thousands of grenades. Underneath the mosque, there were two tunnels with hundreds of weapons, and 120 people have been arrested. Clearly, the terrorist activity is going to be severely limited. Behind all this is the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Hamas and the Jenin battalions. Does my right hon. Friend agree with me that this is a proportionate attempt to reduce terrorism against the state of Israel?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: As I say, while the UK remains absolutely resolute in its commitment to Israel's security, and we condemn absolutely the use of indiscriminate force by Hamas and other terrorist groups, we call on all parties to maintain a proportionate balance, so that we can de-escalate the existing situation and ensure that civilians are not caught up in this any more.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): With water and electricity services in the Jenin refugee camp damaged as a result of the violence, camp residents are unable to move from their homes. Many are in urgent need of food, drinking water and medical support, but the ambulances have been prevented from reaching the wounded. Will the Secretary of State raise with the Israeli authorities the issue of access for ambulances and medical teams to the Jenin camp?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: The FCDO Minister for the middle east, Lord Ahmad, will be listening to the debate and will be able to give an update in the other place later today about his ongoing discussions with Israeli counterparts.

Nicola Richards (West Bromwich East) (Con): Let us be clear: any loss of innocent civilian life is one too many. But let us also be clear that the Palestinian Authority has lost control over Jenin and it has become a safe haven for terrorists. Terror groups have fortified the area with IEDs and last week they fired rockets

towards Israel from inside the camp. Iran has also boasted about arming, training and funding the Palestinian terror groups that operate there. Does the Minister agree that it is in the interests of both the Palestinians and the Israelis that terror groups cease these operations, which only further destabilise the Palestinian Authority and the region, with innocent people dying as a consequence?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: We recognise the real security concerns facing Israel and the Palestinian Authority while they try to deal with those terrorist groups, and we condemn absolutely terrorist groups planning and carrying out attacks. To my hon. Friend's point on the loss of innocent lives, every loss is one too many and there will also be a serious number of injuries to civilians. We continue to be deeply concerned by the cycle of violence in the west bank. The urgent need for all parties to de-escalate to prevent that loss of life remains critical.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Unless and until we acknowledge our own role in this developing tragedy, anything the Minister says at the Dispatch Box is essentially going to be meaningless. The increase in violence by the IDF and the expansion of settlement in the west bank happen because we and other countries in the west do nothing to hold Israel to account. So could the Minister tell us now: will she commit to supporting an International Criminal Court investigation into what is happening there? Will the Government here now set a timetable for the recognition of the Palestinian state?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: This Government and Members on both sides of the House do not waver from the two-state solution that we all wish to see. As I have said, settlements are illegal under international law and we will continue, alongside allies and partners, to make that point clear. As for the ongoing activity today, I hope that Lord Ahmad will be able to pick up on that later today as progress is made with our counterparts in Israel.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): But hasn't our strategic partnership with Israel, announced in this House, afforded us any leverage over Israeli policy in the west bank?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: Our strategic relationship with Israel is a strong and long-standing one. We work with Israel in many areas, from security to trade. It is an important partner. That does not negate the fact that we want to see a de-escalation of the current situation and to ensure that the loss of civilian lives is minimised.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I share the distress of others at the loss of civilian life. Islamic Jihad has already claimed several of the dead as Islamic Jihad fighters and, as we have heard, the Israelis say that the camp was used as a hub for terrorist operations. Does the Minister think any more can be done to prevent terrorists from embedding themselves among civilians, particularly in places such as refugee camps?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: We recognise the security challenges that are faced and will continue to be faced, not only by Israel and the Palestinian Authority in this case, but elsewhere in the world, where innocents living

in refugee camps are used as a cover for terrorists wishing to cause harm. We all have to continue to tackle that not only in the west bank, but around the world. Importantly, in this situation, we will all continue to urge de-escalation to reduce the risk of any further civilian casualties or loss of life.

Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab): This year has seen more Palestinians killed than in any other year, more settlement starts announced than in any other year, more demolitions in East Jerusalem than in any other year and more violence in general. We are on the precipice of another intifada. At the minute, it looks to me as though Israel is acting with impunity and this is an all-out assault on Palestinian life. So what actions will the Government undertake—not just conversations—to bring this dreadful escalation in violence to an end?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: We are absolutely committed to working with all parties on the challenges associated with demolitions so that people remain calm and avoid provocation. But we are clear that in all but the most exceptional of circumstances demolitions and forced evictions are contrary to international humanitarian law. The practice causes unnecessary suffering to Palestinians and is harmful to efforts to promote peace. In particular, we are monitoring developments at Masafer Yatta closely and we have made our views clear to the Israeli Government on that matter.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Constituents have written to me about their grave concerns for the welfare of civilians and health workers in the Jenin camp. They, like me, know that the Israeli army enjoys a climate of impunity because the international community never holds Israel to account for its actions. Israel continues to breach international law, including the fourth Geneva convention. As we have heard already today, settlements are war crimes under the Rome statute. So my question for the Minister is: what specific actions will the Government take to ensure that Israel adheres to international law and that its leaders are held accountable for its war crimes?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: As I say, we have been clear on this. My colleague in the other place will speak with the Israeli ambassador later today to ensure that we put forward the UK view that de-escalation is urgently required in this difficult situation and that we continue to tackle the questions associated with illegal settlements, which are contrary to humanitarian law.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): When the Russians have bombed predominantly civilian areas, resulting in the death of civilians, we have rightly condemned it as a war crime. Why have the Government not condemned these actions, which are resulting in the loss of civilian life, as a war crime? Have the Government called in the Israeli ambassador to remind her in the strongest terms possible of the legal responsibility that Israel has to protect civilians?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: The UK supports Israel's right to defend itself and its citizens against terrorist activities, but we are clearly urging the IDF to demonstrate restraint

in order to prioritise the protection of civilians. As I say, Lord Ahmad will be speaking with the Israeli ambassador later today.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): We all condemn attacks on civilians, regardless of which community they are from. The actions of the IDF in Jenin are indefensible and have resulted in 2023 being one of the most lethal years for Palestinians. The UK has long claimed to support a two-state solution, endorsed UN Security Council resolution 2334 and recognised that settlements are illegal under international law. So after yesterday's appalling move to block action by citizens and public bodies to stop illegal occupation and settlements, have UK Government policy changed?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: As I say, this Government will continue to stress the importance of the adherence to the principles of necessity and proportionality when Israel defends its legitimate security interests, as well as the importance of continuing to provide appropriate protection to the Palestinian civilian population, particularly children.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): At around 11.30 am yesterday, 17-year-old Majdi Younis Saud Ararawi sustained a gunshot wound to the chest and Nouruddin Husam Yousef Marshoud, who was just 15, was shot in the head by Israeli occupation forces. Their names join a list of more than 30 Palestinian children killed by the Israeli regime since the beginning of 2023. The ultimate cause of those senseless killings is Israel's brutal and illegal occupation of Palestine, which has gone on for over half a century.

Given that last night the Government voted for legislation banning peaceful means of protesting against this abomination, and given Britain's humanitarian and historic responsibilities to the Palestinian people, what actions have the Government taken? The Minister has ducked the question so far, but I will give her another chance to answer. What action will the Government take to ensure that Israel adheres to international law and its leaders are held to account?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: As I have said, we are engaging both with the Israelis and the Palestinians to urge them to de-escalate those tensions. Lord Ahmad will be speaking to the Israeli ambassador later, highlighting and demanding that under international law access to medical care and staff is allowed, so that those who are injured in the Jenin refugee camp are able to receive the medical care that they require.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): The use of aerial bombardment and armoured assault by thousands of troops in a refugee camp, familiar to the people of Gaza, is now extended to the west bank. Alongside settlement expansion, it is part of the annexation of the Occupied Palestinian Territories by Israel's far-right Government. Occupation is the cause and context of these latest war crimes. Will the Government acknowledge that and respond by recognising the state of Palestine?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: As I say, across this House we continue our long-standing position of a two-state solution. We will continue to work with partners across the world to find a solution that allows that to happen. In the

[Anne-Marie Trevelyan]

meantime, we are deeply troubled by the level of violence and we continue to call on Israel, while defending itself and its citizens, to demonstrate the restraint required to ease the situation in Jenin today.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): My thoughts go out to the people affected by the horrific attacks on the Jenin refugee camp. We must be clear that this is a violation of international law and that the occupying forces, in particular, have a responsibility to end the violence. I will give a clear suggestion of a possible action: will the UK Government send a clear message of condemnation by bringing to an end the importation into the UK of goods that are produced in those Israeli settlements that are deemed illegal under international law?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: As I say, we will continue to make calls on Israel—[*Interruption.*] Goods made in the settlements are not allowed to be imported, and that continues to be the case. We continue to grow the work that we do on trade with Israel, the Palestinian Authority and the OPTs, and I know the Department for Business and Trade is focused on that development work.¹

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I do not think the Minister understands the power of office. Today we have heard comments and some warm words, but we have seen no action. The UK currently has the power of holding the presidency of the United Nations Security Council, so will she call the Security Council together to act now on the atrocities that we have seen in Jenin? What other measures will she take to stop further atrocities occurring?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: As I say, we continue to work on the peaceful two-state solution. Later today, Lord Ahmad will provide an update in the other place on our continuing activities.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): This year has already been the deadliest for violence in the west bank since 2005. What assessment has the Minister made of the impact of rising Israeli violence against Palestinian civilians? I will give her another chance: does she not agree that civilian deaths should lead to investigations and accountability?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: As I say, we continue to be deeply troubled by the high number of Palestinian civilians who have been killed and injured, as the hon. Lady highlights. While Israel has a legitimate right to defend itself, it is important that Israeli forces exercise maximum restraint, especially in the use of live fire, when protecting that legitimate security interest.

Ms Anum Qaisar (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

Peace is a word we often hear in relation to Israel and Palestine, but how can peace be achieved when Palestinians are subjected to systematic and deliberate oppression and discrimination by Israeli authorities? The people in the Jenin refugee camp have already fled their homes, and they have been displaced yet again. Can the Minister set out what is being done by the international community to help those who have now been displaced twice? Will

she condemn the denial to access medical care for Palestinians in Jenin? And will she join me in calling out Israel's behaviour for what it is? As stated in a report by Amnesty International, Israel is committing the crime of "apartheid against Palestinians."

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: As I say, Lord Ahmad will be speaking to the Israeli ambassador later and will be making clear that we want to ensure that medical supplies are able to get into refugee camps to provide the care that is needed to those who are injured as a result of the violence of the past few days.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Reports from Jenin are shocking, particularly reports that medical teams are unable to get access to civilians in need. I support what the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns), said about having steps towards a solution and an ending of Israeli settlements. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reports there have been at least 570 attacks by settlers against Palestinians in the west bank this year, which is an average of three attacks a day. What is the Minister doing, in discussions with her counterparts, on tackling Israeli settler violence, as well as on the issues faced because of new Palestinian militant groups? Action is needed now to de-escalate the situation, as well as looking again at the international funding for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, which is vital to support Palestinian refugees.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: As I say, we condemn settler violence in the strongest possible terms and we urge the Israeli authorities to do what they can. The Foreign Secretary's statement, published with Australia and Canada at the end of last week, highlighted the very clear demand that the Government of Israel reverse their decision to approve over 5,700 new settlement units in the west bank and change the settlement approval process. We will continue to work with allies to achieve that.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): The escalation of violence in the west bank over the past year and the killing of innocent civilians, including children in recent days, is devastating. The two-state solution, which many of us hope will bring peace and stability to the region, seems further away than ever. What are the Government actively doing to stop the killing of innocent people and to ensure that a two-state settlement is still a diplomatic reality?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: As I have said, we continue to work with partners and allies on the two-state solution. Indeed, we call on all those caught up in the violence today to show restraint and to de-escalate the situation so that the violence can come to a halt and we can ensure that those casualties are able to receive treatment.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): My good and hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Beth Winter) was absolutely correct in her remarks and I thank her for securing this urgent question. I visited the refugee camp at Jenin in 2012 and saw some of the clinics and schools; to say that the conditions were grim is an understatement. What we have seen over the past day or two is an attack by Israeli security forces on a refugee camp, using missiles against children, parents, the elderly

1.[Official Report, 5 July 2023, Vol. 735, c. 4MC.]

and the vulnerable. This is not about Israel defending itself. Even the White House has stated that it is tyranny. When will the UK Government intervene not just with words to condemn those actions, but with something in practical terms to support the Palestinian people undergoing such appalling oppression?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: The UK's position on the middle east peace process is clear and we will continue to support a negotiated settlement, which leads to a safe and secure Israel living side by side with a viable and sovereign Palestinian state, based on the 1967 borders. In the short term, we are calling very firmly, as are all partners around the world, on Israeli defence forces to show the required level of restraint to ensure that the violence ceases in Jenin refugee camp as soon as possible.

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Beth Winter) for securing this urgent question. It has been reported that medical teams have been prevented from entering Jenin. Will the Minister condemn that now from the Dispatch Box? Will she express to her counterpart that Palestinians must have medical aid, and can she then return to the House to update MPs on the medical situation?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: As I have said, international humanitarian law requires access to be made available for medical teams to treat those in need of care, so we are urging Israel to allow that as soon as possible. I know that my colleague, the Minister for the middle east, will be raising that particularly urgently with the Israeli ambassador when he speaks to her this afternoon. I will ensure that an update is provided by the Department in due course.

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Lab): The last time that we saw tensions rise like this, we experienced a month of hate, with incidents of antisemitism rising to an all-time high, and horror tropes on the streets of London. Does the Minister agree that, while discussions are taking place to de-escalate the situation, we all have a duty to temper our language to make sure that Jewish residents, such as my constituents, do not live in fear of abuse, graffiti, racist convoys and, ultimately, violence. We all have a duty to try to tackle this behaviour on the streets when we see it.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: We all have a duty to ensure that antisemitic voices are not allowed to cause distress or violence. We will continue to ensure that those who feel anxious get the support they need. We provide a great deal of support and are very proud of the work that the Home Office does in support of many of our Jewish communities.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): This year, we have seen a record number of settlement units approved. The Israeli Finance Minister has instructed ministries to prepare for an additional 500,000 settlers on the west bank. We have seen 33 Palestinian children killed. While the Government urge restraint and we get the same weak answers time and again from the Dispatch Box, Israel is acting with impunity. I think the Minister said it slightly wrong earlier on, but it seemed that she was saying that trade with illegal settlements is now deemed illegal by the UK Government. Is that the case?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: Let me reiterate again that the UK position on settlements is absolutely clear. Those settlements are illegal under international law and, indeed, they call into question that commitment to the two-state solution, to which the UK are committed. We will continue to urge Israel to halt that and ensure that the trade relationships that we have with Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories can progress as they need to.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): Many of my Luton South constituents have been in touch to say how distressed and angry they are about the increase in violence on the west bank. Many have set out that the access to supplies, clean water and powdered milk for children is at risk, so, beyond conversations, can the Minister confirm that there will be additional support for healthcare and medical organisations on the ground so that they can help civilians?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: Once my noble Friend Lord Ahmad has had discussions with the Israeli ambassador, I will ensure that further information on how we will continue to support UNRWA and other humanitarian groups focuses in particular on this incident. I am afraid that I do not have more information to hand at the moment.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): One eye witness in an interview with CNN has compared the impact of the incursion with a natural disaster in terms of the destruction of infrastructure, such as roads, water systems and electricity. What role can the British Government play in helping reconstruction to reduce further humanitarian suffering? Is it the policy of the British Government that the state of Israel should pay reparations for damage to civilian infrastructure in the occupied territories as a result of military activity?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: As I have said, we have seen the violent activity today on our TVs and we call on the Israeli Defence Forces and the Israeli Government to demonstrate the restraint that is required to prioritise the protection of civilians and ensure that we can see both medical support get into the Jenin camp and de-escalation of the violence as soon as possible.

Ian Byrne (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab): I wish to pass on my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Beth Winter) for raising this issue today. I will give the Minister one more chance before we end this urgent question: can she set out with far, far greater clarity than she has done so far what action the Government will take as president of the UN Security Council to ensure that Israel adheres to international law and that its leaders are held accountable?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: As I set out earlier this week, the Foreign Secretary spoke to the Israeli Foreign Minister, Eli Cohen, on 26 June and to Palestinian Prime Minister Shtayyeh on 16 June. Such conversations are going on day after day. Lord Ahmad will be able to give an update on his conversations later on in the day in the other place.

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance): Israel is clearly in breach of international humanitarian law as well as multiple UN Security Council resolutions. The Minister has ducked the very specific question on the

[Stephen Farry]

Security Council on multiple occasions. As president of the Security Council, the UK has a particular power to convene the Security Council and, indeed, the responsibility to do so. Can the Minister give us a very clearcut answer: will the UK Government convene the Security Council on this issue—yes or no?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: As I have said, the Government continue not only to have close discussions with the Israelis to try to ensure a de-escalation of the violence that we are seeing today, but to work closely with our allies and partners to ensure that we continue to support and give the clear direction of international partners on the question of the two-state solution.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister of State for her measured and careful answers to the urgent question. It is important that her interest in this matter is put on the record. Will she outline what discussions have taken place with our Israeli allies to renew peace talks, to allow both states to co-exist beside each other without the tit-for-tat action that has become normalised and yet is truly horrific and heartbreaking for all those who are losing loved ones in this conflict?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. He is right that, when this violence occurs, the great tragedy is that civilians are caught up in it, especially where the Israeli Defence Forces are legitimately trying to defend themselves and, indeed, Palestinians from the terrorist threat. The Foreign Secretary continues to have a strong focus on this and we are working with leaders and our allies around the world to try to find a solution.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): The Minister mentioned that the Government have urged the Israeli Defence Forces to demonstrate restraint and have urged de-escalation to protect civilians, but actions speak

louder than words. Can the Minister say what it will take for the Government to suspend arms sales to Israel until we can be sure that they are not being used to violate international law and perpetrate war crimes and human rights abuses? I would appreciate it if the Minister could give a well-thought-out answer to the question, instead of referring to pre-scripted notes in a folder.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I will continue to state the fact that these violent activities are ongoing and colleagues are in discussions right now with Israeli counterparts. I do not wish to disturb those discussions in any way. I am here to update the House on as much as we know. It is an ongoing situation, but I know that when my colleague Lord Ahmad responds to an urgent question later in the day, he will have more information to share in the other place.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): I have listened carefully to the Minister, but since 2015 the Government have sold £500 million-worth of arms to Israel, and UK arms have been implicated in previous atrocities against Palestine. Can the Minister say categorically whether any of that military equipment has been used in Israel's assaults on the Jenin refugee camp? Does not this attack again show why the Government should suspend all arms sales to Israel until it abides by international law?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: The Government take our defence export responsibilities seriously and we operate some of the most robust export controls in the world. I reiterate, as colleagues have heard me say before in previous roles, that all applications for export licences are assessed on a case-by-case basis against strict criteria and we will not issue a licence if there is a clear risk that equipment might be used for internal repression. The Government will continue to monitor closely the situation in Israel, Gaza and the west bank and, if extant licences are found to be no longer consistent with those criteria, those licences will be revoked.

Points of Order

1.22 pm

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. My dad, God rest his soul, said to me that there are not many levers to tackle injustices, but boycotting is one of them. That is why I could not vote for the Government's Economic Activity of Public Bodies (Overseas Matters) Bill yesterday, which Ministers and lawyers have said would likely place the United Kingdom in breach of international law obligations. The hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns)—I have informed her that I will be mentioning her—said in an intervention on the Minister:

“The Foreign Office’s own legal advice states that the Bill could breach UNSC 2334. How am I being told repeatedly from the Dispatch Box that that is not the case, when that is what Government lawyers are saying themselves?”

She said,

“please do not repeat that this does not change anything when the Government lawyers themselves say it does.”—[*Official Report*, 3 July 2023; Vol. 735, c. 656.]

Conservative Members seem to have been informed that the Bill could breach international law, while Government Ministers state the opposite. I am minded to believe the hon. Lady, but could you advise me, Madam Deputy Speaker, on what I can do to ensure that the Government place all their legal advice in the Library, so that we can all have a read and discover who is telling the truth?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the hon. Lady for giving me notice of her point of order. No, the Chair does not have the power—nor has

it ever in the whole of our constitutional development—to require the Government to place any document in the Library, and certainly not legal advice. The hon. Lady, who is well versed in these matters, has rightly used the opportunity of a point of order to put her opinion on the record, and I am sure that it will have been heard by those on the Treasury Bench. As I say, she is well versed in these matters, and she will know it has been the long-standing practice of Governments of every political persuasion not to publish their legal advice. That is the normal course, and I certainly have no power from the Chair to compel the Government to do otherwise.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Last week in Justice questions, the Justice Secretary conflated the conviction rate and the charging rate for sex offenders and alleged rapists in the UK. Every day 300 women will be raped, and only three of those rapes will end in a charge. What can the House do to emphasise to Ministers that conflating the conviction rate with the charging rate in the courts is a basic error? The Secretary of State should know better and not repeat the sloppy practice of mixing up the two, especially on the very sensitive question of rape convictions.

Madam Deputy Speaker: As Mr Speaker and the Deputy Speakers have said many times from this Chair, the interpretation of statistics is not a matter for the Chair. One person looks at statistics and comes to one conclusion, while someone else looks at those statistics and comes to a different conclusion. The hon. Lady has made her point well and I am sure that those on the Treasury Bench will have heard it.

Republic of Somaliland (Recognition)

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

1.26 pm

Sir Gavin Williamson (South Staffordshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require His Majesty's Government to recognise formally the Republic of Somaliland; to make provision in connection with the establishing of diplomatic relations with the Republic of Somaliland; and for connected purposes.

I draw the attention of the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

The fourth of July is often known as independence day for a particular country, but I am not here to talk about the United States—I am here to talk about the republic of Somaliland. On 26 June 1960, Britain granted independence to the British protectorate of Somaliland. It was in the euphoria of that moment that Somaliland a few days later entered into a union with the old Italian trust territory of Somaliland, a union that proved deeply unhappy.

While it started in hope and optimism, that union ended in tragedy. It saw the rise of a brutal military dictatorship based in Mogadishu, whose next steps were the persecution and genocide of many Somalilanders. Over the following years, that union saw a genocide unfold with the loss of many lives—I am talking about not just tens of thousands, but hundreds of thousands of lives. In the capital city of Somaliland, it saw Somali air force jets rising to the skies to drop bombs on the people of Hargeisa. Some 90% of the city was completely destroyed, and there was destruction in many other cities right across Somaliland.

That union also saw many of the nomadic tribes of Somaliland persecuted, with their wells—their only source of life, which provided them vital water—being poisoned. Hundreds of thousands of people died in that genocide and, sadly, much of the world did not notice or pay attention. The impact was not just on the people killed; every single family in Somaliland was touched by that violence and many families either were displaced within the borders of Somaliland or had to flee to neighbouring countries such as Ethiopia and Djibouti.

We in this country should take pride in the fact that we welcomed so many of those Somalilanders to our shores and that they made us their home, as so many Somalilanders had done in the past. It is that connection—a connection that goes back long before independence—that ties our two nations together.

Out of that genocide, out of that civil war, we saw the emergence once again of an independent country. In 1991, Somaliland was able to declare itself free of Somalia. It was able to stand proud and independent, away from the persecution and genocide that it had suffered for so long. Somalilanders have asked the world for recognition for more than 30 years now. They have asked the world to recognise what is there on the horn of Africa. They have listened to countries such as Britain, the United States, France and Germany, which have turned to them and said, “We expect certain things: a democratic process, parliamentary and presidential elections, and a judicial process. We expect you to educate your boys and girls. We expect you to be welcoming and a safe place for people to visit.” And Somaliland

has delivered that, yet it still waits for recognition from countries such as Britain, the United States, France, Germany and so many others. That wait is too long.

Somaliland is a country doing everything that it believes people expect a democratic free country to be doing, but it asks for something in return. The people of Somaliland have, over so many decades, been willing to look to Britain as a friend. In fact, when we were in our greatest need during the second world war, the people of Somaliland joined with us in our battle against fascism. They fought side by side with British soldiers. When I was in Hargeisa, I visited the Commonwealth war graves cemetery, where I saw British names and the names of Somalilanders. Blood was spilled by both our nations for those common values and interests. We now need to step up as a nation and do something more than just being there. It is time to recognise Somaliland.

For too long, we have resisted that. We always find excuses for inertia and inaction. Now is the time for us to start being brave and reward the people who are doing the things that we as a nation ask them to do. Somaliland does not live in the easiest of neighbourhoods—it has difficult neighbours—but it is a democratic country that wants to educate its boys and girls and has a fair and robust judicial system. Those are things that we need to reward. We need to put them on a pedestal and say, “This is an example that we want others to follow.”

I say that if the Government will not take the action that is required, let it be the British House of Commons that leads the way. If the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office is deaf, let us show the will to recognise what is a nation: a country that has its own judicial process, elections, and every other function that we want in a democratic nation. If the Government are reluctant to take action, let this House do it. Let us ensure that we reward those who are doing what is needed.

As we look at Somaliland, we see a country that is developing and that has investment coming into it. I thank the British Government for the investment in Berbera port and the highway north to Hargeisa, but by the simple act of recognition, we could transform the lives of 5.7 million people, making every single one of them more prosperous and enabling Somaliland—a good ally of this country—to play a bigger role on the world stage and a vital role in supporting the values that we in this House hold dear.

Somaliland may seem a far-off place, and I recognise that a nation of 5.7 million perhaps does not seem significant to Britain, but it is. It plays a pivotal role in Africa. I urge this House to take the action that is required to support the republic of Somaliland and ensure that we deliver for its people, as they have defended what we value so dearly: democracy and freedom.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Sir Gavin Williamson, Mr Clive Betts, Sir Robert Buckland, Dr Lisa Cameron, Alun Cairns, John Spellar, Ian Paisley, Alec Shelbrooke, Paul Blomfield, Alexander Stafford and Kim Johnson present the Bill.

Sir Gavin Williamson accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 24 November, and to be printed (Bill 341).

Estimates Day

[4TH ALLOTTED DAY]

Department for Work and Pensions

[Relevant documents: Fourth Report of the Work and Pensions Committee, Universal Credit and childcare costs, HC 127; Second Report of the Work and Pensions Committee, The Cost of Living, HC 129; Fourth Report of the Work and Pensions Committee of Session 2019-21, The temporary increase in Universal Credit and Working Tax Credit, HC 1193; and Third Report of the Work and Pensions Committee of Session 2019-21, Universal Credit: the wait for a first payment, HC 204.]

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2024, for expenditure by the Department for Work and Pensions:

(1) further resources, not exceeding £88,727,809,000, be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 1383 of Session 2022-23,

(2) further resources, not exceeding £571,264,000, be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and

(3) a further sum, not exceeding £89,293,628,000, be granted to His Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.—(Guy Opperman.)

1.36 pm

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee to open the debate.

Sir Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I am very grateful to have been granted today's debate about DWP spending.

I will focus in particular on universal credit, whose roll-out started 10 years ago in 2013. The DWP is forecast to have, by some considerable margin, the highest expenditure of any Government Department, at £279.3 billion in this financial year, followed by the Department of Health and Social Care, at £201 billion. DWP spending is the largest by a considerable distance.

Of course, the DWP forecast is uncertain. Almost all its funding counts as annually managed expenditure; it is hard to forecast demand-led spending. DWP's admin spending—departmental expenditure limits—is 27% lower in real terms this year than in 2010-11. Universal credit spending is forecast to be £50.8 billion this financial year, which is £8.8 billion higher than forecast in these estimates last year, reflecting the recent much-needed uprating and a higher case load. In February, 4.5 million households were receiving universal credit payments.

A key argument in the business case for universal credit was the prospect of reducing fraud and error. Nearly a quarter of the £34 billion net present value gain expected over 10 years from introducing universal credit was due to come from lower fraud and error. In fact, fraud and error have been much worse than they were for legacy benefits. The Department's statistics show that the universal credit overpayment rate decreased, but from an astronomical 14.7% in May 2021 to 12.8% last year. I know that the Department is setting out to address that problem, and that it has obtained resources from the Treasury to do so. Underpayments were at

their highest-ever recorded rate last year, at 1.6%. I hope the Minister will be able to tell us about plans for tackling those problems.

An additional reason that it is so important to get decisions right at the moment is that universal credit is a passport to cost of living support payments. There was a strong case for merging the various benefits into universal credit, and the success of the system in getting urgently needed support out effectively during the pandemic was very important and very impressive. However, there are some big problems—above all, the problem of the five-week wait between applying for the benefit and receiving the first payment. With legacy benefits, the first payment would usually arrive a week and a half or so after applying. With universal credit, having spent hundreds of millions of pounds on what we were always assured was agile technology, the same thing now takes five weeks. That is a fundamental and unnecessary flaw; the security is absent from social security.

In January 2021, the Government rejected the Select Committee's recommendations to eliminate the wait and instead pay all first-time claimants of universal credit a starter payment equivalent to three weeks of the standard allowance, just to tide people over. The Government response pointed out that claimants can access advances, but of course, those are loans. Repayments reduce the already low monthly awards, and repaying advances is a major driver of the explosive growth in food bank demand that we have seen. Our colleagues in the other place, those on the Lords Economic Affairs Committee—with its Conservative Chair—succinctly highlighted the consequences of the five-week wait in July last year:

“the five-week wait for the first payment...drives many people into rent arrears, reliance on foodbanks and debt.”

As such, I ask the Minister once again whether the Government will reconsider our recommendations, or whether we have to wait for a different Government for that fundamental flaw to be addressed.

I am very pleased to say that one area in which the Government have listened to the Committee is reimbursement of childcare costs for people claiming universal credit. I warmly welcome the lifting of the cap and up-front payments for childcare announced in the Budget, and I hope that our future reports will have comparable levels of success. Those changes will support people to be in work in future.

Last week, the Child Poverty Action Group published a fascinating report called “You reap what you code”, highlighting areas where the universal credit computer system does not deliver what it should. It gave the example that legislation and guidance allow some groups to submit a universal credit claim up to a month in advance, but the system does not allow that, nor is there an adequate workaround outside the digital system. As such, some care leavers and prisoners expecting release can miss out on an entitlement that they are due. For all its success in the pandemic—I am unstinting in my recognition of that success—the rigidity of the digital system is a problem. Can the Minister tell us whether a fix is planned for that problem of early claims, which the Child Poverty Action Group highlighted last week?

Does the level of benefits meet need in the way it is supposed to? Do benefits represent value for the taxpayer? The Committee is conducting an important inquiry

[Sir Stephen Timms]

into benefit levels in the UK, and will report in the first half of next year. Benefit levels are very low. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Trussell Trust told the Committee that

“the basic rate of Universal Credit—its standard allowance (or equivalents in previous systems)—is now at its lowest level in real terms in almost 40 years (CPI-adjusted) and its lowest ever level as a proportion of average earnings.”

They estimate from pretty careful research that a single adult needs £120 per week to cover essentials: food, utilities, vital household items and travel. That is excluding rent and council tax. Universal credit’s standard allowance is £85 per week for a single adult over 25. That is a shortfall of at least £35 per week, and deductions—for advance payments, for example—often pull actual support well below the headline rate.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Trussell Trust call for an essentials guarantee. They make the point—which has been suggested this week in the press—that we might get a below-inflation uprating of benefits next year, making those problems even worse. I would be grateful if the Minister gave an assurance on that front, because that would be very bad news indeed.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Does the Chair of the Select Committee agree that the Government need to resist the temptation to try to plug the gaps with one-off payments? They should actually look at the wider, more structural problems that they have with the social security system, rather than just try to plug gaps when the system is falling apart at the seams.

Sir Stephen Timms: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point, and I very much value his contribution to the work of the Select Committee. He is quite right, and I hope that we will be able to look at some of those structural issues over the course of the inquiry.

If universal credit did meet basic needs, other demands—including on food banks—would decrease. When the £20 a week uplift to universal credit was introduced, there was a significant drop in food bank use; when that uplift was removed, food bank use went straight back up again. Universal credit was intended to make work pay, but how can it achieve that aim if people do not have the means to pay a bus fare, for example? In evidence to the Committee, the Trussell Trust, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Public Law Project all highlighted not being able to buy public transport tickets as a significant barrier to work. As far as we can tell, the Government have made no assessment at all of whether benefit levels are adequate. If I am wrong about that, I would very much welcome the Minister telling us, but there is certainly no evidence of such an assessment ever having been made. I hope the Department will look very carefully at the findings of our report when they are published in due course.

One other point was highlighted in a briefing for this debate prepared by the charity Barnardo’s. That charity describes the two-child limit as the single biggest policy driver of child poverty in the UK, and says that ending it would be the most cost-effective way of reducing child poverty, lifting a quarter of a million children out of poverty and easing the poverty of a further 850,000 children. The cost of doing so would be £1.3 billion per year. I must say that I am puzzled about the justification

for the two-child limit: it presumably reflects a belief that parents should not have more than two children, but as far as I understand it, that is not the Government’s view. Indeed, Government Members are understandably starting to worry about our falling birth rate, so why do we refuse to provide support for children beyond the first two? Is it not time to just scrap that limit, which does not seem to make any sense?

Another reason for higher DWP expenditure this year is the continuation of cost of living support. Expenditure is forecast to increase by just over £2 billion this year, due to higher payments—£900 in this financial year, compared with £650 last year—and higher take-up. Those payments have been crucial, but they do not fully meet need, particularly the £150 disability support payment. Last month, Maddy Rose of Mencap told the Select Committee that the payment is “clearly not commensurate” with the extra costs that those eligible incur, and we have heard other strong evidence to the Committee along those lines. Helen Barnard of the Trussell Trust told us last month that the cost of living payment

“has certainly helped the families that have got it, but of course, it is a flat payment. It is not calibrated for the number of people you are trying to feed, so it has clearly gone less far if you are a family with children than if you are a single person or a couple.”

That is one of the reasons why the Trussell Trust data shows a faster rise in food bank demand among families with children than among families without.

The lump sum nature of the payment is problematic. Citizens Advice, speaking for many, told the Committee that increments to universal credit would be better than one-off payments. Our colleagues on the Treasury Committee called on the Government last December to provide monthly payments over a six-month period to give more households support at the time of their greatest need and reduce the severity of the disincentives to work. The Government rejected that proposal, essentially due to the limitations of the IT system, but as we know from the pandemic, monthly universal credit can be increased overnight.

The need to meet a specific qualifying period for each payment window has led to what evidence to the Committee has described as

“a cliff edge where receiving a nil UC award one month—maybe due to a sanction or a higher salary due to backpay or a bonus—caused recipients to become ineligible for the entire cost of living support payment in that qualification period.”

I am looking forward to discussing cost of living support further with the Minister responsible for social mobility, youth and progression—the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Mims Davies)—at the Committee tomorrow morning.

A very important aim in achieving effective spending is transparency over how the money is being spent and what is being achieved. The Department has had a very poor record in recent years, so I warmly welcome signs of a new commitment to transparency since the appointment of the new Secretary of State. Keeping things hidden, which has been the Department’s practice, has the short-term advantage for Ministers of avoiding having to answer sometimes awkward questions, but over the medium and long term, people depending on the Department form the impression that it is conspiring against them. The result is terrible mistrust, causing the Department very serious problems over time—for example,

the very serious lack of confidence in the DWP among disabled people at the moment. It does not have to be like that, but changing things requires deliberate effort on the Department's behalf.

None of the recently introduced employment support initiatives had regular performance reporting on introduction. I warmly welcome the Minister's announcement of six-monthly performance reports for the restart scheme. That is one of the signs of welcome change in the Department's approach, but it should be the norm and part of the arrangements built in at the outset, not something that has to be dragged from the Department kicking and screaming subsequently. Greater openness could deliver a wholly different relationship between the Department and the people depending on its services, with the Department seen to be working with those it serves, rather than conspiring against them.

An interesting suggestion in the Child Poverty Action Group report I mentioned earlier, "You reap what you code", is that the source code for the universal credit computer system should be published. There would no doubt be some security concerns about doing that, but could not a small team—with experts from disability groups, Citizens Advice and software experts—be charged with reviewing that software and proposing improvements, perhaps in an annual report, a little bit along the lines of what the Social Security Advisory Committee does at the moment?

Let me briefly say a word about a different aspect of the Committee's work. We have been worried by the cuts to the funding of the Health and Safety Executive, and one result has been drastically fewer inspections of workplace asbestos. We published a report on this last year, and called in particular for two things—a target to remove all workplace asbestos within 40 years together with a plan to deliver it, and a central digital register of all workplace asbestos and of its condition. The Government rejected those recommendations, although I do welcome the agreement of the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for Mid Sussex, to meet a group of us, together with three industry groups and the Health and Safety Executive, to discuss further the idea for a register. That meeting will take place later this month.

I very warmly welcome the launch of the campaign by *The Sunday Times* at the weekend drawing attention to the continuing scale of the tragedy being inflicted by asbestos even now, a quarter of a century after its use was banned. It is still the biggest source of workplace-related deaths. *The Sunday Times* campaign headlines in particular our two recommendations, and I do hope that Ministers will now recognise the need to act. I welcome the fact that *The Sunday Times* will be running this campaign on a consistent basis.

I again thank the Backbench Business Committee for recommending today's debate. I would be very interested to hear from the Minister specifically how Ministers are assessing whether the different cost of living support payments meet needs and whether they are reaching the right people, and also how and when Ministers will decide whether payments along these lines will be needed next year. I look forward to the debate we are about to have.

1.55 pm

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): It is a pleasure to follow the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee, the right hon. Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms). This is an opportunity for us to scrutinise the spending of the DWP as a whole, and I think it is important to reflect, as the Chair did, on the amounts of money that we are talking about. Spending on pensioner benefits equates to £134.8 billion and spending on universal credit and equivalent benefits equates to £82.8 billion, and that is before we look at disability and carer benefits, housing benefit, incapacity benefits and the one-off cost of living payments.

We are talking about a significant amount of money, but we are not just talking about it in the whole or in the round. I am sure that all of us here, as constituency MPs, know that casework associated with the DWP takes up a significant proportion of our casework teams' time. Frankly, that is usually because of errors in the system. We know that every constituent's circumstances are unique, but the themes are the same and the consequences for people's day-to-day lives and living circumstances can be significant. I will highlight a survey carried out by the WASPI—Women Against State Pension Inequality—campaign that reports that nearly one in three women who have been impacted by changes to the state pension have fallen into debt in the last six months. That is people's day-to-day lives. Given the amount of money spent on the DWP, I think we all, on a cross-party basis, would want the money that is spent to be used effectively and efficiently. I want to use my time this afternoon to highlight some of the inefficiencies in the system and seek updates from the Minister on points that I hope he will address in his concluding remarks.

On the state pension, it is important that we recognise that those who are most reliant on the state pension are those who are least able to work for longer. I want to highlight the current LEAP—legal entitlement and administrative practices—correction exercise for underpayments of the state pension, and to ask the Minister to confirm whether the Government are still on track to complete those corrections by the end of 2024. In February 2023, they had paid out only £200 million of the target of £1.5 billion.

I also want to highlight the uptake of pension credit. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has advised that there is a policy proposal on the table looking at combining the housing allowance and pension credit systems. It believes that that would increase uptake of pension credit, which I know the Pensions Minister—the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott)—has been working very hard to do. If that is the case, why is it potentially being pushed back to 2028?

Home responsibilities protection errors were discovered last year and mentioned in the DWP's annual report. When people had accrued HRP under the old state pension, there were errors in converting it to national insurance credits in the move to the new system, and that left people with incomplete records and underpayments. When I say people, it is generally women. We are still waiting for the report to set out the scale of the problem now and how the DWP plans to fix it. I would be grateful if the Minister mentioned when that correction exercise will start. I urge that it starts in parallel with the current correction exercise rather than being delayed

[Wendy Chamberlain]

until after the current exercise is finished. Again, a lot of these issues tend to be for women. It feels to me that the way systems are set up sometimes means that they do not recognise the situation of women who have been in the workplace, the decisions they make for family and other reasons, and their caring responsibilities.

I want to mention the missing national insurance credits for people who received universal credit. The Minister confirmed to me in a letter in March that the automatic system for updating the records did not work because the format of the UC data sent to His Majesty's Revenue and Customs did not work with its systems, so that was suspended. This has meant that NI records are being manually updated, with errors being made as a result. I think this ties in with the Chair of the Select Committee's comments about IT and the problems that legacy systems sometimes have. We all remember that the £20 uplift in universal credit was never seen by those on legacy benefits, and the initial reason given for that was that the IT systems could not cope, and that was never addressed. Does the Minister think that all those corrections to NI records will be made by the end of 2023-24, and may we have an update on the number of pensioners who are still missing out on their full entitlement?

If we want work to work, and to work effectively, we must acknowledge that we need to do more on pensions. For me, a startling statistic is the fact that most people are not in work a year before their pension age. For a variety of reasons people are not working, and they are therefore waiting for their state pension. Recent DWP reporting puts the gender pension gap for private pensions at a staggering 35%. Do the Government have an estimate of the gender pay gap if they include people who have no private pension entitlement at all? I suspect that if they have not been included, the gap will be somewhat larger. Will the Government make it a departmental statutory objective to close the gender pension gap?

That brings us back to women, because that changing portfolio of careers that women potentially experience will increasingly be the case for many people. I think about my own background before I came to this place. Increasingly, people do not stay in one organisation for 30-plus years and then draw down their pension from that organisation; they instead do a variety of different jobs in different places. As a result, the pension dashboard that was introduced by the Pension Schemes Act 2021 becomes even more critical so that people can keep track. Again, I would be grateful for an update from the Minister on that roll-out.

Let me return to benefits and the insufficiency of income. A number of us were present at the statement on the disability cost of living payment, and there was a general acknowledgement, certainly on this side of the House, that insufficiency of income is at the root of that. DWP data shows that in 2021 one in six people were in relative poverty, and one in five after accounting for housing costs, while 13% were in absolute poverty and 17% after housing costs. The Resolution Foundation estimates that that figure will rise in 2023-24 to 18.4% after housing costs.

Keeping people in poverty has negative outcomes. When people are financially insecure, they are more likely to have health or mental health problems, and more likely to struggle to get into work—it becomes a

self-fulfilling prophecy. I echo the comments of the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee on the uprating of benefits. The previous uprating, which was welcomed, was simply to keep up with inflation. If the problem is insufficiency of income, not committing to do that going forward just makes the problem worse.

I co-chair the all-party parliamentary group on ending the need for food banks, and our “Cash or food?” inquiry deals specifically with how we better support people and ensure a decrease in the use of food banks. In my constituency—indeed, this is something the Scottish Affairs Committee is looking at—the rural poverty premium is real. The Chair of the Committee mentioned transport costs, and going from East Neuk in my constituency to the jobcentre in Levan costs £9 on the bus. When talking about the small amounts of money that constitute universal credit, we can quickly see where that money goes, and that is before someone potentially has to go shopping in premium local shops as opposed to Aldi and Lidl. Money goes very quickly.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): The hon. Lady made a good point about benefits and the key role that they play in creating a wealthy society. She may or may not know that there is an interesting TED talk called “Where in the world is it easiest to get rich?” The answer is: in Norway, Sweden and Denmark, where they have identified that one of the key aspects of creating a wealthy society is a good benefits system that enables workers to go around with some security, and society and children to have security as well. If we want to have millionaires and billionaires, we need a very good benefits system.

Wendy Chamberlain: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that contribution. Absolutely; I think we all look to the Scandinavian countries to see how they promote quality of life and support individuals, and we must think about how we can better support that. Indeed, the public generally tend to support that. They are comfortable potentially paying more in tax to have better services, and that debate must continue to be had.

I am pleased that my carer's leave private Member's Bill is now the Carer's Leave Act 2023, and it will for the first time give employment rights to unpaid carers. One of the huge challenges when I was engaging with unpaid carers in my constituency—I have said this in the Chamber before—was the number of people who had left work because of their caring responsibilities, and therefore they would not benefit from provisions in the Act. Sadly, it is a fact that too many unpaid carers and the people they care for are living in poverty.

Carers UK estimates that unpaid carers are providing care worth £162 billion a year, and when we contrast that with the costs of the Department through the estimates debate, we can see the comparators. Without unpaid carers, our economy would be severely strained. Some 45% of unpaid carers are estimated to be unable to afford their monthly expenses, and two thirds of those who receive carer's allowance or the universal credit carer element say that they cannot meet their monthly expenses. The level of carer's allowance needs to be increased urgently—I have called for that before, and I will continue to do so.

We must also think about how we taper carer's allowance. Caring never stops, and we should not have people falling off a cliff edge in relation to hours worked.

Frankly, that is a disincentive for people going into work, because if they have the choice between working or caring for their loved one, they will choose their loved one every time. For young carers, I am not just concerned about their education; I am also concerned that we will never get them into the workplace if we do not provide them with the support to get there.

I am conscious that some unpaid carers decide to step out of the workplace for some time and then their caring responsibilities end, potentially through the loss of a loved one. What are we doing to support unpaid carers, who might have been out of the workplace for some time, to get back into work? There are similarities with issues such as parental leave and other decisions, and we should be looking at that body of people, who frankly are some of the best multitaskers I know, given their skillsets, and how we can help them into work.

Finally—this is an issue that other Members will be hugely aware of—child benefit thresholds are becoming an increasing problem, particularly given some of our frozen levels of income tax. It is a ticking timebomb. Families do not apply for child benefit if they know that they will not be entitled to it, but because those levels have never changed, that is increasingly an issue for stay-at-home parents—again, those are usually women; there's a theme—who then miss out on accruing national insurance credits for the state pension. They do not realise that if they do not apply for child benefit payment, even to be told that they do not apply, they cannot pick up the national insurance credits, and that can be a real issue. Will the Minister consider reviewing the scheme for accruing credits for stay-at-home parents, or at the very least doing an awareness-raising campaign, as has been done for pension credits and other things? This is a good opportunity, whether a Member has an interest via the Committee, or otherwise, but as a constituency MP I want, and my casework team want, the DWP to be working as effectively as possible, so that those who need help get it, and those who can get into work are supported to do so.

2.8 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain). I find myself resonating with her comments on carers and the lack of support that exists in so many different ways, but particularly through the social security system, and the billions—multiple billions—that are provided in equivalent support to this country that we sadly do not adequately recognise.

I also pay tribute to the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms), for all that he does in the plethora of different inquiries that the Committee has held over the past few years. I am particularly pleased about the work that we are doing on the adequacy, or inadequacy, of the social security system, and the important things that will reveal when it is published early next year.

This debate is about DWP spending. Associated with that is what it means for the priorities of the Department and, in particular, the Government's priorities for social security as a whole. I will focus my remarks on the fall in support for working-age adults. We need to recognise that particular group and the impact that fall is having on so many different families across the country.

We have had two major welfare reform Acts, in 2012 and 2016. I will refer to the latter in a moment, but the cumulative impact of those up to the pandemic was the equivalent of a 17% reduction in working-age support, which in cash terms is about £33 billion. That was only slightly offset by the temporary increase in universal credit during the pandemic. Although I welcome the uprating last year, and I support what my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham said about that, it does not at all make up for the last 10 or 11 years of significant cuts. That has had an impact on relative poverty across the UK.

Just under one in three children in the UK are growing up in poverty, and in my constituency the figure is nearly one in two. We also know that just under two thirds of children growing up in poverty live in families where at least one adult is working. The implications of these cuts for those children are not insignificant. We now have the highest ever level of in-work poverty. What on earth does that say about this country? It is shocking.

Many people who know me will know how strongly I feel about the impact of these cuts on disabled people. One in three disabled people are living in poverty, which is twice the rate for non-disabled people. It is totally unacceptable. These are the most vulnerable people in our society, and we are failing to recognise their needs and support them.

I know that the Minister will come back and say, "Actually, poverty has reduced." The Joseph Rowntree Foundation reflected that in its annual report, which came out at the beginning of the year. Yes, poverty levels have gone down, but that reflected the fact that during the pandemic we saw reductions in overall incomes, and with relative poverty that is the position. Importantly, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation said that it was also about different choices that the Government made at the time. As much as we are talking about now, we must recognise that that £20 a week of additional support made a difference to those poverty levels. Poverty is not inevitable; it is about political choices. Again, I hope we can reflect on that.

When I speak to my constituents in Oldham East and Saddleworth, and indeed people across the country, they tell me that they feel our current system no longer provides the safety net that it was set up to provide in the post-war settlement with the British people, and they are right; it is inadequate. Following on from their first-hand experience during the pandemic, polling shows that two thirds of Britons think that universal credit is too low.

Not only has the adequacy of the UK's social security system diminished over time—in terms of average weekly incomes, it is approximately half of what was provided after world war two—but it is also lower than most of our European neighbours, with data from 2018 showing that our social security spending as a percentage of GDP was below EU27 and OECD averages.

We must never forget that the post-war Labour Government created the NHS and the welfare state. As we mark the remarkable achievement of our NHS with its 75th anniversary tomorrow, we must reflect on the principles of universality and access for all, which I would like to see reflected in our social security system, too. Like our NHS, our social security system should be there for all of us in our time of need, whether that is a

[Debbie Abrahams]

result of illness or disability, of being unable to work anymore because we have reached retirement age, or for any other reason. It should provide basic financial support and should be valued for the safety net it provides. That is not the case now, and that is why I am advocating for a new social contract that defines the future of our social security system. A good starting point would be the essentials guarantee that my right hon. Friend talked about. That has been proposed by the Trussell Trust and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, but a wide coalition of charities have advocated for it. They found that 90% of low-income households on universal credit are going without essentials such as food, electricity and clothes.

That inadequacy is the main driver of food bank need, with almost 1.3 million food parcels distributed between April and September 2022. That is just unacceptable in the fifth richest country in the world. An essentials guarantee would ensure that the universal credit standard allowance met a level that provided basic security for a family's need. The charities calculated that at £120 a week for a single person and £200 a week for a couple. The guarantee would bring us in line with our European neighbours and provide a safety net in the same vein as our NHS. It would also reduce the poverty that too many are experiencing and which has a lifelong impact on children.

Some Members will know that I chair the all-party parliamentary group on health in all policies and have done so for a number of years. In 2020, just before the pandemic, we commissioned a review of the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016 to analyse the impacts it was having on children and disabled people. Anybody watching or listening is welcome to have a look at that on my website. One of the biggest and most worrying figures that we found was that:

“Each 1% increase in child poverty was significantly associated with an extra 5.8 infant deaths per 100 000 live births...about a third of the increases in infant mortality between 2014 and 2017 can be attributed to rising child poverty”.

That was published in one of the peer-reviewed medical journals. Understanding the impact that that has had on so many families is devastating. It is yet further evidence that far more needs to be done to provide an essentials guarantee.

The flipside of that is that we have one of the highest tax burdens in 40 years, but I was heartened to see members of Patriotic Millionaires—they are all multi-millionaires—come out and say, “We recognise the impact that not having a wealth tax on us is having on the fabric of our society. We do not want our children growing up in a society where there is not the fairness that we grew up with in our country.” It has come up with the proposal of a wealth tax that would fund the essentials guarantee. For me, that group espouses what we as a nation can be.

In contrast—this takes me back to what other hon. Members have said—there has been a rather nasty element in the media. When we look at DWP spending, we must remember that half of it, rightly, goes on the state pension; that is the biggest slice of the spending. The next biggest is on housing benefit. We need to recognise that. Nobody would criticise DWP spending on our pensioners. I urge responsible journalists to

recognise that we should not criticise social security spending on people who are disabled or not able to work because of illness. We must be better than that.

As I conclude, Madam Deputy Speaker, because I did promise that I would be very brief, I repeat that poverty—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. For clarification, I am not putting the hon. Lady under any pressure. As far as I am concerned, she has all the time in the world.

Debbie Abrahams: Well, that is an offer that I definitely will refuse this time. As I said, poverty and inequality are not inevitable—they are political choices—and I believe that, like our NHS, our social security system should be there for all of us in our time of need.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the SNP spokesman.

2.21 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): May I start, as others have, by sending my thanks to the Chair of our Select Committee, the right hon. Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms), for securing today's debate and for setting the scene so well? The debate takes place against the backdrop of an ongoing Westminster-made cost of living crisis that affects the livelihoods and lives of people across Scotland and these islands. The harsh, yet inescapable reality is that people in Scotland can no longer afford to pay the price for the economic mismanagement of a Westminster Government they did not elect. Indeed, we have not voted by majority for the Conservatives since 1955.

In May, CPI was still at 8.7%. Prices are still soaring and the cost of living under Westminster control is still far too high for many families who were already struggling to get by after 13 long, brutal years of Tory cuts, Brexit and economic mismanagement. We know that inflation disproportionately impacts lower-income groups such as single parents, who spend a relatively high proportion of their income on food and fuel. Indeed, new Trussell Trust research shows that families are going hungry as a result of the Westminster-made cost of living crisis, with one in seven people in the UK facing hunger in the last year due to a lack of money. Ministers often tell us that the reasons for food bank usage are complex. It is not complex—it is because people do not have enough money.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation's latest cost of living tracker found that 5.7 million low-income households are having to cut down or skip meals because they do not have enough money for food, while the number going without items such as food, heating and basic toiletries has remained at about 7 million for more than a year—all of that in the sixth largest economy in the world.

The average interest rate for a two-year fixed-term mortgage has risen to 6%. The Resolution Foundation has said that average annual mortgage repayments are set to rise by £2,900 for those renewing next year. In short, that is the eye-watering Westminster mortgage premium that Scots are paying for the pleasure of a Tory Government they did not elect.

What is more, analysis by the consumer group Which? shows that the prices of popular family meals have risen by 27% in the last year. The Irish and French Governments

have reached agreements with major supermarket retailers to reduce food prices, while the Tory Government are sitting on their hands. It is those low-income families I represent in Parkhead, Shettleston and Baillieston who are paying the price for the sheer intransigence of Conservative Ministers here in London. Even at this late hour in the cost of living crisis, I urge the British Government to use all the powers at their disposal to tackle that crisis on the scale that is required. That does mean that they will have to be bold and radical, and the same is true of the pro-Brexit Labour party.

I turn specifically to universal credit, which is obviously the main focus of the debate. In short, the British Government's continual refusal to fix the extensive and known-about problems with universal credit is unacceptable, and it is without doubt subjecting some of the most vulnerable people in our communities to additional and unnecessary hardship. With the three main parties in this place now agreeing on the principles of universal credit, there is an opportunity, so we should put our heads together to look at what we can do to fix it.

I will start with the level of universal credit. JRF research shows that support has eroded over decades and that the basic rate of universal credit is now at its lowest level as a proportion of average earnings. Indeed, the JRF's latest cost of living tracker warns that about nine in 10 low-income households on UC have gone without at least one essential for the third survey in over a year.

For most people referred to food banks in the Trussell Trust network, the design and delivery of the social security system are major contributors to their inability to afford the essentials. The majority of people—indeed, some 89%—referred to food banks in the Trussell Trust network receive a means-tested benefit such as universal credit, but that did not provide them with enough to cover the cost of the essentials. As the right hon. Member for East Ham said, JRF and the Trussell Trust are together calling on Ministers to implement that essentials guarantee to ensure that, at a minimum, the basic rate of universal credit covers life's essentials and that support can never be pulled below that level.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Is not another problem the insane part of the system where people pay back money because of advances and the level of deductions—more than £60 a month is being deducted from my hon. Friend's constituents' and my constituents' universal credit? That envelops that cycle of poverty.

David Linden: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for putting that point on the record. He was my predecessor on the Select Committee and follows this work well. I will come to debt and deductions, because that is one of the big issues raised in the evidence that the Select Committee receives, certainly by the stakeholders that we meet. He is spot-on to draw attention to the £60 from each of our constituents that is paid back to the Government when it could be spent in our local economies.

New CPAG research finds that the digital aspects of universal credit routinely lead to wrong amounts being awarded to claimants—often those who are most vulnerable—and to breaches of rule of law principles. That is why I have repeatedly called on the Government to reverse their cuts to universal credit and working tax

credits. Let us not forget that this was the biggest overnight cut to welfare in 70 years, inflicting hardship on people who were already struggling. To have done that as we came out of the teeth of the pandemic was particularly cruel.

Rather than offering one-off payments to shore up struggling families' incomes, the DWP should reverse the damaging policies that are impacting on the most vulnerable people. It should reinstate the UC uplift at £25 per week and, of course, extend it to legacy benefits. Let us not forget the 2.5 million disabled people, so ably advocated for by the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), who were cruelly left behind without that uplift during the pandemic. The Government also need to remove the benefit cap and the two-child limit with its associated rape clause. They also need to halt the punitive sanctions regime so that all households are lifted out of poverty now and in future.

I turn to the benefit cap. As the Poverty Alliance points out, the cap's design means that those who require the highest level of support from the benefit system are the most likely to be affected. That is simply unjust. Based on the latest departmental figures, 114,000 UK households have had their benefit capped and 86% of those are families with children. The benefit cap disproportionately impacts lone-parent families, the majority of whom are women—a point made by the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain)—as well as larger and ethnic minority families.

The same is true of the two-child limit. Thousands of families with children will be pushed into poverty because Ministers on the Treasury Bench refuse to scrap the two-child limit on child tax credits and universal credit. A new London School of Economics study found that the policy's impoverishment of larger low-income households has helped few parents get a job. Instead, its main function has been to push families further into poverty and to damage their mental health.

I wonder why Ministers are so furred to the two-child limit. The vast majority of them are actually quite embarrassed by it, and that is before we get to the associated rape clause, or as the Government like to call it, the “non-consensual sex exemption”. When this Government go around lecturing people about the values of global Britain, I am pretty sure they do not tell folk that the state will only support the first two children in the family, but if someone can prove that their child was born as a result of rape, that is okay.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con) *indicated dissent.*

David Linden: The Parliamentary Private Secretary is shaking his head at that, but probably because he is so embarrassed.

The five-week wait for a first payment is needlessly pushing people into hardship. The issue could easily be fixed by implementing the Scottish National party's proposal to turn advance payment loans into non-repayable grants after the claimant has been deemed eligible. The Trussell Trust, which I referenced earlier, has consistently shown that the five-week wait for universal credit is a key driver in the need for food banks, both during those five weeks and after the payments have started.

[David Linden]

I want to draw attention to the young parent penalty in UC, which Ministers must end. It denies single parents under the age of 25 the same level of social security as those above that age, and it pushes those affected into real poverty. Let us not forget that when under-25s go into Aldi, Lidl, Morrisons or whatever supermarket, they do not get a discount on their shopping because they are under 25. I find that Ministers have an obsession with that.

Wendy Chamberlain: The hon. Gentleman has campaigned on this issue, as have I. Does he agree that the response I received from the previous Secretary of State on this point—that under-25s were treated differently because they tended to still be at home with their parents—is a pretty spurious argument and excuse from the Department?

David Linden: That is right. It was not unusual for the previous Secretary of State to say things which, after some scrutiny, might not make sense. The hon. Lady is right. For Ministers to hide behind the housing crisis—caused by this Tory Government—as some kind of justification for ensuring that people under 25 get less support does not stand up to scrutiny. That point was hammered home to me on Friday, when I was in Drumchapel visiting the Christians Against Poverty debt centre, to meet staff and volunteers there, to whom I pay enormous tribute for their sterling work.

According to One Parent Families Scotland, as a result of the young parent penalty, young couple parents are around £100 worse off per month than single parents, and around £65 worse off a month than over-25s. That research found that 55% of children with a mum under 25 are in relative poverty, and 49% are in absolute poverty. Let us never forget that those statistics are the result of the structural inequality put in place by intransigent Ministers. Although I certainly welcome the change whereby people on UC will now be able to claim childcare support upfront, I am afraid that does not change the fundamental issue that the amount of UC that people receive is simply not enough. Families will still be required to make up the 15% shortfall in their overall childcare costs under UC rules.

An issue that continues to come up in evidence at the Select Committee is that far too many households face destitution because of DWP rules that push them into debt through sanctions and reductions—a point made eloquently by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens). Aberlour Children's Charity produced a report that states that half of families with children in Scotland who receive universal credit are having their incomes reduced by the DWP to cover debts to public bodies. I hope the Select Committee will be able to drill into that a bit more. It is increasingly a problem, and I am sure I am not the only MP who sees people raising it regularly at advice surgeries.

It is well established and on record that the SNP completely opposes the widespread use of sanctions, as there is clear evidence that they do not work. Indeed, evidence from the Department's report admits that sanctions have a minimal effect on moving people into work. Instead, people who are sanctioned end up earning less than those who have not been sanctioned, or simply become economically inactive.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making such important remarks. Does he agree that the impact of sanctions is detrimental to people's mental health? We are facing a mental health crisis. If we want to support people getting into work, we need to make sure that they are not struggling on the breadline.

David Linden: The hon. Lady is spot on. Sometimes, Ministers overlook when they take those decisions—yes, they might be driven by focus groups and such things—that the state bears the cost. If somebody hits a period of mental ill health or is made homeless, the health service or the local authority will pick up the pieces. It is not without cost for the state. I would like Ministers to have the wider picture as they pursue sanctions, because the research shows that they do not work.

Margaret Greenwood: The hon. Gentleman is being generous. Does he agree that the issue of poverty is so concerning for small children because it impacts on the development of the brain and how well they will be able to learn? If a child has a good five years at the start of their life, that will see them through life. So many children in desperate poverty who do not know whether they will get enough food are also in receipt of the anxiety their parents are in, as they battle those stressful situations.

David Linden: I am proud that the Scottish Government invest in things such as the best start grant, the baby box and free school meals, to ensure that young people get the best possible start in life. My local authority in Glasgow is spending millions of pounds on holiday hunger programmes, to ensure that children who receive free school meals during school term time are still being fed. It is a damning indictment on the state that we have to spend money from local authority budgets feeding children because their parents do not have enough money. That is the situation we are in, in the fifth richest economy in the world.

Remarkably, as I am sure we will hear when the Minister responds to the debate, Ministers are still forcing more people into the sanctions regime, which further demonstrates the fundamental issue with the British Government's attitude to those on low incomes: preventing vulnerable families from receiving the social security they are entitled to and, most importantly, when they need it the most.

Before I draw my remarks to a close, I want to turn to the local housing allowance. The freeze of LHA rates for three consecutive years is placing additional and needless pressure on tenants and housing associations, and is likely to increase poverty and inequality. That is why Ministers should protect household incomes and support renters by restoring LHA rates to the 30th percentile as a minimum. The SNP has long called for the British Government to fix those fundamental flaws in our social security system but, as is so often the case, it falls on deaf ears each and every time, to the extent that every time I take part in one of these debates, it feels like groundhog day.

The blunt truth is that the Scottish Government cannot change those policies while 85% of welfare expenditure and income replacement benefits remain reserved to this institution here in London. That includes universal credit. By all means, I am happy to take part

in debates and make suggestions about how we repair the social security system, but it is difficult to conclude anything other than Westminster—whether the Tories or the pro-Brexit Labour party—has zero appetite to genuinely step in and sew up a system that is failing some of the most vulnerable people in society. For that reason, the only way genuinely to bring about that compassionate, fair and dignified social security system in Scotland is with the full powers of independence. Frankly, that cannot come soon enough.

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

2.39 pm

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): This has been a good, important and timely debate. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms), the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee, on bringing the debate to the Floor of the House. He rightly opened it by placing in context the size of the Department and its central place at the heart of economic policy, and discussed the work of his Committee, which has been substantial, on looking into some of the Department's very significant flaws. Given the economic situation the country now faces, the work of the Committee has never been more important. As he mentioned, it has published very important and significant reviews, and some of the recommendations have been adopted by the Government, so I applaud him for securing the debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), in her usual way, explained the manner in which poverty harms people not just in their financial life but in every single aspect of their life. The Government would do well to listen to her.

I want to make some brief remarks—with an emphasis on brief—as many good points have already been made and I will not be repeating them all. I want to get to the heart of the points that have been discussed, in particular on universal credit. I have been in this House long enough to remember the country before universal credit, so I am able to compare and contrast the system we had before with the one we have now. I offer this reflection based on that experience.

On its introduction, universal credit was claimed to be a kind of cure-all which would release everyone from the so-called trap of poverty. I did not think that that was going to be true when it was introduced and I do not think it is true now. The Department for Work and Pensions, in its spending and policy choices, has to be far more than just universal credit and social security, important though they are. As much as the pensions side of the Department is a huge part of its spending and very important, it must also be the department for dignity: the dignity of work and the dignity of well-functioning, decent social protection. Those two areas of policy must work hand in hand to ensure that the ups and downs of life do not upend life chances when unfortunate things happen. We should be using good work and social protection to help people to move on and move up in life. The Chair of the Select Committee and other Members have provided a good survey of what is happening in the Department at the moment. I would argue that on both work and social protection it is failing.

On work, to put it simply, we have fewer people in work now than before the pandemic. That cannot be a success. We have businesses crying out for staff, yet, unlike in other countries, our employment rate has not recovered from the pandemic. That is a huge failure. Pay, the money in people's pockets, has been stagnant for the past decade. We think about the promises made about universal credit and all the Department does, so what questions has the Minister asked about that? What research has he commissioned to get underneath why pay is so stagnant? We have had reviews of in-work progression. The Government have claimed that they want to tackle our productivity crisis. What research and evidence has the DWP actually published to show, despite the claims made about universal credit supporting people to escape the so-called poverty trap that Conservative Members felt previous Governments had created, why we have had such stagnant levels of pay?

It is arguable that the Department's policy choices might have exacerbated the labour market crisis, so I ask the Minister again: what policies does he have now, today, to help people escape low-paid work? For all the Government have talked about the possibilities of universal credit, why has it delivered so very little in terms of the money in people's pockets and their chances of getting on? Has universal credit really delivered all that was promised? On all those areas—work incentives, the chances families have to do better, pay progression and supporting employers to get the skilled staff they need—I look at all the Department does and I have many questions about the disappearance of that promised success.

We have had a series of failed employment schemes. Kickstart failed to deliver what it was said it would deliver. We heard from Members about restart and the work and health programme, and all we do not know about what they are doing. Looking at the labour market and everything that the Bank of England has said about the consequences for our economy of the state of the labour market, does the Minister really believe that the DWP is helping, or is it a hindrance? I would love to hear him talk about published evidence that the Department's policies are actually helping.

Finally on work, one major challenge for our economy is the imbalanced labour market. Businesses in many towns across the country are crying out for staff, yet we have an unemployment challenge. Some towns and cities have areas where unemployment is twice the national average. How can that be right in a country that has such a need for staff? Does the Minister really believe that his Department's spending and policy choices are helping? Work should be the way that all of us achieve our hopes and ambitions. I just wish the Department was able to live up to those ambitions.

As many people have said, social security should be the backstop that puts a floor beneath families, yet at almost every step over the past decade the Conservative Government have made that harder. At every turn, the political turbulence they have created has had an economic cost for our country as a whole, and for families up and down the country. The inflation we now face makes life harder for everybody, but not equally. If we look at the money families must now find to put food on the table and pay their bills, we know that the choices made by the Tories have made life harder for those who were already finding it tough. Their failings on energy have

[Alison McGovern]

made life much harder, in particular for people with disabilities who pay significant extra costs. It is a well-evidenced phenomenon that people who face illness or disability have significant challenges with the rising cost of energy. The Conservative Government have never taken their needs into account enough. I agree with comments made by both my colleagues on the Select Committee that the relationship between the Department and people with disabilities is not nearly good enough to achieve what we would wish for them.

The evidence of failure is all around us, whether it is the open doors of food banks or the closed doors of businesses who have been unable to survive this crisis of inflation and staff shortages. On the housing crisis, I would bet anything—I am not a betting woman, but I would none the less bet anything—that almost every Member has seen a rise in their housing case load. Even those with a relatively low case load have seen it rise in relation to the recent housing crisis.

One fact above all shines out of the Department's accounts: rising ill health, which is having economic consequences for all of us and disastrous consequences for people who are trying to earn money to keep their family housed and fed. Over the past decade or more, the Tories have been not just not up to the challenge; they have actively made it worse.

2.49 pm

The Minister for Employment (Guy Opperman): It is an honour once again to present the case on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions in an estimates day debate. I have lost track of the number of times I have done this, but I have certainly done so on numerous occasions during my seven years at the Department.

It is, first of all, my privilege to thank all DWP staff—whom I regard as a massive help and not a hindrance, as some may have suggested—for the fantastic work that they do up and down the country.

David Linden: Will the Minister give way?

Guy Opperman: No.

The Government have never paid more for the pensions that we support in this country, we have never paid more for the benefit support that we provide in this country, we have never paid more for the housing support that we provide in this country, and we have never paid more for the disabled in this country. As we celebrate the 75th anniversary of the national health service, let me also put on record my thanks to the NHS. I have had my life saved twice by the NHS, once after I collapsed in Central Lobby in 2011. I got into politics because of my attempts to save my local hospital, and I am proud to have visited Hexham General Hospital this week to see the amazing new maternity suite that has recently been opened.

Much has been said today about a variety of issues, but I want to try to put the debate in context. The Government clearly understand the pressures that households are facing. We are all familiar with the root causes of our higher costs, including the global factors: the illegal war in Ukraine brought about by Vladimir Putin, the aftermath and consequences of the pandemic, and the furlough scheme and the other support that we

set out in great detail and the country provided at a time of difficulty. We are committed to delivering on our priority of halving inflation, which will help to ease those pressures for everyone and raise living standards.

Alongside that work, we continue to implement a significant package of cost of living measures to support the most vulnerable during 2023-24. We have increased benefits and state pensions by 10.1%, and raised the benefit cap by the same amount so that more people feel the benefit of uprating. For low-paid workers, we have increased the national living wage by 9.7% to £10.42 an hour; that represents an increase of more than £1,600 in the gross annual earnings of a full-time worker on the national living wage. That increase, and the increases that we made in the national minimum wage in April, have given a pay rise to about 2.9 million workers. To help parents, we are delivering a significant expansion of childcare support, including a 47% increase in the maximum amount of universal credit childcare payments. As I said in the House last week, that is a dramatic increase. In addition, where there are gaps in provision, notwithstanding the above cost of living payments, the £842 million extension of our household support fund into 2023-24 means that councils across England can continue to help families with grocery bills and other essentials.

Margaret Greenwood: Some universal credit claimants can apply to have the housing elements of their universal credit paid directly to the landlord. However, a report by the Child Poverty Action Group on the discovery phase of managed migration identified delays or errors in the setting up of direct payments and poor communication between the DWP, landlords and claimants, leading to people falling into arrears. That is clearly a serious state of affairs for anyone to find themselves in. Will the Minister tell us what the Government are going to do about it?

Guy Opperman: I will ask the Minister who is responsible for that to write to the hon. Lady. However, her intervention brings me to the issue of housing, which was raised by several Members.

In 2022-23, the Government are projected to have spent £30 billion to support renters. That is 1.4% of GDP. Members may have criticised that sum, but they should be aware that it represents the highest spending on household rental support in any country in the OECD. The next highest is 0.9% of GDP. That figure is clearly higher than the figure that obtained when we came to office. Moreover, there are 2 million more homes than there were then, and more homes are meeting decent homes standards. I could go on.

Employment now stands at 30 million. It is up 23,000 on the month and 73,000 on the quarter, and vacancies are down again—35,000 down on the month in May and 79,000 down on the quarter. Today I met representatives of UK Hospitality and a host of hospitality providers at the Department to discuss some of the long-term vacancy issues that they wished to raise. I believe we can continue to work with jobcentres throughout the country to try and address that, and to increase the overall employment rate, which was up by 0.1% on the month and 0.2% on the quarter, with unemployment down by 0.1 percentage points on the month as of May. Economic inactivity is down by 0.4 percentage points on the quarter and down by 781,000 since the 2010 general election. It is clear

that the pandemic had impacts, and the progress in certain areas is not as quick as one would like, but we have made huge efforts to turn that around, and all the indications from all the labour market statistics released by the Office for National Statistics in May are that the trends are in the right direction.

Margaret Greenwood: Will the Minister give way?

Guy Opperman: No, I will not. I have already given way to the hon. Lady.

Let me say something about cost of living payments. We are building on, and extending, the one-off cash payments that we provided in 2022-23, when we made more than £30 million worth of cost of living payments, including the £150 disability payment to 6 million people, £650 for more than 8 million households on means-tested benefits, and an additional £300 on top of the winter fuel payment for more than 8 million pensioner households. That put hundreds of pounds directly and quickly into the pockets of millions of people.

Criticism was made of universal credit as a principle. The first—and simple—point that I would make, which I think was acknowledged by the Chair of the Select Committee, is that the legacy system would in no way have been able to provide the degree of support that universal credit provided during covid, and it would in no way be able to provide an ongoing degree of cost of living support. Universal credit, as we see, provides a massive amount of support on an ongoing basis, which is targeted to help those most impacted by rising prices throughout this financial year.

Sir Stephen Timms: Will the Minister give way?

Guy Opperman: There are about a dozen points made by the right hon. Gentleman to which I was going to respond, but I will give way once again.

Sir Stephen Timms: I am grateful to the Minister. When does he expect to make a decision on whether the cost of living payments will continue for a further year? When, this year, is that decision likely to be made?

Guy Opperman: Because the right hon. Gentleman and I have worked together for many years—and I emphasise “together”—he will know that I have been a humble junior functionary at the Department for Work and Pensions for a very long time, never to rise any higher. Let me also say to the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) that I have had the privilege of serving under three female Secretaries of State before the present Secretary of State. I think I am now on my seventh Secretary of State.

These matters are monumentally above my pay grade, and, as I am sure the right hon. Gentleman knows, having done my job and many other jobs in the Government, they will be decided by the Chancellor and the Prime Minister at some stage over the course of the coming year. *[Interruption.]* I have much to be modest about, to be honest. As I have said, these matters are above my pay grade and beyond my knowledge, but they will be considered. There will be an autumn statement in November, which will be the obvious time for decisions to be telegraphed, if not made.

The right hon. Gentleman raised a number of points, and I will try to answer some of them in the time that I have. He mentioned prison leavers. The Department

recognises the need for prisoners and carers to be able to make advance claims for universal credit, and there is a working process in place to support that. I have met the prisons Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds), who will welcome any questions that will follow during the justice debate, and the social mobility Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Mims Davies), who looks after most aspects of matters relating to prisoners, on several occasions to try to drive forward universal credit take-up. However, it requires the individual to desire to do that, and that is clearly complicated and not easy. It is a work in progress, but it is very much something that we are aware of.

I know that the social mobility Minister is giving evidence to the Select Committee tomorrow, so I will not address in too much detail the issues the right hon. Member for East Ham raised on the Health and Safety Executive, which is one of the few briefs I have not held in the last few years. He rightly raised the issue of transparency, and I would respectfully say that I agree with him. The present Secretary of State has transformed the position in that regard. The right hon. Gentleman knows my strong view that, save where we have to provide data on a monthly basis under labour market statistics, we should have six-monthly provision of the vast plethora of data, linked to the two fiscal events of the year, but that is a work in progress. The Department is definitely reviewing all aspects of those things.

The right hon. Gentleman raised the flexible support fund and particular issues about people taking buses to work. I want to take issue with that, because there is absolutely no doubt that a jobcentre can use the flexible support fund to support bus or other transport fares for agreed work-related activity. If it is for a work-related activity, that support can be provided as it is in other contexts—childcare being the one of which he will be particularly aware. I would certainly very much hope that the individual jobcentre that he referred to would be aware of that.

On fraud and error, the right hon. Gentleman will be aware that huge amounts of effort are being made by the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work, who takes control of that particular part of the portfolio, and by the Secretary of State in a multitude of different ways. We have a large number of extra staff who have been brought in to address fraud and error. According to the latest national statistics, it has fallen to 3.6% from 4%, and overpayments from fraud are down to 2.7% compared with 3% in 2021-22. Universal credit losses have fallen by nearly 2% over a similar period. Bluntly, we are trying to crack down on those who are exploiting the benefit system, and we want to make it very clear that we are coming after those people. We want to ensure that the maximum amount of support goes to the people who need it.

The targeted support includes support for people on means-tested benefits such as universal credit, with up to three cost of living payments totalling up to £900. We have delivered the first £301 payment to 8.3 million households in support worth £2.5 billion. The two further payments of £300 and £299 will be made in the autumn and next spring. To help with additional costs, we have paid the disability cost of living payment to 6 million people as well as paying the winter fuel support payment. A huge amount is being done in

[Guy Opperman]

jobcentres, whether that is through the in-work progression offer, the support of extra work coaches, the over-50s support, the administrative earnings threshold support or the 37 new district progression leads who are working with key partners, including local government, employers and skilled providers, to identify and develop local opportunities and to overcome barriers that limit progression.

The hon. Member for North East Fife raised a number of pension matters. Clearly, I continue to defend the actions of the Labour Government and the coalition Government on the rise in state pension age. She referred to both the LEAP exercise and what has happened at HMRC, and they are both works in progress. I do not believe there is any fundamental change to that of which she has been previously advised. On pension credit, she will be aware that there has been an increase in excess of, I think, 170% in applications. There is a slight backlog, but that is coming down dramatically. On the gender pensions gap, she will be aware of the changes to the new state pension, which are massively advantageous to women, and of the fact that successive Governments—starting with the Labour Government and the Turner commission, and then the coalition—have brought in automatic enrolment specifically to address that particular issue.

The hon. Lady raised a final point about those who change jobs in later life. I cannot overstate the importance of the project for which I have been pressing for only five and a half years now, which is the mid-life MOT. I am delighted to say it is now being rolled out across the country, whether that is online, in jobcentres up and down the country or, more particularly, in the three private sector bodies that are trialling particular processes. If she is not yet acquainted with that, I would strongly urge her to become so, particularly because in her area of Scotland in North East Fife there are, I know, providers that are offering that process. I can provide her with the details. Aviva and others are doing very good stuff there.

I am conscious that I have been speaking for some time, but the practical reality is that we believe we are removing the barriers that prevent people from working. We believe that we are reducing the number of people who are economically inactive, with a fifth consecutive month when inactivity has declined. I accept that there is more to do, and I am determined to leave no stone unturned in taking the decisive action needed across Government to see that downward trend continue.

In conclusion, I believe that we are tackling inflation to help manage the cost of living. We are providing extra support. The economic trends, as shown by the labour market statistics, are heading in the right direction and, with the Government's ongoing significant package of cost of living support, that is worth over £94 billion in excess of the rises to state pension and benefits. We are protecting those most in need from the worst impact of rising prices by putting more pounds in people's pockets, and I commend these estimates to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): To conclude, I call Sir Stephen Timms.

3.6 pm

Sir Stephen Timms: Let me reiterate my thanks to the Backbench Business Committee for enabling us to hold the debate, and I would like to thank everyone who has taken part in the debate as well. The hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) spoke in the debate last year as well, I am pleased to say, and I want to pick up one point she made about the gender pensions gap. I join her in welcoming the fact that the Pensions Minister has now come forward with a definition of that, so that we know what we are talking about. But I also agree with her that we need a target to reduce it, and I hope that we will see that in due course as well.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) for all her work on the Committee and her very committed work on behalf of disabled people. This afternoon, she spoke about the scourge of disability poverty and some of the things that we need to do to tackle that.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) for combining his work on the Committee with his Front-Bench role. He makes a very valuable contribution to the work of the Committee. Let me endorse his tribute to the work of the organisation Christians Against Poverty, which is very valuable. It is doing a very impressive job all over the country.

I am grateful for the interventions we have had from my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood), the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens)—it is good to see him back on this beat—and the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil).

I am grateful to the Minister for suggesting that we will perhaps hear about the plans for further cost of living payments in the autumn statement. I think they will be needed. My hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) was absolutely right to make the point from the Opposition Front Bench that in many respects the security has been removed from social security. That is a lamentable feature of the last few years. The level of benefits is much too low and it has not been properly uprated. I want to renew my appeal. We did have a proper uprating this year, thankfully, but we need that again next year. We are talking about a historically low level of benefits. That is the major reason why food bank demand is still rising. If we do not have a full uprating next year, it will rise further.

I am glad the Minister has confirmed that the Department is reviewing arrangements for transparency. I am grateful to him for that and the confirmation he has given of the direction of travel and the work in progress. I am also interested to hear about the staff being recruited to tackle fraud and error. The Committee would be very interested to follow progress on that and perhaps to table some questions about how many staff there are.

I am very grateful to have had the opportunity to have this debate, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to everyone who has contributed to it.

Question deferred until tomorrow at Seven o'clock (Standing Order No. 54)

MINISTRY OF JUSTICE**His Majesty's Prison and
Probation Service***Motion made, and Question proposed,*

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2024, for expenditure by the Ministry of Justice:

(1) further resources, not exceeding £6,418,705,000, be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 1383 of Session 2022–23,

(2) further resources, not exceeding £1,528,277,000, be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and

(3) a further sum, not exceeding £7,350,811,000, be granted to His Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.—(*Scott Mann.*)

3.10 pm

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): It is a pleasure to open this important debate, and I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for giving us the opportunity to debate this part of the Ministry of Justice estimates. I am glad to see the Minister and the shadow Minister in their places.

I want to raise succinctly, but in some detail, a number of pressing areas that trouble the Select Committee on Justice. Despite the funding increases that have recently been achieved, there is a background that causes real difficulties to the Prison and Probation Service.

I will highlight four areas in particular where the Minister ought to seek to persuade the Government to prioritise and increase their efforts, for the sake of both those who work in His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service and the offenders it is meant to manage and hold safely but humanely, with a view to reform wherever possible.

I will flag up the following issues: prison capacity, the projected prison population and overcrowding; the quality of the prison estate; the prison and probation workforce, and workforce shortages; and the youth custody estate. The Select Committee has looked at these matters on a number of occasions, and we are currently carrying out an inquiry into the prison workforce—I am grateful to everyone who has given evidence so far, and I appreciate the engagement we have had with Ministers.

I will start with one of the most pressing issues facing the Prison Service today. We now have the latest prison population projections and the reasons for their increase. The reality is simply that the prison population has grown substantially over the past 30 years. As of last Friday, there were some 85,851 people in prison. The number has changed a bit even since then.

Despite the Government's efforts to manage the population, England and Wales has the highest imprisonment rate in western Europe and, of course, it is projected to grow further. We see no sign of the imprisonment rate falling. At the same time as having one of the highest imprisonment rates in western Europe, we also have one of the worst reoffending rates. Successive Governments have failed to address that ironic dichotomy.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Ind): The hon. Gentleman, the Minister and the shadow Minister know my bona fides on matters of law and order. Bad and

dangerous people should be in prison to protect the public, but we do not talk often enough about prevention and rehabilitation. It would cost far less to keep people out of prison, and to stop them going back into prison, than to keep them in prison.

Sir Robert Neill: I could not agree more. The current Lord Chancellor has said previously that prison is there for the people of whom we are entitled to be afraid, not for the people with whom we are annoyed or angry. That is an important distinction, because prison is there to deal with those who are a danger to society or who have significantly harmed society; it is not there, in an ideal world, to deal with people who, for any number of reasons, have got their life into a mess. Such people can be a nuisance to society, but there is surely a better way to handle them than incarceration in the closed estate at a cost of some £40,000 a year.

The Justice Committee held an inquiry into the prison population back in 2017. There was about a 15% reduction in the prisons budget between 2015 and 2020, and it was found that had an impact on the safety and decency of the estate, following a reduction in the number of prison officers between 2010 and 2015. In truth, there has been underinvestment in prisons and, I would argue, underinvestment in the whole justice system for decades, under Governments of all complexions. Because the Ministry of Justice is both an unprotected Department, in budgetary terms, and a downstream Department, it often picks up the consequences of things that have gone wrong elsewhere in society and elsewhere in Government. The Ministry of Justice is particularly vulnerable.

In 2017 we saw there had been a 20% increase in the prison population over 15 years, and future projections indicated growth to 2022. There was, at that time, a transformation programme committed to expanding the prison estate by 10,000 places and to closing outdated prisons. Sadly, the truth is that the programme was not fully delivered. The Public Accounts Committee reported that just 206 places were delivered by the programme.

In 2018 the Ministry of Justice decided not to deliver the prison estate transformation in full because of budgetary pressures. Around 6,500 places were removed from the programme, but nothing has been done to reduce demand. Indeed, a number of changes to sentencing policy have, in fact, increased demand in a number of areas.

The 2017 inquiry found clear evidence that the reduction of spending in prisons had had a major destabilising effect. Reducing staff numbers put more pressure on remaining staff, and the way in which facilities management services were outsourced through block contracts meant the operation was very remote and very unresponsive to the day-to-day needs in prisons. It was very frustrating for governors, who were frequently finding that it took months to get basic repairs done. The nature of the contract was seriously at fault. I do not have a problem with contracting out in the right circumstances, but the way it was done was extremely inefficient.

Six years on, the Prison Service faces largely the same issues. The population has continued to increase, there is still an issue with the recruitment and retention of staff, and the estate still has capacity pressures. There was another prison expansion programme in 2019, and the "Prisons Strategy" White Paper said the provision of prison places would make a "more modern and secure" estate.

[Sir Robert Neill]

There was an ambitious target of 20,000 additional prison places as part of that programme, but we now know that planning permission has not been granted for three prisons—either it has been refused or no decision has been made—and the Ministry of Justice is having to appeal those planning decisions. That is hardly joined-up government. Surely the risk of delays in planning should have been foreseen at the outset.

On behalf of the Committee, I wrote to the permanent secretary at the MOJ following the publication of its main estimates, and I am grateful to her for responding yesterday. Disappointingly, only 8,200 new prison places will have been created and made operational by May 2025. We are about 11,800 short of the Government's target of 20,000 by the mid-2020s. Given that background, is the Minister convinced that the current prison expansion programme is genuinely deliverable? When are we going to get to the 20,000 places? What steps are being taken to speed up a rate of delivery that, so far, will not get us there?

Prisons in England and Wales are reaching breaking point; the growth in the adult male population has forced the Government to use police cells to accommodate prisoners, through Operation Safeguard. The Government have said that would be in place for no longer than is necessary, but how much longer does the Minister anticipate that will be? How frequently is Operation Safeguard being used?

I mentioned the changes to sentencing policy, which have put more pressure on prisons. For example, we have seen changes to magistrates' sentencing powers; there was an increase to two years and then, suddenly, a temporary reduction back down to one year. That is not good lawmaking, and it is not fair or just sentencing policy to have a lottery whereby when a defendant appears before the court decides whether he is dealt with by the magistrates or committed to the Crown court. As we all know, that move was done not because magistrates sentence more heavily—there was no evidence to suggest that—but because if people are sent to the Crown court for sentence, as the magistrates deem their powers insufficient, it will take longer before they end up in prison. There is a bit of sleight of hand here, as that was done to ease out the demand in the prison system, pushing people's arrival in prison back down the road a bit, in the hope that somebody else will have left by then and so a bit more space is available.

That is not the right approach and it puts more pressure on another part of the MOJ's responsibility, the Crown courts, because more cases are then being sent to them when they could have been dealt with more quickly by the magistrates. The Government need to address that situation. What is going to be done to deal with it? How long does the MOJ envisage this reduction in sentencing powers lasting? What is being done to consult the judiciary on whether that is a proper approach to the use of judicial resources and sentencing policy? I know that there has been a temporary response in respect of rapid deployment cells, which may offer some support. It may be of some assistance, but what is the long-term plan? How long do we envisage those cells being in use? What is the plan eventually to integrate them with the rest of the estate?

We have the plans for the 20,000 prison places, but the delay is significant. That means there is significant overcrowding in the estate, which is the second point I want to address. The overcrowding is such that it is difficult for prison staff to carry out rehabilitative work, which is one of the objectives of prison. That feeds into that high rate of recidivism and reoffending that I have referred to. It also creates real challenges on our basic duties of care towards both prisoners and prison officers. When the state removes someone's liberty for the broader public good, it has the duty to commit to keep them safe and in decent conditions.

Equally, the state has a duty to provide decent, safe and reasonable working environments for those who supervise the prisoners and run the prisons. I fear that in a number of our prisons we are simply not getting there at the moment. We are simply failing in that, and repeated reports from His Majesty's chief inspector of prisons have flagged that up. The growth in the number of urgent notifications that have been issued by the inspector to the MOJ is also evidence of that. I appreciate that the Minister has always responded promptly to those urgent notification procedures, and I am grateful to him for that, but it speaks to an underlying problem that needs to be resolved. I suspect that that can be done only through sustained investment and by thinking about whether we are using the alternatives to prison effectively. To go back to the point made by the hon. Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn), we need to make sure that we use it for those who are dangerous, where there is no other safe means of dealing with them and we cannot use cheaper and often more effective rehabilitative alternatives.

We still have many Victorian prisons—the “local prisons”, as they are often called—some of which are in a very poor state. They have been described as “not fit for purpose” and “dilapidated”. There has been historical under-investment in maintenance and we have a backlog of maintenance work in the prisons. In March 2021 this was estimated to be about £1 billion-worth. His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service is regularly taking prison cells out of use because of their state of disrepair. In the decade between 2009-10 and 2019-20, some 1,730 prison cells were permanently out of use for failing to meet the required standards. The lack of money going into basic maintenance therefore adds to the capacity crisis.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): The Chair of the Justice Committee is making an excellent critique of the system. There is something ironic about prisons being so undermaintained and needing £1 billion spent on them, such that their accommodation is not available, when some £4 billion is being spent on new prisons at the same time. It looks as if we are just forgetting the ones that we have, particularly the remand and the local prisons.

Sir Robert Neill: I have a lot of sympathy with that point. The irony is that the chief inspector of prisons, in his 2021 annual report, describes some of those old prisons as

“cold, dark and shabby cells...often plagued by damp and cockroaches, leaking pipes and toilets, and broken or missing furniture and windows”

but, at the same time, as we have already observed, the new prison building schedule is way behind and, because of the planning situation, so far we have no assurance

about when those spaces will be delivered. In any event, they will not replace the dilapidated prisons, as we had originally hoped, but will simply increase capacity, because we have a tap that nobody seems able to find the means of properly turning off, in terms of those coming into the system.

The original plan was to close old prisons as part of the prison estate transformation programme, but that has not happened. In 2019 the Minister's predecessor said that they would need to be kept open. Well, how long do we expect to keep those prisons open? What is the long-term plan for those prisons? What is the plan to ensure that the risks in relation to planning permissions and restrictive covenants, which plagued the potential redevelopment of Holloway, for example, are recognised and sorted out well in advance of the commitment of the capital?

It is worth observing that we have had an increase in the capital departmental expenditure limits for prisons, which is welcome, but if we are spending only a fraction of it so far—as I recall it is about £4 billion, and we have spent about £1.6 billion so far—clearly we have resource being allocated by the Treasury that we cannot have confidence that the Ministry is able to spend and use to deliver in a timely fashion. What steps is the Minister taking to deal with that? What reassurance can he give us? What is the plan to speed up that programme and get the resource spent where it is needed?

The other issue I want to deal with is the operational workforce—as I said, the Committee is currently running an inquiry on that. I pay tribute to the men and women who work in our prisons. They do a very tough job, which probably no one in this House would want to do. They do it on behalf of society, frequently in difficult and unpleasant conditions—sometimes unacceptable conditions—and at some risk to themselves. They deserve to have the recognition that I do not think they always get. On behalf of the Justice Committee, I recognise and salute them for what they do, but we need more than just recognition and warm words; we need some real support for them.

As part of the inquiry, the Justice Committee undertook a survey of serving prison officers. Some 6,582 staff responded to it, which was a decent number. The responses were striking. We found that half of band 3 to band 5 staff do not feel safe at the prison they work in. Feeling safe at work is surely a basic right for anyone. Half is a frightening statistic. Reports from the inspector and the independent monitoring boards have highlighted the growing number of assaults, both on staff by prisoners and between prisoners. That is a result of the cramped, overcrowded and stressful conditions in which many prisoners are held, so perhaps it is no surprise that the prison officers feel so concerned about that.

Band 3 to band 5 and band 2 are the key operational grades—the frontline people who do jobs on the wings. Only 15% of band 2 operational staff felt they had proper, regular training; 25% of band 3 to band 5 staff said they had regular training. That means the majority of staff do not think that they have such training. Surely training people is a basic part of making sure that we professionalise and keep the workforce up to scratch? We are bringing in various protective equipment for them; they need to be trained to use it.

It is no surprise that morale is low. More than 70% of staff in band 2 and 80% of staff in bands 3 to 5 said that staff morale was not good at the prison in which they

worked. If that is the position with the frontline staff, is it any wonder that we have a problem not just with recruitment, but with retention? It is clear that there is a real issue with experienced officers leaving the service. When things get difficult in prison, when those tensions threaten to boil over, and when there is potential dispute or violence on the wings, it is exactly those experienced officers—the old hands, the men and women who have been around the system—who know how to deal with sometimes quite damaged and challenging individuals. Their experience is more necessary than anyone's to calm things down and to prevent things from escalating. Therefore, unless we have a proper strategy for retention, we are creating a potential powder keg for the future.

Ultimately, we have both to retain and to increase the number of staff. Unless we do that, we will not get the purposeful activity that is necessary to make prisons beneficial; otherwise we end up just warehousing individuals with no benefit at the end of it. That pressure on staffing and overcrowding in prisons is reflected in the concern of the president of the Prison Governors Association, Andrea Albutt, who said that the prison system faces an immediate crisis and could run out of prison places as early as mid-July. What is the Minister's assessment of that? Does he agree with the president of the Prison Governors Association that, in a few days' time, we could run out of space? If so, we are in a very grave situation indeed.

What, too, about the observations of the Shannon Trust—I am very grateful for its information—pointing out that statistics from the Office of National Statistics, HM Prison and Probation Service and the voluntary sector suggest that some 62% of all those incarcerated have a literacy level lower than an average 11-year-old? Given that we have some 85,000 people in prison, that potentially equates to about 53,000 people who have real literacy deficits. Without that being put right, what is their hope of getting a job on release? How do we then get them out of that cycle of reoffending? Because it is so difficult to carry out education activities in those cramped and inadequate facilities and to attract staff to do the tough job of education work in prisons, all too frequently, the level of courses is not being delivered in the way that was intended. What will the Minister do to increase the amount of education and purposeful activity that we see in our prisons? We all say that it is the objective, but so far we are not delivering on it in any consistent manner.

Let me look beyond prison to the critical issue of probation, which is sometimes, I fear, regarded as the poor relation of the two. The bulk of the budget goes on prisons because of the very high fixed costs, but probation is essential and we should pay tribute, too, to the probation officers who work so hard. It is essential to give alternatives to prison in the first place and, secondly, to have a proper means of transitioning prisoners back into society when they are released, without the risk of reoffending.

When we carried out our inquiries, we found high staff vacancies, overloaded probation practitioners working overcapacity, poor staff retention and inaccurate risk assessments, all of which were flagged up by the chief inspector of probation, who said that many services are experiencing exceptional staff shortages, with half the positions at key grades in some areas being unfilled. It is no wonder, therefore, that things are being missed. That

[*Sir Robert Neill*]

is a risk not only to prisoners, but, potentially in the worst case, to the public as well. What is being done to deal with staff pressures in the probation service?

We met many probation officers. They want to improve their service, but they need decent and sustained funding to do so. You cannot have it being switched on and off like a light switch. We know that three fifths of the HMPPS's expenditure is on prisons. We need to concentrate on and not forget the other two fifths of the budget as well.

Conor McGinn: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Robert Neill: I will give way one more time and then I shall move on.

Conor McGinn: I am sorry to intrude on the hon. Gentleman again. He is making an excellent speech. I think he will agree that the privatisation of the probation service was a disaster and it is right that that is being reversed, but that does not mean that probation cannot work with the private and voluntary sector, particularly around employment. There are some great examples of that, with firms such as Timpson, the voluntary sector and organisations such as the Prison Advice and Care Trust. It is important that the service works collectively with all those groups to ensure that we stop people from reoffending, and help them rebuild, get on and be successful in their lives.

Sir Robert Neill: Yet again the hon. Gentleman is spot on. I join him in paying tribute to Timpson, for example. The work of the Timpson family and their firm has been consistently quite exceptional over a long period; I have constituents who benefited through their endeavours and many others in the House will have similar cases.

The hon. Gentleman's point is an important one. The Justice Committee was critical of the way the probation service was privatised. As he knows, I do not have an ideological objection to privatising services, in the right circumstances and in the right way, but the simple truth is that the way it was done in probation was absolutely the wrong way to do it, splitting up and dislocating the service, with a mixture of that which was retained nationally and that which was with various outsourced companies. It was wholly unsatisfactory and created some dire results.

I pay tribute to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for South Swindon (Sir Robert Buckland), who, when he was Justice Secretary, took the tough but right decision to reverse the process and unify the service once more. That was welcome. None the less, that privatisation is still affecting morale, it has affected retention and it has created considerable dislocation in data sharing between various services. It also broke a number of the local ties that had been developed between the probation service and local authorities and other providers in the area.

Ironically, as the hon. Member for St Helens North says, there is a role for the private sector. The privatisation of probation was intended to have more private sector groups coming in to the provision of probation work and more smaller-scale charities. What happened instead is that it went on bulk contracts to some of the usual big outsourcers and defeated its own object.

We need to work hard now to ensure that we give charities, not-for-profits and small-scale organisations real access to provide services where they can bring a unique perspective. Again, I would be grateful for the Minister's observations on what the Government will do to encourage those providers into the sector, where they can work collaboratively with the new unified service. We currently have 220,000 people on probation and 16,000 staff in probation. The service has been through any amount of upheaval. It now needs stability and support—both practical financial support and recognition for the work that it does.

I have only a couple more points, Mr Deputy Speaker. I turn now to the youth custody estate. Youth custody, it should be said, has been a real success. We imprison far fewer people now than we used to. That is a real win that all sides involved can take credit for. The service does not face the same pressure of numbers and we have seen a steady decline in the number of children in custody.

One is tempted to say, "Why, if we can do that for children, largely because of a more holistic approach and far more early interventions, can we not apply the same philosophy to the adult estate as well?" The principle is not different: it is getting in early when we see the first signs of the problem in someone's life that is likely to make them more vulnerable to falling into offending. If we can do that successfully for youngsters, why should we not at least do much more of it in the adult estate too?

However, although the numbers are not an issue, safety is a real concern in the youth estate. Staff retention is a problem in the youth estate too, which has an impact on safety. Lack of staff and training is also a matter of concern and recent inspection reports from His Majesty's chief inspector of prisons have raised concerns about education in the YOIs.

Safety concerns extend beyond physical harm. If the institutions fail to provide adequate educational programmes, vocational training and rehabilitative regimes, young offenders will not receive the tools they need to reintegrate into society. Instead, they will be all the more vulnerable to being sucked back in to the leadership model of their criminal friends on the outside, whom in many cases they joined up with because of the gaps elsewhere in their life. I wrote to the Minister in May about the woeful findings in relation to His Majesty's Prison Cookham Wood in the urgent notification procedure there, and I am grateful to the Minister for his response. However, it is pretty disappointing to see yet another urgent notification being issued in relation to a failing prison—particularly one where children are involved. We must see improvements for those children. They have been entrusted to the state's care, and we have a duty to them to ensure that they are safe and that when they leave those institutions, they are in a better place than when they went in.

I recognise the Government's attempts to stabilise prisons and probation by injecting funding, but they are trying to make up for the great deal that was taken out earlier. I recognise the Minister's commitment, and I appreciate the personal courtesy and determination in his words. I recognise in particular the commitment of the new Secretary of State, who understands these issues very well from his own professional background. They will both know that we have a lot of ground to make up to get prisons and probation back to where

they should be. The fact that there is some increase in the estimates is good news, as I have demonstrated, but I fear, first, that it may not be enough and, secondly, that we need an assurance that funding will be sustained over a period of years and that the Ministry has the capacity to spend the money wisely and successfully to deliver on all that.

I hope that the Minister will respond on those matters with his usual care and courtesy, but we need not just words but a clear programme of action. Frankly, we need to increase and raise the extent and awareness of public debate about the Prison and Probation Service, as we need to with the whole criminal justice system. It ought to be a decent prisons system and probation system—a means of protecting the public but also of rehabilitating those offenders who can be rehabilitated—and that ought to be as central a mission to any Government as a decent education, health or social care system. It does not get the same level of attention. Perhaps this debate will help, if only in a small way, to flag up some of the issues. We all have a duty to talk about those issues with our constituents, in a measured and calm way, more than perhaps we currently do.

3.41 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): It is a real pleasure to follow that forensic speech by the Chair of the Justice Committee, the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill). He took us through many of the problems, particularly those in the Prison Service. I will be rather more selective about the issues I speak about, but I will concentrate in particular on prison conditions.

Three weeks ago, I visited Wormwood Scrubs prison in my constituency. It is a prison that I have visited on and off for the past 30 years as an MP, a councillor and a criminal barrister. Despite meeting many dedicated officers and determined governors, I have never changed my mind about it being an unsuitable institution in the 21st century, particularly for the rehabilitation, or indeed the punishment, of offenders. On my most recent visit, I saw that many of the men were sharing one-person cells with unshielded toilets, making their living conditions cramped and unpleasant with no privacy. In addition, the Scrubs, like many prisons, is still operating a 23-hour lock-up regime, in which some prisoners get only one hour a day outside their cells. Is it any wonder, then, that self-harm and poor mental health are at a high across the prison estate?

I recently asked a series of written questions of the Minister's Department, mainly on the topic of time out of cell. The MOJ responded that it does not hold those statistics centrally and that it was not practical for it to record the data. How does the MOJ hope to have an overview of the wellbeing of the prison population in its care if it does not know what each prison's time-out-of-cell regime is? I followed up to inquire about why the MOJ does not collect that data centrally, and I was provided yesterday with a response that said that the MOJ would need to record data for each prisoner individually, based on his or her movements each day, to understand time out of cell for each prison. If I may say so, that is a ridiculous response and the Minister has misunderstood the question—not intentionally, I hope.

To get an understanding of each prison's time-out-of-cell regime, the MOJ need only ask each prison to report that data to it. As the data is about the time out of cell

rather than the individual schedules of prisoners, it will be much simpler to collect than the Ministry pretends. *[Interruption.]* The Minister is chuntering from a sedentary position. I am sure that he will, when he responds, deal with that point in more detail.

A couple of weeks ago at Justice questions, I also asked about the overcrowded conditions in prisons. That data is held and published by the Government, but I do not think it is an accurate representation of what is and is not an overcrowded prison. For example, when I visited Wormwood Scrubs, the governor told me that she had just been asked by the MOJ to increase operational capacity. How will we ever know if a prison is overcrowded if the MOJ keeps moving the goalposts of operational capacity? If the MOJ keeps asking prisons to increase operational capacity, overcrowding will become an even bigger problem, as well as something of a hidden one.

Prisons are overcrowded, single cells are being used to house two people, and most time-out-of-cell regimes are oppressively restrictive. What necessitates much of that is an insufficient number of staff on the wings. Prisons need more staff, but they cannot hire more staff if their budget does not allow it. Prison officers are leaving the profession in their droves, and it is not hard to see why. It is a very dangerous job; prison officers are at very real risk of physical injury. It is also emotionally taxing seeing prisoners at some of the lowest points in their lives, and getting very little assistance by way of productive work, education and other support. The pay does not do the job justice, and is proof that the MOJ has insufficient regard for the profession. It wastes thousands of pounds training new prison officers who then leave within the first two years due to the conditions. It is clear that something is going very wrong, and the Government need to fix the problem.

Conor McGinn: As well as prison officers, will my hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to prison chaplains, particularly at his local prison of Wormwood Scrubs, where Father Gerry McFlynn was the chaplain for a long time? He is now the director of the Irish Council for Prisoners Overseas; my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) will know him. Father Gerry celebrated his golden jubilee just last week—he is 50 years an ordained priest, and has dedicated his whole life to prisons and prison chaplaincy. I am sure my hon. Friend will join me in sending his regards to Father Gerry, as will all Members.

Andy Slaughter: I am very glad to have taken that intervention. I agree that prison chaplains, prison priests, prison vicars and prison imams—we have an excellent imam at the Scrubs—are in many ways unsung heroes, doing a fantastic job alongside the other staff.

I am afraid that often the problem is the MOJ itself, which is seemingly always one of the first Government Departments to offer itself up as soon as the Chancellor of the day mentions cuts. I think its budget is now 12% lower than it was in 2010. If prisons do not have the staff to unlock the prison safely for a reasonable period of time, do not have the money to provide meaningful activities and do not have the resources to provide good-quality education, mental health declines, and that can have tragic consequences for prisoners and staff.

[*Andy Slaughter*]

I will come back to the issue of education in a moment, but I will briefly mention mental wellbeing in prisons. I recently met a lawyer who has been representing four bereaved families of prisoners from Wormwood Scrubs who took their own lives. Between April 2020 and February this year, there have been seven self-inflicted deaths at the Scrubs. The pain for the families must be unimaginable, and I am sure that other prisoners and the staff who found the deceased are also struggling. Any self-harm death in a prison is a potentially preventable one that deserves a rapid response to work out what went wrong and to implement learning for the future, but not one of those cases has yet made it to an inquest. An inquest for one of the families is scheduled for August this year, but that is over three years of waiting for answers.

We rightly talk a lot about the court backlog, but maybe not enough attention is paid to the coroner's court backlog. According to coroner statistics for 2022, the average time from the date of death to the conclusion of an inquest is 30 weeks, but it is a postcode lottery; I think the worst case was at North Lincolnshire and Grimsby, where the wait was 72 weeks. One of the important outcomes of inquests is often the prevention of future deaths report. If an institution such as Wormwood Scrubs is waiting over three years for an inquest into the death of a prisoner and there is crucial learning that a coroner could uncover, how can that prison be expected to make the necessary changes? When the coroner does provide recommendations in their prevention of future deaths report, how do we know that public bodies will implement them?

I recently spoke on a panel for a campaign launched by the charity Inquest, which is asking the Government to implement a national oversight mechanism. The mechanism would collate recommendations from inquests and prevention of future deaths reports, along with the public body response, in a database. It would then analyse these responses, and produce a report. Finally, the mechanism could allow a follow-up procedure to check on the progress of implementing changes arising from the original recommendations. This sounds like a sensible and not expensive approach, and one that could help to lower the number of preventable deaths, if recommendations became centralised and easy to follow up. I am grateful that the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, the hon. Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Mike Freer), has offered to meet me and Inquest to discuss this, and I hope to hear from him soon. I realise that deaths in custody and deaths in prison are only one part of the equation, but they are an extremely important part.

I want to finish by coming back to education in prisons. In my recent meeting with the governor at Wormwood Scrubs, she explained that individual prisons have little control over their education services. The MOJ employs education providers in the Prison Service, but the quality of these providers can vary greatly from prison to prison. The governor says that she is unable to change the provider, because it has a contract with the MOJ for a number of prisons. That is only one example, but I think it is typical of the disconnect and neglect that is apparent.

I mentioned local and remand prisons. These are often the oldest, Victorian prisons and those in the worst condition. The Government boast—I am not sure why—that they are on this massive prison expansion programme and putting huge sums of money into new prisons. However, that is not to renew the prison estate, but because of the increase in population. I urge the Minister to look at the way that some of our older prisons are being run. They do a disservice not only to the people who work there and run them, as well as of course to the inmates, but to the wider community, because people are not being rehabilitated and are coming out of prison insufficiently supported and going back into prison very quickly. That is a recipe for disaster not only for the individual but for society as a whole, and it is an indictment of the failure of the prison system under this Government.

3.52 pm

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), who made some really interesting points about the collection of data both in the MOJ and in prisons, and the ability that gives us as parliamentarians to hold to account, scrutinise and understand better what is happening in our prisons and the impact that that is having, as the hon. Gentleman finished by saying, on wider society. I want to pick up on a very specific element of that, which is the impact that it is having on families.

I was very privileged last week to host an event in this place on behalf of my constituent Professor Jane Payler, who has carried out a two-year research project on the impact of prison sentences on the families of offenders. In particular, she highlights the work of Families First, which is a Worcestershire project. One could reasonably question why I was looking at Worcestershire when I very clearly represent Hampshire, but this is in fact an Open University project, led by my constituent, to scrutinise the impact of prison sentences on the children and families of offenders and what we know about that.

The answer comes back, sadly, that we know far too little, because at no point is there any coherent, strategic collection of data that gives us any indication of how many children prisoners may have, and therefore of how many children in wider society may need additional support because they are missing a parent. It is not just that the parent is absent; the children are also coping with the stigma and shame of the fact that their parent—usually their father, although not in every case—is imprisoned. There can be a reluctance on the part of the prisoner to volunteer the information that they have children, because there is a fear that those children will then have an involvement with social services that the mother—I say mother, and I am generalising, but it is usually the mother—may well not want, and there is a fear that that could result in even more adverse outcomes for the children.

I am prepared to concede that in comparison with my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill), the Chair of the Justice Committee, I know little about this subject, and I am not an expert by a long way. What struck me instantly, however, was that today is an opportunity to raise with the Minister the importance of our improving our understanding and discourse around the impact of prison, and

understanding what the MOJ, and indeed the Minister, could do to improve the situation, so that there is at least some collection of this data and we know about the numbers. Estimates of the children impacted vary wildly. We can find one estimate back in 2009 of perhaps 90,000 children impacted, and if we extrapolate the numbers for the increase in the prison population we might expect that number to be in the region of 120,000 or 130,000 children now. Some academic research, relying on French data, indicates that the problem could extend to as many as 300,000 children who are impacted by parental imprisonment.

What do we know of those children? First, we know far too little, but we do know that there are considerable problems with their emotional and mental wellbeing. We know there are considerable problems with the physical impact of a child potentially being moved around the country because they are missing a parent, and the changes that there may be in schools. We know that such children have poorer educational outcomes, and that they and their families are largely forgotten, unseen, and impacted as a result of that. We know there is a lack of holistic and tailored support for those children. We know about secondary prisonisation—I am not convinced that it is a word, but we will go with it for the time being—and that there is an impact on their mental health because of the stigma and shame that they feel. Children lack an understanding of what has happened to their parent, and many are assuming caring responsibilities that that absent parent may have.

We heard from the hon. Member for Hammersmith commentary on the impact that criminal behaviour can have on young people who have previously witnessed criminality, and in far too many instances the young person may step into the void caused by a father or parent going into prison. However, we cannot access up-to-date data, and the number of children impacted is simply not recorded. Freedom of information requests to the MOJ have indicated that such data is not in an extractable format, so even if it has been collected, we cannot necessarily extract it within the cost parameters that are often used.

I have one request, which I think is on quite a short list this afternoon. I thought at one point that I could perhaps stand up and make a cheeky little intervention, but I could see five minutes in that this request clearly could not be made in an intervention without testing your patience, Mr Deputy Speaker. My request is to the MOJ: please find a mechanism whereby that data can be recorded and shared with those services that are in a position to support those children, whether that is local authorities, or the excellent charity sector, just as we had with Families First in Worcestershire. It has worked incredibly hard to ensure that such support is provided to children with, I must say, some really striking outcomes.

The report, which I will send to the Minister after the debate, contains heart-warming stories of the difference that has been made to children when there has been intervention and they have been given support. Also crucial has been the difference that such support has made to parents coming out of prison; having conversations with their children who have articulated the impact on them, which has convinced their dad that the last place he ever wishes to return is prison.

Given that I have this opportunity and few other Members wish to contribute—I have plenty of time—it would be remiss of me not to raise two other issues

regarding the MOJ that are of concern to me. The hon. Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn) is no longer in his place, but he raised the important point that prison should be used as a mechanism to keep us, wider society, safe from people who are dangerous. I recently met two incredible women, Carole Goulde and Julie Devey, who both tragically lost their daughters in domestic homicides. They have lobbied long and hard for there to be a review of sentencing. They have welcomed the fact that the eminent KC Clare Wade has done her review into domestic homicide sentencing, but it would be remiss of me not to use this opportunity to reiterate their calls about the fact that “overkill”—a horrific and graphic term for where people, all too often women, are murdered in a frenzy by someone they may have recently been in a relationship with, or still are—still does not carry a mandatory 25 years. We need to be protected from the truly dangerous individuals who abuse women and murder their own partners. I would argue they are among the most dangerous people we can encounter.

I know that the Government's response to the Wade review is due imminently. Will my right hon. Friend the Minister discuss that with the Lord Chancellor and the Minister of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), to make sure that that Government response is not snuck out on the last day of term? It would be most helpful if Members had the opportunity to have time in this House—perhaps an oral statement or an urgent question the following day—to discuss what we think of the Government's response to the Wade review. As I said, these are among the most horrific crimes, and it is important that this House is given the opportunity to debate that review in due course.

I thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to speak. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst, the Chair of the Select Committee, who has led this debate and highlighted his expertise in this area.

4.1 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I pay tribute to the Chair of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill), who gave a comprehensive overview of what is happening on prisons and probation. I am so pleased that the right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) raised the issue of children. When we had the debate on imprisonment for public protection sentences, it focused on the fact that the whole family is serving the sentence and we do not give enough consideration to the implications for the family, and particularly to the support needed to assist the rehabilitation of prisoners as they are released.

I will declare an interest, as I am an honorary life member of the Prison Officers Association. There is no financial interest, and in fact I am told by the POA that it does not even gain me an extra pillow in a cell if I ever need it. It is as simple as that. We have had discussions over recent months—in particular a presentation in the Jubilee Room a few weeks ago, which a number of us attended—where we have been meeting prison officers working on the frontline. I want to report the conversations we have had and, on their behalf, set out some of the concerns they have expressed, which build

[John McDonnell]

much upon what my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) said about the state of prisons.

There are three messages that prison officers want to get across. The first is that the austerity Budgets have taken so much from the Prison Service over the past decade that prison officers have left the system. It can only be described as being in crisis, and that is not just putting prisoners and prison officers at risk but putting the public at risk of dangerous reoffending. The second message is that Ministers need to understand that they cannot run prisons on the cheap. It requires investment, particularly in staffing, to ensure safe, secure and purposeful regimes. The third message, which the Chair of the Select Committee has raised and which I will come back to, is that prison officers want the Minister to know that they are fed up. Morale is at an all-time low, and it is developing into real anger at how they have been treated. To give one quote, they felt like they were “disposable commodities” to be “worked to the bone” and then discarded. They are voting with their feet to leave the service.

Mention has been made of the budget cuts that have taken place over the years and how we have arrived at this situation. To give one statistic, at one point at the height of austerity after 2010, the Prison Service saw a 30% cut in overall expenditure. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith has said, the figure is still 12% below what it was in 2010. Alongside that, we have had a number of fairly disastrous privatisation experiments—those have not just been in probation, but in the maintenance of the prisons themselves.

What happened in the first years of austerity was startling. In the early-2010s, a quarter of the operational workforce was laid off, and a crisis of violence was unleashed. Having laid so many staff off, we also got into a vicious downward spiral of insufficient staff and increasing violence, and therefore problems with retention. Recruitment drives simply failed to resolve the situation.

On one estimate, during that period we lost 100,000 years of professional experience built up over decades. As a result of that, exactly as has been said, prisons are fearful places with prisoner-on-prisoner assaults and assaults on staff, which have soared, so prison officers and support staff are leaving in droves. We have heard some of the statistics. Mark Fairhurst, the POA national chair, presented evidence to the Justice Committee, where he explained, just as my hon. Friend did, that many leave

“within the first two years”.

He said:

“We are at the highest attrition rate that the service has ever seen. We are currently running at 16% for prison officers and 19% for operational support grades. Some areas of the country have seen attrition rates of between 35% and 45%.”

The Chair of the Select Committee mentioned the survey of how prison officers are feeling. Exactly as he said, half of those surveyed do not feel safe at work and 80% said that staff morale at their establishments was bad. When we talk to officers at some establishments, they tell us that it has collapsed completely. Many have a lack of confidence in the future.

It was also raised with us in conversations that the number of prison officers suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder is rising and at critical levels. Serving and

ex-prison officers receive little support for PTSD, and it has an overwhelming impact on their lives. It is unfortunately becoming almost accepted as the norm that prison officers will have to go through that. Mark Fairhurst told the Committee:

“There is no support if you have mental health problems. More and more of my members are getting diagnosed with PTSD, because of the trauma that they deal with and the things they see. There is no mental health support on site for those staff. They are leaving the job with ill health or capability retirement, so there is no support there for mental health.”

This is one of his most startling statements:

“We have come across scenarios in some jails where the most experienced member of staff on that same wing has nine months in the job. It is the blind leading the blind.”

To try to give us an understanding of what that meant, he said:

“When you have inexperienced staff dealing with experienced prisoners who have been in and out of prison all their lives, it has a massive knock-on effect on stability.”

Spending during the first five years of austerity fell by 20%. That is why, as has been said, with spending levels cut so dramatically over a period, it is hard for prison officers to fully comprehend why £4 billion is being spent on building a new generation of prisons to boost capacity when our existing prisons have become mired in squalor—that is the description used—and, according to the Public Accounts Committee only two years ago, there was a £1 billion backlog of work needing to be done.

Prisons are violent places. We have, at times, reached catastrophic levels of violence. It needs to be acknowledged—not to accept that it will continue—that violence is part and parcel of prison life. Prisoner officers cannot understand that the Government will not even include levels of violence in their new key performance indicators for prisons. My hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) introduced a private Member's Bill in the last Session—the Prisons (Violence) Bill. We urged parliamentarians to support it to enable that sort of monitoring to be part and parcel of the performance indicators, so that the Government could develop a full strategy.

The POA has joined, as a founding member, the Joint Unions in Prison Alliance, alongside the other unions and working with the Prison Service. It fully supports the Safe Inside campaign to reduce violence in prisons. It is especially concerned about what it described as the “ultra-violence” in the youth custody estate. It warns that an urgent review is needed of the protections that prison officers need when working in that estate. It comes back to investment. The POA also said:

“Dangerous, squalid jails...make rehabilitation impossible. Prisoners are released more criminalised, more traumatised, more addicted to drugs than when they arrived. This is madness and should be completely unacceptable in a civilised society. Prisons are often the best chance that state has to turn someone's life around, whether through education or treatment, but we're doing the opposite—we're making them worse.”

The POA has reached such a state of frustration that it is calling for a royal commission. I believe that was one of the proposals considered by the Conservative party before the last election. A royal commission should examine the problems in our justice system from end to end, to try to tackle imprisonment, incarceration and, more importantly, rehabilitation and, as other hon. Members have said, to look at preventing crime and preventing people reaching imprisonment.

The POA wants to raise clearly what has happened on pay and on retirement age. On pay, the unions welcome the Government's increase in early starters' pay, but are concerned about recent statements from the Government about not honouring the pay review rewards in future. Nothing will undermine morale more. When there is an independent assessment of pay, the POA is not allowed to take industrial action like other unions, and therefore has to rely on the pay review bodies. That the Government say they will not honour those recommendations is utterly defeating when prisons are seeking to recruit and retain.

The POA has made it clear time and again that it believes that a pension age of 68 is unacceptable for the physical job that prisoner officers undertake. It would welcome the Government returning to the negotiating table on retirement age, which they walked away from in 2016 after the POA rejected the offer to reduce retirement age. Those negotiations need to be reopened, because 68 is too late.

I have tried to give some understanding of what prison officers are going through at the moment. They ask straightforward questions: what happened to the Conservative party's commitment and pledge of a royal commission on criminal justice? Will the Minister bring back those proposals? Will he commit to investing the resources, especially in staffing, that are needed to save the system from the current crisis? Will he look to improve workforce morale and retention by looking again at the issues of pay, terms and conditions, and the pension age, which is currently threatened? The final issue they want to draw attention to is the fact that there needs to be a clearer programme to reduce prison violence, ensuring there is sufficient support for prison staff so that they can perform their professional jobs without risk to their lives and limbs.

4.15 pm

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill), the Chair of the Justice Committee, for speaking so persuasively, as always, on these incredibly important issues.

Our prison and probation services do vital work to deliver justice, rehabilitate offenders and protect the public, but sadly, after 13 years of Tory neglect, they are broken: judges are being told to jail fewer people because our prisons are full; no prisons are rated as good for rehabilitation and release planning; and one murder every week is committed by criminals out on probation. It is hard to separate that declining performance from the cuts faced by the Ministry of Justice. Even a former Tory Prisons Minister recently declared that they went too far. But with what scarce resources are left, we continue to see incompetence: £1 million spent on maintaining closed prisons; £98 million wasted on avoidable mistakes on a new tagging programme; and an estimated works backlog on the prison estate of £1 billion.

When I visit prisons, I see at first hand overcrowded crumbling estates blighted by staff shortages. Last year, I visited Wandsworth prison, where inmates were locked in their cells for up to 23 hours a day. While I was there, I met two prisoners who had jobs as prison cleaners. They said that in the dilapidated and run-down wings, pigeon mess created most of their work. They told me that they considered themselves lucky, as their roles as

cleaners meant that both of them got to be out of their cells for around three hours a day. They explained that come the afternoon the smell of drugs in the wing is overwhelming, as prisoners use them out of boredom without fear of consequence. While there, I saw a library staffed by some passionate librarians, but there were no prisoners there. It was completely empty, because there were no available staff to move the men across the prison. I saw rooms set up for training, including opportunities for inmates to gain qualifications in skills such as dry lining. Again, they were not being used for the same reasons.

That is hardly surprising, given that prison staff have been leaving in droves. Since 2010, over 100,000 years of cumulative prison officer experience has been lost, leaving wings to be managed by smaller, less experienced teams. As a consequence, violence against staff is up by 165%. Apart from the impact that staff turnover has on the running of prisons, it also has a devastating impact on the public purse. It costs £13,000 to recruit and train a prison officer, yet one quarter of officers leave within a year of taking up the role. Why? Because under this Government being a prison officer is no longer considered a vocation. Instead, it is often just a stepping stone to move into less dangerous, more lucrative work. One thing that the Government could do tomorrow to improve retention would be to give prison governors a say over who they recruit. Currently, they do not as they have no role on interview panels for new recruits. That would be an important step in getting a best fit for their prison, but it is an opportunity that is being missed.

The same goes for procurement. If a governor wants to buy goods for a prison, they have to go through the approved Ministry of Justice supplier. Now, there is an obvious security need here, but the system would seem to be beset by delays and huge cost inefficiencies. At Wandsworth, the new governor told me she needed a new screen for their office to conduct Zoom meetings on. It took weeks to arrive, and the exact same screen was available from Argos to be delivered the next day, and it was cheaper. When I visited Leeds Prison, staff there said that they wanted to procure some wood to make raised flowerbeds for one of their rehabilitation projects. Timber from the approved supplier cost three times as much as the amount quoted by the local timber merchant. Those savings could have been made. When I visited HMP Styal, one of the house units had just been renovated: that consisted of new windows, an alarm system and a basic refurbishment. Using the approved supplier cost just under £12 million, which seemed far out of step with the work required. I strongly urge the Government to look into this issue, as it seems that there is a potential for huge savings and efficiencies—as well as the opportunity to build links between prisons and local businesses, which could provide a path towards collaboration and post-release employment.

In 2021 the Government committed more than £500 million to work and skills reform in prisons, to improve employment rates post release. Two years on, however, the probation inspectorate has found that just 8% of those available for work went into employment upon release. When classrooms remain empty, access to libraries is limited and inmates are locked in their cells for 23 hours a day, how can we be surprised when prisoners, who have had no intervention and no opportunity

[Ellie Reeves]

to learn anything new, leave and reoffend? Moreover, the effects of this are costing the taxpayer £18 billion a year.

Cutting reoffending has to be an absolute priority, but in the current overcrowded, understaffed conditions, prisons are little more than colleges of crime. Since 2015, the Government have repeatedly announced plans to build new jails and increase capacity, but in the last 10 years they have closed nearly 3,200 places, and three new prisons that were planned will not open until 2027 at the earliest. An internal Ministry of Justice memo published in June stated that even if all prison building targets were met, there would be a shortfall of 2,300 places by March 2025. Overcrowding is already having a detrimental effect on conditions and the daily prison regime. Last month the chief inspector of prisons inspected HMP Pentonville, which was originally designed to hold 520 men. Today it holds more than 1,000. How can rehabilitation take place in these conditions? It is just more evidence of a failure to get a grip of our justice system.

The fact that little or no rehabilitative work is being done in prisons is making it even harder for probation officers to do their job. When I speak to them, they tell me that what they long for is to be able to do their job properly, but case loads are simply unmanageable. Officers are having to prioritise paperwork and databases instead of spending proper time with the people they supervise. Under Labour, probation was a well-regarded service, but this Government's ill-conceived part-privatisation wreaked havoc on the service and caused a mass exodus of experienced staff. In total, these reforms cost half a billion pounds, and they left the public at greater risk from offenders because the work was often reduced to a tick-box exercise.

What was the result? Between 2014 and 2019, during the privatisation years, the number of serious further offence convictions increased by more than a third, and the number of serious offenders on probation found guilty of murder increased by 123%. The service has rightly reunified now, but the huge organisational changes, the staff exodus and the vast sums wasted on privatisation mean that probation is on its knees. Today only one local service has received a good report, and in December the vacancy rate was 29%.

These shortages and high case loads are leaving the public at risk. Just this morning, the probation inspectorate found that only 28% of domestic abuse offenders on probation were being sufficiently assessed for any risk of further domestic abuse. Nearly half should have had access to an intervention such as a group programme or a one-to-one meeting with a probation officer to reduce the risk of a further offence, but that had not happened. In nearly 75% of cases, significant changes such as moving in with a partner, altered child protection plans or a partner becoming pregnant are not being adequately reviewed or reassessed.

All the above failures in probation have caused judges to lose confidence in community sentences, meaning offenders who should be eligible for them are being sent to overcrowded prisons instead. Last year I visited a community payback scheme in my constituency where those on unpaid work were helping to maintain a community play space, which without them probably

would have closed. They all, without exception, spoke with pride about doing work of value and having the opportunity to learn new skills. It showed just what can be achieved, but these schemes are patchy and the use of community sentences has more than halved under the Tories despite the clear benefit when they work effectively.

We need to look at how probation can be delivered as an effective local service. Labour would begin to do that by creating a system of community and victim payback boards to strengthen community and victim involvement in sentencing. Under those boards, local people and victims of crime will have a say in deciding what unpaid work offenders must undertake.

Rather than getting to grips with those issues, the Government are currently restructuring probation via the One HMPPS plan. I really hope they will take seriously the concerns raised by the sector and the findings from the damning inspection reports. Funding needs to be channelled to frontline officers, not the bureaucratic layers of organisation above them. That is the only way to reduce the burden they face and ensure they can give proper time and attention to those they supervise. Their inability to do this because of failed Tory reforms has meant that, on average, there have been six serious further offence convictions every week since 2010, including for murder, kidnapping and rape.

We have had 11 Justice Secretaries and 13 Prisons Ministers in the last 13 years, so it is no wonder that the system is in crisis. They are never in post long enough to get to grips with the issues, to take responsibility for their spending and be held accountable, or to set a long-term strategy and ensure stability. No wonder the service is stuck lurching from one crisis to the next when that is exactly what is happening in its political leadership. If we are to fix that, we need continuity at the top. We need stable management that delivers a proper plan for prisons and probation, instead of rehashed announcements and gimmicks, and we need leadership that is laser-focused on reducing waste, driving efficiency and cutting reoffending. The Tories have had 13 years to deliver that, and they have failed.

4.27 pm

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Damian Hinds): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill), the Chair of the Justice Committee, for his opening remarks and, more broadly, for securing this important debate on this estimates day. I thank everybody who has contributed to the debate.

There can be no higher purpose for a Government than protecting the public from the devastating consequences of crime and maintaining a criminal justice system in which people have confidence. We have honoured our manifesto commitment to recruit 20,000 additional police officers and, through the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022, we have introduced tougher penalties for the most serious crimes and removed automatic halfway release of the most violent and sexual offenders so that the worst criminals are locked up for longer. We are building new state-of-the-art prisons that will not only give effect to the order of the court to take criminals off our street, but properly rehabilitate them so that they turn their backs on crime for good. That way, we can break the destructive cycle of offending that costs

the taxpayer £18 billion a year and has an incalculable personal cost to the victims and communities blighted by it.

The PCSC Act also brought in better monitored and more effective community sentences, which were just mentioned by the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves). They punish offenders, tackle the underlying drivers of offending and support people who want to turn their lives around. Those measures include tougher and more flexible electronically monitored curfews. We aim to almost double the number of defendants and offenders tagged at any one time to reach 25,000 by March 2025.

We have recruited more than 50 new health and justice co-ordinators, who will cover every probation region and work with health partners so that offenders get the right treatment to stay on the straight and narrow. That will be underpinned by regular drug testing to monitor compliance. We are investing up to £93 million in community payback to drive up the hours of unpaid work done by offenders, so that they visibly pay their debt to society for the damage they have done.

We are achieving our vision to cut the youth custodial population, which was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst. Roughly 3,000 children and young people were in custody in 2008-09; as of April this year, the number had fallen to around 600. It is also important to note that, in line with our female offender strategy, between 2018 and 2021, the average female prison population fell by 17%.

Our £100 million security investment programme to reduce crime inside prisons, including stemming the flow of illicit items such as drugs, mobile phones and weapons, was completed in March 2022. Enhanced gate security—including 659 staff, 154 drug dogs and over 200 pieces of equipment—has been deployed to 42 high-risk prison sites that routinely search staff and visitors. We now have 97 X-ray body scanners covering the entire closed male estate and they have recorded more than 28,000 positive indications.

To date, 89 prisons have completed their roll-out of PAVA synthetic pepper spray to stop violent prisoners in their tracks and we have introduced 13,000 new generation body-worn video cameras across the estate, with networked, cloud-based technology. These important investments rightly underpin our focus on the safety of staff and others in prison.

Linked to that, we need prisons to be a place where offenders overcome addiction, which is why we are rolling out abstinence-focused drug recovery wings and increasing the number of dedicated, incentivised substance-free living units across the estate, where prisoners commit to regular drug tests in return for incentives such as more gym time.

Alongside safety and security in prisons, we must invest in education and employment if we are to cut crime sustainably. We know that, if a prisoner can hold down a steady job, it reduces their chance of reoffending by up to nine percentage points, which is why we are driving forward initiatives to help prisoners to secure jobs on release, including through prison employment leads to match prisoners to jobs and employment advisory boards to build links between prisons and local industry, and to ensure that the skills being taught in prisons align with what is demanded and required in the local labour market.

I agree that we need to go further on education. The hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) spoke about the Shannon Trust and I pay tribute to its work. I confirm that we are extending what we do with the literacy innovation fund across 15 prisons. There is also a much sharper understanding of neurodiversity in our prison population, and I am pleased that we will have neurodiversity support managers across the estate by January 2024. I am also excited about the prospect of the first secure school, which we will be doing in partnership with the Oasis Trust. It is a different approach from those in youth custody, further elevating the role of education.

Ensuring proper support is on offer beyond the prison gates is also crucial if we are to help offenders stay on the straight and narrow, so we are improving pre-release planning and continuity of care. We want to ensure that no one supervised by probation is released from prison homeless. Our new transitional accommodation scheme—community accommodation service tier 3, so below the level of bail hostels—helps us to deliver on that commitment. It was initially delivered in five probation regions in 2021, but our investment is expanding to operate across all of England and Wales by April 2024.

We are also investing in pre-release teams, which have been embedded in 67 prisons and provide an important interface for commissioned rehabilitative services that help ex-prisoners with accommodation, personal wellbeing, employment, training and education. To improve continuity of care for prison leavers with substance misuse or wider health issues, we are recruiting more than 50 health and justice co-ordinators with responsibility for ensuring more joined-up support between prison, probation and healthcare treatment services. Where appropriate, alcohol monitoring on licence is available.

Small things that the rest of us can take for granted can make all the difference, for good or ill. That is why we have introduced resettlement passports, set up ahead of release, to bring together the essentials that offenders need in one place: bank accounts, CVs and the identification people need to prove the right to work and to rent a flat. We have also supported the Offenders (Day of Release from Detention) Act 2023, which recently received Royal Assent, having started out as a private Member's Bill. It will enable offenders at risk of reoffending to be released up to two days earlier, to avoid what can be the hectic rush of trying to get round different services on a Friday.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst asked specifically about magistrates' sentencing powers. Given the time, I should not talk about that in great detail now. We have had a chance to talk about it in the Select Committee. On his specific question about working with the judiciary, we are working with the Judicial Office as part of the review we are undertaking on the changes and plan to engage magistrates on it. We should have completed that review by the autumn.

My hon. Friend and others rightly asked about capacity, the role of Operation Safeguard and other shorter-term capacity measures, as well as the longer-term capital programme. Since October 2022, we have seen an acute and exceptional rise in the prison population. Operation Safeguard is a temporary measure to provide a short-term solution to that acute rise in demand. He asked how much of that capacity has been used. The answer is that it goes up and down; it is a facility to be drawn on as

[*Damian Hinds*]

needed. The average over the period is really quite low, but there are days when its usage is greater. Standing it up has provided us with vital extra short-term resilience as we develop further that longer-term capital programme.

As of April, we had invested £1.3 billion in capital towards the delivery of the 20,000 additional, modern prison places to which my hon. Friend referred. By the end of June, about 5,400 of those places had been added to the estate. That includes the two new 1,700-place prisons, HMPs Five Wells and Fosse Way, with the latter having accepted its first prisoners at the end of May.

Sir Robert Neill: I am grateful to the Minister for that update. Those who have been to Five Wells and Fosse Way recognise what an advance they are in design and facilities. Will he give us a specific update on where we are in the stalled planning process on the other three prisons, which are still stuck in the system? When are we likely to get those moving forward?

Damian Hinds: As my hon. Friend well knows—he was previously a leading light in ministerial office, dealing with local government—we do not control the planning process. I am therefore not in a position to give him a bang-up-to-date update, except to say that those three projects remain part of our plan. Overall, this is a complex capital programme and we need to deal with external factors, including working through the planning process.

Sir Robert Neill: Perhaps the Minister could write to me and the Select Committee to set out where we are with those projects. Have they gone to appeal yet? If so, has any indication been given as to when the hearings will take place?

Damian Hinds: Of course, I will be delighted to correspond in that way with my hon. Friend.

We are also rolling out 1,000 rapid deployment cells across the estate. The first three sites, HMPs Norwich, Wymott and Hollesley Bay, are now accepting prisoners, and the majority of the 1,000 additional places will be delivered this year. We are undertaking major refurbishments at sites including HMPs Birmingham, Liverpool and Norwich, delivering about 800 cells between them. The wing-by-wing refurbishment at HMP Liverpool will see every cell renovated. Construction has also started on new house blocks at HMPs Stocken, Hatfield, Sudbury and Rye Hill, which will add around 850 places between them. HMP Millsike, the new prison of some 1,500 places by HMP Full Sutton, will open in 2025. Our new prisons have a laser-sharp focus on rehabilitation, with workshops and cutting-edge technology that puts education, training and jobs front and centre, so every prisoner gets the right opportunity to turn over a new leaf.

Like many, or most, workforces, the Prison Service has experienced recruitment and retention challenges at a time of very low unemployment. Ensuring our services are sufficiently resourced and that we retain levels of

experience are fundamental for delivering quality outcomes. That is why we are targeting the drivers of staff attrition and taking steps to improve recruitment, alongside a wider agenda of development in the workforce.

We welcome the Justice Committee's important inquiry into the prison operational workforce and we have worked closely with the Committee to provide evidence. We are now closely considering the survey of prison staff, and I reaffirm that we take the issues of the morale and safety of staff with the greatest gravity. Prison staff do incredible work and, so often, are the hidden heroes of our justice system and society. In every prison I have visited, their dedication and drive are clear to see.

We fund a range of services to support staff wellbeing, which include care teams in public sector prisons that are trained to provide support to any member of staff involved in an incident at work. We are committed to making sure our prison staff feel safe, supported and valued, and we look forward to receiving the Committee's full report and recommendations in due course.

The 2022-23 prison staff pay award was announced in July 2022. It represented a significant investment in the workforce. Alongside an increase in base pay of at least 4% for all staff between bands 2 and 11, we targeted further pay rises for our lowest-paid staff of up to £3,000.

The probation service is in its second year of a multi-year pay deal for staff. Salary values of all pay bands will increase each year, targeted at key operational grades to improve what has been a challenging recruitment and retention position. The pay increases differ for different job roles, but to provide an example, probation officers will see their starting salary rise from around £30,200 in 2021-22 to a little over £35,000 by 2024-25.

Let me respond briefly to some of the individual points made by colleagues during the debate. The hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) asked about crowding in prisons. The most recent statistics show crowding at 20.6% in the estate; by way of comparison, in 2009, that figure was 25.3%.

My near neighbour, my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes), raised the horrific crime of overkill. I have heard what she says and I will pass on those points within the Department.

I commend the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) for his close association and work with the Prison Officers Association. I confirm that I will continue to look forward to speaking with the Prison Officers Association and other staff bodies throughout the Prison and Probation Service. He was right to identify the centrality of safety and security in people's experience of work. I reassure him that we measure those things centrally through the key performance indicators that we have in prisons.

Multiple Members rightly talked about rehabilitation. Specifically on the question about education providers asked by the hon. Member for Hammersmith, it is true that there are four education providers contracted to provide education services through the prison system. However, there is also a flexible fund that enables individual governors to draw down funds to make supplementary provision in certain ways. It is important that we get a blend—that we are able to respond to local conditions

and the specifics of a prison population, and have some commonality in the provision and in the qualification studies.

Andy Slaughter: Will the Minister give way on that point?

Damian Hinds: I am sorry, but I think that I might be starting to stretch Mr Deputy Speaker's patience. I will be happy to follow up with the hon. Gentleman separately if he would like to do so as an alternative.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North talked, quite rightly, about the impact on families. That works in both directions—the effect on the children and what can be an adverse childhood experience, and the effect on the prisoner. Then there is the importance of having family time and family support, and the difference that that can make on release. I pay tribute to Lord Farmer for the work that he has done in that area. We have done some work on improving the maintenance of family ties, but I bring here today the good news that we are working on some data-linking in order to understand the extent and nature of these issues more closely.

We know overall that the efforts of our dedicated staff are working. The proportion of prison leavers in employment six months after release has more than doubled in the two years to March 2023, from 14% to more than 30%. Since 2010, the overall reoffending rate has decreased from 31.6% to 24.4%. As of February 2023, our transitional accommodation service had supported more than 5,000 prison leavers who would otherwise have been homeless across the initial five regions. Of course, there is still a huge amount more to do, but it is clear that we are making significant and important progress. The Government will always value and invest in His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service. Our prisons must be and will be a safe place in which to work, where staff are provided with the right support, the training and the tools to empower them to do their jobs. I look forward to a continued dialogue on this matter with the Committee and others beyond this debate and the report.

In closing, let me repeat my gratitude to my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst for securing the debate, and to all who have contributed today. I commend the estimates to the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): The final brief word goes to Sir Robert Neill.

4.46 pm

Sir Robert Neill: I am very grateful to all who have taken part in this important and valuable debate. I just wish more people had been here to hear it, but I hope that they will read at least some of what was said, because the issues raised by hon. Members on both sides of the House are important. They include the condition of prisons, and the issues raised by the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) and the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) on the legitimate concerns of the staff in our prisons, which should not be ignored. The points made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) about families are also critical. I, too, look forward to the report of the Wade review.

There are positive things happening and there were positive suggestions from both Front-Bench teams. In some ways, we should try to find a more consensual approach to some issues of prison policy, because to put it right will require an approach that will span the lifetime of more than one Parliament. It is an important challenge, and I am grateful for the time for this debate today.

Question deferred until tomorrow at Seven o'clock (Standing Order No. 54).

Women and Equalities Committee

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call Sir Bill Wiggin to move the motion on behalf of the Committee of Selection.

4.48 pm

Sir Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That Dr Jamie Wallis be discharged from the Women and Equalities Committee and Lia Nici be added.

I believe that I have until 7 o'clock this evening, so I have a few words to say. [*Laughter.*] I was hoping for a collective groan from SNP Members. [HON. MEMBERS: "Groan!"] Thank you.

I will, if I may, adapt a quote from Winnie Ewing, "Stop the speech, Scotland wants to get on". I shall leave it at that.

Question put and agreed to.

Winnie Ewing

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

4.48 pm

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): Here we are, just coming up to 4.50 pm on Tuesday afternoon. If I reflect back on the time that our dear friend and colleague Winnie Ewing was in this place, quite often Parliament could be sitting to 2 am, 4 am or even 7 am. If she were here today, I can only begin to think what she would make of it. I am sure my much-missed colleague would be saying, “What a shambles this place is that it cannot conduct its business in a way that allows for timely discharge of events. Doesn’t this show to those of us on the SNP side that Westminster has nothing to say to the people of Scotland? Doesn’t it just suggest that it is about time that Scotland completes its journey to independence?” We do the task that Winnie Ewing set for us: our job was not to come here and to settle down, but to settle up for the people of Scotland.

I am grateful for the opportunity to celebrate the remarkable achievements of Winifred Margaret Ewing. Winnie was elected to this House first for the seat of Hamilton in a by-election in 1967, then for Moray in 1974, when she unseated the then Tory Secretary of State for Scotland. Not only did Winnie serve in this House, but she was elected to the European Parliament as well as to the Scottish Parliament. The fact that she served in three legislatures makes her unique as a Scottish politician.

However, it is not the accomplishment of that electoral record that makes Winnie unique. As our colleague from the 1974 intake, George Reid, said:

“Occasionally, just very occasionally, a person emerges from the murk of daily life with the vision and determination to change things for good, to set the country on a different path. That was Winnie.”

That was Winnie—George was absolutely right about that.

When the Hamilton by-election took place on 2 November 1967, the voters of Hamilton changed the political landscape of Scotland. They changed the history of Scotland. When Winnie emerged from the count that night, she did indeed utter the immortal words:

“Stop the world, Scotland wants to get on.”

Winnie lit a spark that night and the fire from that spark has shone brightly ever since.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): My right hon. Friend mentions that very famous Hamilton by-election, but there was another, just before Hamilton, that set Scotland on the path: the Glasgow Pollok by-election, in which the SNP candidate was the great George Leslie, who we also lost fairly recently. It goes to show, does it not, that we on these Benches stand on the shoulders of giants?

Ian Blackford: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention, because he is so right. With our colleagues in Edinburgh delivering government for the people of Scotland in our Parliament, we have the task of completing that journey to independence, but at a time like this it is right that we pay tribute to those who have gone before.

The Scottish National party was formed in 1934 through the merger of two political parties, the National Party of Scotland, formed in 1928, and the Scottish (Self-Government) party. My goodness, to think of some of the people who had the courage to give their lives to shaping Scotland’s future at that point, we do indeed stand on the shoulders of giants. There are so many to mention. We think of John MacCormick, two of whose sons became parliamentarians—Neil MacCormick in the European Parliament, and Iain MacCormick in this place.

We think of giants such as Robert Bontine Cunninghame Graham, a remarkable individual who was a Member of this House. He was elected as a Liberal in Lanarkshire in 1886—although I believe he never formally took the Liberal Whip—then stood as an independent and then became the first president of the Independent Labour party. Like so many, however, he was on a political journey and became the first president of the Scottish National party. He was also very well known in Argentina as a rancher and an accomplished novelist. I tell that story because of the spark of genius in those who formed the movement at that time, in the likes of Compton Mackenzie.

We talk about by-elections, and I will come on to the 1960s. I remind the very few Conservative politicians who are here that we have until 7.30 pm, so they should stick with us—[*Interruption.*] Go on, smile. You might learn something.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Ian Blackford: If the hon. Gentleman would bear with me, there is plenty of time. Let us just settle down.

In thinking about those by-elections in the 1960s, as well as talking about George Leslie, we should also think of the likes of Billy Wolfe in West Lothian in the early 1960s. That journey gathered a sense of momentum, and that momentum really sparked into life with Winnie’s success in Hamilton in 1967. I go back, if I may, to the 1935 Midlothian by-election. My own grandfather and his two brothers became members of the SNP in that period. By-elections have been important for the SNP in fulfilling the promise that it had.

Jim Shannon: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way on political journeys?

Ian Blackford: This will be quite a political journey!

Jim Shannon: It will be. May I first congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on securing the debate? He and I spoke earlier. Not many people in this House will know that Winnie Ewing and Dr Paisley were good friends from the European Parliament and had a good relationship. Quite clearly, one was committed to Unionism and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, while the other was committed to independence, but that did not in any way inhibit their relationship.

Although Mrs Ewing and I had very different views on Unionism, I much admired her courage, advocacy, passion and desire for her country. Her nickname in Brussels translated to “Mrs Scotland”—a legacy to be proud of. Her advice of “stand your ground” applies to

many of us in politics, myself included. It is a timeless motto not simply for generations of Scots, but for their very proud Ulster Scots cousins in Northern Ireland.

Ian Blackford: I am so grateful to my hon. Friend, if I may refer to him in that way. People should listen to his wise words.

It is worth reflecting on the fact that those of us on these Benches have a passion and commitment. We want to see Scotland become an independent country, but, as we often say, the debate about our country's future ought to be one of mutual respect. Of course, we understand that there are other traditions, but we all have a responsibility to extend the hand of friendship, as Winnie Ewing did. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) talks about the relationship that she had with the Reverend Ian Paisley. I am aware of that relationship, but she also had one with John Hume. Those in Brussels at that time would often see the three of them in conversation—and, indeed, at more social occasions as well, if I may refer to them in that way.

It is important that, when we talk to people externally, we give the message that we are here in this place to stand up for our constituents—and, in our case, to stand up for our country—but that we have no personal animosity towards those on the other side. Those who served with Winnie, whether in this place in Westminster, or, like some on the SNP Benches, in the Scottish Parliament, knew that she always looked out for new Members or younger Members in particular. In the end, the way in which someone comports themselves is important in that regard. Winnie was a shining light and an example to us all.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP) *rose*—

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP) *rose*—

Ian Blackford: I will give way first to my hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford).

Dr Whitford: Obviously, we are celebrating Winnie as an absolute icon of the Scottish National party and of Scotland, but we need to remember that she was also a woman and a mother. We send the condolences of everyone on these Benches, and of the whole House, to Fergus, Annabelle and Terry.

Ian Blackford: I am very grateful, because that is important. The sense of grief that they will all be feeling from the loss of their mother will be very different from our experiences. We have fantastic memories of Winnie, as so many of us were lucky to spend time with her. It is right that we reflect on all that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire talks about thinking of Winnie as a woman. Let us quickly reflect on that and think about the circumstances for a woman coming to this House in 1967, when it was not that common. It is not just that a woman came to this House in 1967, but that she came here on her own to represent her constituents as the only SNP politician in this place. Quite frankly, the experiences that she had were utterly disgraceful in the main—the misogyny that she faced. I will pay credit to Harold Wilson, who was a friend of hers, but the experiences that she had in this place were absolutely unspeakable.

When we think about where we are, we think about the Scottish Parliament being re-established in 1999 and the SNP going into Government, and I often reflect on those who have driven our movement. We have spoken about being on the shoulders of giants, but for me, there are two people in particular who we owe an enormous debt of gratitude: one is Winnie, and the other is Margo MacDonald, who won the Govan by-election in 1973. As someone who was a teenager in the 1970s, what drove me into the SNP was the leadership of those two people. By goodness, we are so blessed by the leadership, drive, ambition, intelligence, wit, sophistication and glamour that both those women presented themselves with. What fantastic leaders and role models they were for Scotland!

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP) *rose*—

Ian Blackford: Speaking of role models.

Hon. Members: But not of glamour!

Peter Grant: No, certainly not.

My right hon. Friend mentions the wit that we got from Winnie and Margo, and one of the great things about Winnie was that her wicked sense of humour was as often as not turned on herself. If I can give one brief example, when I stood in the 2008 Glenrothes by-election, Winnie did a lot of campaigning, just by going for cups of coffee in places and talking to people. She came into the campaign rooms doubled up with laughter once, because a woman had spotted her and dragged her 12-year-old daughter across the road to meet this legend of Scottish politics. The wee girl said that she knew who Winnie was because she was learning about her in school. Now, Winnie was a lawyer—she should have known that you do not ask a question if you do not know the answer. She said to the wee girl, “You must be doing modern studies, then”, and the wee girl said, “No, history.”

Ian Blackford: Well, indeed: that is a typical Winnie story. The only thing that I could reflect on beyond that is the description of anyone going for a cup of coffee with Winnie. In all the years and decades that I have known her, I have never known anyone going for a cup of coffee with her—an Irish coffee, perhaps.

Since the issue of by-elections has been mentioned, it is probably worth reflecting that many of us were by-election candidates, including my hon. Friend and myself. I stood in Paisley in 1997.

Ms Anum Qaisar (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): And by-election winners.

Ian Blackford: And winners—from Airdrie more recently. What used to happen was that Winnie Ewing would turn up and assist you for the last few days of the campaign. She was your minder—in my case, she actually replaced Nicola, who had been my minder for most of the campaign. For those who have not experienced it, it really was something to behold, because it was not normal political campaigning, certainly when it got to the evenings. In my case, we did a tour of the pubs of Paisley. As someone who was relatively modest, shy and retiring, it was quite remarkable to see Madame Écosse work the tables, and to be welcomed by everybody and have discussions about political life.

[*Ian Blackford*]

Since we are on the subject and we have time, I remember that on election day, we were in a particular inn in Paisley—Members can probably think of the one I mean. Winnie said, “Let’s get a dram”, and I had to say to her, “Winnie, I’m the candidate”, but I relented and had one. She wanted to buy a second one, and I said, “Come on, not today. I’m the candidate; let’s miss that.” The point of telling that story is the spirit and warmth of the individual. It was an absolute pleasure to spend time in her company. I am glad to say that I became a very good friend to Madame Écosse—to Winnie Ewing. She would come up and spend some time with us in Skye. She was fantastic company.

Ronnie Cowan: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Ian Blackford: One second, then I will.

Ronnie Cowan: You said that 15 minutes ago!

Ian Blackford: Well, I recall going to visit her when she was in the Quarriers home in my hon. Friend’s constituency, I believe. I went with a fellow parliamentarian, a colleague of ours from the Scottish Parliament, Colin Campbell. Colin had made the fateful error of phoning the nursing home as we were leaving his house to say that we would be there in a few minutes. The upshot of that was that rather than our going to visit her in the nursing home, there she was at the door with her coat on and her handbag. As we went in, the remark was, “Right, boys, where are we going?” The expectation was that we would be taking her out to a place where we could have some relaxation and entertainment, if I can put it that way.

Ronnie Cowan: There are two links to me there. Colin Campbell was my history teacher when I was at school. [HON. MEMBERS: “Not modern studies?”] No, history. I also had the great privilege of Winnie being a constituent of mine when she was in that nursing home. I was the candidate in 2015, and I got the phone call to go and meet Winnie Ewing, which was quite an experience for me, and she was incredibly generous with her time and her advice. However, a week later Winnie was not feeling so good. It was coming up to the election, and her family phoned me to say that Winnie did not have a postal vote. So I had enormous pleasure, on election day, of taking Winnie Ewing’s ballot paper and voting for myself, which was a proud moment and something that will live with me for the rest of my days.

Ian Blackford: That is a wonderful story, and knowing the woman as I did, I can say to my hon. Friend that nothing would have given Winnie more pride than knowing he had done that.

I remember that 2015 election with some pride in my own interaction with Winnie at that time. Winnie had sent me a video address that I could use in my own election campaign, and it was not short—it was 30 minutes long. [HON. MEMBERS: “The irony!”] Well, I did say that she was my mentor. Some 29 minutes of that 30-minute address was about Europe, so there is a serious point to this. Winnie studied law in Glasgow, but she also went to study in The Hague. She was a Scottish nationalist—from the age of nine—but she was a European and she was

an internationalist. She was so proud of what the European Union had meant for Scotland. She was so proud of the role she had played as a parliamentarian and of the friendships that she had developed with her friends not just from these islands, but right across Europe.

There was the role Winnie Ewing played in the Lomé convention, and in bringing it to Inverness, for goodness’ sake. There was the work she did in establishing the Erasmus programme, which was so inspirational in providing opportunities for our young people. It is therefore not surprising that she would often talk about what the European Union had meant. There are a number of us here from the highlands and islands, and my goodness, how we have benefited from objective 1 status, and the person responsible for that was Winnie Ewing. Think about where we are today—we have to go cap in hand to Westminster for levelling-up money and for what are in effect scraps from the table, as opposed to what was there for us as a right when Scotland and the European Community were working together in partnership. The highlands and islands are full of signs for projects that have been financed by Europe, and that is the legacy of Madame Écosse. Michel Barnier was recently on Skye, and he posted a picture of a path that had been funded by the European Union. What a difference between the spirit of generosity we had from the European Union and what we face in this place.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): I am very grateful to the modest, shy and retiring gentleman, my right hon. Friend, for giving way. Earlier, he mentioned Compton Mackenzie, and I think it is worth remembering that Compton Mackenzie, who was buried in my native island—he was a founder of the SNP in 1934—was actually an Englishman, which says a lot about the SNP, despite what many would say.

I had the great fortune during the general election of 2001 to get to know Winnie very well. I stayed with her at Goodwill in Milnorduff on several occasions, and I spent many an hour, over a coffee perhaps, with her late husband Stewart, and I look back fondly on that. I remember one time going to the Black Isle show—the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) smiles—and we sat down with some farmers. I was the candidate, and I thought, “This meeting with the farmers at the Black Isle show has to go well”, but Winnie sat down and told them, “Well, if we were independent now, guys, you wouldn’t be suffering the problems with BSE, would you?” I thought that “I told you so” start to it would absolutely torpedo our meeting, but it did not, because Winnie Ewing had style and she had the respect of the people, and it was taken that way. They knew the truth of what she was saying and did not take it badly, and the meeting progressed really well.

Of course, we know that Winnie Ewing has left us not just the great political legacy we are standing on, but her own children, two tremendous Scottish National party MSPs, Fergus Ewing and Annabelle Ewing. We extend our condolences to them as well as to Terry, and to her grandchildren.

Ian Blackford: Indeed, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention.

Winnie was elected to the European Parliament in June 1979.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: I remember it.

Ian Blackford: No you don't!

Angus Brendan MacNeil: I do. I was eight years old.

Ian Blackford: Well, not many of us were active in Scottish politics at that time. I was a teenager—let's be brutal—and in fact, the first election I voted in was that '79 European election. The general election of 1979 was not our finest hour. It was, if I may say so, a temporary setback for the Scottish National party. We lost some ground and perhaps were not in the best of fettle. In that European election—I remember it well—there were not many expectations that the SNP was going to win any seats in the European Parliament. Indeed, it was forecast that the Liberal Democrats were more likely to take the Highlands and Islands seat. But what a night that was, when Winnie Ewing won the Highlands and Islands for the SNP.

We hear stories about Winnie Ewing's interaction with the farmers, and the same would have been true if we were talking about fishing people, crofters, those working in the industrial community in Fort William, and so on and so forth. One thing about Winnie was that she worked for her constituents. I remember, when the pulp mill was closing in Fort William, the way that she picked up the phone to every newspaper proprietor up and down the land to try to get business for that pulp and paper mill. The legacy of the work she did, building relationships right across the Highlands and Islands, was that she increased her majority in every election that she fought as a European MP. What a role model she was for us, as someone who believed in our political philosophy, and someone who was ultimately a first-class parliamentarian.

My wife's family moved into the Hamilton constituency while Winnie was the MP there, and they often talk about the success that she had getting a phone installed for them in the 1960s. Winnie did that casework, and she came to visit them and made sure that she did her job as the local MP.

I say for those on the Government Benches that I am on page 1 of my speech, but I will make some progress over the next while, don't worry. [*Interruption.*] I am in my introduction; actually, it is the précis.

Winnie was a trailblazer for those of us who sit on the SNP Benches, but we would do well constantly to remind ourselves of her words from 1974 when, in response to Harold Wilson asking her how she was settling in, she responded:

"I'm not here to settle in. I'm here to settle up"

for Scotland. Let us remind ourselves on these Benches that that is exactly the job that we are expected to do.

When we talk about the memory of those who brought us here, and about what Winnie wanted with Scottish independence, it was not for us, or for past generations that have tilled the soil. It was for those who will follow us and for future generations, so that Scotland can become the country it can be—a prosperous, greener, fairer country that allows our human capital to flourish. That would be an appropriate legacy for Winnie, our dear friend and colleague.

Who was Winnie? She was born and brought up in Glasgow. She attended Glasgow University as well as the Hague Academy of International Law. She was a Scottish nationalist from the young age of nine. A nationalist, but also a European and an internationalist, as I said earlier—perspectives that were to shape much of her political life. Like many who made this journey, she came from a Labour supporting family. Her father George had been a member of the Independent Labour party, and it was only after her father's death that Winnie learned that he had joined the SNP in July 1967, months before the Hamilton by-election. So many in the Labour party would make that journey towards the SNP—her family made it in the 1970s. It is a pity that no one from the Labour party is here to hear this speech and join the journey that so many in Scotland have already made.

That phrase, "Stop the world, Scotland wants to get on", encapsulates so much of Winnie's outlook—that desire for Scotland to achieve its potential; to get on and be the best that we could be. There was no better ambassador for Scotland in Europe than Winnie. She had a focused determination to put Scotland on the map at home and internationally. Although she served with distinction, leaving her mark in Westminster and Europe, that opportunity to serve in the Scottish Parliament brought her particular pleasure.

When Winnie was elected to the Scottish Parliament in 1999, it was a culmination of a drive to restore nationhood to Scotland that had driven her since first being elected to Westminster in 1967. It was a journey of 32 years that brought the re-establishment of the Scottish Parliament. How fitting it was that Winnie presided over the opening session of the Scottish Parliament, when she proclaimed that

"the Scottish Parliament, which adjourned on 25 March 1707, is hereby reconvened."—[*Scottish Parliament Official Report*, 12 May 1999; c. 5.]

There was that long journey to Scotland establishing a Parliament, and it being opened by the MSP who was so inspirational in driving forward the process of achieving that Parliament was a recognition of the determination and leadership she had shown since that breakthrough in Hamilton in 1967. Scotland had got on.

Winnie was on her own as an MP in her first Parliament, although she was supported by her Plaid Cymru friend, Gwynfor Evans. Those would be challenging times for her, with the open hostility often shown in this place. How different her experiences would be when she returned to this place in 1974 as the Member for Moray and Nairn and ultimately as a member of the SNP's first 11. In many respects, it was a challenging Parliament. George Reid, sadly now the only surviving member of that group, remarked of a group meeting when Winnie said:

"Look, if we don't hang together, we'll hang apart."

As was often the case with Winnie, it was sage advice, as apt for all of us today as it was then.

After Westminster came Europe, as we have discussed, and the success that Winnie had there. Before she departed Westminster, she happily took up a number of issues. In her maiden speech in 1967, in a debate on the age of majority, she said:

"There are moral and intellectual reasons why it is good sense to make people responsible at the age of 18 if not sooner—and I mean fully responsible in every sense of the word. They are becoming less inclined to follow their parents' way of thinking

[*Ian Blackford*]

and they are more able to earn. They have seen the world on the television screen, and the visual is more compelling than reading. They have a very good understanding of what the world is all about. There is a revival of interest in politics. I am sorry that the Report does not talk about voting at 18, because that is in the minds of everyone who considers this matter, but if we go as far as the Report recommends, then voting at 18 may well be the logical next step.

I am absolutely on the side of youth. I would remind the House that even if we give the vote at 18, the average age at which the first vote is cast is 21, and if we give the vote at 21, then the average age at which it is first cast is 23. Mr. Pitt was a good Prime Minister, so it was said, and he was only 23, so that today presumably he might not even have had a vote and could not have been Prime Minister.”—[*Official Report*, 20 November 1967; Vol. 754, c. 980.]

I am telling that story because this was a woman who recognised the importance of lowering the voting age at that time in the 1970s. If we then think about our referendum in 2014, the Scottish Parliament legislated to make sure that 16 and 17-year-olds got the vote. I know that Winnie was particularly proud of the fact that our young people—those who were going to be part of Scotland’s story—were given that opportunity.

I will close with some reflections on the referendum day in 2014 and Winnie’s remarks when she was interviewed at her home by Hugh MacDonald—incidentally, he was the son of one of the two men who hoisted her aloft after the Hamilton by-election. Perhaps sensing that our cause would not be won that day, she maintained her optimism that the process of independence was going in only one direction. She said:

“I have never had any doubt that Scotland will be independent. None. This is still hopeful Thursday for the Yes campaign. I am not daft. I know this is on a knife edge, but this cannot be stopped. It is a movement. It is a process.”

My dearly departed friend and colleague was exactly right.

I want to make my closing remarks to my colleagues on the SNP Benches about the responsibility that we have. If we think about what we have endured over the course of the last few years since the financial crisis of 2008, the United Kingdom has been in reverse. We have had a decade of decline in living standards, with our people being held in poverty. Our responsibility is to have the vision, the energy, the drive and the leadership so that we can show people in Scotland that it does not have to be this way.

I will reflect for a moment on a book written by a chap called Anderson at Aberdeen University, in which he graphically shows that Scotland’s population in the United Kingdom on a relative basis has declined in every decade since the 1850s. That is a matter of fact. It is not about blaming anyone else but about what happens within the status quo.

People often talk about the deficit that Scotland has, but an important factor that has to be borne in mind is that that is the deficit within the context of the United Kingdom. In many respects we have missed the opportunity of North sea oil. Where is the legacy of the £350 billion-plus harvested in tax revenues from that resource? It is gone. But, friends, we will not make the same mistake a second time. What Scotland is facing now is an enormous opportunity from green energy, not just in providing energy for us but in providing leadership in the global economy.

The Skilling report, which we as a group published last year, demonstrates that Scotland has the potential to increase its green energy output fivefold. Let us think about the opportunities for us if we can capture that supply chain: it is about creating a green industrial future, driving that investment into the Scottish economy, driving up productivity, driving up living standards and delivering the tax receipts that will be necessary to invest in health, education, transport and every other area of social policy in Scotland.

Look at our academic community, look at the excellence and leadership that we have in world-leading universities in Scotland, and think about the opportunity from putting that to work, developing the start-ups and spin-outs of the new industries of the future and not being held back by a United Kingdom that has turned its back on Europe, sent our economy into decline, lost opportunity and struck 4% off our GDP through the foolhardiness of Brexit.

The challenge for us is to say to people, “Yes, there is a better way; there is a way that Winnie Ewing would want us to take.” It is about showing how we would deliver that prosperity, and putting that in the context of the cost of living crisis, where so many of our people are in fuel poverty—my goodness—in a country rich in energy resource. That is the price that we pay for being part of this Union. As we face that election next year, and the opportunity of removing the Tories from power, it is not about removing the Tories in one election; it is about removing the Tories from Scotland for good, because Scotland becomes an independent country. That would be a legacy for Winnie Ewing.

5.24 pm

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Like the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who has just left the Chamber, I come from a different political tradition, but for four years, between 1999 and 2003, I had the privilege and pleasure of serving with Winnie Ewing in the Scottish Parliament. I would like to make a few remarks from a personal angle.

As some Members present know, my parents were small farmers. My father was a small dairy farmer in Easter Ross. In the late ’60s, he and my mother established a small cheese business, which my brother still runs today—enough of the family advert. In the late ’60s, they ventured south of the border and took a stand at the food fair at Olympia. My mum and dad wrote to all the Scottish MPs in this place and asked them to come and visit the stand and taste the cheese. Only one took up the invitation: Winnie Ewing. My parents never forgot that. It meant a huge amount to them.

I did not know Winnie at that stage—I was still at school. Later, my father died, too young. The letter that Winnie wrote to my mother was remarkable. I have it yet; it is a treasured letter that I will never part with, and I trust my children and grandchildren never will either. It meant so much to my mother. This lady transcended party politics. She cut right through to ordinary folk in Scotland. That was a tremendous and rare strength, to which I pay tribute.

In 1999 I appeared, as green as grass, in Holyrood. There was the great lady herself. From the word go she showed nothing but friendship to me. Where my party tended to drink in Deacon Brodie’s, Dr Ewing of Goodwill in Milnorduff rather preferred the Jolly Judge, further

up towards the castle. But many were the happy, small refreshments that I had with Winnie Ewing. We enjoyed each other's company enormously.

I think, too, of the Durness highland games in north-west Sutherland, where Winnie was a regular—and she was very fondly received by the local folk, I can tell you. She was much loved, and they were really charmed that she came to the games as often as she did. Again, it was a great pleasure to have a small dram with Winnie at the games. One evening, in fact, we maybe had one too many, and Winnie decided that I was her favourite Liberal. I was extremely worried because I thought that might totally destroy my career, so I made sure that all copies of the *Northern Times* that referred to that were suppressed and never came anywhere near here. I took that as a great compliment. It was meant very kindly indeed.

When the word came out that she had left us, I happened to be in north-west Sutherland at the time. People said, “Oh, dash it; she's away—what a shame.” When people say that kind of thing about someone who has left us, it is meant ever so genuinely. If my parents were alive today, they would be very sad that Winnie is no longer with us. I am very sad that she is no longer with us. As I said, she transcended party politics; she was way above that. It was an enormous privilege to have known her. Her hard-working attitude and sincere approach were something to behold. I mourn her today. We mourn her today.

I would add two things. First, the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) referred to her as Madame Écosse. I was the member of my party who once had to go on the telly and explain why she had won such a huge victory in the highlands. It was a testing event for me, but I come from the school of hard knocks. Secondly, I imagine that a great number of people in Europe, including present and former Members of the European Parliament, will mourn her passing. Can there be any greater epitaph? I doubt it.

5.29 pm

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): I am very grateful for this opportunity to pay tribute, on behalf of Plaid Cymru, to the late Winnie Ewing and to send my condolences to the family, particularly Annabelle, who was a very valued Member of this House when I started in 2001. I think she left us in 2005.

Much has already been said about the inspirational contribution Winnie Ewing made to Scottish and European politics. I could add to that, but I just want to note our appreciation in Wales of her contribution, in particular of course her breakthrough election in the Hamilton seat. I was a teenager at the time—you would not think so, being such a young lad—and completely obsessed with politics. Gwynfor Evans had been elected to the Carmarthen seat in 1966, just before Winnie Ewing. We had also had some near misses. As we have some time, and for the interest of the House, I will mention that, in Rhondda West, we came within 1,000 votes of beating the Labour party. They were much more colourful times back then. Our candidate Vic Davies would drive around the valley perched on the back of a big red dragon, which was loaded on to a flatbed lorry, getting his message to the people. It was a complicated message, I have to concede, but he knew how to do it. Then, in

Caerphilly, the much missed Phil Williams, who many people here will remember, again came close to beating the Labour candidate.

Perhaps the most interesting one, if I can just go off on a slight tangent and diversion, which would be of interest to Labour Members, were they here, is S. O. Davies, who, in 1970, was the hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil. He was allegedly 82 but probably quite a bit older and Labour decided to deselect him, so he decided to stand as an independent. This is a message for the Labour party: he stood as an independent and trounced the very lacklustre trade union official the Labour party had parachuted in. Interestingly, he was then offered the freedom of Merthyr Tydfil but turned it down, saying that the support of the people of Merthyr Tydfil was quite enough for him, thank you very much. They were much more colourful times.

As a young person in 1967 and 1968, the old world seemed to be dying and the new world was being born—not struggling to be born, but being born—before our eyes. As with S. O. Davies, some people from the old world showed us the way a bit. And that is when we had the Hamilton by-election to spur us on. At the time, I do not think one could overestimate the inspirational quality of Winnie Ewing's victory. Joining Gwynfor Evans, it seemed that the tide was with us. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) said, this place can be very dispiriting. I know how much Gwynfor Evans, as the lone voice of Welsh nationalism, appreciated and welcomed Winnie Ewing's arrival, which heralded a fruitful partnership between our two parties that has existed ever since.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Just for the hon. Gentleman's knowledge, in the many times I spent with Winnie Ewing, she mentioned Gwynfor Evans frequently.

Hywel Williams: I thank my hon. Friend for that point. Some people around me may be able to see this very interesting picture, which is of Winnie Ewing and Gwynfor Evans together at an advanced age sitting in the sunshine on a bench outside Gwynfor's house chatting and laughing. I think Winnie was slightly disappointed that the glasses were empty. [*Laughter.*] There has been a very fruitful partnership between our two parties and that was established a long time ago. May that long continue. True to the path that Winnie Ewing and Gwynfor Evans established over 50 years ago, may we, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber said, never forget that we are here not to settle down but to settle up. That is an inspirational statement.

I am now of an age when the old saw, “They don't make them like that any more” begins to ring true; I tend to think that as well. So may I say about Winnie Ewing sincerely, “Thank you,” but also, “They don't make them like that any more.”

Hon. Members: Hear, hear.

5.34 pm

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I could not have failed to take advantage of the opportunity to speak in a debate entitled “Winnie Ewing” and to add just a few recollections of my time with Winnie, because it was a very special time. Indeed, I think that what has come across in the tributes that we have heard

[*Pete Wishart*]

over the past couple of weeks is how much people enjoyed and appreciated being in her company. She had that special ability to make people feel not just welcome and glad to be with her, but proud to be with her. Spending time with her was something quite special. I spent a lot of time with her and I want to share a couple of stories about that.

There was one day that I will never forget. I was elected in the same year as my hon. Friend the Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams), back in 2001. One of the proudest moments of my life occurred when I was making my maiden speech, from roughly where I am standing now, because over in that Box, the Under-Gallery, sat Winnie Ewing. I kept glancing over to her, and she kept giving me that encouraging smile that I am sure everyone remembers. However, as you probably suspect, Mr Deputy Speaker, she was not there just to hear my eloquence. Her daughter Annabelle was to make her maiden speech the next day, but Winnie was determined to come along and hear all the other new Members of Parliament make their maiden speeches. That is the sort of person she was: she was here to give us solid support and encouragement.

I remember going down to the Strangers Bar with Winnie, as we would inevitably end up doing. On the Terrace, she said, “Your speech was quite good, Pete—the content was quite good—but you are going to have to learn to speak a bit more slowly, and you are going to have to wear better suits.” I leave it to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, to decide whether I met the standards that were set by Winnie Ewing.

In 2001, the year I was elected, Winnie was a serving Member of the Scottish Parliament. She regularly came up to Perthshire and to Angus, the seat I was contesting at that point. It was always Winnie people wanted to speak to. I had thought myself to be a reasonably exotic candidate, coming from a rock music background, but she was the real rock star: it was Winnie people wanted to speak to on the doorsteps, and she always had time to speak to everybody. I also remember the 2005 campaign, because I ran it, and Winnie was there for all the new candidates. I recall her being particularly thrilled that my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) was a candidate and had a real prospect of winning the seat. Winnie was so proud and pleased about his victory—although I do not know about the rest of us!—because she thought it very special for him to win back the Western Isles after her good friend Donnie Stewart had held it for such a long time. I knew how much she appreciated my hon. Friend’s election.

There is one other thing about Winnie Ewing, and I am going to try to set this right over the next couple of weeks. Winnie was a fantastic singer, and I had the pleasure of recording her for a CD that I was commissioned to make as vice-convenor for fundraising for the party back in the 1990s. Rather foolishly, I decided that I would record a few of the personalities in the Scottish National party—with mixed results, it must be said, but one performance stood out, and that was Winnie’s. I remember her wandering into the recording studio like a rock star, straight to the mike, for the first take of “Will Ye No’ Come Back Again?”, the great poem by Lady Nairne, and she sang it so beautifully. I found a

version of the CD which I will share with my colleagues, and I will make sure it is put online. That is a thing that Winnie was always able to do: to give a song, to take part, and to be prepared to do everything else.

I have not been on the SNP’s national executive committee for some years, but Winnie and I ran the election committee that was responsible for vetting candidates for the Scottish Parliament. I will spare his blushes, but someone we vetted is in the vicinity of the Chamber today, and we had a long conversation about his suitability. I think that Winnie won the day, and he is now our Minister for independence in the Scottish Parliament. We had such a great time on that panel. Winnie, Fiona Hyslop and I were given responsibility for vetting candidates, and I think we got most of them right, but we definitely got that one right.

There are so many great memories; there were so many fantastic times with Winnie. She lit up a room. She was a great friend. She was a mentor and a total and utter inspiration for all of us in the Scottish National party. I am so proud and pleased that I spent some of my parliamentary time as a colleague of Winnie, albeit in different Parliaments, and that I had that time to get to know her and to call her a friend in what we were doing. She will always be a massive figure in this party. I know that everybody says we will not see her like again, but we will not. It is hard to believe that somebody of her stature will emerge in the theatre of Scottish politics for a long time.

I know how much my colleagues are hurting and grieving the loss of Winnie Ewing and I know that this parting has been hard, but what a life. What a contribution. What a legend Winnie Ewing is, and we will miss her dearly.

5.40 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (John Lamont): I welcome the opportunity to pay tribute to Winnie Ewing in this House today. I want to start by thanking the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) for securing the debate, and I also want to express my deepest sympathy to Winnie’s family, particularly Fergus Ewing MSP and Annabelle Ewing MSP, alongside whom I worked during my time as a member of the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh.

Although our politics could not be more different, I recognise the enormous contribution that Winnie Ewing made to public life in Scotland. The excellent contributions we have heard this evening from Members on both sides of the House are testament to her extraordinary life of public service. Her place in the history of Scottish politics, going back nearly six decades, is secure and very well deserved.

As others have already noted, Winnie Ewing served twice as a Member of Parliament: for Hamilton, after her famous by-election victory in 1967 until 1970, and for Moray and Nairn between 1974 and 1979. She was also a member of the European Parliament for two decades from 1979, earning her unofficial title as Madame Écosse. From 1999 to 2003, she served as a member of the Scottish Parliament. As we have heard already, her words at the opening of the new Parliament have gone down in Scottish history. It is truly a remarkable record of service, with more than 30 years in total as an elected politician. As Members have highlighted, Winnie Ewing was also a dedicated servant to her party as president of the SNP for 18 years from 1987.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I thank the Minister for giving way and for his very generous opening remarks. It is also worth putting on the record that Winnie's late husband Stewart was a councillor in the Summerston area of Glasgow, which I currently represent in this place. Winnie, her husband and her children have between them represented Scotland and the people of Scotland at every conceivable level, which really is a tremendous legacy. I echo the condolences paid to all those who survive her and her family.

John Lamont: I am grateful for that point. I think it is fair to say that the family are a bit of a dynasty in Scottish politics.

All those dates of her terms in office and the various Parliaments tell only a fraction of the Winnie Ewing story. We have been reminded very clearly this evening how she approached politics with intelligence, warmth and wit.

I want to pick up on a couple of points made in the debate. The hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) made a very important point that Winnie's family are grieving and we should not forget that. A number of Members spoke of Winnie's humour and wit, and we heard about her passion for Europe. Personal family memories were shared by the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone), as well as memories of the friendship that Winnie offered and, clearly, very fond memories of the Jolly Judge pub in Edinburgh at the top of the Royal Mile, which is one of my favourite pubs as well.

The hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams) pay tribute from a Welsh perspective and the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) spoke of memories of Winnie during his maiden speech as well as her various contributions to the SNP campaigning machine.

Winnie Ewing brought a winning combination of charisma and commitment to everything she did throughout her long and distinguished career. Members have reflected on her by-election victory in Hamilton and what that meant to her party and the constitutional ambitions of the Scottish National party to break up the United Kingdom. As I said, our political views on such matters were and remain very different, but I think we can all agree on the huge significance, back in 1967, of the arrival at Westminster of a young and dynamic Scotswoman. Her driving up in a Scottish-built Hillman Imp to the sound of bagpipes set the tone. She was here to make an impact, and there is no doubt that is what she did.

There is no doubt that Winnie Ewing was a trailblazer and a strong role model whose high profile made it easier for other women on all sides to follow in her footsteps. Parliament is a much better place today for the example she set more than half a century ago.

Winnie Ewing was an inspiration to many, and her voice was truly unique. Since her passing was announced last week, we have heard numerous tributes in news reports and obituaries, in speeches at Holyrood and now here today. We have heard many warm and fitting words from across Parliament to remember Winnie and to celebrate her life. I hope Fergus and Annabelle Ewing and her whole family will take comfort from that.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Winnie Ewing was a truly legendary politician who served Scotland both in this place and in Europe. Hers was a full life of public service, and a full life well lived. Rest in peace.

Question put and agreed to.

5.46 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 4 July 2023

[SIR ROBERT SYMS *in the Chair*]

Srebrenica Memorial Week

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

9.30 am

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Srebrenica Memorial Week.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Robert. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing us the opportunity to hold this debate in time to mark the commemoration of the Srebrenica genocide. I also thank the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns) and the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), who are co-sponsors of this debate. Their support is a testament to the fact that this issue transcends all party divides in this House and across the country.

The Srebrenica genocide and the events leading up to it contain important lessons on which we must take this opportunity to reflect. The House is familiar with the story of the appalling atrocity. The Bosnian war from 1992 to 1995 saw the planned, systematic and industrialised murder of just under 100,000 Muslims, the displacement of 2 million people and the genocidal rape of about 50,000 women simply because of their Muslim identity.

In July 1995, the Bosnian Serb General Mladić and his forces seized the Bosnian town of Srebrenica, which had been declared a UN safe area. Over just a few days, more than 8,000 people, mainly Bosnian Muslim men and boys, were systematically murdered by the Bosnian Serb forces. The bodies were dumped in mass graves and later moved to secondary and even tertiary mass graves as the Bosnian Serb soldiers sought to cover up what they had done. There are still some people missing.

I am sure that, like me, colleagues here today remember the harrowing scenes of the war in Bosnia on our television screens. We watched neighbours turn against neighbours, friends against friends, ethnicity against ethnicity. I will not forget seeing the images of the emaciated prisoners held in the concentration camp while looking on in disbelief that ethnic cleansing, systematic mass rape and genocide were all happening not in a faraway place, but in Europe.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for securing this debate. I apologise to you, Sir Robert, and to the hon. Lady for not being able to make a speech. I wish to do so, but I have to attend the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee—I have permission to leave it for a short time and then return.

The genocide convention places obligations on the UK Government not only to punish the perpetrators of such crimes, but to predict and prevent those atrocities from happening. Unfortunately, as Srebrenica showed, we keep forgetting that duty. The International Development Committee's report, "From Srebrenica to a safer

tomorrow", challenged the UK Government to incorporate prevention at all stages of the policy cycle, including trade, education, supply chains and asylum policy. Does the hon. Member agree that that work needs to be done at pace to prevent an escalation because of not just what happened in Srebrenica, but what is happening now in Sudan and Nigeria?

Yasmin Qureshi: I entirely agree and thank the hon. Member for his intervention. We need to continue to work on this and take action across the board, so that these things do not happen again.

Bosnia was a horrific reminder of the vulnerability of ordinary people. It made me question how that could happen on our doorstep when the world had pledged "Never again" after the second world war. I also questioned what chance ethnic minority communities have in Europe if the xenophobic claims of ethnic superiority could prevail among white indigenous people who have been assimilated, integrated and lived together for hundreds of years. For me, Srebrenica demonstrates where the hatred and the dehumanisation of others can lead. Only when we reflect on those lessons can we truly strengthen our resolve to stand up to hatred in our own society.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): I welcome the debate and commend all those who called for it. I worked in Bosnia during and after the war, and visited the site of the Srebrenica memorial to the genocide of more than 8,000 people in July 1995.

My hon. Friend refers to saying, "Never again". Does she agree that when we say "Never again", we must demonstrate the commitment to keeping peace in the region, opposing genocide denial and opposing the Serb separatism of Milorad Dodik and other politicians, and take pride in the work our embassy has done to support the Srebrenica memorial and to support local organisations working for peace in the region?

Yasmin Qureshi: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that we need to be vigilant. Especially in the western Balkans, as she has rightly said, issues of ethnic nationalism are arising, and the Serbians are trying to hide the fact that this event ever happened. I am grateful for the fact that the United Kingdom is the only European country to commemorate the Srebrenica genocide, although I will come later to the lack of resources and the funding cuts that have been made. I thank our Government and our country for recognising the event and for being the world leader in commemorating the Srebrenica genocide.

While much has been achieved in building a cohesive society in the UK, there is more work to be done. According to Home Office figures released last year, police recorded hate crime in England and Wales has risen consistently over the past several years. I know the Minister will agree that standing up to hatred and intolerance in the UK remains extremely necessary and should be a priority for Departments.

The Minister will be aware of the vital work done by the charity Remembering Srebrenica, which was set up 10 years ago with the support of the then Prime Minister, David Cameron. The charity has established 11 regions, as well as other bodies across the UK, and has gone from holding one memorial event at Lancaster House in 2013 to holding nearly 2,000 annual community

[Yasmin Qureshi]

actions in schools, town halls, mosques, synagogues, churches, community centres and police stations to bring communities together in a collective act of remembrance. Remembering Srebrenica has educated nearly 150,000 young people through its educational resource and teacher training programmes about Srebrenica, and has appointed community champions who work together to unite communities in order to work against hate and to build a safer, stronger community.

As part of the charity's work to commemorate the genocide each year, it selects a theme that speaks to communities here in the UK. For 2023, the theme is "Together We Are One", which is particularly potent when we remind ourselves that Bosnia and Herzegovina is well known for being a melting pot of cultures and identities in which Muslims, Christians and Jews have lived side by side for centuries. Many colleagues will know that the capital, Sarajevo, is known to have been the Jerusalem of Europe, and it is the only European city with a mosque, a Catholic church, an Orthodox church and a synagogue in the same neighbourhood.

However, after the break-up of Yugoslavia, nationalist leaders who played on identity politics rose to power across the region. Those ultra-nationalist forces promoted hatred and division with the agenda of creating a greater Serbia, but only with ethnically pure Serbs. One of the most well-known integrated societies in Europe imploded. The theme "Together We Are One" underlines why we have a responsibility to do everything we can to combat divisive rhetoric, by focusing on the things that unite us together as one.

This year's theme also reminds us to remain vigilant against the forces of hatred that seek to "other" groups as being negatively different—the narrative of us and them, or where one group dehumanises and denies the humanity of another, and the dominant group is taught to see the target group as less than human and not belonging to their community or society.

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): I thank the hon. Lady for securing this debate. It is less a debate and more a commemoration and recognition of the unity that we have in this Parliament never to forget what happened in Bosnia and Srebrenica. She makes the excellent point that there is a real danger of history repeating itself. Right now, our position towards the Balkans is not alert enough to the problems faced by Bosnian citizens.

Does the hon. Lady agree that we need to take three steps? First, we need to upgrade our resources in Bosnia, with more British troops available and on the ground, and through NATO. Secondly, we need to use Magnitsky sanctions on those perpetrating crimes in the area. Thirdly, we need to ensure that we do not cut funding to the Remembering Srebrenica group, which we have by 50%. After all, is an ounce of prevention not worth a pound of cure?

Yasmin Qureshi: I entirely agree. I know that the Minister does listen, so I hope she will take back to others in the Foreign Office the point about more spending and more resources in the western Balkans to ensure that we do not have any further eruptions there.

I say gently that both the first world war and second world war started in that part of the world. That is important.

Remembering Srebrenica is the charity doing the most work on this matter, but, year on year, it has had funding cuts. I wrote to the Foreign Office and to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to ask for funding, but that was sadly rejected. They—especially DLUHC—have responded by saying they are not going to make any change, which is a shame because this is an important cause. The only way in which so many people are finding out about this is because of the work done by Remembering Srebrenica on the memorial, through volunteers and others across the United Kingdom. It is very much volunteer-led, but it needs resources. After this debate, I hope that the Foreign Office will consider putting in some money and that, hopefully, it will talk to DLUHC to ask it to consider funding as well.

We know that polarisation and propaganda drive groups further apart, through deepening division. We saw that played out in the years leading up to the Srebrenica genocide in 1995. Non-Serbs had to mark their houses with white flags or wear an armband. There was a systematic and careful process of dehumanising Bosnian Muslims. Anti-Muslim propaganda was instrumental in Bosnian Serbs turning against their Bosnian Muslim neighbours, who were constantly referred to as "Islamic fundamentalists".

That is why commemorating Srebrenica is so important, so that we can stop to reflect on our own society as well and help people in our country better understand the behaviours and influences around them, which can either build or damage the cohesion of communities. We need to help equip them with skills and confidence to challenge such behaviours, and dismantle the foundations that allow intolerance to survive. We must do more to encourage people to reflect on how we can create an environment that helps find common ground with people from different backgrounds, instead of focusing on a single facet of their identity.

The work that Remembering Srebrenica does across the country in Srebrenica Memorial Week, and throughout the whole year, empowers communities to actively challenge stereotypes, the scapegoating, hate speech and dehumanising language, and to counter that by working towards creating a society that is characterised by embracing our common humanity. It is a reminder of the role that each of us, irrespective of our background, has in us all coming together as one community against hatred and division. I look forward to hearing the Minister acknowledge some of the importance of that work in her remarks and I hope that DLUHC and the Foreign Office will consider funding the charity.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): Every year when we reflect on the horrors of the Srebrenica genocide, we all reiterate our commitment to stamping out the Islamophobia, prejudice and intolerance that led to the murder of the 8,000 Muslim men and boys in 1995, yet we are witnessing the ethnic cleansing of Uyghur Muslims at the hands of the Chinese Government in Xinjiang, and the persecution of Muslims in Kashmir by the Indian Government. Does my hon. Friend agree that to avoid another Srebrenica happening in Xinjiang, Myanmar, Kashmir or elsewhere, the very real threat of Islamophobia must be taken seriously and tackled on a global scale?

Yasmin Qureshi: I thank my hon. Friend and I entirely agree. I do not normally criticise colleagues, but comments were made recently by a certain Home Secretary and she needs to reflect on what she says. Those kinds of things do not help in the situation we are facing.

The events in Srebrenica have stayed with me. Indeed, they have shaped me. A few years after the genocide, I worked for the United Nations mission in Kosovo to help to rebuild the justice system and department after the war. That region of the world is personal to me. I saw the after-effects 23 years ago, when I worked in Kosovo. That is part of the reason why I have dedicated so much of my work to challenge hate and division, and that is why I set up the all-party parliamentary group on Srebrenica, with the help of Baroness Sayeeda Warsi.

After the holocaust, we said “Never again”, yet what happened in Srebrenica proved that words are not enough—they must be met with action. As we approach the 28th anniversary of this harrowing tragedy, we must all come together to unite and reaffirm our commitment to challenging hate, wherever and whenever it arises, and to take actions so that things like Srebrenica never happen again.

9.48 am

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Robert. I thank the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) and the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) for sponsoring and securing this important debate with me. It is particularly fitting that we are having this debate as the President of Bosnia is here in the UK today. I very much hope that the Prime Minister will meet him later this afternoon to show the UK's steadfast commitment to Bosnia.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) said, we are here to commemorate; this is not a debate, but an occasion for us all to share our words of continued support for our friends. We remember the Srebrenica genocide and we pay our respects to the 8,000 men and boys who were murdered in cold blood by Bosnian Serb forces in 1995. They were massacred because of the ruthless ambition of Milošević and his cronies, men's dreams of a greater Serbia and the hatred that lived in their hearts.

The memory of those who were stolen will never be forgotten, but the trauma of what women and those who survived went through remains today. That trauma reminds us why the region matters to us. It is not a region where people have forgotten and moved on. It is a region where people live, on a daily basis, waking up and knowing that they are not saying good morning to 27 or 28 members of their family.

The United Kingdom is the only country outside Bosnia and Herzegovina that commemorates this and has an official remembrance service, and I am so proud of that. This is the second year running that we have held this debate. That demonstrates our eternal commitment to remembering the victims, but I share the concerns of my hon. Friend's concerns about the lack of funding for Remembering Srebrenica. We would never consider cutting funding to the organisations that commemorate the holocaust. Srebrenica is a genocide that took place in Europe, and people still live with it and remember it. It is a shame that a DLUHC Minister is not here to hear those comments, because that decision is absolutely wrong.

Anthony Mangnall: It is worth putting on the record the fact that funding has been cut from £200,000 to £100,000, so we are not asking for a great deal to ensure we debate this issue. It should come as a bit of a surprise that the funding cut has come at the same time as the Secretary of State's office is being done up at the cost of £1 million.

Alicia Kearns: My hon. Friend's point stands for itself. He has my wholehearted support.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I am delighted that so many people across the House are making the case for appropriately funding Remembering Srebrenica, but it is slightly worse than has been indicated: the funding was not just cut but did not materialise for a long time. I want to thank the right hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark), who, in the brief period in which he was a Secretary of State, intervened to make the payment this time last year. The charity was relying on its reserves at that point. On a cross-party basis, we need to keep this story alive, support the charity and make sure its funding is not cut again. We need to be able to tell the stories, so the funding has to be increased to the previous level, and it needs to be provided in a timely manner.

Alicia Kearns: I agree entirely. Remembering Srebrenica does not just commemorate; as the right hon. Gentleman said, it tells stories to educate, and there has never been a more important time to educate people about what happened to the Balkans. I will come on to that point shortly.

We cannot discuss Srebrenica without discussing the Mothers of Srebrenica, who went through the most unimaginable loss. Their dignity and humanity are frankly astonishing, and their bravery and forgiveness are an example to us all, although when I meet them I struggle to understand the forgiveness they embrace in their daily lives. I wish I could take with me some of the power that they have in the way they express themselves.

After the Srebrenica genocide, two words were spoken around the world: never again. That was a sacred promise never again to allow innocent civilians to be displaced, raped, tortured and murdered, yet that is what we see in Xinjiang and Ukraine, and that is what I fear for the Balkans again. We secured international peace through the Dayton agreement, which was not easy or perfect—it locked in many of the ethnic divisions that we wish we could have eradicated—but it was preferable to war. For the past 28 years, it has represented peace.

Now Dayton and, by extension, peace are once again at risk in the Balkans. We once again see the cynical ambitions of Milošević's cronies, dreams of greater Serbia and hatred in the hearts of leaders in that region. If we allow Dayton to be broken, we risk breaking that sacred promise. When we say, “Never again”, we mean it. That is what we need to see, but I fear the Government are repeating some of the mistakes of the 1990s, when our foreign policy was centred on Belgrade. A Belgrade-centric foreign policy will not work in the Balkans. An obsession with keeping Serbia on side, no matter what it does and regardless of its actions, intentions and words, does not work.

Regardless of our failure, we must stand strong. Not only did Serbia recently not stand with us on Ukraine, but it signed a foreign policy agreement with Putin in

[Alicia Kearns]

September. Why are we desperately running around behind somebody who embraces autocracy day after day? It is our democratic partners living up to the commitments we set that are vulnerable. We asked Bosnia and Kosovo to be democratic, follow EU accession and move towards NATO accession. They are doing that, yet we punish them with no punishment for Serbia. I will come on to that shortly, but we are currently being found wanting in deterrence diplomacy.

Milorad Dodik—I hesitate to call him the President of Republika Srpska—has made clear his intention to break the Dayton agreement and threaten the sovereignty of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Although he has always been prone to exaggeration and theatre, his recent actions have unfortunately demonstrated meaningful intent. In the last two weeks, he has rejected the Office of the High Representative and the Constitutional Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina, saying that their judgments do not apply to all of Bosnia. Dodik is issuing the first direct challenge to almost 30 years of peace, and he plans to test the Dayton agreement over the coming year. We must make sure that he is not able to do that and that we stand firm.

Part of the reason why Dodik is lashing out is because he is desperate. The sanctions placed on him by the UK and the United States are biting, and I thank the Government for listening and putting in place a sanctions regime when we asked for it. Public servants and Republika Srpska will soon be protesting outside his office, because he promised pay rises five months ago that have not come. The fact that he can no longer raise money on the London stock exchange—another important UK diplomatic effort—means that he is getting desperate, but now I want the EU to withhold funds from Dodik. I want the EU to join us in sanctioning Dodik and fellow secessionists. France and Germany have taken some moderate, unilateral steps, but we need to take action together.

Dodik has shouted to anyone who would listen over the last few years about his relationships with Putin and Xi Jinping, which is why it is important that the Prime Minister meets the President of Bosnia today to show that we stand with democratic allies. What has happened in Ukraine, combined with Russia's weakness and clear lack of strategy and foreign ability, has made Dodik more dangerous. Russia may seek to open a separate front in Europe, and the reality is that Dodik acts as a stooge to give Putin a chance of distraction. A war in Bosnia and Herzegovina would serve no one but Putin, and Dodik should know that if he dances to Putin's tune, he is likely to end up in The Hague, just as Radovan Karadžić and others did.

Anthony Mangnall: I apologise for intervening, because my hon. Friend is making an excellent speech, using her expertise as the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee. We must be absolutely unequivocal in Parliament and within the UK Government that we will not tolerate the undermining of Dayton or the redrawing of any part of Bosnia and Herzegovina's borders. Can she make sure that, in her role as Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, she makes that point to the Government and, indeed, to the Prime Minister when she is in the Liaison Committee this afternoon?

Alicia Kearns: It is so important that if I make that point, I do so with the whole support of the House, so I thank hon. Members for attending today's debate, because it gives me the ability to speak up and say that it is not just me saying this; the whole House wants to see this.

It is our job to make sure that we create the circumstances in which reckless decisions cannot be taken by Dodik and others. We must wrap Bosnia and Herzegovina in a protective blanket to make sure that the Balkans do not experience war again. The Government must rejoin the European Union force. Chile, Turkey and other countries that are not in Europe are part of EUFOR, and we must rejoin it. As a signatory to the Dayton peace agreement, a member of the Peace Implementation Council and a UN Security Council permanent member, we have a responsibility to stand by Bosnia, but that is not enough to guarantee peace.

We know that Russia holds a veto over EUFOR. Every single year, we in this place wait and see whether Putin will decide to act in the interests of peace or to support the idea of sovereignty through violence. So far, he has renewed the mandate, but this is not sustainable. Putin could refuse to renew it at any time, and we do not have the UN mandate in place to block him militarily. The Government need to work with allies to commit to a NATO military presence in key areas across Bosnia and Herzegovina, particularly the Brčko district, which Dodik has plainly said in the last weeks that he will take by force if he has the opportunity. That is a legally mandated right in the Dayton agreement, and it would send a firm message that Bosnia's territorial sovereignty is not up for debate and will not be taken by force. By joining EUFOR now and transitioning to a NATO-led peacekeeping mission, we can play our role in maintaining peace in Bosnia. We cannot afford to be reactive when peace is at stake.

I want to place on the record my personal commitment to the Office of the High Representative, which is the ultimate arbiter of peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Attacks against the office and role are designed to weaken the foundations of peace. This does not mean that we cannot criticise or critique individual decisions by the High Representative, but we must protect the institution itself, and I fear that Russian and secessionist propaganda are succeeding in undermining its role in Parliaments across Europe. As a House, we must stand behind that vital institution, because if the worst were to happen and we fail to live up to our sacred promise of "Never again", there will be violence, not just in Bosnia, but across the Balkans.

Kosovo is critical, and the United Kingdom has a unique responsibility there. We need to call a spade a spade. What is currently happening in Kosovo is a result of foreign interference by Belgrade 18 months ago, when it committed foreign interference in Kosovo's domestic elections. Belgrade told Kosovo Serbs not to participate in the elections. The elections were fair and free but did not have the attendance or participation that we wanted because Vučić told Kosovo Serbs not to take part.

If we then fast forward, we see mayors trying to take up their electoral positions, and the response is that western countries—the EU and the US worst of all—attack Kosovo for wanting to uphold the rights of mayors to go into their offices to do their job. We then saw a brutal

attack by a Belgrade-backed, funded and armed militia on KFOR, with 26 military officers being severely wounded or hospitalised. The response was to criticise Kosovo: “How dare Kosovo have created this situation!” We know, however, that it was Belgrade-funded militias, and the situation was ultimately created by Belgrade when it said, “Do not participate in the elections.”

Worse still, we then saw Serbian counter-terrorism police go on to Kosovan territory and illegally kidnap—kidnap is always illegal under international law, yet apparently our allies did not recognise that—three Kosovan police officers, who were taken to Serbia. That is not allowed; it breaches all international law and specific agreements reached between Serbia and Kosovo. Finally, there was a response and we saw some balance: “Belgrade and Pristina must work to normalise, calm down and de-escalate.” However, Serbia was at fault, and there was no calling-out of the fact that it was arbitrary and illegal detention.

When Kosovo called on its mayors to take up their positions in the mayoral offices there was a great deal of response by the US Government. The US Government said, “Right, Kosovo, you are no longer allowed to participate in a scheduled military exercise. We will no longer help you to be recognised by other countries. Good luck to you—you are not welcome in DC.” When Serbia kidnapped three Kosovan police officers, there was no punishment. In fact, Serbia took part in a military exercise with the US only a week later while the Kosovan police officers were still being held illegally. What message does that send to Kosovo, a democratic ally that has stood with and supported us on Ukraine, and done everything that we have asked of it? There were significant punishments from the US and the EU, which have now introduced sanctions against Kosovo, but nothing for Serbia.

When Serbia finally released the three police officers, it told Viktor Orbán in Hungary first and allowed him to announce it. I say to the EU, what message does it send when Victor Orbán is the person chosen by Serbia to send those messages? It is a failure of deterrence diplomacy and it is a disproportionate and unbalanced approach. The UK has an independent voice within the quint and the international arena to say no to the EU and the US. We can say to them, “You will allow us to take part in the peace talks in Kosovo, and you will not continue to take the approach that you currently are, because all you are doing is enabling the autocrats and, frankly, hitting our democratic allies with a stick.”

That is why the security picture is so severe. For too long we have failed to call out the armed Serb militias operating in the north of Kosovo. The Government are well aware, with the Fusiliers having only just returned from serving in KFOR, that there are weapons being smuggled across the border from Serbia into Orthodox churches in ambulances. When our troops become aware of that, and try to get permission to go and get them, the permissions take too long. By the time there is permission—quelle surprise—an ambulance has turned up at the church and taken all the weapons out again.

I will touch briefly on our export policies towards Serbia. I am gravely concerned about the fact that we are selling small armaments to Serbia. Given that the counter-terrorism police there carried out attacks and kidnapped three Kosovan police officers, how do we

know that nothing we have sold to Serbia is being used in that context? I urge that a handbrake be put on all export sales to Serbia.

I call on the Government to make it clear that the United Kingdom stands by Kosovo’s territorial sovereignty and democracy. To do that, we need to expand KFOR’s mandate to ensure a more proactive approach to countering weapon smuggling and militias north of Kosovo. We need to ensure fairness and take the action required to operate a meaningful policy of deterrence diplomacy.

It is a critical moment in the Balkans. As we watched the cold-blooded murders of innocent Bosnians in 1995 we made a promise: never again. The Government must now wake up, take the initiative and ensure that sacred promise is honoured. They must recognise that the power to deter sits in this House and at King Charles Street. We can do this. I therefore urge the Government: let us rejoin EUFOR, let us commit NATO peacekeepers to Brčko district, let us transition to a NATO-led peacekeeping mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina, let us allow KFOR to take the front foot in anti-militia and anti-weapons smuggling operations in the north of Kosovo and finally, let us implement a more even-handed approach to Kosovo that prioritises the protection of Kosovan sovereignty and democracy.

I thank everyone who has spoken today, and I am grateful for being given the time to make those points. I will conclude by returning to the commemoration of all those who were massacred during the Srebrenica genocide. Their memory can never be forgotten, because this was a genocide in Europe and on European soil. It is a genocide that still marks our future, and my children’s future could still potentially be shaped by the actions that took place at that time. It is important we do everything we can in Parliament to take more people to Bosnia and Herzegovina. When you go, that country gets into your heart and your soul. I do not know how to describe it; I do not know how to find the words. I will take another delegation of the Bosnia APPG next year, so I encourage all hon. Members to tell me who to reach out to.

Yasmin Qureshi: On the hon. Lady’s point about visiting the Srebrenica genocide memorial and how that affects people, I went there with a couple of my members of staff, and I have to say that they were so impacted by it. My office manager does not travel much and she started crying when she was there. She is a quite a hardened soul and I could see how much of an impact it had on her. I just wanted to confirm how going there impacts people.

Alicia Kearns: I thank the hon. Lady. I remember that my first visit to Srebrenica was with former British serving members of special forces who had not returned there since they had served in Bosnia. I saw the trauma in their faces, the pain and the knowing in them that there is a risk that violence could once more return to the places where they had hidden in a dugout for 10 days and seen children shot in the street by those who had hatred in their hearts. I took away from that experience that we could never ever allow that.

I thank the Mothers of Srebrenica and Remembering Srebrenica for all they do. I also thank the Backbench Business Committee for giving us the time to discuss this matter. When we say “Never again”, we must mean it. The risk, if we do not, is far too great.

10.7 am

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Robert. It is also a pleasure to follow the Chairperson of the Foreign Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns). I thank her for her passion and wisdom on these matters. I also thank the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) for making sure that we secured this important commemoration. This is the first time I have been in Westminster Hall since 2017; while I was leader of the SNP, I was not permitted to be here. It is nice to be back, and to participate in something this important.

For many years, there has been a strong tradition of the third party in the House giving particular focus and priority to international causes and campaigns. In my years as the SNP's Westminster leader, I was proud to follow that tradition, and my office continues to make an effort to engage with and reach out to international organisations and individuals who need and deserve the attention of the House of Commons. With all my experience of those organisations, though, I have no hesitation in saying that Remembering Srebrenica has been one of the most impressive and inspiring. That is why we need to take responsibility for funding the organisation appropriately.

Ever since I was elected as an MP, I have been lucky to enjoy a close working relationship with the dedicated volunteers involved in organising educational events, and events that commemorate the massacre. We must never forget, and never again should the events that we witnessed in 1995 happen on European soil. We Members of Parliament have an obligation to keep this alive, educate people and, yes, take action, as we need to now, to support our friends—our comrades—in that part of Europe.

Year after year, the work of the charity in Parliament and in communities right across these islands has made a real difference. Its work has never been more relevant. The long association that I have been lucky to have with the charity is why I am genuinely honoured to be one of its patrons. Over the past number of years, it has given me the opportunity to meet survivors of the genocide. I come away with paradoxical feelings from those very poignant meetings. On the one hand, you are faced with the raw reality of man's inhumanity, and an awareness of how it once again showed its terrible face in the acts of genocide in the Bosnian conflict, and most especially in Srebrenica. However, the other end of the human experience is equally on show in those meetings, as these survivors are the perfect demonstration of resilience, healing and, ultimately, hope. That is because despite all that they have suffered, they are still prepared to believe in and work for a world beyond the horrors that they were born into. That spirit is the essence of what makes the charity so powerful.

There can be few better examples of the grassroots movement than Remembering Srebrenica. A brief look at what it has achieved tells its own story. Since 2013, it has created a vibrant network in every part of these islands, helped by eight regional English boards, and by national boards in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. During that time, with its modest resources, it has educated no fewer than 180,000 young people about Srebrenica. It has also enabled more than 10,000 community actions to take place right across these islands each

year, and created 1,450 community champions, each of them pledging to stand up to hatred and intolerance in their community.

The charity is not alone in its work, which is about a necessary and respectful remembrance of the past. It is making a positive contribution to shaping all our futures, which is why we should support it. Through its remembrance work, it ensures that prejudice does not take root in any of our communities. I am delighted that that ongoing mission is reflected in its theme for this year, which is "Together we are one". That is a powerful message, but it is also a mission for building peace and reconciliation.

Of course, that theme is perfect for Bosnia and Herzegovina, which, as we heard, is renowned for being a melting pot of cultures and identities—a place where Muslims, Christians and Jews, among others, have lived side by side for centuries. Sarajevo is rightly known as the Jerusalem of Europe, being the only European city to have a mosque, a Catholic church, an Orthodox church and a synagogue in the same neighbourhood. We all know just how badly this theme, and a focus on genuine community building, nation building and peacebuilding, is needed right now. More than anything else, this charity understands that remembrance and commemoration is not a passive act. Instead, it is a determination that the horrors of the past will never be repeated. There is so much that we need to remember; if we fail to remember it, it can be, and sadly will be, repeated.

Of course, we remember the 100,000 Muslims who were murdered in Bosnia. I repeat: 100,000 Muslims were murdered in Europe in living memory. We also remember the displacement of 2 million people, and the genocidal rape of up to 50,000 women, simply because of their Muslim identity. That happened in Europe in living memory, and 28 years on, the horror remains as raw as ever. That rawness is exactly why we must remember. In this commemoration, we are all very conscious that we are remembering those horrific events of 28 years ago. Sadly, violence, repression and war have returned to Europe. We had hoped that we would never see such things again in our lifetime, but sadly they are here again. War is again scarring our continent and our people. As we remember Srebrenica, our thoughts are ever with the people of Ukraine and the suffering that has been inflicted on them.

I want especially to say this: after the horrors of Srebrenica, the International Criminal Court was rightly the forum where those who inflicted the genocide were prosecuted and sentenced. All of us need to ensure that the war crimes in Ukraine, and the war criminal in the Kremlin who is sanctioning them, are brought before The Hague too. That is the justice that needs to be done, and the justice that the Ukrainian people deserve.

Dominic Raab (Esher and Walton) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman is giving a very good speech. He is talking really about the modern-day relevance to us of having staying power in Ukraine. I remember, as a young Foreign Office lawyer, negotiating the UN-UK sentence enforcement agreement for the Balkans in 2004. We had to wait until 2021 for Radovan Karadžić to be sentenced and transferred to a UK jail. Does he agree that we will need to show the same strategic patience in Ukraine and the other areas of the world still haunted by genocide?

Ian Blackford: I am saddened to say that the right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. The lesson from Bosnia for what we are witnessing in Ukraine, and the message to us and every one of our allies, is that we have to be in this for the long haul. We must leave no stone unturned in our support for the Ukrainian people, so that they can defeat the aggressor on their shore. That message about the lessons, and the sense of responsibility that we all have, must go out. I rue the fact that we cannot do more. And yes, my God, those responsible must be held to account for their crimes against humanity.

I thank the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton, for shining a light on what is going on in Bosnia and Herzegovina. There has been an increase in tensions there since 2021, and we must remain vigilant to preserve peace and stability. There must be no return to conflict. The EU has doubled its peacekeeping forces since the Russian invasion of Ukraine. I regret that, the UK having left the EU, we are not part of that peacekeeping effort. There must be a UK-EU security pact, so that we can work together and assist in negotiations.

I will conclude on this point. Despite all the lessons of history, we still far too often forget what we need to remember. Grassroots charities such as Remembering Srebrenica can help political leaders to do so much better. They can keep at the forefront of our mind the consequences of conflict, and stop us ever again going down the path that leads to the inhumanities and outrages that were inflicted on the people of Srebrenica. Those charities not only deserve but need our support. The UK Government have to go the extra mile in fully funding Remembering Srebrenica. I hope that all of us live up to the need to provide that support in the coming months and years.

10.18 am

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): It is a humbling experience to listen to colleagues' contributions, and to speak in this debate. I was 12 when Srebrenica happened. One of my earliest memories of the news is of watching the news about Srebrenica with my mum, who was completely glued to it, and who tried to explain the horrors of what was happening to us children. Not long after that, I visited the fields of world war two in France on a school trip, and the graves of my ancestors—my gran's uncles—who were killed in that conflict.

I would very much like to take up the offer made by the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns). Bearing witness is one of the most important things that we can do, not just as parliamentarians, but as human beings. I thank the Backbench Business Committee and particularly the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi), as well as the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), for supporting this debate and bringing to life the importance of not just bearing witness and remembering, but taking those lessons forward. As many have said, given the war crimes that Russia is visiting on the people of Ukraine, and what is being done in Myanmar, China and Ethiopia, the sad reality is that we do not appear to be learning the lessons of Srebrenica, and of the past.

The hon. Member for Bolton South East made a number of points about the genocide that hit home. It was neighbours against neighbours, and friends against

friends. My right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber spoke, as did others, about the melting pot of cultures in Bosnia and Herzegovina—Muslims, Christians and Jews, among others, were working and living together in peace. That is the kind of society that we should all aspire to live in. The hon. Member for Bolton South East spoke about the dangers of othering minority groups. I have to say that in the UK Parliament, in 2023, we see some of that, directed against minority groups across the UK and beyond. Sadly, we see imported bigotry and hatred coming across the pond from the US, and seeping into the media in the UK. We must draw the line, and understand that what is happening today is potentially a repeat of what has happened in the past. We must all be alive to that. She also spoke about the diversity of the communities involved.

The hon. Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall), who is not in his place any more, intervened to point out how vital preventive funding is, and how important the full implementation of the Magnitsky principles is, as many of us said, to quell money laundering, which fuels dictators. The hon. Member for Rutland and Melton made the important point that there are murderous dictators across the world. We must be alive to that, and take real action on it.

We should provide proper funding. My right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber spoke about the importance of the grassroots charity Remembering Srebrenica, and about the work that he has done with it. That will strike a chord with many. If we pull funding from such organisations, we run the risk of not properly educating the next generation, who will not remember the images on the television; for them, the events will not be real. He talked about the 180,000 people who have been educated through Remembering Srebrenica. The hon. Member for Rutland and Melton was reminded, in an intervention, of the cut in funding from £200,000 to £100,000. I hope that the Minister hears that.

We have a proud history of this kind of work, not just in Scotland but across the UK. Between 1992 and 1996, during the conflict in Bosnia, the Scottish Refugee Council evacuated around 400 Bosnian refugees, and opened a reception centre in Scotland; the refugees were welcomed into our communities, and across the UK. I say gently to the Minister that we must reflect on the work done then, and why that work must continue for those fleeing conflict who seek refuge.

The SNP would like the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to publish a new cross-departmental strategy on preventing mass atrocities. That new strategy should be implemented in consultation with civil society and relevant experts. I pay tribute to all those who briefed us for this debate, and who work in this area, but they can do that work only if they are properly funded, and if we engage with them fully. We should also clarify what training tools and methods can be used to prevent atrocities, including the UK's new sanctions regime. The hon. Member for Rutland and Melton talked about that; she speaks with authority as Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee. We need to demonstrate and formalise how the UK will act in concert with like-minded international partners, particularly the United States.

[Hannah Bardell]

We want the introduction of a new atrocity prevention toolkit that provides day-to-day guidance for those at UK posts and desks. It would support them in raising the alarm in a crisis. From my work on deaths abroad, I know about the challenges that our consular and embassy staff face. I have worked in a foreign mission for the US, and have seen the importance of the work that foreign missions do. We need to make sure that our staff on the ground are fully funded and trained, so that they can raise the alarm and can work with international partners.

Alicia Kearns: Before my election, I lobbied the Government to create an atrocity prevention centre. They have now done so, and we have the conflict centre—I do not mind the different name, as long as it does the work. It is doing some really interesting work, particularly on Ukraine. The point is that the desk officer for Mongolia has no training on what to do if they start to see the signs of genocide or ethnic cleansing—for example, if they see controls that could escalate put on ways of life or on language. It is really important that the centre is fully activated, so that when an officer anywhere in the world has the slightest inkling that something is happening, they can go to the centre, which can say, “This is how we bring in the multilaterals, and how we produce sanctions. This is the conflict, stability and security fund programme that we can put in place.” That is not happening yet, so we need to make sure that the centre is fully embraced.

Hannah Bardell: That is an incredibly powerful point. It is easy for Opposition Members to criticise, and to say, “This needs to be done better, and we need more money.” The truth is that we have a genuine desire to get into the detail of how consular officers are trained and funded, how the work is done, and how we ensure that the centre and its resources are available, as the hon. Member says, because that is the first line of defence in many situations.

I will not detain the Chamber any longer, because we have important Front-Bench speeches to come. I simply say: together we are one, and working on that is incredibly important. We must make sure that this generation and the next not only learn the lessons but put them into action, so that we can change the narrative. As I said at the beginning of my contribution, a tide of increased funding for the right wing is seeping into our media. If we want to be international leaders and set an international example, we must get our house in order.

10.27 am

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Sir Robert. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) for securing this important debate, and I thank Members from across the House for this thoughtful and considered debate, in which important views have been expressed. There has been unity in remembering the genocide and wanting to learn its lessons for today. I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Putney (Fleur Anderson), and for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan), for their interventions.

We heard strong speeches from the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns), and from the right hon.

Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford). They talked about not only what happened, but what is needed today across the western Balkans. This House is at its best when we speak with one voice and in defence of core values. Despite political differences, we all share the values of democracy and stability, a commitment to preventing conflict and atrocities, and the defence of fundamental human rights.

I want to re-emphasise the words of the Leader of the Opposition, who said that we need to use Srebrenica Memorial Day

“and the memory of Srebrenica to not only remember those we have lost but to educate...future generations, bring our communities together and renew our efforts to tackle hatred and prejudice wherever they lie.”

Heeding those words is integral to forging a lasting peace in the western Balkans. I want to emphasise that that is a priority for me and our team, and would be for a future Labour Government. So too would be resolutely standing up for Dayton, and standing against those who would seek to undermine it.

I have visited the region extensively in the past and continue to engage with the views and perspectives of people across Bosnia to understand how we better promote dialogue and ensure regional security. We will be taking part in meetings this week. The shadow Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), is meeting the President of Bosnia today to listen directly to him.

I recognise the significance of the historic role that the UK and its armed forces played in working to secure a stable Bosnia and stability across the western Balkans more generally. The horrors of the 1990s are ingrained in the mind of many people across the country and across the House, particularly our armed forces personnel who served, such as members of my own family. I have visited Srebrenica, and I have met Remembering Srebrenica and Mothers of Srebrenica, which was one of the most profound experiences I have had while a Member of the House. Owing to my past career, I have engaged with many people who suffered in war and conflict and in horrific situations, but visiting the factory at Potočari, visiting the memorial, and in particular meeting a survivor of my own age, was a profound experience.

I remember the week the massacres happened. I was on a beach in west Wales with my friends, having a wonderful time during a holiday from school—my first trip away from home. The survivor of my own age whom I met told me that he was loaded into the back of a truck, and that all the other men in the truck were shot; he survived among a pile of bodies, rolled into a ditch and, heavily wounded, managed to escape into the forest. He has never forgotten not only the tragic loss of his family and friends, but the terrible experience he had. For me, there was such a stark contrast between my holiday and the war and the atrocities that were happening just over a thousand miles away in our own continent. Today, I think of the horrors we are seeing in Ukraine. I will never forget my visit, and I thank Remembering Srebrenica, Mothers of Srebrenica and all those who seek to educate us and warn us of those experiences.

Hannah Bardell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that incredibly powerful contribution. I have been a member of the Council of Europe for nearly six years, and one

of the Council's most powerful events was Mothers of Srebrenica talking to us and sharing their experiences. I am proud that we continue to be members of the Council of Europe and proud that the Council continues to support that work.

Stephen Doughty: I absolutely agree, and we should reflect not only on those who were murdered during the atrocities, but on those who suffered terrible sexual violence and rape, who have rightly been mentioned. We must remember that utterly horrific history.

This year's campaign theme for Remembering Srebrenica is "Together We Are One", and we need to highlight the fact that the conditions for genocide are built on a climate and a culture that allow hatred and extremism to breed, resulting in the dividing and fracturing of communities in this country, across Europe and across the world. We know that flourishing hatred and extremism can escalate from inflammatory rhetoric to attacks, persecution and, indeed, extermination, as we have seen in Bosnia, Rwanda, Ukraine and so many other conflicts around the world. We must combat that divisive rhetoric by focusing on the things that unite us as one.

I think of our dear friend and much missed colleague, Jo Cox, whom we have remembered in recent weeks. In our past careers with Oxfam, Jo and I worked on issues related to the terrible atrocities in Darfur, and here in Parliament we worked on issues related to Syria. The message that we have more in common and that we must work together is critical, and we must reflect on it.

The remains of more than 1,000 victims of Srebrenica are still unaccounted for. We must support families and others achieve a lasting closure, so I welcome the important identification work that is being done.

The war in Bosnia resulted in close to 100,000 civilians being killed, 2 million forced displacements and, as many colleagues have mentioned, the systematic rape of up to 50,000 women because of their ethnic and religious identity. If we fail to learn the lessons of atrocity prevention and, indeed, of investigating, prosecuting and bringing to justice those responsible, we will have made a grave mistake. Again, I think of Ukraine and what we need to learn in relation to that terrible situation.

Today, we see forces across Europe, and indeed across the western Balkans, seeking to sow disharmony, spread acrimony and stir up tensions. I pay tribute to the work of our envoy, Lord Peach, and of the EU's High Representative in Bosnia, Christian Schmidt, who worked to prevent a return to the atrocities of the past. The work of the High Representative continues to warn of the real prospect of a return to conflict in the region. We have heard about the behaviour of Milorad Dodik, and indeed Russian attempts to aggravate already tense political circumstances.

On Saturday, we saw the High Representative annul two laws that the Bosnian Serb Parliament had adopted but that defied the constitution and the terms of the peace deal that ended the war in the 1990s. The High Representative concluded that:

"Recent decisions by the National Assembly of Republika Srpska directly violate the constitutional order of Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Dayton peace agreement".

It is crucial that the Government work with the High Representative and, through Lord Peach, support his efforts to prevent a return to the darkness of the past.

Will the Minister outline what support we are giving the High Representative and what recent meetings Lord Peach has had with him, given the importance of maintaining the integrity of Bosnia's institutions, particularly after recent events?

Let me be clear that those seeking to undermine stability in Bosnia must face consequences. We will continue to support the targeted measures that the Government have introduced, including sanctions. I would be grateful if the Minister set out her assessment of the effectiveness of the sanctions levelled to date. What discussions has she had with officials across the western Balkans on how we can exert further diplomatic pressure on those who are attempting to undermine the Dayton agreement and the constitutional settlement in Bosnia?

Will the Minister also say a little about outside attempts to influence the situation? We know that Dodik and Putin, and many of their aiders and abettors, share the same goals: they want to strengthen the Serbian-Russian alliances, extend Russian influence in the Balkans, block Bosnia from securing membership of the European Union and NATO and undermine the legitimacy of state institutions that have preserved the delicate balance of peace. We see huge Russian disinformation operations in the region, including in Bosnia and Serbia, and of course Kosovo and elsewhere, which the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton, the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, mentioned. Does the Minister share those concerns? What are we doing to support local partners to combat disinformation and all those seeking to undermine stability and peace? Will she respond to the comments that were made about military support in the region, where that is from NATO, the EU forces, or directly from UK armed forces, and say what steps we are taking both to ensure stability now and to prepare for the situation worsening?

Today, let us reflect on Srebrenica, the lives lost and how the aggravation of ethnic tensions led to appalling evil that should never be forgotten or repeated. There are those who still deny the scale of the atrocities that occurred in the war in Bosnia and those who have avoided justice. One of the most powerful ways to hold those individuals to account is to remember Srebrenica, pay tribute to the lives lost, tell victims' stories and ensure that the future does not come to replicate the past.

Once again, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East for bringing forward this debate, and all hon. Members for their thoughtful and powerful contributions.

10.37 am

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): I thank the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) for securing this debate. I pay tribute to her work as the co-chair of the APPG for Srebrenica.

What happened in Srebrenica was one of the worst atrocities to take place in Europe since the end of the second world war. As all hon. Members have said, we must never forget it, and we must continue to learn the lessons from it. I know that the Minister for Europe would have been pleased to be here to reply to this debate, but he is travelling abroad. I am conscious that I can never do these appalling events justice by setting out our perspectives and the efforts we make in response

[Anne-Marie Trevelyan]

to, but it is an honour to reply on this debate on behalf of the Government and to reiterate our collective horror at genocide and all that we will continue to do to keep that front and centre.

I am very grateful to all the hon. Members who have contributed to today's discussion and will do my best to respond to the points raised. Hon. Members have highlighted the continuing educational work of the charity Remembering Srebrenica, which does incredibly important and effective work. I can confirm to hon. Members that FCDO officials are in contact with DLUHC on the questions of funding, so I will ask the Minister for Europe to update colleagues when he is able to do so. My hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns) raised a number of important questions on the issues of export controls to Serbia and whether the UK should provide support to EUFOR. I assure hon. Members again that we will respond in a timely manner on those issues.

The hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) asked a number of questions about Lord Peach's activities and meetings. I do not have the answers to those questions, but I will ensure that we provide full answers to him and other Members in due course.

This week is the commemoration of the Srebrenica genocide, in which, as colleagues have said, more than 8,000 people were murdered and more than 20,000 were driven from their homes. We honour the memory of those killed and we pay tribute to the extraordinary courage and resilience shown by their families and by survivors. We stand with those families in their ongoing fight for justice. I am proud that the UK is one of the few countries that commemorate the genocide at national level, due to the commendable work of Remembering Srebrenica UK. I confirm that the Minister for the Armed Forces will be hosting the national Srebrenica Memorial Day ceremony this evening at Lancaster House.

As we consider the events of 28 years ago, our thoughts must turn to the current situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina. We have seen real progress since 1995 and many years of reform. Politicians across the country, including those from Republika Srpska, have worked together to create important institutions, including the armed forces and the tax authorities. The new state-level Council of Ministers has demonstrated energy and commitment to making further progress, recognising that reforms are required to strengthen democratic processes, to tackle corruption and to bring economic benefits to all the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The European Union's decision to award candidate status in December 2022 has given important impetus to those efforts. The UK stands behind the Council of Ministers. We will use all the diplomatic, defence and economic tools at our disposal to support Bosnia and Herzegovina's progress towards the strong, stable and prosperous future to which its people aspire and which they deserve.

It is regrettable that we continue to see divisive and dangerous nationalist rhetoric, threats of secession and open challenges to the constitutional order established by the Dayton peace agreement. The UK is committed to a single sovereign Bosnia and Herzegovina and we will continue to take action in support of that. We welcome and fully support the High Representative's

actions on 1 July, including his decision to prevent the Republika Srpska legislation that represented a flagrant attack on Dayton and the constitutional order that it created. The High Representative's executive powers remain a crucial tool for protecting the sovereignty of Bosnia and Herzegovina, strengthening the rule of law and advancing stability and judicial independence. Those people who perpetrate instability and undermine peace do not speak for the whole of Bosnia and Herzegovina. There are many Bosnians who want to build a more inclusive and cohesive society, one that leaves the divisions of the past behind. The UK supports them and will continue to those efforts.

We work in partnership with the Srebrenica Memorial Centre to develop its operational capacities. With our support, it is establishing itself as a world-leading centre for research into preventing genocide and a hub for reconciliation and inter-ethnic dialogue across the region. The British ambassador to Sarajevo will represent the Government at the annual commemoration at Srebrenica on 11 July.

We are supporting organisations in Mostar to bring citizens together and to create public spaces that are accessible and welcoming to all. We are helping the city to develop sustainably so that all its citizens can prosper in the long term. As well as helping to create inclusive, physical spaces, we are also assisting the creation of a safer and more pluralistic online and media environment; we are empowering people to recognise and object to the lies and divisive narratives that can foster hatred, and supporting independent media to create new material that challenges those insidious stories. We are bolstering the capacity of the Bosnia and Herzegovina Press Council, helping local media to lead the fight against disinformation by developing fact-checking procedures that spot it and limit its publication.

Furthermore, we are working with political parties, media and civil society organisations to decrease the use of hate speech in political discourse. When politicians seek to exploit existing divisions or drive in deeper wedges for their own gain, they are moving Bosnia and Herzegovina further away from being the safe place its citizens deserve. They are making it less stable and creating a climate of fear and instability.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton will be pleased to know that the Prime Minister hopes to meet the President later today to reiterate the sentiments and continuing commitment of the UK to these important stages of progress. Rejecting hate speech and demonstrating that commitment is only one part of building a brighter, more united Bosnia and Herzegovina and healing the fractures caused by conflict. We also continue to urge political leaders to condemn any glorification of the perpetrators of war crimes and to take action against genocide denial.

Alicia Kearns: I thank my right hon. Friend for setting out some of the areas in which the UK is investing to help Bosnia and Herzegovina to build its resistance—I recognise that that is in her brief. I remember writing the conflict, stability and security fund programme for Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2017. Unfortunately, the challenges remain, which suggests that either I did a very bad job, or the challenges were more significant than we realised.

In the list of programmes, there was very little about what we are doing to deter Belgrade. I know that that is not the Minister's area, so I cannot ask her to answer the question directly, but this goes back again to the fact that we have a Belgrade-centred western Balkans policy. When we talk about Bosnia and Kosovo, we should also talk about what we are doing to deter Belgrade. It would be helpful to understand what we are doing on that point.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: If I may, I will ask my colleague the Minister for Europe to meet the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee to discuss that in more detail. In all foreign policy and diplomacy, there is a continuum, not a fixed point. I shall ensure that that meeting is set up.

What happened at Srebrenica was unequivocally a genocide. Two international courts—the UN international criminal tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, and the International Court of Justice—have both ruled that Srebrenica was a genocide, after exhaustive legal processes. Denial of that fact only punishes the survivors and the families of the victims and keeps them from finding justice and solace. Moreover, if there is to be true and lasting reconciliation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and if Bosnians are to build a society in which everyone feels safe, welcome and able to succeed, there needs to be acknowledgment of the facts of the conflict, and willingness to accept the wounds that have been caused.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton raised the question of UK efforts on atrocity prevention more widely, in Sudan and Nigeria. I can tell the House that the mass atrocity prevention hub was launched in September, and has been developing into a central co-ordination point for Government on atrocity prevention. It has now established a number of relationships with thematic and geographic teams across the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. The hub is also working with partners to understand what best practice in atrocity prevention looks like, in order to develop centralised guidance and tools to support those teams, to build capacity and to embed atrocity prevention work. My hon. Friend raised how that can reach those working in every country, so that they have the chance to feed in, spot and be supported in the work they do across our embassies. I know the team will take that away to consider more fully.

As we reflect on a crime of the horror and magnitude of Srebrenica and the deep scars it continues to leave 28 years later, we can come to only one conclusion: we must do all we can to ensure something so terrible is

never allowed to happen again. We owe it to the victims to create societies that are stable, inclusive and cohesive, and to fight against prejudice, hatred, fear and division, wherever we find them. That is how we will show that Srebrenica will never be forgotten.

10.48 am

Yasmin Qureshi: I thank all right hon. and hon. colleagues for taking part in the debate, including those who had to go because of other parliamentary business. I also thank the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns), the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, for sharing my efforts to get this debate.

I also want to put on record my particular thanks to the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), because he might not be here for next year's commemoration, as he is stepping down. From the beginning, when he became the leader of the SNP at Westminster and I approached him about this subject, he has been an absolutely tremendous supporter. It is fair to say that he was initially the only leader at Prime Minister's Questions who would commemorate or refer to the Srebrenica genocide. I thank him from the bottom of my heart for all the support and everything he has given to the all-party parliamentary group on Srebrenica.

Ever since the fantastic Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee has been in that role, we have worked very well together. The hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) and I worked closely on another campaigning APPG—the all-party parliamentary group on hormone pregnancy tests, which dealt with Primodos. I have also worked well with my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty). When I approached the Minister for another campaign, her response was absolutely sterling and fantastic, and I thank her for replying to the debate today. I take heart from what she said about what the Government will do about what is happening in the Balkans. She also said she is looking at the funding. Remembering Srebrenica does work throughout the country, and we would not be here if its funding had not been cut over a number of years, so I hope the Minister will help it.

I am grateful to all Members for their support. As we say, it must never happen again.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Srebrenica Memorial Week.

10.51 am

Sitting suspended.

A5036 Park Lane Footbridge Replacement

11 am

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the replacement of the A5036 Park Lane footbridge.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Robert. Let me say to the Minister that if he were in my position and this matter affected his constituency, he would do exactly what I am doing today; namely, proselytising for an issue that is of deep concern to my constituents.

The A5036 is the main road leading down to the port of Liverpool. It is a very busy road, with tens of thousands of vehicles going to and fro, 24 hours a day, amounting to about 40,000 vehicles a day. That is an awful lot of vehicles. At a particular point in the cycle, at around 3 or 4 o'clock in the afternoon, there may be something like 2,500 or 2,600 vehicles going to and fro along a stretch of about 2.5 miles. There are various junctions along that stretch and one of the main ones, which is very busy in terms of interaction with pedestrians, is the Park Lane junction with Dunnings Bridge Road, which is part of the A5036.

On the corners of that junction, we have a church, a primary school, a hotel, a social services centre and some football pitches. For as long as anyone can remember, we have had a footbridge that takes people safely from one side to the other of that major road with those thousands of vehicles, 13% of which are heavy goods vehicles. However, over the years, as such infrastructure goes, the footbridge became less robust and needed to be repaired and renewed. There was an acceptance, as far back as 2017 or perhaps earlier, that the footbridge needed to be replaced and brought up to date to meet modern standards with respect to health and safety and to accessibility for disabled people using motorised units and so on.

National Highways—it was Highways England at the time—acknowledged that really needed to be done, and it came up with three options: a “do nothing” option, a “do minimum” option and a “do something” option. I will not go into them all but, in effect, the preferred option was to provide a new footbridge. Some of the land nearby would have to be purchased, possibly via compulsory purchase, and an application went in for that. Some would be purchased from the local authority, some from a private owner and some from Our Lady of Walsingham Church—the school is directly attached to the church; the road runs directly parallel to the school and the church—and that, in effect, was agreed.

As early as 18 October 2017, a public consultation was held at Our Lady of Walsingham School, and it was agreed that the preferred solution should be option B: to replace the footbridge with a modern structure, as I described. That appears to have been what was agreed. National Highways went off and, in 2022, deposited some documents in public in relation to the compulsory purchase of the land. So as late as August or September 2022, which is less than a year ago, everything was on track. There had been some delays—surprise, surprise—because of covid. However, I and everybody in the area—the thousands of people who use the footbridge every day, including hundreds of children—were quite happy that there was going to be a replacement footbridge.

In October 2022, a lorry crashed into the bridge, which had to be closed after becoming even more dangerous and even less functional. The footbridge, which for decades—as I said, as long as anyone can remember—had been on a very busy junction for pedestrian-vehicle interaction, disappeared. There is now an opportunity: the bridge has been knocked down, so that cost has already been taken into account. Let us push on and get our new bridge. Job done—everybody will be happy. I will be happy, the school will be happy, the church will be happy, the hotel will be happy and, more importantly, the residents will be happy and their children even happier, because they will not have to cross a busy road, which is three lanes wide at points. In a way, it is serendipity that the bridge was crashed into.

Having agreed that we were going to have a new bridge, National Highways decided, after the bridge had been damaged and knocked down—potentially because of costs, but I am not absolutely sure, because the cost of replacing the bridge had already been set out in its “Statement of Reasons” report of 28 September 2021, which I have before me—that it was going to rethink whether there was an alternative method of people getting across the very busy road.

I understand that National Highways is not saying that it will not replace the footbridge, but there is a terrible suspicion, rightly or wrongly, that that is the case. I am sure the Minister will appreciate—he would appreciate it if it were in his constituency, although I am not pointing my finger at him—that people are thinking, “What’s so different now, given the massive use of the bridge?” Other junctions are less challenging, but the accident rate along that stretch of road is not the best. I could talk about the figures, but I hope the Minister will take me at my word that there have been accidents along that route for a whole variety of reasons, so everyone was perplexed by the step back from replacing the bridge.

One of the suggestions as part of the options appraisal was for a pelican crossing-type thing. Everyone was a bit concerned that, on a road of that width, that would not be practical and that it would be psychologically challenging for many people, especially children and parents with prams going to the school or coming back from church. From what I can tell from the documentation, although I am happy to be corrected, the assessment was that such a crossing would have a deleterious effect on the traffic flow—in effect, we would have a junction going four ways—given the significant number of people who need to use the junction to go to school and so forth, so a bridge would be required. That is what the options appraisal said: “Let’s have the bridge, because the alternative—a pelican crossing-type scheme—would impact the free flow of traffic.” In effect, that is what the report said. Again, the case for a new bridge is fairly compelling.

Then, lo and behold, National Highways decided that it would pull away from that and begin another consultation process, which apparently may take until the end of the year. No one has been consulted in any substantive way—I think some letters have gone out—but people have not changed their minds. It is quite clear that people locally do not want a pelican crossing across a major road.

Another piece of context is that, as the Minister knows, National Highways has consulted about a potential new road through Rimrose Valley, which would effectively

replace the A5036. It is a bit more complicated than that, but in effect it would be an alternative. There is massive opposition to that, but there is obviously a recognition that the A5036 needs work doing to it in one way or another to make it more accessible to traffic, safer for pedestrians and so on, to the extent that National Highways wants to build an alternative road, which would cost the best part of £300 million and maybe £350 million, according to the latest estimates. That shows that National Highways recognises that something needs to be done.

There are all sorts of arguments about the alternatives to that, but that is not for today. Today's debate is about a bridge across an existing very busy road—one of the busiest out there, I suspect—in an area that is full of people who would use it. For the life of me I do not know why National Highways cannot just acknowledge that it has done an assessment and an analysis, it has come up with options, and it has finalised an option—a new bridge. No one can comprehend why we are in this situation. I find it very difficult to explain why there has been a step back. I suspect that if we had not had covid, the bridge would most probably be there.

Everybody is very worried. The junction appears pretty safe, but why? Because it had a footbridge, which everybody used. People very rarely cross the road, because it is a potentially very dangerous junction. I push and push that point because the number of accidents around the junction is fairly minimal. There may be collisions between cars, but collisions with people are pretty rare. That speaks volumes—it is because people used the footbridge.

There is a compelling case for the footbridge, but now we are told that it may not be built—it will go to consultation—because it is more expensive than set out in the 2021 document, which stated:

“The approximately £3.5m scheme has been allocated £1.8m funding from the Designated Funds (Integration) and £1.7m from the Capital Structures Renewals budgets for delivery of the Works.”

It seems to me that that figure has clearly gone up. I do not know what it is now; perhaps the Minister will be able to tell me. It may have gone from £3.5 million to £4 million or £4.5 million—I do not know.

However—I say this with the best intentions—I cannot be too concerned with that at this stage. We had a bridge for decades. It was safe, people felt safe, and it gave access both ways across the main road to the school and all the other facilities. It is the best way to ensure the flow of traffic, given that 40,000 vehicles a day go through the junction and, at peak time—about 3 or 4 o'clock in the afternoon—about 2,500 vehicles whip back and forth across it. That is an awful lot. I did some calculations: 2,500 or 2,600 vehicles in an hour is virtually one every second. That is a vast number of vehicles going to and fro.

That is why I am quite exercised about the bridge. I cannot understand why we cannot get on with it. Everybody accepts that there should be one. People were settled that there was going to be a new footbridge. People are concerned about their children. I do not say that to frighten anyone; that is the reality. People felt safe with the bridge that had been there for so long. The new bridge has been assessed, and that was National Highways' own plan. As far as I am aware, it has bought the land, but if it has not done so, it is available because

it has gone through the process and the land is still owned by the local authority, the church and a private owner.

There is no opposition to the proposal; quite the opposite. Will the Minister please take this back to National Highways and tell it that we have had all the assessments, options appraisals and consultations we need? Do we really have to go through this again? Do we have to wait yet again, for another six, 12 or 18 months, for a decision to be made? Everyone—me, my constituents, the school, the church—will push and push, and we will not stop until the bridge is built. I hope the Minister gets the anxiety, tension and concern of residents, who want to get this matter sorted out. Everybody will be happy if we can move it on. If we do not, the unhappiness and resentment will persist. I ask the Minister to intervene and move this matter on as soon as possible for the sake of my constituents.

11.17 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Richard Holden): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Robert. I thank the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) for securing this debate on the replacement of the A5036 Park Lane footbridge. He is absolutely right that if it were in my constituency, I would be doing exactly the same as him. I have been doing this with the A689 in my constituency; we are looking at road safety measures at Crook and various other places where we have speeding issues. He is obviously doing his job as a constituency MP absolutely to the letter.

I will make a couple of general points before I address the issues the hon. Gentleman raised. Good transport connections are key to ensuring that road users use our transport network safely. They play a crucial role in supporting productivity, innovation and economic growth across the country. We have provided a series of devolution deals to mayoral combined authorities to ensure that transport connectivity maximises economic growth and supports thriving communities. The Government are fully committed to delivering our vision of levelling up the British economy, strengthening the bonds of our cities and unlocking England's economic potential, particularly through the northern powerhouse, while ensuring that the Liverpool city region and the north of England play a key role in a resurgent economy.

As the hon. Gentleman said, the A5036 is an urban two-lane dual carriageway that widens out into three lanes at the current signal control junction at Park Lane and Park Lane West. It is the main access road to the port of Liverpool. We have had many discussions and debates about its potential. To the west of the junction, there was a pedestrian footbridge, which was the only crossing facility over the A5036 in the vicinity of the junction. As he said, it was at the heart of the community. National Highways was considering options for its removal as part of a broader look at structures that have been on our roads for decades and perhaps need upgrading or replacing. As he knows, the bridge was struck in October 2022 by an HGV, which resulted in its demolition, as it was deemed unsafe to try to patch it up.

Following that incident, the first priority of National Highways was to ensure that crossings could still be maintained on the road, so it installed a temporary, signal-controlled crossing for access to the west of the

[Mr Richard Holden]

junction, next to the existing bus stops. National Highways has now completed the replacement of this initial crossing solution, with a signal-controlled toucan crossing for cyclists and pedestrians that has enabled the removal of the traffic management measures and temporary speed limits. That is a temporary solution, but because of the volume of traffic on the road, including the number of HGVs, it has been constructed to a permanent standard. However, National Highways accepts that the current arrangements have resulted in most pedestrians taking a detour from their usual routes in order to use the new crossing.

As I said, prior to the incident, National Highways had been considering options for replacing the bridge, which was far from ideal as it was accessed by a stepped ramp that provided really poor accessibility for vulnerable users, wheelchair users, motorised wheelchair users, mums with buggies taking the kids to school and other users. In considering the permanent options, National Highways has a duty to ensure that it invests money to deliver schemes that are safe and offer value for money. However, I can assure everyone that across all its activities, National Highways' top priority, which it takes very seriously, is ensuring public safety.

As the scale of the works to replace the bridge has become clearer, the cost estimates have increased substantially, particularly when we reflect on the modern standards for access. National Highways is completing a review to assess the various options for providing a crossing point that will ensure that users can cross the road at this location safely. Junction improvements that provide signalised crossing points or a bridge are under consideration, but the full cost for those and the difference between the two will be outlined in the near future. I have had a word with National Highways and it will communicate the outcome of the review to local stakeholders within the next few months—I hope that it will be well before the end of the year—and it will also confirm timescales for the construction of any permanent solution.

Following that review, when the options with the costings have been put forward, I will be very happy to meet the hon. Member and National Highways, after they have had a preliminary meeting, to talk about any issues—if he is not happy with the solutions that National Highways comes forward with. I recognise that the outcome of the review will affect the community in Bootle, but it is right that we strive to reach a proper, long-term solution that is safe and delivers value for money. We will continue to work with National Highways to reach a solution and as it looks to communicate that in due course.

Question put and agreed to.

11.23 am

Sitting suspended.

Defibrillators: Public Access

[SIR CHARLES WALKER *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Abena Oppong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered public access to defibrillators.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Charles. I am bringing this motion before the House this afternoon to maintain the steady pressure from campaigners and parliamentarians in relation to increasing awareness of and knowledge about defibrillators in two key regards: one, where they are; and two, how to use them. This continues the fine work conducted by Members from across this House, including the members of the all-party parliamentary group on defibrillators, its chair—the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis)—and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), as well as Members of the other place.

This issue was brought home to me by the experience of my constituent, Bonnie McGhee, who works in the cardiology unit at Queen Elizabeth Hospital. Sadly, Bonnie lost her father to a cardiac arrest, but has since successfully raised funds for a defibrillator in his memory. Access to a defibrillator may have saved his life. The defibrillator that Bonnie funded is in the Clockhouse Community Centre in memory of her father, Jeffrey Anthony Mee. I think of Bonnie and her late father often, and today, they are especially in my thoughts.

In the UK, one person dies every three minutes from a heart or circulatory disease and, every year, 60,000 out-of-hospital cardiac arrests occur. Research by the National Institute for Health and Care Research found that only 8% of people suffering a heart attack outside of hospital will survive. However, the same research found that the odds of survival increase to 32% if a member of the public has access to an automated external defibrillator. If someone has access to a public defibrillator and can administer a life-saving electric shock to the heart to restore its normal rhythm, that will improve the likelihood of survival for anyone who has had a cardiac arrest.

Defibrillators represent an incredible technical advance. They are lightweight, easy to use and designed only to help and not harm the patient. The issue is not about their design but their distribution and public awareness of what they are and how to use them.

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for securing this important debate and for her excellent speech. Does she agree that community defibrillator training sessions are vital, and will she join me in thanking people such as Ryan Cawsey of St John Ambulance Cymru and Stephanie Roberts of the Gwalchmai Hotel, who make possible free defibrillator training sessions for Ynys Môn constituents?

Abena Oppong-Asare: I thank the hon. Member for her intervention, and I will come to that really important point about community training. I also thank her and agree with her comments about the charities and organisations that are already doing the groundwork to provide help and ensure that people are adequately trained.

Research from Resuscitation Council UK shows that access to AEDs is not fairly distributed across the income and ethnic distribution of England. In other words, if someone is poor and/or black, they are less likely to have access to a defibrillator, but if someone is affluent and white, they are more likely to have access. The research shows unequal access across England, with fewer in the north-east and more in London. This is a classic example of what Dr Tudor Hart called “inverse care law”, whereby people with the most needs get the least provision, and vice versa. I hope that the Minister can address that point and tell us what the Government are doing to tackle these stark examples of health inequality.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): I am grateful to the hon. Member for securing this important debate. I want to mention Lucky2BHere, a charity based on the Isle of Skye that works across Na h-Eileanan an Iar and the highlands. There are now more than 150 defibrillators across the Western Isles—my constituency—which is about the length of Wales. There is one outside my constituency office in Stornoway, which I will come back to in a second. They are outside schools, and can be accessed at all times.

The work is having to be done by volunteers, who see the great need for it. Michelle Macleod, who works in my office, collapsed in 2019 after having run a relay part of a half marathon, and it was with the help of defibrillators that her life was saved. That underscores, on a personal and an office basis, exactly how important those defibrillators are in my constituency. I congratulate the hon. Member on raising this subject, so that there is greater awareness among the public and the Government about what needs to be done.

Abena Oppong-Asare: I thank the hon. Member for making such an important contribution and Lucky2BHere for the work it is doing. I acknowledge his constituent, whose life was saved by this work. Volunteers are doing a lot of work to raise money for defibrillators. I have seen it happen in my constituency recently, where the Friends of Lesnes Abbey and Woods have raised money for defibrillators.

I welcome the Minister’s announcement that £1 million will be available for community defibrillators. I am sure that he will set out how that money will be used and what impact it will have. Otherwise, the money risks being more of a PR exercise than an exercise in serious public health policy.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for securing the debate. She was very kind to mention me earlier—I brought the Automated External Defibrillators (Public Access) Bill to the House in 2020, as most Members will know. The Government accepted the need to have defibrillators in schools, which was really good.

The person who made that happen was Mark King, whose son Oliver died in March 2011 from a cardiac arrest—he was an outstanding young man who would have gone very far in the world. There have been 4,500 AEDs placed in schools, 70,000 staff have been trained in AED awareness and 47 lives have been saved. Two of the lives saved were in my constituency, because the defibrillators were in place at the right time. I congratulate

the hon. Lady on securing the debate, and I look forward to doing even more. Perhaps the Minister can give an indication what the next steps will be.

Abena Oppong-Asare: This is not to blow his trumpet, but I thank the hon. Member for the work he has done on the issue and for the important points that he just highlighted.

Let me go back to my point about the Minister’s announcement of the £1 million that will be available for community defibrillators. I have questions about the timing of the announcement, just a few days ahead of this debate. What will the method of distribution be for the roll-out? I am concerned that Ministers will pitch community groups against one another in a cruel competition to see who wins. The danger is that the winners are either the best organised or have the loudest voices, or else are favoured in the eyes of Ministers. This does happen with schemes of this nature. Resuscitation Council UK warns about

“defibrillators being disproportionately stored in communities that have resources, amplifying the UK’s mismatch between Automated External Defibrillator...density and Out of Hospital Cardiac Arrest incidence. By instead targeting public-access devices in areas of poor health and high OHCA incidence, this initiative could increase the chance of survival in the most high-risk communities.”

There is also the issue of public awareness and knowledge. Each year, there are 60,000 out-of-hospital cardiac arrests in the UK, with less than one in 10 surviving. While immediate CPR and defibrillation can more than double the chances of survival, public access defibrillators are used in less than one in 10 cases. Defibrillators must be located in well-signposted, unlocked and easily accessible places that members of the community can access immediately in an emergency. They must be maintained and ready for use. By the way, the criminal justice system should throw the book at anyone convicted of vandalising public access defibrillators. Few crimes are more mindless than selfishly disabling a defibrillator that might save a stranger’s life. Does the Minister believe that the current range of punishments available to the courts for vandalising a defibrillator is adequate?

As the House will know, there is a national database of locations of defibrillators. It is called The Circuit and is maintained by the British Heart Foundation, NHS, Resuscitation Council UK and St John Ambulance. I pay tribute to each of them for their work, but the database is not complete. The Circuit currently has more than 70,000 defibrillators mapped, but there are estimated to be between 100,000 and 200,000 devices in the UK. This means that emergency services, including the ambulance service, might not be able to direct people to a defibrillator to save someone’s life. Will the Minister explain how that can be acceptable and what the Government are doing to rectify the situation?

Jim Shannon: The hon. Lady is right to outline the fact that many people do not necessarily know where defibrillators are located, and there is a need to ensure that that happens. Does she agree that one thing that should happen—maybe the Minister can answer this question—is the teaching of CPR, which is crucial to ensuring that people feel confident enough to use the apparatus of a defibrillator? Does she feel that the Minister should take that issue on board as well?

Abena Oppong-Asare: I thank the hon. Member for making such an important point. He literally took the words out of my mouth, because I was going to mention that later. He is right, because there is no point having all these defibrillators if no one knows how to use them. There are some located in my constituency and more widely, and people do not even know about them. I went to my local station recently, and some of the staff did not know that there was a defibrillator in the station. That lack of awareness is quite concerning.

I warmly welcome the Complete The Circuit campaign being run by the *Daily Express* and the British Heart Foundation. The campaign seeks to have every defibrillator listed. If Google Maps can list every pub and restaurant, which I know we all like, surely we should be able to see every defibrillator on our smartphones. I congratulate the *Daily Express* and its editor, Gary Jones, for this initiative—I think that is the first time I have ever said that.

I thank the *Daily Mirror*, which has run a lengthy campaign to install defibrillators in public spaces. Martin Bagot has been the driving force behind the campaign, and I know that people will be interested to know more about the current availability of defibrillators, such as the sorts of public venues that are more likely to have them and the public venues where there is an acute absence of them. Is the Minister aware of any blackspots, particularly in rural areas, where there is a lack of defibrillators? As the hon. Member for Strangford mentioned, if someone can find a defibrillator, will they be able to use it?

There is a strong case for a public information campaign to explain what a defibrillator is and how to use it, which should be supported by workplace training courses and much greater awareness. There are examples of defibrillators from abroad where the information is much clearer and easier to understand. Can the Minister tell us what assessment the Department has made of accessibility for people who cannot read or who do not have English as their first language? Is there a case for reviewing signage and instructions to make defibrillators even more accessible?

Lastly, what about our workplace? According to information released under the Freedom of Information Act 2000, there are 25 defibrillators on the parliamentary estate, including in Central Lobby and Portcullis House—do we know where they are? No. We should be shouting that information from the rooftops; it should not be released through an FOI request. How many right hon. and hon. Members know the whereabouts of those defibrillators? I do not know where the 25 are. How many of our staff know where they are? How many of us have had training in CPR or using defibrillators? This is a classic case of “Physician, heal thyself.” In other words, we in this place should model good behaviour in all things, including access to defibrillators.

There are so many tragic stories from every constituency of lives lost when a defibrillator could have saved them, and I have heard some of them through interventions. Of course, there are many stories in which people have survived because of access to a defibrillator and the quick thinking and swift action of a stranger. That is the ultimate reminder that we are interconnected by shared humanity, that we rely on the kindness of strangers and that, one day, any one of us might need a passer-by to save our lives.

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): I reassure the hon. Member, as Chair of the Administration Committee as well as Chair of this proceeding, that we will certainly look at her request around defibrillators on the estate. An email is being sent to the Clerk now. I remind Members who want to speak to bob up and down.

2.46 pm

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare), who set out some moving thoughts about the importance of altruism and caring for other people in their moment of need, and about how the Government can perhaps help communities to enable individuals to help other people.

I want to pay particular attention to two aspects of best practice in my constituency and in broader east Devon, and I will close with one ask of the Government. The two examples of great ideas relate to Devon Air Ambulance Trust and Axe Valley Runners club. I met Devon Air Ambulance Trust here in Parliament last winter. The trust let me know that it is running CPR training and training on how to use a defibrillator. It invited me along to Sidmouth rugby club to get some training on CPR and how to use a defibrillator. It was great, because I had not done much of that sort of training since being a Scout as a young lad. It was brilliant to see how much progress has been made in resuscitation and how much more can be achieved these days with technology that we did not have in the 1980s and 1990s.

The Devon Air Ambulance Trust has a “Help with all your Heart” campaign, which seeks the best possible outcomes for patients who suffer a cardiac arrest. Part of the objective is to provide more of the equipment, as well as trying to train people such as myself in how to use it. The trust has put AEDs outside its charity shops on high streets, and it is working with town councils in east Devon to enable better access to AEDs.

The second organisation that is doing great stuff in my part of Devon is Axe Valley Runners club. Earlier this week, as covered by the *Midweek Herald* newspaper, the club did a “defib dash”. A defib dash is a bit like orienteering, for those who know what that is. The idea is that the runners go off in groups with a map to find a number of defibrillators. They go on various routes, competing against one another, to see who can get back to the beginning having found the most defibrillators. They ran around Seaton, Axmouth, Beer, Colyton and Colyford, covering a big chunk of the Tiverton and Honiton constituency. I pay particular tribute to Heather Simmons, Claire Warner and Sarah and Ronnie Whelan, who deserve credit for that novel and creative idea.

My third and final point is the ask. It would not be necessary for community groups to come up with these fantastic initiatives if there was better understanding of where defibrillators are and how to use them. The hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead has mentioned the Complete The Circuit campaign being run by the *Express*. The absence of a complete register of AEDs is a particular issue for rural areas such as my part of Devon. We think that there are 70,000 AEDs on the national register, but our understanding is that there are between 100,000 and 200,000 AEDs in existence. We are, therefore, nowhere near having a good idea of where defibrillators are located.

This is an important issue. If someone comes across somebody who has had a cardiac arrest, one of the first things that the ambulance service will do when they call 999 is direct them to the nearest AED. In a rural area such as mine, however, the service might think that the nearest AED is miles away, without knowing that there is one just a few hundred metres away from the incident. As the *Express* has said, we need to Complete The Circuit. We need a full and proper record of where AEDs are located.

I am a Liberal Democrat and we do not really believe in intervening in matters in which the state need not get involved. In this instance, however, I have been racking my brains for reasons why the Government might not want to legislate or intervene to require community groups to register AEDs on a national database. I have asked the chairman of Sidmouth Town Council and other community groups about the arguments against having a comprehensive register of AEDs, but I have not yet heard a sound argument why we should not require everyone who, through the kindness of their heart, buys an AED to register it so that the ambulance service can direct people to all available AEDs.

In summary, fantastic work is being done outside the House by community groups, but we need a central register and it has to be as comprehensive as possible.

2.52 pm

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Charles, and to follow the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord), who made a really interesting speech. I like the idea of a defib dash. I do not know whether we have enough defibrillators in my constituency, but I am certainly going to go away and find out.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) on securing and leading this important debate and on her great speech. Fewer than one in 10 people survive an out-of-hospital cardiac arrest. Tragically, that means, given that annually in the UK about 30,000 people experience an out-of-hospital cardiac arrest, that only approximately 3,000 of them will survive. In Yorkshire each year, there are approximately 3,300 out-of-hospital cardiac arrests, with a survival rate of only one in 13. Sadly, that means that more than 3,000 people in Yorkshire will not survive a cardiac arrest this year.

There are measures that can improve the chances of survival, including bystander willingness to begin CPR. I have seen that at first hand: my mum, on a number of occasions over the last few decades, has stopped, as a bystander, and she has saved more than one life. As a trained nurse, she had the confidence to do CPR. What is really encouraging is that when research has been done, ordinary members of the public—by “ordinary”, I mean without any medical training—are willing to get involved, but as I will come on to say, they do not always have the skills to do so. That sort of intervention can double or even quadruple the chances of survival.

I am pleased to say that Resuscitation Council UK found that people in Barnsley are more willing than some in other parts of the country to begin CPR if they witness someone having a cardiac arrest. Access to defibrillators and how quickly they are used can also be incredibly effective in improving the chances of survival

after a cardiac arrest, with research finding that defibrillation within three to five minutes of collapse improves survival rates from around 50% to 70%. During the public engagement sessions leading up to this debate, the House of Commons research team found that more than half the people asked would feel confident to use a defibrillator without having had training. It is encouraging that 80% of people reported feeling confident to respond to an emergency situation where someone was suffering a cardiac arrest.

Although people are generally willing to help and get involved, they may not always be able to do so. Resuscitation Council UK found that defibrillators are disproportionately more present in affluent areas, where the incident rates of cardiac arrest are typically lower. Of course, no one would begrudge any area for having as many defibrillators available to them as possible, and I am sure that Members from across the House will join me in sending our thanks to those who have fundraised to source a defibrillator for their local community. I would like to take this opportunity to recognise the work of the Hoyland, Milton and Rockingham Ward Alliance in Barnsley, which has funded five new defibrillators for the area, three of which have been installed. That will literally be a lifeline to many in Barnsley East, and I know local people will be incredibly grateful to them.

Not everyone can rely on organisations to provide funding in that way. Less affluent areas face inequality in their cardiac arrest survival prospects, as those who live in more disadvantaged areas are more likely to suffer arrests but less likely to have access to a defibrillator. We need the Government to take urgent action to ensure that defibrillators are suitably distributed across the country, so that people are not at greater risk of dying from cardiac arrest just because of where they live. Last month, my office was pleased to support a parliamentary event by Resuscitation Council UK to highlight this and other issues associated with cardiac arrest survival and follow-up care. We were joined by cardiac arrest survivors and members of the council, who demonstrated how to administer CPR should we ever need to do so. I would like to take this opportunity to put on the record my thanks to them for an informative event.

Defibrillator access and awareness in local communities, particularly in areas such as Barnsley, will save lives, so I am pleased that we are having this debate today. I am keen to hear from the Minister what the Government are doing to improve public access so that as many lives as possible are saved.

2.56 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): It is good to see you in the Chair again, Sir Charles. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) on the way she introduced the debate and the passion she put into it. If we could all be as passionate, we would save more lives, which is wonderful, and I thank her.

Defibrillators save lives and that is why we need to have more of them. Everyone who has spoken in the debate so far has had a story of how a defibrillator has saved someone in their community, and that is because defibrillators save lives. If we know where defibrillators are, how to use them and what to do in medical emergencies,

[Luke Pollard]

we will save more lives and be more confident in allowing communities to be a part of the healthcare response, especially at a time when our NHS is in crisis. According to the British Heart Foundation, around 3,500 out-of-hospital cardiac arrests happen each year in the south-west of England. In Plymouth alone, 28,000 people struggle with high blood pressure, and 25,000 people in my city live with heart-related conditions. That means we need to ensure that support is available in every one of our communities, should it be required.

Without doubt, the availability of defibrillators would improve cardiac arrest survival rates, and I know this at first hand. In March I held a #MeetLuke public meeting in Compton ward, at which local residents had an opportunity to ask questions to me and local councillors. Our three local councillors—Labour, Conservative and independent—had just been asked an exciting question about cuts to local buses, but the independent councillor struggled to answer. They said they needed some air, and they quickly wanted some water. When they stood up, they fell to the ground having a heart attack. If it had not been for the quick reactions of people in that room, that person would have died. One of the councillors started doing CPR on their fellow councillor, while the other one ran to get the defib, which had been installed in a church opposite to where we were. They called 999 to get the access code to the locked cabinet, and that triggered an emergency response from the ambulance service because a defib had been activated, and a police car was sent as well as an ambulance.

If it had not been for the quick measures and thinking of Labour Councillor Dylan Tippetts and Conservative Councillor Charlotte Carlyle, the independent Councillor Nick Kelly would have died right there. We had help from doctors and first aiders in the room, but if it had not been for the defib, he probably would not have survived. As much as we pride ourselves on having political banter, everyone should be able to go home to their family at the end of the day. When I saw a defibrillator being used right in front of me and how it saved a life, it left not only a harrowing memory, but a responsibility to ensure that there is a defibrillator in every one of our communities.

Councillor Carlyle is working with the local Pearn Charitable Trust to fund more defibrillators in that community, which is admirable. In addition to Compton ward, every other ward in the patch I represent needs defibrillators, and that is especially true of our poorer communities. Richer communities have more access to defibrillators than poorer communities. That is often because of the high upfront cost of a defibrillator, so I welcome the initiative the Minister has outlined to provide funding for communities to bid for a defibrillator. However, I share the concern of my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead about where defibrillators are located. We need to ensure that they go where the need is, not just to where people are good at filling in bids. We are aware from other areas of funding that if someone is a good bid-writer, they are more likely to succeed in the bid. That does not necessarily mean that they have a more worthy cause. I would be grateful if the Minister could set out how his Department is ensuring that the funding goes to where the need is, and not just to where the most successful bids are.

Regarding availability of AEDs and the overall package, it is absolutely important to consider where the risk is. The £1 million funding announced by the Minister is welcome, but it will soon be spent and the great need for AEDs will remain. Where are the deficits? Which areas have a lower concentration and density? They will also be the areas on the map where people are at higher risk of heart disease, and that is why we need to ensure that they have AEDs.

I second the call for defibrillator guardians to register their device with The Circuit. When people dial 999, they will then be able to access a nearby defibrillator and the emergency code to unlock it. It is important that people know about that. I recently visited the O2 store in Drake Circus in Plymouth, which had just installed a defibrillator and trained all staff in how to use it. That is an incredibly welcome move. I would like big corporates to take the initiative and ensure that they are looking after not just their own staff but customers and others nearby.

I challenged local supermarkets in Plymouth on whether they had defibrillators, but not all of them did. The shopping demographic includes people of all ages. For some, leaving the house to push a trolley or carry a basket around a supermarket can be quite intense. We know that cardiac arrests happen when people go shopping. As a basic piece of social responsibility, every single supermarket should have a defibrillator and a sign on the front of the store informing people that it can be used in the event of a problem. What additional conversations is the Minister having with large chains and corporates to ensure that defibrillators are not only registered on The Circuit but visibly signposted?

I echo the call about parliamentary AEDs. There is one outside the office of my hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan), who will speak in a moment, and my office is situated between hers and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead. That means that I know where the nearest AED to my office is located, but I am not in my office at the moment and I do not know the location of the nearest AED. There is a challenge to onboard people. I like the idea that we should be a beacon of best practice. All staff should be onboarded when they arrive on the parliamentary estate and informed about not only where AEDs are located but how to use them. We are often confused by advice on how to use the staff training allowance provided to us by the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority, but I think it could be put to good use with first aid training. Following the incident at my public meeting, all my staff will shortly go on a first aid course so that they can feel confident about how to respond in the event of a medical emergency. But that should be a standard for everyone in this place. We should lead by example.

Finally, there needs to be more focus in education and training. If we are faced with someone having a cardiac arrest or a suspected one, knowing what to do in those first few seconds could be the difference between that person surviving or not. As a country, we should aspire to equip each and every one of our citizens with a minimum level of first aid knowledge. Wherever someone is, they should have an understanding about how to provide basic first aid and what to do in the event of an emergency. That training should be repeated throughout their life as a refresher to top up their knowledge,

so that wherever someone is, and regardless of whether they have a defibrillator near them, they know what to do in the event of an emergency.

What conversations has the Minister had with the Department for Education to make sure that our young people leave school equipped with first aid? They need to feel confident about operating an AED, especially given that there are places where young people are encouraged not to touch that thing on the wall because it is dangerous. I have heard that said a few times about defibrillators, but we want our young people to know what they should do in the event of an emergency. We should not scare them, but equip them with the knowledge about what should happen.

The defibrillator that saved Nick Kelly's life in Plymouth was installed only a month before the public meeting. Had the meeting taken place two months previously, as I had originally intended, he would not be alive today. We owe an enormous thanks not only to the organisations, charitable groups and individuals who fundraise and host defibrillators, but to the organisations that pay for the recharging and upkeep, because it is often more prominent to buy a defibrillator in the first place, incurring a high capital cost. It is often less prominent in fundraising to pay to keep it tip-top and in good condition, so that it can be used.

I want to say a special thanks to the congregation and clergy at Emmanuel Church for taking the risk to buy a defibrillator, the benefits of which they have seen almost immediately. I hope that every single church, supermarket, public building and major location in Plymouth takes note of that, buys a defibrillator and puts the maintenance of it in its annual budget. If they do that, we will save more lives and it will help the health service to be able to respond to medical emergencies quicker when they do happen.

3.7 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) for securing today's important debate on public access to defibrillators, and I congratulate her on the thorough way in which she opened it. It is always a pleasure to take part in debates that are so consensual, and I suspect we are all on the same page, which is nice for a change.

Cardiac arrests strike without warning, and usually outside the confines of a hospital, leaving people in immediate need of medical attention. We have heard from a number of speakers that fewer than one in 10 people survive, which is truly frightening. According to medical professionals, every passing minute without defibrillation reduces a cardiac arrest victim's chances of survival by a staggering 10%. In such critical moments, defibrillators emerge as vital instruments that are capable of restoring the rhythm of a failing heart, so accessibility and knowledge of where they are located are vital. Incredibly, there is no official centralised database that records the number of defibrillators and their locations.

Thankfully, as we have heard, some organisations have launched their own maps, such as the British Heart Foundation's Circuit, to improve access to defibrillators. The Circuit is a comprehensive national network of defibrillators, which aims to improve survival rates by mapping the locations of defibrillators across the UK, enabling prompt access during emergencies. There are

currently 60,000 defibrillators registered on The Circuit, but it is estimated that tens of thousands remain unknown to the emergency services. Raising awareness about The Circuit and encouraging registration of these devices will enhance their effectiveness in critical situations.

Luke Pollard: Having the data on one database is really important. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the data has to be accessible and pulled through to other devices? I just googled "defibrillators near me" on Google Maps, and there really are not any, so we need to make sure not only that the data is stored, but that it is publicly available for people, especially on their handheld devices.

Martyn Day: That is a very good point. None of us, myself included, goes anywhere without a mobile device nowadays, so that is the obvious tool of choice.

Timely defibrillation is a cornerstone of improving survival, and Scotland's out-of-hospital cardiac arrest strategy aims to increase to 20% the rate of incidents where a PAD is applied to the patient before the arrival of the Scottish ambulance service. I encourage groups and organisations with a defibrillator to ensure that it is registered.

Early defibrillation can massively increase someone's chances of surviving out-of-hospital cardiac arrest, but many defibrillators are never used because the emergency services simply do not know about them. "Scotland's Out-of-Hospital Cardiac Arrest Report 2019-22" highlights:

"The number of Public Access Defibrillators (PAD) in communities across Scotland that are registered on the national defibrillator network (The Circuit) has more than doubled since 2019".

That is good, but we need to do better. Currently around 5,000 are registered. Registration on The Circuit makes a PAD device visible to the Scottish Ambulance Service and alerts emergency call handlers that there is a pad near an out-of-hospital cardiac arrest. That makes registration a vital component in that chain of survival.

I am reminded of the Gandhi quote: "You cannot help everyone, but everyone can help someone." Each of us as an individual can play a crucial role in bridging the gap between cardiac emergencies and lifesaving interventions. The British Heart Foundation's map of The Circuit offers a valuable resource that allows individuals to check the availability of nearby defibrillators. By using the tool, anyone can quickly identify the nearest defibrillator, which improves response times and potentially saves lives.

Of course, 80% of cardiac arrests occur at home, so it is vital that Governments continue to consider ways to increase engagement at community level. For example, the Scottish Government want bystanders who witness an out-of-hospital cardiac arrest to feel able to take action. To achieve that, Scotland's out-of-hospital cardiac arrest strategy aims to familiarise a total of 1 million people in Scotland with CPR skills; it works through increased engagement with community organisations such as sports hubs, local businesses and other community groups to raise awareness of and offer opportunities to learn CPR. I had CPR training in the past, but I think I could do with a refresher, as I suspect could many of us who have had the training. It is not done often enough; if an emergency occurred, I am not sure that I would feel as confident as I would have done a month or a couple of months after the training.

[Martyn Day]

As I repeatedly point out in health debates, we cannot escape the fact that health inequality and poverty go hand in hand, and that is the case with out-of-hospital cardiac arrests. Those in the most deprived areas are twice as likely to have an out-of-hospital cardiac arrest and 60% less likely to survive than those in less deprived areas. Deprivation also has a significant effect on the likelihood of receiving bystander CPR. Then there are geographic and demographic issues: around 11% of the population of Scotland live in rural areas; they are 32% less likely to survive or to leave hospital after an out-of-hospital cardiac arrest than those living in urban areas. Over the last seven years, we have started to understand more clearly the association between measures of socioeconomic position and decreased survival rates after such incidents.

Ethnicity can also be a factor in how likely a person is to experience an out-of-hospital cardiac arrest. For example, people from south Asian backgrounds are at up to 50% higher risk of developing coronary heart disease than white Europeans, and coronary heart disease can lead to heart attack or cardiac arrest. In addition, international studies show that women are less likely to have CPR performed on them—a pattern that we also see in the Scottish data. The misconception that breasts make CPR more challenging, fear of doing harm, fear of inappropriate touching and fear of being accused of sexual assault have been given by the public as reasons for that gender discrepancy. It is important that we work to combat those fears and embed the knowledge that CPR is a gender-neutral lifesaving technique. Those health inequalities confirm beyond doubt the importance of prioritising pads in areas of the highest risk first, as a number of other speakers have mentioned.

Availability and accessibility of defibrillators are critical factors in reducing the devastating impact of cardiac arrests. One way of making defibrillators more accessible would be to make them more affordable. Currently, charities and local authorities can claim a VAT exemption when purchasing a defibrillator, but that should be extended to anyone buying the equipment. Quite simply, the UK should follow Ireland's example and remove the tax. However, raising awareness of initiatives such as The Circuit, encouraging greater community involvement and tackling poverty all remain essential. By embracing those measures and working together, we can create a society in which every individual has a fighting chance against cardiac emergencies, and ultimately save more lives.

3.14 pm

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): It is a pleasure to close for the Opposition with you in the Chair, Sir Charles. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) for bringing forward this debate. She never ceases to bring the voice of her constituents right to the heart of this place, and today is yet another shining example her doing her community incredibly proud.

It is welcome that there is such unity and consensus on this issue. As we have heard, tremendous progress has been made towards making defibrillators accessible to the public, thanks to the many incredible charities and people who have been working hard to do so. The

Community Heartbeat Trust, the Oliver King Foundation and SADS UK are just some of the organisations that are doing brilliant work to provide education and information about automatic external defibrillators, AEDs, and to ensure that more defibrillators are easily accessible in public spaces.

The British Heart Foundation's Circuit project has ensured that thousands of defibrillators and their locations are registered online, but, as we have heard, that work needs to go further. People who experience the very worst in the heart of their communities need to know that they are able to find and access an AED when they so desperately need it. The Premier League defibrillator fund will provide AEDs to grassroots clubs, which is very welcome and will ensure that lifesaving treatment can be rolled out to even more stadiums.

As we have heard, in the UK one person dies every three minutes from heart or circulatory disease, and 60,000 out-of-hospital cardiac arrests occur every year. Take a minute to think about that. My hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead quoted research published by the National Institute for Health and Care Research, which found that just over 8% of people suffering a cardiac arrest outside hospital survive—just 8% of the 60,000 out-of-hospital cardiac arrests. The same research found that the odds of survival increase to 32% if a bystander has access to a public AED, and some studies place that figure even higher. It is simple: AEDs save lives.

According to the British Heart Foundation, the low cardiac arrest survival rate in Britain can be attributed to a lack of access to defibrillators. This critical technology must be accessible to work. With my medical hat on, I will take a moment to explain how it works. CPR works to send the blood around the body to take oxygen to the tissues as a holding measure, but the AED is required to shock the heart and try to restart it again so that it can pump the oxygen around the body. Imagine somebody providing non-stop CPR for hours on end. Not only would that be far too long and the person would be brain dead at the end, but without an AED—without that shock delivered to the heart—CPR is actually pointless.

We must be clear: AEDs are simple, safe and effective. They are portable, have plain instructions and the user cannot give a shock accidentally or hurt somebody. From my professional experience in the emergency department, I know how important quick access to treatment is for patients in cardiac arrest. There can be no doubt that patients who are admitted to hospital after having received prompt treatment with chest compressions or, even more effective, a defibrillator have far improved chances of making a recovery. There is also an economic benefit, because the people whose chances of recovery are worse may spend a long time in an expensive intensive care bed, often not surviving at the end of it. That makes the argument for giving people a better outcome in the first place, which prevents those protracted stays in intensive care and saves money in the long run.

When the heart stops beating, every second counts, and a person's chance of survival decreases by approximately 10% with every minute that defibrillation is delayed. That speaks to the importance of everyone knowing where the AEDs are. With our NHS in crisis and emergency care at breaking point, lives are being endangered. In December last year, the average ambulance

wait for category 1 patients had increased to 10 minutes—the worst performance on record. Those stats make a very clear argument: the painful fact is that people are dying as a result of not being able to get the shock they need from a trained person, whether they arrived in an ambulance or came from an AED in the vicinity.

Category 1 patients are the most serious and life-threatening cases, including cardiac arrest. In a category 1 scenario, every second is the difference between life and death, and longer ambulance waits are costing lives. Sadly, after 13 years of Conservative governance, patients can no longer rely on an ambulance arriving in time. At the end of last year, one in 10 urgent cases waited over 11 hours for an ambulance. How can we in all conscience say to people who lost loved ones in such cases that their loss could not have been avoided, when we know full well that it could have been?

Last year, the Government committed to funding a defibrillator in every state-funded school in England by the end of the academic year. As the academic year is nearing its end, will the Minister outline what progress has been made on that commitment? The Government also committed last year to £1 million of funding to provide an estimated 1,000 public access defibrillators across communities in England. I note that the Department re-announced that policy just last week, so has there not been any progress on that commitment? Will he update us on how the application process is progressing and whether any PADs have been installed, and if they have, in which communities? It is crucial that they are placed in communities where the need is greatest to tackle growing health inequalities, which we have heard about extensively today.

It is really important that health inequalities are not allowed to widen any further through a lack of access to equipment that could save lives. That has to go hand in hand with training people in how to use them. I would be interested to know what work the Department is doing to encourage uptake in the communities that are most in need. While many of us will agree that public access to defibrillators will be a fantastic step towards saving lives, we must not forget that our country also deserves a well-funded, well-resourced and well-supported NHS. It is heartening that there is widespread, cross-party support for publicly accessible AEDs. I hope that the Government will build on the support from across the House and do what is needed to ensure that access is available.

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): I remind the Minister that if he takes up the full time he must leave two minutes for the mover of the motion to wind up.

3.22 pm

The Minister for Health and Secondary Care (Will Quince): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Charles. I assure you that, although I will try to address as many of the points and themes raised during this very constructive debate as possible, I do not intend to take the full time available to me.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) on securing a hugely important debate, and I thank all hon. Members for their contributions. Although I did not agree with all the points made by the Labour Front Bench, the

hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan), I thoroughly agree that there is considerable consensus. What has been displayed is Parliament working at its best, with all hon. Members raising constituency cases and rightly campaigning for greater access to and awareness of defibrillators in their communities and across our country. I put on record my condolences to those who have lost loved ones due to sudden death caused by an undiagnosed heart issue.

As has been said, defibrillators provide vital treatment, with the latest research showing that the use of such devices within three to five minutes of a cardiac arrest increases the chance of survival by over 40%. It is therefore crucial that we have enough defibrillators in public spaces to provide life-saving interventions when needed. I join the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead in paying tribute to and thanking the APPG and its members for all their work in this area. She mentioned the need for steady pressure, and I think that she is absolutely right to use that phrase. It is vital that we keep that steady pressure up, not just on the Department or the NHS but on organisations up and down the country, to ensure that we have as much access to these vital AEDs as possible.

The hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead set out very articulately and eloquently the compelling case for access to and awareness of defibrillators, and I think that she did her constituents and the House a huge service today. I would also like to thank the charities, businesses, clubs and societies that go out and fundraise for AEDs; they are doing their communities a huge service too. Investing in devices and treatments that can prevent the most serious cardiac arrhythmias is a priority for the Government. The hon. Lady also rightly raised the issue of inequality. That certainly preys on my mind when considering many aspects of health. She made a very powerful case, and I hope to address that point in my contribution.

As the hon. Member for Tooting mentioned, in December the Government announced a £1 million fund to design a grant scheme for the expansion of publicly accessible AEDs in the community. That fund was designed to provide an estimated 1,000 new defibrillators in spaces across the country. Whether at a town hall, a post office or a favourite green space outside the local Co-op, having access to AEDs in easy-to-reach areas, as we know and as has been very articulately set out this afternoon, can be a lifeline that keeps loved ones with us.

The fund builds on work by the Government, the NHS and stakeholders to improve survival from out-of-hospital cardiac arrests via the use of defibrillators and cardiopulmonary resuscitation—from now on I will use “CPR”, as I do not have the health expertise of the hon. Member for Tooting. The Department of Health and Social Care will invest the funding through an independent partner—I think this directly answers the question from the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead—which will be selected from the Government’s Crown Commercial Service list of approved suppliers. Successful applicants will then be asked to demonstrate that the defibrillators will be placed in areas where they are most needed.

To address the hon. Lady’s point about inequality, although Ministers will have no involvement in deciding where defibrillators are sited—it would be totally inappropriate for them to have that kind of involvement—

[Will Quince]

I understand her concerns. It is inevitable to some extent that where an item of medtech is purchased by local communities, there will be a higher prevalence in more affluent areas, where it is easier to fundraise. Where there is Government funding available, it is important that wherever possible we use it to redress the balance in favour of areas that find it more difficult to fundraise. We must ensure that we target areas where there is a shortage of AEDs and do not just top up provision in areas where coverage is already good. I will certainly speak with the Minister for Social Care to see what more we can do to involve local Members of Parliament and interested groups, including the APPG, with the selected partner, to ensure that we get that right, because the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead has made a compelling case.

Abena Oppong-Asare: That is really good news to hear. Something that I also want to suggest to the Minister, which I think is really important, is about mapping areas of high need, because one of my concerns is that I am seeing community organisations fundraise for defibrillators, unaware that that fund has been available since late last year. I appreciate that these things take time and it is important that we get it right—we are not just flashing money around anyhow—but will review mechanisms be put in place to ensure that over time the funding is going to the right areas and that the right individuals are receiving the benefits of it?

Will Quince: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. She is absolutely right. It is important that whenever we spend Government money—taxpayer-funded money—in this way, there is a proper evaluation process. Having said that, although looking back and asking if we got it right is key, the most important thing for me is to get it right first time. We do that by ensuring that there are clear criteria.

The hon. Lady is also right that we have to map and look at not just areas where people do not have access to AEDs, but areas of social deprivation and areas with a higher prevalence of cardiovascular disease or higher footfall. Those are all factors that we absolutely need to consider when designing the criteria that the independent third-party provider would scope. I am keen to work with the hon. Lady and the APPG to ensure that we are getting that right.

Alongside that—and this is the reason why the number of AEDs that will be available through the fund is an estimate—there is a plan to ask for the match funding that some organisations receive. I am conscious that some areas will be able to do that but others will struggle, which is why it can be full or partial. Potentially, however, that could double the number of AEDs available. Some communities might be able to make only a small contribution, but others could match-fund it entirely. It is important that we set criteria that make it available as widely as possible to communities, especially those less affluent areas where fundraising is difficult.

Abena Oppong-Asare: That is really good. Another thing to highlight is that, as we see in data from The Circuit, not everyone is registering their defibrillators. Is the Minister coming to the point about organisations ensuring that when they receive the funding, they register it as well?

Will Quince: Absolutely. The hon. Lady pre-empts me: I am coming on to The Circuit, because that point has been made by nearly all hon. Members, but I will first conclude my remarks about the fund.

Successful applicants will be encouraged to train or facilitate CPR training in the local community. That is an important element. To expedite the distribution of funding, and in readiness for the appointment of our partner organisation—this touches on the hon. Lady's question—on 28 June the Department published an invitation for those organisations that wish to bid for an AED to submit an expression of interest.

My hon. Friend the Minister for Social Care wrote to all hon. Members informing them of the AED expression of interest and setting out how organisations can register their interest. It is incumbent on all Members of Parliament to ensure that community groups, organisations and local authorities across our constituencies spread the message loud and clear so that we get as many expressions of interest as possible. I urge any organisation that may benefit from a defibrillator, whether it is a sports club, a local theatre or a community hall, to register and have that opportunity. It is also important that we encourage local councillors to get involved.

The hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead asked specifically about the Department for Education. I was Schools Minister at the time the decision was made and signed off. On 17 July, the Department for Education announced that it would provide defibrillators to schools in England that do not already have access to one. That is expected to be completed by the end of the 2022-23 academic year. The scheme, of which I am very proud, is the largest distribution of defibrillators to be rolled out across England to date. It will provide more than 20,000 devices, backed by £19 million of funding.

Dr Allin-Khan: The end of the academic year is in two weeks' time, on 17 July. May I ask for an update on the progress to meet the target?

Will Quince: I have not been the Schools Minister for many months, but I will gladly ensure that the relevant Minister—or I, having accessed that information—gets it to the hon. Lady.

I remember that a key point in the design of the scheme—this touches on a point made by many hon. Members—was that providing an AED, in and of itself, is not enough. Accompanying the roll-out, we wanted to ensure that there were awareness videos about how easy it is to use an AED. We want teachers, as part of their training and in the staffroom, and pupils in assemblies to see how easy an AED is to use. In a rolling way, we hoped to create a new generation of young people who are confident in their use. As AEDs become more prevalent across communities, that can only be a good thing.

I think it was the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) who asked about CPR and first aid training. As a Back Bencher, I campaigned to have first aid included on the curriculum. The Schools Minister at the time was not very happy about that—not because he was against having it on the curriculum, but because the curriculum was already very full—but we did manage to get it included. It is important that we

upskill young people so they have the confidence to act in the unlikely but possible event that they encounter someone in cardiac arrest.

The question about vandalism of defibrillators is a fair one. I had not given it any thought, but I will certainly have a conversation with my counterparts in the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice and see if there is any scope to take further action in that area.

Turning to The Circuit, I would certainly like to recognise the incredibly important work that charities do in ensuring that the public have access to defibrillators. The British Heart Foundation, in partnership with Resuscitation Council UK, the Association of Ambulance Chief Executives and of course the national health service, set up The Circuit, which is the national defibrillator network database that provides information on where defibrillators are located.

I heard the point that the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord) made about legislation, which I have some concerns about. At the moment, registration is entirely voluntary, so nobody is forced to register their defibrillator with The Circuit. However, registration enables the emergency services and community first responders to locate the nearest publicly accessible external defibrillator when they are treating someone suffering from an out-of-hospital sudden cardiac arrest. In those crucial moments after a cardiac arrest, we know that locating an AED quickly will help save lives.

Richard Foord: What are the arguments against making registration compulsory?

Will Quince: That is a question that I had not previously been asked. The danger of legislating in an area like this is that often there are consequences of legislation. One consequence would be that all existing defibrillators were registered as part of The Circuit, and that comes with a tick—that is a merit. However, having created legislation and having worked in Government Departments where legislation has been drafted on numerous occasions, I know that there are invariably and inevitably also negative unintended consequences that need to be considered and thought through.

For example, would registration discourage communities from taking a defibrillator? Would it discourage businesses like the one to which the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport referred from putting one in their shop? We have to think through that kind of thing. What kind of pressure does it put on those organisations? Would it discourage people? If we are going to create legislation, what are the implications of not registering? Will there be a criminal sanction or a civil one? These are all things we would have to work through, and that is why legislating on something like this is complex. We have to remember that most defibrillators are bought by community groups, although in this particular case the Government support them. We would be placing a legal requirement on them for something that they are purchasing through goodwill, for philanthropic or altruistic reasons.

We have just got to be careful. I am not saying that we should not consider it, but it is not quite as simple as saying, “Let’s legislate,” and thinking that that will address the problem. What we need to do, and are doing, is to encourage as many people as possible to register because of the benefits of registration.

Abena Oppong-Asare: Would those who receive funding from the £1 million fund for the community be required to register with The Circuit? Where there is Government funding, I think we should be encouraging registration. The more people who are aware, the better.

Will Quince: I totally agree. I will check whether registering will be among the conditions for grant funding; I would like to think that it will, and I will work with the Minister for Social Care to ensure that it is. We know that there are many defibrillators that are not on The Circuit, and—short of legislating, which would not be a quick or easy solution—we have to get them on it as quickly as possible. We have to urge as many organisations and individuals as possible to register.

The hon. Lady asked what steps we are taking to promote that. I recently wrote to all local authorities to ask them to check and, if they have not done so already, to consider adding their defibrillators to The Circuit. I also asked them to reach out and share that message with parish councils, town councils, community groups, village halls, businesses and others that may have a defibrillator that is not registered on The Circuit. I am keen to work with local authorities, which have a reach into their communities that neither central Government nor the national charities could possibly have. I also urge all right hon. and hon. Members to encourage those organisations that have a defibrillator to ensure that it is registered. I join hon. Members in paying tribute to and congratulating the *Daily Express* on its important campaign, which I am happy to support.

I hear what the hon. Lady says about raising more public awareness about AEDs and where they are located, not on just the parliamentary estate but across communities and the country. I will continue to look at what more we can do centrally, but also by working with national and local charities, to raise that awareness.

The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport asked about businesses. Some organisations—such as the Premier League, which the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead referred to—are leading the way, but we want to encourage more to do so. I will give further thought to how we can encourage other businesses to do the same.

The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton asked about first aid, and particularly about CPR. Better awareness and education around first aid training is key to improving survival rates from cardiac arrest. I am pleased that NHS England has partnered with St John Ambulance to, in effect, co-ordinate skills development to significantly increase the use of AEDs by individuals in community settings. That includes a national network of community advocates to champion the importance of first aid training. The plan is to reach 60,000 people, which will help to save up to 4,000 lives each year by 2028, empowering local communities to act more quickly to save people’s lives.

Finally, I cannot speak about cardiac arrest without speaking about prevention, which the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport referred to. The prevention of heart disease is critical to reducing the number of sudden cardiac arrests. I will set out some of the work that NHS England is doing to reduce preventable deaths from heart disease. Currently, £2.3 billion is being spent to increase the number of centres diagnosing heart disease to at least 100 sites by March 2025.

[Will Quince]

NHS England has developed a new fast-track echocardiography training scheme, which has led to 150 additional echocardiographers, with further support available in 2023-24.

The NHS health check programme, which the Secretary of State recently spoke about, is a core component of NHS England's CVD prevention pathway. Over 15 million people are eligible for a NHS health check every five years. For every 1 million checks delivered, the NHS health check could prevent an estimated 400 heart attacks and strokes. Something like 10.8 million checks have been delivered between 2013 and December 2022, but it is important that we work hard to ensure that more people benefit from that lifesaving service and get a health check. I am keen that we make it easier and more convenient for people to do so.

I hope that today I have demonstrated the Government's commitment to increasing the number of AEDs in our local communities. I am keen to see how we can turbocharge that and work with businesses and local communities to go much further. We can all agree that this agenda really matters. Once again, I thank the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead for highlighting this vital issue. I look forward to working with her to bring about the change in this area that we all want to see.

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): I invite the hon. Member who secured the debate to wind up for up to two minutes.

3.44 pm

Abena Oppong-Asare: I thank the Minister for his remarks about what can be done. This debate was very much about a collaborative approach. Indeed, it is one of the rare debates that I have attended where there has been much consensus.

I thank hon. Members for sharing their experiences, particularly the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord), who also shared some best practices on defibrillators. I am not familiar with the defibrillator dash, but it is something that we can all look into. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) for her comments about the community groups fundraising for defibrillators in her constituency, and my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), who

talked about the importance of corporates, the work that they have done in Plymouth and what can be done in supermarkets.

I thank the Minister for saying that he will consider what engagement and what encouraging conversations there can be with businesses. I am a bit concerned about the £1 million fund, in terms of inequality and little groups being missed out, particularly because we know that the groups that know how to do slick bids are the ones that are very good at getting the money. I am feeling a bit reassured by the Minister that the Government are looking at work to ensure that it is distributed equally, but I think a review needs to be done to make sure that nobody is left behind. It would also be good to get some clarification about whether those receiving funding are being required—

Will Quince indicated assent.

Abena Oppong-Asare: They are? That is good to hear.

May I take this opportunity to thank you, Sir Charles, for saying that you will look at defibrillators in Parliament in your role as Chair of the Administration Committee? I am very impressed that you have taken that on board straightaway. I also want to thank the organisations and charities that have been driving this campaign for their excellent work and briefings.

I thank Bonnie for campaigning on this issue in memory of her dad. I want every citizen, no matter where they live or what they do, to know about defibrillators, where they are and how to use them. I want us all to know how to use one, just as surely as we know how to use a cashpoint. I have had training in how to use a defibrillator—it is so easy to use. I also welcome what the Minister says about the Government's work in schools and particularly about starting with very young people. I remember receiving first aid at school, so it is good to start this from a really young age.

All these things are possible with the political will to make them happen. I know we will keep up the fight on this issue. I thank everybody for their contributions to this debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered public access to defibrillators.

3.48 pm

Sitting suspended.

Levelling Up: South-west

4 pm

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): I will call Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger to move the motion and then call the Minister to respond. Mr Liddell-Grainger is feeling generous, so he will take short interventions.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered levelling up in the South West.

It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Charles. I am delighted to see you. I thank the House for granting me this short debate.

The phrase “levelling up” is not a recent innovation, believe it or not. It was talked about in Parliament 150 years ago, as some hon. Members may remember. In the 1860s, for example, their noble lordships and the bishops were getting bogged down in another place debating delicate questions about rival religions in Ireland. A wise old peer intervened and said that we could only treat Anglicans and Catholics equally

“by levelling up or by levelling down”.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 29 June 1868; Vol. 193, c. 183.]

I do not know whether hon. Members can make head or tail of that, but that is levelling up.

I am delighted that the Minister for Levelling Up is in her place; I am so pleased that she is replying to this debate, and I thank her for her thoughts and kindness. I doubt whether there is any political disagreement about the principles of keeping everything level. Why should there be? It means working to equalise opportunities and providing a level playing field for constituents across the UK. Right now, the only people who could possibly object to a level playing field, as we understand it, are the Australian cricket team, and I am pretty sure that Jonny Bairstow would agree with me—damned foreigners!

The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, in which my hon. Friend plays an invaluable role, has published some maps that are very detailed indeed. They show how much money has been allocated to a huge array of projects in our constituencies all over the country. They are very large maps, covered with multicoloured markers. They remind me of the huge maps down in the depths of the RAF Uxbridge command centre on the western outskirts of London, where I have been recently—it may ring some bells. Those maps are from 83 years ago, so I am glad to see that we are still using the old tried and trusted methods.

It is helpful to keep that image in mind, because the scale of the task in levelling up is almost as heavy as it was for the battle of Britain. It is a herculean task, especially when we study those maps. As one naturally would, I immediately noticed the markers in my own constituency. Bridgwater’s transport needs have had to be reorganised with a very large grant indeed, for which I am incredibly grateful. The towns fund, for which I am also very grateful, will be used to bump up facilities in the constituency. There are also to be a new NHS training centre for Bridgwater and Minehead. These are well thought-out projects, and I am very grateful for the money. It has been a great team effort by a lot of good people.

Inevitably, my eyes wander around these vast maps. I know Somerset, and as colleagues know, I come from Devon originally. Strangely, the bits that stick out are not the places with coloured markers; they are the areas without a single flag or marker in sight, like Mid Devon. There ought to be only two possible conclusions: either those places are so prosperous that they do not need help, which colleagues well know is not the case, or they are bleak, empty deserts where nobody lives at all, which is obviously not true either—they are extremely good areas. In fact, levelling up has not reached these places either because bids have been submitted but have not made it or because there have been no bids at all.

It would not be fair to blame the Government. That is not how this works, and we know it. The rules of levelling up have not changed, from the first opportunity we went for many years ago to what we have now. If we want a project to be considered, we have to do one simple thing: work out exactly what we hope to achieve and then make a very intelligent, well thought-out bid. I get the distinct impression that sometimes—not just in my constituency, but right across the area, because I have looked at an enormous amount of bids—the intelligence is in slightly short supply. There has to be a proper business case, as the Minister is well aware.

I currently represent an area that has an exceptional district council, which has spearheaded the bids. Sedgemoor District Council has been a shining example in this and has had more bids than anywhere in the country. It understood local needs; it also got local people involved at the highest level. At the same time, it managed to mastermind national and international negotiations to bring many thousands of jobs to Bridgwater, and beyond. In fact, this affects all our constituencies.

Simon Jupp (East Devon) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Liddell-Grainger: It is with great pleasure that I give way to my neighbour.

Simon Jupp: I appreciate my hon. Friend’s speech and the points that he is making. Devon, Cornwall, Dorset and Somerset have secured £231 million from the levelling-up fund so far. Plus, we have seen the reopening of the Dartmoor line and spades in the ground to dual more of the A303. Those four counties make up the great south-west; I chair the all-party parliamentary group for the great South West. Does my hon. Friend agree with me that although the Government are backing our region, there is still much more to do?

Mr Liddell-Grainger: I am incredibly grateful for that intervention, not only because my hon. Friend has done sterling work in the south-west and is well known and revered for it but because the A303 has been a labour of love for him; I know that it has been incredibly hard. For 22 years, Sir Charles—as you know, I have been here that long, God help you—it has been a bone of contention, but I think that my hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Simon Jupp) has managed to move it on further than almost any of us, and I congratulate him on that. The A303 is crucial for all of us.

That neatly brings me on to the fact that Sedgemoor smoothed the way for building Hinkley Point C nuclear power station, as my colleagues are well aware. This was

[Mr Liddell-Grainger]

a mammoth task for a local council. It did a superb job, an amazing job, on a £25 billion project, which nobody had done for a generation. Sedgemoor has also been working incredibly hard to attract the latest innovations to the town. The chances are that the latest opportunity will soon be announced. I cannot say what it is, but it is called Gravity and it is on an old bomb site outside Bridgwater; it goes to 626 acres. I think that we will hopefully be announcing good news on that soon. Again, that will help the whole south-west with a massive input—

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): Will the hon. Member give way?

Mr Liddell-Grainger: Yes, I give way to the education corps.

Richard Foord: It is really good to hear about the work of Sedgemoor District Council and the excellent bid that the hon. Member put his weight behind. When I became MP for Tiverton and Honiton last year, I gave my endorsement to a bid by Mid Devon District Council to build a relief road at Cullompton. This and a railway station at Cullompton would be fantastic in easing congestion and improving people's health. Does the hon. Member agree with me that Mid Devon District Council was right to prioritise the levelling-up fund bid for the relief road at Cullompton?

Mr Liddell-Grainger: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the intervention. I did say earlier that there was a lack of intelligence in some of these bids, and the hon. Gentleman makes a good point. Perhaps having had a little bit more intelligence from, if I may say so, certain people could have been a little bit more helpful. It is a great shame that we did not get what was bid for. That is a great shame. But I can give an assurance that although Cullompton will not be in the new constituency, I think that it is in our interests to work together to try to get this. I know that my hon. Friend the Minister has been very good on this and that I and my neighbours will be having a conversation with her about it. I think that we can probably do something and add intelligence to it, if I may be so proud—who needs the education corps?

Meanwhile, just over the border, the district council—dare I say it to the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord)?—limps along. Since May, it has been under Lib Dem management, but it is absolutely rudderless. The new Lib Dem leader—forgive me, but his name has escaped me—has announced that he will only work part time. Perhaps that is actually a blessing for everybody—you never can tell these days. It certainly shares out the spoils of running a council exclusively among themselves. This is why we need people who can do the job. All the councillors running the main committees are, yes, Liberal Democrats. That includes the important scrutiny committee—yes, exactly. There is considerable doubt whether the Lib Dem lady who chairs the committee is able to scrutinise anything, including her own shopping list.

Richard Foord: Will the hon. Member give way?

Mr Liddell-Grainger: No. The Lib Dems said that they were going to scrap bigger charges for car parks. Guess what? They are putting them up. The new councillors

could have reneged on their annual increase in allowances—now up to £5,600 a year. They voted to abstain, dare I say it? I do not know how you vote to abstain, but never mind. So they get paid anyway. The new council leader, whatever his name is, also picks up £16,800 for his extra responsibility of being a part-time leader—and you wonder why these bids fail. That makes £22,000 in total. “Ching”, as the cash register goes. To think that they promised to be totally transparent. The truth is that these people are not transparent at all; they are totally invisible. Levelling up demands visibility—that is something that I have learned. Very vocal, completely focused local authorities need to argue the case. It has been proved that that is how to get results.

What price for Mid Devon's part-timers? A vital new high school is needed in Tiverton. I am grateful for the Minister's incredible help on that. Just before Christmas last year, the Government said, “Yes, the money is ready and waiting.” It is still waiting. We know the issue, and I thank the Government for their help. Seven months later, no progress has been made. Did anybody ask? Well, I have asked, and we are getting to the bottom of it. That is what this is about. Does the part-time leader of the council, Mr Thingummybob, pick up the blower and complain? Who knows what has become of the other invisible people, including the one who was suddenly catapulted, dare I say it, closer to here, last seen with clipboards and pencils preparing a strategy.

Levelling up means many things, but usually it means the unequal treatment of rural parts of the south-west. That is most important: we are rural areas.

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con) *rose—*

Mr Liddell-Grainger: I give way with great pleasure to my hon. Friend.

Anthony Mangnall: I thank my hon. Friend for his excellent speech and for raising this topic. He is talking about things within our rural constituencies, but may I make a point about coastal communities? Within my constituency, I have Brixham harbour, which we put in a bid for. The two bids that we put in under the Liberal Democrat administration in Torbay failed; thankfully, it is now a Conservative administration. Where there are successful stories, such as Brixham fish market, we should not rule it out because it is making money; we should recognise the potential of what it could do for the whole county, were we to invest in it and give it the support that it needs.

Mr Liddell-Grainger: A superb synopsis, and I congratulate my hon. Friend on the work that he does. Leave the Lib Dems in charge and, as I said, the intelligence goes. I am sorry that the bid was lost, but we will be back. The Minister is listening, and I know that we will get the bid, because in rural areas such as that of my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes we have to fight our corner. That is especially important in places such as Cornwall. We are joined by my Whip, the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann), to ensure that I behave.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I backed a levelling-up bid from the then Plymouth Conservative council in St Peter's, which is one of the lowest super output areas in the entire region. Sadly, we were turned down in that bid. I would be grateful if the

hon. Member could lend his support for clarity on what a levelling-up round 3 might look like—whether it will be a “Hunger Games”-style competitive bid, or whether there will be devolution of funding so that local authorities can back the projects that they know would work in their area. Does he agree that it should be the latter, because local people know better?

Mr Liddell-Grainger: I completely agree, as I have already said, about local, intelligent, highly-motivated people. Having been in Somerset now for 25 years, St Paul’s is slightly legendary. It does need help. We have to say that. Talk to the police in Bridgwater: St Paul’s is always an issue. The Minister will have heard the second part of what the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) said, and I cannot disagree. It is vital. In the middle of Bristol is one of the most affluent areas of the south-west, but outside of Bristol it is completely different. The hon. Member’s seat has challenges. We all have to face up to that. I know the job that he does, and it is difficult.

I will move on—with more abuse, if I may. Yesterday morning, I received a self-congratulatory letter from Project Gigabit’s Minister of State telling me about the wonderful developments of bringing ultra-fast broadband to the extremities of Somerset and Devon. I had a giggle about that. There is no encouraging news for either of the counties, partly because the broadband roll-out has been left in the incapable hands of “Project Useless”, actually known as Connecting Devon and Somerset. CDS is a total cock-up. It was designed—I think that is loosely the word—by someone in a hurry and without a fully functioning brain. There does not seem to be anybody on the board capable of understanding the technology or writing a contract. How many times have we had problems? As a result, millions have been committed in public money to an organisation that could not deliver. Now Connecting Devon and Somerset is still failing to deliver, and it is two years behind schedule.

Do not bother storming round to the CDS office, because it does not have one, which is great. It is run by councillors, who are mostly part time, across the two counties, and employs only a handful of people, who are doing their best but are basically not up to the job. We need to move on. We have to sort out broadband in rural areas across all our counties. The same goes for the management of what turns out to be the worst water company in the United Kingdom. Never mind Thames Water, we have South West Water. It overpays its top team, dumps sewage in rivers, fails to invest in new reservoirs, yet wants to be treated like a paragon of virtue. It sells services in Bristol and Bournemouth as well as in Devon and Cornwall. They are up to their necks in it.

Richard Foord: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Liddell-Grainger: No. Anyway, I received a jolly little email from the PR chief, which I would like to share. I will read, if I may, the first paragraph of the email I got yesterday, addressed to “Dear Mr Liddell-Grainger”, which was spelled correctly.

“I wanted to get in touch in advance of your levelling-up debate. May I congratulate you on securing this important debate? If you are planning to attend this debate on Tuesday I would be grateful if you or your team could confirm this.”

That is a water company supplying millions of people with water, yet is not sure I am turning up for my own debate. What hope have the rivers and fish of Somerset and Devon got, with people like that? If I may, I would also like to bring in potholes, the bane of all our lives.

Anthony Mangnall *rose—*

Mr Liddell-Grainger: I will give way with pleasure.

Anthony Mangnall: I apologise for having two bites of the cherry, but since my hon. Friend has raised South West Water, does he not agree with me that, if it is failing to clean up our waterways or expand our storm overflows, and is not following the laws that we have passed in this place, namely around dividend payments, we have to ask the question, what is the point of this place, if the company is not going to follow those laws? We have to ask it not to take Parliament into contempt when it comes to enacting the stringent laws that we have passed to ensure that it cleans up our waterways.

Mr Liddell-Grainger: I am very grateful for that extremely serious intervention. My hon. Friend is quite right; it is beyond the pale. South West Water is a disgrace at every level. We are rightly trying to hold its feet to the fire. It has to be brought to account. If necessary, we have to get representatives here to ensure they understand just what a shambles and disgrace the company is. It is damaging the environment, damaging confidence and damaging people’s water. It is failing at every level. My hon. Friend gave an extremely good example of how it is holding this place, us, and the elected representatives of the people of the United Kingdom in contempt. That is wrong.

But back to potholes! Potholes are the bane of all our lives. Minister, I know they do not come under the remit of levelling up, but would it not be sensible if they did? Somerset has more roads than Belgium, and who knows where Belgium is? Weak beer and people in strange hats. Minister, we need to look at giving money to pothole improvement, in Somerset and Devon, as both counties desperately need it, which is important.

Before I give up, I would like to thank one person who is a star in my constituency, Emma Thomasson. Her father-in-law was a colleague of ours, Bob Walter, who was in this place for many years. She has been working flat out to put a bid together on the west Somerset side, which could easily incorporate Devon, because it is about learning and skills, rural access, mobility and giving young people opportunities in our areas. We know it is not easy. A-level provision is not good, local buses are not good, trains—well, we will gloss over that. People like her, who are dedicated to trying to get us forward are doing really well.

I will conclude by saying this. Levelling up is a deadly serious business; I know because I have done a lot of bids. I believe that the Government are treating it seriously, having talked to many Ministers, but they cannot do it alone. We have got to work together to achieve this. It needs practical local people producing workable plans that will benefit the greatest number of residents, and provide real value for money across the whole county and country. Levelling up is something that we all know works. We know it can work in rural areas. My hon. Friends the Members for Totnes, for East Devon and for North Cornwall have made the point time and again: give us the money, give us the tools, and we will deliver the job.

4.19 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Dehenna Davison): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Charles, and a pleasure indeed to hear such a characteristically colourful contribution from my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger). I congratulate him on securing this important debate.

I am delighted to have the opportunity to speak about what the Government's agenda on levelling up really means for the south-west of England. I want to dispel the common misconception that levelling up is solely about north and south. It is about so much more than that. It is as relevant to Minehead as it is to Manchester, and it is as much about rural and coastal communities as it is about towns and cities.

My hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) mentioned Brixham harbour, which he has discussed with me on multiple occasions. I am very supportive of the project, so I hope that we can secure something really positive for him from future funding. Levelling up is about unlocking the potential of every place and person right across the UK, because only once we have done that that will be able to maximise the strength of our economy, increase its resilience and, ultimately, improve the lives of everyone across the UK. That really is at the heart of levelling up.

It is not business as usual; we are changing the way the Government work with places to reverse inequality and unleash opportunity, prosperity and pride in place in all parts of the UK. We will do that by empowering local leaders and communities to deliver tangible changes through investment; boosting productivity, pay and living standards by growing the private sector; spreading opportunities and improving public services; and, finally and perhaps most crucially, restoring a sense of community, local pride and belonging. Our outlook can be distilled into one core idea: that no matter where someone is born, they should have a fair opportunity to succeed. Our message and mission are simple: stay local and go far.

Richard Foord: Will the Minister give way?

Dehenna Davison: I will take a very short intervention, because I do not have much time.

Richard Foord: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. The Cullompton relief road has been part of the Mid Devon District Council levelling-up bid on two occasions. In both the first round and the second round, the bid was unsuccessful. How does the Minister recommend that Mid Devon District Council should pursue the relief road?

Dehenna Davison: I am grateful to the hon. Member for mentioning the Cullompton relief road, but I am afraid he has been pipped to the post, as my hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Simon Jupp) has raised the issue with me on multiple occasions, to the point that it is probably one of my favourite relief roads. I hear about it weekly.

There will be a third round of the levelling-up fund, which is an incredibly exciting opportunity for local areas. The Government are easing the bureaucracy and burden of bidding rounds by simplifying the funding landscape, and we are introducing further funds, such

as the shared prosperity fund, to provide further input for local people and hand powers and tools back to local areas so that they can deliver on their local priorities.

Anthony Mangnall: Where bids fail, what consideration has been given to loaning the money to organisations and councils, on the basis that the Government will reclaim it in the future, to allow levelling up not just for Government organisations but for the private sector?

Dehenna Davison: My hon. Friend raises a really interesting point. As I said, we have been exploring alternative funding streams, such as the UK shared prosperity fund, but the most exciting opportunity we have is proper devolution. We are rolling out devolution deals around the country so that local powers and local cash are in the hands of local people. To me, that is the better and right approach to enable long-term strategic thinking locally, but I certainly heard my hon. Friend's point loud and clear, and I will be happy to discuss it with him further.

Luke Pollard: I am trying to understand whether the third round of funding for levelling up will be allocated in a similar way to previous rounds. The Minister talks about devolution. I am in favour of devolution, and I think that most of us in the Chamber are, because people in Devon and the south-west know their communities better than any mandarin, no matter how good, in Whitehall. Will future rounds of levelling-up funding be allocated in parallel with devolution deals? Devon is looking at a devolution deal at the moment, but we are uncertain about the timescales for the levelling-up funding and the devolution bid. Could the Minister provide some clarity on what will come first and on how they will interact?

Dehenna Davison: As it stands, the two are separate strands, as the hon. Member will know. At level 3 devolution, there is the opportunity to access an investment fund, which is a fantastic way to fund local infrastructure projects and the like. It is up to local areas to decide what level of devolution they wish to pursue, and we are in talks with Devon, Plymouth and Torbay to explore opportunities there. As for round 3 of the levelling-up fund, we are dotting the i's and crossing the t's, so it would be inappropriate for me to make any announcements today, but I assure Members that we will provide full detail in due course and very soon. I hope that provides the clarity that the hon. Member seeks.

I am not suggesting that levelling up is a quick fix that will happen overnight, but our levelling-up plans, underpinned by 12 ambitious missions, are set to be achieved by 2030. For that to happen, they require serious cross-Government and cross-society efforts. The first mission, for instance, has a target for pay, employment and productivity to grow everywhere, which is vital for the south-west, where average productivity lags the national average.

As I have outlined, our plans will lead to more devolution in more places across England; rebalanced spending across regions in areas such as research and development, arts and culture, and housing; investment in infrastructure and skills to grow the economy; and, crucially, a renewed focus on regeneration, supporting community initiatives and community safety.

To many, the south-west is the region of cream teas, the world's best cider and buildings made from the famous Bath stone. It is unquestionably a beautiful part of the world, and it is no wonder so many people choose to take holidays and make trips to the south-west. In fact, the south-west attracts more visitors than anywhere else in the UK bar London—but I reckon you guys can catch up if we work hard enough!

Relying on tourism to drive the economy is a double-edged sword, especially in the south-west. While it creates plenty of jobs, many are low-paid, and while it supports countless businesses, that can price local families out of their area. For example, a full-time worker earns an average of £33.40 less per week than the UK average and more than a third of local people do not have a level 3 qualification. The unfortunate reality is that for all the region's incredible natural beauty, it is also home to significant pockets of deprivation and disadvantage. One in 10 of England's most deprived neighbourhoods is in the south-west. I have always firmly believed that prospects should never be determined by postcode.

The challenges in the south-west are clear, but so too are the opportunities. The region is home to world-class universities, highly skilled workers and cutting-edge small and medium-sized enterprises. Bristol and Bath are centres of advanced manufacturing and engineering, aerospace and creative industries, Plymouth is a growing centre of expertise in maritime autonomy, and in Torbay, high-potential opportunities in photonics and microelectronics have been identified.

In my Department, we recognise the potential of supporting local projects and are investing—I hope hon. Members are ready for me to rattle off my list—£131 million in them through round 1 of the levelling-up fund. From creating a new training academy for health and social care in Bridgwater, which my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset referenced, to supporting the University of Gloucestershire to bring empty buildings back into use, we are supporting projects that are delivering on local priorities. We are investing a further £198.6 million across nine towns in the region through the towns fund, and an injection of £96.2 million

is going to the south-west through the getting building fund. Those are just some examples of the diverse opportunities and incredible local projects that we are funding.

As I have said, we need to empower local leaders and communities, which is why we are carrying out an ambitious package of devolution—the biggest transfer of power away from Westminster to local government in modern times. I am delighted that Devon, Plymouth and Torbay, and Cornwall, are in the first wave, giving local leaders the tools they need to deliver for their communities, such as increased control over transport and infrastructure.

On transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset raised the issue of potholes, that vital scourge on our society. I am pleased to say that there is an £8 billion pothole fund announced by the Government, which I hope he and his community can draw upon.

I am conscious of time, but let me again mention round 2 of the levelling-up fund, which will provide £186.6 million of funding across the south-west. The UK shared prosperity fund, which is worth more than £2.6 billion in total, is living up to the Government's commitment to match EU structural fund receipts in each nation of the UK and in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly. As I said, round 3 of the levelling-up fund will be announced very soon. I am pleased that we will be providing further funding in that way.

Levelling up is not just a slogan or a tagline; it is the central mission and commitment of this Government. We have defined the problem and drawn up a long-term plan based on measurable missions. Our focus now is on delivery. Work is under way. Funding has been allocated. Devolution deals are being negotiated. The whole of Government is being mobilised towards this goal. Decisions on transport, culture and healthcare are all being viewed through the prism of levelling up. That is no small task, but the size of the prize is clear, and I look forward to continuing to work with all hon. Members present to make levelling up a reality in the south-west.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Human-specific Medical Research Techniques

4.30 pm

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered human-specific medical research techniques.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair today, Sir Charles. I want to briefly address the issue of how and why we might end the practice of using animals to test potential new drugs and treatments.

Like many others, I have in the past defended the use of animal experiments. I believed that the benefits, in terms of cures and treatments for human conditions, were worth it, despite the ever-increasing protests of people associated with the animal welfare lobby. Bringing new drugs to the market can be slow and expensive. Since 1950, the cost of developing a new drug has doubled approximately every nine years. Many of those drugs fail, and a major contributor to that failure is the problem of translating the results of pre-clinical trials to human beings. Over 92% of drugs that show promise in animal tests fail to translate into safe and effective medicines for humans.

Increasingly, researchers are relying on what are known as new approach methodologies based on human biology and utilising artificial intelligence, organ-on-a-chip methods, and the advanced use of human cells and tissues. I am grateful to Animal Free Research UK for a recent briefing at the Institute of Translational Medicine at the University of Birmingham and for its support in advance of this debate. It is a key organisation that is involved in funding and promoting the use of such methods in the UK.

We are beginning to see some exciting things. At Queen Mary University of London, researchers are using human-specific techniques to study the spread of various cancers. The University of Nottingham is developing stem cell models to better understand heart disease. Great Ormond Street Hospital is working with a three-dimensional model of the infant lung to help in treating RSV, which I understand stands for respiratory syncytial virus, and bronchiolitis, which is a life-threatening lung infection.

Animal Free Research UK also partners with the lifETIME—Engineered Tissues for Discovery, Industry and Medicine—Centre for Doctoral Training on developing animal-free technologies. Young researchers are trained in the use of advanced human-specific techniques. One experiment I saw in Birmingham involves a lab model of the human cornea, which researchers hope will make tremendous advances in treating various eye conditions and in helping people who may have lost their sight already. Another crucial development is the innovative liver-on-a-chip technology, which is proving to be a much more reliable predictor than any animal test of whether a new drug could be toxic to the patient's liver.

There is a fast-growing market for human-specific techniques. The global market for 3D cell culture technologies grew to nearly \$2.9 billion this year, and it is expected to exceed \$5.5 billion in four years' time. British universities and research units are at the forefront of much of that research, but trends suggest that we could fall behind. I know from work at the new Precision

Health Technologies Accelerator in my constituency in Birmingham that human-specific technologies could be a game changer. By concentrating on them, Britain could secure a strategic advantage as a global life sciences superpower. Several leading companies are based in the UK, but the United States is making huge inroads with the work it is already doing with those companies, its regulatory framework and its plans for the future.

Evidence provided to the all-party parliamentary group on human-relevant science indicates that the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency is open to exploring alternatives to animal tests, that animal tests should not be used by default and that that should be made clear to sponsors of clinical trials. The public supports that. A YouGov poll in 2021 revealed that 65% support ending animal testing and replacing it with new methods, and 70% would like to see all animal experiments phased out by 2040. If we are to make real progress in this area, we need to adopt a strategy similar to that used for the Climate Change Act 2008; we need a human-specific technologies Act to provide a new legislative framework.

Just today I saw a letter from Professor David Main, who chairs the Animals in Science Committee, in which he suggested that we should transfer responsibility for new approach methodologies and ending animal testing from the Home Office, where it currently resides, to the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology. There is probably a good historical reason why responsibility resides with the Home Office, but it seems strange, if we are talking about a new technology that could make a massive difference to the British scientific community, that the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology is not taking the lead on the subject. I hope that the Minister—I realise this is not wholly his brief—will report that back and ask for such a change to be considered. That seems sensible, the Government having gone to the trouble of setting up the new Department.

Professor Main also makes the case for a clear strategy to underpin a human-specific technologies Act. I do not want to say exactly what should happen, but, as I say, we could learn from the experience of the Climate Change Act, so we might include an expert advisory committee to keep us up to speed with the science. We could establish a milestone by which the transition to human-specific research could be accomplished. Obviously, that would have to be agreed after consultation with industry and academia to ensure that the timescale was realistic. Of course, the Government would need to take responsibility for developing and maintaining a comprehensive action plan and for regularly reporting progress to Parliament.

It goes without saying that it will require consistent and predictable funding—I hope that is part of the new Department's intention—and other practical assistance if we are to help the scientific community achieve the transition. The benefits in terms of animal welfare, the development of new medicines and treatments, new jobs and a leading role for the UK would all be worth it. I hope that I can rely on the Minister to assure me that the Government stand ready to make this change a reality and that we can look forward to updates in the very near future on the steps they are taking to advance these new technologies and help us put an end to wasteful, sometimes pointless and often very ineffective animal testing.

4.40 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): You are putting in some shift today, Sir Charles, if I may say so.

I am grateful to be here, and very grateful to the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) for securing today's debate, which is on an issue close to my heart. I chair the all-party parliamentary group on human-relevant science, and although I have spoken at some length on this issue before, today I will make just three points.

First, what drew me to supporting human-relevant science was the need to safeguard and protect animals. Home Office statistics show that 3 million testing procedures involving animals took place across the UK in 2021. Also, the UK is the top user of primates and dogs in experiments in Europe; thousands of experiments are conducted every year on these sentient animals. Many people will have seen *The Mirror's* film showing horrific gavage, or force-feeding; UK-bred, factory-farmed animals are force-fed chemicals directly into their stomachs without any pain relief, day in and day out. Of course, other poor creatures have been bred to be bled. All this animal suffering is quite unnecessary.

Then we have the staggering waste of animal lives. Millions of non-genetically altered animals are being bred for scientific procedures; they are killed without even being used in procedures; 1.8 million animals were killed in this way in 2017. I have previously called for laboratory animals to be included in the Animal Welfare Act 2006 and the Animal Welfare (Sentience) Act 2022, and I reiterate those calls today.

The stark reality is that animal experimentation is not a good enough predictor of what will happen in humans. For example, animal experimentation delayed the introduction of penicillin, failed in HIV research, and delayed the development of the polio vaccine by decades. History is littered with examples of human harm and fatalities after the application of animal data to human patients. Indeed, 92% of new medicines fail to pass human trials simply because testing on animals cannot predict human responses. Compare animal testing with, for example, the innovative liver on a chip, which can identify 87% of drugs that risk causing human liver damage, including where those drugs have passed animal tests.

That brings me to my second point, which is that human-relevant techniques work. They are based on human biology. There are also computer models, use of artificial intelligence, organ-on-a-chip technology and advanced use of human cells and tissues. Then we have rapidly developing gene-based medicine, whereby medicine is personalised to a patient's individual DNA. It would be impossible to replicate that with animal tests. All that work is directly relevant to humans. It speeds up medical progress and gets new medicines and treatments to patients quicker, all without any inhumane treatment of animals. What is not to like?

Animal Free Research UK highlighted an excellent case in its briefing for today's debate. It relates to diabetes, a major health issue for our nations and a cause of cost pressure to our health services. Scientists at the University of Exeter made a major advance in the treatment and prevention of diabetes by working with human cells. They made important discoveries about

the changes that occur in insulin-producing beta cells. This could not have been achieved using animals, due to genetic differences between animals and humans.

My third and final point is that in addition to ending animal suffering and producing more effective and faster solutions for humans, ending animal testing would also be good for our economy. Once we look past the big business of animal research, which obviously has a vested interest in continuing with animal experimentation and blocking progress, we can start to turbocharge our economy and our place as a world leader in life sciences. In Scotland, life sciences contribute £3.4 billion to Scottish gross value added, and it is a growth sector. Given that we also have world-leading universities, and some amazing pharmaceutical companies in which efforts to undertake animal-free research are ongoing, we are really well placed. What we need is legislation to support the transition to human-relevant science. I would support a human-specific technologies Act; that would be an important step.

In conclusion, our laws are simply outdated. The regulatory requirement to test on animals before humans, despite clear and compelling evidence that it is ineffective, is simply not fit for purpose. I also note the letter written by Professor Main from the Animals in Science Committee, which calls on UK Ministers to take the initiative now on non-animal techniques.

I call on the Minister and the UK Government to mandate a rigorous, public, scientific hearing on the issue. We need to be evidence-led. That would reduce the unnecessary harm involved in animal experiments, and ultimately lead to a ban on this immoral practice. We must open up legislative paths that allow us to pursue alternatives, or risk being left behind when other countries steal our lead.

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): Before I call the Front Benchers, would anybody else like to make an intervention or a short speech?

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con) *indicated dissent.*

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): The Father of the House is shaking his head; he is here to listen. Carol Monaghan.

4.45 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Charles. I thank the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe), for securing this debate on what is clearly an important topic and a source of increasing public concern. He mentioned a poll commissioned by Cruelty Free International and carried out by YouGov in 2021, which found that seven in 10 adults believe it is unacceptable to use animals for experiments when alternative non-animal research methods are available. That is an important statistic to bear in mind throughout this debate.

Scotland is a nation of animal lovers. We often get correspondence about animals. People are very exercised about this issue. They love animals, and they want to be world leaders in protecting animal rights. The use of live animals for scientific purposes has long been a source of discomfort. My hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) quoted

[Carol Monaghan]

Home Office figures that point to over 3 million procedures involving animals having taken place in 2021. Worryingly, that was an increase of 6% on the previous year.

Given the importance of medical research and innovation in 2021—I think we all know about the development of the covid vaccine, in which data from animals was used before there was a move to human clinical trials—we can acknowledge that without a viable replacement, we cannot stop the use of animals in medical research immediately at the stroke of a pen. To try to be balanced, I will also say that a ban on animal research in the UK could move that research to countries with poorer regulation and actually make things worse. That is something to remember.

However, it is incumbent on the research community, the pharmaceutical companies and indeed the Government to funnel resources into the development of techniques that do not involve animals. It is worrying that the figures continue to trend upwards, and I would appreciate it if the Minister could address that increase. Opposition to the use of animals in medical research is not limited to concerns about cruelty and animal rights; there are significant questions regarding its effectiveness. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak, pointed out that 90% of new medicines fail to pass human trials because animal responses cannot be used to predict human responses. Dr Fiona Godlee, editor-in-chief of *The BMJ*, reports that it is

“nearly impossible to rely on most animal data to predict whether or not an intervention will have a favourable clinical benefit-risk ratio in human subjects.”

If animal testing is proving a more and more unreliable method of testing medical interventions, the justification for continued and increasing use of animals in medical research appears to be limited. Considering that evidence, we must question whether sufficient urgency has been shown in the search for human-specific alternatives to the use of live animals. Last week, I spoke in the main Chamber against the continued use of fur, in particular fur for fashion purposes. I talked about the ceremonial hats worn by the King’s Guard and how much that was a symbol of cruelty. Much of last week’s debate, however, focused on fashion. Fashion is a human want, but in today’s debate we are talking about medicine and clinical intervention, which are a human need. Despite that distinction, there is a key similarity in both debates—there are alternatives.

Isolated human tissue and cells have been used as a replacement for live animals in drug discovery and development. The For Life On Earth campaign group points out that

“blood, tissues, and organ cultures are ideal test-beds”.

My hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk and the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak, talked about AI and computer modelling, and how those can give us another potential alternative. Against the backdrop of the ever-developing capabilities of AI, it is an area that we must explore fully.

On many occasions, the Government have spoken about their ambition to become a “science and technology superpower”; I believe we can also be a superpower in animal rights. It was interesting to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk talk about

a human-specific technologies Act; that is the way we should be going with regulation and legislation. Things are out of date and have not moved as quickly as the technology. It is in all our interests, be it from the point of view of animal cruelty or of effectiveness, to prioritise the move away from animal testing towards a more humane framework for medical research. We need to phase out the use of animal testing in scientific research, and to develop human-specific new approach methodologies.

4.52 pm

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Charles. I draw your attention and that of the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe), on securing this important debate on human-specific medical research techniques. I pay tribute to his deeply informed knowledge of the subject, and to his advocacy for the ending of animal testing. I recognise the important role of Animal Free Research in progressing that important ambition. I am glad to have the opportunity to question the Government on the subject, and to reiterate the Labour party’s message that we must work to end harmful and unnecessary animal testing once and for all.

We have heard about human-specific medical research techniques, which are sometimes termed new approach methodologies or non-animal methods. Such methods can truly be at the forefront of scientific innovation. They include, as was mentioned, 3D tissue culture, also known as organs on a chip. That tissue culture mimics organ behaviour and can be used to study biological and disease processes. Other methods include computer-based modelling, such as that done by Bit Bio, the synthetic biology spin-out from Cambridge University; I met people there recently. It also provides human cells for research, drug discovery and cell therapy.

Recently, I spoke at SynBioBeta, the synthetic biology and bio-engineering conference. The range and potential of synthetic biology and of bio-engineering to address testing and trial challenges is stunning. I was given real hope that replacements for animal testing are around the scientific corner.

I am pleased that the Government have a policy of limiting the number of animals used in science, and I am grateful for the fact that non-animal methods of research have developed and improved, thanks to the work of brilliant scientific minds, not least in our United Kingdom. We must also recognise the tireless work of animal rights activists, some of whom have been mentioned in the debate, in progressing that ambition.

Labour supports the three R’s approach—that is, working to replace, refine and reduce the use of animals in research and testing—and I pay tribute to the National Centre for the Replacement, Refinement and Reduction of Animals in Research for its work with scientists to achieve that. The development of alternative methods, and the advancement of AI and advanced computer modelling techniques, or in silico models, mean that we should be able to greatly reduce reliance on animal testing.

In his passionate contribution, the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) highlighted the ways in which the use of animals is not always appropriate for research on human diseases and treatments,

as did the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan). I recognise that, but I note that there are a range of opinions on human-specific medical research. For example, some organisations, including some universities that undertake medical research using animals, have drawn attention to the limitations of non-animal methods, and the University of Oxford has stated that animals need to be used because of the need to understand the complexity of living bodies.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak, was absolutely right to say that life sciences will be key to the future prosperity of our country. That relates to the fast-growing global market for human-specific technologies. The global market for 3D cell culture technologies grew to nearly \$3 billion in 2023 and is expected to almost double by 2027. I gently ask the Government to consider whether it is possible to truly address my hon. Friend's concerns when the Department is in a perpetual state of crisis. We have had nine changes of science Minister in five years and four Chancellors in six months, and it is perhaps not surprising that, with so little a focus on our scientific future, there has been a decline in late-stage clinical trials. From 2018 to 2021, the UK fell from fourth to 10th place globally as a host for phase 3 clinical trials. That is a matter of huge concern to many scientists and clinicians in our life sciences sector, and it is also a barrier and pinch point to the recognition and adoption of new and innovative medicines. The total number of new and innovative medicines available to UK patients is lower than in other comparable nations, such as Germany.

Approaches such as human-specific medical research are vital parts of our life science sector. As well as pushing the boundaries of humanity's collective understanding, our life sciences are a priceless platform for the UK's future growth. Labour sees a clear path from investing in scientific research and innovative methods to creating jobs that people can raise a family on. Innovation and science are critical to building regional economies that are strong and self-sufficient. Moreover, they are critical to our NHS and to building an NHS that is fit for the future. Human-specific research techniques have the potential to deliver effective treatments for major human diseases, to reduce pressure on the NHS, and to reduce the disease burden on individuals, and we need to ensure that the NHS has the capacity to absorb such innovations. That is why one of Labour's five missions for Government is to build an NHS that is fit for the future.

I hope that the Minister will be forthcoming in his answers to the questions that have been asked. Specifically, I want to raise the latest data on funding from UKRI, which is an important funder of non-animal methods. UKRI funding fell by 6% between 2020 and 2021. That is in the overall context of the Government's pledge to double science spending. Can the Minister explain the reason for that decrease? What impact does he believe that it will have on the UK's ability to be world leading in human-specific medical research?

Will the Minister also set out what recent steps his Department has taken to reduce the use of animals in research, and will he commit, as Labour has, to a comprehensive review of animal testing, with a view to improving practice, limiting animal suffering, increasing transparency and with a long-term objective of phasing out animal testing entirely? Human-specific medical research techniques provide an opportunity and a challenge

to our science, research and life sciences sectors, and I hope that the Minister will set out how the UK is responding to that.

5.1 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Paul Scully): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Charles. I congratulate the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) on securing this debate on human-specific medical research techniques. I also thank the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) for his thoughtful words, and the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) and the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah). There has been a lot of food for thought and important points raised in some insightful contributions, and I will try to cover those. However, at the heart of today's discussion has been what it takes to build world-leading science—science that does not just top global rankings in league tables, but changes British people's lives for the better.

Earlier this year, the Government set out our plan to cement the UK's place as a science and technology superpower by 2030. Backed by a commitment to increase public expenditure on R&D to £20 billion per annum by 2024-25, we are investing in the areas where we have the infrastructure, experience and insight to lead the world. Indeed, it was interesting to hear the shadow Minister talk about bioengineering, because that is one of the priority emerging technologies that the new Department for Science, Innovation and Technology has identified as something we want to back.

Life sciences is one of the areas that is crucial not just to grow the economy and create high-skilled, well-paid jobs today, but to ensure that British people can live longer, healthier, happier lives tomorrow. Our life sciences vision sets a strategy for the sector to solve some of the biggest healthcare problems of our generation. In May, we announced an ambitious policy package in support of the life sciences sector, backed by more than £650 million in funding, including £121 million to improve commercial clinical trials to bring new medicines to patients faster.

Clinical trials, which were raised in the debate, are not necessarily directly related to animal testing. That said, the UK led the world in trials during covid, providing both the first vaccine and the first treatment. That has wider impacts on the clinical research system, and, as we saw from the recently published review by Lord O'Shaughnessy, that provides the clear path for us to regain our world-leading position.

As the vision makes clear, research is at the heart of that. Research is critical to ensuring that we are providing the best possible care for everyone now and in the future. It is thanks to bold research by brilliant scientists that we can win the battle against life-threatening conditions by equipping our NHS with a new generation of innovative treatments. Extraordinary advances in non-invasive techniques, such as medical imaging, sensors and ex vivo analysis, promise to revolutionise human healthcare. However, to unlock that promise, many of the research questions that those technologies have opened up must be explored directly in humans. It is only by doing so that we can quickly and efficiently translate medical discoveries out of the laboratory and into our hospitals, where they can make a real difference.

[Paul Scully]

UK Research and Innovation, as the UK's national science, research and innovation funding body, plays a vital role in supporting the development of human-specific research techniques. For a number of years, UKRI has prioritised experimental medicine research, in which studies are undertaken in humans, to identify the mechanisms that drive diseases and provide early evidence for the validity of new discoveries and treatments to fight them. The Medical Research Council's translational funding strategy pioneers that work, taking the most exciting ideas from discovery science into research using humans, with a clear focus on early clinical application.

The experimental medicine panel is a core part of that strategy, backed by an annual budget of £10 million. Since its establishment in 2020, the panel has invested more than £19 million to support 16 world-leading projects across the UK that could rapidly lead to major benefits for human health. That includes a project from Manchester Metropolitan University that aims to unpick how a region of the brain stem functions and signals to the rest of the brain. The university's researchers hope that by using the innovative technology of deep brain stimulation, they will gain insight into the neural mechanisms that cause Parkinson's, a particularly cruel disease, whose devastating impact will be all too familiar to many of us. That project shows just how transformative human-specific research techniques can be.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak talked about animal testing not working, and I think the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk said the same. Animal studies are used as the basis for extrapolation, to indicate possible risks to humans. Very few drugs that enter human clinical trials prove to pose an unacceptable risk to humans. There are many reasons why drugs that are assessed as potentially effective and safe in animals do not progress to market, including commercial reasons, but should animal testing not occur, more potential medicines would not progress to market. Resources would be spent on potential medicines that would have been excluded through animal testing, and the risk to humans in clinical trials would be considerably higher. We have heard a lot about the three Rs, and I will come back to that point—we actively support that approach.

Let me just take the opportunity to make clear this Government's position on animal testing. There was discussion earlier about which Department has responsibility, and, clearly, we work on this across Government. The Home Office regulates existing animal testing, but it does not oversee the ending of it. That sits with the research undertaken under the auspices of the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology. That is why there are dual regimes. Clearly, as we move towards more advanced research and innovation, the responsibility increasingly comes under the auspices of DSIT.

Through UKRI, the Government actively support and fund the development and dissemination of the three Rs, which were set out more than 60 years ago by two English scientists in a programme for a more ethical approach to animal testing. As we have heard, the three Rs are: replacement of the use of animals where they are not necessary for research; the reduction in the number of animals needed to obtain the same amount

of information; and the refinement of testing methods to minimise the pain, suffering and distress of the animals involved.

That is achieved primarily through funding for the National Centre for the Replacement, Refinement and Reduction of Animals in Research. World-renowned for its leadership in this space, the NC3Rs works nationally and internationally to drive the uptake of non-animal technologies and ensures that the advances in these technologies are reflected in policy, practice and regulations on animal research.

Since its launch in 2004, the NC3Rs has committed £100 million to its research, innovation and early career awards to identify new and more ethical approaches for scientists in academia and industry. It has set out its strategy to increase the focus on animal replacement technologies, as well as championing high standards in animal research.

UKRI's Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council also supports research into developing and applying innovative methodologies to study human and animal physiology, including in-silico approaches—organ-on-a-chip, as we have heard—organoid and other advanced cell culture systems. That includes a recent £4 million BBSRC and NC3Rs programme that focuses on supporting the next generation of non-animal technologies that mimic the physiological environment, enabling a whole-system/multi-system approach for discovery and translational science across the life course.

Much research can be done in non-animal models, as we have heard, but there are still purposes for which it is essential to use live animals. The dizzying complexity of whole biological systems means that they cannot always be replicated using validated non-animal methodologies. Therefore, although we very much recognise the need to replace the use of animals in scientific procedures with non-animal alternatives where we can, the carefully regulated use of animals in scientific research remains absolutely necessary at this time if we are to protect humans and the wider environment, whether that means improving our understanding of how biological systems work or accelerating the development of safe and effective medicines, treatments and technologies.

Steve McCabe: I appreciate that this is not the Minister's brief—I am not trying to be difficult, and I am listening with interest to what he is saying—but I and others watching the debate will be curious to know whether it is Government policy and the Government's intention to move to phasing out animal experiments, or is the Minister telling us that the Government think there will always be a place for animal experimentation?

Paul Scully: I have talked to the hon. Gentleman about the three Rs. Essentially, nobody wants to be using animal testing where it is absolutely not needed. If innovation, such as computer models and new research, can find new ways of edging that out, why would any Government not want to do that? It has to be based on the evidence and the best science, and done on what is best for humankind, and that is what we will keep in mind. It is not done for the sake of animal testing in itself; it is very much evidence-based, as I said. That is why the current approach is to actively support and fund the development and dissemination of techniques that replace, reduce and refine the use of animals in

research and to ensure that the UK has a robust regulatory system for licensing animal studies and enforcing legal standards.

Our legal framework is absolutely clear: animals are only ever used in science where there are no alternatives, where the number of animals used is the minimum needed to achieve the scientific benefit, and where the potential harm to animals is limited to that needed to achieve that scientific benefit. Under UK law, there are three main purposes for which animals may be used in science: for basic research to understand biological processes and systems; for translational research to understand how biological systems apply to real-world applications, such as the development of medicines; and to test the safety and efficacy of medicines and chemicals.

In each of those instances, the rationale is clear. Without basic research using animals, we would limit our ability to make the kind of scientific discoveries that could transform medicine for the better. Without translational research using animals, we would limit our ability to develop new medicines not just for humans, but for animals. Without testing those medicines using animals, we would not know whether those medicines were safe or effective for use in humans or animals, unnecessarily limiting the availability of medicines to treat life-threatening diseases. Many medicines that prove ineffective in humans are detected earlier through animal testing, too, enabling us to focus valuable research funds on medicines that will be effective.

To be clear, this Government are unapologetically ambitious in our mission to make Britain a science and technology superpower. We understand just how much

world-leading research matters if we are to succeed and translate that success into real benefits for our people and our NHS. That means investing in the next generation of tools and technologies that provide alternatives to animal research, and it means, where animal research remains necessary, maintaining those rigorous principles to put ethics at the heart of that research. I thank Members once again for their insightful contributions to the debate, and I look forward to our working together in the months and years to come.

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): Mr McCabe, you have two minutes.

5.13 pm

Steve McCabe: Thank you, Sir Charles. I am grateful to everyone who has taken part in the debate. As I said earlier, I appreciate that this is not the Minister's main brief, so I am grateful to him. I am a trifle disappointed that, towards the end, I thought I detected a "steady as we go" message, rather than one that was actually going to progress to phasing out animal testing, which is what everyone else would like to hear. I am pleased to hear about the investment and plans that the Government are making. I will conclude by simply urging the Minister again to take back the mood of the debate, so that people realise there is an alternative.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered human-specific medical research techniques.

5.15 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 4 July 2023

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Withdrawal Agreement Joint Committee: 11th Meeting

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (James Cleverly): The Withdrawal Agreement Joint Committee met on 3 July 2023 in Brussels, with delegates attending in person and by video conference. I co-chaired the meeting with European Commission Vice President Maroš Šefčovič. A joint statement was agreed.

The committee welcomed progress on the implementation of the Windsor framework and adopted new arrangements that embed the joint solutions found by the UK and EU, which are critical for businesses and people in Northern Ireland.

Both sides agreed to continue working expeditiously to deliver the framework and to maximise the potential of the relationship between the UK and the EU, as exemplified by the recently agreed memorandum of understanding on financial services.

The committee addressed other important issues including the rights of UK nationals in the EU and EU citizens in the UK. Both sides recognise the important contribution these citizens make to the UK and EU, and remain committed to upholding their rights.

The committee also received an update on the work of the withdrawal agreement specialised committees since the last meeting on 24 March 2023 and adopted the withdrawal agreement annual report for the year 2022, pursuant to article 164(6) of the withdrawal agreement.

The Committee adopted two decisions:

On adding two newly adopted Union acts on sanitary and phytosanitary measures—agrifoods—and medicines to annex 2 to the framework.

On amending part I of annex I of the agreement, by amending the list of recommendations and decisions by adding two decisions of the Administrative Commission for the Co-ordination of Social Security Systems which are not listed in Part I of Annex I of the agreement and by removing three decisions which have been replaced by the two new decisions.

[HCWS911]

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

Establishment of Oflog and Publication of Best Value Guidance

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Michael Gove): The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities is today establishing the Office for Local Government (Oflog) and publishing new best value guidance for consultation.

Oflog is a new performance body focused on local government in England. It will provide authoritative and accessible data and analysis about the performance of local government, and support its improvement.

By collating, analysing, and publishing existing data about the relative performance of councils, it will help councillors and the public have the information they need to scrutinise more effectively local decisions; it will ensure council leaders can compare themselves against their peers and find examples of good practice to learn from; and it will allow central Government and their partners to identify where there might be challenges and a need to step in to give support, where appropriate.

Oflog will improve the transparency of local government performance by publishing data in a clear and accessible way on the new local authority data explorer. Initially this includes a subset of service areas for data—adult skills, adult social care, finance, and waste management. These service areas will be expanded to cover the breadth of what local authorities do, and the initial metrics will be improved over time.

Local authorities have a critical role in providing essential services and building stronger communities. Oflog will recognise and celebrate the local authorities that do this best—making sure that those local leaders get the credit they deserve and showcase the best in class so others can learn from them. Where local authorities are identified as at risk of potential failure, Oflog will convene dialogues between local authorities and expert local leaders to explore the issues in more detail. In parallel, Oflog will consider performance in areas with devolution deals so that it can reflect their progress.

The Government believe that giving local leaders increased freedoms creates improved outcomes, but we have heard from colleagues that devolution needs to be matched with accountability. Given the scale of ambition of our devolution programme it is right that we have the appropriate checks and balances in the system. Oflog will work closely with DLUHC and local partners, particularly the mayoral combined authorities, to make sure that the outcome metrics used are the most appropriate for holding devolved areas and their leaders to account for their performance.

Oflog is not an attempt to micromanage councils or establish an expensive compliance regime, nor will it require box-ticking or filling in forms. This is not about recreating the Audit Commission.

To give greater clarity to local authorities—and help to identify potential failures—we are also launching a consultation into new statutory guidance on what constitutes best value, and the standards authorities are expected to meet by Government and residents.

This new guidance sets out seven themes of good practice for running an authority to secure continuous improvement and provide value for money. These include the characteristics of a well-functioning local authority and those used to identify challenges that could indicate failure.

The guidance also sets out the models of statutory and non-statutory intervention available when standards are not upheld. We will publish the final guidance after the Department considers the results of the consultation.

Further information on Oflog can be found on the Oflog gov.uk website, at <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/office-for-local-government> which contains the policy document “Office for Local Government—Understanding and Supporting Local Government Performance” and a link to the local authority data explorer.

Further information on the best value guidance can be found on the www.gov.uk website.

A copy of the best value guidance for consultation and the Oflog policy document will be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS912]

Local Authority Funding Landscape: Simplification

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Dehenna Davison): I am today publishing this Government's plan for simplifying the funding landscape for local authorities. This plan sets out our ambition for increasing the effectiveness and efficiency of the current funding system.

This publication follows the commitment within our landmark levelling-up White Paper to deliver a more transparent, simple and accountable approach to funding.

This Government are focused on continually improving the way funding is delivered, including by minimising burdens and paperwork on all organisations bidding for funds, to unlock the potential of local economies, create visible improvements within communities and ensure that more funding does not mean more bureaucracy.

By reducing administrative burdens on local authorities, this plan will support them to maximise their return on spending, generating the best outcomes for communities. This plan is one step in a long line of measures that have already been announced, to increase the impact and reduce the red tape around funding and levelling up.

The plan details three main phases for change:

Immediate simplification of existing funds and communication. This includes a new "simplification pathfinder pilot", to test the streamlined delivery of capital funding in a small group of local authorities. We are also amending our project adjustment request process for town deals, the levelling-up fund and the future high streets fund, giving local authorities more flexibility to change projects;

A new "funding simplification doctrine", requiring Departments to strive for a simpler and more streamlined way of delivering funding to local authorities, including considering allocative distribution approaches; and

Reforms to be implemented at the next spending review, including single multi-year departmental-style funding settlements for the trailblazer mayoral combined authorities and better join-up across interconnected policy areas and investment programmes.

Together, these reforms meet our levelling-up White Paper commitment to streamline the local funding landscape. As set out in the plan, we will continue to engage with local authorities on all aspects of funding simplification.

[HCWS910]

Petition

Tuesday 4 July 2023

PRESENTED PETITION

Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor

Irchester Village's Post Box Installation

The humble petition of the residents of Irchester, Northamptonshire, and the surrounding areas.

Sheweth, that the petitioners believe that, to improve the accessibility of postal services, the village of Irchester would be better served if a post box was installed in the centre of the village.

Wherefore your petitioners pray that your honourable House urges the Government to work with Royal Mail to consider whether the needs of the village of Irchester could be better met with a new centrally located post box.

And your petitioners, as duty bound, will ever pray, &c. —[*Presented by Mr Peter Bone .*]

[P002841]

ORAL ANSWERS

Tuesday 4 July 2023

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO	673	ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO—continued	
Clean Energy Projects: Planning System	680	Lithium-ion Battery Storage Facilities:	
Clean Energy Technology: Private Sector		Regulation	676
Investment	684	Net Zero Projects: Skills.....	684
Community Energy Projects	686	Net Zero Target: Population Increases	682
Energy and Trade Intensive Industries	679	Onshore Wind Proposals: Community	
Energy Costs: Support for Households	688	Engagement	678
Energy Intensive Industries: Decarbonisation	675	Prepayment Meters	686
Energy Security: Gas Imports from Russia	681	Rooftop Solar Panels	683
Energy Transition Projects: Scotland	673	Small Modular Nuclear Reactors.....	687
Floating Offshore Wind: Supply Chain.....	677	Topical Questions	688

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Tuesday 4 July 2023

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND		LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES—	
DEVELOPMENT OFFICE	35WS	<i>continued</i>	
Withdrawal Agreement Joint Committee: 11th		Local Authority Funding Landscape:	
Meeting.....	35WS	Simplification.....	37WS
LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND			
COMMUNITIES	35WS		
Establishment of Oflog and Publication of			
Best Value Guidance.....	35WS		

PETITION

Tuesday 4 July 2023

	<i>Col. No.</i>
PRESENTED PETITION	5P
Irchester Village's Post Box Installation	5P

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons*,

**not later than
Tuesday 11 July 2023**

STRICT ADHERENCE TO THIS ARRANGEMENT GREATLY FACILITATES THE
PROMPT PUBLICATION OF BOUND VOLUMES

Members may obtain excerpts of their speeches from the Official Report (within one month from the date of publication), by applying to the Editor of the Official Report, House of Commons.

CONTENTS

Tuesday 4 July 2023

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 673] [see index inside back page]
Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero

Violence in the West Bank [Col. 695]
Answer to urgent question—(Anne-Marie Trevelyan)

Republic of Somaliland (Recognition) [Col. 711]
*Motion for leave to bring in Bill—(Sir Gavin Williamson)—agreed to
Bill presented, and read the First time*

Estimates (4th allotted day)
Department for Work and Pensions [Col. 713]
His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service [Col. 737]
Questions deferred until tomorrow

Winnie Ewing [Col. 763]
Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall
Srebrenica Memorial Week [Col. 235WH]
A5036 Park Lane Footbridge Replacement [Col. 257WH]
Defibrillators: Public Access [Col. 262WH]
Levelling Up: South-west [Col. 283WH]
Human-specific Medical Research Techniques [Col. 293WH]
General Debates

Written Statements [Col. 35WS]

Petition [Col. 5P]
